

THE MOTHER'S MARK:
REPRESENTATIONS OF MATERNAL INFLUENCE IN MIDDLE ENGLISH
POPULAR ROMANCE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation investigates fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances in English as they struggle with the complicated question of maternal influence, collectively constructed by intersecting, yet often contradictory discourses and interests. I argue that for Chaucer and the late medieval poets who wrote *Octavian*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Melusine*, the genre of the family romance proved particularly conducive to exploring the status of maternal influence and contribution in the context of these political, medical and religious contexts in their poems. In this project, I argue that not only is biological maternity and its significance interrogated in these romances, but that romance, especially the so-called "family romances" that gained in popularity in the later Middle Ages, with their narrativization of the vicissitudes of genealogy, offered poets an appropriate vehicle for meditating on the problems mothers posed to patriarchal genealogies—and, in some cases, the solutions they offered. Religious and medical texts often located maternal influence as a source of deviance, even monstrosity. Yet *Octavian*, *Sir Gowther*, Chaucer's *Man of Law's* and *Clerk's Tales*, and the Middle English *Melusine* undermine and critique paternal claims of maternal monstrosity or pollution as both untrue and ultimately dangerous to the genealogical project of reproducing the patrilineal dynasty.

Modern scholarly discussions of medieval maternity tend to avoid the maternal body itself, identifying motherhood as a series of practices or identifying maternal images and metaphors as they were used by non-reproductive figures to describe their identities in other contexts. This project seeks to shift the register of an emerging conversation about medieval maternity to a more complicated level, one which acknowledges and references the complex and ambivalent social contexts in which maternal bodies and their influence were read and interpreted in the late Middle Ages. From the *Octavian*-poet, who acknowledges and refutes claims that the maternal body is a source of pollution, to the *Melusine*-poet's examination of the repercussions of recognizing and acknowledging maternal influence, late medieval poets approached the maternal body with profound ambivalence and an awareness of the social and religious stakes involved in representing that body and its significance to the community.

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Introduction: Maternal Traces in Middle English Romance

The medieval mother is an elusive figure, for both historiographical and evidentiary reasons. As Clarissa Atkinson notes, it is only in the recent past that maternity has acquired a history at all; until the last few decades, motherhood was defined as a universal and timeless biological fact and process, rather than as “an institution shaped by culture and subject to history.”¹ Yet in the late Middle Ages, the value of a mother’s contribution to her child was a question of some political and religious urgency. According to the Church, the Virgin Mary’s legacy of humanity to her son enabled salvation through the Incarnation. The Virgin and her celebrated maternity were venerated by church and laity, and her cult was widespread. Lay maternity, however, was viewed with much more ambivalence. Biblical authority identified childbearing as a condition of a woman’s salvation, yet pollution fears deriving from Leviticus proscriptions labeled the pregnant and postpartum body as profoundly polluted and dangerous to mother, child, and community.² Politically, the system of inheritance by patrilineal primogeniture required faithful and fruitful wives for lieges, yet these women were ideally constructed as vessels rather than contributors to their children.³ During the Hundred Years War, however, the transmission of bloodlines through the mother was at the heart of Edward III’s claim to the French crown, challenging the status of mother as mere vessel to her husband’s seed.⁴ The significance of maternal bodies as sources of inheritance, biological and financial, presented late medieval society with

¹ Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 6.

² Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England*, (Routledge: New York, 2002), xvi.

³ Sarah Hanley, “Mapping Rulership in the French Body Politic: Political Identity, Public Law and the King’s One Body,” *Historical Reflections/ Reflexions Historiques* 23(2)(1997): 136.

⁴ Hanley, 146.

often self-contradictory sets of standards, beliefs and practices which rendered simplistic dismissals or declarations of maternal influence difficult if not possible to clearly articulate. For Chaucer and the late medieval poets who wrote *Octavian*, *Sir Gowther*, and *Melusine*, the genre of the family romance proved particularly conducive to exploring the status of maternal influence and contribution in the context of these political, medical and religious contexts in their poems.

My dissertation investigates these fourteenth- and fifteenth-century romances as they struggle with the complicated question of maternal influence, collectively constructed by intersecting, yet often contradictory discourses and interests. To date, literary criticism of medieval romances has overlooked the maternal, occasionally asserting that such bodies are too physical, too embodied, too abject to be represented in romance, textual evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. This study explores the discourses relating to maternity and maternal experience within a patriarchal and patrilineal culture in an area that cultural historians have neglected: medieval romance. As Stephen Knight reminds us in his call for more intensive examination of the much-maligned Middle English romances, these romances provide “the best testimony to the hopes and fears of the medieval English ruling class, and a part of the cultural pressure on those who permitted them to rule.”⁵ Accordingly, in this dissertation, I treat medieval romance as a screen for projecting cultural fantasies, processing the difficulties of historical change, and instilling new ideologies of individual, familial, class, and social reproduction. Religious and medical texts often located maternal influence as a source of deviance, even monstrosity. I argue that biological maternity and its significance is

⁵ Stephen Knight, “The Social Function of the Middle English Romances,” in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology & History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 119.

interrogated in these texts and they ultimately undermine and critique claims of maternal monstrosity as untrue and ultimately dangerous to the genealogical project of reproducing the patrilineal dynasty.

This study seeks both to expand and complicate existing treatments of medieval motherhood. The rise in feminist inquiry in the last quarter of the twentieth century initiated a greater interest in historicizing and analyzing all aspects of female roles and experience, including maternity. Medieval studies were not exempt from this trend, and longer works focused on representations of medieval maternity, such as Caroline Walker Bynum's "Jesus as Mother" essay found in the collection of the same name (1982), and Clarissa Atkinson's *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (1991) began to explore medieval maternity and the ways that medieval individuals and groups understood and deployed the figure of the mother, often in religious contexts and communities. In 1996, a collection of essays devoted to the topic of *Medieval Mothering* was published and a web resource focused on "Medieval Maternity," featuring a searchable database of pertinent scholarship in the fields of literature, history, and art history, was launched in 2002. Medieval mothers and maternity had become visible to the scholarly community, who began to explore the history of motherhood in the Middle Ages.

When one begins to examine available scholarship concerning this topic, however, and in particular, longer projects devoted to maternity in the Middle Ages, a curious pattern emerges. For the most part, the recorded evidence of medieval mothers, their experiences and most particularly, their bodies disappear from the critical line of sight. For example, Bynum's seminal "Jesus as Mother" essay examines the

appropriation of maternal imagery and roles in Cistercian monastic discourse.⁶ These communities, she suggests, associated males, Christ and monks, and especially abbots with idealized maternity, while simultaneously denying any inherent correlation between the idealized maternal imagery attached to Christ and monks and the women who were literal mothers: “There is little evidence that the popularity of feminine and maternal imagery in the high Middle Ages reflects an increased respect for actual women by men. Saints’ lives might romanticize mothers, but there was in the general society no mystique of motherhood.”⁷ In other words, maternity provided a useful metaphor for the relationships between Christ and believer and between abbot and monks, but its metaphorical efficacy bore no relation to the status or imagery regarding mortal biological mothers. Likewise, Atkinson’s *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages*, the first English book-length treatment of motherhood in the Middle Ages, focuses greatly upon “spiritual motherhood” and “theological motherhood,” referring to the use of and appropriation of maternal roles by cloistered men and women and representations of Mary as mother and “queen-empress,” respectively.⁸ While Atkinson also devotes a chapter to “Physiological Motherhood,” for the most part, this chapter discusses patristic readings of classical theories of generation in order to ground the discussion of “spiritual motherhood” as drawing upon those discourses. Both of these works emphasize motherhood as it was appropriated as a metaphor defining the experience of people who either could not be or chose not to be biological mothers. Indeed, for both of these authors, idealized maternity (whether that of abbots, chaste nuns

⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) 112.

⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁸ Atkinson, 6.

and abbesses, or the Virgin Mary) becomes located in non-reproductive bodies defined in opposition to biological mothers.⁹

In more recent work focusing on maternity in the Late Middle Ages, questions of medieval constructions of biological maternity and its significance are largely set aside in favor of representations of maternal behavior or roles. In the introduction to their essay collection focusing on “Medieval Mothering” John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler note that the essays in their collection “combine to lay emphasis on nurturant behavior rather than strict sexual reproduction as the dominant theme in medieval mothering.”¹⁰ The title of their introduction, “Medieval Mothering, Medieval Motherers” highlights the association between maternity and the normative social behavior of “mothering,” which Parsons and Wheeler explicitly associate with nurturing.¹¹ This emphasis on behavior associated with mothers and mothering is useful in its efficacy in avoiding the biological essentialism and determinism which long rendered mothers ahistorical, yet can itself obscure the various contentious ways that maternal bodies—pregnant, parturant, post-partum, and nursing—signified within late medieval culture.

The evasion of maternal bodies from the critical gaze is a function not only of disciplinary preoccupations or concerns but also of a dearth of contemporary documentary evidence regarding those bodies. Because childbirth was considered one

⁹ Mary, of course, was understood as having given birth to Christ, yet theologians carefully delineated the significant distinctions between Mary’s miraculous gestation and birth and the more mundane and compromised bodies of other women, as Atkinson points out. See Atkinson, 111. Atkinson suggests that this dynamic becomes less prevalent from the early sixteenth century as biological maternity of women other than the Virgin no longer registers as incompatible with sanctity or beatification, as it did in the Middle Ages. See Atkinson, 195.

¹⁰ John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, “Introduction: Medieval Mothering, Medieval Motherers,” in *Medieval Mothering*, eds. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996, xv.

¹¹ Not all of the essays in this collection eschew the biological component of maternity and its representation; essays by William F. MacLehose and John Carmi Parsons directly engage with constructions of maternal physicality within late Medieval culture.

aspect of “women’s secrets,” for the most part women were segregated from men during late pregnancy, childbirth, and a period of some time after birth.¹² Male curiosity, even on the part of a husband, regarding the secrets of childbirth and maternal bodies was considered ill-befitting the status of a man, even indecent, and in some cases, illegal.¹³ Thus, most extant information most directly dealing with medieval maternity and maternal bodies tends to come from medieval commentaries and translations of classical medical texts, and from gynecological manuals. Even authors of gynecological texts worried that should a man read such a work, he might go on to defame or insult women.¹⁴ Lack of male experience or knowledge of birthing practices led to the relative paucity of historical documentation regarding the practices of childbirth, gossiping, and lying-in.¹⁵ Jennifer Hellwarth suggests that the “lack of traditional documentary evidence” regarding the practices of childbed, childbirth, and churching has for the most part caused any discussion of medieval and early modern maternal bodies to be “subsumed” within larger discussions of gender and sexuality.¹⁶ As such, she notes, the critical discussion has been somewhat limited as yet.

Romances offer a site where we can see different coexisting discourses about maternity emerging, often in tension with each other. Recent scholarship on romance in general and Middle English romance in particular has emphasized romance’s particular interest in both gender and the problem of generation through legitimate lineages. For

¹² See Chapter 1 for a more detailed description of birthing rituals, including the segregation of the lying-in room from males and the isolation of this site from other parts of the household.

¹³ Myriam Greilsammer, “The Midwife, the Priest, and the Physician: the Subjugation of Midwives in the Low Countries at the End of the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991), 290.

¹⁴ Hellwarth, 12.

¹⁵ Hellwarth, xv; See also Becky R. Lee, “A Company of Women and Men: Men’s Recollections of Childbirth in Medieval England,” *Journal of Family History* 27(2002): 92.

¹⁶ Hellwarth, xv.

example, Susan Crane identifies romance as “the medieval genre in which courtship, marriage, lineal concerns, primogeniture, and sexual maturation are most fully at issue.”¹⁷ Felicity Riddy notes the particular interest of Middle English romance in “the crises and hiatuses of the nuclear family and the lineage.”¹⁸ Helen Cooper associates the emergence of romance itself with the transition of inheritance patterns to a system of strict primogeniture, suggesting that romance provided an authorizing set of narratives which validated the shift in familial and property arrangements.¹⁹ The ideological demands of patriarchy under the system of primogeniture required the appearance of genealogical continuity whereby “kings beget true sons who take over the reins of government smoothly, [and] society is represented as stable and the system that rules it as unproblematic.”²⁰ Laura Barefield identifies this claim as a particular demand not only of the genre of the genealogy, but also of romance and chronicles, each of which purports not only to record history but also to justify it as underpinned by ideological and divine legitimacy.²¹

Romance’s dominance over other secular genres suggests the intensity of interest that these themes inspired in late medieval English audiences, and the variety of treatments of the issues of gender, sexuality, genealogy and family relationships marks romance as a

¹⁷ Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁸ Riddy, 235.

¹⁹ Helen Cooper. *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 326. Donald Maddox, following Duby, has made a similar claim regarding the emergence of the genre of the genealogy. See Donald Maddox, *Fictions of Identity in Medieval France*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.

²⁰ Laura D. Barefield, *Gender and History in Medieval English Romance and Chronicle*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), 13.

²¹ Ibid.

genre which not only transmitted and perpetuated existing ideas about these topics, but which also offered challenges to and critiques of those ideas.²²

Barefield's juxtaposition of romance and genealogy offers a useful point of departure for exploring romance's particular engagement with genealogy and the narrative construction of families and lineages. If the form of genealogy often elides individuals, enforcing a sort of "mythic homogeneity" between members of successive generations as well as a somewhat narratively stripped-down format, romance, especially the family or domestic romance follows a similar ideological imperative as the genealogy but focuses specifically on episodes concerning a particular generation or short series of generations whose tribulations appear to threaten the smooth surface of genealogical continuity.²³ [*this is useful*] Emerging as a dominant secular genre in England in the early fourteenth century and increasing in popularity over the next three centuries, the romance allowed the elaboration of potential threats to legitimate lineages and the ensuing spectacle of the triumphant emergence of the patriline.²⁴ In these narratives, the featured bloodline shows itself not merely remaining intact, but in fact enhanced by its brushes with disaster and newly justified by the display in the latest generation of the virtues which elevated the family in the first place. For this reason, the particular interest that the family romance has in the structure of the family is in its ability to be organized in terms of a bloodline most clearly represented by the latest generation's scion, the son. Felicity Riddy thus identifies the primary romance construction of the family as a patriline and the resultant focus on the heir as hero overcoming the dangers which

²² Cooper, 6. See also Crane, 6.

²³ Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Genealogy: Form and Function in Medieval Historical Narrative," *History and Theory* 22(1983): 50.

²⁴ Cooper, 29-30.

threaten to prevent the reproduction of the next generation. In these tales, she reminds us, a family represents not only members of a household connected by economic and affective ties, but also and perhaps more pertinently

a lineage that is the route for the transmission of property and privilegeFrom the point of view of the lineage the son's role was crucial because his marriage ensured its continuity; the marriage of the daughter who inherited took the property to another family. All this is the stuff of Middle English romance; many of its plots are derived from the crises and hiatuses of the nuclear family and the lineage²⁵

Consequently, in family romance, the male heir to the primary bloodline of the narrative is generally the “prime focus of sympathy” due to the genre’s “concern . . . with true inheritance, the rightful passing on of land and power underwritten by Providence.”²⁶ The lack or loss of a male heir is presented as an acute personal and political crisis, and is indeed the starting point for many Middle English romances of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Surviving manuscript evidence suggests that at the turn of the fourteenth century, romances in English began to appear with increasing frequency, many of them focusing on women and children, and the scattering and reconstitution of noble and royal families.²⁷ We might attribute the increasing popularity of this genre at this time in part at least to what Atkinson has identified as an increasing interest in both the Holy Family and by extension, secular families in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries.²⁸ While

²⁵ Felicity Riddy, “Middle English Romance: Family, Romance, Intimacy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235.

²⁶ Noël James Menuge, “A Few Home Truths: The Medieval Mother as Guardian in Romance and Law,” in *Medieval Women and the Law*, ed. Noël James Menuge, (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000), 94; Cooper, 324.

²⁷ Cooper, 29-30; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 185.

²⁸ Atkinson, 144-5. See also Sue Niebryzdowski, “Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in*

Atkinson sees a link between religious discourses regarding the holy family and a growing cultural interest in secular families and family roles, scholars often take care to distance literary representations of women in general and mothers in particular from both religious discourse and from lived experiences and attitudes. For example, Bynum suggests that we can find “little evidence that the popularity of feminine and maternal imagery in the high Middle Ages reflects an increased respect for actual women by men.”²⁹ Lay and clerical devotion of Mary, and imagery associating Christ with maternity, do not, she argues, necessarily translate to positive associations between mortal mothers and Christ and his own mother. Instead, the “true” maternity exhibited by these divine mothers was often read in opposition to the maternity of lay mothers.

Likewise, in literary criticism of romance, scholars often are careful to draw a line between romance depictions of women and the attitudes toward and experiences of actual aristocratic women in the late Middle Ages. Critics of romance often vacillate between lauding what they perceive as romance’s less misogynistic treatment of women as compared to clerical writings and pointing out that even the limited agency granted to female figures in romance would be unrealistic to find in the actual lives of medieval women. For example, Jennifer Fellows suggests that in romances, “we find evidence that the period was somewhat more sympathetic to female predicaments and less misogynistic than a study of its clerical writings alone might lead us to believe.”³⁰ However, Fellows also cautions us that while “romance mothers often display a good deal of strength and

the Middle Ages and Renaissance, eds. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 196 for a brief discussion of the increased interest in both secular and religious writing in the role and function of maternity.

²⁹ Bynun, “Jesus as Mother,” 143.

³⁰ Jennifer Fellows, “Mothers in Middle English Romance,” in *Women and Literature in Britain 1150-1500*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56.

dignity, exercising control over their own and their children's destinies," the types of influence these characters wield "would have found little if any counterpart in real life."³¹ Fellows' simultaneous claim for romance's relatively favorable treatment of women and detachment from historical realism recalls the long trend in literary histories which simultaneously labels romance a feminine genre, linking romance to women as both patrons and audience while associating romance's untruths with those expected of women, matching "the relatively low creditability of romance's lies and wonders to feminine identity."³²

Even when critics do note the prominence of women in romance, and particularly as mothers, they often seem to approach the subject with a palpable sense of disappointed resignation, noting that the favorable representation of such figures not only fail to correlate with the [*recorded*] lived experiences of medieval aristocratic women, but also seem merely to serve blatantly patriarchal ends. Thus, David Salter suggests that "even those very restricted roles and identities that are available to women [in romance] tend to be governed by masculine codes and concerns" and therefore, he concludes, the favorably represented romance woman "presents absolutely no challenge to masculine authority."³³ Similarly, Elizabeth Archibald notes that "romances are overwhelmingly concerned with male values," and Fellows reminds us that the "traditional themes and motifs [of Middle English romance] are made to serve the ends of a distinctly patriarchal ethos and to

³¹ Ibid., 55-6.

³² Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10.

³³ David Salter, "'Born to Thralldom and Penance': Wives and Mothers in Middle English Romance," in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne, (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 44, 58.

reaffirm patrilineal values.”³⁴ In each case, there seems to be a sense that romances which focus on maternal characters or roles represent lost opportunities to offer less patriarchal or conservative representations of women or mothers. In a related vein, the critical understanding of questions of fertility, reproduction, and maternity as simply motivated and formed by patriarchal concerns limits critics’ ability to approach romance treatments of mothers with anything other than dismissal or disappointment. For example, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski remarks that “Aside from hagiography and miracle collections the literature of the time gives almost no place to mothers . . . except to dramatize the tragic birth of a hero, . . . or to depict families in connection with the creation and perpetuation of a lineage.”³⁵ Isolating discussions of maternity from all connection to either the product of maternity (the tragic birth of a hero) or a major context through which maternity was discussed and interpreted in late medieval culture (the creation and perpetuation of a lineage), unnecessarily limits the ability to interpret motherhood where and when it is represented, and additionally circumscribes the kinds of analysis brought to bear on the subject. In other words, if we merely toss up our hands in exasperation that medieval childbirth and maternity were seen within a larger context directly tied to patriarchal and patrilineal agendas and look no further, we decline to analyze the subject in all its complexity where we can find it because we assume that such constructions, by virtue of being influenced by patriarchal concerns, must be both

³⁴ Elizabeth Archibald, “Contextualizing Chaucer’s Constance: Romance Modes and Family Values,” in *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*, eds M. Teresa Tavormina and R.F. Yeager (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995), 162; Fellows, 55. For another essay, like Archibald’s which discusses this dynamic with particular attention to the emphasis upon female vulnerability, see Amanda Hopkins, “Female Vulnerability as Catalyst in the Middle English Breton Lays,” in *The Matter of Identity in Medieval Romance*, ed. Phillipa Hardman, (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002), 43-4.

³⁵ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 14.

unambiguously simple and essentially a known entity, an assumption often belied by the texts when more closely examined.

In this dissertation, I argue that these five Middle English romances each examine the significance of the aristocratic mother and her position in late Medieval families and communities. Each invokes the various fears associated with the maternal body—pollution, deceit, miscegenation, illegitimacy, and monstrosity—and then presents its audience with the consequences of those fears, whether founded or not. Ultimately, these romances critique the attempt to avoid or nullify maternal contribution, suggesting that such attempts are both futile and ultimately self-defeating, derailing lineage altogether. My dissertation focuses on these romances, which often attempt to organize family relationships and crises through narrative and repeatedly reveal the mother's contribution to her children as a source of anxious scrutiny. Informing my project is Susan Crane's insight that "Like all social representations gender has a history, and literature has a prominent role in that history of asserting and modifying what it means to live in gendered identity."³⁶ By examining representations of medieval maternity within their various intersecting historical contexts, I argue, we can come to a much more nuanced understanding of the late medieval construction of the maternal body and role than has previously been offered.

My first chapter, "Sacred and Secular Conceptions of Childbirth and *Octavian*," analyzes the fourteenth-century popular romance Northern *Octavian*, focusing on the birthing room as a site of conflicting secular and sacred discourses of containment. In this chapter, I read *Octavian* in the context of contemporary aristocratic and Church rituals which each served to contain the pregnant and postpartum body, if to different ends.

³⁶ Crane, 6-7.

Whereas the ritual of churching was meant to reintegrate the postpartum body into the community of church and neighborhood by purifying it from the sexual and spiritual contamination caused by pregnancy and birth, aristocratic practices of concealment and isolation of the pregnant body tended to privilege the privacy and autonomy of the pregnant woman and the community of women who served her in the birthing chamber, acknowledging them as important safeguards to legitimate succession. *Octavian* interrogates the intersection of these two characterizations of the birthing room, weighing the claims of sexual and lineal contamination against the promise of productive feminine secrecy. I argue that in its repeated enactments of intrusions into the birthing room, this romance imagines the maternal body, which it links to lineal continuity, as being threatened by male curiosity. Pollution, frequently associated in medical and religious texts with the pregnant and post-partum body, becomes a characteristic related instead to the inquisitive paternal intruder.

Nursing, like pregnancy blurred the boundaries between maternal and infant bodies, and thus became a source of anxiety concerning undue maternal influence. In my second chapter, “Sacred and Profane Cannibalism and the Reeducation of *Sir Gowther*,” I consider the question of oral incorporation of the mother through nursing in the late fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gowther*. This romance draws persistent parallels between Gowther’s early vampiristic breast-feeding, which results in the deaths of nine nurses and the mutilation of his mother, with his later parodic enactment of communion, in which he is fed bread and wine from the mouths of dogs. By linking both of these forms of blood-drinking with cannibalistic violence, *Sir Gowther* anxiously explores the ramifications of consuming another’s blood, including the alternately desired and feared

result of oral incorporation, whereby the eater takes on aspects of the eaten. While the close of the romance implicitly suggests that the eucharist might be adopted as a corrective replacement for mother's milk and blood, it also warns that such a disentanglement of Christ's body and maternal bodies threatens the salvific logic of the eucharist itself. By refiguring conversion as a transition from cannibalistic nursing to eucharistic feeding, the *Gowther*-poet examines the analogous relations between a mother's nourishing body and Christ's body as holy meal, defamiliarizing eucharistic practices at the center of lay piety at this time.

In the final two chapters of this study, I shift my focus away from material exchanges between maternal and infant bodies to the representation of maternal genealogies as alternative sites of identity formation and patriarchal resistance and denial of maternal genealogies. Maternal genealogies continually surface and assert themselves in romance, and the resultant desire of characters to suppress or derail these impulses are frequently proven futile and destructive, not only to the women involved in reproducing a bloodline, but also to their husband's dynasties. Politically, the most fraught form of maternal inheritance was lineal, the transmission of bloodline from one generation to another. Thus in my third chapter, "'A Mooder He Hath, But Fader Hath He Noon:' Constructions of Genealogy in the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Man of Law's Tale*," I turn to the examinations of patrilineal logic in Chaucer's *Man of Law's* and *Clerk's Tales*. In this chapter I argue that Chaucer critiques the monotonous logic of patrilineal primogeniture as it deracinates daughters, subjects them to exile, and threatens them with incest. The slanderous accusations that Constance's child is a "horrible feendly creature" and that Janicula's blood has contaminated Griselda's children both participate in a discourse

which designates all maternal contribution as “other” and therefore monstrous.

Moreover, Chaucer suggests that the patriarchal desire to eradicate maternal influence encourages figurative and literal incest in an effort to bypass the threateningly foreign body of the wife altogether. While the attempt to eradicate maternal transmission seems ultimately successful in the *Clerk’s Tale* and undermined by the *Man of Law’s Tale*, Chaucer’s critique of the desire to avoid maternal influence as inherently threatening to dynastic continuity defines the attempt as both futile and perverse.

While Chaucer suggests that patriarchal logic both underpins and undermines the genealogical project, in the late fifteenth-century Middle English *Melusine* the genealogical project itself is represented as inherently unstable, even futile, existing primarily in the imaginations of men and women who must work hard to fill in the inevitable gaps of the system and to overlook its exuberant excesses. My final chapter examines *Melusine* as it meditates upon the elaborate system of strategies deployed to obscure maternal contributors in patriarchal genealogies. While *Melusine* explicitly presents itself as a genealogical romance which will relate the founding of the Lusignan line and the narrative of its fairy progenitor, proper genealogical form is obsessively undermined at every turn; biological and economic inheritance are separated and male heirs are nearly impossible to find, leaving Christian nations at constant risk of Saracen invasion. The only apparent exception to this breakdown is in Melusine’s monstrous line, which produces ten male heirs to supplement the shortcomings of other dynasties. While the romance explicitly articulates the shortcomings of patrilineal primogeniture, as well as the multiple strategies of self-delusion which serve to maintain its apparent coherence as a system of maintaining political stability, it suggests that, as long as

maternal influence is not explicitly acknowledged, it can indeed prop up what is clearly a faltering system. *Melusine* suggests that maternal transmission, associated with fairy power and excess, is absolutely vital to the production of heirs, yet that public recognition of maternal contribution is fatal to bloodlines. From *Octavian*'s calumniated and hapless Empress to *Melusine*'s seemingly all-powerful matriarch, these romances expose the late medieval fascination with maternity and the various contexts through which understandings of maternity were negotiated.

Sacred and Secular Conceptions of Childbirth and *Octavian*¹

The motivating crisis of the mid-fourteenth century tail-rhyme romance *Octavian* is caused by the violent intrusion of the eponymous Emperor into his wife's birth-chamber, or lying-in room. He intrudes at the instigation of his conniving mother, who has bribed a kitchen servant to join the delirious and exhausted new mother in her bed – nude. Upon his entrance, Octavian jumps to the obvious though erroneous conclusion that his wife is an adulteress. He deals with the situation with considerable dispatch, immediately beheading the terrified servant and tossing the severed head at his awakening wife. The slandered empress thus emerges from a premonitory nightmare only to enter a far more horrifying reality of violence, blood, and disgrace. This intrusion precipitates the central crisis of the plot, the scattering of the royal family and consequent endangering of the patrilineal line due to the violation and misrepresentation of the Empress' lying-in room. Octavian's entrance into his wife's lying-in room breaks the codes through which births, particularly aristocratic births, were culturally constructed and represented in medieval culture. Aristocratic births were configured within a matrix

¹ The Middle English (Northern) *Octavian* romance exists in two extant manuscripts, The Lincoln Thornton Manuscript (Lincoln, Dean and Chapter Library, MS 91, and the closely-related Cambridge Manuscript (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38. A third edition exists in a fragment of an early print, Huntington (San Marino, Huntington Library 14615), but less than half of the romance is preserved in the fragment. Editions of each of these manuscripts are found in the facing-page *Octovian*. Frances McSparran, ed. *Octovian* EETS o.s. 289. (London: Oxford University Press, 1986). A related Middle English Octavian romance, commonly known as "Southern Octavian," also exists in a single manuscript, Cotton Caligula A. II, available in an edited edition, *Octovian Emperor*. Frances McSparran, ed. *Octovian Emperor* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1979). The Southern version is less linear in its description of the abductions of the sons and their subsequent adventures, and also offers a much more elaborate accounting of Clement's adventures with the Sultan's flying horse. Internal evidence of the Lincoln Thornton manuscript suggests that it was copied in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, in the northeast Midlands, and the Cambridge manuscript later in that century, near Essex. McSparran suggests that both versions of the Northern *Octavian* were probably composed during the second half of the fourteenth century (42). The Lincoln Thornton manuscript includes more details of Florent's narrative, including expanded episodes from the giant slaying, Florent's knighting, and Clement's behavior at the feast celebrating the knighting. Unless otherwise marked by "C.," all citations will refer to the Lincoln Thornton text, following the EETS edition edited by Frances McSparran.

of gendered and political beliefs concerning the significance of the work performed within the lying-in room, work that could not be authorized or recognized if the crucial integrity of the space allotted for childbearing was broken. The poem does not allow this primal crisis to disappear; violent male intruders repeatedly disrupt this traditionally female zone at key moments throughout the romance. These repetitions reconstruct the violated area of the lying-in room and the ambivalent interpretations of the place of women in both religion and the state played out in this contested space, a space both endangering and endangered which is adversely marked by discourses of contamination and sexual threat that ultimately threaten the integrity of the state. In its exploration of the legitimacy and consequences of ambivalent and ultimately self-contradictory sacred and secular discourses concerning the status of the lying-in room, *Octavian* explicates the complexities of identity available to the medieval aristocratic mother, as well as the resultant equivocality of her political and spiritual status within her community. Ultimately, by staging an unjust violation of the lying-in room which takes to extremes the cultural suspicions centering on female sexuality in general and the reproductive body in particular, *Octavian* challenges both secular and sacred discursive and ritual practices which malign or undermine the validity of the lying-in room and the bodies that occupy and define it. The redramatizations of this first violent intrusion which are enacted later in the romance continue to interrogate aristocratic and ecclesiastic discourses which constructed the pregnant and postpartum body as the site of sexual, and thus, lineal contamination.

Octavian shares its concerns with the intersection of family, gender and political stability through the production of heirs with a larger category of romances which focus

on women and children, and often feature the estrangement or separation of aristocratic families and the consequent problem of recognizing true heirs.² As such, this romance includes the common themes of the falsely accused aristocratic wife, the exile (through exposure to the sea or wilderness) of wife and or heirs, the unwitting reunion of father and heirs, and the eventual production of physical, magical, or divine proof of the heir's legitimacy – all elements which would be familiar to the audiences of late-medieval English romance. Geraldine Heng has suggested that this subgenre of romance be called “family romance,” “to stretch and complicate” Freud's use of the same term.³ Helen Cooper notes the fourteenth-century “flurry” of English-language romances and the overall “concern of the genre with true inheritance, the rightful passing on of land and power underwritten by Providence.”⁴ These romances, critics have suggested, often feature women more prominently than martial or chivalric romances, though the representation of women prioritize conventional female behavior and virtues.⁵ David

² Middle English popular romances almost obsessively return to the problems and vicissitudes of producing and retaining viable heirs to continue valued bloodlines. *Sir Gowther* and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* also directly address the problems caused by the lack of an heir, *Melusine*, *Emaré* and Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* feature claims of unsuitable, monstrous heirs, *Athelston* includes the violent slaying of the heir while still in his mother's body, and the *King of Tars* focuses on the racially hybrid production of a lump of flesh rather than a child and the subsequent transformation of the lump into a child, and in *Cheuelere Assigne*, the seven children of the king are threatened by accusations of adulterous and bestial conception, attempted murder, and magical transformation into swans.

³ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 29, 185. Felicity Riddy also notes the persistent centrality of families to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century popular English romance, but avoids the term “family romance,” preferring instead to associate the romances with the idea of the “domestic.” See Felicity Riddy, “Middle English Romance: Family, Romance, Intimacy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235-52.

⁴ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 324. Cooper links the rise of romance in Europe with the rise of primogeniture, suggesting that the genre and the legal practice each strives “to make the same point, that there will always be one claimant whose title can be proved rightful ahead of all rivals,” 326.

⁵ Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 185; David Salter, “Born to Thralldom and Penance”: Wives and Mothers in Middle English Romance,” in *Writing Gender and Genre in Medieval Literature: Approaches to Old and Middle English Texts*, ed. Elaine Treharne. (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 44; Jennifer Fellows,

Salter has identified *Octavian* as a “representative” and “typical” example of Middle English popular romance, “particularly in its treatment of women within its highly conventional narrative form.”⁶ I do not disagree with this point, as the romance’s rendition of familial crisis and resolution clearly seems to follow a recognizable pattern of convention that is well-established. I would argue, however, that *Octavian*’s repeated attention to social rituals of reproduction and political legitimation takes these familiar concerns and tropes and focuses attention specifically on the tensions inherent in contemporary representations and treatments of childbirth and the rituals through which late medieval people and institutions, both secular and religious, experienced, constructed and understood the significance of women’s bodies and childbirth. These tensions in particular, the romance suggests, endanger the project of reproduction and thus political stability.

Octavian seems to offer a sort of catalogue of the potential difficulties and trials attendant upon patrilineality as a system of aristocratic male reproduction. Infertility, infidelity, slander and deception, murder, misrecognition, abduction, abandonment, and, later, death in battle are each options which the poem offers as potential barriers to the smooth transmission of patrilineage. The romance begins with the quandary of the eponymous Emperor, whose wife has failed to conceive after several years of marriage. At his wife’s suggestion, he erects an abbey and dedicates it to the Virgin Mary, with the desired result of a speedy pregnancy. However, Mary’s apparent intercession on behalf of the Empress’s conception does not ensure the smooth arrival and legitimation of the

‘Mothers in Middle English Romance,’ in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1550*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 43-4.

⁶ David Salter, ‘Born to Thralldom and Penance,’ 44. Salter also notes the popularity of the Octavian narrative throughout medieval and early modern Europe, noting versions surviving in English French, Italian, German, Icelandic, and Polish, 45.

newborn heirs. The Empress's delivery is very difficult, leaving not only the exhausted mother, but also her companions, swooning and unconscious. This provides an opportunity for Octavian's mother to trick her son into believing her slander regarding his wife's infidelity, which results in the murder of the servant and banishment of the Empress and her twin sons. Both children are abducted by wild animals in the wilderness. Octavian, the elder son, is soon reunited with his mother, while Florent, the younger, is eventually adopted by Clement, a Parisian merchant, and predictably shows frequent signs of his inherently noble nature. After defeating a Saracen giant menacing Paris, Florent is brought to the attention of his father, Octavian, and they go to war against the Saracens together. Soon, however, both are captured, and from their safe haven in Jerusalem, the Empress and the younger Octavian learn of the captivity of their long estranged family members. With the lion who first abducted and then nurtured him, as well as Jerusalem's armies, Octavian's heir rides to his father and brother's rescue, bringing his calumniated mother in his retinue. Upon the emperor Octavian's release, his son reintroduces his parents, and the Empress fortuitously recognizes in the mysterious young Florent her infant son carried away long ago by an ape. Reunited, the family travels to Rome to find along the way that the emperor's mother, learning that her deception was revealed, has cut her throat in shame. All enjoy a hearty laugh at this turn of events and the romance ends with the triumphant entrance of the reconstituted royal family into Rome.

The particular concern of Northern *Octavian* with the problems of perpetuating a continuous patrilineal line results in an unusual amount of representation and scrutiny of the events and mechanics surrounding medieval aristocratic childbirth. The various stages

of lying-in and birth, churching, or ritual purification and thanksgiving a month after birth, and post-churching feasting and revelry are all noted and represented, generally as they go horribly awry, destabilizing the continuity and security that each is meant to enact within its communal context. In particular, the poem represents the practices of lying-in and churching feasts as being subverted and sabotaged, virtually guaranteeing the derailment of primogeniture, if not patrilineage itself. By presenting scenes of botched rituals of social legitimation following childbirth and the catastrophic results of their disruption, Northern *Octavian* emphasizes the crucial role these practices—some obscured from sight, others ostentatiously performed before the community—played in the communal production of political and social stability, as well as the anxieties about this stability that these practices both undermine and enact. Thus, this chapter examines first the domestic and then the ecclesiastical practices through which medieval families and communities experienced and interpreted childbirth (lying-in, gossiping, churching and feasting in particular) and then juxtaposes these normative rites with their disruption in Northern *Octavian*. In its rendering of a Roman dynastic crisis, *Octavian* not only repeats familiar conventions and tropes of the family romance and other genres, but also draws attention to specific anxieties the particular treatment of these tropes illuminate in this romance: the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory political, scientific and religious meanings of the pregnant and postpartum body as constructed by public and private rituals and representations of childbirth and its aftermath, the role of the birthing community in producing an heir, and the vulnerability to individuals, bloodlines and social structures that these various medieval birthing practices often attempted to

minimize, but which were paradoxically made evident by the insistence upon the very need for those practices.

Secular Rituals of Aristocratic Childbirth

The emperor Octavian's intrusion into the lying-in chamber where his wife has just given birth, is bloody and violent, marked by both horror and nightmare. The poem juxtaposes his entrance and subsequent decapitation of the servant with his unconscious wife's "dolefull swevenynge," delirious nightmares of her sons' abduction by a dragon, foreshadowing their eventual abductions by an ape, a lioness, and a griffin (57). Much emphasis is placed at this moment in the text upon the blood that splashes from the servant and his severed head onto the bed and the sleeping empress. After the killing of the servant, "Alle was beblede with blode," a transformation of royal blood into contamination, staining everything within the area, literally and metaphorically (159). Soon thereafter, as the empress awakens, the first thing she sees is "fle clothes all byblede," rather than her husband or the decapitated corpse of the servant (179). The repeated references to the bloodiness of the scene, particularly the blood on the sheets, emphasize not only the terror of childbirth in general, but also and more importantly the peculiar horror arising from the double contamination of the lying-in room by out-of-place men who transform the site from one of domestic and civil reproduction to one of violent and terrifyingly gruesome death and disorder. The transformation of "the richese that scho [the Empress] in lay" into "the clothes all bybledde" signals a dramatic reverse from honor and potential into a nightmare of disgrace, death, and catastrophe centered specifically in the lying-in room (146, 179). The abject tableau of the prostrate body of the exhausted and now suicidal empress with her enraged husband standing over her,

decapitated head of the kitchen boy in hand, is abruptly closed off with the announcement of the uneasy, yet total silence which follows: “Wordis of this were spoken no mo” (184).

While the repeated attention to the bloody sheets of the birthing bed might suggest the trauma of childbirth, the excessiveness of the violence perpetrated there, as well as its source, points to the violation of a culturally-imposed site of female privacy, through Octavian’s deviant and violent entrance, an intrusion which seems to parallel the even more transgressive presence of the kitchen servant within the Empress’ bed. The presence of these men in the lying-in room functions not only as a violation of propriety, but also as the violation of the social codes forbidding both their presence and their acceptability as witnesses to what occurs within the lying-in room. The scene of derangement and dismemberment which ensues represents the similar state of the space of the invaded lying-in room, culturally defined by the containment of the female child-bearing body in a space of enclosed and inviolate femininity, a space doubly violated in *Octavian*, with disastrous results.

Late in her pregnancy, an aristocratic woman’s bedchamber (also that of her husband) would be converted into the lying-in room, a space characterized by the ritualized separation of the pregnant woman from the outside world.⁷ The moment of enclosure was not strictly regulated, but seems by the sixteenth century to have been loosely defined as between four and six weeks before expected delivery.⁸ The contained

⁷ Gail McMurray Gibson, “Blessing From Sun and Moon: Churching as Women’s Theatre,” *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in the Fifteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 144; see also Adrian Wilson “The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation,” *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. Valerie Fildes, (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁸ In terms of the woman’s retreat into the lying-in chamber, “All of the late fifteenth-century accounts of court ceremonials simply use the formula ‘when it plessithe the Queen to take to hir chambre’, or a variation upon it, to describe the withdrawal of the heavily pregnant queen from the court. A sixteenth-century document suggests that four to six weeks were normal.” (Kay Staniland, “Royal Entry into the

nature of the space was emphasized by its conversion and redefinition of boundaries through strategies of decoration and of gendered exclusion. Household expenditure records as well as letters and other documents reveal that new furniture was purchased often in the construction of the lying-in room and that the room was lavishly decorated in coordinated curtains, hangings and rugs, which were used to cover the floors, walls, and even the ceiling.⁹ The effect of these fabric boundaries was to fashion an enclosed and insulated space of reproduction located within the household, yet clearly considered a special site of isolation from it, sealed off from the normal functions of both household and state. The importance of the enclosure of this space and its protection from outside intrusion was emphasized by the recommended measure of stuffing keyholes with fabric or other substances to prevent violation of the lying-in room's integrity through peeping.¹⁰ This practice clearly suggests not only the desire to keep the space inviolate and private, but also the assumption that such a space will invite curiosity and the desire to witness what is being marked as secret and off-limits. Strategies to police and control this space, as well as the knowledge of the lying-in room and its practices, construct the lying in chamber as a site of privileged knowledge that outsiders in general and men in particular, are ineligible to share.

Secrecy is a practice that assumes, even demands, speculation and curiosity about what is being concealed, particularly when that concealment is lavishly, and sometimes ostentatiously performed by those included in the secret. In these cases, knowledge becomes associated with a privileged few, and the rituals surrounding the enclosure of the

World" *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium*, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1987), 301).

⁹ Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, (London: Methuen, 1984), 8-9; see also Wilson, 73-8.

