

Illustrations from the Wellcome Library

Who was Elizabeth Okeover?

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Modern notions of medical authority being essentially embodied in the figure of the professionally trained and registered practitioner and his corporate representatives, and in the medical textbook or official pharmacopoeia, are comparatively recent developments. Much work has been done by historians of medicine to show that, far from being merely an underdeveloped version of modern medicine, the medical culture of early modern England was a rich matrix of overlapping spheres of competence and activity, populated by a range of claimants to medical expertise.¹ It was moreover a culture in which medical authority was not exclusively represented by the official publication or printed word, but also embedded in oral tradition and manuscript transmission of knowledge. During the seventeenth century, the circulation of handwritten medical information, especially recipes, among the laity flourished on an unprecedented scale. Central to this development was the culture of household medicine and the role of women in establishing their claims to expertise in this area.² This paper examines two related manuscript medical recipe books in the Wellcome collection that shed light on lay medical knowledge and practice in the later seventeenth century. It also tries to uncover the identity of a somewhat elusive figure who stands at the centre of a network of family and community relationships.

In 1933 the Wellcome Library acquired a manuscript recipe book that had belonged to a certain Elizabeth Okeover in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth century (MS 3712). It is a quarto volume in limp vellum, gilt-stamped covers, with the remains of green silk ties. The recipes are written in a variety of hands, including one that identifies itself as that of “Eliz. Okeover now

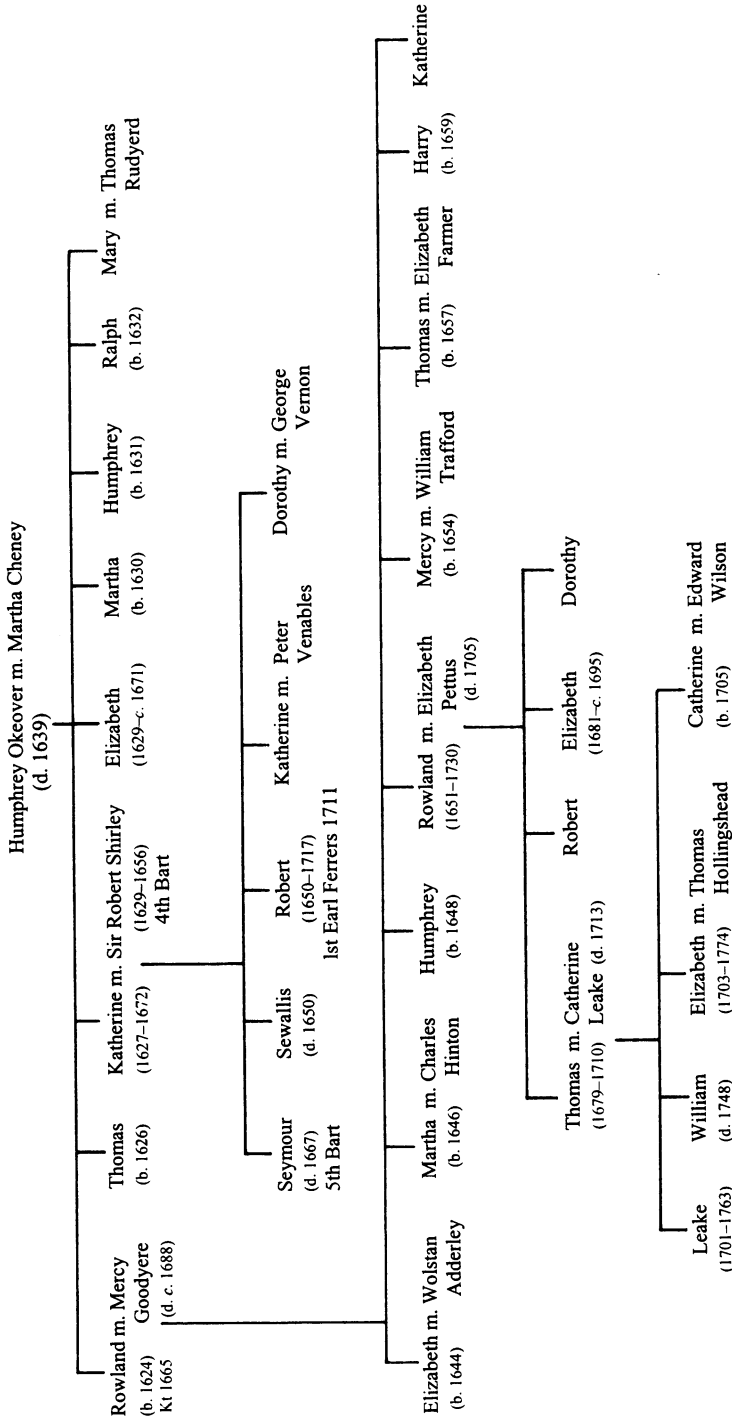
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¹ See for example, Lucinda McCray Beier, *Sufferers and healers, the experience of illness in seventeenth century England*, London, Routledge, 1987; Margaret Pelling, ‘Medical practice in early modern England: trade or profession’, in W Prest (ed.), *The professions in early modern England*, London, Croom Helm, 1987, reprinted with other relevant essays by Margaret Pelling in *The*

