

# Transcribing Early Modern Recipe Books: Undergraduate Scholarship in the Classroom

Ian F. MacInnes - Howard L. McGregor Professor of English, Albion College, Albion, MI 49224

## THE PROJECT

Students in ENGL345 - Renaissance Women's Writing - learned to read 16th- and 17th-century handwriting and worked on never-before-transcribed manuscripts. As a group, they participated in an international collaborative "transcribathon" sponsored by the Early Modern Recipes Online Collection (EMROC) and coordinated by the Folger Shakespeare Library's Early Modern Manuscripts Online (EMMO).

## UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH?

The Council for Undergraduate Research (CUR) defines UR as "an original contribution to the discipline" that is "publicly disseminated." This is a high bar in the humanities, where original contributions usually grow out of years of expertise, and dissemination is usually restricted to significant peer-reviewed publication. Transcription projects offer smaller, appropriately sized opportunities for students to make a significant original contribution to the field and to see their work become publicly available.

## WHY RECIPES?

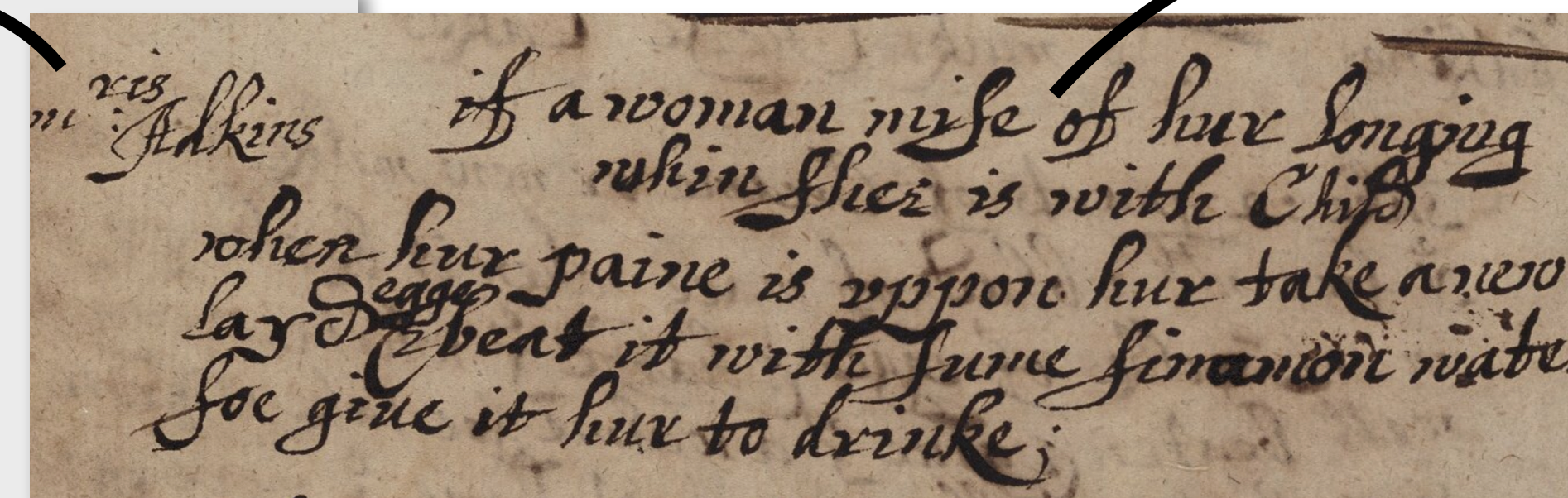
For many reasons, women's opportunities for writing were restricted in the 16th and 17th centuries. Fewer women than men were writing in traditional canonical literary genres (secular poetry, plays, etc.). Renaissance women's studies has thus focused in part on expanding the canon by examining other forms of expression, including letters, memoirs, poetic translations, needlepoint, etc. Recipe books are an important and previously unacknowledged form of women's knowledge and expression in the period.

## ANATOMY OF A TRANSCRIPTION

Items from *The Receipt Book of Margaret Baker*, Folger MS V.a.619

### Knowledge Networks

One of the reasons scholars have been particularly interested in recipe books is that they often demonstrate the circulation of knowledge within a network of women, previously unacknowledged by scholars.