¹⁰ Orme, *From Childbirth to Chivalry*, p.8.

pregnant woman simultaneously close off and titillate, reminding those closed out that there is indeed something occurring in the forbidden space that is both tempting and important to know, yet inaccessible. If, as Lochrie argues, secrecy is a practice which works to exclude others from knowledge in order to construct those in the know as more powerful (within that venue) than those shut out, the separation of the lying-in room not only reiterates sexual difference in the hidden spectacle of childbirth; it also works to redefine the meaning of that difference through access to that spectacle. These practices thus transform the meaning of the pregnant body from a representation of a husband's masculine dominance over the female body to a mysterious ritual which he is responsible to finance, but not permitted to observe.¹¹ This dynamic of male ignorance and blindness is shockingly reversed in one of the few significant deviations of the Cambridge manuscript of *Octavian*, as, in this version "The lady slept and wyste hyt noght:/ Hur comfort was the mare" (C.179-80). Here, the ignorance and blindness is projected upon the Empress: she is completely (and apparently happily) ignorant of the actions within the lying-in space, but nevertheless subject to its consequences upon her emergence from confinement. While she presumably awakens later to find a severed head in the bed with her and "the ryche clothys . . . all bybledd,/ of redd golde there they ware," this rude awakening is not represented in this text and the extent of her knowledge of events is left completely unexplained (C.176-7). Her ignorance, compounded by her innocence of the sexual crime imputed to her, seems monstrous and horrifying, highlighting the inversion

¹¹ Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 93. For a reading of the pregnant body's representation of paternal and lordly dominance over a female body and feminized polity, see John Carmi Parsons, "The Pregnant Queen as Counselor and the Medieval Construction of Motherhood," *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: Garland, 1996), 46.

of the “proper” state of the lying-in room as a site of validated feminine and maternal knowledge bracketed by masculine ignorance.

The space constructed within the boundaries of walls, hangings, and furniture was emphatically and ritually feminized. The conversion of a pregnant woman’s bedchamber into a lying-in chamber was performed exclusively by women, typically her female friends, relatives, and servants.¹² During the time of her lying-in, the woman would traditionally be attended by many of these women, denominated her “gossips,” as well as a female midwife. The exclusion of men was both mitigated and highlighted by the explicit substitution of female “officers” for each banished male servant and retainer.¹³ The quotidian gendered division of household tasks, as Philips suggests, is made visible specifically through the carnivalesque exception provided by the exclusively feminized exception of the lying-in room.¹⁴ These women functioned not only as attendants to the birth, but as witnesses as well, providing a sense that while mysteries were contained in the lying-in room, there was some sort of community surveillance of that space and evidence that the product of the lying-in room was legitimate. Serving as mediators between the lying-in room and the outside community and also as witnesses to the hidden event of childbirth, gossips and midwives were regarded as community representatives at the birth. The authority of those within the room was made most explicit in the case of

¹² Wilson, 73.

¹³ Staniland, 302.

¹⁴ Kim M. Philips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270-1540*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), 116-7. Philips cites a 1494 Royal Ordinance describing the enclosure of a pregnant queen after attending mass:

Then all the ladies and gentlemen to go in with her; and after that no man to come into the chamber where she shall be delivered, save women; and they to be made all manner of officers, as butlers, panthers, sewers, carvers, cupbearers; and all manner of officers shall bring to them all manner of things to the great chamber door and the women officers for to receive it in the chamber.

the midwife, who was frequently involved in legal inquisitions regarding the probable legitimacy of children of questionable paternity.¹⁵

From the time that the woman entered the converted space of the lying-in room she was forbidden to leave that space until a period of thirty to forty days had passed following the delivery of her child. Following birth, the woman progressed through three distinct stages before emerging from the lying-in room to be churched.¹⁶ The first was confinement to the bed, which lasted anywhere from three days to two weeks. After this, her bedclothes were changed for the first time since giving birth, and the woman could leave the bed occasionally, but for the most part she remained bed-ridden during a flexible period of a week to ten days. In the final stage, the woman was somewhat more mobile, occasionally leaving the lying-in room, and sometimes men were allowed limited access to her as her confinement to the lying-in room itself relaxed immediately before churching. During the lying-in period, which consisted of the last 4-6 weeks of pregnancy and the period leading up to churching, men, including the woman's husband, were forbidden entry into the enclosed lying-in room.¹⁷ Thus, a woman's gossips also acted as intermediaries between the woman and the rest of the household, relaying her requests and demands to the household and bringing gifts to the woman from the outside world. However, even this level of communication was ritualized, often requiring a particular

¹⁵ Denise Ryan, "Playing the Midwife's Part in the English Nativity Plays," *The Review of English Studies* (n.s) 54(2003): 437. See Ryan for accounts of midwives used to interrogate women in labor as to the paternity of their newborns. Ryan also notes cases where midwives testified to courts corroborating claims of premature childbirth (rather than premarital or extramarital conception).

¹⁶ Jennifer Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England*, (Routledge, 2002), 9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9; also, "When, for example, the time for childbirth drew near in 1442 for Henry VI's queen, Margaret of Anjou, a royal decree excluded all men from the lying-in chamber and specified that a closed curtain be placed in her inner chamber," never to be drawn until after her purification, until which time, no man would be allowed within (Gibson, "Sun and Moon," 149).

salver or decorated plate, usually a wedding gift, as the medium of transfer between the two spaces.¹⁸

The bounded and inviolate space of the lying-in room figures its metonymy with the enclosed space of the womb, where interdicted male presences also must be completely excluded in order to preserve the patrilineal line. Thus, the enforced femininity of the lying-in room represents the inviolability of the pregnant woman's womb against the intrusion of an unauthorized male presence and the resultant uncertainty as to the true paternity of the woman's child. In the case of the lying-in room, this interdiction extended even to the presence of the woman's husband.¹⁹ The expulsion of males from this space contributed to the association of the lying-in room with the secrets of the woman's reproductive body to which men were equally not allowed access. Gibson notes that "Neither the parts of the female childbearing body nor the domestic space in which an intimate community of women presided at the labour of childbirth and the ritual postpartum confinement or lying-in room was fit object for the male gaze."²⁰ While this statement surely captures the sense of men's interdiction from the lying-in room and the potential harm, gendered and lineal, that might come from transgression of this code, an underlying tension remains in the overall characterization

¹⁸ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Scene and Obscene," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29 (1999): 11.

¹⁹ Romances and gynecological texts both suggest that female shame or embarrassment prohibits men, including husbands, from seeing their wives during or immediately after childbirth. *Le Roman de Silence* suggests that it is only his great eagerness to learn the sex of his child which spurs the Count to ignore both his shame (vergoigne) at approaching a woman in childbed, and his wife's subsequent great shame or embarrassment (moult grant vergoigne) (l.2004, l.2007). Heldris de Cornäuille, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992). The same desire to avoid slander or embarrassment at the hands of men who witness such a scene is evident in the fifteenth-century Middle English gynecological text, *The Knowing of Women's Kind in Childing*, ed. Alexandra Barratt (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 40-2. The text suggests that its translation to the vernacular was completed in order to shield women from the embarrassment of male curiosity and slander by making it possible for women to treat other women.

²⁰ Gibson, "Scene and Obscene," 8-9.

of the lying-in room. For while there is a sense that the lying-in room is dangerous to men and masculinity, there is also a strong intimation of privilege associated with the lying-in room, a privilege men are not invited nor welcome to share.

The status of the lying-in room as a place of darkest mystery to men, as well as its position as a site of extreme liminality, suspended between the poles of life and death, marked both pregnancy and the lying-in room as sites of miraculous revelations and wonders. While the enclosure of the lying-in room marked it spatially as a site of extreme interiority, the juxtaposition of life and death which it contained produced the lying-in room's liminal status. According to Parsons, the unborn child's position, "of this world, but not yet in it," lent even more of an aura of mystery to late pregnancy as the child might act as an intermediary between the world of its parents and other worlds, bringing otherworldly messages or information.²¹ As a result, late pregnancy was often regarded as a time of miracles and prophetic revelations. Accordingly, *Octavian* emphatically constructs the empress' lying-in room as a place of mystery, even of miracles. This comes as a result of the empress' apparently miraculous impregnation, which occurs after the empress' foundation of an abbey in honor of the Virgin Mary. The empress established the abbey as part of an explicit plan to seek Mary's intervention on the empress's behalf to help her to conceive an heir. Thus, the pregnancy itself carries the weight of divine intervention. Further, the lying-in room is also the site of strange and prophetic dreams in which the Empress accurately foretells both her own banishment and the subsequent abduction of her children by wild creatures (161-71). However, the contamination of this space through Octavian's intrusion and misreading masks these

²¹ Parsons, "The Pregnant Queen as Counsellor and the Medieval Construction of Motherhood," in *Medieval Mothering*, eds. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 43.

signs of wonder associated with the birthing-room, transforming it instead into the patriarchal nightmare of diverted patrilineage.

The emphasis on the enclosed femininity of the space of birthing was profound enough to at times inspire illicit curiosity about the proceedings behind the curtains, doors or screens; fictitious representations of violations of this space are not uncommon, occurring in romances such as the *Roman du Silence* and the Middle English *Melusine* and suggested in medieval mystery plays concerning the birth of Christ.²² Literal invasions of the lying-in room were considered to be crimes against decency. This is evidenced by the records of a fifteenth-century case against a Belgian man, “One Henne Venden Damme, [who,] for having hid behind a staircase to eavesdrop upon his wife, she being in labour of childbirth, which thing doth not befit a man, for the said eavesdropping was fined fifteen livres.”²³ The necessary exclusion of men from gynecological knowledge or witnessing on the grounds of decency provided the justification for female medical practitioners laid out in the 1322 legal defense of the female physician Jacoba Felicie, which argued that “it is better and more seemly that a wise woman learned in the art should visit a sick woman and inquire into the secrets of her nature and her hidden parts, than a man should do so, for whom it is not lawful to see and seek out the aforesaid parts. . . . A man should ever avoid and flee as much as he can the secrets of women and of her societies.”²⁴ The injunction against the male presence in the lying-in room is gauged not only by his physical presence, but also by the simple fact that he is not

²² For a reading of this trope in mystery plays, see Gail McMurray Gibson, “Scene and Obscene.”

²³ Louis Théo Maes, “Les Délits de Moeurs dans les Droit Pénal Coutumier de Malines,” *Revue du Nord* 30 (1948): 11-12, quoted in Myriam Greilsammer, “The Midwife, the Priest, and the Physician: the Subjugation of Midwives in the Low Countries at the End of the Middle Ages,” *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21 (1991), 290.

²⁴ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990), 94.

supposed to know or witness what occurs within that space. For a man to do so reflects not only upon the violation of that space, but also upon his status as a man, as suggested in the language used in both legal arguments. At the same time, it is their privileged access to this knowledge that constructs the women involved in a confinement as a community, or “society.”

The notion that the space of the lying-in room enclosed an alternative female community, however, also gave rise to suspicions regarding the intent and behavior of that community and its consequences both inside and outside the lying-in room. In addition, while the official ceremonies and constructions of the lying-in chamber focused on its dynastic purpose and the validation of its productive value for the realm, the isolation and imposed impermeability of this space inspired not only curiosity, but also suspicion and even derision. The fifteenth-century satire *Les Quinze Joies de Mariage* identifies a wife’s pregnancy and lying-in as the third of the dubious “joys” of marriage. The text opens its discussion of the husband’s woes during his wife’s pregnancy by archly suggesting that every pregnancy is fraught with the possibility of infidelity: “elle devient grouse, et a l’aventure ne sera pas de son mari, qui advient souvent,”²⁵ After this sally, the text goes on to decry the extravagant expenditure of entertaining and maintaining the gossips and the demanding wife. The lying-in period is described as a time of female overindulgence and husband-baiting, with devastating consequences for the rest of the husband’s life. The gossips coach the wife in unchaste and self-indulgent behavior, and it is suggested that this behavior is maintained past the lying-in period.²⁶ The month or so of post-partum isolation is revealed to be nothing other than an

²⁵ “ . . . she becomes pregnant, and perhaps not by her husband, which often happens” (translation mine) *Les .XV. Joies de Mariage*, ed. Jean Rychner, (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1967), 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p19-26.

expensive excuse for women to get together and drink copious amounts of good wine and to eat hard-to-find and extravagant delicacies while assassinating the character of the pregnant woman's husband.²⁷ With this in mind, wife, gossips and midwives are all represented as colluding in order to deceive the husband as to the severity of his wife's condition so as to prolong the lying-in period, and thus their expensive revelry. Both the threat of infidelity and illegitimacy and the description of the ruinous gluttony and subversive speech that characterize the lying-in room in this text suggest an anxiety that the lying-in room is a space where women gather to take advantage of and deceive men, most specifically, the husband of the pregnant woman. Secrecy thus is equated not only with power, but with deception and the shame of the pregnant woman's husband and the patriarchal order he represents.

In *Octavian*, gossips are singled out as potential liabilities in the construction of the lying-in room through the deceptions of the dowager empress. Readers of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* find the figure of the slanderous mother-in-law whose lies result in the expulsion of her grandchildren a familiar character. As a privileged intimate, the mother-in-law stands in an excellent position to betray that trust by undermining her daughter-in-law. In *Octavian*, the Dowager Empress' particular situation as a member of Octavian's household not only underscores her duplicitous treachery, but actually compounds it by a second related betrayal. As the mother-in-law of the empress and an apparent resident or guest of Octavian's at the time of his wife's pregnancy, the dowager empress would certainly be recognized by the audience as one of the empress's childbed

²⁷ The consistent association of women with both gluttony and sinful speech was a staple of medieval misogynistic material, as R. Howard Bloch has demonstrated. For an outline and analysis of this association, see R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 14-22, 65.

gossips. It is in fact, her machinations, and her ability as a gossip to travel between the lying-in room and the outside world that allows her to sabotage the apparent legitimacy of her grandsons. Instead of acting as a witness to the birth and thus to the legitimacy of Octavian's children, the Dowager subverts this role in order to nullify the political and social value of the newborns, in direct violation of the codes that require her presence in the room in the first place. In her attempt to convince her son of his wife's infidelity, the dowager empress draws upon the assumed partiality of the gossip for the pregnant woman who has summoned her to her bedside at this critical time. After the mass thanking God for the birth of his sons, Octavian encounters his mother, who expresses first her thanks for the safe delivery specifically of the mother, and not the children.

Then she informs her son that his wife's sons are not his:

‘Sone,’ scho said, ‘I am full blythe
That e empyrse sal haf hyre lyfe,
And lyffe with vs in lande;
Bot mekyll sorowe dose it me
That Rome sall wrange ayerde bee,
And jn vncouthe hande.’ (103-108)

At this point, the dowager empress suggests that she has two contradictory allegiances, two communities whose interests diverge, an overriding anxiety of *Les Quinze Joies* in its treatment of gossips. The dowager skillfully suggests that she has a sincere personal interest in the wellbeing of the empress, and is happy for her safe delivery from childbirth. This interest evokes her role as gossip, whose foremost allegiance is to the pregnant woman, even at the expense of her husband. Her next statement however, where she bemoans the fate of Rome's inheritance by an illegitimate bastard, suggests her allegiance to Rome, which is juxtaposed and contrasted with her allegiance to the empress as a gossip and as a woman. Thus, the dowager empress constructs a sort of

competition between the interests of the empress (and her sons) and of Rome, in direct contradiction of Octavian's rationale for desiring his wife to conceive earlier in the romance. Whereas earlier, the delivery of the empress's child was linked to the security of Rome, the dowager empress insinuates that the interests of Octavian's wife and his land are mutually exclusive and contradictory. Ironically, the dowager empress presents an inversion of the suspicions cast upon gossips in *Les Quinze Joies*: whereas in the satire, it is suggested that it is the solidarity of gossips and their overriding desires to stick with the wife's side and to prolong their own enjoyments at the husband's expense lead to their deception of those outside the lying-in room, in *Octavian*, deception is deployed not to protect or cosset the newly-delivered woman and her reputation, but rather to defame and endanger her and her children. In other words, the tension represented in *Octavian* is not between the lying-in room and the community of women it represents and the masculine world of governance and inheritance, but rather between one gossip, the dowager empress, and both communities which are ideally protected by the lying-in room—that of the mother and her gossips, as well as of the father and primogeniture. The dowager's insistence that the interests of Rome and of the newly delivered mother are mutually exclusive serves only to highlight their interdependence. To believe the Dowager's slander and to act upon it virtually guarantees that "Rome sall wrange ayerde bee." The description of the violent scene in the lying-in room as "'The grete treson that ere was wrought'" also underscores the common interests of polity and the childbearing empress by conflating two betrayals into one. Essentially, the Empress, by her deceptions, has committed two separate acts of treason against communities to which she belongs: the community of women in the lying-in room and the community of Rome

which is dependent upon that space for stable continuity and internal peace. In betraying her community of women, the Dowager betrays the larger community of Rome, as well as her son, who represents Rome. By manipulating the lying-in room at its most vulnerable moment and then “exposing” it to male scrutiny and interpretation, the dowager empress conceals her own massive act of treason behind an imaginary one, infidelity. The beleaguered empress’ associations with Rome and later Jerusalem, both identified by medieval exegetes with “the Christian Church and soul” renders this betrayal a reenactment of Judas’ paradigmatic betrayal of Christ.²⁸ Late medieval identifications of Rome as the daughter of Sion and *synagoga* as its mother reinforce the status of the mother-in-law as a treacherous and perverse betrayer associated with the enemies not only of imperial Rome, but also of Christianity itself.²⁹ The later triumph of the combined armies of Rome and Jerusalem over eastern pagan enemies, followed by the reunion of Rome’s imperial family and their return to Rome links the domestic and political stability of Rome with its status as the seat of the Christian faith.

Within this context, it is not surprising that the knowledge that Octavian receives upon his intrusion is terribly distorted, with serious domestic and political consequences attached. Presumably, the threat to his masculine identity induces Octavian to violate the lying-in room in the first place, in order to discover its otherwise obscured truths. Octavian approaches the lying-in room spurred by his mother’s assertion that it is his own sexual deficiency in producing an heir that has compelled his wife to turn to other lovers to conceive and therefore secure her own threatened position in the household. She taunts her son, stating that “sone myn . . ./ For flou myght no childir haue,/ Scho has

²⁸ Suzanne M. Yeager, “*The Siege of Jerusalem* and Biblical Exegesis: Writing About Romans in Fourteenth-Century England.” *Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 94, 89.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

takyn thy kokes knaue;” (112-116). In this way, she links the lying-in space with the discourse of masculine powerlessness, but in a different formulation than do the practices of protective secrecy around the lying-in room. It is precisely the threat of Octavian’s lack of potency, made plausible by the long barrenness of the Empress before her pregnancy that drives Octavian into the lying-in room. The lying-in room is thus linked in this romance with sexual shame and the supposed sexual inability of the emperor to provide his people with an heir. The intrusion of a father into this space results then in the realization of his greatest political fears—with the banishment of his sons, it becomes all too likely that “Rome sall wrange ayerde bee” (107). Octavian’s mother offers a narrative that explicitly associates what happens in the lying-in room with her son’s powerlessness, as well as with the “women’s secret” of reproduction. The lying-in room, the Dowager Empress suggests, will make clear the consequences of her son’s insufficient masculinity. Octavian’s anxieties concerning sexual impotence drive him to reassert dominance over his wife’s body and its secrets by entering the space defined socially by his absence and ignorance. Octavian’s mother thus deploys anxieties centering on the intersection of ignorance and secrecy surrounding the lying-in room and taunts her son into reorganizing the polarities of the lying-in room—first through “discovering” the “secret” prepared for his view and then through his predictable assertion of patriarchal prerogative through violence. The isolation and silence that enshroud the lying-in room after this episode are reframed by Octavian’s acquisition of his wife’s “secrets” and the uneasy tension that results.

The third crucial aspect of the construction of the aristocratic woman’s lying-in room, in addition to its enclosed and feminized status, was its purpose as the site of the

reproduction of the state through birth. Childbirth itself was a mystery of state obscured from the sight of men, as “the late medieval woman’s space of the birthing room enclosed women’s bodies, women’s discourse, and women’s cultural performance, but also existed, first and foremost, to produce the male children that were the essential links in the chains of male order and control.”³⁰ The political function of the lying-in room was often emphasized in the material construction of the space, as it was encouraged that the room’s enclosing hangings and rugs be made up predominantly of the royal colors of scarlet and gold, suitable to the purpose of the room and especially purchased and used to both frame and honor that specific occasion, the birth of the potential heir.³¹ Gifts associated specifically with the room and its purpose, including the ritual *deschi* salver platter, were often decorated with images of the desired male product of the birth, a young male child.³²

In contemporary instructions for midwives, much emphasis is placed on the comfort of the room, its consistency with the nobility of the woman’s endeavor, its value to the family, and upon the need to keep men out, rather than the woman in. Midwives were especially enjoined to concentrate on the social construction of the lying-in room as a place where the woman’s feelings and body must be dignified, rather than denigrated or repudiated.³³ This injunction underlines the prevalent ambivalence which characterized social interpretations of childbirth, as well as an authoritative attempt to limit or control that ambivalence, imposing a positive value to birth. Hence, the initial conversion of the lying-in room has the effect of a sort of dramatic staging for an aristocratic or royal birth

³⁰ Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” 11.

³¹ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 9.

³² Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” 11-13.

³³ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 16.

paradoxically meant to go unseen by the males of the household. The emphasis on the political status of the birthing and lying-in room is crucial to *Octavian*, which opens first with the explicit crisis of a long-childless emperor and his fears for his land's fate, as after his death, "they childir hade nanne/ theire landis to rewle one ryghte," prompting his fear that the land will exist "in werre and in kare" should he fail to produce an heir (44-5, 68). This problem is further complicated by the possibility of his wife's alleged infidelity with a servant, a crisis also literally and explicitly located within the space of the lying-in room. The problematic nature of the lying-in room is emphasized by its simultaneous status as the focus of both political wish-fulfillment and of anxiety that the fulfillment of those desires might be illusory or unattainable. As such, it functions as the site of the reproduction of both order and chaos.

Octavian's intrusion in to the lying-in room is characterized by violent imagery implicitly suggesting the destabilization of the state. Upon his entrance he is struck dumb and "wode," maddened by the sight of another man, a kitchen servant at that, lying in his wife's (and his own) bed (165). The presence of the servant in the king's bed, particularly on the occasion of the birth of the empire's heir, represents an unacceptable inversion of the proper order of the state, as does the presence, after Octavian's attack, of peasant blood on the emperor's sheets. The proper blood of the Emperor and of his wife's labor is displaced by that of the poorest and most ignoble figure in the household, transforming the rich and glorious cloths of the royal bed into rags soaked with the blood of the mean. However, it is emphatically at just this moment of inversion that the text takes pains to remind us that, whatever Octavian's interpretation of the scene he finds in the room, his reading is incomplete and therefore his actions unjust. The Lincoln

Manuscript emphasizes the innocence of the “giltles knave” at the moment of his death by Octavian’s hand, while the Cambridge text singles out the released “blode” as “gyltles,” later referring to the scene in the lying-in room as “The grete treson that ere was wrought” (L.158, C.156, C.178).

Ironically, this tableau works to refigure the typically stigmatized reading of blood revealed in childbed. In the Middle Ages, the blood of parturition was categorized as menstrual blood, as were forms of female genital bleeding.³⁴ As such, the blood of childbirth was generally repudiated as a pollutant in the same way as menstrual blood. In *Octavian*, the decapitated servant’s blood seems to simultaneously efface and double the blood of parturition, replacing and mingling with the mother’s childbed blood, and destroying its political significance by appearing to manifest a literal alternative to the blood of the king and father. If, as McCracken suggests, the woman’s blood signifies a sort of inherent sexual contamination specific to women, as well as the disruptive presence of the wife’s alternative matrilineal genealogical narrative, in *Octavian*, this logic is taken a step further.³⁵ Blood on the bedsheets, associated paradoxically with both virginity and with the transmission of an illicit or underground matrilineal bloodline, becomes transformed into a completely alternate, and –within the logic of the narrative – fictive, genealogy, representing the patrilineage of the empress’s supposed peasant lover. Finally, the image of the head toppling off of the servant’s body and into the emperor’s bed clearly suggests the fall of the royal head from the body politic, emphasized by Octavian’s beast-like status as speechless and unreasoning, “wode.” The literal consequences of Octavian’s “discovery” potentially mirror these of the nightmarish

³⁴ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), ix, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

tableau in that the true heirs to the empire are first threatened with execution and finally separated from the state through the banishment of both themselves and their mother. The literal decapitation of the kitchen servant becomes the likely foreshadowing of the realm's permanent state, with the expulsion of the infant heirs to Octavian's throne.

Childbirth and the Church

The status of the pregnant and recently-delivered maternal body in the medieval church was highly ambiguous due to conflicting doctrinal opinions as to whether a pregnant woman was eligible to enter the church or to receive holy sacraments, such as communion. The close association of childbirth with sexuality and therefore with sin rendered the pregnant body as particularly representative of sexual activity and man's fallen nature. McCracken notes that "While childbirth is not a sin in itself, it is associated with the pollution of sin, and the logic of churching reflects that association, even though the ritual is often characterized as one of thanksgiving"³⁶ At the same time, the association of childbearing with women's spiritual salvation problematized an outright condemnation of the gravid woman.³⁷ This potential contradiction had had a long history in the church, particularly in England. Many of Augustine's questions posed to Pope Gregory at the end of the sixth century related to the particular spiritual status of menstruating and pregnant women, as well as their eligibility to participate in mass and sacraments, such as baptism. Gregory's letter to Augustine, dated at around 600, while considered moderate, highlights the contradictory nature of the church's response to pregnancy. According to Pope Gregory, churching was a ritual of thanksgiving rather

³⁶ McCracken, 68.

³⁷ "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" (I Timothy 2:14). In representations of childbirth and childbirth culture, Hellwarth sees a struggle with conflicting doctrines of fruitfulness and chastity. See Hellwarth, 6.

than purification, and therefore a woman should be allowed to enter the church to give thanks immediately after birth, without sin.³⁸ In this message, Gregory also reminds Augustine that ‘the fruitfulness of the flesh is no offense,’ and refers to pregnancy itself as God’s ‘gift of grace,’ and thus that pregnant women are eligible to be baptized.³⁹ At the same time however, Gregory notes that a woman who thus breaks her lying-in period early to give thanks is subject to penance for having done so. Clerical associations of women’s bodies in general, and pregnant bodies in particular with pollution, became more prevalent and exaggerated in the later Middle Ages, and particularly during and after the “eleventh and twelfth centuries amidst the turmoil and zeal of ecclesiastical reforms striving to make clerical celibacy the accepted norm and a reality in the church.”⁴⁰ The earliest liturgical evidence for formalized churching ceremonies appear to date from this time, according to Rieder, and suggest that these rituals not only “cured” the contamination of the pregnant body, but also symbolically produced these bodies as polluted in the first place through the call for the purification ceremony itself. The definition of the pregnant body as a contaminated and potentially contaminating object seems to have become increasingly recognized and prevalent throughout the late Middle Ages, resulting in the widespread practice of refusing to bury a woman who had died in childbirth or before churching in the church itself, burying her in the churchyard instead.⁴¹

³⁸ McCracken, 68; Orme, *Medieval Children*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 31.

³⁹ Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 79.

⁴⁰ Paula M. Rieder, “Insecure Borders: Symbols of Clerical Privilege and Gender Ambiguity in the Liturgy of Churching” in *The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation, and Marriage in Premodern Europe*, eds. Anne L. McClanan and Karen Rosoff Encarnación, (New York: Palgrave 2002), 99.

⁴¹ Orme, *Medieval Children*, 31.

In practice, the ritual of churching appears to have been widely viewed by practitioners and by participants as an act of ritual purification, which coincided with thanksgiving. During the time of her confinement, a pregnant or postpartum woman was figuratively expelled from the Christian community as a sexual contaminant, refused admittance into sacred space, whether the church or (in some parishes) consecrated ground, and refused administration of holy rites. Still filled with the “bodily fluids of lustful generation,” the woman’s womb became doubly contaminated, by the presence of both the salacious liquids of intercourse and the menstrual material forming the matter of the unborn child and staining the sheets at birth.⁴² The humoral imbalances and sexual contamination related to childbirth necessitated churching and, in some cases, exorcism, as the pregnant woman was believed to be particularly vulnerable to demonic possession.⁴³ For Taglia, the scattered custom of refusing to bury either pregnant women or those who had died in childbirth in holy ground due to the fear of spiritual contamination of the sacred through proximity to the woman’s body and that of her potentially unbaptized child demonstrates that these compromised and contaminated bodies were “not and could never be part of the Christian community or the plan of salvation.”⁴⁴ In some parishes, a woman was refused Christian burial in consecrated ground not only if she were still pregnant or just delivered at the time of her death, but

⁴² Gail McMurray Gibson, “Saint Anne and the Religion of Childbed: Some East Anglian Texts and Talismans,” *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 96. See also Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 196.

⁴³ Paula M. Rieder, 99.

⁴⁴ Kathryn Taglia, “The Cultural Construction of Childhood: Baptism, Communion, and Confirmation,” in *Women, Marriage, and Family in Medieval Christendom: Essays in Memory of Michael M. Sheehan*, C.S.B., ed. Constance M. Rousseau and Joel T. Rosenthal, (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 1998), 259. For a discussion of the specific controversies concerning the appropriate burial site of a postpartum woman and/or her child who died during a Caesarian section, see Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 26. See Erickson, 195-197, for a further discussion of church and folk beliefs concerning menstrual contamination, pregnancy, death and burial.

also if the ritual purification of churching, typically performed thirty to forty days after birth, had yet to be performed.⁴⁵ The belief that the contaminated and unpurified body of the recently pregnant woman would attract demons that could desecrate the entire churchyard in general constructed the pregnant woman specifically as a potential threat to the souls of the entire community.⁴⁶

Christian rituals and ritualistic activity surrounding childbirth and the lying-in room structured that space as the site of a pregnant woman's profound and potentially permanent separation from the community of believers. When a woman neared childbirth, she was encouraged to perform confession, due to the physical and spiritual danger of her condition.⁴⁷ For noble and royal wives, this procedure was formalized in a specific ritual known as houselling, in which the pregnant woman would walk from her home to a nearby chapel and give confession, then walk back home to her bedchamber, from which she would not emerge until between thirty and forty days after she had given birth.⁴⁸ At this time, she would emerge with much pomp to attend her churching ceremony, which was modeled upon the Marian example, commemorating the presentation of Christ to the temple forty days after she had given birth.⁴⁹ En route to the churching, the woman to be thus purified was accompanied by a number of the gossips

⁴⁵ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 8-9; Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 26; See also Gail McMurray Gibson, *Theatre of Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 61.

⁴⁶ Erickson, *The Medieval Vision*, 196.

⁴⁷ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, 9.

⁴⁸ The conversion of the woman's bedchamber into a lying-in room was completed at this time, and her return from the church marked the official change in status of the room. See Staniland, 309.

⁴⁹ Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages, Fifth Through Fifteenth Centuries* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 14. As Gibson notes, Mary's purification differed from that of other women as it was unnecessary due to the Virgin's sinless conception of Christ. Mary's submission to the ritual was seen as emblematic of her humility. See Gibson, "Blessing from Sun and Moon," 139. In his *Lyf of Oure Lady*, Lydgate lingers on Mary's exemption from Purification due to her unblemished purity, and hence her condescension and humility in suffering the ritual. Lydgate emphasizes the superfluity of the ritual twice in Book VI, ll.15-35 and ll.57-90. John Lydgate, *A Critical Edition of John Lydgate's Life of Our Lady*, eds. Joseph A. Lauritis, Ralph A. Klinefelter and Vernon F. Gallagher. Duquesne Studies Philological Series 2, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961).

who attended her in the lying-in room, and wore a veil on the journey, maintaining the ritual containment of the contaminated woman, her isolation from the Christian community, to be lifted, with the veil, at the ceremony of purification.⁵⁰

This ritual sequence of feminized separation, containment, and reintegration in many ways resembles the ritualistic domestic activity surrounding the domestic and dynastic lying-in room, yet constructs the lying-in room as a space marked by an exile from community, rather than the reproduction of it. Both Church and domestic rituals surrounding aristocratic childbirth center the confinement and the creation of a ritualized space around the event of childbirth that is nevertheless characterized by each discourse in radically different ways. Like the domestic ritual of childbearing, the dominant spiritual trope describing the condition of the lying-in room is of containment, but a containment signifying the figurative expulsion and absence of the pregnant woman from the community of the faithful through contamination, rather than the expulsion of men from the revelation of the mysteries of both the woman's body and the process of the reproduction of the state. Within sacred rituals concerned with childbirth, the dominant trope is that of the carnal and spiritual contamination of women in general, and of pregnant women in particular, and the character of the woman's confinement seems to figure her expulsion from the community of the righteous until the purification of that contamination.

While sacred and secular rituals and practices centered on the pregnant body seem to offer opposing constructions of the pregnant body and its societal significance, in everyday practice, there was much interdependence between them. The resultant multiplicity of contradictory perspectives left the pregnant woman in a profoundly

⁵⁰ Gibson, "Sun and Moon," 149; Wilson, 78.

ambivalent position. For example, the interdiction against pregnant women leaving the birthing-room made their exclusion from the church a somewhat moot point. In effect, a schism developed in the church between doctrinal authorities, which seemed to validate the pregnant body, or at least not to discriminate strongly against it, and the logic of the sacred rituals surrounding that body, as well as the apparent interpretations of actual clergy, as evidenced by their practices within parishes which clearly identified the pregnant and postpartum body as a dangerous contaminant. Local parish priests often seemed to gravitate toward the ritual interpretations of the pregnant body, rather than doctrinal assurances of the pregnant woman's position within the divine plan. These positions were taken despite documents discussing the position of the church, such as Gregory's response to Augustine, which seemed to mitigate the sense of contamination associated with the pregnant and post-partum body. Ultimately, even the most misogynistic interpretations of churching allowed for the ability of the polluted postpartum body to become reintegrated within the community, revalued through the ritual of purification. Yet this was a status that could only be granted after a public ritual and after a certain amount of time had passed during which, presumably, the malignant effects of her contaminated state would have faded. As a result, while the secular and sacred practices surrounding the pregnant woman seem to diverge greatly in their constructions of the value of what occurs within lived experience, these constructions seemed to intersect, resulting in profound ambivalence, even confusion, regarding the status of the pregnant woman and the space and rituals associated with her pregnancy, delivery, and gradual reintegration within the community.

The Post-Partum Body and Community

While the actual ceremony of churching was constructed by church ritual and performed within the church space as a rite of purification carrying rather clear implications as to the degraded status of the pregnant female body, the journey to and return from the chapel was often attended by a festive atmosphere. The *Liber Regie Capelle* specifies that a delivered queen be dressed in particularly valuable (and usually new) robes, and set up in an extravagant state bed as if she were still completely bed-bound.⁵¹ Duchesses were to fold back the covers while a pair of Dukes helped the queen from her bed. A procession including these figures as well as the gossips and midwife went to the church, where special prayers and blessings were performed before the queen could enter. Wealthy women often gave alms and donations at and near the church after the ceremony and arranged for minstrels or other entertainers to entertain the household during the post-churching celebrations, which in the case of very wealthy or noble mothers, could be lavish indeed, including feasts, jousts, and eventually, the performance of masques.⁵²

Purification or churching feasts and banquets appear to have become widespread in England during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.⁵³ The post-churching celebration of a royal or aristocratic birth could be and was often an elaborately staged political spectacle signifying the power and wealth of the concerned family as well as the significance of the heir to the land. As this birth-centered celebration had the most

⁵¹ Staniland, 308.

⁵² Gibson, "Sun and Moon," 147. Staniland, 308. For accounts of expenditures concerning churching and post-churching festivities, see also Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066-1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 68-70.

⁵³ Becky Lee, "Men's Recollections of a Women's Rite: Medieval English Men's Recollections Regarding the Rite of Purification After Childbirth," *Gender & History* 14, 2(2002): 230.

available preparatory time and was conducted after most of the immediate perils of birth had passed for both mother and infant, it was generally the most extravagant opportunity for festivities following an aristocratic or royal birth.⁵⁴

The post-churching celebration acted to refigure the significance of the churching ceremony, which strongly attributed negative implications to the politically expedient and anticipated birth of an heir, promoting a more positive interpretation of the ritual as an act of thanksgiving, a celebration of the woman's safe delivery, and a display of the affluence and rank of woman's family. The sumptuous celebration following a churching thus functioned as a juxtaposed response against the discourse of contamination associated by church ritual with childbearing, offering a counterdiscourse that reconfigured the positive aristocratic interpretation of the lying-in room and its function within society. In addition, it has been suggested that the very extravagance of the feasts and celebrations functioned not only as a declaration of family's power and wealth, but also served as a safeguard to smooth patrilineal transition at the death of the newborn's father. Becky Lee notes that in proof-of-age inquests, guests who had attended purification rituals were often used as witnesses to testify as to whether an heir was old enough to inherit his father's property in his own right.⁵⁵ To this end, purification feasts were intended to be as memorable as possible, so that the exact year of birth of a potential heir would be fixed in the memories of potential witnesses. In addition, gifts with the date inscribed upon them were also distributed to prominent guests at the festivities. In doing so, the father of the newborn attempted to fix the memory of the date of birth of his heir, and thus to create a sort of communally accepted fact or history of his heir's arrival




⁵⁴ See Staniland, 299-308, and Lee, 224-41 for more detailed descriptions of churching feasts in England in the 14th and 15th centuries.

⁵⁵ Lee, 224.

and legitimacy in the memories of his community in general, and powerful guests in particular. The event of birth itself as well as its communal significance therefore are given social reality and force through the churching feast and the opportunities it created to establish communal bonds between men and to later call upon those men to testify on behalf of a deceased father's heir if need be, to safeguard his patrimony. This suggests that while the mother was the most visible celebrant and guest of honor at the festivities, patriarchal discourses and strategies were also overtly bound to the churching ritual. As both Lee and Parsons suggest, the churching ritual also underscored the sexual potency of the father, as the presence of his wife and child made obvious.⁵⁶ The coincident themes of inheritance and sexuality highlight the significance of the empress's purification feast as the moment that Octavian chooses to reveal his wife's "infidelity" and its consequences in *Octavian*.

The distortion of community interests constructed by the dowager empress earlier in the romance becomes fully realized at the purification feast of the empress, in a sort of parodic inversion of the forms of community bonding described by Lee as a chief product of purification feasts. Whereas Lee suggests that purification feasts often functioned as an opportunity for new fathers to forge, recognize, and advertise their bonds with other well-placed men in their community and acquaintance, *Octavian* suggests the potential for these communities to become destructive to the larger good if they follow the sort of competitive model against the female community of childbirth laid out by the dowager empress. At the feast, Octavian tells the story of his wife's "betrayal," omitting all names, to an ad hoc jury of men attending the feast, who are asked to judge the fate of the

⁵⁶ See Lee, 236, and Parsons, 49. Note that while Lee suggests that the purification festivities marked the return of the wife to the conjugal bed and therefore highlighted her active sexual status, Parsons suggests that the passive presence of the objectified mother acts to mask or deemphasize her sexuality.

anonymous adulteress. The formation of a specifically masculine community of    suggests the implementation of the dowager empress's construction of mutually antagonistic camps of assumed adulterous and deceptive women and politically powerful men who represent the greater polity (212, 217-219). The condemnation of the empress for her "treson" recalls the "treson" within the lying-in room, as well as the essential ignorance, not only of the feast guests and particularly the empress's father, who pronounces her sentence, but also of Octavian himself, who perpetuates his mother's counterproductive construction of society through his deliberate delineation of a gendered tension of which Rome is the biggest victim.

The struggle between secular aristocratic and sacred discourses surrounding the contained site of childbearing and represented in the juxtaposition between churching and post-churching festivities is dramatized by the entrapment and accusation of the empress first by her mother-in-law, and again at her churching feast in *Octavian*. At these moments in the romance, the sacred discourse of contamination problematically invades the aristocratic lying-in room, making it, and the structures of lineal continuity, and thus the state's political status, unstable and unacceptably vulnerable. The invasion of men, and the breaking of the lying-in room's self-contained space of secrecy and of mystery, is made possible first by the imputation that the lying-in room is not in fact characterized by the positive interpretation granted by the aristocratic discourse, but rather as a space of sexual contamination, as suggested by the sacred discourses and representations concerning childbirth. The Emperor's mother represents the lying-in room not as the site of simultaneous mystery and miraculous revelation, but rather as the place in which an

unwelcome “truth,” that of the “true” origin of the children (or at least, the sexual infidelity of the empress), will be revealed. Ironically, it is this revelation that is false, completely engineered by the machinations of the omnipresent figure of the evil mother-in-law. The Dowager Empress cannily represents the room and the mother as the site of sexual contamination, a discourse already allotted that space by the sacred interpretation of the pregnant body as a site of sexual pollution and of the lying-in room as a place of contamination and of death. The suggestion of sexual contamination is heightened by the class miscegenation implied by the presence of the kitchen lad in the empress’ childbed, as well as by the direct association of the alleged adultery with the political consequences of such an act, the likelihood that the realm, so long heirless, is now in fact “wrange ayerde” and “in uncouth hande” (107, 108). She asserts,

“ . . . sone myne,
 Wete thou wele thay [the children] are noghte thyne,
 And that lykes me full ill.
 For thou myghte no childe have,
 Scho hase takyn thy kokys knave;
 I will it prove thurgh skylle.” (112-117)

After bribing a reluctant and terrified kitchen servant to join the unconscious empress in her bed, Octavian’s mother brings her son into the room, breaking taboo, supposedly revealing the truth concealed behind the walls and veils of the birthing room, while in actuality rupturing that space and distorting the nature of the secrets created within. She uses the discourse of sexual contamination to make her claims appear more reasonable, playing on her son’s own perceived inability to either know or participate in the mysteries confined in that space. With “skylle,” the Dowager joins the linked, though opposing, discourses of lineal reproduction and of sexual contamination already associated with the lying-in room, with disastrously effective and provocative results. While the secret of the

lying-in room has changed in character, from the mysterious secrets of state regeneration to the revealed “truth” of sexual pollution, after its initial violation, it is kept as tightly contained as if nothing untoward has happened, regaining the insularity granted it by both sacred and secular discourse.