common lot: sickness, medical occupations and the urban poor in early modern England, London, Longman, 1998; Doreen Evenden Nagy, *Popular medicine in seventeenth-century England*, Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1988.

² Jennifer K Stine, ‘Opening closets: the discovery of household medicine in early modern England’, PhD thesis, Stanford University, 1996; Lynette Hunter, ‘Women and domestic medicine: lady experimenters, 1570–1620’, in L Hunter and Sarah Hutton (eds), *Women, science and medicine*, Stroud, Alan Sutton, [1997], pp. 89–107.

Family Tree of the Okeovers, Staffordshire



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Adderley”;³ elsewhere in the manuscript this person ascribes recipes variously to an “Aunt E:O”, an “Aunt L:O”, to a “Coz: Okeover”, to her father and mother, and to an “Unkle Rudyerd”. In short, the book contains a good deal of evidence of a rich lay medical culture associated with the Okeover family. This family had been established for centuries on the border of Staffordshire and Derbyshire, with its seat at Okeover Hall in the valley of the river Dove near Ashbourne. Humphrey Okeover (d. 1639), High Sherriff of Derbyshire in 1631, who married Martha, daughter of Sir Oliver Cheney, had four sons and four daughters; the eldest son, Rowland (b. 1624), inherited the estate and was knighted by Charles II (19 April 1665). One of Sir Rowland’s daughters was called Elizabeth, and we know that she is the author of the entries in MS.3712 as she later married one Wolstan Adderley. There were however at least three other Elizabeth Okeovers who might have been candidates if the author had not helpfully identified herself by using her married name: the wives of two of Elizabeth Adderley’s brothers shared the same Christian name, and one of Sir Rowland’s younger sisters, Elizabeth Adderley’s aunt, was also called Elizabeth Okeover.⁴

Recently another seventeenth-century medical recipe book which proved to have Okeover associations was acquired by the Wellcome Library (MS.7391). An elegantly written folio volume in limp vellum covers, this manuscript is unusually rich in identifying the sources of its recipes, among whom occur “Coz: Eliz: Okeover”.⁵ The author remains anonymous, and the volume is as empty of dates as Elizabeth Adderley’s book. Closer inspection of the two volumes however revealed an intimate connection between the two. A large section of MS.3712 appeared to be more or less identical to the text of the new manuscript; proof that it was indeed a direct copy from MS.7391 was provided by the discovery that text corresponding to an entire double opening of the latter book was absent, a circumstance which could be most readily explained by a copyist having turned over two pages by mistake.⁶ The copyist does not seem to have been Elizabeth Adderley, but an anonymous contributor who had apparently owned MS.3712 before her. Whoever it was clearly had access to MS.7391, though presumably did not own it (why copy out scores of recipes verbatim from a book one already possessed?), and was in some way connected with Elizabeth Adderley, who would thus have been in a position to inherit the copied recipes. Elizabeth Adderley was evidently the last owner of MS.3712 to make any significant contribution to its contents; she was the author of the last major section of medical recipes, a small group of cookery recipes written from the rear of the