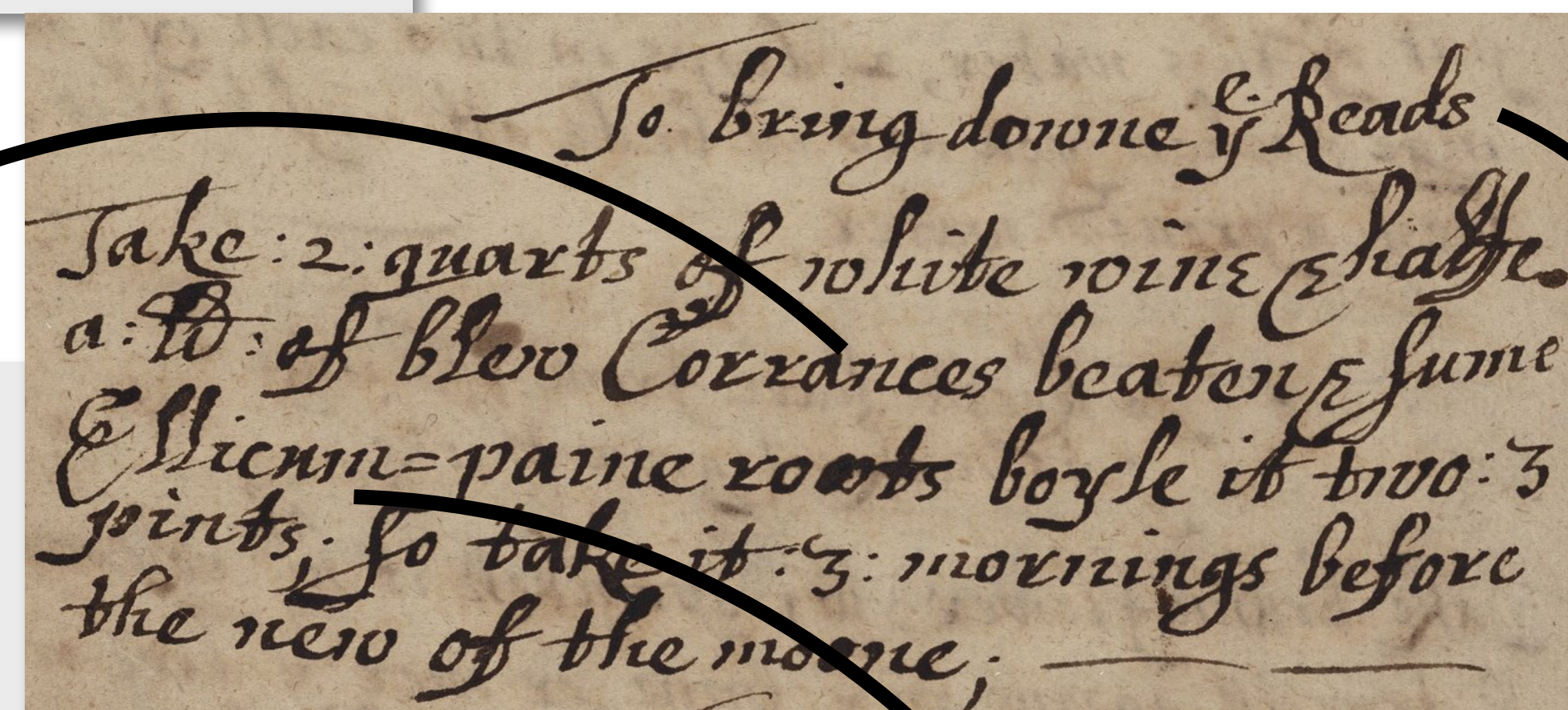
**Transcription:**  
Mrs Adkins  
if a woman miss of her longing  
whin shee is with Child  
when hur paine is uppone hur take a new  
layd egge & beat it with some sinamon water  
soe giue it hur to drinke;

### Cultural History

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the verbal phrase "miss of" meant "fails to get." Some cultural history is required to explain why a woman's failure get something she craves during pregnancy is a medical emergency. The answer can be explained through the materialist psychology of the time. A woman's imagination was thought to have a profound influence on a fetus. Birthmarks, for example, were called "longing marks."

### Unrecorded variants

The Oxford English Dictionary records many variants, but most manuscripts have many un-recorded variants such as "Corranes" (currants). Solving these requires a creative phonic approach, a good sense of the linguistic possibility, and sometimes a creative use of Google's predictive engine. The result is original discovery and a contribution to the future of the Oxford English Dictionary.