With the entrance of Octavian and his mother in to the lying-in room, the disruption of the lying-in room by the discourse of contamination produces an immediate and drastic effect upon the space. It is transformed at once into a site resembling that described by the sacred interpretations of the status of the lying-in room, which indeed becomes the site of death, contamination by abjectified blood (that of the servant), and of the expulsion of the Empress and her twin sons from the community and kingdom. Ironically, however, this transformation is easily interpreted as itself the product of a sort of contamination, perhaps not sexual in the manner suggested within sacred interpretations of the space, but surely gendered, the result of the breach of the inviolate space of birth, metonymic with the purity of the womb, by the intrusion of interdicted male presences. In effect, the presence of the sacred discourse of contamination emphasizes that contamination is taking place, transforming the practical identity of the problematic, yet politically necessary space by its mere presence, into its own object, its own constructed representation.

Ironically, it is at the feast marking the reintegration and purification of the Empress that she is expelled yet again, significantly upon the (false) accusation of sexual contamination. At the churching feast, the discourse of sexual contamination comes into direct conflict with the discourse of birth as state holiday and source of thanksgiving. Octavian’s narrative reinvasion and disbanding of the contained and tabooed space of

childbearing reverses the usual status of the post-churching celebration as the site of a secular rebuttal of church discourses of childbirth contamination, instead transforming that space of social reaffirmation of childbirth and its political and social value into a declaration that the church has essentially had it right, after all. The banishment of the Empress and her sons from her husband's lands functions as a dramatic reenactment of the figurative expulsion from and return to society represented within Christian rituals concerning childbirth. The acceptance of the sacred imputation of sexual shame within the lying-in room, however, has a high political cost—the loss of Empress and heirs—and it is perhaps not surprising that the mass response of the aristocratic guests at the pronouncement of the Empress' sentence is not of vindication, but rather of intense grief, of “dole and grete peté” (232).

Despite the apparent ascendance of the sacred discourse of childbirth as a form of contamination within *Octavian*, this interpretation is thoroughly undermined within the romance itself. Most simply and directly, it is clear to the audience throughout that the Empress herself is innocent of the sexual crime she is accused of. Her innocence is merely emphasized by her literal unconsciousness of the man in bed next to her. Even this potential danger to her chastity is diffused by the servant's care to avoid even the possibility of touching her, as “ever he droghe hym ferre awaye/ For the rechese that scho in laye” 146-7)). These strategies of narrative defense of the empress highlight the unwarranted nature of her expulsion from her husband's lands, as well as the accusation of sexual guilt leveled at her; from the secular point of view of the romance, in the space of the lying-in room, it is not the empress who is unclean; her expulsion is unjust, and politically, potentially disastrous. Aware of the falsity of the charges against the Empress

and cued by the romance's early emphasis upon the emperor's dynastic woes, the audience's attention and sympathy is shifted away from the discourse of pollution and to the personal plight of the empress which is linked to the political plight of Rome. Octavian's misreading of childbirth as adultery is undermined along with the legitimacy of any claim of sexual contamination attaching itself to the empress or to this birth. Further, the romance reimagines the generalized accusation of sexual contamination leveled at all women by the church and some secular discourses as a clearly spiteful and underhanded slander against a maligned and innocent woman who happens to be vital to the political future of Rome.

In addition to undermining the empress' connection to any sort of discourse of sexual contamination, the romance reconstructs the empress' relationship to religion as a positive value, emphasizing her status as the romance's only overtly pious character. This is a position seemingly at odds with the accusation of sexual impurity leveled at the Empress, which is inflected with religious constructions of the female sexualized and reproductive body. The empress' association with religion altogether is made a part of her character's virtues as the only explicitly pious character in a romance that includes Saracen enemies and ostensibly holy wars, yet no particular emphasis upon Christianity. In contrast, it is the empress who suggests the building of an abbey as a solution to her childlessness, she who begs that her children be christened before they die so that their souls might be spared, and she who, upon the loss of her children to the abducting animals, acknowledges her sorrows as just punishment for her sins and who vows to dedicate her life to holy works in Jerusalem (400-405). Significantly, this emphasis upon the empress' piety is only present in the Middle English redactions of the romance;

earlier versions lay pious remorse upon the marginally more sympathetic Octavian.⁵⁷ The empress's piety and strong connections to Rome, then Jerusalem, and the later rescue of Christian forces against explicitly pagan enemies further validates the empress as a single site through which imperial power of Rome's armies is fused in a Holy War with Jerusalem's armies, supported and embodied by the prowess of the younger Octavian and his leonine companion.⁵⁸

The wrongful expulsion of the empress and her children causes a rupture in the political sphere of Rome. With the empress' banishment, the ruptured space of the lying-in room is repeatedly revisited in the wilderness, suggesting a sort of need to restore the corrupted site of reproduction. Seeking solace at a fountain in a clearing, the empress' sons are respectively abducted by an ape and a lioness. Having abducted the heir to the throne, the lioness is herself attacked by a griffin, another heraldic beast, who carries her, and the child, to an isolated island, far from her own cubs (355-63). The child's safety, asserts the speaker, is due to his royal blood, "for it was a kynge sone iwysse,/ The lioness moghte do it no mys" (349-50). Instead, the lioness protects him and loves him, and significantly, legitimates him through his very immunity from her violence. Attacked by the male griffin within the isolated and enclosed space, the lioness returns the aggression and slays the griffin, rewriting the experience of the empress in such a way as to protect the integrity of the island's space from adult male intrusion, incorporating Octavian's

⁵⁷ Harriet Hudson, "Introduction," *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour* ed. Harriet Hudson, (Kalamazoo: TEAMS/Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 47-48.

⁵⁸ Suzanne Yeager notes the medieval identification of Rome as the New Jerusalem. This association lent Rome a double status, both "as city and as personification of the Church." The conflation of Rome and Jerusalem also allied imperial and religious ideologies, while simultaneously encouraging ambivalent identifications with both Romans and defending Jews, she suggests. Suzanne M. Yeager, "The Siege of Jerusalem and Biblical Exegesis: Writing About Romans in Fourteenth-Century England." *Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 70-102, 71, 93-5.

own beast-like violence in the defense, rather than in the violation of the contained space of state reproduction.

The lioness then converts the island into a den, closely resembling the space of the lying-in room, for the sake of her new charge, whom she “lufe[s] . . . for hir whelpes sake,” suckling him, playing with and kissing him, and creating for him a den on the island (374, 376, 445-47). The lioness’ policing of an isolated and contained space of mothering by a female mother figure is continued as she later slays two curious sailors who invade the island looking for water. The analogy of the island with the lying-in room is not only a function of its isolation, nor of the violent repulsion of male intruders perpetrated by the lioness, but also by the fundamental inability of men confronted with the interdicted space to cope with what they see there. Like Octavian, the twelve soldiers who find the den are struck by “drede,” rendered, in a phrase mirroring that used to describe Octavian, “nere wode,” by the sight of the lioness’ home, as well as by the empress’ safety within (447, 471). Like the lying-in room, the lioness’ island den is the site of femininity, maternity, wonder, and brutal violence, this time appropriated from Octavian’s misinformed rage and channeled toward the preservation of the crucial intact status of the lying-in room. Significantly, the lioness allows the empress to safely approach both herself and the child, reclaiming her son, and bringing him safely to the world outside. These repeated intrusions throughout seem to revisit the original site of intrusion, that of the lying-in room, as well as its catastrophic vulnerability, and finally, of its restoration through the wondrous interference of an heraldic beast.

The fact that the abductor of the heir to Octavian’s throne is not merely an heraldic beast, but a lioness, is crucial to her role in the reconstruction of the lying-in

room and thus to the restoration of Octavian's ruptured state. The lioness' recreation and restoration of the violated space of the lying-in room, as well as her implicit legitimation of the young heir to the Roman throne, allows the reconstruction of the lying-in room to take place without the potentially problematic presence of the empress' necessarily sexualized body. The lioness' parallels to the empress, her status as the mother of two lost offspring, her involuntary banishment from her home by an aggressive male intruder, and her association with royalty through her heraldic status make her a clear analogue to the beleaguered empress, but one better equipped to handle the vicissitudes of her predicament. Additionally, however, as an heraldic beast, she seems to signify the secular and political significance of the child as a product of royalty, both legitimating him and repairing the tattered sense of wonder and mystery associated with the lying-in room without any association with the sexual process which brings the empress to the lying-in room in the first place. In addition, as a beast, the lioness is free of the bloody taint of contamination associated with human mothers through the blood of menstruation and parturition. Albert the Great explains the more advanced development of newborn animals as opposed to human babies due to the lack of menstruation in the animal world.⁵⁹ According to Albert, because female animals do not suffer the same humoral superfluities as do women, they do not menstruate and therefore retard the growth of their young by contact with that debased fluid, unlike human mothers. The lioness's status as a non-menstruating stand-in for the empress further distances her from potential discourses of sexual impurity. Her creation of the den with her paws, and her early care of the child without the presence of his mother or of her gossips displaces him from a site of containment characterized by individual women's femininity, and into a space

⁵⁹ Atkinson, 41.

represented by her own desexualized and totemic femininity. Thus, the lioness' restoration of the contained and inviolate space of state reproduction takes place through the displacement of the empress, who only reappears to carry her son to the aristocratic court of Jerusalem, where the wonder of the lioness' regal and mysterious presence serves as both the empress' vindication and her son's legitimation. The young Octavian becomes defined not as his mother's son, but as the legitimate son of a "kyng," of Octavian the elder, restoring lineal continuity by bypassing the potentially (though not actually) problematic empress altogether. Significantly, his mother only reappears at the end of the romance with the final reunion of the dispersed family.

Noble medieval childbirth was experienced by women and their communities largely as a staged performance, rather than a biological function through which maternal and lay female cultural identity is constructed through the placement of the gravid woman within a ritualized space. However, the conflicting discourses of secular and sacred authorities and customs made the exact status of that identity equivocal. As an expectant mother to an heir, an aristocratic woman could, depending on who was describing her, embody the stability and hopes of the realm, and her own centrality to the (re)production of the state, or she could conversely embody the wretched contamination and site of death that must be expelled from the community of the righteous for the protection of all. As in festive practices following the churching ritual for recently delivered women, *Octavian* marks and joins the competition between two related forms of discourse that attempt to bound and define the space of reproduction. The sacred discourse of female contamination is roundly displaced in *Octavian* by a counter-discourse of male contamination and through the displacement of the female body as

signifier of the ritualized space with the wondrous and heraldic figure of the lioness. In both the churching celebration and the romance, there is an emphasis upon the political work performed within the lying-in room and its positive impact upon societal stability, a theme emphasized within the physical construction of the lying-in space itself. Further, the very validity of the discourse of contamination concerning the lying-in room is revealed as catastrophically dangerous to the integrity of the state itself, and is thus not only undermined, but repeatedly attacked through strategies of displacement and of refutation through the pious example of the empress. However, the romance ultimately does not function as a sort of proto-feminist vindication of the status of women in general but rather as a defense of the integrity of the state reproduced within the confines of the lying-in room against the corrosive associations of that space with sexual contamination, a threat absolutely inimical to the status of that space as a legitimate zone of state stability. Of course, the anxiety that the lying-in room was inherently marked by sexual contamination and the implicit threat of miscegenation suggests the resultant fear that any and every kingdom might indeed be “wrange ayered,” an untenable conclusion for aristocratic dynasties. The displacement of the empress by the lioness, however, demonstrates the lingering anxiety attached to the actual maternal body, and the desire for a less problematic and more incontrovertible vessel of legitimacy.

Sacred and Profane Cannibalism and the Reeducation of *Sir Gowther*¹

The popular Middle English romance *Sir Gowther* focuses upon a literal demon child, Gowther, who embodies monstrous miscegenation and the romance itself has been frequently understood to resemble its monstrously hybrid protagonist in its generic blending of romance and hagiography. The romance begins, as do many popular Middle English romances, with a dynastic crisis. It then offers an infernal solution to the crisis which violates genealogical structures, and at the end of the romance, the problem of genealogy is obviated in favor of the sanctification of the hero. The critical history of this romance has frequently focused on the romance's generic categorical confusion, which is emblemized in the problematic hybrid body of Gowther.² Until recently, much criticism on *Sir Gowther* has been driven by the question of whether the narrative tends more toward the hagiographic or the romance mode. Where a critic tends to fall frequently is determined by which of the two extant redactions is preferred. As Alcuin Blamires notes, those who favor the Advocates redaction tend to identify the romance as more religious in nature, while the less-frequently read Royal offers a more aristocratic

¹ *Sir Gowther* survives in two extant late fifteenth-century manuscripts from the Northeast Midlands, British Library Royal MS 17.B.43 and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1. Both versions of the poem are written in twelve-line tail rhyme stanzas. One of the more noticeable differences between the two versions of *Sir Gowther* is Royal's omission of the incident in which Gowther and his men rape the nuns of a convent and burn it with their victims still inside. Quotations in this work will be taken from the Advocates version, as found in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed Maldwyn Mills (Rutland, Vermont, Charles E Tuttle Co., 1992).

² For examples of this pattern in Gowther criticism, see Shirley Marchalonis, "Sir Gowther: The Process of a Romance," *Chaucer Review* 6:1 (1971): 14-29, E.M. Bradstock, "Sir Gowther: Secular Hagiography or Hagiographical Romance or Neither?" *AUMLA: Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association* 59 (1983): 26-47, Henry Vandelinde, "Sir Gowther: Sainly Knight and Knightly Saint," *Neophilologus* 80 (1996): 139-47, and Alcuin Blamires "The Twin Demons of Aristocratic Society in *Sir Gowther*." In *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed Nicola McDonald (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004). Marchalonis and Blamires both suggest that the secular elements in the romance outweigh the hagiographic trajectory, though Marchalonis does note some eucharistic additions to the romance which were not included in the source texts. Bradstock on the other hand, argues that the hagiographic mode is ultimately dominant in the narrative.

and secular romance.³ Some critics have gone so far as to claim that the two redactions, though superficially similar, differ so much in terms of intention and prominence of sacred and secular discourses, that they should be considered different texts, belonging to different genres, altogether.⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen also identifies *Sir Gowther* as a hybrid romance, but rather than locating the romance somewhere between a secular and pious romance, he suggests that it combines elements of the ancestral and Fair Unknown romance traditions.⁵ Like its protagonist, *Sir Gowther* resists easy categorization, forcing a reexamination of categories often treated as discrete.

As the product (probably) of an adulterous union between a demon and a Duchess whose level of complicity in the adultery is ambiguous at best, the character of Gowther challenges both secular and religious categories – a challenge only resolved through his abject humiliation, violent defense of Christianity, and eventual sanctification. His monstrosity is less physical than appetitive, as he murderously suckles nine nurses to death before mutilating his mother's breast by worrying at her nipple until it is torn off. His penance and eventual redemption also occur at the site of his mouth, which is controlled by papal injunction until Gowther's forgiveness is miraculously revealed through the granting of speech to a formerly mute princess who then marries Gowther. To label *Sir Gowther* as ultimately secular or sacred oversimplifies the romance's own interrogation of these categories and their interpenetration. Within this narrative, the proximity of sacred and secular discourses involving cannibalism, maternal nourishing of the child, and the eucharist is revealed to be problematic. The eventual redemption of

³ Blamires, 47.

⁴ Vandelinde, 140.

⁵ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Gowther Among the Dogs: Becoming Inhuman c.1400," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1997), 221.

Gowther occurs primarily through an educational regime which restores boundaries between sacred and secular, self, and other, eater and eaten, each of which he has destabilized in his earlier behavior, which conflates maternal and eucharistic feeding through his violent attacks on maternal and religious bodies. The ultimate restabilization of these categories proves problematic in itself as the curious cross-pollenization of categories is underwritten with incarnational logic and ramifications, which themselves are disrupted by the apparent resolution of the romance.

Sir Gowther consistently reveals the interpenetration of the secular and sacred in its treatment of its protagonist throughout its narrative. The plot of *Sir Gowther* begins, like many popular romances, with a secular crisis, the lack of an heir in Austria, a crisis which ultimately remains unresolved by the romance. The Duchess of Austria prays to God and Mary to become pregnant by any means possible, and her prayer is answered through a diabolical intervention by a demon who impregnates her in the guise of her husband. After the child Gowther is born, he fulfills the warning of the demon that the child will be “wylde,” murdering his many wetnurses and maiming his mother while nursing (74). As he gets older, he continues his career of destruction, raping wives, maidens and widows, killing priests and friars, and in perhaps his most spectacular transgression, despoiling an entire convent of nuns and then burning them alive in their cloister. When confronted by an old man who tells him he must be the son of a devil, Gowther discovers his true paternity and hybrid nature. Here the romance shifts from the problems of dynasty to conversion as the pope orders a repentant Gowther neither to speak nor eat any food unless it comes from the mouth of a dog as penance for his evil deeds. In time, his silence and habit of sitting under the table and eating with the dogs

earns him the name “Hob” and a place in the castle of an emperor. A Saracen messenger then brings an offer of marriage from his Sultan to the daughter of the Emperor. The Emperor refuses to marry his daughter to a “hethon hownde,” and the Sultan immediately starts a war with the Emperor, whose forces are terribly outnumbered. For three days, Gowther prays for and receives fighting gear and a horse, each day in a different color, and aids the Emperor in disguise. On the third day, he is wounded and the Emperor’s daughter, the only one to recognize Gowther, falls from her tower in despair and appears as if dead for three days. After the Emperor’s victory over the Sultan, the Pope comes for the burial of the daughter, who awakens and miraculously speaks, telling Gowther his penance is over, and informing her father of the identity of the mysterious knights who rode to his rescue. Gowther returns to Austria to found an abbey and make his mother marry the old man who first confronted him about his parentage. He gives up all rights to Austria and becomes a paragon of an heir to the Emperor. After he dies, many miracles are granted to those who pray to him for help. In the course of *Sir Gowther*, Austria’s secular dynastic crisis gives way to the Christian drama of Gowther’s conversion and the triumph of the Christian community over its Saracen aggressors through divine intercession which enables the reformed Gowther to defeat the pagan invaders he himself used to resemble. Gowther’s marriage and elevation to the rank of Emperor, while it does not solve Austria’s heir problem, does provide a more worldly sort of apotheosis for the hero, while the final discussion of his sanctity as Emperor and ability to perform miracles after death offers a parallel sacred elevation.

The romance of *Sir Gowther* consistently shows a great deal of interest in the activities of the mouth. The central protagonists are mute, one due to an imposed

penance and the other from birth. The climax of the romance is their miraculous emergence into speech. But even more significantly, the mouth focuses problems of cannibalistic consumption. The first sign that Gowther gives of his unusual heritage is related to his monstrously voracious appetite, as he literally sucks nine nurses to death in his first year of life (110-116). Understandably, the knights of the land who had offered their wives as wetnurses refuse to submit more candidates for vampiric attention, remarking that “hit was no gamun/ To lose hor wyffus soo” [it was no joke to lose their wives in this way] (119-20). With no other recourse, Gowther’s mother takes on the duty of nourishing her son, and Gowther’s appetite continues to prove unacceptably extreme: one day, while nursing at his mother’s breast, “He snaffulld to hit soo, [worried at it so much]/ He rofe tho hed fro tho brest” (126-27). Later in the romance, Gowther’s eating habits come to the foreground again as the pope limits the repentant demon child’s diet to the food he receives from the mouths of dogs, and additionally forbids him to speak until he receives a sign of his forgiveness by God for his crimes against the church (292-7). Significantly, Gowther’s social and spiritual education is oral, and consists of the monitoring of his mouth—his speech and consumption. A pattern in the romance emerges in which Gowther is retrained to recognize and even enforce categorical boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, sacred and polluted bodies. His reeducation focuses on his mouth and the management of what is allowed to enter and emerge from the site of his earliest transgressions.

That cannibalism becomes a crux of identity and natural hierarchy in this romance is not surprising.⁶ Diana Fuss identifies cannibalism as “one of the most serious

⁶ David Williams. *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), 145; Nicola McDonald, “Eating People

transgressions against the social prohibition separating the inedible from the edible, the human from the animal, the cultural from the natural.”⁷ As David Williams notes, in authorized acts of consumption, a person generally eats what is considered inferior: plants and animals.⁸ The act of eating a creature nominally equal to the self rather than inferior erases that categorical difference, and relegates humans to the category of the bestial or vegetable. In special cases, however, authorized cannibalism, particularly ritual cannibalism, is explicitly predicated on the idea of eating one who is considered superior, or in possession of a desirable and desired characteristic which is lacking in the self, and potentially incorporated through the act of ingestion.⁹ Thus, while cannibalism conflates people and their food, it also troubles the boundaries between the self and the other as well as the meanings conventionally attached to those boundaries. The difference between the self and the other is usually doubled and reinforced by the categories of inside and outside, whether speaking of an individual or a corporate body.¹⁰ The distinct boundaries between self and other are made most distinct and visible in the autonomous integrity of each individual body, whose boundaries are clearly visible on the surface of the skin. The boundaries of the body and the categories of difference enforced by them, however are a point of vulnerability in the categories of difference as the boundaries both act as proof of individual integrity and as the dangerous point of contact between the categories of inside and outside.

and the Alimentary Logic of *Richard Cœur de Lion*.” In *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 124.

⁷ Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 96.

⁸ Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, 145.

⁹ Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 7; McDonald “Eating People,” 139.

¹⁰ Kilgour, 4.

Cannibalism in particular disrupts these boundaries first through the rending of the other's body and then in the incorporation of that body into the self through the act of ingestion.¹¹ This is a danger not only to the physical integrity of the obvious victim of cannibalism, but also to the eater as well. The incorporation of the other into the self through ingestion also leaves its mark on the body of the cannibal. Indeed, this is often the logic behind acts of literal and literary cannibalism, as the cannibal attempts to incorporate some desired yet lacking aspect of the other into the self using the rationale that one is what one eats.¹² This is, of course, the idea that made the consumption of the eucharist in Christian communion at once both desirable and outrageously daring to medieval communicants, for whom the belief that the wafer contained the literal flesh and blood of Christ designated the act of communion an explicit case of cannibalism. In the act of cannibalism, therefore, the distinction between the self and the other becomes blurry and indistinct as the boundaries between bodies and attributes are shifted. Thus Bildhauer sees in cannibalism the "deformation" of both eater and eaten, as the body of the victim is mutilated through consumption while the body of the perpetrator becomes a sort of "monstrous conglomerate" made up of self and other.¹³ When the other becomes both "inside" and "self" through incorporation, and "people" become "food," the basic categories through which the world is apprehended themselves become incoherent and deformed like that of the cannibal's body as distinctions blur and disappear.

¹¹ Bettina Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture," in *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, eds. Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 81.

¹² Jill Tattersall, "Anthropophagi and Eaters of Raw Flesh in French Literature of the Crusade Period: Myth, Tradition and Reality," *Medium Ævum* 57 (1988): 240-1; McDonald, "Eating People," 139; Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism*, 7.

¹³ Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews and Monsters," 81.

In *Sir Gowther*, transgressive, even cannibalistic consumption is a prominent and recurrent theme. In fact, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, Gowther becomes readily recognizable to a medieval audience as a monster specifically in his cannibalistic acts.¹⁴ Gowther's first acts of violence occur as he suckles nine wet-nurses to death and then maims his mother while nursing. His penance for his later crimes against his community also focus on the mouth and eating, especially the command that he only consume food he receives from the mouths of dogs. While this connection might seem coincidental, contemporary medical and religious discourses concerning blood and its consumption in the Middle Ages suggest that in his wild youth, Gowther problematically conflates prominent discourses featuring the authorized consumption of human flesh and blood and must be reeducated so that he can properly distinguish between the sacred and polluted bodies he feeds from. However, the resolution of the romance suggests that a clear and permanent distinction between these bodies is difficult, if not impossible to maintain in the context of biological reproduction and its analogous proximity to both pollution and the sacred in fourteenth-century England. The inevitable conflation of consumed bloods results in the jettisoning of the biological family as a locus of identity in order to insulate the Holy Family and the body of Christ from association with the corrupt and corrupting bloods of the maternal body.

Blood was a ubiquitous concept of identification in the Middle Ages. The medieval inheritance of the humoral system, as well as its respect for classical medicine, ensured that blood became a crucial term in the construction of the body.¹⁵ It could be

¹⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 121.

¹⁵ Carole Rawcliffe, *Sources for the History of Medicine in Late Medieval England*, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 13; Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*:

invoked to describe or define one's character, lineage and health. As McCracken notes, blood was a central concept in medieval identity formation, as "in secular society, status and privilege are inherited through bloodlines, or won with the blood shed in battle."¹⁶ Blood legitimated, transferred, and in some cases elevated status through its spilling in others or its loss to the self. This property of blood was gendered and chivalric, operating primarily within patrilineal bloodlines and masculine battlefields. For women, the monthly flow of menstrual blood marked them as inferior, even dangerously polluting, in both medical and Christian discourses.¹⁷ Medical and philosophical texts often discussed the body's health status in terms of blood; its excess or lack, and its texture, color, etc.¹⁸ Blood thus placed the individual body within a hierarchical system and also on an individual continuum of health or illness.

In the Middle Ages, people used the concept of blood not only to talk about the individual body, but also, perhaps even more profoundly, to discuss and to understand the relationships between bodies, bodies which might alternately be described as making up the community of Christendom, families, and enemies. Bloodlines referred not so much to a metaphorical link between generations within a certain family as to an understanding that successive generations of heirs were formed by the literal blood of their fathers and that their respective heirs would also be formed by and transmit that same blood to the next generation *ad infinitum*. Heirs thus were thought to inherit and then pass on the very

Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), ix. Also see David C. Lindberg, *The Beginnings of Western Science: The European Scientific Tradition in Philosophical, Religious, and Institutional Context, 600 B.C. to A.D. 1450*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially 126-8.

¹⁶ McCracken, ix.

¹⁷ Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 39; Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 109; Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture," 90-1.

¹⁸ McCracken, ix.

“flesh and blood” of their fathers, hence the idealized stability of the system of patrilineal succession. Medieval sermons and secular literature described violent acts, especially murder, as the consumption of the victim’s blood, beginning with Cain, the first homicide, and continuing into contemporary crimes decried by authors.¹⁹ They constructed the act of violence not so much as the spilling of one person’s blood by another, but rather as the drinking of one person’s blood by another, a monstrous transfer from body to body, rather than a theft. Thus the murderer was imagined as an inherently cannibalistic and monstrous individual. This unauthorized transaction was doubled in the most sacred of medieval Christian sacraments, the consumption of the eucharist. Through the Christian rite of communion, members commemorated Christ’s sacrifice and their own salvation by consuming the very flesh and blood of their savior, which was believed to be literally present in the eucharist. This act constituted the community of Christendom as well as the relationship between Christ and communicant, through the metaphor of the communicating church as the body of Christ. The transition from Gowther’s early literal and figurative acts of blood drinking to eucharistic consumption and then authorized violence to protect the integrity of the corporate Christian body and Gowther’s own inclusion within it suggests the potential slippage between these various understandings of the act and significance of consuming the blood of another.

These various secular and religious understandings of blood, its meaning, and its efficacy coexisted in the later Middle Ages, often reinforcing each other.²⁰ Some of the overall consistency on basic assumptions about blood, the humoral system, and the status of the body in these texts presumably derived from similar ultimate sources based in

¹⁹ Bildhauer, Bettina, “Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture,” 88, 83.

²⁰ McCracken, 110.

medical texts of classical antiquity which were translated and revised in the Middle Ages, largely by members of the clergy and often in monastic settings.²¹ Latin and vernacular texts, as Getz notes, were thus often closely related, each including scholarly and folk-based knowledge, as well as charms and prayers.²² Medieval redactors excerpted and compiled both what we might call practical medical texts, such as gynecological manuals and other books of hands-on information for a practicing physician and compendious encyclopedias from classical texts.²³ Often, they framed and appended these revised and compiled texts with reference to explicitly Christian themes, beliefs, and examples.²⁴ At the same time, overtly religious doctrines, arguments and opinions influenced sermons and rituals experienced by lay people which also contextualized their understandings of their bodies, including their blood. For example, medical assertions that the menstrual blood constituted a deadly poison dovetailed seamlessly with Christian moralized understandings of menstruation as a part of Eve's punishment, and the fallenness of human nature, especially in women. In addition, religious writings and doctrines which distinguished Christ and sometimes his mother as having had bodies in perfect humoral balances appropriated the humoral understanding of blood as something that should be monitored for good health, tweaked, lessened (in case of superfluity), or adjusted to calibrate the patient's body into perfect health. These ideas were also exploited that the Eucharist, Christ's body, ingested in communion, was a sovereign remedy, medicine for both spiritual and physical ailments.²⁵

²¹ Faye Getz, *Medicine in the English Middle Ages*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 36, 39, 47.

²² *Ibid.*, 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 41, 47, 64.

²⁵ Rawcliffe, 4.

The above examples highlight another connection between secular and sacred discourses about blood; under certain circumstances, both textual traditions constructed blood as something that passes between two bodies, particularly through consumption, and that this transfer creates a bond or connection between the participants which has important consequences for both, but particularly for the one who consumes the other's blood. *Sir Gowther* first demonstrates the dangers of confusing or conflating different nourishing bloods and then goes on to show Gowther's educational process of differentiating between these bloods as he moves away from sadistic breastfeeding and bloodthirstiness to eucharistic feeding and the authorized bloodthirsty slaughter of the enemies of Christendom.

Gestation, Birth, and Nursing: Consuming the Mother's Blood

‘Sire,’ fait-il, ‘qu’est mere? Et s’on le mangera?’²⁶
(*Beatrix*, 747)

This ingenuous question posed by a child raised in the wilderness by a monk is apt in its encapsulation of a mother's relation to her child: “What is a mother? Can one eat it?” The notion of blood and its consumption permeated medieval medical understandings of the process of reproduction, particularly in the case of the consumption of the flesh and blood of the mother by the unborn and nursing child. The agents of reproduction provided by both parents were consistently associated with, even conflated with, the literal blood of mother and father. Semen, a man's seed, was considered a highly processed and refined version of the father's blood. Aristotle argued that the heat of the father's heart took some of the blood pumping through it and refined it into the white substance that made up man's reproductive seed which was then saved in the man's

²⁶ *The Old French Crusade Cycle*, Vol. 1: *La Naissance du Chevalier au Cygne: Elioxe*, ed. E.J. Mickel Jr.; *Beatrix*, ed. Han A. Nelson. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press), 1977.

testicles.²⁷ Semen, therefore, was blood, refined to its purest form through the heating agency of the male heart. Bildhauer notes a fear that in her absorption of her partner's sperm, a woman who engaged in intercourse consumed some of the life's blood of the man, weakening him and shortening his lifespan.²⁸ The mother's contribution to her child, or seed, as it was sometimes called, was also made up of her blood, though this blood was categorically understood to be inferior to that which made up the paternal seed.²⁹ Menstrual blood was thought to be the substance that a mother contributed to her child in the womb. Women produced menstrual blood through the conversion of food into blood, yet, colder and dryer than men, the blood they produced was not as highly refined, remaining red in color, and in addition, this blood was seen as superfluous in nature, inadequately burned away due to the lesser heat of the female body.³⁰

Aristotelian-based medical theory considered semen to be the organizing seed and active principle involved in conception and gestation, while it imagined the menstrual blood of the mother to be formless matter or *materia*, shaped from a state of incoherent passivity into a form determined by the male seed. The formative property of the male seed ensured that, in ideal situations, the product of conception would resemble the father and through its own blood, be able to transfer the father's qualities in turn to its offspring.

²⁷ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge, 1993), 22. See also Bettina Bildhauer, "Bloodsuckers: The Construction of Female Sexuality in Medieval Science and Fiction," in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 105.

²⁸ Bildhauer, "Bloodsuckers," 107.

²⁹ Cadden, 24-5, 33-5. Whether or not the menstrual blood was considered a seed was largely determined by whether a writer followed a Galenic or Aristotelian model of reproduction. In the Galenic model, both men and women contributed a seed to the child, which competed for influence in the shaping of the child. The female's seed was, however, still considered to be a form of menstrual blood. In the Aristotelian model, only the father's contribution was considered a seed, and it ideally provided the blueprint for the child so that it would resemble the father. Any deviation from this pattern was seen as a deformation of the child's intended form.

³⁰ Bildhauer, "Bloodsuckers," 105; Cadden, 22; Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 35-6

This of course, ideally posits a male child, whose properties would be transferred through his active seed to his son. On the contrary, a daughter could contribute only menstrual blood to her offspring, and thus the raw materials to be shaped by the material of another bloodline. Thus the thirteenth-century Franciscan encyclopedist, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, says of the father that “He produces a child similar to himself in species and appearance, especially when the virtue in the seed of the father overcomes the virtue in the seed of the mother.”³¹ This statement, however, also suggests disruption of the system in the case of inadequate male seed or unusually strong or viable female seed. Generally, these texts imagine the “virtue” of a woman’s seed as resistance to the organizing principle of the male seed.

Menstrual *materia* was described as inherently recalcitrant, despite its essential passivity. For example, the underdeveloped state of human children at birth compared to animal young was blamed on the retarding influence of menstrual blood upon the fetus.³² Albert the Great notes the superfluities that vex women’s bodies, which cause women, unlike female animals, to menstruate.³³ He thus figures the mother’s contribution to her child as not only inferior to that of men, but even to that of female animals, who presumably do not inhibit the growth of their unborn young through contact with superfluous menstrual matter. Middle English gynecological texts describe this *materia* as alternately “a mortall poyson” and “a corrupte blode,” less refined even than normal blood on account of its superfluity and the inadequate heat of the mother’s heart.³⁴ A

³¹ Qtd in Goodich, Michael. “Bartholomaeus Anglicus on Child-Rearing.” *History of Childhood Quarterly* 3(1975): 81).

³² William F. MacLehose, “Nurturing Danger: High Medieval Medicine and the Problem(s) of the Child,” in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996) 5.

³³ Atkinson, 41.

³⁴ *The Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing*, ed. Alexandra Barratt, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 46.

long religious tradition which associated menstrual blood with the most pernicious forms of pollution corroborated the problematic nature of menstrual blood as a contagious source of corruption.

Church rituals and some lay practices related to them registered menstrual bloods, particularly the bloods related to gestation and parturition, as dangerous contaminants within the community. Menstrual blood had been labeled unclean since earliest Christian tradition, following Hebrew law.³⁵ Menstrual blood was understood to be a “sign of women’s fallen nature,” and, as Clarissa Atkinson notes, the relatively low life expectancy of women in the late medieval period ensured that for the most part, adult women were assumed to be menstruating women.³⁶ Penitential manuals commonly discussed menstrual blood in connection with warnings and prohibitions, particularly related to intercourse during menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation.³⁷ Menstrual blood was a flexible category in the late Middle Ages, including not only the monthly menses, but also the blood shed during childbirth and all other forms of bleeding from the genitals.³⁸ In addition, the blood in the womb from which the child was believed to be formed and nourished was also explicitly understood to be menstrual blood, as discussed above. All of these forms of blood participated to some degree in the pollution inherent in Judeo-Christian understandings of menstrual blood.

In particular, communities and parishes singled out the afterbirth and blood of parturition as physically and spiritually contaminating to the woman, her child, and to the

³⁵ McCracken, 3; Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 195. For a description of the connections between Levitical prohibitions on unclean women and the later Christian traditions, see Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 3-6.

³⁶ Atkinson, 39.

³⁷ Erickson, 195; McCracken, 63.

³⁸ McCracken, ix.

surrounding community. These substances were considered polluted not only by their status as menstrual blood, but also by the influence of the pleasurable lust which was assumed to have been experienced in the act of conception.³⁹ Thus church and secular society often singled out the pregnant and recently postpartum body as doubly stigmatized—both in terms of menstrual pollution and the added pollution of the “filth of sin.”⁴⁰ This pollution was cleansed through a purification rite called churching which was derived largely from Hebrew rituals of purification of the recently delivered body.⁴¹ However, in the late sixth or very early seventh century, Pope Gregory responded to anxious questions from the missionary Augustine in England about the exact status of menstruating, pregnant, and/or postpartum women: should those in these compromised states be allowed to enter the church, to participate in sacraments, or take communion?⁴² Gregory’s responses to Augustine are somewhat equivocal; while he explicitly states that pregnancy does not invalidate a woman’s candidacy for baptism, nor her right to enter the church while pregnant or even directly from childbed to offer thanks (without churching), he also acknowledges the contamination of the woman’s body by the sinful lust almost always attendant upon conception as well as the relationship between the pains of labor and the curse visited upon Eve by God in Eden.⁴³ As a compromise, Gregory suggests that it is up to the conscience of the woman in question whether she feels worthy to enter

³⁹ Dyan Elliot, *Fallen Bodies: Pollution, Sexuality, and Demonology in the Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 5.

⁴⁰ Erickson, 196. See also Gail McMurray Gibson, “Blessing From Sun and Moon: Churching as Women’s Theatre,” in *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in the Fifteenth Century*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), and Adrian Wilson “The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation,” in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁴¹ Ibid., 196. For a description of the churching ritual itself, see Chapter 1. Also see Adrian Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation.”

⁴² Atkinson, 79.

⁴³ Atkinson, 80; Elliot, 3-4.

the church and participate in its rites, though he also implies that for a woman to abstain would show her devout piety. In practice, women in the later Middle Ages who entered the church before churching were subject to a penance, affirming that, whatever Gregory might have told Augustine, the message to women was somewhat clear: to reenter the church without having undergone the ritual of churching, whether it was called a purification rite or a thanksgiving rite, was considered a sin.⁴⁴

By the late twelfth century, churching was the typical aftermath of childbirth in England. Communities and individuals considered churching necessary to protect the new mother from the consequences of her own polluted state, as pregnancy and birth were believed to leave a woman particularly open to demonic possession until she was churched.⁴⁵ Women who could not be churched because of some sort of rift with the church were known to sneak into mass after it had begun in order to try to effect an informal purification of their polluted state.⁴⁶ The consequences of dying without having been churched could be severe. As Orme notes, by the end of the fourteenth century, a woman who died in childbirth could not be buried in the church, but was relegated to the churchyard because of the compromised state in which she died.⁴⁷ In some parishes, an unchurched woman was denied burial in holy ground because of common fears that her contaminated blood and afterbirth would attract demons and deconsecrate the entire churchyard.⁴⁸ This fear led to the practice in some areas of bereaved families bringing the corpse of a dead woman into the church to undergo postmortem churching, a practice

⁴⁴ McCracken, 68.

⁴⁵ Paula M. Rieder, "Insecure Borders: Symbols of Clerical Privilege and Gender Ambiguity in the Liturgy of Churching" in *The Material Culture of Sex, Procreation, and Marriage in Premodern Europe*, (New York: Palgrave 2002), 101.

⁴⁶ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 339.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 31.

⁴⁸ Gibson, "Blessing From Sun and Moon," 146; Erickson, 197.

considered by priests to be superstitious, but which was tolerated to some extent in various parishes.⁴⁹ Even in parishes which allowed unchurched women to be buried in the churchyard, the bodies were often furtively buried at the outskirts of the yard so as to avoid the unlucky occurrence of a pregnant or potentially pregnant woman being upset by the sight of the grave or harassed by a vengeful and unquiet spirit.⁵⁰ Thus, while postpartum pollution was believed to be removable after a certain period of time had elapsed and through the ritual offices of the church, its effects were believed to be pernicious and threatening to other women, and in the potential deconsecration of the churchyard, to the entire Christian community. The status of maternal blood and the afterbirth as a pollutant, however, was perhaps most problematic as regards its potential effects on the unborn and newborn child, effects which were not mitigated by churching or ecclesiastical ritual.

The belief that menstrual blood was dangerous not only to those outside the woman's body, but also to her child extended to anxieties about the potential for menstrual matter to give rise to deformities and monstrosities of many types. Bildhauer notes the tendencies of monastic scribes to transcribe "*menstruum*" as "*monstrum*" in medical texts, and the contamination of this blood is repeatedly linked to monstrous births.⁵¹ These texts warn that too much menstrual blood in the womb could cause deformity or monstrosity of children, whose contact with superfluous *materia* in the absence of adequate organizational power provided by the father's seed resulted in a

⁴⁹ Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: an Interpretation of Early Modern Germany*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 78.

⁵⁰ Erickson, 197; Karant-Nunn, 78.

⁵¹ Bildhauer, "Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture," 90-1.

chaotic, malformed body.⁵² The most extreme form of this concern was reserved for children conceived during the prohibited time of menstruation, who were believed to be doomed to be born as lepers or other monsters.⁵³ The proximity of the fetus to menstrual blood was necessary to conception, but occasionally resulted in catastrophes beyond the immediate control of physicians, midwives, and even parents. While conscientious couples could indeed abstain from sex during menstruation, humoral imbalances and superfluities in the maternal body could also spell disaster for developing progeny, in effect undoing or diverting the authorized organization of the developing child's form into an undesirable, even hideous new shape.

The status of menstrual matter as the primary material of the fetus and the fetus's location within the mother's womb made the child uncomfortably subject to what was considered "undue" influence by the mother during gestation. The clearest example of this was the widespread belief in the "mother's mark" upon the child.⁵⁴ Excessive fear or desire in the mother was thought to impress itself upon the matter in her womb, leaving a mark of some type upon the child. Generally, this mark manifested as a birthmark resembling the object of fear or desire—strawberries, perhaps, or a bear. In some cases, the influence upon the child could be much more significant, especially if the moment of impression was simultaneous with the moment of conception. In these cases, the unguarded glance of the mother could have a strong influence on the appearance of the

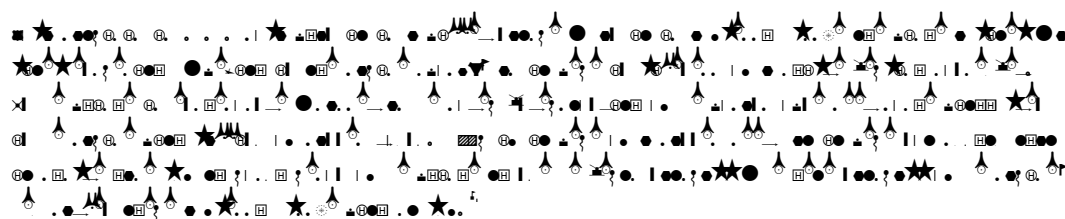
⁵² Ibid., 90-91.