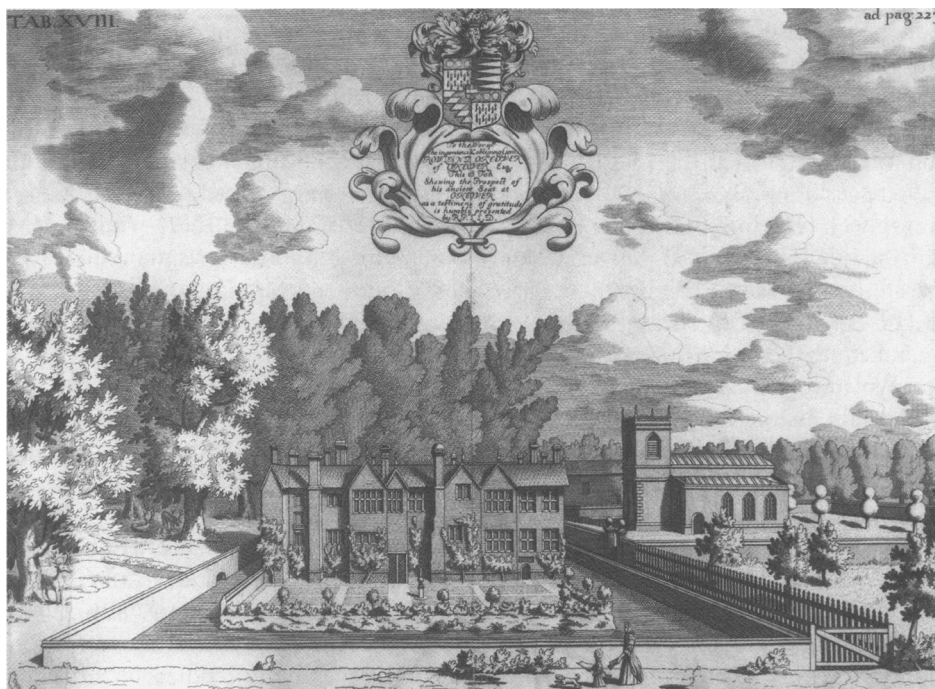
³ Wellcome Library, Western MS.3712, ff. 117, 125v.

⁴ Sir Bernard Burke, *A genealogical and heraldic history of the landed gentry of Great Britain and Ireland*, 6th ed., London, Harrison, Pall Mall, 1879, vol. 2, p. 1199; *Burke’s Peerage and Baronetage*, 106th ed., Crans, Switzerland, Burke’s Peerage, 1999, vol. 2, pp. 2923–5; Joseph

Foster, *Alumni Oxonienses, 1500–1714*, vol. 3, p. 1087.

⁵ Wellcome Library, Western MS. 7931, pp. 143, 147.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 3–147 are reproduced verbatim (with a sprinkling of copyist’s errors and omissions) in MS.3172, ff. 39–112v., with the exception of pp. 44–5, which are entirely absent.



*Figure 1: Engraving of Okeover Hall and church, from Robert Plot, *The natural history of Stafford-shire*, 1686. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the William Salt Library, Stafford.*

volume, and for the index covering the entire contents of the book. It is reasonable to suppose that Elizabeth Adderley's contribution to the text was made when she was still a relatively young woman: she refers to herself on two occasions as "Elizabeth Okeover now Adderley", suggesting a recent change of marital status, and on other occasions describes recipes that her "mother constanly useth" and "alwais maketh to use".⁷ Elizabeth Adderley was born in 1644; her mother, Mercy Okeover, died in about 1688.⁸

MS.7391, the exemplar from which the copied recipes in MS.3712 were taken, was certainly compiled therefore no later than the 1680s, and probably considerably earlier. It is a quite different production from Elizabeth Adderley's book; the contents are, for the most part, in a single, calligraphic hand, evidently that of a professional scribe. Unfortunately, the first two leaves, which might have

⁷ Western MS.3172, ff. 38v., 186.