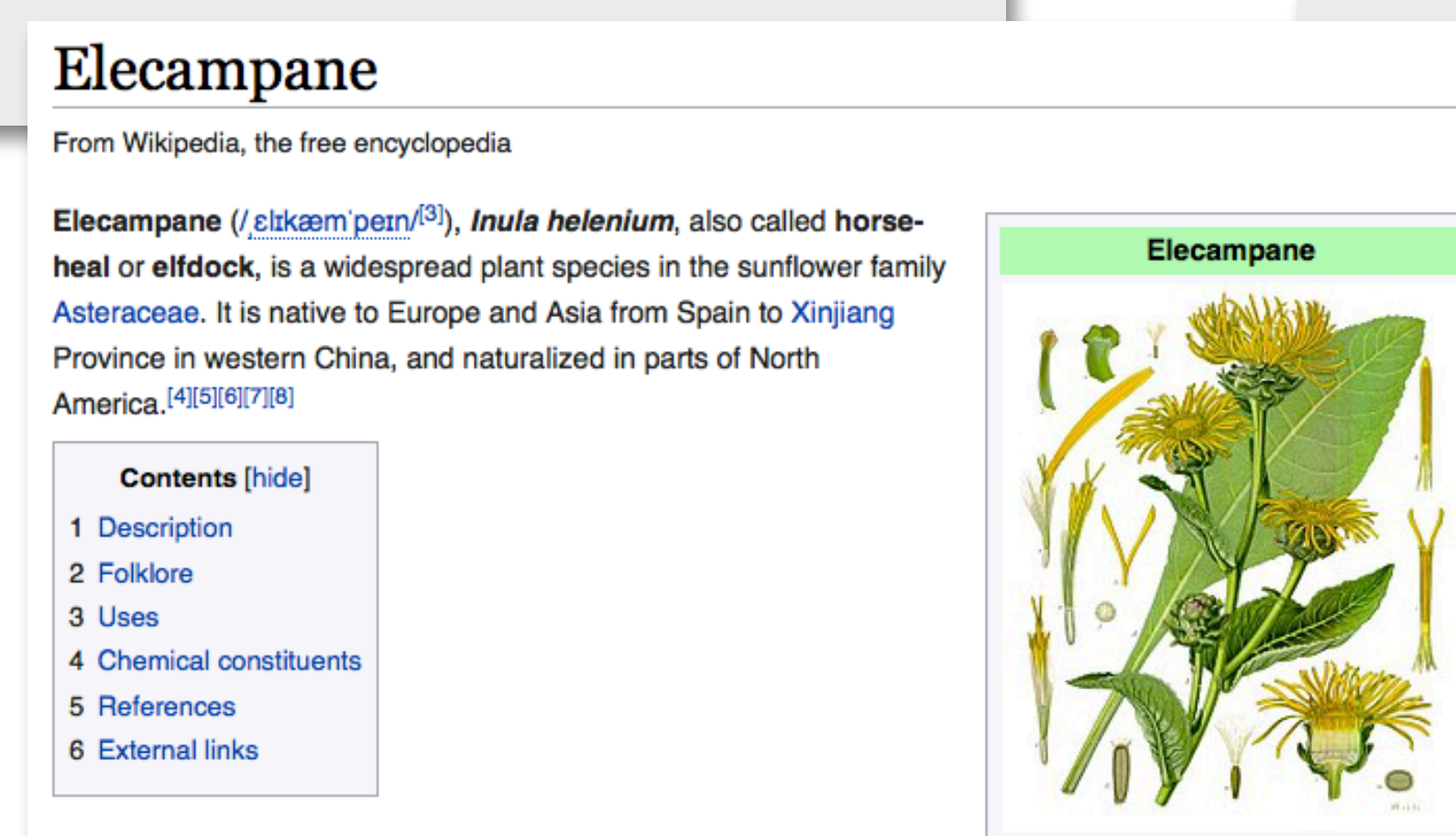
**Transcription:**  
To bring downe the Reads  
Take: 2: quarts of white wine & half  
a: lb: of blew Corranes beaten & some  
Ellicum-paine roots boyle it two: 3  
pints. so take it ;3: mornings before  
the new of the moone;

### Lexicography

"Reads" is "Reds": menstruation, especially excessive. English spelling was not standardized until recently, and early documents are full of oddly spelled words. Figuring these out requires the Oxford English Dictionary and a sound phonic approach to reading. Pedagogical research suggests that this process improves students reading skills across the board.