⁵³ For example, a fifteenth-century gynecological handbook includes this discussion of the consequences of conceiving while menstruating: "And o erwhile in is tyme they haue wille to companye with men & so ei done and bryngen forth chyldren that ben meselles [lepers] or haue some o er suche foule syknesse." in *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health: The First English Gynecological Handbook*, ed. Beryl Rowland (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1981), 62.

⁵⁴ Douglas Kelly, "The Domestication of the Marvelous in the Melusine Romances," in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, eds. Donald Maddox and Sarah Sturm-Maddox (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 39-40. See also MacLehose, 8.

child, muddling apparent paternity and in some cases even race.⁵⁵ Maternal contribution in the case of the mother-mark is seen as purely a deviation, even if trivial, from the intended form of the child as determined by the father's seed. Fears regarding the potential for unruly female desires and anxieties to mark their children tended to focus on the disruptive powers of the female imagination, which threatened the unborn through proximity and through the in vitro nourishment that sustained them.

Perhaps the most horrifying consequence of the prominence of menstrual blood and thus maternal contribution (or obstruction) in the process of conception was its potential to completely overcome, resist, or obviate the shaping properties of the male seed. Gynecological texts discuss the formation and prescribed treatment for a condition called *mola matricis*, in which the menstrual matter grows as if it was a child, but instead continues to be a shapeless lump of flesh, due either to the inadequate power or virtue of the male seed, or to its total absence in the womb. In such cases, the *materia* takes on a monstrous inchoate form, animate, yet essentially lifeless:



In this nightmare of procreation, the matter takes on a sort of passive and pulpy life of its own, mimicking the signs of true pregnancy (swelling of the womb, retention of menses), but with none of the generative potential of actual gestation. The understanding that the

⁵⁵ Margo Hendricks, "Monstrosity and the Mercurial Female Imagination," in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 96-7; MacLehose, 8. See also Elliot, 43. This phenomenon of the ill-timed glance evoked great classical interest as well, inspiring narratives such as the *Aethiopica*, by Heliodorus. In it, an Ethiopian queen glances at an image of Andromeda during the act of conception, and this results in the birth of a blond white daughter.

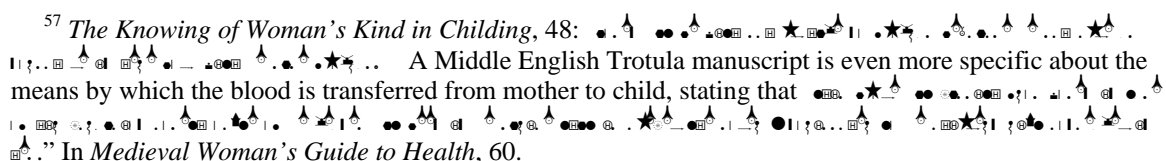
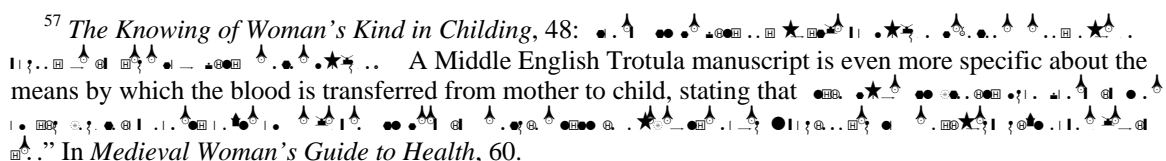
⁵⁶ *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health*, 140.

materia of a woman's womb is resistant to the proper control and organization of the male seed is realized horrifically in this scenario of lifeless hijacking of the reproductive process by the matter meant to be formed. The consequences of menstrual inferiority ensure that the monstrous lump never attains true life; however, the resistant properties of the menstrual matter may in fact sabotage the formation of a fetus if the male seed is inadequate to the challenge of subduing the recalcitrant material.

The case of the *mola matricus* is telling in the way that it largely constructs unsatisfactory fertility as the fault of a woman's body, an imbalance between relative strengths of female and male seeds. This accords with the medieval tendency in practice for women to be blamed for infertility despite acknowledgement that the masculine seed might be weak in relation to the wife's seed. With the understanding that barrenness might be caused not only by a deficiency in the mother's womb or seed, but also in its superfluous potency in relation to her husband's seed, the Duke's threatened repudiation of his wife in order to seek a more productive womb, as "Y do bot wast my tyme on the" carries the potential suggestion that, while the Duke clearly blames his wife for the lack of an heir, either seed might reasonably be at fault (55). The later impregnation of the Duchess by a demon leaves this question somewhat ambiguous as well; the pregnancy might have resulted from the supernatural potency of the demon's seed, suggesting an unnaturally strong maternal influence which could only be overcome by diabolical means, or it may simply have been the inherent weakness of the father's seed which kept the Duchess barren until the arrival of the fiend. Gowther's birth suggests that in any case, his mother is not inherently barren, but that her husband is either impotent or that his seed is unequal to the challenge posed by his wife's *materia*. Either scenario

implicitly represents a threat to the Duke's bloodline which is posed by the recalcitrance of that maternal *materia*, as it is the relative potency of mother and father which has a hand in the production of an heir.

The prominence of menstrual blood in the formation of a fetus was even more problematic because it was believed not only to make up the substance of the child, but also its nourishment, explaining why pregnant women did not menstruate.⁵⁷ The degraded and degrading status of menstrual blood in this context was noted by authorities such as the Franciscan encyclopedist Bartholomaeus Anglicus, who comments with some wonder that it is this "poor and weak material" which provides sustenance to all men at the beginning of their lives.⁵⁸ If Franciscan friars found the idea of such sustenance difficult to countenance, a more problematic objection sometimes was believed to be registered by the imbibers themselves. Gynecological texts identified menstruation during pregnancy as a sign that the fetus had refused to consume its mother's blood and would sicken and die in the womb for lack of an alternate source of sustenance.⁵⁹ These texts understood mother's blood, registered as menstrual blood, however distasteful and polluting a substance, to be the sole source of nourishment to the child in vitro, adding to the initial maternal influence provided by the *materia* shaped by the seed. While the ingestion of such blood might be necessary to the survival of the child, it also carried its own dangers, including the transmission of maternal emotions like fear and desire to the child, which could have more or less serious repercussions in the form of the mother-

⁵⁷ *The Knowing of Woman's Kind in Childing*, 48: . A Middle English Trotula manuscript is even more specific about the means by which the blood is transferred from mother to child, stating that . In *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health*, 60.

⁵⁸ In Goodich, 77.

⁵⁹ *Medieval Woman's Guide to Health*, 58-60.

mark. In a worst-case scenario like the one mentioned above, the necessary fluid might nevertheless be rejected by the child, resulting in its death. The understanding that menstrual blood was both corrupt blood and a poison made it easy and likely to be imagined as inherently harmful and distasteful to the gestating child.

Discussions of gestational and post-partum feeding of a child thus tend to conflate food and blood. Excess food eaten by a woman is the source of the incompletely processed *menstruum* that provides the initial material from which the child is formed. After conception, this extra food is no longer passed from the mother's body as menses, but instead becomes the source of nourishment for the child, who ingests the blood and is nourished exclusively from it. After birth, the mother's excess food is converted into menstrual blood, which then flows into the breasts and is processed into milk, a more refined version of menstrual blood which is yet still less refined than a man's sperm. This milk, still considered to be blood, is then fed to the child, whose physical and moral constitution were believed to be strongly influenced by the basic qualities, diet, class, and habits of the milk provider. Food was processed into blood, which, in a more or less mediated form, provided the nourishment of the fetus and unweaned child.

Even after birth, menstrual blood was believed to provide the sustenance of the child through milk. Milk was considered to be more highly refined menstrual blood than *materia*, yet still inferior to sperm, and was still considered to be potentially damaging to the child. Because of its status as menstrual blood consumed by the child, milk was thought to transmit the "virtue and spiritual qualities" of the provider to the child.⁶⁰ For this reason, breast-feeding inspired anxieties concerning the possibility that unsavory or

⁶⁰ Tania Colwell, "Mélusine: Ideal Mother or Inimitable Monster?" in *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages*, eds. Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller, & Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 181-204, 185-6.

debilitating maternal influence might occur through the act of ingestion. The perceived threats to the child were both physical and spiritual. This anxiety became heightened in the Late Middle Ages, as the increased attention to Marian maternity and nursing emphasized the transmission of maternal morals and character through the medium of milk.⁶¹ In this context, as Colwell notes, breast-feeding by a mother began to be considered a form of “moral education.”⁶² The notion that the ingestion of milk had consequences for the character of the child led to exhortations that mothers nurse their own children, rather than allowing a wet-nurse to take over this crucial role.⁶³ The preference for maternal nursing coincided with class assumptions about the link between moral and societal status and consistency between the alimentary education provided a young child through nursing and the class status of the child was considered most advantageous to the child, as wet-nurses typically were drawn from significantly lower class levels. As a nursling, Gowther is privileged to be serviced by the best wives of his father’s duchy, wives clearly considered part of the chivalric class, as their husbands are described as knights. In addition to class inconsistency between nurslings and nurses, authorities were also concerned about religious divisions between wetnurse and infant, leading to Pope Honorius III’s prohibition against the employment of Jewish nurses for Christian babies.⁶⁴

The consequences of nursing for the child, however, were not only moral, but physical in nature. Thus the health and diet of the nurse were of concern, as well as her morality. For example, belief that the recently postpartum body was particularly polluted

⁶¹ MacLehose, 3.

⁶² Colwell, 189.

⁶³ Ibid., 185-6.

⁶⁴ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 98.

required an exception to the general preference for maternal nursing.⁶⁵ In addition, gynecological texts warned nurses against eating salted “metes” or bitter foods while nursing, lest the transference of these foods through the milk cause the child to “rot.”⁶⁶ So-called “vicious milk” was thought to cause a host of serious health problems to the child, including vomiting, diarrhea, oral ulcers, and spasms.⁶⁷ This same transmission, however, was seen as a boon in the area of medicines, which could first be ingested by the nursing woman, and thus more safely administered to the children through the milk.⁶⁸ The belief that “good milk produces good progeny and bad milk bad progeny” made the quality of a woman’s milk crucial to the health of a young child, particularly because of the malleable physical and moral qualities of the very young.⁶⁹ The ingestion of bad milk, that is to say, bad blood, could in this way undermine the perceived ideal organizational and formative properties of the male sperm on the child, just as the *materia* and ingested menstrual blood threatened to do to the fetus. The qualities passed through the milk, however, tended to be more general than specific, and thus the mother’s milk was considered to be an acceptably close source of nutrition and formation under most circumstances.

The lingering aura of this nourishment as blood, and more importantly, as menstrual blood, had serious consequences for the ability of that blood to provide sustenance for the child under certain circumstances. In general, authorities were adamant that a mother’s milk was the best for her child and that women who turned

⁶⁵ Elliot, 4; McCracken, 68; Rieder, 98-99.

⁶⁶ *The Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing*, 76.

⁶⁷ See Goodich, 77.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 77. Bartholomaeus also stresses the importance of giving the nurse a good diet, so that her strength can compensate for the weakness and vulnerability of the young child.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

do. Ironically, Gowther's family follows the strictest injunction that nine nurses be used before his mother is allowed to nurse him, but in the logic of the romance, this strategy is not deployed in order to protect Gowther, but rather because no nurse can adequately supply his hunger. The nurses seem more like a line of defense protecting Gowther's mother from her son, rather than the reverse. In addition, even the use of such superior nurses and his own mother's provision of sustenance is not enough to adequately influence Gowther's "wylde" nature. If nursing provides a moral education, Gowther resists its effect upon him.

The discourses surrounding medieval ideas of gestation and early development constructed the boundaries between mother and child, inside and outside, as shifting and insecure. Carried within the mother's body, the child could not be clearly defined as existing outside the mother's body, and the moment when the child was considered to be an autonomous entity within the mother's body was both a matter of some importance and controversy.⁷⁴ Because the child was first made up from the mother's blood, and then fed by it, any definitions of inside and outside boundaries between their bodies became compromised, in much the same way as in the relation between cannibal and victim. While the child's consumption of his mother's blood was not explicitly described as cannibalism, it caused a similar unease due to the emphasis placed upon the nourishment as blood even in its more refined state as milk. The overt connection to cannibalism is circumvented by the lack of mutilation of bodies; if anything, the devouring child is imagined as more at risk than the nourishing mother. The nursing

⁷⁴ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 26. For example, midwives needed to make decisions about whether or not an unborn child had died with its mother or not, decisions which could end in the child being prohibited from burial in holy ground.

mother provides a potential instance of monstrosity itself, as, in a parallel to women's ability through menstruation to bleed without wound, the nurse's body provides sustenance without being deformed through consumption. As in discussions of cannibalism, the disruption of boundaries between eater and eaten is exacerbated by the issue of incorporation, in which the eater takes in or receives some of the qualities of the eaten party. In the cases of prenatal feeding and nursing, this transmission of qualities through consumption was a profoundly ambivalent facet of the mother/child relation. Foods fed to the mother were also fed to the child, and this meant that the mother's nourishment could alternatively represent sustenance, medicine or poison to the feeding child. Moreover, intrinsic qualities of the mother could be transmitted to the child, for better or for worse, as could even fleeting impressions of emotions like fear or desire. While positive qualities were believed to be carried by the blood or milk of a good woman, the great potential for negative physical and moral consequences to the child were repeatedly stressed in discourses which discussed early development of children, whether in a predominantly medical or religious context. In the case of negative incorporation, the effect is represented as a deviation from the proper development of the child from the paternal pattern to a transgressive anarchic form associated with maternal corruption or monstrosity.

The flip side of the anxieties and prohibitions concerning nursing was of course the potential for breast-feeding and the selection of a proper milk-provider, whether the mother or another woman, to provide some sort of a positive influence upon her charge through the transmission of her basic qualities in her milk. As in eucharistic discourses, there was a basic understanding, that, at least in the case of malleable and vulnerable

infants, one was what/who one ate, and therefore the choice of a nurse was of critical importance. In its adherence to the rule that nine wetnurses are best before infant introduction to maternal milk, Gowther indeed is provided in quick succession with nine hapless nurses. Curiously, however, the strategy of choosing worthy and admirable nurses for a problematic child seems monumentally ineffective in *Sir Gowther*. The “melche wemen” [milk women] the Duke provides for Gowther are “The best in that cuntre,” proven nurses of god repute who are also “full fud knyghttys wyffys,” yet their proven qualities prove unequal to the task of subduing or satisfying Gowther (107-109). Not only do they succumb to his hunger, but even this excessive consumption does not prove sufficient for Gowther to retain some of the nurses’ superior qualities. If anything, Gowther’s nursing behavior only grows worse, culminating in the attack on his mother which leads to his early weaning. The positive effects of nursing, which support, sustain and strengthen the body and morals of the infant are not in evidence. Gowther does physically grow prodigiously fast and strong, but his immunity from the moral influence of good milk makes that strength a cause of tragedy for his family and realm, as it fuels Gowther’s bad behavior. In fact, the connection between the sustenance of milk and Gowther’s acts of brutality is specifically noted by some of his later victims who lament “That ever modur h[im] fed” (162)

Nourishing the Soul: Eucharistic Practices, Sacred Cannibalism

Cannibalism and the ritualistic incorporation of the eaten into the eater’s body and vice-versa is at the heart of late medieval Christianity’s most cherished and anxiety-ridden sacrament, the eucharist. In a form of “licensed anthropophagy,” the communicant consumed the flesh and blood of Christ in communion, performing and enacting his or

her status as a member of the Christian community.⁷⁵ By eating the host at communion, communicants celebrated and advertised their relation to each other and to the larger Christian church. Eating Christ's body was believed not only to make the communicant more like Christ, but also to incorporate the eater, in an inversion of cannibalistic logic, into the body of the eaten savior.⁷⁶ Thus a new yet preexisting body was reconvened with the eucharist—the body of Christ, which referred both to Christ's literal body and its metaphorical double, the Church as body of Christ. The identities of consumer and consumed thus become conflated and fluid as incorporation of Christ's body into one's own causes one's body in turn to become assimilated into the body of Christ. Communicant and Christ become indistinguishable in their doubling as “both God and man play “host.”⁷⁷ Theologians and mystics overtly considered eating Christ in communion an explicit act of union. For example, in the mid-thirteenth century, Bonaventure describes the mystery of communion as “a wondrous and unending union between the eaten and the food, and there is a conversion of one into the other.”⁷⁸ Theologians such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas set communion apart from other types of consumption in its ability to render the eater into the eaten. Glossing Augustine, Aquinas notes that

There is a difference between bodily and spiritual food. Bodily food is changed into the substance of the person who eats it and, therefore, is of no help in conserving life unless it is physically consumed. But spiritual food changes man into itself. This is the teaching of Augustine in his *Confessions*. He heard, as it were, the voice of Christ saying to him, ‘*you will not change me into yourself as you would the food of your flesh; but you will be changed into me.*’⁷⁹

⁷⁵ McDonald, 143.

⁷⁶ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 3, 256-7.

⁷⁷ Kilgour, 15.

⁷⁸ Qtd in Rubin, Miri. *Corpus Christi*, 17.

⁷⁹ Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 12-13:

This logic of incorporative transformation was sometimes played out at the literal level, with the appearance of stigmata upon communicants' bodies. The act of ingesting Christ was thought, then, not only to enact a spiritual transformation upon the communicant, but also, in some cases, a physical transformation in which the communicant's body took on aspects of the tortured flesh of Christ through oral incorporation. On a larger scale, the eucharist's ability to incorporate people into the body of Christ was intended to construct the Christian community itself as a single coherent entity or body, that of the sacrificed human God. Communion thus enacted "the integrity of an entire culture" through the ritual consumption of the host.⁸⁰

The doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ in the eucharist, established at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1214, insisted upon the actual presence of the true flesh and blood of Christ in the communion host, and thus declared the figurative cannibalism involved in communion literal.⁸¹ While the status of Christ's presence in the eucharist had been seriously considered since the twelfth century, the questions raised by the official doctrine of the Real Presence were varied and urgent. Controversies raged as to the consequences of the inevitable degradation of the host wafer during communion or misuse. While the consecrated wine had been denied most congregations since the

Ad secundum dicendum quod hæc est differentia inter alimentum coporale et spirituale, quod alimentum coporale convertitur in substantiam ejus qui nutritur; et ideo non potest homini valere ad vitæ conservationem alimentum coporale nisi realiter sumatur. Sed alimentum spirituale convertit hominem in seipsum: secundum illud quod Augustinus dicit, quod quasi audit vocem Christi dicentis, '*Nec tu me murabis in te, sicut cibum carnis tuæ, sed tu mutaberis in me.*'

Curiously, the logic of breast-feeding seems also to have at least partially followed this incorporative logic, despite Aquinas's differentiation of Eucharistic feeding from other types of sustenance.

⁸⁰ Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 3. Beckwith notes that, despite this ideal (or perhaps, because of it), specific individual beliefs concerning the eucharist were often used as litmus tests for orthodoxy and heresy. Thus, even as the Eucharist was confirmed as a symbol and enactment of solidarity, it also provided the fault lines along which nonconformists were excluded from the community. See also Rubin, 9.

⁸¹ McDonald, 127

twelfth century, largely for fear of spillage, the host was still seen as vulnerable to accidental and malicious abuse.⁸² This was made possible by the doctrine that both Christ's flesh and blood were present in the element of the wafer.⁸³ Clergy debated about the fate and significance of crumbs eaten by mice, infidels, Jews, or those with doubts as to the literal presence of Christ's body through transubstantiation.⁸⁴ While it was eventually agreed that no harm could come to the body of Christ through unauthorized consumption nor through the biological processes of digestion and excretion, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, communion tended to become more and more rarely enjoyed by the laity.⁸⁵ As a result of anxieties over the treatment of the eucharist, most members of the laity consumed the eucharist only at Easter, while sick, dying, or before giving birth.⁸⁶ However, while actual communion tended to be rare for the laity, eucharistic imagery and themes were ubiquitous in late medieval culture.⁸⁷

The already present undertones of cannibalism in communion were validated and made much more prominent in light of the ascendancy of the doctrine of the Real Presence, as clergy, mystics and artists all made use of the potent image of man-eating that was confirmed at Fourth Lateran. As Nicola McDonald notes, this doctrine invited and even mandated the congregation's understanding that they were committing a daring act of cannibalism when they communicated as "the requirement that Christ be literally present in flesh and blood –real to see, touch and taste – on the altar, in the priest's hands and in the communicant's mouth liberates us to imagine the unimaginable and, more

⁸² Rubin, 48. For symmetry's sake, watered wine was often offered after the host, though clergy were quick to emphasize that this was not in fact the blood of Christ, merely an aid to swallowing the dry bread of the host.

⁸³ Ibid., 54.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 67, 43.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 43, 80.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73. See also Beckwith, 116.

significantly, forces us to record these fantasies in words and images.”⁸⁸ While the cannibalistic potential in communion had been exploited since the early Church in narratives of eucharistic miracles, these stories gained momentum leading up to and following Lateran IV.⁸⁹ Frequently the stories dwelled with ghoulish fervor on the tactile and gory ramifications of transubstantiation: the taste, appearance, and scent of flesh and blood, the graphic slaughter of a man, or more common, a child or infant. From the late twelfth century on, miracles involving bleeding hosts or chalices overflowing with flood become much more common.⁹⁰ Often, the miracle stories focused on rewarding the belief of a faithful member of the congregation, or more commonly, proving the miraculous power of the eucharist to an erring member of the Church or an outsider, such as a disguised Jew or Saracen.⁹¹ These miracles emphasize the interchangeability of child and loaf, wine and blood, host and tortured flesh, as well as the aggressive demand by the elements of the eucharist (flesh and blood) to be recognized in their true, yet obscured forms. Communion thus offered the exuberant promise of becoming at least in part the divine through a normally transgressive act which is given special license in the sacrament of the eucharist. The practice of imagining and experiencing the consumption of the eucharist as a literal act of cannibalism accentuated the emotional charge of this act.

⁸⁸ McDonald, 143.

⁸⁹ G.J.C. Snoek, *Medieval Piety from Relics to the Eucharist: A Process of Mutual Interaction*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 37. Snoek notes that many of these stories were drawn from the popular tales found in the *Vitae Patrum*, including a representative narrative of a fourth century Jew who participates in communion in order to learn its secrets. After seeing the priest slaughter a child, he goes on to drink real blood from the cup and eat flesh with the rest of the congregation.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 311-2.

⁹¹ Rubin, 139; Snoek, 37, 311-12; Bildhauer, Bettina, “Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture,” 90.

The cannibalistic elements of the eucharist offered believers a daring, yet validated license to intimately touch, experience and incorporate the body of the divine, while imagining in that act the performance of a socially taboo behavior, the consumption of another human being. The idea of the Real Presence of Christ in the wafer and wine foregrounded and emphasized the transgressive nature of the consumption of the eucharist as cannibalism and sometimes the license to eat God-as-Christ spilled over into uncomfortable and unwelcome corollaries. For example, in what Snoek refers to as “a somewhat embarrassing episode” in the late twelfth century, Hugh of Lincoln gnawed on a relic purported to be the arm bone of Mary Magdalene, chipping off several fragments in the process.⁹² When confronted by the abbot of Fécamp, who was understandably appalled at this behavior in his guest, Hugh excused his actions by referring to the act of communion which had just occurred during mass, saying “Why should I not try to take a few morsels of the bones for my protection since I have just taken between my unworthy fingers the most holy body of the holiest of holiest, have eaten of it and touched it with my teeth and my lips?”⁹³ Hugh’s logic suggests that the license to eat the divine implicitly authorizes other forms of less ritualized cannibalism, at least of the saints. The sheer audacity of eating the man-God makes other types of cannibalism seem banal, not worthy of much notice. While Hugh’s reasoning was clearly not shared, at least at first, by the audience to his bone-gnawing, it does suggest some of the potential for uncomfortable slippages between the ritual of communion and other forms of literal cannibalism which are imagined as parallel to it. The eucharist was not seen in isolation

⁹² Snoek, , 28. See also McDonald, 143 for a slightly different rendition and interpretation of this narrative.

⁹³ Snoek, 28.

from other systems of understanding, and, at least in this case, in isolation from other human bodies than Christ's.

The doctrine of the Real Presence of Christ's body in the eucharist was linked to and reinforced the rise of affective piety and its identification with a suffering human savior and his sorrowing mother. Affective piety focused upon two reciprocal understandings of the relationship between God and humanity and Christ and humanity. First, affective piety stresses the status of humans as having been created by God "in his image and likeness."⁹⁴ At the same time, affective piety focuses on Christ's humanity as a means of identifying with him as a fellow sufferer, in fact as the prototypical suffering mortal, exemplary and yet approachable through his capacity for pain.⁹⁵ Appropriately, the form of Christ ingested and incorporated by the communicant in the eucharist was Christ's living and suffering body, broken on the cross in order to redeem mortal flesh.⁹⁶ Christ's physical humanity became more emphasized throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and the intense devotion to his Incarnation tended to focus increasingly on both his entrance and exit from his human form; his formation in Mary's womb, nativity and crucifixion became major objects of attention and devotional fervor.⁹⁷

The persistent focus of affective piety in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries upon Christ's humanity as located especially in his infant and dying bodies often resulted in a conflation of the two especially in miracles and imagery centering on the Eucharist.

⁹⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 17.

⁹⁵ Beckwith, 50. See also Rubin, 139.

⁹⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 256-7.

⁹⁷ Jane Gilbert, "Putting the Pulp into Fiction: The Lump-Child and Its Parents in *The King of Tars*," In *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed. Nicola McDonald (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 111; Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 130.

For example, eucharistic miracles often described a doubting member of the congregation, or in some cases, an especially pious person or a child as witnessing and experiencing, not the breaking of the host at the altar, but rather the slaughter and consumption of a small child or baby.⁹⁸ Rubin likewise links the increasing frequency of the image of the child on the altar with the simultaneous trend of increasingly bloody and graphic crucifixion imagery.⁹⁹ The necessity of literal cannibalism in communion as dictated by the doctrine of the Real Presence, when combined with the twin devotions to Christ's infancy and death, resulted in the substitution of Christ's infant body with his broken body on the altar. While less dramatic, other forms of eucharistic imagery also conflated the Christ child or his suffering adult version with bread and wine offered for consumption.¹⁰⁰ In paintings, the Christ child is often associated with bread or hanging grapes, and devotional readings frequently describe the ecstatic consumption of wine from Christ's side wound.¹⁰¹

Affective piety's attention to Christ's humanity and carnal body also brought with it much curiosity and scrutiny of his hybrid nature, the mechanics of the Incarnation and thus, the source of his humanity, the Virgin Mary and her own miraculous body. The status of the Virgin's life-giving body had been a topic of intense debate throughout Christianity. The nature and status of her body was of particular interest as it was the source of Christ's humanity.¹⁰² While menstruation was seen as a sign of sin, it was necessary for Mary to possess menstrual blood, first, since it confirmed Christ's

⁹⁸ Rubin, 136; Snoek, 311-2; for a representative example, see Snoek, G.J.C. *Medieval Piety from relics to the Eucharist*, 37.

⁹⁹ Rubin, 139.

¹⁰⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 271-272.

¹⁰¹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 123; Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 271-2.

¹⁰² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 239.

humanity, and second, because, at least according to the contemporary medical and physiological theories described earlier, menstrual blood constituted Mary's maternal contribution to Christ's makeup that provided his humanity via his mother's *materia*.¹⁰³ In effect, Mary's blood, and later her milk (another form of her blood, and consumed by the infant Christ), constituted the salvific flesh and blood of Christ himself, and this conclusion and its eucharistic context was not lost on theologians and artists. Some theologians went so far as to suggest that Christ's flesh, derived from his mother's blood, was not only human flesh, but also "in some sense female, because it was his mother's."¹⁰⁴ In the eleventh century, the theologian Peter Damian describes the transformation of Mary's milk into the flesh of Christ and then links that flesh explicitly to the flesh of Christ consumed in the eucharist:

O blessed breasts which, when they pour delicate milk into puerile lips, supply the food of men and angels . . . The fluid flows from the breasts of the Virgin and is turned into the flesh of Christ . . . It is indeed that body of Christ which the most blessed Virgin bore . . . that I say without any doubt and no other that we now receive from the sacrament of the altar and his blood we drink in the sacrament of our redemption.¹⁰⁵

This elision of Mary's milk and blood into the flesh and blood of Christ, and then into the bread and wine of the eucharist linked Mary and her bodily processes to the theology and imagery of the eucharist. Rubin notes the ubiquitous association of the Virgin Mary, particularly in her nourishing role as mother and nurse, with the eucharist in vernacular

¹⁰³ Elliot, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 265.

¹⁰⁵ Qtd in Elliot, 110. "O beata ubera, quae dum tenue lac puerilibus labris infundunt, angelorum cibum et hominum pascunt. . . . Manat liquor ex uberibus Virginis, et in carnem uertitur Saluatoris. . . . Illud siquidem corpus christi quod beatissima Virgo genuit, . . . illud inquam, abseque ulla dubietate, non aliud, nunc de sacro altari percipimus, et eius sanguinem in sacramentum nostrae redemptionis haurimus" from Peter Damian, Sermon 45, c. 4, *Sermones*, ed. Giovanni Lucchesi, CCCM, 57, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983), 267.

literature.¹⁰⁶ Specifically eucharistic discourse and imagery made a strong association between the appearance of Christ's flesh in the sacrament, and its formation leading to the nativity. In art, as Bynum notes "Medieval artists explicitly associated the lactating Virgin with the eucharist . . . the nursing Virgin was also depicted as a table or an oven on which the child . . . was offered or baked."¹⁰⁷ Mary as nursing mother, provider of sustenance to Christ, is thus shown to be the source of the bread consumed and incorporated at communion by members of the congregation. Other images drew implicit connections between Mary's nourishing breasts and Christ's nourishing wounds and blood, as both simultaneously offered their life-giving liquids in similar poses of invitation.¹⁰⁸ The late twelfth and early thirteenth century abbot of Perseigne describes Christ himself as the milk of the Virgin who is consumed by the faithful who then, by sharing the milk of Mary, which Christ also drank, become Christ's siblings.¹⁰⁹ Mary's blood and milk, therefore, become not only the substance and source of Christ's redeeming flesh, but also the means of access to it, albeit through the somewhat circular source of Christ's flesh in the Eucharist.

The conflation of nursing and of consuming Christ's blood became more prevalent in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, as nursing itself was routinely associated not with the consumption of milk, but of blood.¹¹⁰ As the distinctions between blood and milk blurred, so did the boundaries of Mary's and Christ's nourishing bodies. Like Christ, Mary was seen to nourish the faithful directly, but in the later Middle Ages, she, like her son, was as likely to nourish with blood as she was with milk. At the same

¹⁰⁶ Rubin, 142.

¹⁰⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 271.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 272.

¹⁰⁹ Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 124.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 152-3.

time, as Bynum has extensively demonstrated, mystics and devotional writers from the twelfth century on frequently envisioned Christ as a nursing mother who offered milk to drink from both his breasts and his wounds.¹¹¹ For example, the fourteenth century male mystic Henry Suso described himself as a baby suckling milk from God, but also as drinking liquid flowing from Mary's heart.¹¹² Alda of Siena, who died in the early fourteenth century, owned a painting which depicted Mary holding Christ while feeding from the wound in his side.¹¹³ The fluidity of the roles of eater and eaten between Mary, mother of Christ, source of his flesh and her son who nourished all faithful, including his mother, doubled the fluidity of roles assigned in communion between those who incorporated Christ into their bodies and thus became incorporated into his. Within this system, sacramental nursing provided a recognizable means of imagining a case where the consumption of blood could be recognized as non-deforming to Christ, the Host. His body's miraculous ability to provide sustenance and yet remain intact mirrored the same property of the nursing mother, at the same time as it drew upon the dependency of the infant upon his mother as a potent model for the bond between believer and Christ. The slippage of bodies and roles between Mary, Christ, celebrant and eucharistic eater formed one of the central mysteries of the sacrament of the eucharist.

One consequence of the proximity of Mary's blood to Christ's body and thus to the eucharist was a pressing need to distinguish Mary's contribution to the divine body of Christ from the products of other, less exalted bodies. While theologians deemed Mary's menstrual blood necessary to the humanity of Christ, they vociferously defended the

¹¹¹ See Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 117, 123, 133. See also Elaine H. Pagels, "What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity," *Signs* 2(1976): 302.

¹¹² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 103.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 142.

Virgin's blood as inherently different from the *materia* used in ordinary conception. For example, in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas asserted that because of the special circumstances of the Annunciation the blood used in Christ's conception was not tainted by sexual desires' contaminating influence over blood, for "while the hot lust of ordinary intercourse draws the menstrual blood down to the woman's genitals for purposes of conception, the blood used in the conception of Christ never visited these lower regions. On the contrary, the operation of the holy Spirit brought completely pure and untainted blood directly to the Virgin's womb."¹¹⁴ This might have helped to explain why Christ alone out of humanity was believed to have been created in recognizable form in the womb, skipping over the stage of chaotic matter.¹¹⁵ In addition, Mary's body, while it supplied the menstrual blood necessary to Christ's formation, did not suffer, as did other women's bodies, from a superfluity of menstrual blood, leaving her free of "Eve's curse" of menstruation.¹¹⁶ Likewise, her body was untainted by the pollution of the afterbirth as well as the pain of childbirth, just as her conception was free of the polluting effects of lust. Thus, while Mary did submit to being purified after Christ's birth, her participation was seen as a mark of her humility and obedience, rather than a sign that she had any actual need of purification.¹¹⁷ The very distance between Mary's pregnant body and its proximity to the eucharist and the bodies of ordinary women was demonstrated by the "tacit acceptance" that the menstruating woman was impure and thus should ideally abstain from communion, despite Pope Gregory's assertions that the pregnant or

¹¹⁴ Elliot, *Fallen Bodies*, 5.

¹¹⁵ In Goodich, 77.

¹¹⁶ Elliot, 109.

¹¹⁷ Gibson, "Blessing From Sun and Moon," 151.

menstruating woman should be allowed to participate in mass and the sacraments, though her conscience might lead her to abstain.¹¹⁸

Despite the explicit differences between Mary's reproductive body and the bodies of other people, especially women, the associations between the biological processes of reproduction which Mary's miraculous body linked to the crucifixion and the sacrament of the eucharist became manifest in the bodies of other believers as well devotional practices as well as in narratives of eucharistic miracles. In addition, women's bodies, like Christ's were sources of new life and sustenance, especially through the means and consumption of blood.¹¹⁹ The parallels between the female reproductive body and the ideas and imagery surrounding the eucharist to some extent mitigated the lines drawn between Mary's body and other pregnant and lactating bodies as the language and imagery of reproduction permeated discussions and descriptions of eucharistic behavior and devotion. Pregnancy in and of itself offered a potent and accessible metaphor for the mystery of a cannibalistic consumption that at once truly was about the literal and sustaining consumption of another's blood which nevertheless posed no great harm to the person being consumed. The figure of the mother as one who nourished through her blood without injury offered believers a way to imagine themselves as alternatively Christ's fetal child or nourishing mother in the act of communion, much as in the slippage between Mary's and Christ's roles in other eucharistic imagery and discourses. Mystics, priests and some members of the laity at times likened the presence of the host in the belly of the communicant to the presence of the Christ-child's body within Mary's

¹¹⁸ Rubin, 149; Atkinson, 79; Elliot, 4.

¹¹⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 30.

womb.¹²⁰ The priest who officiated as the celebrant of communion was sometimes imagined and described as being himself pregnant with the host.¹²¹ Both religious men and lay women reportedly experienced mystical pregnancies, their bodies swelling in imitation of gestation, either in preparation for or after receiving the sacrament.¹²² Mystical pregnancy rewrote the body of Mary and its intimate connection with the Christ child on the bodies of those who partook of Christ's flesh in communion. In addition, as Franz Borkenau suggests, the medieval prohibitions against biting the Host or even touching it with one's teeth required the communicant to consume the host "like a liquid, not like a compact body."¹²³ The loop between Christ's and his mother's nourishing and life-giving bodies becomes available to communicants as their own bodies simultaneously host and nourish the body of the Christ child whose flesh they consume at the altar.

The seemingly endless fluidity between the bodies of Christ, his mother, celebrants and communicants, however, occasionally led to uncomfortable moments of inadvertent proximity to the elements of physical pollution that Mary's uniquely sanctioned body was supposed to provide a bulwark against. For example, Aude Fauré, a fourteenth-century woman who lived near Montailhou, made an explicit connection between the pollution she felt she had experienced recently in childbed and the status of Christ and the presence of his body in the host.¹²⁴ Her inquisitional testimony, meant to

¹²⁰ Elliot, 29.

¹²¹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 278.

¹²² Ibid., 136, 257.

¹²³ Franz Borkenau, "Stages on the Road to Western Civilization," in *End and Beginning: On the Generations of Cultures and the Origins of the West*, ed. Richard Lowenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 411.

¹²⁴ Rubin, 343.

determine whether she adhered to the Cathar heresy, demonstrates how literally some members of the congregation linked everyday reproduction and the birth of the savior, as well as the potential eucharistic repercussions of that association:

One day as I was going to the church of the Holy Cross to hear mass, I heard some women . . . saying that a woman had given birth on the roadside [due to the swift onset of delivery]. . . . Hearing this, I thought of the disgusting afterbirth that women expel in childbearing and whenever I saw the body of the Lord raised on the altar I kept thinking, because of that afterbirth, that the host was something polluted. That's why I could no longer believe it was the body of Christ.¹²⁵

This narrative demonstrates not only the slippage which apparently took place between sacred and secular bodies, a slippage which occasionally ran in both directions, but also the extreme consequences of the proximity of eucharistic discourses which drew upon images of the pregnant and lactating body and religious and medical discourses which labeled those bodies as sinful and polluting. If even lay women can become pregnant with Christ by means of the eucharist, so too can Christ's body and divinity be challenged by proximity to the afterbirth.

The close associations between eucharistic imagery and images of childbirth and lactation also sometimes led to interpretations of church rituals by large numbers of laypeople which ran counter to the intentions of the clergy. For example, women who came to be churching after their lying-in period were invited to come to the altar in their churching ritual and were allowed to consume blessed bread, *pain bénit*, as a mark of their purified status.¹²⁶ Rieder notes that, despite the protestations of clergy and bishops, many women who received this bread regarded it as sacred, even eucharistic. This belief, occurring at a time when most laypeople received communion perhaps once a year, privileged the post-partum body as particularly favored with regards to the eucharist, a

¹²⁵ Qtd in Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 266.

¹²⁶ Rieder, "Insecure Borders," 105.

belief perhaps bolstered by the tendency for pregnant women, like other people categorized as sick or on the point of death (including those going to war or on pilgrimage), to be granted communion because of their precarious state.¹²⁷ In fact, according to Karant-Nunn, pregnant women requested the privilege of the eucharist more than any other category of person, except for the dying.¹²⁸ The inadvertent symmetry between the *pain béni* as well as the saturation of eucharistic imagery and discourse with images of the pregnant and lactating body apparently made the idea that the pregnant and post-partum body should enjoy a special privileged status with regards to the eucharist despite centuries of belief in the contaminated nature of that body and the existence of a ritual of thanksgiving for childbirth which was, often explicitly, regarded as a necessary safeguard against the pernicious pollution caused by childbirth.

As in discourses which discussed the nourishing of unborn and newborn children, discussions of the eucharist often blurred the boundaries between the bodies of eaten and eater as the late medieval communicant was encouraged to focus upon the cannibalistic elements of communion and the oral incorporation which was ideally to follow. By eating Christ, one became a part of his body even as Christ's own characteristics were to be absorbed by means of the eucharist. Eucharistic discourses incorporated much of the imagery and logic of the biological discourses surrounding childbirth, both in conflations of Christ's body with Mary's, and also in the slippage between Christ's role as nourisher and that of the mother or nurse. The promiscuous slippage between Christ's body, his mother's body, and the bodies of ordinary mothers and their children culminated in the construction of communicants not only as nursing from Christ, but also nourishing Christ

¹²⁷ Rieder, "Insecure Borders," 105; Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy 1066-1530*, (London: Methuen, 1984), 9.

¹²⁸ Karant-Nunn, 83.

in turn, and in becoming part of his body through communion. Eater then becomes incorporated into the body of the eaten, much in the same way as the nursing child or unborn child becomes associated with the properties and identity of his nourisher. Pregnancy thus often emerges as an analogue in discussions of the Eucharist even as the heightened attention to Christ's humanity drew attention to Mary's body and reproductive processes, strengthening the associations between female physiological processes and the sacred act of incorporation involved in the sacrament of communion. However, the two forms of incorporation were differently valued, as maternal nourishment was often feared for its potential to harm the child, the eucharist was seen as a physical and spiritual medicine. In addition, consumed blood and milk was associated with transgression and monstrosity when related to ordinary mothers and their children, in the case of communion, it was both a commemoration of the humanity of Christ, which justified human salvation as well as a way to incorporate some of Christ's divinity in order to reach salvation.

'To lerne anodur lare:.' Gowther's Oral Education

The mouth constitutes one of the principal thresholds of the body and thus of the self, a border between the inside and the outside, a portal giving access to the recesses of the living organism or, in the other direction, to the phenomenal, physical world. Through the mouth the self deals with the other; and for this reason the rules related to the mouth are crucial.¹²⁹

From his conception, Gowther is a figure and product of categorical confusion, one which draws upon the rampant fluidity of bodies and categories created by the nexus of biological and holy maternity, blood, flesh and milk, communion and cannibalism described above. Gowther's body in his "wylde" youth is marked by indeterminacy and hybridity (74). He is the product of both a prayer, made by his mother, to have a child in

¹²⁹ Williams, 141.

any way possible, “On what maner scho ne roghth,” and the resultant attentions of a “felturd fende” who impregnates her in an orchard using the guise of her husband (63, 71). Gowther’s birth, then, takes place under both holy and infernal circumstances; his mother’s prayer is answered, but the means of that answer is diabolical and immeasurably complicates her already unstable position in her husband’s household. The Duchess’s prayer is motivated by her husband’s declaration that, after ten years of married life without the birth of an heir, he has decided to repudiate her, presumably in order to marry another, more fertile woman. While Gowther’s birth does ostensibly protect his mother from repudiation, it does so at the apparent cost of her husband’s bloodline, which is supplanted by the demon’s seed. Gowther, the apparent heir, is not the Duke’s son, but rather, the progeny of another male who is at once “as lyke hur [the Duchess’s] lord as he myghte be” and “a felturd fende” (67). Like that of his shape-shifting father, Gowther’s body is difficult to classify. He is a hybrid child, an illegitimate heir, and his exact paternity is somewhat ambiguous in the text. The romance states that Gowther’s fiendish father is the same demon who sired Merlin, making Gowther Merlin’s half-brother, but at the same time, the romance also refers to contemporary beliefs about demons and demon insemination that undermine the fiend’s ability to act as a biological father.