⁸ George Wrottesley, 'An account of the family of Okeover of Okeover, Co. Stafford', *Collections for a history of Staffordshire*, n.s.,

1907, 7: 110. Mercy Okeover's will, dated 21 April 1686, was proved on 11 April 1688, Public Record Office PROB 11/392, f. 308.

provided clues to the circumstances of the manuscript's production, are wanting, but the script, the lack of later annotation or amendment, and the existence of catchwords, all indicate that this is a fair copy of an original recipe collection, probably commissioned for presentation or bequest, despite the fact that the commission does not seem to have been completed, as the work lacks both an index and a suitable ending. We know that such commissions were issued, and some such productions can be found in the Wellcome collection: Lady Ann Fanshawe's recipe collection was copied out in 1651 by one Joseph Averie, who may have been a professional scribe, though only much later was it presented to her daughter Katherine; the recipe books of Lady Frances Catchmay (d. 1629) were bequeathed to her son, Sir William Catchmay, with instructions for him to arrange multiple copies for his siblings.⁹

Another distinctive feature of the new manuscript is that it is evidently the record of a particular practice. Like most recipe collections, this one is arranged in somewhat random fashion, with only the crudest attempt made to bring recipes for particular diseases, conditions or symptoms together in a systematic way. Yet running through the collection there is a strand of personal recollection and experience that is suggestive of an individual medical career. This provides some clues to the identity of the compiler. Firstly, the anonymous author was almost certainly female; the large number of gynaecological, obstetric and paediatric remedies and directions alone seem to suggest this. Secondly, the compiler was a lay medical practitioner. There are a few hints in the text that she practised her medical skills beyond the confines of her family and household; a recipe for a "sweet oyntment" carries the gloss "I gave it to a woman of Burton who went on chrutches two yeares together and useinge this a month was so well that shee flung them away".¹⁰ A number of recipes, including this one, are qualified with the words "I pro.", indicating their use in practice. Elsewhere the anonymous author, describing a recipe for an "oyntment to strengthen the legs and backe", adds that she had "found by experience that the cure is more difficult" without bleeding the patient from the ears and forehead, although some physicians disagreed. Thirdly, the compiler had at least some Latin and a certain familiarity with pharmaceutical symbols; at least one complete recipe, for "Vatican pills", is given in Latin, albeit with a vernacular translation beneath,¹¹ while standard pharmaceutical measures are used throughout. Finally, the author

⁹ Ann Fanshawe's recipe book, Wellcome Library Western MS.7113: Katherine Fanshawe recorded inside the front cover that it had been given to her by her mother on 23 March 1678. Frances Catchmay's instructions to her son are recorded at the beginning of the text of MS.184a, f. 2v. Another example of a recipe collection perhaps commissioned for presentation is Alathca Howard, Countess of Arundel's book, apparently presented to her by her mother-in-law on her marriage in 1606, MS.213.

¹⁰ MS.7391, pp. 16–17. Elsewhere the author lauds "a most excellent balsome for wounds,

aches, or any swelling, [that] hath done admirable cures on sore breasts when the chyrurgeons had given them over", *ibid.*, p. 115. The terms in which this cure is described recall the boast of Henry Dingley, another lay medical practitioner, that his plaster and oil of mallows had cured a woman with "broken" breasts that London surgeons had been unable to help for two years, Wellcome Western MS. 244, f. 31.

¹¹ MS.7391, p. 40.

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An excellent sweet plaister to
 dress Ulcers with.

Take halfe a pound of Virgins wax a quarter of
 a pound of Venice Turpentine, three ounces and
 a halfe of vermillion, one ounce of Red Lead, one
 ounce of Orris Root; two graines of muske.
 melt the wax & Turpentine together then put in
 the powders being finely ground mix all well and
 whilst it is ~~hot~~ moderately hot dip peeces of linnen
 in, not too long when cold spread y^e & cut y^e as you will

this I made
 Elix. Okeover
 non Alderley

Lucafellis his Balsome: Aunt. C. D.
 Excellent for many things

Take a pint of the best Canary a pint of y^e best
 Salit oyle and 2: ounces of y^e y^e of Sinsolms worst
 beat them all well together in the mortar, then
 put to it: 4: ounces of wax cut thin, which boyle
 with the sack and oyles halfe a qt. of an hour or
 les, then shake in gently: 2: ounces of Red Sanders
 being finely sorted, let all these boyle softly an
 hour, then take it off the fire and pour in y^e y^e
 8: ounces of Venice Turpentine, which must first be
 well beaten in Rose water or faire water till it
 looke very white; set the balbum on the fier a
 gain, and let it have but one warme, then take
 it off and put in: 6: pennyworth of natural Balsome
 then straine it through a new civill cloth in tea
 pot or pan, when it is cold cut the balbum and set on
 the tickour, then put it after you have put y^e sanders
 in you must be sure to stir it continually with a wood
 stick, till it be strained, very good

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Figure 2: Medical recipes in the hand of Elizabeth Adderley *née* Okeover (b. 1644), late seventeenth century. Wellcome Library, Western MS. 3712.

records prescriptions by medical professionals for medicaments for herself (“a diet drinke prescribed mee for my eyes”) and her sister (“the drinke prescribed my sister in her violent flux after her miscarriage”).¹²

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 140–1.