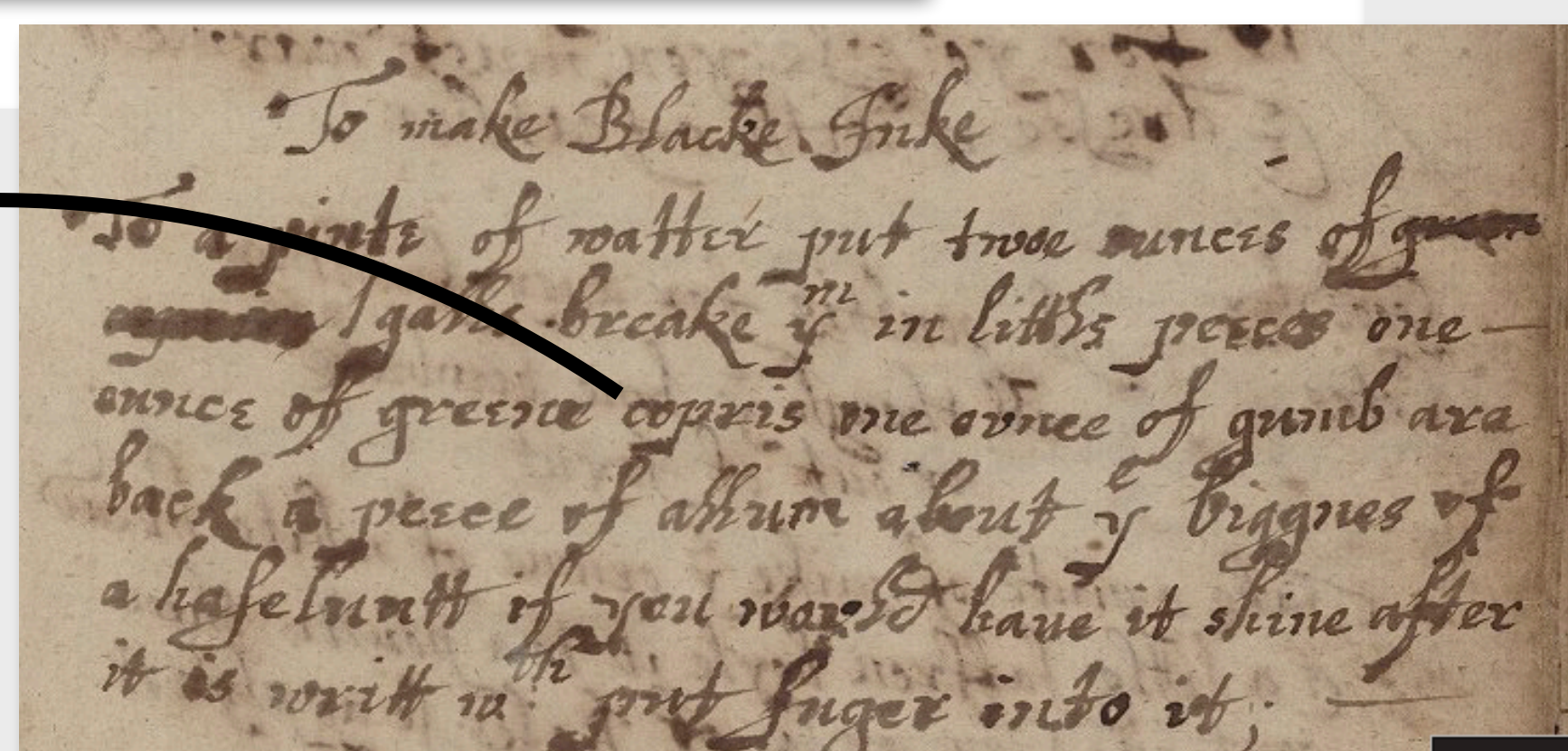
### Ethno-pharmacology

"Ellicum-paine root" is elecampane. Understanding the relatively mild pharmacology of elecampane helps explain that this recipe is designed to reduce excessive menstruation and not, as an abortifacient, to *cause* menstruation (one meaning of "bring down").



### Chemistry

Deciphering the ingredients in many recipes requires a basic sense of the likely chemicals and the processes used in the period. "Green copris" is iron sulfate.



**Transcription:** To make Blacke Inke  
To a pinte of water put two ounces of gum  
xxxx galls breake them in little peeces one  
ounce of greene copris one ounce of gum ara  
back a pece of allum about y biggnes of  
a haselnutt if you would have it shine after  
it is writt with put suger into it;

### Experiential Learning

Recipes can be recreated, a recognized form of original scholarship that tends to engage students' attention.



## SKILLS LEARNED

Transcription of early material is not just a mechanical process. Understanding a difficult text requires the attention to detail and wide-ranging research. It fits perfectly with our English department's mission of teaching students by introducing them to "complex problems shaped and solved by language." Students must demonstrate amateur familiarity with

- Lexicography
- History
- Ethno-pharmacology
- Botany
- Mathematics
- Theology
- Basic Latin
- Chemistry

## INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

Transcribing manuscripts is a labor-intensive process, often requiring significant expertise. The solution is crowdsourcing, with multiple transcribers working on every document. Zooniverse has been one solution, with projects like "Shakespeare's World," but in Zooniverse the individual transcriber can feel alienated from the product, fed random snippets of text. The Folger Library's Early Modern Manuscripts Online (EMMO) has developed a collaborative software solution, Dromio, that allows more deliberate and visible collaboration. The Early Modern Recipes Online Collective (EMROC) began using Dromio two years ago as a tool for its biannual collaborative "transcribathon," open to all participants including undergraduates.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License