At the opening of the narrative, God’s protection is invoked against the fiend who attempts to destroy men’s souls and who used to have the power to impregnate women by taking on the appearance of their husbands (4-15). However, impregnation itself is not accomplished by the literal seed of the demon, but rather of unspecified men:

A fende to nyeght wemen nere,
 And makyd hom with chyld,
 Tho kynde of men wher thei hit tane [have taken, assumed]
 (For of homselfe had thei never nan,

Be meydon Maré mylde). (14-18)

In this passage, the romance refers to contemporary theological beliefs about the nature of demons. Drawing on the writings of Thomas Aquinas, theologians agreed that demons did not possess corporeal bodies or even genders of their own, but in fact constructed the bodies they used to tempt and befuddle humans out of wasted seed produced by nocturnal emissions and masturbation.¹³⁰ Following Aquinas, the authors of the *Malleus maleficarum* suggested that a demon would fashion the body of a succubus out of wasted sperm, copulate with a sleeping man and then refashion itself into an incubus who would then use the resultant seed to impregnate a sleeping or deceived woman.¹³¹ Children conceived through the agency of a demon with human seed were still believed to be human, and therefore redeemable.¹³² The romance's reference to the demonic lack of a true body and the theft of the "kynde of man" in this passage implies that Gowther, himself, as the result of demonic impregnation, might not be the literal son of the fiend any more than he is of the Duke. As "kynde" could refer not only to one's shape or nature, but also one's bloodline or sexual seed, including sperm, the exact nature of the "kynde" appropriated by the devil is left tantalizingly unclear, with significant repercussions for Gowther's true nature. While the romance repeatedly refers to Gowther as the devil's son or as doing his father's will (generally during descriptions of Gowther tormenting members of the church), Gowther's biological paternity is put very much in question by the juxtaposition of the romance's opening discussion of demon impregnation with the story of Gowther's conception (173). In fact, depending on where the demon might have obtained the seed, Gowther's biological father could be anyone,

¹³⁰ Elliot, 53, 32-4.

¹³¹ Ibid., 33.

¹³² Ibid., 57.

even the Duke himself. The deception of the Duke by the Duchess which results in their attempt to conceive on the very night of the Duchess's demonic encounter muddies the proverbial waters even further. Gowther, then, enters life as a figure of malleable and indeterminate identity.

After his birth, Gowther takes on other forms of ambiguously hybrid identity in his repeated similarity to Saracens and their frequently analogous monstrous companions, giants. His signature weapon, "A facion bothe of stylle and yron," has been identified by Cohen as a curved falchion, "an Eastern weapon, suggestive of Saracens and other fiendish heathens," an appropriate weapon for a youth who inveterately attacks representatives of the church at every opportunity (139).¹³³ Gowther's later canine associations also play into this association with Saracens, who were often called "dogs" in Christian and romance polemics, and frequently associated with the cynocephali, or dog-headed people in medieval teratology (monster lore).¹³⁴ Saracens were also often described as the sons of the Devil, an epithet that is clearly resonant with Gowther's own problematic parentage.¹³⁵ Mere lines after the description of Gowther's falchion, the romance notes Gowther's prodigious growth as a child, a common feature of the romance giant—as well as the romance hero: "In a twelmond more he wex/ Then odur chuldur in seyvon or sex' Hym semyd full well to ryde" (142). Gowther's incredible growth is measured against two different benchmarks, those of "other children," and of chivalric and aristocratic skills—in a single year Gowther grows as much as any other child might

¹³³ Cohen, "Gowther Among the Dogs," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages* (eds. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland 1997), 219-44, 225.

¹³⁴ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1; Michael Uebel, "The Foreigner Within: The Subject of Abjection in *Sir Gowther*," In *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 108.

¹³⁵ Jesus Montano, "Sir Gowther: Imagining Race in Late Medieval England," In *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 118-132, 122.

in six or seven years, and he also seems able to ride a horse after that same single year. Gowther's comparison to other children registers both similarity and difference—he appears just like a six or seven year old, but after only a single year. He is at once wondrously strange, even monstrous, yet comparable to other children. Gowther's irregular parentage, of a human mother and demon father, recalls narratives of the generation of the race of giants, in which fallen angels impregnated mortal women, giving rise to the giants.¹³⁶ Gowther's exsanguination of his nurses and cannibalistic attack on his mother's breast also links him to giants in romances and other texts which include monsters. These texts which routinely depict giants as cannibals, as well as many other monstrous bodies in medieval literature. While extremely accelerated growth is a common feature of the romance giant (and occasional hero), and associates Gowther at least peripherally with giants, as does his curved sword reminiscent of a Saracen weapon, Gowther is never explicitly described as a giant. He may grow monstrously fast, yet Gowther does not grow monstrously large. In fact, he is emphatically described by the Emperor's porter as an ideally attractive man. He entreats the Emperor that Gowther is “a mon,/ And that tho feyryst that ever Y sye;/ Come loke on hym, it is no lye” (336-338). Gowther's physical body wavers between that of monstrous eastern Saracen giant and beautiful aristocratic youth, compounding and exacerbating his already confused status on account of his irregular birth. Half-breed demon, Saracen, quasi-giant, illegitimate (or legitimate?) son of anyone, perhaps even his nominal father, Gowther operates as an unstable site of identity who violates social, racial and species categories by eluding all of them in his indeterminate paternity and even more elusive corporeality.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 219-44, 223.

Gowther's problematic conception is refigured by his mother in her deception of the Duke after the fiend reveals his true identity to her. In a canny act of self-defense, the Duchess convinces her husband to have intercourse with her on the evening after her apparent conception by suggesting that she has been the recipient of a holy, rather than infernal visitation:

Tonyght we mon geyt a chylde,
That schall owre londus weld.
An angell com from hevon bryght
And told me so this same nyght:
I hope was Godus sond.
Then wyll that stynt all owr stryfe. (80-5)

The Duchess outrageously links the intent and unfortunate results of her prayer gone awry with a claim of heavenly intervention in the realm's dynastic problem. By equating the fiend with an angel and then changing the nature of their encounter, the Duchess deceives her husband into accepting her child as his own, and as the product of divine intervention. Her narrative, coupled with the actual events in the orchard, recasts her family as a sort of parodic holy family, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has previously noted.¹³⁷ The demon blasphemously stands in for both Gabriel and the Holy Spirit in the Annunciation and Incarnation, while the Duchess acts as a decidedly compromised Virgin Mary and the Duke as a befuddled Joseph. Gowther, of course, presents a somewhat problematic Christ child, at least in his youth.¹³⁸

Gowther's status as a parodic Christ figure is suggested in his infant crimes against society, which focus on transgressive breast feeding. In his first year, Gowther goes through the recommended nine wetnurses before he is handed over to his mother for

¹³⁷ Cohen, "Gowther Among the Dogs," 219-44, 222.

¹³⁸ Uebel notes that in medieval demonology, Merlin was often figured as the Antichrist. As Merlin's half-brother, Gowther's parodic Annunciation as reported by the Duchess becomes even more blasphemous. See Uebel, 100.

nursing, but the reason for his alimentary promiscuity is not so that he may avoid contamination by postpartum pollution, but rather because none of his nurses survive his attentions for long: “By twelfe monethys was gon/ Nyne norseus had he slon” as Gowther “Sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvys” (115-6, 110). When the widowed knights of the land then refuse to offer up any more of their wives to Gowther’s insatiable hunger, the Duchess attempts to nurse Gowther herself, only to have him gnaw off her nipple in his hunger (125-7). After that, Gowther is permanently put on solids, for which he also has a prodigious appetite.

Gowther’s vampiristic tendencies in nursing recall much of the imagery surrounding Marian and eucharistic nursing discussed earlier in this chapter, but here they are made horrifically literal. The milk/blood suckled by the baby is transformed into literal blood and flesh, particularly in the cannibalistic consumption of the Duchess’s nipple. If the Duchess has figured herself as Mary in her version of Gowther’s conception, her breast, and those of the other nurses to her child, yields nourishing milk, blood and flesh to her child’s voracious appetite. Her flesh and blood, which nourished Gowther’s body in the womb and made up the substance of his body in conception (indeed, which provided the only certain contribution to Gowther’s formation), becomes the flesh that he consumes after birth in the most literal and horrifying way. Gowther’s bloody breastfeeding thus is linked to the cannibalistic deformity usually excluded from nursing.

After Gowther’s mother flees him and he is instead fed “rych” food to compensate for the loss of the breast, Gowther grows prodigiously fast, and wreaks havok wherever he goes (133). The Duke dies of grief shortly after knighting the unruly

Gowther, and Sir Gowther embarks upon a breathtaking career of depravity and carnage. He beats down priests, refuses to hear mass, drives friars to jump off cliffs, hangs parsons on hooks, rapes wives and maidens, including an entire convent of nuns (with help from some rowdy companions) and sets a poor widow and assorted religious hermits on fire (166-201). Gowther's targets largely comprise two groups, women and members of religious orders. These two categories overlap in the case of the nuns, whose horrific story represents the most lengthy and detailed mini-narrative included in the catalogue of Gowther's crimes. All of these deeds constitute explicit acts against chivalric principals, as has been repeatedly noted, and Gowther's particular predilection for clerical targets is also well-documented and frequently explained by his demonic heritage.¹³⁹

While Gowther has clearly run amok, critics have typically associated the major categories he attacks with his respective parents—the attacks on women continue the attacks at the breasts of his nurses and mother, while the attacks on the church constitute the will of his demonic father.¹⁴⁰ I would suggest that the violence against these two groups does represent parodic eucharistic feeding that continues the carnage originally wreaked specifically upon nursing bodies. For the attacks on clergy and other members of the church suggest a literalization of church members as the body of Christ, as well as an attack on *Mater Ecclesia* herself, and Gowther's hungry Eastern sword is particularly eager to attack those targets, so much the better if they are also women, as in the case of the violated nuns who are then consumed by fire as Gowther burns them alive in their

¹³⁹ Cohen, "Gowther Among the Dogs," 222. Blamires, 52-3.

¹⁴⁰ Blamires, 46, 53; Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 152; Cohen, "Gowther Among The Dogs," 222; Marchalonis, 18; Jane Gilbert. "Unnatural Mothers and Monstrous Children in *The King of Tars* and *Sir Gowther*," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*, eds. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchison, Carol Meale and Lesley Johnson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 338, 339; Uebel, 101.

convent. Gowther's continuing campaign against "All that ever on Cryst con lefe" (all those who believe in Christ) suggest that his desire is to consume the Christian community, the body of Christ both enacted through the consumption of the eucharist, and literalized within it. His incorporation of this community, however is parodic, and operates within a different hierarchy than the one assumed in communion. Whereas communion assumes the incorporation of the divine, something greater than the self, which is elevated through that consumption, Gowther's grisly predation which is made possible by his social status as lord, figures his consumption of those ostensibly under his protection as a consumption of inferiors. In his attacks, Gowther treats and blood of the corporate Christian body as merely food to be eaten, neither incorporated nor inducing a change in his identity or status. His depredations thus figure an inverted and parodic eucharistic feeding, which not only horrifically literalizes the sacrament of consuming the holy, but which also inverts the relative position of eater and eaten in the eucharistic context. Fittingly, his later penance for his overarching arrogance and pride includes his humbling at the feet of another court, where he is placed alongside dogs. The association of Gowther's violent acts against church and community with his earlier feeding habits is made in the declaration of the men who protect the Duchess that it was "Evyll heyle . . . That ever modur him fed" (161-2). Gowther's exsanguinary eating habits are thus linked to his career of violence not only as a model for his later acts, but also as a condition for their occasion.

Gowther's reign of terror abruptly ends with the intercession of an elderly Earl who reveals Gowther's real paternity through deductive reasoning. This outrageous young duke must surely be the spawn of a devil (204-209). After this accusation is

reluctantly confirmed by his mother, Gowther goes to the Pope to give confession and to be reeducated in a new law, “to lerne anodur lare” (234). At first, however, Gowther proves to be a somewhat intractable student; When the Pope attempts to take away Gowther’s sword, the primary means of his blood-drinking, Gowther flatly refuses, citing his vulnerability to attack from his (one must imagine) numerous enemies: “No, holy fadur . . ./ This bous me dedus with mee beyr:/ My frendys ar full thyn” (289-91). In his rejection of the demands of this “holy father,” Gowther implicitly recalls his less-than-holy father, who he has just described as similarly bereft of fellowship, having “frenchypuys f[one]” [few friendships](273).

Gowther’s initial refusal of an ordered penance is reminiscent of the story of St. Christopher, another recalcitrant monstrous supplicant to Christian authority and one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages.¹⁴¹ Gowther’s resemblance to this wildly popular figure in both terms of both his resistant behavior and relation to both dogs and hybridity suggest that a medieval audience would relate Sir Gowther to its widely-known intertext. A giant member of the cannibalistic race of dog-heads, Sir Christopher willingly serves Satan until he sees Satan flee from the crucifix.¹⁴² Christopher, at that point known as Reprobis, learns of Christianity from a hermit, and asks how to serve him. The hermit suggests constant prayer and fasting, but both of these options are unequivocally refused by the newly christened Christopher, who says that he is constitutionally unfit for either task. Instead, Christopher agrees to act as a beast of burden, carrying anyone who asks for passage across a river. He eventually inadvertently bears the Christ child along with the entire world across the river. In time, Christopher is

¹⁴¹ Williams, 286.

¹⁴² Ibid., 288.

martyred, and his posthumous miracles convert many, including his persecutors.¹⁴³

Gowther's own desire to learn another way of life, one centered on Christ, recalls Christopher's own conversion, especially in its rocky start. Both are figured as cannibals serving the desires of Satan, who experience sudden abrupt conversions for which they seem ill-equipped. Each wishes to be reeducated, yet dismisses as impossible the means of instruction suggested to him. In addition, Christopher's identity as a dog-head, frequently associated with Saracens, recalls Gowther's own indeterminate racial identity, which is spiced with intimations of monstrosity.¹⁴⁴ Gowther's ability as a young infant to bite off his mother's nipple has been associated with premature teething, a condition associated in the Middle Ages with canine qualities, even lycanthropy.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Christopher's hybrid body, which becomes canine above the neck, mirrors the reconfiguration of Gowther's body under the Pope's penance; he can only eat what he receives from the mouths of dogs, and like a dog, he is unable to speak. Significantly, however, what is described as impossible for Gowther and Christopher varies strikingly. Christopher rejects outright the idea of fasting, while Gowther refuses to hand over his sword but is quite willing to take on a unique form of fasting, as well as a vow of silence. *Sir Gowther* slyly references its protagonist's similarity to Christopher even in his deviations from Christopher's story; while Gowther accepts the fasting that Christopher rejects, the special condition of this fast, that Gowther will only consume food taken from the mouths of dogs, recalls his sainted yet monstrous double, the dog-headed cannibal.

Gowther's integration into Christian humanity occurs at the site of his first crimes and the metaphoric source of his later bloodthirsty behavior, the mouth. Through the

¹⁴³ Ibid., 288-9.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 145.

¹⁴⁵ Uebel, 101.

penance assigned to him by the Pope, Gowther's mouth becomes an intensely policed site, emitting nothing, and taking in only very limited substances that are largely out of his control. The injunction to eat only food taken from the mouths of dogs not only forces Gowther into a position of humility, but also becomes a means of teaching Gowther to inspect the world for signs of God's will. For example, Gowther leaves the city and is fed bread and meat by a greyhound for three days after the Pope instructs him in his penance (308-12). However, on the fourth day, the dog fails to appear and Gowther takes the hint: "Up he start and forthe con gon,/ and lovyd God in his thoght" (314-5). Immediately, he comes upon the Emperor's castle, and after some hesitation, sits under the table to be fed dinner scraps like the dogs. Offered meat from the hand of the Emperor himself, Gowther refuses, but then eagerly steals food from the "other" dogs, even "yf it wer gnaffyd or mard" (chewed or spoiled) (357). As before, Gowther subsists on a transgressive diet, one which is made abjectly nasty and viscerally disgusting by the specified details which describe not only the unsavory source of the food, but also its compromised and contaminated state. The "gnaffyd or mard" state of the flesh is reminiscent of the "snafuld" and torn breast of Gowther's mother, which the infant Gowther had worried at as if he were indeed a dog at a bone. Gowther's public humiliation and humility provides both an expiation and a response to his earlier assumption of superiority. No longer a predatory cannibalistic eater of flesh and blood-drinker, Gowther still eats like an animal or monster, but he neither looks nor acts as one. His handsomeness is noted for the first time at this point in the romance, and his strange eating habits no longer function as a sign of his excessive and arrogant appetites, but rather of his obedience and restraint in the face of the "lare" the Pope has set him. The

description of the sullied food that Gowther eats is contrasted with his controlled and humble nature, and what results is less a repetition of Gowther's earlier problematic behavior, but an enactment of how much Gowther has changed, which is made evident by the incongruence between his current spiritual status and control and the status of the bestial dogs whom he had resembled much more when he was an infant and then a duke.

In his stint as a courtly dog, Gowther thus reestablishes somatic boundaries that he has ignored or defied since birth by reclaiming the mouth as a site of control and restraint, rather than of voracious and cannibalistic consumption. By "becoming" a dog, Gowther clearly acknowledges the differences between bodies, no longer incorporating the other into the self without regard to individual or social boundaries. Gowther earns a place in the court (under the table), a (small) room and a new name (Hob the fool) at the emperor's court, and the very contrast between his current state and his past excesses suggests that Gowther's humble reintegration into human and Christian communities is well underway. Gowther's abject and mediated feeding upon soiled flesh under the Emperor's table is implicitly measured against his earlier rapacious feeding directly upon the flesh and blood of his nurses and mother and is designated superior. In addition, Gowther's consumption gradually becomes more and more mediated by others as the romance continues. While he directly obtains his sustenance from others in his early cannibalistic behavior, his later meals come first directly from the greyhound, then from the court dogs, through the emperor and his court, who deliberately overfeed the dogs so that Gowther will be fed (359-63), and finally the Emperor's daughter herself feeds Gowther through the intercession of the dogs, taking the added step of rinsing the dogs' mouths out with wine first. This act of courtesy acknowledges Gowther's humanity as a

member of the court, and comes as a result of the princess's recognition of Gowther's prowess in the battle against the Saracens, where he acts as an anonymous member of both the Christian community and of the court.

Gowther's Eucharistic Reeducation

After his first battle against the armies of the "hethon hownde" who wishes to marry the Emperor's mute daughter, Gowther's meals go beyond representing control and his submission to mediation between himself and what he consumes, and become more overtly eucharistic. Where before Gowther was described as eating bones and spoiled meat, now his food is made up of the elements of the eucharist, rendered up by the intercessory princess, and eagerly accepted by Gowther:

The meydoun toke too gruhowndus fyn
And waschud hor mowthus cleyn with wyn,
And put a lofe in tho ton,
And in tho todur flesch full gud;
He raft bothe owt with eyggur mode,
That doghthy of body and bon. (442-7)

The loaf, wine, and "flesch full gud" strongly suggest the elements of the eucharist, and are significantly offered to Gowther by the princess, the only member of the court who recognizes the champion knight who has saved the court from the Saracen armies.¹⁴⁶ The importance of this detail to *Sir Gowther* is highlighted in its absence from the romance's source texts.¹⁴⁷ Gowther's feeding thus begins as miraculous with the first greyhound,

¹⁴⁶ The eucharistic implications of this moment have occasionally been remarked by critics. For example, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes the eucharistic overtones of this meal as well in "Gowther Among the Dogs," 233, though his reading of the moment takes a more Lacanian turn, seeing Gowther's quest as specifically one for the Name of the Father.

¹⁴⁷ Bradstock, 39-40. In fact, according to Bradstock, the additions to *Sir Gowther* seem to suggest a much more invested approach to the narrative's religious progression: mother's prayer, miraculous feeding by the greyhound for three days, the sacramental nature of Gowther's food at court, the miraculous resuscitation of the princess, sanctification of the hero and the miracles after death" are all major additions to this incarnation of the narrative. I would suggest that religion is certainly emphasized in these additions,

moves into a mediated intercessory mode in the court and then becomes sacramental at the hands of the princess. The romance emphasizes the distinction between this meal and earlier ones at the court in its description of the dog's mouth as made "cleyn" with the wine by the princess. As the mediator through which the Eucharist, Christ's flesh, is offered, the Emperor's daughter acts in the capacity of Mary as celebrant, as Cohen has previously noted.¹⁴⁸ The substitution of the mute princess for Gowther's mother in the position of Mary parallels the substitution of mortal maternal flesh and blood for the "clean," sacred flesh and blood of the eucharist and invites comparison between them, a comparison which locates the problematic nature of Gowther's early cannibalistic feeding not only in Gowther's monstrous appetite, but in the nature of the maternal sustenance, and its foregrounded differences from eucharistic sustenance, which obviate the parallels between them. Thus the eucharistic meals recall then undermine the analogous associations with maternal nourishment. Both maternal feeding and eucharistic feeding enable Gowther's martial prowess, but the values of the respective battles he wages are diametrically opposed. In fact, nursing doesn't seem to work at all as a form of moral education, as the presumably noble qualities of Gowther's nine nurses and his mother spectacularly fail to be transmitted to the young hellion.¹⁴⁹ While his mother's feeding of Gowther is blamed for his early rampages, the eucharistic meals offered up by the princess enable Gowther to protect the Christian community from Saracen attack.

These later scenes also sacramentally transform the violence of Gowther's childhood breast feeding, where he rends the nurses' flesh in search of the blood within –

but more specifically, that attention to consumption and a progression of appetitive education also seems evident in this list of additions.

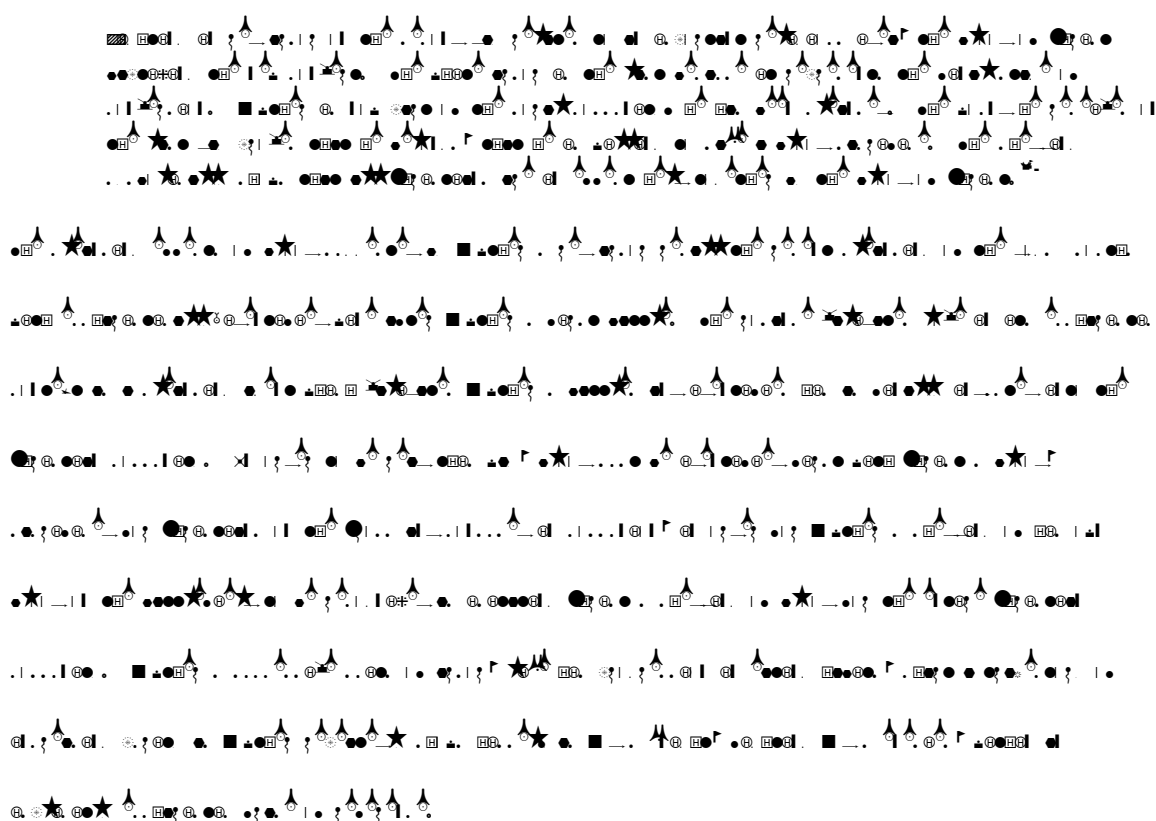
¹⁴⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 130-1.

¹⁴⁹ Gilbert, 341.

emphasizing a desperate hunger for the life-giving blood which the nurses—and his mother—prove incapable of providing. The deaths and mutilations of Gowther's wetnurses result from their inability to sate his appetite, and through the limitations of their bodies to sustain their integrity against the onslaught of Gowther's hunger. Theologians famously declared that the eucharist was inherently and permanently both sufficient and whole despite its apparent breaking and dissolution through ingestion. Every crumb of every wafer contained the entirety of Christ's body, which therefore could not be harmed by hands, teeth, stomach or vermin.¹⁵⁰ Christ's body, therefore, offered a total and unending source of sustenance for the believer, whose great appetite for his flesh could never result in his mutilation or annihilation, as opposed to the limited resources of nurse and mother. *Sir Gowther* further emphasizes the great divide between maternal sustenance and eucharistic sustenance by the intermediary steps that Gowther takes in his alimentary education; if one's sustenance goes from the milk and flesh of mothers to spoiled meat to good flesh which is the flesh of Christ, then the flesh and blood offered by the mother or nurse rates somewhere below the gnawed and spoiled flesh stolen from the unclean mouths of dogs. If Gowther has come a long way in his education, then the romance implicitly claims that there is a vast difference between maternal feeding and eucharistic feeding, however analogously they are represented in theological, medical and popular discourses.

¹⁵⁰ Elliot, 12. An exception to this line of thought existed in stories of the desecration or torture of the communion host by Jews as described by Bettina Bildhauer in, "Blood, Jews and Monsters in Medieval Culture," 90. In these narratives, the host would often bleed when attacked or tormented by Jews eager to either continue Christ's persecution or to learn the secrets of the host. Christ's body in the host, already the broken body of the crucified Christ, was then never tortured by the communicant, having already been tormented by the Romans and Jews. Christians thus could participate in ritual cannibalism without themselves contributing to the mutilation of the victim that cannibalism requires. This aspect of cannibalism was instead displaced upon vilified others.

The succession of differently colored suits of armor and horses that Gowther is miraculously provided reinforces the pattern of purification that Gowther seems to have undergone in his oral reeducation. Shirley Marchalonis and, more recently, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen have commented on the alchemical process hinted at in the order of the colors of Gowther's battle gear.¹⁵¹ Over three days, God provides Gowther with black, red, and ("mylke") white armor and horses with which to attack the invading Saracens (557). Perhaps the most significant stage in Gowther's polychromatic display of his spiritual status is represented on the second day of fighting, when Gowther dons his red armor. Jesus



Sir Gowther also represents Gowther's transformation in his progressive differentiation from the beasts and racialized monstrous others to which he has previously

¹⁵¹ Marchalonis, , 20; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants*, 136.

¹⁵² Montañó, 127.

been linked in the romance. In his first battle, Gowther wears black armor and carries a spear, much like the Saracens he has already been implicitly associated with. The Sultan who leads the Saracens also wears “sabull blacke” armor and his men are described as “Sarsyns blake” bearing “speyr and schyld” (571, 472, 458). In addition, they are repeatedly referred to as dogs or hounds, the status Gowther publicly accepts in the court. However, after the first battle, Gowther no longer uses his spear but reverts to the curved sword that previously attacked the Christian community but which now protects it. Gowther no longer harasses the church, but fights for it with an invincible sword which still drinks blood, but on an explicitly Christian battlefield.¹⁵³ If his Saracen enemies, with their associations with curved swords, dogs, cyno cephalis, and cannibalism, recall Gowther’s earlier misbehavior, the romance’s description of his sword reminds the audience of its bloodthirsty history. Whereas before “Ther was non in that londe/ That dyndt of hym durst byde” once Gowther receives his sword, every stroke cleaves through helmet and head, and every man who comes within reach either dies or wishes he had (149-50, 465-80, 610-15). The process of differentiating Gowther from the heathen hounds he has sometimes recalled is a tricky one. In the first battle where he, in black armor, most resembles the “black” Saracens and their black-armored Sultan, Gowther does not appear to carry the “facion” which resembles Saracen swords, but instead carries the more nondescript spear which is also carried by the Saracens. After the first battle, in which the disguised Gowther dismembers and decapitates many Saracen “hounds” and Gowther’s meals take a more overtly eucharistic turn, Gowther’s

¹⁵³ The figure of the bloodthirsty warrior for the Christian faith was also used in the crusading context; in the anonymous *Gesta Francorum et Aliorum Hierosolimitanorum*, a crusader describes the crusaders as “thirsting and craving for the blood of the Turks.” Qtd. in Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 29. For discussions of chronicle accounts of Christians cannibalizing the bodies of their enemies in the Crusades, see Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 18-42, and Tattersall, 249-50.

problematic eastern sword reappears but is reborn in its defense of the community it once terrorized. In these battles, the romance differentiates Gowther from the “real” dogs, the racially marked heathen “howndes,” as he once again steals a prize, the emperor’s daughter, from their jaws. Gowther thus reenacts his youthful excesses in his exuberant violence, but in this case, he fights to protect sexual and social boundaries he once gleefully transgressed. Sustained by eucharistic meals rather than the mother’s milk dolefully blamed by his countrymen for his depredations, Gowther now defends Christianity.

In the third and decisive battle against the Saracens, Gowther rescues the Emperor from captivity and beheads the Sultan, but is, Christ-like, wounded by a spear, causing the distressed princess to fall from her tower and appear to have died for two days (628-36). However, in her own act of *imitatio Christi*, she emerges from apparent death on the third day, when the Pope arrives for her burial. For the first time, she speaks, unmasking Gowther as the mysterious knight and bringing heavenly proof of Gowther’s forgiveness by God. The Pope declares Gowther to be “Goddus chyld” who no longer must “dowt tho warlocke wyld” (667-8). The romance then concludes with the marriage of Gowther to the princess, Gowther’s triumphant return to his homeland where he marries his mother off to the old Earl who first accused him of being a demon’s child, and his erection of an abbey with a large wall devoted to the souls of the nuns he violated and then burned alive. Once a perpetrator of outrages upon normative boundaries, a penitent and reclaimed Gowther erects them voluntarily. When he returns to the Emperor, he finds his father-in-law has died and rules in his place, becoming a saint and eventually being buried at the abbey he built in his homeland.

This conclusion to a romance which began with a dynastic crisis seems odd, to say the least. While *Sir Gowther* does conclude with two marriages which ideally would ensure the dynastic continuity, the romance seems to retreat from biological reproduction and transmission in both cases. The initial crisis, the lack of an heir for the Duke's land, goes unresolved. Gowther, an apparently illegitimate child, cannot fill that position, and so his inheritance of the Emperor's land through marriage makes a certain amount of sense in that context. However, his appointment of the old Earl first as his heir, and then as his mother's husband, does little to improve the situation from a dynastic point of view, especially as the extreme age of the old man is repeatedly mentioned whenever he is discussed in the romance. The likelihood of heirs from this pairing seems uncertain at best, and the bloodline of the original Duke is apparently abandoned altogether.

Gowther's married life also seems to offer little hope of an heir. After his marriage to the princess, she never is mentioned again, and the romance turns to Gowther's saintliness and death without any mention of his mortal family or earthly heirs. The dynastic plotline, rooted in biological reproduction, climaxes instead with the marriage of two Christ-like figures, and finally seems to have been abandoned altogether, unable to survive the repeated recitations of Gowther's own sordid conception. Instead, the initial problematized bodies of the fully, even vulgarly sexualized bodies of Duke and Duchess of Austria are replaced by the sanitized union between two Christ-like figures whose marriage is mentioned only once, to be pushed aside in favor of the sanctified spectacle of the dead yet potent saint-emperor Gowther.

Much has been made in criticism of *Sir Gowther* of the romance's apparent rejection of the biological family, particularly of the mother. In the gory beginning and

incongruous conclusion of the romance, Blamirez identifies a rejection of the feminine, but moreover “a self-alienation from genetic stock.”¹⁵⁴ Likewise, Cohen sees both Gowther and *Sir Gowther* as rejecting “familialism,” offering God in place of mortal parents, and Gowther as an example of the aspiration to embody the Name of the Father. Such an apotheosis, however, can only occur with the loss of the mortal body and human relationships. Cohen thus notes the shift in emphasis on biological relationships at the end of the romance, but sees this as a shift from corporeality stating that, at the conclusion of the romance, “Gowther has come to signify a transformative, corrective, normalizing principle. Gowther in triumph is Gowther abstracted, the hero who becomes an incorporeal Name under which miracles are performed: from inhuman origins to superhuman transfiguration, an inhuman end.”¹⁵⁵ I would not argue with this interpretation, but would also suggest that the relinquishing of Gowther’s flesh serves another purpose, less linked to the problems of the Name of the Father and more attached to the flesh and blood of the mother and the eucharistic logic that by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had become perhaps hopelessly entangled. While Gowther comes to an “inhuman end” in the romance, this is driven by the need to escape his all-too-human beginning. With both maternity and paternity so undermined by this text, intergenerational continuity seems both impossible (in the case of the father), and untenable (in the case of the mother). However, while both parental relationships become disavowed in the romance, *Sir Gowther* constructs the link between mother and child, in its potential to model the sacred bonds of Christ’s relationship to his mother and to his congregation, as particularly unsettling. The paternal relation is somewhat more

¹⁵⁴ Blamires, 52-3.

¹⁵⁵ Cohen, “Gowther Among the Dogs,” 219-44, 220.

easily disposed of, by miraculous revelation and papal degree. God can, as has been suggested before, substitute for an unworthy father. However, the link between Gowther's body and that of his mother is more elusive, especially in the problem of incorporation. At the beginning of the romance, the Duchess suggests a blasphemous interchangeability between sacred and profane bodies, substituting herself for the Virgin Mary and a hairy devil for the Holy Spirit. At the end of the poem, her identity is refixed by Gowther, but outside of the Holy Family model that she proposed to her husband. In fact, by marrying his mother off to another man whose bloodline is neither Gowther's nor his nominal father's Gowther essentially rewrites family and lineal history so that he does not issue from either his father or his mother. Gowther reinserts his mother into familial temporality, yet she is unlikely to prove reproductive within that role, both due to her own age and the repeatedly emphasized age of her new spouse.

Moreover, the princess seems to be substituted in the Marian position vacated by Gowther's mother, and her Christ-like death and resurrection seems to more appropriately model the slippage between Christ's body and his mother's. However, the romance also buffers the princess against biological maternity as she disappears from the romance altogether as soon as she is definitively given to Gowther and presumably becomes sexually active. Her status as the last item to be stolen from the mouth of a "hownde" aligns her, as does her Christ-like resurrection, with the consumed body of Christ, the validated object of sexual and alimentary desire. Her return to Gowther coincides with his authoritatively confirmed induction into the family and body of Christ and there her role ends. While eucharistic feeding does take the place of the horrific maternal nourishing at the beginning of the romance, all maternal nourishing exemplifies

the same dangerous proximity to the sacred meal of the eucharist that *Sir Gowther* foregrounds. The solution the romance offers to this conundrum is to abandon biological reproduction altogether, and so avoid the conflation of mortal maternal and salvific divine bodies which had become so prevalent in contemporary discourses. In Gowther's early depredations against maidens, wives, widows and the ecclesiastical authorities who could perform and help to maintain the institution of Marriage, Michael Uebel locates in the young Gowther a repudiation of marriage, reproduction, and even sex.¹⁵⁶ *Sir Gowther* seems to implicitly offer a similar, if less overtly violent repudiation of the biological family and aristocratic bloodline as a solution to the conflation of eucharistic and maternal bodies effected in religious and secular discourse.

Criticism discussing the monstrous often notes that monstrosity often is embodied by an affront to categorical integrity.¹⁵⁷ In the Middle Ages, cannibalism represented the disruption of categories of inside and outside, self and other, animal and human, and thus became a commonly attributed behavior of many monsters, as well as sufficient cause to label an otherwise normal person as a monster.¹⁵⁸ However, the doctrine of the Real Presence established the sacred cannibalism of Christ at the center of late medieval religious practice, harnessing the disruptive power of cannibalism to confer aspects of the divine upon communicants. Increasing association of this ritual practice with the life-giving processes of gestation, birth, and lactation which were also associated with the consumption of flesh and blood resulted in a great deal of confusion and anxiety about

¹⁵⁶ Uebel, 102.

¹⁵⁷ Williams, 143; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 6; McCracken, 83; Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters, "Introduction," in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁵⁸ Williams, 145.

respective status of bodies which were increasingly conflated with each other yet traditionally categorized as opposing; pure and purifying flesh was described using the analogy of a corrupted and corrupting body. Eucharistic discourse, which was predicated to some extent upon the violation of the integrity of bodies and identities, became the site of promiscuous fluidity between bodies, violating the categories of sacred and profane in an ever-widening range of reference.

The popular romance of *Sir Gowther* first represents the rampant slippage between sacred and secular consumed bodies as monstrous and blasphemous and it is through the reeducation of the protagonist and his ability to make distinctions at the site of the mouth that reestablishes categories of order which he has violated since his conception. Gowther begins life as a monstrous bundle of mixed categories and crossed boundaries. A product of blasphemous miscegenation and the indiscriminate conflation of sacred and profane bodies, holy and debased cannibalism, Gowther embodies exuberant disregard for categories of identity, meaning, and value. His appetitive reeducation separates the conflated categories of maternal feeding, which becomes associated more clearly with cannibalism through its violent deformation of the host's body, and eucharistic feeding, which is disassociated with images of the broken body of Christ. While presented as analogous to each other the two types of anthropophagy become placed in a temporal relationship with each other, with eucharistic feeding being offered as an acceptable substitute for the violent and problematic cannibalism that represents maternal feeding in this romance. In order for this substitution to remain stable, however, biological reproduction must effectively disappear, since a new generation would reenact the cannibalistic maternal feeding which is the focus of so

much horror at the beginning of the romance. The jettisoning of biological generation at the end of the romance suggests an implicit recognition of the difficulties presented by the analogous association of eucharistic and reproductive models of incorporation. The danger of the monster and the disruption of categories it represents is that those categories become inextricable even or especially in their miscegenated incongruities. To escape the conflation of maternal and holy bodies, *Sir Gowther* must abandon the very humanity of bodies which gave the eucharist its salvific efficacy. After distancing and opposing maternal and eucharistic consumption, the romance must finally reject human embodiment altogether, ignoring the dependence of eucharistic logic on that very foundation. *Sir Gowther* thus presents the audience with a paradox which serves only to emphasize the interdependence and co-terminance between eucharistic and maternal feeding, where to escape one requires the dismantling of the other.

“A Mooder He Hath, But Fader Hath He Noon:”
 Constructions of Genealogy in the *Clerk’s Tale* and the *Man of Law’s Tale*

In the early fourteenth century, the kingdoms of England and France were in conflict over the issue of women’s power to transmit heritable rule in their own right. The disposition of France’s throne hung in the balance. In 1316, Philip of Poitiers, the brother of the reigning King Louis X and future Philip V of France set out to disinherit his infant niece, Jeanne, of the French throne, setting the stage for eventual conflict with England. From 984, with the establishment of the Capetian monarchy until the death of Louis X in 1316, no French king had failed before to provide a son who survived his father’s death.¹ The question of female eligibility for the throne had thus never been broached, giving Philip an opportunity to argue for the exclusion of women from succession, yet no clear precedent from which to base that argument. In the absence of precedent, Philip cast about for a way to invalidate Jeanne’s claim to the throne.

As an infant female, and quite possibly illegitimate due to her mother’s well-known indiscretions, Jeanne presented French aristocrats with a somewhat unappealing candidate for the throne, yet Louis X had publicly acknowledged her as his legitimate child.² Philip was left in a peculiar bind. Prominent medical discourses based in Aristotelian biology supported his claim by suggesting that only men could inherit and transmit bloodlines. As a daughter, Jeanne would then be ineligible to claim a birthright to her father’s throne through blood, and even if she herself inherited by right of her relation to her father, her own children would carry the blood of her husband, effectively

¹ Sarah Hanley, “Identity Politics and Rulership in France: Female Political Place and the Fraudulent Salic Law in Christine de Pizan and Jean de Montreuil,” in *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*, ed. Michael Wolfe (Durham: Duke University Press), 1997, 79n.

² Katherine Crawford, *Perilous Performances: Gender and Regency in Early Modern France*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2004, 15-16.

spelling the end of the Capetian royal line. As Louis's brother, Philip thus would be a much better choice for the throne; as a man, he could both carry and transmit that bloodline to his own heirs. However, Philip could not employ this argument without difficulty, as he had previously petitioned Louis X to allow his own patrimony to pass to his daughter in the case that his sons died.³ While still Philip of Poitiers, he had successfully appealed to "reason and natural law" to support the right of daughters to inherit in the absence of brothers, and as the hopeful Philip V, he needed to find another rationale to support his attempt to disinherit his niece of those same rights.⁴ Through negotiation and outright bribery, Philip eventually successfully disinherited Jeanne, and French lawmakers passed, without elaboration, a law which stated that a woman could not rule France in her own name.⁵ Despite this law, Jeanne was later required to sign away her rights to the throne, suggesting, of course, that they were her rights to relinquish in the first place.⁶ Twenty-one years later, the French and English focused on this very issue, the heritability and transmission of bloodlines in women, in the ideological and literal war for the throne of France, the Hundred Years War (1337-1453).