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Spring water *℞*: till *℞*. be trayned, then straine it, put to the liquor
 without *℞*: Simg *℞*: Saffron ʒ. and drinke of this waime fasting. *℞*: Coz. Eliz. Okeover

Pomatum. ~

Take rose that 2. or 3. ord. cut it in Collyard, and lay it in water & dauid. change
 the water every day, then wash it take it out and strape it cleane and steepe
 it in a moxer. then part 6. dipped and sive them in pure water. and 2
 Lemonds parted & sived with sate wint dilly roots amongst them. put all these
 in an earthen pot together with a little faire water and white soft water
 or Idiane flower water or Ullay dew. then if the pot on a soft fire fill it
 with a sive it steame, and straine it through a cloth into a quart of faire
 water take when it is cold take it from the water and put it in the earthen
 pot againe and put to it Symplicack ʒij. with some white soft water or plain
 sate and pure of steame. then melt it and strain it againe. then straine it into
 a great earthen dish, that it with a white sive fill it to the brim with Siquoer
 and so may keepe it with the pure of Lemonds or some other water if shall be best.

For the Stone. ~

Take Live Saffron and pound it all to powder, and put him into a Lefter sic,
 and give a spoonfull of the water to and one in getate paine of it. *℞*: S.
 Sifted is a red & doring darts a pound to powder get much of it as will lay on
 a quart in a small glass of Nutcraine taken fasting is good.

For Convulsion fits. ~

Take of y^e best Sallet wine *℞*. almost *℞*. of Leimond, Balsome, & a Nutmeg
 cut into small peeces and 6. Doves spent them all into the wine in a glass, & let it
 stand till reduced all night, then filter it and steep y^e water till kept and give it the
 patient in Convulsion fits after he hath taken a while and it serveth. *℞*: S.

For an Aque. ~

Take the water of the patient, that is the matter after his first sleep, and lay
 it on fire in a new bladder, and have the bladder white in the chimney, and when
 water remains the distill will waite away. *℞*: S. ~

A preservative against the Plague. ~

Take every weert Consuet of good lowell & Methuadote mix together the mites
 and of a Walnut as well as possible. ~

For an extreme Cough. ~

Take y^e roots of Amlo Campana dryed & of ʒ. halfe a mite Leimond & an
 equal quantity of Camphire to the Leimond halfe an ounce of sate of Leimond
 of sate, make of all these a very fine powder, this take some of Maiden haire & sive
 and ʒij. pure like honey ʒij. mix them together very gently, & take of it the best part of
 a Spoonfull every night till cured. But when he was cured he sate with it.

Miss. (Peching)
Dr. Dakins

Figure 3: Page from an anonymous medical recipe book associated with the Okeover family, with an attribution to 'Coz. Eliz. Okeover' in the top right-hand corner, mid-seventeenth century. Wellcome Library, Western MS. 7391.

Turning to the authorities cited by the author as sources for her recipes, a total of 103 individuals are named: some twenty are medical professionals, nineteen peers, knights or their spouses, the rest other lay commoners. Since a medical recipe was only as good as far as it effected a cure or relief from affliction, it was clearly important to identify those which had been proved by experience; hence the ubiquity of such terms as “approved” or “*probatum*” in seventeenth-century recipe collections. Additionally, provenance played a part in authenticating a recipe or merely bolstering a collection’s prestige. Medical professionals and members of the aristocracy were obvious sources of authentication.¹³ Some of the medical names in our manuscript were clearly remote authorities with whom the author cannot have had any personal or family connection, although the most frequently cited, a certain Dr Dakins, with nine citations, seems to have ministered to the Okeover family, as Elizabeth Adderley records a recipe for “Dr Dakines bollous given my mother”.¹⁴ Likewise, the aristocratic authorities cited are likely to be conventional, implying no necessary connection with the author; by the second half of the seventeenth century a large number of medical recipes were circulating in print, as well as manuscript, and it was clearly commercially desirable to adduce aristocratic provenance or approbation.¹⁵ Thus Lady Dacre’s medicine for stone in MS.7391 is the same as that attributed to her in *The Queens closet opened*, an anonymous work purportedly based on the recipe collection of Queen Henrietta Maria, from which the compiler may have gleaned it.¹⁶ The non-aristocratic lay authorities are more likely to indicate a personal, family or geographical connection with the author, though even here we cannot be certain, as printed recipe collections also include commoner authorities,¹⁷ of the three most common lay surnames cited in the manuscript, two, Cresset and Kettleby,¹⁸ are associated particularly with Shropshire, and indeed there appears to be some bias towards the north-west Midlands in general among the surnames. Elizabeth Okeover is cited twice, by no means one of the more frequent citations, but the only one described as a relative (“coz”[in]).