The ambivalent status of women in relation to genealogy—their disputed ability to carry and transmit the patriline—continued to plague France after the crisis of 1316, returning most dramatically in the 1337 claim of Edward to the throne of France through his mother, Isabelle, the last surviving child of Philip IV (who was also the father of Louis X, Philip V, and Charles IV). So long successful in producing male heirs to the

³ John Milton Potter, "The Development and Significance of the Salic Law of the French," *English Historical Review* 53 (1937): 236.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Peter Saccio, *Shakespeare's English Kings: History, Chronicle, and Drama*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2000, 76-7.

⁶ Colette Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late-Medieval France*, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1991, 248.

throne, the kings of the Capetian line failed to do so twice more in the span of twelve years. In the second instance, however, a direct male descendent of the primary Capet line did exist. Awkwardly for the French, this descendant was the current king of England. The English based their claim to the French throne in the assumption that a woman could in fact transmit her father's bloodline to her son. If this model of genealogy was accepted, then Edward III of England (r. 1327-77), the only direct grandson of Philip IV of France became the clear rightful heir to the throne of France after each of his three maternal uncles (the sons of Philip IV) had died without begetting male heirs of their own.⁷ In 1337, years after the last of these uncles, Charles the Fair, had died, Edward III claimed the throne on behalf of his mother's right, challenging the legitimacy of Philip VI's rulership.⁸ For their part, the French understandably wished no part of an English king ruling France and thus they claimed that a woman was not only ineligible to claim the right of the crown for herself but in addition stated that a woman could also not transmit the claim to the French throne to her children.⁹ With this justification, the French had chosen Charles the Fair's cousin Philip of Valois (then Philip VI) as the new king of France in 1328, bypassing Edward III, the only living direct male descendant of Philip the Fair. The maneuverings of both France and England around the question of the potential for the female transmission of a bloodline reveal not only the high stakes involved in the claim for male transmission of lineage but also the interest in and political difficulty of establishing precedents and mechanisms for excluding women's transmission of bloodline and thus birthright.

⁷ Saccio, 76-7.

⁸ Edward's claim followed the seizure of his lands in Gascony by Philip VI. Thus, while the content of the argument was genealogical, the motive was territorial. See Christopher Allmand, *The Hundred Years War: England and France at War c.1300-c.1450*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1988, 10.

⁹ Saccio, 76-7.

In the *Clerk's* and *Man of Law's* tales, Chaucer draws attention to the patriarchal fantasy of autonomous male reproduction of the patriline, the desire to imagine male lineages as self-reproducing without the interference of maternal influence. In these tales, Chaucer examines the construction of autonomous male genealogy and suggests that it leads to a pair of contradictory, yet mutually reinforcing ways of imagining women's relationship to genealogy. The first is the representation of the mother or potential mother as infinitely fungible or arbitrary, and thus interchangeable with other women. After all, if women contribute nothing directly to the bloodline or formation of their children except for raw material, one woman is as good as another, as Walter implicitly claims in his seemingly capricious and arbitrary choice of Griselda. The second preoccupation which arises from the investment in purely male constructions of biological influence and genealogy is an obsessive anxiety that maternal influence will manifest in the heir to an overwhelming degree, displacing paternal influence altogether. The specters of maternal hijacking of men's bloodlines figure resultant children as exclusively the product of the maternal bloodline, and imagine them as other, even monstrous. While the *Man of Law's Tale* appears to ultimately validate maternal transmission and the *Clerk's Tale* seems to retreat from it, Chaucer roundly critiques and dismantles the reflex that in both narratives makes maternal transmission an object of horror. In these tales, Chaucer suggests that the monotonous logic of exclusive patrilineality threatens not only young women, but ultimately the bloodlines and sovereignties of realms. Moreover, the supposed interchangeability of women as mere vessels to a man's seed allows for and even encourages father-daughter incest as the ultimate realization of the fantasy of autonomous male self-reproduction. In both of these

narratives, Chaucer undermines the desire for self-replication inherent in fantasies of exclusively male-identified genealogies, representing this desire as transgressive, associated with both narcissism and incest.

Bloodline Transmission in Fourteenth-Century England and France

While questions of heritability and bloodlines are always important within a society organized explicitly in classes determined at least nominally by birth, the question of what exactly could be inherited from one's father or mother had particular relevance in the context of the Hundred Years War. Pragmatically speaking, the Hundred Years War was waged in order to settle a feudal dispute between the French monarchy and English kings who owned land in France and thus acted as (often recalcitrant) vassals of the kings of France.¹⁰ In ideological terms, however, the war's rhetoric focused on the disputed potential for women to transmit bloodlines as the Valois and English kings based their claims to the French throne on differing interpretations of this very question. For example, in order to justify their claims within France, Edward III and his mother, Isabella claimed that they were "closer in line" genealogically to Philip IV than Philip VI, (being related by direct descent, rather than products of a distantly collateral line, as Philip VI was) and therefore had a stronger claim to the French throne.¹¹ Throughout Henry IV's reign (1421-71), the English practice of preparing illustrated genealogies with accompanying text "proving" through reference to both maternal and paternal descent Henry's hereditary claim to the throne of France and displaying them on church doors in Northern France demonstrates the ideological work of genealogical discourse during the

¹⁰ The feudal, rather than genealogical basis of the war is insistently, even testily affirmed by historians of the Hundred Years War, who often appear as if still fighting a rearguard action against the longevity of the genealogical propaganda surrounding the Hundred Years War. For two examples, see Edouard Perroy, *The Hundred Years War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 69 and Allmand, 10.

¹¹ Beaune, 248.

Hundred Years War, as well as the crucial role played by the question of maternal transmission of bloodlines in that controversy.¹²

Medieval Europe's inheritance of multiple classical models of human generation existing in uneasy tension with each other enabled England and France to advance contradictory biological justifications for their claims of maternal transmissions. Indeed, even within both nations, these conflicting models had coexisted for centuries, each being privileged on a case-by-case basis as lineal and political exigencies required. Aristotelian medical theory suggested a unilaterally male transmission of bloodline, while the Galenic theory suggested that either or both parents could transmit characteristics to offspring. While Aristotelian discourse tended to dominate in medieval discourse, the Galenic alternative hovered in the background, often emerging to shore up potentially faltering or failing bloodlines. Aristotelian models of reproduction supported the notion of exclusively male bloodlines by suggesting that the father's seed organized the passive material of the maternal *menstruum* in the image of the bloodline.¹³ According to this logic, "fathers' contributions [to offspring] are superior, for it is their seed which provides the defining essence, the actualizing form for the offspring, whereas mothers' contributions are inferior, for the incompletely processed surplus nutriment which they produce is the more passive matter out of which the more active, form-bearing seed shapes the offspring."¹⁴ Thus the male seed attempts to recreate itself in the body of the child, who properly, according to Aristotle, will resemble its father, even on the level of

¹² Allmand, 137.

¹³ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

sex.¹⁵ In this system, daughters represent failures, imperfect copies brought about either by deficiency in the father's seed or by unwelcome recalcitrance in the mother's contribution of matter. Barring such difficulties, medieval treatments of Aristotle insisted that the father passed his own principle of organization through his seed to the following generation, creating a stable line of continuity between generations, figured as a bloodline shared and transmitted by men, from fathers to sons. Familial and social structures and procedures of inheritance imported from the continent with the Norman Conquest reinforced this understanding of biological transmission of bloodlines.

Within this understanding of generation, women seem to disappear from the genealogical landscape. In biological discourse, this made sense as according to Aristotelian models of procreation "a woman's body was constructed to be nothing but the container of this pure procreative blood [provided by the husband in the form of semen, or "seed"], awaiting the introduction of seed for the production of male heirs."¹⁶ Thus, within Aristotelian-based constructions of reproduction, a mother did not (ideally) contribute heritable form to her children, and a daughter did not pass on her father's bloodline to her children, who belonged to and were formed in the image of her husband's bloodline. Thus, while a woman's birth family might be important in terms of political alliance through marriage or in the perceived social status she brings into her husband's household, it would generally have little or no genealogical import.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Philip Barker, "The Politics of Primogeniture: Sex, Consciousness and Social Organisation in North-Western Europe (900-1250 AD). In *Feudalism: Comparative Studies*, ed. Edmund Leach, S.N. Mukherjee and John Ward (Sydney: Pathfinder Press), 1985, 97.

¹⁷ Laura Barefield notes the tendency for medieval genres such as chronicle and romance, which have an ideological investment in patrilineal bloodlines to downplay or elide maternal contribution to offspring: Laura D. Barefield, *Gender and History in Medieval English Romance and Chronicle*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), 13, 23.

Moreover, according to this system, the only contribution a woman *can* make is harmful, making it expedient that her contribution should vanish or be minimized.

Less prominent, but coexisting with the Aristotelian model of generation, the Galenic understanding of procreation (based on Hippocratic literature) did leave some room for maternal contribution. Under this model, both mother and father contributed seed to the child, and those seeds would in effect compete for dominance in the formation of the child.¹⁸ Maternal matter might also affect the child during gestation, as could the uterine environment.¹⁹ Within the Galenic model, therefore, children of either sex might be the product of either parental bloodline or a mixture of the two, and might or might not successfully transmit that legacy to their children. This model coexisted with the Aristotelian version of generation and haunted it, even as medieval writers tended to emphasize and even exaggerate the differences between them.²⁰ Political, legal, and social structures which reinforced and sometimes relied upon the conflation of the father with his son ensured the prominence of the Aristotelian model, but the Galenic model continued to coexist, complicating this construction of unilaterally male genealogy, especially when reproductive and demographic exigencies forced families to look to individuals other than sons to perpetuate the family.

¹⁸ Cadden, 35.

¹⁹ A prominent belief about the potential for the uterine environment and the mother's blood contained within it to affect the child had to do with the potential for maternal emotions or fancies to become embodied in some way by the child. This belief operated in classical and medieval medical and literary discourse. For the most part, the potential influence upon the child was considered negative, subverting paternal influence. For more detailed treatment of this belief, see William F. MacLehose, "Nurturing Danger: High Medieval Medicine and the Problem(s) of the Child," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: Garland, 1996), and Douglas Kelly, "The Domestication of the Marvelous in the Melusine Romances," in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, eds. Donald Maddox and Sarah Sturm-Maddox (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 39-40, as well as chapters 2 and 4 of this dissertation.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

Familial and social structures and procedures of inheritance imported from the continent with the Norman Conquest reinforced the Aristotelian understanding of biological transmission of bloodlines. However, when male lines failed, the Galenic model of reproduction, which allowed for female inheritance and transmission of paternal bloodlines offered at least families with daughters a way to preserve the integrity of the patriline. Thus, as in the case of biological discourses, English common law looked to a preferred model of inheritance which privileged the transmission of property from father to son analogous to and justified by reference to a male-transmitted bloodline. However, this system was in practice more complicated and brotherless daughters' rights to inherit were justified by their presumed inheritance of their father's bloodline through his generating seed, a fortuitous melding of Aristotelian and Galenic models of generation which allowed the appearance of lineal continuity even in the absence of male heirs. This amalgamated understanding of biological and hence property inheritance, however, only operated when the privileged mode of inheritance, succession by a son, failed. Social, political, and legal structures in both France and England tended to unselfconsciously reflect and refer back to the Aristotelian model as the basic model of how biological transmission took place.

While the patrilineal model was the ideal and ideologically dominant pattern for maintaining social and political stability in the late Middle Ages, reproductive and social circumstances complicated the realization of that ideal and thus the complete elision of women in the genealogical transmission of name and inheritance in both England and France. In England, male heirs were privileged as transmitters of bloodline, but in the absence or death of male heirs who had not produced their own sons, with few

exceptions, a daughter inherited, in accordance with common law.²¹ Her inheritance was based in the premise that, in the absence of brothers, she provided the only legitimate means of continuing her father's lineage.²² The demographic crisis of the Black Death contributed to the visibility of these heiresses in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²³ The average percentage of female common-law heiresses rose 50 per cent, from 10 to 15 percent of total heirs to landowners. When such an heiress married, she often brought not only her inheritance, but name and heraldic devices to her husband, or in some cases, her children, particularly when her heritage outranked that of her spouse.²⁴

In France, following customary law, "Women succeeded to duchies, fiefs, and appanages, and rendered homage for them."²⁵ In addition, in some cases where women did not themselves inherit directly, they successfully passed their inheritance rights on to their children. Often specific rules about female succession and transmission of succession rights were determined on the regional, rather than national level. For this reason, different areas of France and England recognized different levels of heritability in

²¹ For example. S.J. Payling notes that "It is surprisingly difficult to find among the families chronicled examples of cases in which the heir general was largely, if not entirely, disinherited in favour of a male collateral, whether by an earlier settlement in tail male or an *ad hoc* settlement." S.J. Payling, "Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England," *Economic History Review* 45 (1992): 59.

²² J.C. Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1997), 247.

²³ Payling. 52. Payling notes that the Black Death disrupted the generally stable ratio of landowning families who left direct male and female heirs, or no heirs at all: "from the reign of Henry III . . . to the Black Death, there was very little variation in the pattern. About 72 per cent of male landowners left sons (or sons of sons) as their heirs, 10 per cent left daughters (or the issue of daughters), and the remaining 18 per cent left no issue . . . The plague-ridden years of the second half of the fourteenth century, however, brought about a sudden and profound change. Population fell rapidly . . . Comparing the half century that followed the Black Death with the period that went before it, the proportion of landholders leaving sons fell to 57 per cent; leaving daughters rose to 15 per cent; but leaving no children rose to as much as 29 per cent (This crisis of male succession was at its height in the late 1370s and early 1380s, when less than half of landowners left sons to succeed them. It was not until after c. 1450 that the pattern recovered to approximate to that prevailing before the Black Death:" S.J. Payling. 54.

²⁴ David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 10.

²⁵ Sarah Hanley, "Identity Politics and Rulership in France: Female Political Place and the Fraudulent Salic Law in Christine de Pizan and Jean de Montreuil." in *Changing Identities in Early Modern France*, ed. Michael Wolfe, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 79.

women. Thus, as Sarah Hanley notes, a woman in Paris could transmit inheritance rights to her son or grandson yet not claim them for herself.²⁶ Yet in other countries and fiefdoms in France, female inheritance in the absence of brothers was the norm, and, at least until the English claims to the French throne, this practice was openly accepted by Capetian kings.²⁷ Inheritance of the throne in England followed the same pattern as other inheritances. First-born male heirs inherited; in lieu of male heirs, there was no law which prohibited a woman to inherit the throne from her father or from passing on succession rights to her own children, a prospect refused by French with regards to their own throne with the exclusion first of Jeanne of Navarre and later Edward III from succession.²⁸ Both France and England thus generally espoused and applied patrilineal logic to inheritance and accountings of lineage, yet tolerated, in the absence of direct male descendents, the inheritance of women, implicitly acknowledging women's inheritance and transmission of bloodlines.

In the wake of Edward III's belated claim to France's throne, French lawyers, churchmen, and nobles scrambled to justify the exclusion of women from inheritance to the throne of France or from transmitting that right to their offspring. The ensuing spate of discourse was often inconsistent with observed practice in both England and France. The Salic Law had not yet been resurrected and adapted to fit the political need to avoid an English king's inheritance of France, so other grounds for exclusion were necessary. The death of Philip V made recourse to Aristotelian models of biology tenable again, particularly the concept of male reproductive self-replication, which was then allied with

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Beaune, 248.

²⁸ Saccio. 77.

a political concept of male monarchic replication, treated as a French public law.²⁹

French scholars and politicians used the supposed female inability to produce seed to exclude women from both inheritance and transmission, rendering Edward III a product of his father's bloodline, and thus ineligible to inherit the throne of France.³⁰ Yet many areas of France observed the inclusion of women within bloodlines and the inconsistency was obvious, if often overlooked for nationalistic reasons. Through the addition of the public law which distinguished the French throne from other inheritances and which collaborated with and enhanced Aristotelian constructions of women's inability to generate or transmit seed, detractors of Edward III attempted to resolve the inconsistency of contemporary practice and historical evidence to promote a revisionary reading of the long success of the Capet line as a manifestation of French custom and law. Predictably, the English were not impressed by this maneuvering and pressed their own hereditary claims upon the French throne, based largely in an insistence that women could both inherit and transmit bloodlines truly, as was the rule for the English throne. If the specter of female influence upon and participation within bloodlines traditionally marked as patrilineal had earlier lurked about the edges of English and French practices and discourses in the fourteenth century, it had certainly emerged from the shadows, championed (at least in this prominent case) by the English, and vehemently rejected by the French. The French rejection of Edward III's claim required and called forth an unequivocal rejection of maternal transmission. While Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and *Man of Law's Tale* do not ultimately advocate for the viability of maternal transmission or its lack, they do suggest that the pursuit of the patriarchal fantasy of exclusively male

²⁹ Sarah Hanley, "Mapping Rulership in the French Body Politic: Political Identity, Public Law and the King's One Body," *Historical Reflections/ Reflexions Historiques* 23(2)(1997): 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

bloodlines endangers order at both the familial and political level because, in its fullest realization, this fantasy entails an impossible and cruel erasure of women's identities and interiority, as well as the legitimization of incest and the destruction of viable and legitimate heirs.

Within the context of the Hundred Years War, Chaucer's decision to explore the question of what exactly fathers and mothers might pass on to their children in both the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Man of Law's Tale* alerts his audience to his participation within an ongoing debate, one which critics of these texts have traditionally missed. Critics responding to the *Clerk's Tale* have largely been split between those advocating religious or sociopolitical readings of the narrative. As Charlotte Morse has noted, religious readings focusing on the allegorical aspects of the *Clerk's Tale* sought in the early half of the twentieth century to reclaim the *Tale* from an almost universally hostile readership.³¹ Such readings often identify the *Tale* as either a successful, or (more frequently) failed allegory or exemplum in which Walter and Griselda stand in for human and divine figures or qualities, rather than representing human psychology with any sort of depth or realism.³² On the opposite end of the spectrum are psychoanalytic readings of the tale, which explore the dynamics of the relationship between Walter and Griselda, typically

³¹ Charlotte C. Morse, "Critical Approaches to the *Clerk's Tale*, in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 78.

³² For readings of the *Clerk's Tale* which attempt to recuperate it by identifying it as either an allegory or exemplum representing the soul's proper relation to god, see James Sledd, "The *Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics," *Modern Philology*, 51 (1953): 73-82; John P. McCall, "The *Clerk's Tale* and the Theme of Obedience," *Modern Language Quarterly* 28 (1966): 260-9; Robert P. Miller, "Allegory in the Canterbury Tales," in *Companion to Chaucer Studies*, ed. Beryl Rowland (New York: Oxford University Press), 1968 (reprinted 1979), 326-51; Charlotte C. Morse, "The Exemplary Griselda," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 7(1985): 51-86. Elizabeth Salter's 1962 reading of the *Clerk's Tale* has become the classic locus for the argument that the *Clerk's Tale* represents a failed allegory because its inclusion of realistic detail encourages readings of Griselda and Walter as human, thus disrupting the allegory of the soul's relation to God.

diagnosing one or both as psychologically aberrant.³³ These readings follow the other major swath of *Clerk's Tale* criticism, which focuses on sociopolitical readings of the *Tale*, particularly regarding its treatment of power dynamics, whether in the arenas of the politics of rule, gender relations, class status, or more textual concerns such as translation or epistemology.³⁴ Feminist readings of the tale in particular have often focused on its representation of female experience under patriarchal domination, valorizing Griselda as a strong character or repudiating her as either weak, masochistic, or otherwise complicit in her own subjugation. While these readings often helpfully draw attention to the question of female interiority and agency obscured or foreclosed upon by allegorical readings of the *Clerk's Tale*, they tend to simultaneously divert critical attention from one of the major priorities of aristocratic marriage in the Middle Ages—the production of an heir.

³³ For readings which pathologize both Walter and Griselda, particularly in terms of the Oedipal complex, see Norman Lavers, "Freud, The *Clerkes Tale*, and Criticism," *College English* 26 (1964): 180-86; Patricia Cramer, "Lordship, Bondage, and the Erotic: The Psychological Bases of Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale,'" *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 89 (1990): 491-511; Andrew Sprung, "If It Youre Wille Be': Coercion and Compliance in Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale,'" *Exemplaria* 7 (1995): 345-69. For a rebuttal which argues that these readings privilege modern psychology at the expense of medieval psychology, see E Pearlman, "The Psychological Basis of the 'Clerk's Tale,'" *Chaucer Review* 11(1977): 248-57.

³⁴ Michaela Paasche Gruden, for example, interprets Griselda's tests and obedience in the context of what is owed to a monarch, and the conflict this obligation causes with the individuality of the Christian soul, Michaela Paasche Gruden, "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* as Political Paradox," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 63-92; For a reading of the Clerk's Tale which locates a critique of tyranny, see David Wallace, "Whan She Translated Was': A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*. ed. Lee Patterson, (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1990, 156-215. See also Larry Scanlon's reading of the tale as an affirmation of monarchic lay authority in *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 146-191. Feminist readings of the Clerk's Tale abound, focusing on various aspects of the narrative. Some seminal works include Carolyn Dinshaw's examination of "masculine hermeneutics" of translation in the tale in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 132-55, and Elaine Tuttle's argument that Griselda's power operates paradoxically, made visible only through torture in "The Powers of Silence: The Case of the Clerk's Griselda," in *Critical Essays on Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Thomas C. Stillinger (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998) 133-149.

Readings of the *Man of Law's Tale* have frequently followed a similar pattern of an initial focus on questions of generic identification of the narrative leading to evaluations the tale and its teller by reference to the criteria suggested by the identification, followed by a division in the criticism between those who focus primarily on the religious implications of the *Tale* and those who pursue more secular readings of the texts, often focusing on gender, racial, and religious difference in the *Tale*.³⁵ Thus, early critics have often condemned the Man of Law for being an inept teller of both hagiography and romance, potentially undermining both genres through miscegenation.³⁶ More recently, critical focus has shifted from the Man of Law to his tale and its heroine.³⁷ As is the case with Griselda, treatments of Constance as heroine have often depended on whether the critic views her as an allegorical or exemplary model of a Christian soul or as a representation of a more humanized character. Again a critical split emerges depending on whether the critic reads the *Tale* as a religious or secular narrative. Examples of the first set tend to act to some extent as apologies for the discomfort the *Tale's* focus on Constance's suffering and victimization often causes to modern readers, while readings focusing on the *Tale* as a primarily secular narrative tend to examine its representation of gender, race, and religious issues and institutions through the use of

³⁵ Critics variously identify the *Man of Law's Tale* as exemplum, romance, secular hagiography and sentimentalized romance, the latter two being categories which merge exemplum and romance elements in differing proportion. See Paul Clogan, "The Narrative Style of the *Man of Law's Tale*," *Medievalia et Humanistica* n.s. 8 (1977): 217-33 and Michael R. Paull, "The Influence of the Saint's Legend Genre in the *Man of Law's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 179-94 for arguments which advance the idea of a composite genre for the *Tale*.

³⁶ For representative examples, see Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), and Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970). Both readings suggest that the Man of Law is satirized for inadequate interpretation or understanding of his narrative.

³⁷ A.S.G. Edwards, "Critical Approaches to the Man of Law's Tale," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 90.

feminist and, more recently, postcolonial theory.³⁸ My reading of both of these tales by Chaucer draws upon feminist understandings of patriarchy in its interest in patrilineal primogeniture and the discourses which defined and contextualized it, but rather than focusing on female experience within these discourses and institutions instead examines Chaucer's critique of the patriarchal construction of motherhood in a system defined by male rule as transmitted lineally through reproduction as internally incoherent and ultimately self-defeating.

**“That a Strange Successour Sholde Take Youre Heritage:
Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and the Problem of Maternal Influence**

Throughout the *Clerk’s Tale*, Chaucer draws attention to the interplay between genealogy, gender, and political stability. The narrative opens with a confrontation between a lord, Walter, and his people centering on the obligation of a liege to perpetuate his bloodline and thus political stability through the production of an heir. This introduction lingers on both the necessity of smooth patrilineal succession and the stakes for a realm when such a transfer does not occur. The confrontation between Walter and his people develops into a debate on the efficacy of biological reproduction in producing children who resemble their parents in terms of virtues and abilities, a cornerstone of the people’s justification for their request, and then ends with Walter’s promise to quickly

³⁸ Block, for example, sees Chaucer’s many additions to his sources as part of a project to render Constance an allegorical figure of Christian fortitude who can also be sympathized with on a human level, while Manning points to Constance’s inadequate humanization as a central flaw in the narrative. For these arguments, see Edward A. Block, “Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” *PMLA* 68 (1953): 572-616, and Stephen Manning, “Chaucer’s Constance, Pale and Passive,” *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul Beichner C.S.C.*, ed. E. Vasta and Z.P. Thundy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979, 13-23). Feminist readings of the *Tale* frequently deal with the question of incest in the Tale, most notably Carolyn Dinshaw’s reading of the Man of Law’s frantic disavowal of incest as a relatable narrative alongside his rendering of a narrative haunted by incest. See Carolyn Dinshaw, “The Law of Man and Its ‘Abhomynacions,’” *Exemplaria* 1 (1989): 117-48. For a reading which merges feminist and postcolonial concerns, see Geraldine Heng’s chapter on “Beauty and the East” in her book *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, 181-237).

marry so long as he can choose his own wife. Walter then marries Griselda, the daughter of his poorest subject, who performs all duties exceptionally well, despite her lowly status, recalling Walter's claims about the inconsistency of genealogical transmission. After the births of each of his children, Walter has both of the infants removed, presumably to have them killed, citing popular discontent among his people because of Griselda's low birth. His actions anger his people, particularly after the apparent murder of the long-awaited heir. Walter then separates from his wife, claiming that in order to satisfy his obligations to his people, he must marry a different woman. Griselda acts as the hostess to the new marriage and her exemplary forbearance so pleases Walter that he reveals that the supposed new bride is actually their "lost" daughter and her brother their son and Walter's heir. Griselda is reinstated and after Walter's death, their son rules well. Throughout the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer meditates on the logic and ideologies which inform the practice of patrilineal primogeniture, as well as the problematic place of women within that practice.

From the first lines of the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer addresses a cluster of issues which converge around the practice of patrilineal primogeniture: the interplay between family and political history, reproduction and power, and the role of the biological family in mediating between mortal bodies, ideally permanent social roles and the passing of time. Like *Octavian* and *Sir Gowther*, Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* begins with the crisis of heirlessness and a meditation on the reasons why the lack of a viable heir constitutes a political emergency.³⁹ Typically, as in *Octavian* and *Sir Gowther*, the childless lord broaches the subject of the lack of an heir, generally with tears and a short sketch of the

³⁹ For a reading of the *Clerk's Tale* which links Walter's need to produce an heir with Richard II's notorious failure in this duty, see Michael Hanrahan, "'A Straunge Succesour Sholde Take Your Heritage': The *Clerk's Tale* and the Crisis of Ricardian Rule," *The Chaucer Review* 35:4(2001): 335-50, 336.

likely consequences of dynastic failure; political strife, invasion, and disaster. Often he follows this brief description with either a total breakdown into weeping or an ultimatum to his wife that she must conceive quickly or be set aside. In these romances, the liege not only acknowledges his responsibility to provide the realm with an heir, but actively seeks out or initiates solutions to the crisis by looking for a more fecund wife or by asking advice from counselors and God. The opening of the *Clerk's Tale* is reminiscent of these other family romances in that it introduces the problem of heirlessness and the political stakes involved in that crisis, yet it suggests that the threat to lineal continuity does not always rest solely on the exigencies of human reproduction. Instead, Chaucer suggests a more human culprit, the lord himself, as a potential cause of genealogical disaster. Chaucer increasingly associates Walter's culpability to his potentially disastrous attempts to negate, avoid, and deny the possibility of maternal transmission and female agency within a patrilineal system of inheritance.

Unlike other family romances, in the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer locates the cause of the dynastic crisis in the unwillingness of the liege to give proper attention to mortality, time, and political expedience. Historical and genealogical time are fused in the description of the establishment of Saluzzo, "That founded were in tyme of fadres olde" (61). If the Clerk links cultural foundation to fathers, he goes on to associate stability and continued prosperity with lineage and the illustrious fathers from whom Walter is imagined to come. Before the Clerk mentions Walter by name, he introduces the lord as a marquis descended from "worthy eldres hym bfore" (64-5). He then links obedience and goodwill of Walter's vassals to their love for Walter's lineage and the continuity he promises to ensure from the rule of his excellent forebears and his superior "lynage" (71).

However, despite his superlative pedigree, Walter presents his people and the Clerk with a difficulty: while he is a product of and represents the smooth transmission of political power between generations, he himself threatens that continuity through his neglecting to marry and continue his line, driving his people to urge him to take a wife. By requiring the narrator and people to initially pose the problem of the lack of an heir to Walter, Chaucer not only gives himself the opportunity to dwell upon the stakes of heirlessness even more than is common in family romance, but also to emphasize Walter's anomalous resistance to the need to procreate, and perhaps more tellingly, to Walter's resistance to the means through which procreation must be achieved—a wife.

In their appeal to Walter, his people, like the Clerk, emphasize the intersection of time, genealogy, and political stability, reminding their lord that “deeth manaceth every age, and smyt/ in ech estaat, for ther escapeth noon” (122-3). Chaucer links individual mortality to political instability in the declaration that should Walter die without an heir, social upheaval would arrive in the guise of a “straunge successour,” leading to “wo” (136-40). The initial focus in the speech shifts upon Walter as an individual shifts increasingly to an interest in Walter as a representative of his bloodline as the people elaborate their concerns to their lord:

For certes, lord, so wel us liketh yow
 And al youre werk, and evere han doon, that we
 Ne koude nat us self devysen how
 We myghte lyven in more felicitee,
 Save o thyng, lord, if it youre wille be,
 That for to been a wedded man yow leste;
 Thanne were youre peple in sovereyn hertes reste.

Even as Walter's people proclaim their approbation of Walter and his “werk,” they invoke his institutional status and thus lineage in their foregrounding of Walter's position

as “lord” and in the assurance that their approval of him is just as they “evere han doon.”

The use of this phrase emphasizes the foundation of Walter’s identity and authority in a past that exceeds the span of his own life, extending instead to the “tyme of fadres olde” already invoked by the Clerk. At the conclusion of their appeal, Walter’s people emphasize their genealogical concerns much more explicitly, linking their desire for Walter to marry with their primary interest: the continuance of his bloodline:

Delivere us out of al this bisy drede,
And taak a wyf, for hye Goddes sake!
For if it so bifelle, as God forbede,
That thurgh youre deeth youre lyne sholde slake,
And that a strange successour sholde take
Youre heritage, O wo were us alyve!
Wherfore we pray you hastily to wyve.” (134-40)

Whereas initially Walter’s people focus upon Walter and his work, their final concern is for Walter’s line and heritage, the continuation of the stable history celebrated in the opening of the poem. The identification of Walter with his vaunted line cannot survive his death unless that line is perpetuated through an heir.⁴⁰ In fact, it is in his production of an heir, the people suggest, that Walter will cease embodying his line entirely; in other words, Walter must reproduce his line in order to prove his continuity with it, yet by doing so, he passes on the task of embodying the line and its future to his son.⁴¹

As Chaucer reproduces and expands upon family romance conventions in the dramatization of a dynastic crisis and the explication for why such a crisis matters, he

⁴⁰ For an example of a psychoanalytic reading of the *Clerk’s Tale* which locates Walter’s resistance to marriage and aggression towards Griselda in a denial of the necessity of death, see Ruth Barrie Straus, “Reframing the Violence of the Father: Reverse Oedipal Fantasies in Chaucer’s Clerk’s, Man of Law’s, and Prioress’s Tales,” in *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, eds. Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donovan, and Merrall Llewelyn (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 122.

⁴¹ Larry Scanlon expands this idea to include the preservation of social order: “The people’s initiative recalls Water to the structural basis of his own power, and reminds him that the function of that structure was not simply to produce him, but also to produce social order, which can only be maintained if the structure is maintained.” See Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 182.

offers a counterdiscourse to that of family romance in Walter's response, which at first appears to undermine the genre's investment in bloodlines as guarantors of political and social stability. Faced by his people with the obligation to reproduce, Walter questions the efficacy of the bloodline in transmitting personal or family traits between generations: "For God it woot, that children ofte been/ Unlyk hir worthy eldres hem bifore" (155-5). Having attacked the principle of intergenerational consistency, Walter goes on to refute the principles of the social and political system which has produced him: "Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen/ Of which they been engendred and ybore" (157-8). By setting the idea of aristocratic continuity through the transmission of a particular bloodline in opposition with the idea of God's "bounty," Walter raises the possibility of severing the connection between rulership and divine authorization which underwrites and ultimately legitimates the political system he represents and embodies. Furthermore, in his demand that his people "worshipe" his wife, despite her birth status as if she "an emperoure's doghter weere," Walter again undermines the role of aristocratic birth by severing behavior and obedience from social rank determined by birth (166, 168). In this response to his people, Walter appears to demolish the linchpin of the request, the apparent continuity promised by the reproduction of the bloodline, and thus, the need to accede to his people's request. For if, as he suggests, lineal continuation does not ensure lineal continuity, there is no guarantee that by producing an heir Walter will actually provide his people with what they have asked for.

However, what follows makes it clear that Walter's interrogation of genealogical continuity is tactical; he actually has his sights on a less radical intervention, limiting the role of the mother in the formation of the desired child. For example, Walter's claim that

God and not bloodline determines the resemblance of parent and child immediately follows his declaration that he himself will choose a wife, rather than accept a well-born candidate chosen by his people (152-4). After declaring that he will trust in God's bounty, Walter reiterates that because of the trust he bears in God, he will choose whatever wife pleases *him*. In couching his potentially revolutionary statements about genealogy as the justification for his own freedom in choosing a wife (as opposed to simply designating a non-lineal heir), Walter shifts the apparent arbitrariness of reproduction away from the male's role in reproduction, and onto the female's. At the same time, he interjects the idea of maternal influence into a conversation from which it has so far seemed entirely absent. For while his people's request does focus upon the need for Walter to acquire a wife who will produce an heir, they clearly intend her role in this process—however necessary—to enable the reproduction of Walter's line and not her own. When discussing a potential bride for Walter, his people suggest a woman "Born of the gentilleste and of the meeste/ Of al this land," yet not, apparently, for dynastic reasons (130-1). Rather, her rank is suggested to be a matter of their respect for both God and Walter (131-2). Walter's demand that his people treat his wife as an emperor's daughter despite her true birth and his insistence that he wed as his "herte is set" again implies that choice of wife is a matter strictly of personal preference, and thus unrelated to the actual substance of his subjects' request, the production of a viable heir (173). While he might be required to wed a woman in order to produce an heir, he suggests, any woman would equally serve the genealogical purpose of lineal correlation. Walter's apparent rejection of genealogy in his answer to his people seems to dismiss both the people's conviction that by procuring a well-born woman they will provide their

lord with a good wife, and also the unspoken idea of a wife's potential to influence the formation of children in his own bloodline. Thus, in the opening of the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer introduces two different potential models of lineal continuity: The first, advocated by both the Clerk and Walter's people, suggests total lineal continuity through an exclusively male bloodline, passed through a woman figured as an empty vessel for her husband's seed and bloodline. This is followed and countered by Walter's claim of total arbitrariness in the transmission of bloodline, which is then moderated in turn by Walter's focus upon the maternal figure in particular as both arbitrary and fungible, thus reiterating the primacy of male seed in perpetuating bloodlines. Yet Walter's opening-up of the question of female contribution to bloodline only to close it by insisting on female interchangeability in procreation suggests a defensive rejection founded in an anxiety of lineal contamination which could upset the identification of father with son. In the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer stages the way that maternal influence always haunts the patrilineal system, slipping unwelcome into every discussion of paternal replication, however sincere and traditional the intent. Confronted by his people with the duty to reproduce himself, Walter seems compelled to raise the possibility of maternal inheritance, only to lay it to rest—for a time.

If Walter's response to his people seems perverse in its move to at once invoke and then deny maternal influence in procreation, his program of transforming and then "testing" Griselda insists upon a similar move. By simultaneously searching for an essential difference between himself and his wife which might legitimate his anxiety that she could pass on such a difference to "her" children and the same time demanding that Griselda hide evidence of any such distinction from himself, Walter enacts both the

patriarchal fantasy of female non-transmission and the nightmare of maternal influence. His “tests” of Griselda constantly point back to the possibility of maternal inheritance even as his acts of mastery over both his wife and children position him as the sole determinant not only of his children’s identity, but also of Griselda’s. The erasure of any trace of Griselda’s behavioral and emotional agency seems to double the attempt to ensure the erasure of Griselda’s biological agency as well. Within that system, maternal influence upon children becomes paradoxical even as it is foregrounded as a perceived threat. Thus, by “emptying” Griselda out, Walter eliminates her threat as a dynastic contaminant. Through his foregrounding of Griselda’s opacity as well as her suffering, as well as by the recurring and resultant specter of incest that arises as a means to guarantee the elimination of maternal influence, Chaucer identifies the obsessive desire to evacuate mothers from accountings of lineage as perverse and threatening to both women and to dynastic bloodlines.

With the birth of Griselda’s first child, Chaucer reintroduces the genealogical thread into the *Clerk’s Tale*. Soon after the marriage between Walter and Griselda, the birth of their daughter brings both dynastic disappointment and hope: “Al had hire levere have born a knave child;/ Glad was this markys and the folk therefore,/ For though a mayde child coome al bifore,/ She may unto a knave child atteyne/ By liklihede, syn she nys nat bareyne” (444-48). The daughter’s birth following shortly upon the marriage of Walter and Griselda confirms Griselda’s fertility, and so promises the likelihood of an heir while not producing one outright. Following the remarkable transformation of Griselda and a description of her popularity and magnificent fulfillment of her political duties, Chaucer recalls his audience to Griselda’s primary purpose in Walter’s life, which

is the production of an heir to continue his bloodline. Griselda's performance in this arena is a little less spectacular, but encouraging, he suggests. Her ability is proven, but the major mark of success, the production of an heir who can pass on Walter's line another generation, is beyond Griselda's direct control. The delay in appearance of a true heir to Walter's line produces a mixture of anticipation and disappointment in "al," reiterating the necessity for the arrival of an acknowledged heir to the successful conclusion to the Clerk's narrative.

In this episode and the ensuing tests to which Walter puts Griselda, Chaucer links the topic of patrilineal succession with anxieties of female influence, marked by compulsion and hostility towards mothers and increasingly, the refusal to recognize children as belonging to the patriline at all. As in the initial encounter between Walter and his people, Chaucer follows a declaration of dynastic desire with a compulsive return to the question of maternal influence. Walter's lack of self-mastery is implicitly contrasted with Griselda's seemingly inhuman self-possession, which paradoxically manifests as an utter loss or denial of self-hood. For it is with the birth of his daughter that Walter becomes consumed with a desire to "assaye" his wife, specifically with the implicit accusation of hijacking his daughter's identity with Griselda's own base heritage (453). Chaucer represents Walter as compelled by this obsession, even unwillingly: Walter "in his herte longeth so/ To tempte his wyf . . ./ That he ne myghte out of his herte throwe This merveillous desire" to test Griselda (451-53). Chaucer increasingly links Walter's tests of Griselda with his lack of self-mastery even as Walter attempts to assert control over a bloodline co-identified with himself through his embodiment of that bloodline. For each time Walter removes one of his children from his wife, the Clerk

interjects critiques of Walter, couched in a general observation about a certain class of people to which Walter implicitly belongs. After the removal of Walter's daughter, the Clerk remarks upon Walter's reaction: while Walter feels some "routhe" for his actions, "nathelees his purpos heeld he stille,/ As lordes doon, what they wol han hir wille" (579, 580-81). Walter's behavior is thus compared to the expected behavior of lords who wish to have their own way. This relatively neutral claim takes on a much more critical cast just before he demands that Griselda hand over their son: having "caughte yet another lest" to tempt his wife, Walter is excoriated as an unreasonable husband, a example of the axiom that "wedded men ne knowe no mesure,/ Whan that they fynde a pacient creature" (619, 622-3). Chaucer identifies Walter's desire to test his wife by removing the heir as a mark of his lack of "mesure," or sense of proportion. He also implies a sense of repetitive loss of control in Walter; he has "caught" "yet another" desire to test his wife in this way.

In the second round of Walter's tests of Griselda, Chaucer revisits and intensifies the sense of compulsion introduced in Walter's initial desire to test Griselda in this second round, and expands the critique to include a declaration of uncontrolled and irrational behavior immediately following the removal of Walter's son:

But ther been folk of swich condicion
That whan they have a certein purpos
They kan nat stynte of hire entencion,
But, right as they were bounden to that stake,
They wol nat of that firste purpos slake.
Right so this markys fulliche hath purposed
To tempte his wyf as he was first disposed. (701-7)

This critique centers simultaneously on lack of control, willfulness, and a sense of compulsion. The reference to "folk" removes the discussion of Walter's behavior from

the context of the social hierarchies and privileges implied by the first two categories Walter is compared and belongs to, lords and husbands. Instead, Chaucer identifies Walter as belonging to a group of people “of swich condicion” that they are unable to stray from their course. Chaucer implicitly pathologizes Walter’s behavior, severing it from social role and attributing it to a personal affliction over which Walter has no control. He describes Walter as if “bounden to that stake,” incapable to behaving in any other way. The image proves apt in terms of genealogy, suggesting both self-destruction and stasis, both potential consequences to the patriline as a result of Walter’s actions. Likened to a captive, Walter becomes less a figure of an overbearing husband or a willful lord and more a prisoner of his own inability to escape his compulsion, instigated by his wife’s fertility and satisfied, at least temporarily, by the removal of the evidence of that fertility. The linking of Walter’s compulsion with outright censure occurs at the moment that the full genealogical purpose of Griselda’s childbearing is realized: the birth of an heir.