Who was Elizabeth Okeover and what was her relationship to both the anonymous author of MS.7391 and Elizabeth Adderley, *née* Okeover, owner of MS.3712? Of the various family members with this name mentioned above, the obvious candidate is Sir Rowland Okeover’s younger sister, Elizabeth (1629–1671). It is clear from Elizabeth Adderley’s book that she had an aunt with the initials “E O”, who was the source of a number of the recipes recorded.¹⁹ This was doubtless the same “E O” whom an earlier contributor to Elizabeth Adderley’s book noted as having “often

¹³ Stine, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, pp., 181, 216.

¹⁴ MS. 3712, f. 115v.

¹⁵ John B Blake, ‘The compleat housewife’, *Bull. Hist. Med.*, 1975, 49: 30–42.

¹⁶ MS.7391, p. 49; W M, *The Queens closet opened . . .*, [London], N Brook, 1655, pp. 168–9.

¹⁷ The list of “prescribers and approvers” of the recipes at the beginning of the 1656 edition of *The Queens closet opened* cites, in addition to medical professionals, royalty, peers, knights and ladies, five lay commoners, including one

female; many more are adduced in the anonymous work *Natura exenterata or nature unbowelled*, London, 1655, including as many as thirty-one women.

¹⁸ Mary Kettilby (d. c. 1730) was a popular eighteenth-century author of recipe books, but cannot have been the authority for the entries ascribed to this name in MS.7931, at least not as a published author, as the earliest (anonymous) edition of her collection did not appear till 1714.

¹⁹ MS.3712, ff. 113, 192v.

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proved” a particular cure for “canker”,²⁰ reminiscent of the expression “hath been often experienced by my Coz: Eliz: Ok:” against a remedy for a “cough from a thin rheum” in the anonymous manuscript.²¹ It is likely that this is the same person as the Mrs Okeover whose recipe of balsam Lettice Pudsey found “most excellent for [a] sore breast”.²² That the entire Okeover family seems to have had an interest in the recording and circulation of medical recipes is evident, but one family member, Elizabeth, younger sister of Sir Rowland Okeover, appears to stand out as both a source of recipes and practitioner.

Elizabeth Okeover’s will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, which claimed jurisdiction over “bona notabilia” or estates in excess of £5 in value in more than one diocese. A resident of Westminster, she made her will on 1 December 1670, aged forty-one, asking to be buried in Okeover church, or, in the event of her brother, Sir Rowland Okeover’s refusal, in Westminster Abbey. She left her estate to her two executrixes, Katherine Dolbin and Martha Colebrand. Some days later, on 13 December, Elizabeth, being ill in bed, made further arrangements, among which were provision for her maid, Elizabeth (Betty) Taylor, who was to have some of her “worst wareing clothes”, and for the widow Okeover’s maid, who had helped attend her in her sickness. She also bequeathed her “resate books” to her sister [Katherine, widow of Sir Robert Shirley]. Elizabeth clearly had other books, including a Bible and a Book of Common Prayer “in octavo with silver bosses and clasps”, but for the most part they are not specified in the will; the receipt or recipe books, presumably handwritten, are given priority. The will was proved on 10 February 1671, providing an approximate date of death.²³

We can perhaps summarize Elizabeth Okeover’s status and role as a medical authority in the following terms. Born into a family with perhaps an unusually strong interest in household medicine, she seems to have turned herself into a medical authority whose practice came to carry the seal of approval for various cures and treatments within her wider family and beyond. Her knowledge and experience were no doubt embodied in the recipe books that she explicitly identified in her will. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Elizabeth Okeover’s reputation as a medical authority extended beyond a localized circle; she certainly published nothing and we search in vain for her name in printed recipe collections of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her influence then remained highly circumscribed in both space and time, and memories of her practice had probably vanished within a generation or so of her death.