Walter’s tests of Griselda each follow a genealogical logic whereby he represents Griselda as both a class and a lineal intruder, one who transmits her own class heterogeneity to “her” children. In his first test, Walter recalls the great poverty from which he raised Griselda and contrasts it with the “present dignitee” which she now enjoys (470). Walter then claims that Griselda’s elevation has become a particular sore point with his people since the birth of their daughter, suggesting that her class origins matter most in the context of her reproductive capacity and thus dynastic role as vessel to Walter’s heirs. In his remarks to Griselda regarding their daughter, Walter’s consistent reference to the child as exclusively Griselda’s—“thy doghter”—implicitly invokes

Griselda's own class heterogeneity, apparently passed wholesale along to *her* child (484, 489).

The genealogical aspect of Walter's accusation becomes much more explicitly articulated when he comes to warn Griselda of the impending loss of their son, the long-awaited heir. In this encounter, Walter himself claims the child as "my sone," acknowledging the blood connection he shares with the child, yet suggests that this connection is not accepted by the people who had before so strongly desired an heir. In this conversation, Walter presents his son as a sort of usurper, supplanting Walter's privileged heritage with a much less honorable bloodline: "Now sey they thus: 'Whan Walter is agon,/ Than shal the blood of Janicle succede/ And been oure lord, for oother have we noon'" (626, 631-3). While Walter distances himself from the claim that Griselda has effectively hijacked and diverted Walter's offspring from their proper line, he elaborates Griselda's status as a potential threat to legitimate lineality, reinforced his initial reference to their daughter as exclusively Griselda's. In his fantasy, Walter does not identify Griselda herself as the genealogical contaminant, but rather her father, Janicula. Walter's son, the product of his blood transmitted through Griselda's body, becomes instead Janicula's child, suggesting not only a violation of class systems, but also a hint of sexual perversity, as the idea of Griselda's having borne her own father's son smacks less of genealogical influence and more of father-daughter incest. Finally, by linking the fantasy of maternal influence directly to dynastic logic and then dynastic catastrophe, the apparent murder of Walter's son and heir, Chaucer at once lays out the forms and the stakes of the patriarchal nightmare of maternal interference. At every stage of the narrative so far, he counters the genealogical imperative to continue the patriline

with a persistent obsession with maternal inheritance, one which leads the patrilineal representative to endanger his own line in his compulsive desire to insulate it from maternal contamination.

In these initial tests of Griselda, Chaucer increasingly reveals the genealogical anxiety underlying Walter's compulsion. Production of offspring compels Walter to invoke and act upon the perceived threat of maternal transmission, coded as maternal contamination, particularly in the light of Griselda's degraded class status as figured by the aged and impoverished Janicula. While Walter's reference to the blood of Janicula invokes a specter of sexual as well as lineal contamination, adulterous incest, the impetus of his behavior is Griselda's potential to carry and transmit her father's bloodline to her children, the impossibility of proving her status as an empty vessel for the transmission of Walter's seed and bloodline. Yet Chaucer goes out of his way, even more so than his sources to present Griselda as just so, a cipher, a blank, an empty slate, and an opaque mystery.

Critics have long identified the transformation scene in which Walter has Griselda stripped of her old clothes and clothed in rich garments as a crux of the *Clerk's Tale*. I would like to focus on this moment and subsequent moments where Griselda's radical emptiness and mobility function as markers of the patriarchal fantasy of women as empty vessels. Chaucer explicitly points to Walter's motivation in publicly transforming his wife before she enters his home as founded in his desire to exclude markers of Griselda's old life from her new: "And for that no thyng of hir olde geere/ She sholde brynge into his hous, he bad/ That wommen sholde dispoillen hire right there" (372-4). According to Chaucer, Walter's transformation of Griselda is done to protect his house from

Griselda's "olde geere," which it seems, is so nasty that the ladies entrusted with the duty are "nat right glad" of the task (375). Walter's translation of Griselda from Janicula's daughter to his own wife is stunningly successful. Not only does Griselda enter Walter's home without any markers of her father's home or the life she led there, the change effected in her makes it impossible, even for those who knew her all her life, to identify Griselda as Janicula's child:

To every wight she woxen is so deere
 And worshipful that folk ther she was bore,
 And from hire birth knewe hire yeer by yeere,
 Unnethe trowed they—but dorste hand swore—
 That to Janicle, of which I spak bifore,
 She doghter were, for, as by conjecture,
 Hem thoughte she was another creature. (400-6)

Thus, Chaucer represents Griselda's transformation, subsequent marriage and behavior as Walter's wife not only as an enactment of class elevation, but also as a radical break with her own genealogical and social identification. Once Walter transforms Griselda, she becomes unreadable as Janicula's child, and thus Walter's people imagine her to be a completely separate person. This transformation includes not only visual markers of Griselda's class status and virtue, but also her behavior, wisdom, eloquence, and good governance. Griselda's transformation appears to exemplify what Lynda Boose had identified as the "alien" status of the daughter, who, destined to be traded into the household of her husband, enters into her father's home as a transient figure who never fully participates in the father's family or bloodline.⁴² Fathers (and husbands destined to become fathers) therefore register as presence while daughters (and wives cut off from paternal bloodlines) function as absences, as signified by the empty space of the wombs

⁴² Lynda E. Boose, "The Father's House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture's Daughter-Father Relationship." In *Daughters and Fathers*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 22.

capable only of carrying the seed of other families' bloodlines.⁴³ Defined first by reference to her father, Griselda becomes wholly identified by the Clerk in her new role as Walter's wife, leaving not only her old gear behind, but also all identification with her father and his bloodline.⁴⁴ Chaucer equates Griselda's genealogical break with Janicula with her class transformation as the "newe markysesse" becomes indistinguishable from the emperor's daughter Walter has insisted she be treated as:

. . . it ne semed nat by liklynesse
 That she was born and fed in rudenesse,
 As in a cote or in an oxe-stalle,
 But norissed in an emperoures halle. (396-9)

Walter's radical and apparently successful transformation of Griselda marks her unlimited fungibility, and her susceptibility to his defining influence. Divested of her relation to Janicula as she is her clothes, Griselda leaves her father in his old home as she is invested in Walter's.

Chaucer marks Griselda's external and public transformation in terms of class as mirrored by her promise to conform both her public demeanor and interiority to Walter's own desires and interiority. Asked by Walter never to publicly disagree with him by word or demeanor, Griselda offers a much more radical form of conformity: "And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,/ *In werk ne thought*, I nyl yow disobeye,/ For to be deed, though me were looth to deye" (362-4, emphasis mine). When Walter tests this resolve later in the text, the extent of Griselda's identification of her consciousness with Walter's and its connection to Walter's act of transformation is made even more explicit:

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴ This reading conforms to anthropological and historical readings of the construction of women under exogamous patriarchy. For representative examples, see Boose, 19-74 and Edmund Leach, *Culture & Communication: The Logic by Which Symbols are Connected*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 74-5.

I wol no thyng, ne nyl no thyng, certain,
 But as yow list . . .
 For as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,
 Whan I first cam to yow, right so . . .
 Left I my wyl and al my libertee,
 And took youre clothyng . . .” (646-7, 654-7)

Griselda describes her will and liberty as, like her clothing, some of the gear that was left behind at her marriage. This construction of her marriage and its consequences imagines selfhood as if it were a physical item that could be carried or dropped at will. Confronted by Walter with the problem and consequences of her heterogeneity in his household, Griselda agrees and sets forth a construction of herself as effectively emptied of all interiority and identity but for that represented by Walter and his wishes. Griselda’s resultant status as a double of Walter is presaged and reinforced by her ability to stand in for Walter in his absence, as “Though that hire housbonde absent were anon,/ If gentil men or othere of hire contree/ Were wroth, she wolde bryngen hem aton” (435-7). Griselda’s status as empty vessel seems uncannily assured; emptied of her former identity, she seems to embody Walter’s identity so fully as to act as his (idealized) double.

Upon Walter’s removal of her children, Griselda not only references her own doubling of her husband, her status as a person defined by and in some way created by Walter, but suggests that she passes the same radical identification with Walter on to her children. For example, when Walter demands that Griselda hand over “her” daughter, Griselda both acknowledges her bond to the child and insists that her own identification with Walter also defines their daughter: “My child and I . . ./ Been yours al, and ye mowe save or spille/ Youre owene thyng” (502-4). Griselda again emphasizes this simultaneous claiming of her children and insistence that, like herself, her children are

defined solely by Walter when he informs her of the incipient loss of their son. After reiterating the absence of her own will except to mirror Walter's back to himself, Griselda again suggests that she and her children are defined solely through their shared connection to Walter:

“ . . . Naught greveth me at al/
 Though that my doughter and my sone be slayne—
 I have noght had no part of children twayne
 But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne.
 “Ye been oure lord: dooth with youre owene thyng
 Right as yow list . . .” (647-53)

Even as Griselda seems to claim her children through her choice of pronoun, she insists that, like herself, her children are entirely Walter's “owene thyng.” As Larry Scanlon has noted, it is precisely in her handing over of her children to Walter that she most clearly legitimates the idea that they belong to him and him alone.⁴⁵ In addition, she claims to have had no part of her children but for the experiences of illness, sadness and pain. Implicit in this claim is the sense that as Griselda has had no part of her children, so, too they have had no part of her. Being herself wholly defined by Walter, Griselda implicitly suggests, she cannot pass anything of herself to the children that was not Walter's in the first place.

Upon her separation from Walter, Griselda again subverts Walter's claims of maternal influence in her bargaining for a smock to replace her maidenhead. The status of her womb as “thilke wombe in which youre children leye,” she suggests, retains that status, the status bestowed by *Walter's* children, even in the absence of those children (877). Whereas Walter has suggested all along that it is Griselda who might mark her

⁴⁵ “What Griselda's submission assures him is that her children belong entirely to him. She can only do that if she freely grants to him even the right to destroy them. Her total submission to his power over her as father of her children reinstates the principle of heritability her ascension to the ruling class may have violated.” Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 187.

children with her difference, here, she suggests, it is they who have irrevocably put their mark on her, and a mark which justifies the covering of her womb, obscuring it from the sight of the people. At the same time, Griselda's desire to obscure her womb from sight echoes Walter's own project of erasing traces of the mother, evidence of her own role in the continuation of his line. Ironically, this explicit mention of Griselda's womb comes quick on the heels of the suppression of another womb. While relinquishing her claim to the clothes and jewels bestowed upon her by Walter, Griselda remarks, recalling Job: "Naked out of my fadres hous . . . I cam, and naked moot I turne agayn" (871-2). As Newton remarks, "Griselda's self-description of having left and returned naked to her father's house displaces Job's similar claim of having left and returned naked to his mother's womb."⁴⁶ Griselda's erasure of the womb from the most canonical text imaginable to a Christian medieval audience underscores the extent to which maternal transmission has been rendered taboo and implicitly critiques this erasure as problematic in its implacable revision of all other constructions of generation. Walter's program of eliminating the threat of maternal transmission threatens to overwhelm all other discourses.

I have suggested that in the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer locates within the desire for patrilineal autonomous self-replication a simultaneous desire to discount maternal influence and an obsessive fear that such lineal contamination is always threatened by the very necessity of using a woman's body to transmit seed. Chaucer constructs Walter's attempts to undermine maternal transmission by associating it with incest and by constructing a wife as inherently dangerous not only to individuals such as wives and

⁴⁶ Allyson Newton, "The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," in *Medieval Mothering*, eds. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 63.

children, but also to the survival of legitimate bloodlines. Chaucer offers an implicit critique of Walter's program through his ratcheting up of the tale's cruelty and in his further obscuring of Griselda's interiority.⁴⁷ In Walter's near-marriage to his daughter, Chaucer offers a model for the only marriage that might conceivably fulfill the compulsive desire to eliminate any chance of maternal influence. Recalling his earlier suggestion that in bearing his son, Griselda was in fact carrying her father's child, Walter sets up a marriage that, following the logic that maternal transmission is equivalent to the bearing of one's father's child, ensures that his influence alone could affect the projected progeny.

Chaucer's unique addition of a discussion of the potential product of this marriage, the "fairer fruyt" which should fall between Walter and his new bride ensures that genealogical concerns come back into focus regarding this proposed marriage (990).⁴⁸ By marrying his daughter, a daughter who has been repeatedly defined as Walter's "own thing," Walter sets up a situation in which he could potentially be absolutely certain that any new heirs would be his and his alone. Totally defined by her father/husband, Walter's daughter/wife would operate, like Griselda, as a double of Walter. In this way, the narcissism inherent in the desire to replicate the self identically becomes linked by Chaucer not only to incest but to narcissistic self-impregnation. In

⁴⁷ John Finlayson notes that "it is generally agreed that Chaucer has drawn attention much more than Petrarch to the human suffering of Griselda and the pathos of her position." John Finlayson, "Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 97:3(2000):255-75, 264-5. In addition, Robert Worth Frank Jr. notes many of Chaucer's modifications to the Griselda narrative, suggesting that Chaucer's obscuring of Griselda's interiority represents "possibly Chaucer's most significant change." Robert Worth Frank Jr. "Pathos in Chaucer's Religious Tales," in *Chaucer's Religious Tales*, eds. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson (Cambridge: D.S Brewer, 1990), 48.

⁴⁸ "In a . . . significant departure from his source materials, Chaucer pauses over the lineage and breeding potential of Walter's second wife, who will produce the worthy heir, ("fairer fruit") that prompted his subjects to urge him to marry in the first place." Michael Hanrahan, "'A Strange Succesour Sholde Take Your Heritage:' The *Clerk's Tale* and the Crisis of Ricardian Rule," *Chaucer Review* 35:4(2001): 335-50, 343.

addition, Chaucer represents this solution as one which would undermine legitimate inheritance law, not only because of its violation of incest prohibition, but also because of its disregard for the claim of Walter's first-born son, potentially supplanted by his sister's son, should one be born of the proposed marriage. This potential desire obviously goes unfulfilled, but the degree to which Chaucer has already defined Walter's wife and children solely as doubles for Walter actually makes this looming incest threat a model for what has already transpired in the *Clerk's Tale*. In transforming and marrying Griselda, Walter has in effect married and produced children with his double. While Chaucer's reinstatement of Griselda as Walter's wife and hasty marrying-off of Walter's daughter to "oon of the worthieste" lords in the land draws the attention away from the incest threat, the brief reconfiguration of Walter's family whereby his first-born heir is potentially displaced in favor of his progeny derived through incest seems to offer a glimpse into the ultimate fantasy of an autonomous male line, and one which threatens to undermine rightful transmission of inheritance altogether. Through the model of incestuous disinheritance, accompanied by the pathetic specter of the displaced and suffering wife, Chaucer demonstrates the costs and the genealogical risks entailed in the fantasy of a self-perpetuating male line. Such a fantasy, he suggests, not only threatens women, abused wives and daughters, but also the bloodline itself, represented by the apparently murdered children and the potentially disinherited heir whose desired birth motivates and underwrites the entire narrative.

Maternal Transmission and Fatherless Sons: the *Man of Law's Tale*

Whereas in the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer does not appear to settle the question of maternal transmission, instead focusing on the ultimately self-destructive patriarchal

impulse to negate or deny the possibility altogether, in the *Man of Law's Tale*, he represents in Constance—the heiress of Rome—an unmistakable and uncanny maternal tradition, as evidenced by Maurice's nearly-identical likeness to his mother. Like Griselda, Constance is persecuted in her marital home after the birth of her child on account of her potential to pass on her heterogeneity (real and imagined) to her offspring. At the same time, the demonization of maternal transmission is rendered questionable by being posited by the two villainous mothers-in-law—each of whom identifies the mother as a sinister agent of lineal, religious or cultural change and then takes condemnable action accordingly. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer again counters attempts to deny or demonize maternal transmission with an alternative narrative of genealogy which displaces maternal transmission with (figurative) paternal incest. Through the contradictory treatments of incest in the Man of Law's anti-incest diatribe in Prologue to his tale and the tale's conclusion in which an autonomous maternal transmission is inadequately obscured by the fiction of paternal incest, Chaucer draws attention to the way that an ideology of perfectly transmitted bloodlines requires that only one parent be recognized as transmitting form to a child. Within such a framework, he suggests, even the transgressive narrative of father-daughter incest proves more palatable to patriarchal institutions than the lineal disorder suggested by maternal transmission.

Chaucer represents Constance, like Griselda, as a figure of marital and maternal heterogeneity and thus lineal anxiety. In both of her marriages, Constance represents otherness within her new home: national, racial, religious, and class difference are each invoked at different points of her stays in both Syria and Northumberland. Chaucer emphasizes Constance's radical heterogeneity from the court at Syria in the initial

impossibility of their marriage due to religious difference. The Sultan's advisors, having come to the conclusion that marriage offers the lovesick Sultan his only opportunity to possess Constance, explain that, as things stand, such a marriage is impossible:

By cause that ther was swich diversitee
 Bitwene hir bothe lawes, that they sayn
 They trowe that no "Cristen prince would fayn
 Wedden his child under oure lawe sweete
 That us was taught by Mahoun, oure prophete." (218-224)

Religious difference between the Sultan and Constance is done away with by the conversion to Christianity of the Sultan and much of his court, but the Sultan's mother and her "conseil" resist by murdering the Sultan, Christian escort, and all those who had converted to Christianity, sparing only Constance, who they set adrift in a rudderless boat. Upon her second marriage, to Alla, king of Northumberland, Constance is again persecuted by her mother-in-law for the difference she seems to embody, an anonymous woman cast up on the shores of England, whose mysterious past is exacerbated by feigned amnesia. Chaucer locates Donegild's hostility to Constance as a response specifically to Constance's otherness:

But who was woful, if I shal nat lye,
 Of this weddyng but Donegild, and namo,
 The kynges mooder, ful of tirannye?
 Hir thoghte hir cursed herte brast atwo.
 She wold noght hir sone had do so;
 Hir thoughte a despit that he shold take
 So strange a creature unto his make. (694-700)

Donegild's objection to Constance's strangeness has a great deal to do with her status as a stranger. As an apparent amnesiac victim of a shipwreck, Constance offers no clues to her true identity or history. No trace of her class or lineage remain and her national origin is likewise effaced, as her language, "a maner Latyn corrupt," offers intelligibility

in terms of speech, but less in terms of identification (519). Constance arrives in Northumberland as a complete blank, upon which desires and fears are easily imposed by all those who encounter her.⁴⁹ Like Walter, however, Donegild interprets the apparent empty fungibility of a married woman as a sham, concealing an underlying difference that threatens her husband's dynastic integrity through her potential influence upon their children. Donegild's later accusation against Constance, that she is "an elf" in disguise who has corrupted the bloodline by giving birth to "a feendly creature" suggests that her hostility arises from a specifically dynastic concern, the potential for her son's mysterious wife to hijack his lineage by producing a child marked by her own strangeness.

In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer emphasizes that Constance's status as an outsider in her marital homes is not only an effect of malicious xenophobia on the part of her mother's in law, but rather a given hardship that Constance herself expects as embedded within her role of wife. Chaucer repeatedly draws attention to the sense that, for Constance at least, the departure for Syria entails a personal calamity. Chaucer's lengthy pause to explore Constance's sense of dislocation and reluctance to enter marital exile is completely absent from Gower's version of the narrative, which moves straight from the marriage settlement to the murderous envy of the Sultanness and the bloody feast. In contrast, Chaucer delays Constance's journey for over twenty-five lines to describe Constance's distress and allow her a thirteen line speech outlining the pathos of her position as foreign bride in an alien land. The *Man of Law* describes the day of departure

⁴⁹ Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 192. Constance's status as a blank space or emptiness upon whom others' desires are written has become somewhat of a critical truism. For example, Dinshaw suggests that "'Woman' in the ideology of the *Man of Law's Tale* is an essential blankness that will be inscribed by men and thus turned into a tale; she is a blank onto which men's desire will be projected; she is a no-thing in herself." See Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 110. Similarly, Geraldine Heng has referred to Constance as "the blankest of blanks" (192) as well as "an enigmatic cipher, a self-masking blank for the fantasy of others" (191).

as “the woful day fatal,” a day which can no longer be delayed by “teriyng,” despite the implied desire to do so (260, 261). Constance herself displays evidence of her distress at departure: she is “with sorwe al overcome” at having to leave, and her face is “Ful pale” (264, 265). Chaucer emphasizes the sense that the voyage is one which Constance would rather put off indefinitely, suggesting that Constance’s obedient report to her parents on the day of departure is carried out reluctantly, in the absence of any recourse as “wel she seeth ther is non oother ende” (266).

Chaucer locates the precise nature of Constance’s distress as her impending immersion in a foreign land, and explicitly validates her trepidation, emphasizing the contrast between Constance’s experiences of amiable familiarity in her natal home and the unknown life that awaits her in Syria:

Allas, what wonder is it thogh she wepte,
That shal be sent to strange nacioun
Fro freendes that so tendrely hire kepte,
And to be bounden under subjeccioun
Of oon, she knoweth nat his condicioun? (267-71)

Chaucer suggests that for women, the transition from parental to marital household is a calamitous reversal, in which tender keeping is traded for subjection, and the company of friends is exchanged for the domination of an unknown stranger from a “strange nacioun.” Faced with such a future, he suggests, weeping is a perfectly reasonable response, and the weak assurance that “Housbondes been alle goode, and han ben yoore” reminds the audience that such is not always the case, and husbandly solicitude cannot be counted on when both the husband and the environment operate as complete unknowns (272). Later, Constance herself reiterates the alien status of her marital destination, referring to Syria as “the Barbre nacioun” that she must unwillingly travel to, as part of

the “thralldom and penance” that is the lot of all women (279, 286-87). Widening the focus from Constance’s particular situation as future wife to a foreign Sultan to the question of wives and husbands in general, Chaucer suggests that Constance’s pathetic position is shared by all women upon marriage.

For a character often described as a passive and cipherlike blank, Constance is quite vocal and articulate in her complaint to her parents on the matter of her departure to Syria.⁵⁰ Despite the Sultan’s eventual recognition that he must convert to Christianity to possess Constance, Constance in her turn insists upon the inherent otherness of her new land, and the personal cost to herself of that difference. Constance consistently represents her marriage as an exile from her natal family, emphasizing the foreignness of her marital destination, and the otherness she will simultaneously encounter and embody in her new home. Regardless of any promised religious conversion, Syria remains to her a pagan land, a “Barbre nacioun” where she will be the outsider, perpetually cut off from her familiar land and family (281). Constance attributes her reluctant acquiescence on her role both as a woman and daughter, which she associates with the abjectified states of penance and thralldom (286-7). In invoking the figure of the thrall, Constance touches on the status of the woman as a transmissible object rather under patriarchy, which allows her to be traded, like the gossip, goods, and other commodities carried on the ships which travel to and from Syria in the first lines of the poem.⁵¹ While the marriage negotiations between her family and that of the Sultan construct her in part like another commodity traded between nations, one which is transferable within that system of exchange, and

⁵⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 110; Heng, 191.

⁵¹ For an extended reading of the connections between mercantilism, maritime trade and the Man of Law and his tale, see David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1997, 182-211.

traded by the same routes and carriers of the goods and gossip described at the opening of the tale, Constance describes her own sense of dislocation with pathos, which the Man of Law as narrator echoes. Constance's trepidation regarding her imminent marriage is explicitly related to the foreignness of the Sultan's "Barbre nacioun" and presumably, her own anticipated isolation there.

In Constance's farewell speech to her parents, Chaucer emphasizes the strength of ties between daughter and birth family, and the contrast between her familiar situation in her natal home and the strangeness she expects to encounter in Syria:

"Fader," she seyde, "thy wrecced child Custance,
Thy yonge doghter fostred up so softe,
And ye, my mooder, my soverayne plesance
Over alle thyng, out-taken Crist on-lofte,
Custance youre child hire recomandeth ofte
Unto youre grace, for I shal to Surrye,
Ne shal I nevere seen you moore with ye.
"Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun
I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;

.

I, wrecced womman, no fors though I spille!
Wommen are born to thaldom and penance,
And to been under mannes governance. (274-287)

In her pathetic address to her parents, Constance consistently emphasizes her affective relationships with each of her parents, particularly her mother, as well the expected break with her own familial ties that her marriage represents. She reminds her father how she was, at least until this moment, "fostred up so softe" but has now become a "wrecced childe." At the same time that Constance appears to juxtapose her parents' apparently exemplary care of her until this moment with the dreaded necessity that she leave them, the universal lot of women, she repeatedly reminds her parents of their own personal responsibility for making this specific choice as to her disposal. With some irony,

Constance recommends herself to her parents' grace, since they have arranged that she will likely never see them again. She reiterates her explicitly unhappy obedience to their will, even if it should result in her death. At once a wretched child, young daughter, and wretched woman, Constance asserts that she will go to a "Barbre nacion" since it is their "wille," yet she also refuses to pretend that it is her will. Thus, her parents, addressed with remembrances of her affect for them, become transformed into exemplars of the anonymous "men" under whose "governance," as a woman, she must fall.

While in Rome Constance may name Syria a "Barbre" nation, but in Syria, it is she who will be regarded as "strange." A perpetual exile from her father's court, her lament suggests, she will always remain to some extent a foreigner in her husband's land, despite the intended Christianization of Syria. Indeed, the initial tidings of her impeccable reputation are simply more of the "wondres" brought back from "strange place[s]" that the Sultan delights in learning of and possessing (182, 178). Upon her return to Rome at the end of the tale, she conflates this initial exile through marriage with her later punitive exiles at sea when she implores:

It am I, fader, that in the salte see
Was put allone and dempned for to dye.
Now, goode fader, mercy I yow crye!
Sende me namoore unto noon hethenesse,
But thonketh my lord heere of his kyndenesse. (1107-13)

In imploring her father to cease sending her into "hethenesse," Constance implicitly conflates her father's initial decision to send her to Syria with her later exposures at sea by her mothers-in-law. Asking him to exile her "namoore" implies that in the end, it was he, and not the mothers-in-law who ultimately condemned her to die by sending her without direction into strange lands. Constance's final return to Rome to join her father

until their deaths seems to confirm Constance's definition of Rome's apparently inalterable status as home and thus all other places, including the marital domicile, as sites of exile. In doing so, Chaucer implicitly elides the basic distinction between Constance's first journey to Syria to marry the Sultan, and her subsequent exiles, so much so that the Emperor is figured as having been responsible for all three journeys. Constance's persistent desire to return to Rome, which she regards as her home as opposed to the "hethenesse" outside of Rome, suggests that while the exchanged woman is treated as infinitely exchangeable by the men who trade her as if she were currency, the woman herself might resist this convenient construction of her self, identifying with a previous alliance or identity independently of the desires of either of the exchanging men. In fact, Constance's plea to her father that he no longer exile his daughter to pagan lands occurs in the presence of her husband from just such a land (though its conversion mitigates this to some point), with whom she will nevertheless return to England, if only briefly.

Constance's status as foreign outsider in both of her marital homes, as well as the hostility this status engenders, is emblematic of the experiences of many aristocratic women, especially queens, who, because of exogamous marriage practices, could expect to marry into a household located at a great distance from their natal families. Parsons and Wheeler suggest that in the Middle Ages, the liminal position of traded women located between rather than within families ensured that, for these women, "their negotiations of divided loyalties between paternal and affinal lineages were fundamental to their careers and self-understanding."⁵² In turn, this suspended position precariously

⁵² John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, "Introduction: Medieval Mothering, Medieval Motherers," in *Medieval Mothering*, eds. John Carmi Parsons and Connie Wheeler, (New York: Garland, 1996), xv.

balanced between potentially conflicting loyalties often translated into anxieties and even resentment in a bride's new home, where members of the household often saw her position as both necessary and threatening in terms of her sexual relationship to her husband and her influence over both him and her future children.

Chaucer represents this anxiety of domestic influence in the form of the enmity of Constance's mothers-in-law, yet undermines the validity of their fears by representing both of these women as evil, perverse mothers noted more for their monstrous acts which endanger or destroy the products of their own maternity, the Sultan in the case of the Sultaness, and Maurice, in the case of Donegild. Oppositional juxtapositions of maternity between the mothers-in-law and Constance not only set up a dichotomy of "bad" and "good" mothers, but also a dichotomy between mothers who are defined either by their negation of their own maternity, or by their dominating biological influence over their children which obscures or even negates paternal influence. Through this opposition, Chaucer implicitly constructs a model of genealogy in which either parent may transmit resemblance and bloodline, but both cannot. Bloodline transmission in this system is an "all or nothing" matter; a mother or either fully determines the child's appearance and bloodline, or transmits nothing.

Chaucer labels the Sultaness and Donegild as monstrous mothers, not according to Donegild's definition centering on the monstrous nature of their children, but rather by pointing to these women the source, coded as maternal, of other forms of monstrosity. For example, in a long diatribe after the Sultaness lays out her plan to kill her son and his counselors, Chaucer invokes comparisons with Semiramis, the Biblical serpent, Satan, and Eve:

O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee!
 Virago, thou Semyrame the secounde!
 O serpent under femynynytee,
 Like to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!
 O feyned womman, al that may confounde
 Vertue and innocence, thurgh thy malice,
 Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice!

O Sathan, envious syn thilke day
 That thou were chaced from oure heritage,
 Wel knowestow to wommen the olde way!
 Thou madest Eva bringe us in servage . . . (358-368)

The Man of Law consistently links the Sultaness with figures of unnatural or monstrous maternity. First he identifies the Sultaness as a second Semiramis, an eastern queen associated in the Middle Ages with unbridled lust, and often with incestuous love towards her son, through whom she ruled. Eve's status as mother of humanity is referenced solely with her role in condemning all of her progeny to the "servage" of sin and death. While references to Semiramis and Eve invoke mothers who prove disastrous or problematic to their children, other appellations accorded the Sultaness instead suggest that while she is undoubtedly a mother, what she has primarily brought forth is not her son. For example, the Man of Law defines her respectively as the root of iniquity, the nest of every vice, and one who breeds everything which might confound virtue of innocence. Each of these epithets associates the Sultaness with reproductivity, identifying her as being a source which brings forth other entities, but these entities are not children, but rather social ills: iniquity, vice and everything inimical to virtue. Finally, having associated the Sultaness with unnatural mothers and unnatural maternity, the Man of Law severs the Sultaness from femininity altogether, describing her as a virago, a serpent under or hidden by femininity, and a feigned woman. Likewise, the Man of Law repeatedly reminds his audience that Donegild is the king's mother, but in

descriptions of her omits any markers of this characteristic, instead associating her first with the masculine vice of “tirannye” and then describing her as both “mannysh” and “feendlych” (779, 782, 783).⁵³ Both examples of the Sultanness and Donegild foreground the biological fact of their maternity in order to deny any significance to it except to heighten the sense of personal betrayal and the reversal of their ideal role of facilitating the continuation, rather than the destruction, of a dynastic bloodline.

Chaucer pairs his displacement of the Sultanness’ and Donegild’s maternity with repeated claims of Constance’s overwhelming status as Maurice’s mother. *The Man of Law’s Tale* consistently points to Constance as the nearly autonomous source of Maurice’s production and identity. While the brief mention of Maurice’s conception by Alla, “On hire he gat a knave child anon” makes explicit Alla’s engendering of the child, from the moment he is born, Maurice functions as a double of and substitute for his mother. For example, in Donegild’s slanderous letter to Alla, she claims that Maurice’s supposed monstrosity provides incontrovertible evidence of Constance’s true nature:

The lettre spak the queene delivered was
Of so horrible a feendly creature
That in the castel noon so hardy was
That any while dorste ther endure.
The mother was an elf, by aventure
Ycomen, by charmes or by sorcerie . . . (750-55)

In Donegild’s calumnious fantasy of miscegenation, the child’s monstrosity denotes his unnaturally strong connection to his mother, and the assumption of maternal resemblance paradoxically does the work of such resemblance by pointing to maternal influence—even in the absences of physical resemblance. A fiendish child, therefore, “proves” the existence of an elfin or demonic mother, whatever appearance she presents to the world

⁵³ Helen Cooper. *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 295.

at large. Donegild correlates Constance's hidden parentage and mysterious past and the ascription of a monstrous nature in her recasting of Constance's miraculous survival at sea the result of "charmes" and "sorcerie." The substitution of monstrosity for the unknown underlines Donegild's anxiety concerning the mysterious interloper in her family.

Donegild's accusation of a monstrous birth invokes the problem of maternal influence in two ways. The first, of course, is the idea of an inherited monstrosity passed in the form of a bloodline. However, medical discourses linked monstrous birth to maternal influence which operated outside of and in opposition to the influence of bloodlines, associated with paternal transmission. As Margo Hendricks has observed, "For most [medieval and early modern] theorists who write about reproductive aberration, the female imagination is one of the principal causes of monsters and marvels."⁵⁴ These theorists constructed the unborn child as vulnerable to the deforming influences of the mother's uncontrolled and perhaps uncontrollable imagination.⁵⁵ In particular, unwary or uncontrolled thoughts or desires could deform the child physically and emotionally, reconfiguring the child to resemble or in some way manifest the object desired or feared by the mother. Contemporary texts on gynecology, as well as medical treatises written by classical Greek warned that excessive fears or desires, even stray or unschooled thoughts or glance on the part of a pregnant woman could have profound consequences for the formation of her child, including monstrosity, resemblance to

⁵⁴ Margo Hendricks, "Monstrosity and the Mercurial Female Imagination," in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002).

⁵⁵ Douglas Kelly, "The Domestication of the Marvelous in the Melusine Romances," 39-40.

someone other than the father, or even death.⁵⁶ This construction of maternal influence still places the mother's influence in direct competition with the authorized influence of the paternal bloodline, but does not substitute maternal bloodline for paternal bloodline, rather tending more towards the chaos and capriciousness denoted by maternal whimsy, desire, or fear. Thus by invoking Maurice's supposed monstrosity, Donegild doubly implicates Constance in a deviant act of maternal influence, related both to an accusation of genealogical hijacking by an other, and implicitly, to a parallel accusation of contamination brought about by maternal misdeeds, resulting in a monstrous birth.

In her letter to her son, Donegild represents the birth of Maurice as an occasion of genealogical deviance, equivalent to similar episodes of calumny in other romances, such as *Octavian*, in which the accusation against a new mother centers on alleged infidelity. Monstrous maternity and infidelity both threaten the integrity of the patriline by substituting for it another, perhaps unknown or undefined, but certainly unauthorized bloodline. Whether the hijacking bloodline is the mother's or her lover's, it equally works to displace that of the father. Visible evidence of the displacement in the form of monstrous appearance, resemblance to another man, or inappropriate behavior in the child all act as signifiers of the disrupted patriline.⁵⁷ Chaucer underscores Donegild's

⁵⁶ Ibid. Kelly notes the prevalent belief in the "mother-mark," a birthmark or other physical mark or deformity on a child which corresponded to an imagined object of fear or desire, even of idle musing on the part of the pregnant mother. See also MacLehose, 8, and Susan Karant-Nunn, *The Reformation of Ritual: an Interpretation of Early Modern Germany* (London: Routledge, 1997), 78. According to Karant-Nunn, for example, pregnant women were advised to avoid looking upon the graves of women who had died in childbirth for fear that their resultant morbid imaginations would harm, even kill their unborn children.

⁵⁷ Alcuin Blamires notes the prevalence in medieval romance of the idea that "where the offspring fails to conform to elite social expectations, medieval society is prepared to allege contamination in the succession." Alcuin Blamires, "The Twin Demons of Aristocratic Society in *Sir Gowther*," In *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England: Essays in Popular Romance*, ed Nicola McDonald, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 50. *Sir Gowther* and *Cheuelere Assigne* offer representative examples of women accused of infidelity with devils, men and dogs resulting in (or, as in the case of *Cheuelere Assigne*, the women are framed to make it look as if their misbehavior has resulted) in deformed, demonic, or bestial children. The flip side of this ideology, or course, is that a lost heir, even one raised in mean

conflation of maternal transmission and infidelity and illegitimate offspring by the punishment she allots Constance and Maurice through a forged letter supposedly from Alla: exposure at sea with in a rudderless boat. As Helen Cooper notes, “Most English stories of women in open boats have them cast adrift as a consequence . . . of real or supposed sexual misdemeanors, along with the baby born as a result of those.”⁵⁸ By proposing that Constance has given birth to a child that embodies starkly his mother’s radical difference from her husband, Donegild suggests that Maurice functions only as Constance’s child and thus is just as illegitimate for carrying his mother’s bloodline as he would be if he were carrying her lover’s.⁵⁹ Donegild thus sets up a case that Constance’s child can only be Constance’s—the monstrosity proves which bloodline the child has received in conception, and the assumption is that the child can manifest only one. In fact, it is only through the child’s appearance, she suggests, that we can find revealed the true hidden nature of the mother undisguised by an evil spirit’s glamour.

If Donegild’s intention is to motivate her son to set his foreign wife aside, as seems likely, she is soon disappointed; while Alla does not reject the logic his mother sets forth in her letter, he suggests in his response that the case might not be hopeless, while explicitly acknowledging the dynastic implications of Donegild’s slander:

“Kepeth this child, al be it foul or feir,
And eek my wyf, unto myn hom-comynge.
Crist, whan hym list, may sende me an heir
Moore agreable than this to my likynge.” (764-7)

circumstances, will show his true breeding through physical markers or effortless conformity to social norms relating to his or her true birth status. For examples of this sort of resolution, see *Octavian*, *Havelok the Dane*, and *Lai le Freine*.

⁵⁸ Cooper, 116.

⁵⁹ One is reminded here of the stereotypical discussion between spouses concerning a misbehaving or at fault child or pet: “Well, s/he’s your son/daughter/dog.”

Like his mother, Alla recognizes a link between the status of mother and child, as well as the problems such a linkage might pose in terms of the child's eligibility to succeed his father. At the same time, however, he suggests that Christ might intervene in the future to ensure the production of a more viable heir for Northumberland. While Donegild's solution to the problem of a mother's influence over an heir parallels the one suggested by Walter's temporary setting-aside of Griselda for a more noble wife, Alla rejects such a solution, relying on divine providence to supply an heir despite catastrophic maternal transmission. Ironically, however, despite Maurice's non-monstrous status, his extraordinary likeness to his mother does in fact directly result in the loss of an heir for Northumberland, as Maurice becomes his maternal grandfather's heir by papal decree.

While Donegild's accusation against Constance as a monster who produces monstrous children is of course false, Maurice's remarkable resemblance to his mother reinforces the idea of maternal transmission. Chaucer describes Maurice as "lyk unto Custance/ As possible is a creature to be" (1030-31). In fact Maurice resembles his mother to such a degree that the first thing his father and grandfather can think of when they first meet him as an unknown child is Constance. Confronted as he believes by a "fantome" of his mind, Alla nearly flees from the table at which he first meets his son, so striking is the resemblance between mother and child (1037). The sight of Maurice likewise affects the Emperor of Rome, Constance's father looking "bisily/ Upon this child, and on his doghter thoghte" (1095-6). Chaucer suggests that Donegild's accusation of lineal displacement might not have been entirely unfounded. The first piece of information Alla receives about his son when he asks after the child who resembles his wife is uncannily apt; having asked who the child is, his host replies that he does not

truly know, for “A mooder he hath, but fader hath he noon” (1020). The striking resemblance between mother and son effectively marks Constance rather than Alla as the dominant source of lineal transmission, and in such a way that no one who sees them apart or together can deny their relation and its mark upon Maurice. For all intents and purposes, Maurice *is* a fatherless child, and the swift demise of his father and Maurice’s status as heir to Rome rather than Northumberland privileges his connection to his mother’s bloodline, rather than his father’s.

A comparison with a close cognate of *The Man of Law’s Tale* helps to foreground the prevalence of the question of unitary maternal transmission in this narrative. The nearly contemporary Middle English Breton lay, *Emaré*, which Maldwyn Mills has called a “first cousin” of Chaucer’s tale, repeatedly associates the child Segramour, *Emaré*’s double of Maurice, with images of hybridity, and the visible coexistence of multiple bloodlines.⁶⁰ For example, the description that *Emaré*’s mother-in-law uses to slander Segramour imagines the infant as a monstrous figure of multiplicity. In her letter to her absent son, she claims the “qwene had born a devyll;/ Durste no mon come her hende;/ Thre heddes hadde he there —/ A lyon, a dragon, and a beere —/ A fowll, feltred fende” (536-40).⁶¹ Later, this nightmare of miscegenation is replaced by a more harmonious image of the true child, one who gracefully manifests evidence of his biological inheritance from two royal lines. The poem describes Segramour as “A fayr chyld borne, and a godelé;/ [who] Hadde a dowbyll kynges marke” (503-4). The poem’s inclusion of an identifying mark of a potentially illegitimate heir offers proof to the audience and to

⁶⁰ Maldwyn Mills, “Introduction,” in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1992), xiii.

⁶¹ All citations from *Emaré* are taken from the edition found in *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Thomas C. Rumble, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press), 1965.

his estranged father and grandfather that their bloodlines indisputably inhere in the child. Romances which feature lost heirs frequently include such markers of true identity and worth, for, as Helen Cooper has noted, the question of proper succession is too critical to take on trust alone:

A disputed succession calls for some sign by which the rightful king can be known, whether by magic, miracle, or some recognizable natural or material proof. Its precise metaphysical status matters less than its signification: it must be a sign visibly and demonstrably beyond everyday experience, such as raises the man who bears the mark of it beyond the common run of humanity.⁶²

Segramour's "double king's mark," apparently a stylized birth mark, attests to his link to both maternal and paternal bloodlines, and the mark on his body specifically denotes social and political status, rather than specific personal links to either parent. By contrast, the *Man of Law's Tale* marks Maurice more specifically through his close correlation to his mother, a relationship so close as to be described by Geraldine Heng as an "imagined co-identity" between mother and son.⁶³ If Segramour's body points back to both his mother's and father's lineages, Maurice's appearance stands as a constant reminder of his inheritance from his mother's side, a biological inheritance later doubled by his inheritance of the Roman Empire. No birthmark or other evidence marks Alla's contribution, and indeed, Maurice apparently receives no mentioned inheritance from his father upon his death. Maurice, according to strict patrilineal primogeniture, should inherit Northumberland, but in a pinch, Rome will accept him as their heir and the Pope will ratify him as the recognizable product of his mother's bloodline.