There remains one question that needs to be addressed, if only to dismiss it. Is it possible that either of the Wellcome Library’s two Okeover manuscripts described above was Elizabeth Okeover’s book, even perhaps one of those bequeathed in her will? To examine MS.3712 first, there were several contributors to this recipe

²⁰ *Ibid.*, f. 37v.

²¹ MS.7391, p. 147.

²² Lettice Pudsey’s book, Folger MS.v.a.450, f. 18, quoted in Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in early modern England*

1550–1720, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998, p. 156. The Pudseys were a Staffordshire family from Seisdon, south-west of Wolverhampton.

²³ Public Record Office, PROB 11/335, f. 195.

collection, one of whom was Elizabeth Adderley, Elizabeth Okeover's niece; of the anonymous contributors, only two made substantial entries, both apparently before Elizabeth Adderley owned the book: the first sixty-five pages contain medical recipes in a large sloping hand that may be that of her father, Sir Rowland Okeover,²⁴ the other anonymous hand—the one responsible for copying out the bulk of the contents of MS.7391 as noted above—was presumably another member of the household at Okeover Hall. We do not know when Elizabeth Okeover left the family home; she apparently remained unmarried, but was already a resident of Westminster at least as early as 1665.²⁵ In short, it seems unlikely that Elizabeth Adderley's book belonged before her to her aunt.

What about MS.7391? At first sight the possibility would seem to be ruled out by the naming of “coz.” Elizabeth Okeover as an authority in the text. However, we have seen that the name Elizabeth was common in the Okeover family and it is not self-evident that this cousin is the same person as Elizabeth Okeover, younger sister of Sir Rowland Okeover and aunt of Elizabeth Adderley. It was common in the seventeenth century to describe relatives by their surname alone (“sister Shirley”, “cousin Rudyerd”), so that use of a Christian name as well suggests a need to distinguish this cousin Elizabeth Okeover either from other cousins Okeover or perhaps even from other Elizabeth Okeovers. If MS.7391 is indeed one of the recipe books bequeathed by Elizabeth Okeover to her sister it would neatly explain how someone in the household at Okeover Hall had access to the manuscript and was thus able to copy out the bulk of its contents. Ownership by Elizabeth Okeover would also be consonant with the anonymous author's obvious experience as a medical practitioner and authority. It would also explain the frequency with which recipes in the manuscript are ascribed to “Dr Dakins”: this was almost certainly Dr Polycarpus Dawkins (born *c.* 1617), of Derby, who as “Polycarp Dakins” is noted as a witness to the will of Katherine, Lady Shirley, Elizabeth Okeover's elder sister.²⁶ Is MS.7391 then a digest of Elizabeth Okeover's medical knowledge and practice, carefully recorded on her instructions by a professional scribe for bequest to her family? The speculation is attractive and not without circumstantial support, but must remain tantalizingly unproven. Elizabeth Okeover is an elusive figure: the few details we know of her life raise as many questions as answers. Further references in manuscript recipe books and elsewhere no doubt await discovery, but it is unlikely that we will ever be able to do more than glimpse the life of a young woman who seems to have eschewed the conventional role of a Stuart gentlewoman as wife and mother for the career of a lay medical practitioner.

²⁴ A remedy for stone in this hand later on in the volume is noted as a recipe of her father's by Elizabeth Adderley in the index, MS.3712, ff. 117v.–118, 193.

²⁵ Elizabeth Okeover is recorded as a resident of Westminster when on 13 February 1664/5 she was granted a dispensation by the archbishop of Canterbury to eat flesh on prohibited days, on

account of poor health, E H W Dunkin, *Index to the Act Books of the archbishops of Canterbury 1663–1859*, London, British Record Society, 1927, 1938, vol. 2, p. 133; I am grateful to Melanie Barber, archivist at Lambeth Palace Library, for the precise date.

²⁶ Foster, *op. cit.*, note 4 above, vol. 1, p. 386; PRO, PROB 11/341, f. 89.