Within England, Maurice's visible biological connection to his mother makes his inheritance of Rome ostensibly through his mother's birthright intelligible as it accords to

⁶² Cooper, 324.

⁶³ Heng, 204.

some extent with common law practice in the case of landowning families who lacked male heirs yet had produced daughters, as discussed above. However, the legal explanation for the transmission of inheritance rights through daughters in the absence of sons was equivocal at best in its assertion that women might transmit bloodlines truly.

As J.C Holt explains,

Inheritance in the female line was determined by these circumstances. A woman inherited not because of any title . . . but because, in the absence of male heirs in the same generation, she was the only means of continuing the lineage, the only legitimate route whereby her father's blood could be transmitted. Her children were his grandchildren just as her brother's might have been. This determined the woman's position as heir. If there were legitimate male heirs to her father then she could not expect to succeed. If there were no male heirs then the inheritance was 'hers' in the sense that it was no one else's, that the claim which she embodied was stronger than anyone else's. But it was not hers in the sense that she could succeed as a spinster. She brought her lands to her husband and ultimately to her children. Her husband had charge of them and he might be followed by her son even in her lifetime.⁶⁴

If English common law recognized a woman's ability to transmit paternal blood, the inherited blood did not entitle her to any property or rank in her own right. Instead, the law defined her lineal status as the vessel through which her children might inherit her father's blood. The law only recognized the potential of maternal transmission in cases of dire genealogical need, when no males of the patriline remained to pass their bloodline on to sons of their own. Even in this exigency, the potential for maternal transmission, while legally recognized, was often seen as a familial catastrophe, as Riddy notes.⁶⁵

Many understood the marriage of an heiress as the transfer of the patrimony to another patriline, thus obliterating the continuity of the heiress's own bloodline. Of course, one family's loss in this case would mark another family's gain. In fact, marriage to a

⁶⁴ Holt, 247.

⁶⁵ Felicity Riddy, "Middle English Romance: Family, Romance, Intimacy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L Krueger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245.

brotherless heiress remained one of the few means by which a man could drastically improve social and financial standing throughout the High and Late Middle Ages.⁶⁶ Constance's superior imperial bloodline also ostensibly helps to explain the transfer of Maurice as the heir to Rome rather than to Northumberland, as in England, a man of lower descent who married an heiress would often see his sons go on to take the family names and regalia of his wife's more prestigious family, rather than his own.⁶⁷ In this context, Maurice's status as his maternal grandfather's heir, rather than his father's, would have some precedent to a contemporary audience. The utter disappearance of Maurice's legacy from his father (no mention at all is made of the disposition of Northumberland after Alla's death), however, seems less explicable, and creates a situation where Rome's gain of an imperial scion robs Northumberland of its only direct heir. The tale's implicit understanding that Maurice can function either as his mother's or his father's son and therefore heir, but not as both maintains the underlying logic throughout the narrative that a child can only manifest or embody one line at a time adequately.

In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer suggests that Maurice's self-evident manifestation of Constance's bloodline in his resemblance to his mother justifies the cooptation of Alla's son into his wife's bloodline, handily solving the apparent dynastic crisis of Rome, if not that of Northumberland. The brief reunion of Alla and Constance results in a year-long sojourn for husband and wife in Northumberland, despite

⁶⁶ Cooper, 223. Cooper further notes that in England, twenty-one peerages were passed through heiresses to their husband between 1439 and 1504 (n. 474). Focusing on the century before the Black Death, Payling notes the relative prevalence of transmission of titles and property through heiresses in England: For example of the 192 known or probable baronies in existence in 1200, 57 per cent had passed through the female line at least once by the end of the reign of Edward II as against 32 per cent that had passed entirely through the male line (the remaining 11 per cent had been alienated, sold, or forfeit):" Payling, 56.

⁶⁷ Crouch, 10.

Constance's stated desire to be sent "namoore into noon hethenesse," a category to which Northumberland seems to be consigned, despite its recent Christianization (1112). In light of Constance's feelings, the return to Rome makes a certain amount of sense, from a purely emotional standpoint. Maurice is made Emperor of Rome by the Pope, and Constance and her father reunite until the Emperor's death. However, the characterization of the reconstituted family in Rome, consisting of the Emperor, Constance, and Maurice, problematizes the reunion and Maurice's ascension by simultaneously re-imagining Maurice's nuclear family and thus lineal history. This closing has been the focus of much critical attention as it seems to point back to the Man of Law's diatribe against stories about incest in the *Tale's* prologue. Chaucer describes Constance's final reunion with her father in Rome, as Carolyn Dinshaw has noted, in terms which closely echo those of contemporary wedding vows; they "lyven alle, and nevere asonder wened;/ Til deeth departed hem" (1157-8).⁶⁸ The apparent absence of Constance's beloved mother allows the restoration of a primary nuclear family made up of a father, mother and child: Emperor, Constance and Maurice. In any case, Maurice's status as the Emperor's heir renders him the functional son of the Emperor. Various critics have been quick to point out that a large proportion of the cognate narratives to the *Man of Law's Tale*, including Emaré, begin with the flight of an only daughter from her father's incestuous advances.⁶⁹ Dinshaw has suggested that the Man of Law's position as a practitioner of family law implicates him in patriarchy's need to suppress narratives of incest, even when they are

⁶⁸ Dinshaw, 102.

⁶⁹ Dinshaw, 100; Ruth Barrie Straus, "Reframing the Violence of the Father: Reverse Oedipal Fantasies in Chaucer's Clerk's, Man of Law's, and Prioress's Tales," in *Domestic Violence in Medieval Texts*, ed. Eve Salisbury, Georgiana Donavin, and Merrall Llewelyn Price, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 134.

“there for the telling.”⁷⁰ I would suggest that the Man of Law’s formation of a structurally incestuous family unit at the conclusion of this narrative works to suppress a potentially even more subversive narrative of maternal inheritance.

In making this argument, I do not suggest that the romance suggests any literal incest between Constance and her father, nor, as Dinshaw suggests, that the Man of Law’s initial diatribe against incest and subsequent telling of a Tale recognizably structured by incest represents an attempt to suppress a narrative anathema to patriarchal discourse.⁷¹ Rather, I would suggest that Chaucer deliberately stages an inadequate attempt by a representative of patriarchal family and inheritance law to obscure maternal transmission as specifically maternal transmission and not paternal transmission by proxy. In the fantasy of lineage that the final domestic arrangements of the Emperor, Constance and Maurice enacts, the Man of Law subtly asserts a model that allows us to imagine Constance as the empty vessel through which her father’s bloodline is transmitted unadulterated to her son, much as in the paternal incestuous fantasy Walter stages in his mock marriage to his daughter. Yet the reconfigured family presented at the end of the *Man of Law’s Tale* serves as a flimsy screen for the dominant influence of Constance on Maurice, which seems to point to Constance, rather than her father, as the point of origin and influence. Maurice, it must be remembered, resembles Constance, rather than his grandfather.⁷² When the emperor himself sees Maurice, he is immediately reminded of his daughter, and not his shaving mirror. The Man of Law never describes

⁷⁰ Dinshaw, 95.

⁷¹ Dinshaw, 95.

⁷² Gail Ashton points out a similar logical problem for a claim of autonomous male self-replication, in this case, on Alla’s part: “What Alla sees, then, when he looks upon the boy for the first time, is his wife’s image, not his own; patriarchy is patently *not* perpetuated in his own image,” See Gail Ashton, “Her Father’s Daughter: the Realignment of Father-Daughter Kinship in Three Romance Tales,” *Chaucer Review* 34(2000): 422.

Constance in terms which compare her to her father, or suggest any kind of clear resemblance, and so the imprint of her image upon Maurice begs the question of what exactly has been passed on to Constance's son, and how confidently one could assume that an unadulterated paternal bloodline has indeed been transmitted to Maurice. The tale's repeated insistence upon transmission of a single bloodline, in the absence of a resemblance to the Emperor, leaves open an implicit possibility that the bloodline Constance passes to her son originated in *her* mother, a proposition anathema to the patriarchal ideology underpinning patrilineal primogeniture. In such a scenario, a scene of structural incest, Chaucer suggests, might be preferable to representatives of patriarchal family law. Chaucer reveals the Man of Law, in his panicked pursuit of parental replication and his utter rejection of the prospect of miscegeny, to resemble his murdered villainess, Donegild.

In both the *Clerk's* and the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer examines the consequences of the logic of inheritance law which depends on the idea of lineal transmission of bloodlines, associated primarily with men. In each, Chaucer suggests that the ideological investment in the singular complete transmission of one parent's bloodline proves problematic, as it encourages an understanding of parental transmission as entirely competitive, where a child's total embodiment of one parent's bloodline necessitates the total absence of the other parent's bloodline. Of course, this is the implicit claim underlying the preferred mode of inheritance transmission in the late Middle Ages in both England and France, patrilineal primogeniture. However, Chaucer's narratives critique the consequences of this claim, both for individual women, who become othered and ostracized for their potential contamination of their husband's

bloodlines, and for the genealogical project of reproduction itself. In both narratives, Chaucer suggests that attempts to avoid lineal contamination lead to incest and disinheritance, undermining the class and social stability that the ideology of lineal transmission promises.

Maternal Generation:
The Middle English *Melusine* and the Collapse of Genealogy¹

Throughout the Middle English *Melusine*, there is a repeated disconnect between primogeniture and the transmission of property, particularly in the form of land inheritance. *Melusine* is a Middle English translation of the late fourteenth-century French *Roman de Mélusine* chronicling the origin of the “noble lynce which issued of” Melusine, a fairy (1.11-12). While there is a well-established tendency in chivalric romance to represent and privilege the desire of unlanded young noblemen to establish a patrimony by marrying an heiress, in *Melusine*, this pattern is more complicated. As patrimonies frequently are created from nothing, lost, reclaimed, then rejected, the genealogy most scrutinized in the romance is associated most clearly not with a founding father, but rather with a supernatural founding mother, Melusine the fairy. While patrilineal dynasty is valued and espoused repeatedly by key characters in the romance, it consistently is revealed to be fragile and vulnerable to a gamut of potential threats, including parental whim or madness, political machinations and usurpations, reproductive failures including sterility or unsuitable heirs (such as daughters and physical and moral monsters), battle, and accident. At the same time, the romance repeatedly associates genealogical identification, biological inheritance and property acquisition and transmission with women in general and Melusine in particular. Melusine acts as a founding mother of the territory and line of Lusignan, and her appearance at moments of transition of this line punctuates her relationship to it even as

¹ The Middle English *Melusine* is found in a unique manuscript, British Museum Royal 18.B.2. It is a prose romance ca. 1500. This prose translation corresponds closely to the French prose *Melusine* composed around 1387 by Jean D’Arras and printed at Geneva in 1478. All citations are from *Melusine*, ed. A.K Donald *Octovian* EETS e.s. 68. (New York: Scribner & Co., 1986). There is a brief plot synopsis of this complicated and under-examined romance provided at the end of the chapter.

her monstrous form distances her from her legacy. The focus on the mother is accompanied by an insistent emphasis upon the monstrous nature of maternity, maternal figures, and maternal biological inheritance.

Melusine's repeated dismantling of the patrilineal ideal and substitution of a matrilineal, albeit monstrous, alternative suggests the ideological strain brought upon the system of patrilineal primogeniture in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a period in which England suffered what has been called a "crisis in male succession."² McFarlane points out that only three of seventeen English earldoms in 1400 had remained in the same family for more than a century, and well over half had transferred between families within the past half century.³ From the early thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth century, about ten per cent of male landowners in England left their daughters (or their daughters' offspring) as their heirs, while around seventy-two percent passed their property to their sons, or to their sons' sons.⁴ However, the demographic devastation of the Black Death caused these proportions to shift significantly as in the last half of the fourteenth century, "the proportion of landholders leaving sons fell to 57 per cent; leaving daughters rose to 15 per cent; but leaving no children rose to as much as 29 per cent."⁵ During the worst decade of this "crisis," 1370-80, "fewer than half of landowning families produced sons" who survived long enough to become heirs.⁶ This "crisis"

² Felicity Riddy, "Middle English Romance: Family, Marriage, Intimacy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 245.

³ K. B. McFarlane, *Nobility of Later England*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 143.

⁴ S.J. Payling, "Social Mobility, Demographic Change, and Landed Society in Late Medieval England," *Economic History Review* 45 (1992): 54.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Riddy, 245. Helen Cooper notes that between the years of 1439 and 1504, twenty-one English peerages were transmitted to a new patriline through the marriage of an heiress. See Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), n. 474.

resulted in anxious questioning about the connections between identity, property and genealogy, accompanied by a refusal to overtly acknowledge that the system of patrilineal primogeniture was faltering, even collapsing. *Melusine* insists on a final stability of identification maintained and represented by constant contact with the monstrous point of origin, but accompanied by inevitable instability in the continuation of a line. This instability comes about, the romance suggests, not through biological gaps or inadequacies, though they abound in the narrative. Rather, it is the public revelation of maternal contribution to generation which topples what is perhaps the only functioning bloodline in the romance. *Melusine* thus is a genealogical romance which suggests the challenges to genealogy and its representation. It suggests that the most threatening challenge to patrilineal primogeniture, is not in fact the fully articulated gaps and excesses that biological reproduction imposes on a relatively strict genealogical imperative, but rather the acknowledgement that women are not only the vessels of, but also contributors to, lineal reproduction.

Melusine opens with two scenes of familial transgression related to the question of what should or should not be witnessed or acknowledged in the origins and reproduction of a family. Upon marrying the fairy Pressine, Elynas, king of Albania, makes a soon-broken promise never to look upon his wife while she is in childbed. His promise resonates with the practices of gendered secrecy and enclosure surrounding childbirth, especially aristocratic childbirth in the Middle Ages, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. These practices construct the site of childbirth, from which men were excluded, as a site of secrecy and the marvelous.⁷ At the same time, the lying-in room is virtually defined by its status as a site where witnessing by men is absolutely

⁷ For a more lengthy description of these practices, please see the first chapter of this dissertation.

prohibited, as much for the protection of men and their interests as for the modesty of the women inside. However, the logic that is set up in the romance's descriptions of fairy interventions in the lives of mortal men gives Elynas's intrusion another context: that of monstrous fairy revelation. In the first chapter of *Melusine*, other stories of fairies, attributed to "Gervaise" (probably Gervaise of Tilbury), describe how "the sayd fayrees toke somtyme the fourme & the fygure of fayre & yonge wymen / of whiche many men haue hadd some doughtirs, and haue to take to their wyues by meanes of some couenauntes or promysse that they made them to swere vnto them" (4). Each of the transgressions involves prohibited witnessing of some vulnerable or exposed moment in the fairies' lives, whether it be when one is naked, in childbed, or indisposed by her "time of the week," as in the case of Melusine (4-6). Peeping at these times either reveals a hybrid or serpentine body, or results in an immediate transformation into one of these forms, followed by permanent fairy decampment and ensuing remorse on the part of the abandoned husband. The parallel that is created between seeing the naked or newly delivered body with the monstrous hybrid body of Melusine at her bath suggests that on some level, nudity and childbirth are also situations where the prohibition to see marks a preexisting monstrous or fantastic identity.

Peggy McCracken associates this prohibition with the patriarchal refusal to recognize maternal contribution to bloodlines. She argues that "medieval stories about unknown maternal bloodlines and forbidden birth scenes suggest that because it challenges the rhetoric of paternal bloodties, the scene of birth is always monstrous."⁸ Although childbirth is necessary to the reproduction of patrilineal succession, it is also

⁸ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 90-91.

the moment in which the illusion of autonomous male self-reproduction is most visibly problematized. The injunction not to look can be seen as driven by the necessary denial of maternal contributions to genealogy in a strictly patrilineal system. The placement of this prohibition as the site of birth of the romance's subject, a founding mother, is a significant anomaly that signals the disruptions in genealogy that are to follow.

Elynas is punished for his transgressive glimpse of his wife not only with the loss of Pressine and her daughters, but also with his living exile and entombment fifteen years later. Melusine decides that the "falshed" perpetrated by her father upon her mother and the resultant "myserye" that she and her sisters suffer in exile must be avenged, and her sisters agree (14, 13). Melusine congratulates her sisters for being "good & lawfull to oure moder," the daughters imprison Elynas in a mountain in Northumberland, where he eventually dies (14). Melusine's invocation of a law that demands loyalty to a mother as "good & lawful" suggests that she calls upon a sense of direct descent and identification solely with her mother. Conversely, Pressine bases her outrage upon learning of her daughters' deed upon her understanding of them as "euyl herted doghters," who refuse to recognize their relationship to their father, "he that begat you on my body" (14). In this case, transgression is marked as refusing to see the connection to the father, to identifying wholly with the maternal relation. What is good and lawful to the daughters is to avenge a wrong against themselves and their mother, whereas Pressine invokes their relation to their father as a consideration that should have stayed their vengeance. Paired with the first transgression of Elynas, this transgression and its punishment suggests a logic of genealogical looking which mimics the implicit demands of patilineage: one must look away from or refuse to acknowledge the maternal while always prioritizing the paternal.

This pair of initial transgressions thus highlight the peculiar genealogical project of *Melusine*, a romance devoted to telling the story of the founding of a great line linked not with the paternal, but with the mother, a fantastic fairy who supplies all aspects of the patrimony.⁹ However, while these transgressions and their punishment seem to endorse the patrilineal project, *Melusine* nevertheless consistently undercuts and problematizes the structures and practices of patrilineal genealogy at every turn.

Consistently, *Melusine* shows itself a genealogical romance that defaults on its promises, calling into question the stability and thus validity of genealogical discourse. The figure of the monstrous founding mother comes to represent the genealogical impulse itself, as well as its limitations. The romance frequently draws upon common medieval tropes of maternity and the dangers mothers pose in order to undermine the assumptions and desired objects of genealogical discourse. *Melusine* invokes and then undermines some of the major discourses that structured how medieval reproduction and inheritance, both biological and landed, were understood. Genealogical and biological discourses are found throughout *Melusine*, but often in ways that seem to default on the transparency and stability each of these discourses is presumed to offer.

Genealogy

As a discourse the genealogy shapes a straightforward narrative out of the often untidy fortunes and histories of particular families. According to the patrilineal system still in place in the late Middle Ages, the ideal shape of this narrative is an unbroken line, one which is narrow so as to preserve the integrity of the patrimony. The genealogy first emerged as a genre in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe as patrilineal

⁹ One is tempted to note here the very difficulty of naming a maternal inheritance. The obvious partner to patrimony would seem to be matrimony, yet that term is already taken . . .

primogeniture became the dominant mode of property inheritance. Genealogies, which originally consisted of rather spare accounts of ancestral descent were linked, according to Taylor, to “a consciousness that unambiguous transmission is essential if a patrimony is to pass freely and without dispute from father to son.”¹⁰ Genealogies, both the early dry records of marriages and parentage that emerged in the twelfth century and the more narrative genealogical myths and romances that began to appear in the thirteenth century, participate in the patriarchal and aristocratic ideology of inherited consistency between generations of lords and their sons. Taylor suggests that the ultimate purpose of the genealogical myth or romance is to identify an outstanding founder for a lineage and then to trace or demonstrate the inevitable heritability of the founder’s stellar qualities, or “heroic consistency.”¹¹ In this way, the representatives of the lineage benefit doubly: they legitimate their position by pointing back to an illustrious forbear, and they implicitly or explicitly project the qualities and virtues of that ancestor upon themselves, according to the logic of medieval notions of class identity and biological inheritance.

Patriarchal genealogies thus posit a one-to-one ratio between the lord and his son, suggesting that they are, for all intents and purposes, the same person, all the way back up the line to the founder. As Philip Barker notes, “Under the regime of primogeniture the entire future of the lineage was invested in the eldest son alone, with his claims to inheritance being centered on the legitimacy of his blood,” blood he purportedly inherited from and shared with his father.¹² Inheritance and naming practices carried over first in

¹⁰ Jane H. M. Taylor, “Melusine’s Progeny: Patterns and Perplexities,” in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, eds. Donald Maddox and Sarah Sturm-Maddox (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 169.

¹¹ Taylor, 169.

¹² Philip Barker, “The Politics of Primogeniture: Sex, Consciousness and Social Organisation in North-Western Europe (900-1250 AD), in *Feudalism: Comparative Studies*, eds. Edmund Leach, S.N. Mukherjee and John Ward (Sydney: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 97.

the Norman Conquest and later from continental connections implicitly supported this suggestion; patronymic surnames signaled one's derivation from a patriline, and the practice of basing a patronym on a place name linked to the patrimonial landholding implicitly linked patriline to property transmission.¹³ Also, first-born sons were frequently named after their fathers, creating the illusion of continuity even in the act of property transmission after a father's death.¹⁴

The practice of primogeniture, which recognizes only the eldest male heir as inheriting the patrimony, ensures that overproduction of heirs does not cause the family estate to dwindle by being portioned out between several heirs. It also preserves the illusion of singularity demanded by patrilineage. These strategies of property transmission along a singular male line privileged not only male children, but also elder children, rendering women and younger siblings superfluous and somewhat invisible in genealogical discourse. According to Barefield, the political imperative of patriarchal genealogy imposes strict requirements on family members in order to create the illusion of stable continuity which is the mark of its divine endorsement: "the son, the object of the first clause, is transformed into a new father, the subject of the next clause, and in order to meet these requirements, it must cut out or suppress other political and narrative possibilities such as multiple sons or female heirs."¹⁵ In reality, however, alternatives to the straightforward narrative of primogeniture were embodied by members of the family who represented not only alternative heirs, but also replacement heirs made necessary by the exigencies of medieval life.

¹³ J.C. Holt, *Colonial England 1066-1215*, (London: The Hambledon Press, 1997), 167.

¹⁴ Cecil R. Humphrey-Smith, *An Introduction to Medieval Genealogy. Family History* 9, vol I, (Canterbury: Northgate, 1975), 6.

¹⁵ Laura D. Barefield, *Gender and History in Medieval English Romance and Chronicle*, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), 13.

Smooth transmission of the male line from generation to generation was the naturalized ideal claimed through patrilineal discourse. However, in reality, mortality often threatened and interrupted this transmission, necessitating the production of multiple male heirs to ensure the survival of the line. This was especially true during the “crisis in male succession” suffered by England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁶ As Francis and Joseph Gies suggest, even prodigious production of heirs did not guarantee success in succession: they point out the sad case of Henry of Bourbourg, who produced twelve children who survived infancy and early childhood, seven of whom were male. The sons each not only failed to outlive their father, but also uniformly failed to produce heirs of their own to receive their grandfather’s patrimony:

Two of the sons were given to the Church; two died accidentally, one in adolescence, the other as a night. A fifth son was blinded in a tournament, an affliction that prevented him from marrying. The eldest son, the designated heir, married twice but failed to produce a son. The seventh and youngest fathered a single son who died in infancy. The inheritance consequently went to [his daughter] Beatrice, and through her marriage to Arnoul [of Andres] passed to the lords of Guines.¹⁷

This example not only gives a sense of the many sorts of impediments that might cause even a prolific bloodline to falter, such as infertility, accident, injury, or child mortality, but also the complicated position into which such realities forced patriarchs. In order to preserve the line and to ensure its continuity, a prudent father was encouraged to sire as many potential heirs as possible. However, the desire to give some sort of property to each child could then menace the patrimony’s integrity and the patriarch’s solvency.

Francis and Joseph Gies note the emerging trend in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries whereby affectionate fathers subverted inheritance laws through various legal loopholes

¹⁶ Riddy, 245.

¹⁷ Francis and Joseph Gies, *Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 191-2.

such as entail, “use,” and the bestowal of lavish gifts on sons and daughters in order to make sure that all children, not only heirs, were provided for.¹⁸ In doing so, however, these patriarchs often dispersed the patrimony largely out of existence—or at least out of the consolidated mass that assured the family’s social and political status. In doing so, such fathers risked effective dis-ennoblement within a generation or so. Bearing children, male or female, was a serious matter. Female children represented financial drains on the estate, and if they were only children, or the sole survivors upon inheritance, their marriage symbolized the migration of the family property into another man’s bloodline. Sons were desirable as they increased the line’s likelihood of survival, but they provided no guarantee of dynastic continuity, and the more sons one had, the more likelihood that, while the family line and name might survive, the patrimony might be dispersed to the point where it became almost worthless. The tension between measures taken in order to ensure the survival of the bloodline and the damage such measures might inflict upon the patrimony reveals the faultlines that existed between two constructs which, it was insisted, were identical. Line and property were not merely two aspects of the same family identity and history, but in fact were sometimes in competition with each other.

As Felicity Riddy notes, the genealogical understanding of the family as a mode of recognizing and transmitting hereditary property and privilege coexisted and sometimes clashed with the sense of the family as a group “of people living together in the ‘nuclear family household’ formation consisting of wife, husband and dependent children, whose home would also include servants and apprentices. The nuclear family, then as now, is always in process, because it comes into being with a marriage and is

¹⁸ Ibid., 188-9.

reshaped by the children's departure."¹⁹ Here, Riddy draws attention to the way that these definitions of the family inhabit or privilege different kinds of time. Social families of individuals who share a household and temporality exist in time together; they may be at different points in their life, but time itself is the vector through which the family narrative is formed by the rhythms of marriages, births, aging, household departures, deaths, and successions. By contrast, genealogical narratives imagine families as constant, the replacement of the father by the son being elided by the acquisition by the son of his father's genealogical identity, name, and title at the moment of death. The temporality of the genealogy is "always the same." Ideally, the narrative shape of genealogy is deadly dull. The genealogical romance, however, takes the ideological assumptions and desires of genealogical discourse and combines them with the diachronic temporality of the domestic family, as well as the threats to its continuity, the "crises and hiatuses of the nuclear family and the lineage."²⁰ In doing so, genealogical romance both legitimizes and confirms the value of the genealogy being described, but also destabilizes the illusion of permanence that is both the desire and product of genealogical discourse. Generally, of course, this destabilization is alleviated by the triumphant return of the lost hero and the untimely demise of the instigator of the original destabilization, as in *Havelok the Dane* and *Octavian*. Meanwhile, the unbroken parade of marriages and births recorded by the genealogy lends a sense of continuity that was often belied in experience.

From its beginning, *Melusine* announces itself as a genealogical romance, one which is explicitly concerned with the founding and history of a specific family. The

¹⁹ Riddy, 235.

²⁰ Ibid.

stated purpose of the romance is to “serche the very trouth and true historye” found in the veray & true Cronykles” received from the Duc of Berry and the Earl of Salisbury in England (1-2). It is generally accepted that Jean de Berry’s desire in commissioning the French version of the romance in the early 1390s was political in nature. Berry had captured Lusignan from the English in the 1370s, and was attempting to solidify his claim to the land and fortress through a remote family connection to the Lusignan line through a maternal cousin’s marriage to a female descendant of that line.²¹ At the same time, the English throne was working to reclaim the fortress as its own. Jean de Berry’s decision to commission *Le Roman de Mélusine* has been recognized as part of a larger strategy to solidify his shaky hold on the duchy of Berry in general and on Lusignan in particular. In this case of this late fourteenth-century redaction, the political stakes of the genealogical romance seem to be overtly utilized. However, the Middle English redaction, written at the turn of the next century, seems less explicitly linked to a specific contemporary claim on Lusignan.

The particular subject of the Middle English redaction is “how the noble ffortress or Castell of Lusygngen was bylded & made of a woman of the fayree . . .” and “the noble

²¹ Donald Maddox, “Configuring the Epilogue: Ending and the Ends of Fiction in the Roman de Mélusine,” in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, eds. Donald Maddox and Sarah Sturm-Maddox. (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 277. For more detailed treatments of Jean de Berry’s claim on Lusignan and Poitou, as well as the conditions of *Le Roman de Mélusine*’s production, see also Taylor, “Melusine’s Progeny,” 166, Tania Colwell, “Mélusine: Ideal Mother or Inimitable Monster?” in *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages*, eds. Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller, & Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols: 2003), 181. It is interesting to note Berry’s attempt to use the genealogical romance strategically, while ignoring the genealogical logic presented by the romance. In the French version, it is said that only a direct descendant of the Lusignan line through either mother or father would be able to hold the fortress in stability. Loose familial connection notwithstanding, Jean de Berry could not possibly claim that distinction. The relationship between genealogies and genealogical romance sometimes made these frictions between expedient claims of illustrious descent and more mundane authoritative genealogical documents evident. Fortuitous “discoveries” might of course lead to revisions, or the uncooperative genealogy might later be supplanted by a more advantageous genealogy or genealogical romance.

line whiche yssued of the said woman/ that shall regne for euer vnto the end of the world” (2). This introduction posits Melusine, the fairy in question, as the fantastic originary point for both the castle and the line of Lusignan. The stable continuity of that line from that distant past until “the end of the world” suggests the fantastic promise of genealogical narratives, that of unbroken lineal survival, not only from days past, but also into the foreseeable future—and beyond. The next gestures of the romance, however, suggest a considerably more bumpy journey as the romance breaks away from its promised agenda twice—first to Melusine’s past before her establishment of the Lusignan line, and then on to a premature listing of Melusine’s immediate heirs, her sons.

Though the romance states that its subject is the founding of Lusignan by Melusine, there is a swift admission of the impossibility of actually starting the narrative there. Instead, the romance moves beyond the “beginning,” to Melusine’s history, “how & of whens cam the said woman whiche bilded the noble ffortress of Lusygne, beforsayd” (6). *Melusine*’s immediate impulse to move past the originary point seems to recognize the problematic nature of starting a story, particularly one invested in identifying a founder of a line; something has always gone before. Melusine’s designation as “a woman of the fayree” might offer an ahistorical, non-linear point from which to create a lineage fully formed, but this gesture is soon undermined by the move to describe in turn her own parentage, and its ramifications for her descendants. The problem founding mothers or fathers pose seems to be that they had to come from *somewhere*, fantastic origin notwithstanding. Immediately, the narrative breaks away from the promised history of Melusine, and skips forward to a list of Melusine’s reproductive triumphs whereby she founds an entire generation of noble lords and kings:

Herafter folowen the names of the estates of the children whiche yssued of Melusyne, and were bygoten of Raymondyn in wedlok. And first yssued kyng Uryan, whiche regned in Cypre. Aftir hym cam King Guyon, which regned myghtily in Armenye. Item, King Regnald, whiche regned right mightily in Behaygne. Item, Anthony that was duc of Lucembourgh. Item, Raymond that was Erle of fforest. Item, Geffray with the grette toth, that was lord of Lusygnen. Item, there yssued also theodoryk, which was lord of Partenay. Item, ffroymonde, that was monk into thabbey of Mailleses, the which Geffray with the grette toth brent the said Abbey, & thabbot also with an hundred religyous or monkes. (6)

This description, however, poses several difficulties in terms of genealogical narrative.

While *Melusine* purports to be a narrative about lineal continuity, instead, what is described here is an expansive list of horizontal, rather than vertical generation. While one might expect a chronological list of “begats,” what emerges instead is a more complicated list of immediate descendants who do not represent a line, but a scattered dispersion of heirs throughout Christendom and the contested lands of the East. In addition, the heir to Lusignan is listed as the sixth son of Melusine, rather than the first, which would be expected due to the system of primogeniture. One can assume that brothers one (Urian) through five (Raymond) all survived the death of their father Raymondin, as they each “regned,” even “right mightily” in other lands.

Even more problematic, however, is the way with which this catalogue ends in the description of a fratricide between the direct heir of Melusine’s castle, Geoffrey of the Great Tooth, and his brother, the monk Froymond. This unexpected ending to the list, with the most descriptive passage detailing a self-destructive impulse within Melusine’s direct line sounds a troubling note in an already disturbing representation of allegedly ideal genealogy. This violent close also truncates Melusine’s genealogy, rendering it incomplete at the first remove from its legendary foundress. Melusine, it is revealed later in the romance, had not eight, but *ten* sons. According to a later list of Melusine’s

children, which is presented during the description of her married years, this first list has omitted Melusine's second and third sons, Edon (or Odon) and Horrible, her tenth and apparently last, child according to this accounting. This second list already presents a challenge to the apparent completeness of the romance's treatment of Melusine's descendents. However, another problem, one of precedence, arises when one compares the lists of progeny provided at different points in the romance, as displayed in the figure below:

6.1.19-32

1. Uryan
2. Guyon
3. Regnald
4. Anthony
5. Raymond
6. Geffray
7. Theodoryk
8. Ffroymond

101-105.19

1. Uryan
2. Edon
3. Guyon
4. Anthony
5. Raynald
6. Geffray
7. Froymond
8. unnamed
9. unnamed
10. Horrible

At these two points in the text, the order of children is shuffled around, and different children are conflated or drop out of the rolls altogether. For example, while Horrible is listed as Melusine's tenth son in chapter 9 of the romance, in chapter 45, Melusine explicitly names Theodoric as her youngest child, despite his having been listed in chapter 1 as preceding not only Horrible, who is in fact not named in the list, but also Froymond, who is listed seventh in chapter 45 and eighth in chapter 1.²² One might

²² Below is an attempt by the romance's 19th century editor, A.K. Donald, to make sense of the discrepancies (without acknowledging them) by making a composite list (378).

1. Urian
2. Odon
3. Guion
4. Anthony
5. Regnald
6. Geoffray

perhaps excuse the excision of the aptly named Horrible from the list of Melusine's children since she herself orders his death. However, the disappearances of Edon, from the first list, and of Raymond and Theodoric, from the second, are puzzling, as are the numerous changes in birth order of the elder brothers. Ordinal numbers are used in the list found in chapter 19, whereas unspecified relative sequential markers such as "first," "after him," and "item" govern the list from chapter 1 as seen above in the extensive quotation. Each list appears to offer an account of birth order, which is imperative in deciding upon an heir, but within the first list, this justification is undermined not only by the instability of order, but also by the iteration of the lands that each son later rules. The disconnect between the inheritance of the patrimony of Lusignan and their birth order is jarring. In the account of Melusine's childbearing which occurs in Chapter 19, the children are described explicitly by ordinal numbers, and years of birth (measured against the number of years of marriage). However, despite the greater specificity and apparent care that is taken to record the conditions of each child's birth against internal and external marks of time and precedence, two children still drop out and questions of property acquisition or inheritance drop out altogether. Instead, each child is identified in terms of the unique deformity that he is born with. In terms of primogeniture, this instability represents a major crime of genealogical transgression, as descendants are rearranged, removed, and reappear within the narrative, and their order of birth becomes

7. Froimond
 8. Horrible
 9. Raymond
 10. Theodoryk

irreconcilably confused and detached from the transmission of inherited property, despite the typically simplifying impulse of genealogy.

After the brief rundown of Melusine's sons, the romance returns to the promised history of Melusine, but makes another short detour into an alternate genealogy, that of Melusine's father, King Elynas, a genealogy which implicitly excludes her. The Scottish king, the romance states, "had of his wyf many children & that Mathas whiche was fader to fflorymond was hys first sone" (6-7). This sketchy genealogy describes the first family of Elynas, the children of his first, nameless wife, and a gesture towards the next generation, represented by Fflorymond, prognitor of Alexander the Great and well-represented in romances himself. In many ways, this example of genealogy seems much more typical of patrilineal discourse; wives and daughters drop out unnamed as non-essential, as do younger sons who do not inherit or enhance the patrimony. At the same time, the knowledge that the story about to be told is not about the transmission of Elynas's kingdom to or through Melusine effects a sort of conscious turning away from the usual object of strictly smooth patrilineal genealogy. One might expect that Melusine herself is one of these unnamed "many children" of Elynas's first wife, but this is not the case; Melusine is the product of Elynas's second marriage to the fairy Pressine, and therefore completely excluded from the genealogy used to introduce her father to the story. Ironically, Melusine's paternal genealogy, usually the object of patriarchal genealogical discourse, is shunted off to the category of a false start, a shelved status usually reserved for maternal genealogies. While Elynas's legacy is reintroduced at the end of the romance, it does so in a considerably diminished way.

Patrilineal gaps and excesses

In its repeatedly enacted difficulty in introducing Melusine's own narrative, *Melusine* draws attention to the inadequacies or gaps in genealogical discourse as its ideological purpose elides the shape of real families. While the scenes of transgression and punishment at the beginning of the romance enact the dictates of patrilineal discourse, much of the rest of the romance is concerned with the sorts of narratives that such imperatives deny or prohibit. Quite strikingly, patrilineal inheritance is consistently subverted or rejected throughout the romance. If a major purpose of the genealogical narrative is to validate and trace the transmission of property from ideal father to ideal son, *Melusine* disrupts this narrative repeatedly. Patrilineal inheritance is often elided, thwarted, and even rejected outright in this romance. Because of his excessive grief over the loss of Pressine and his three daughters, Melusine's father is actually deposed by his people, through the influence of his conniving son (12). In this case, Elynas's son inherits, but he does so before the death of his father, creating a sense of doubling in the signifying position of the father. Even after his living entombment at the hand of Melusine, Elynas lives on, expelled from both land and lineage. Neither father nor son is represented as ideal, and the transition of identity and property occurs prematurely, rupturing the smooth transition between ideally identical signifiers of lineal identity and authority.

Melusine repeatedly refuses to validate the familiar narrative in genealogical romances of the restoration of a threatened or obscured name, lineal position and accompanying patrimonial property. Raymondin grows up completely unaware of his paternal heritage and patrimony, and when he does learn of it, he travels to Britain to

clear his father's name, but then gives up his father's lands, handing them almost casually over to his paternal cousins before he returns to the patrimony Melusine has created for their line. The impetus for Melusine's revelation of Raymondin's past appears to be the birth of their first child, Uryan, suggesting that Melusine desires the patrilineal privilege to be reasserted for the next generation, yet the romance thwarts this reasonable expectation without explanation or justification, as Raymondin inexplicably abandons his newly-regained patrimony to his British cousin to resume his residence at Lusignan. Later in the romance, when Geoffrey finds the tomb of his maternal grandfather, Elynas, and learns the full narrative of his lost grandfather, he does so without recognizing his own connection to this patriarch. When he returns to Lusignan, and learns both of his mother's departure, and of her paternity, the revelation is decidedly anticlimatic: "And by this he knew that he and his brethern were come of the same lyncage; wherof he thought hym self the better, but this not with standing he was ryght sorowfull of the departyng of hys moder, & of the heuynes of hys fader" (331). Reclamation of lineal descent does not result in a change of identity or of property, particularly in this case, due to the superfluity of Melusine's lost branch in her father's family tree. Even the knowledge of such a lofty connection to the line which produced Alexander the Great is not sufficient to compensate for the physical loss of Geoffrey's mother.

If paternity seems to have lost some of its mystique in this romance, viable sons also represent a significant lack in *Melusine*, as they are decidedly scarce on the ground. Sonlessness seems epidemic in *Melusine*, Melusine's exclusively male brood notwithstanding. The heir to Britain that Henry (Raymondin's father) kills in the ambush is not the son, but the nephew of the King of Britain, suggesting that no such son exists.

Melusine's children, one by one, voluntarily reject the patrimony and set out to make their own fortunes. The success of Melusine's sons outside of Lusignan is largely dependent on the apparently universal lack of virile male heirs to defend the vulnerable Christian lands of the Near East. Marriage and martial prowess repeatedly are emphasized as paths to acquiring lands, lands that have, until this point, been linked to lineages that have now dwindled despite patrilineal genealogical ideology. Parricides, deliberate and accidental, abound in this tale, from Melusine's attack on her father to Raymondin's accidental killing of his uncle. In a final dismantling of the power of patrilineage, Geoffrey discovers the truth of Melusine's paternal heritage when he finds his maternal grandfather's prison. However, this revelation does not lead to a new inheritance or position for Melusine's sons, only subdued celebration in the knowledge of a hitherto-unknown relation. *Melusine* repeatedly insists on disrupting expectations of genealogy, thwarting and interrupting smooth transitions within the bloodline in order to feature narratives that undermine the structure and expectations of patrilineal genealogy.

A major example of *Melusine*'s foregrounding of narratives that disrupt genealogical imperatives is in the romance's recurrent concern with the problem of surplus heirs and the strain they put on the patrimony. This issue first emerges when Uryan and Guyon, Melusine's eldest and third sons, leave the family in part to protect the limited patrimony from the potential ravages of their numerous brothers. Upon the return of two Lusignian knights from Jerusalem, Uryan and Guyon learn of the distress of the Christian king of Cyprus, who is besieged by the Sultan of Damascus, and who, importantly "had to hys heyre but only a doughter, whiche was moche fayre" (105). Uryan then suggests to Guyon that "it were grete almese to socoure that kyng ayenst the

Paynemys" (106). While the language of this declaration suggests that Uryan's motive is Christian solidarity, his subsequent remarks suggest that even the claims of Christian community are secondary, if complementary, to the demands of genealogical continuity: "We ben al redy eyght bretherne. the land of our fader may not remayne without heyre, though we were bothe deede" (106). The need for an heir, already made clear by the juxtaposition of the unfortunate king of Cyprus, who has "but only a daughter" to succeed him, with the abundant superfluity of Melusine's heirs, takes priority over the imperative that Christian aid Christian. The excess of eligible heirs to Lusignan makes possible, even necessary, the departure of some of these heirs, who will, in time, prove the best defense of the heir-deficient Christian East against pagan conquest. When Uryan and Guyon approach their mother for permission to aid the Christian king of Cyprus, they again give priority to the concerns of the patrimony over the ideal of Christian solidarity. Uryan specifically addresses the potential damage the multitude of heirs might do to Lusignan's holdings. After suggesting that it is high time that he and Guyon journey to learn more of the world and to acquire personal honors, Uryan returns to the important problem of land acquisition:

Also yf fortune and good auenture wyl be propyce & conuenable to vs, we haue wel the wyll & courage to subdue & conquere Contrees & landes; For we considere & see that alredey we be eyght bretheren / and are lyke, yf god wyl, to be yet as many moo in tyme commyng. and to say that your landes & possessions were parted in so many partes for our sustenaunce & gouvernement / he that suld enheryte the chyfe lyflod shuld not be able to kepe no grete houshold, ne to be of grete estate, to the Regard of the high blood & grete nobless that we come of / also consideryng as now your grete estate. (108)

Uryan suggests that he and his brother venture out, not just to learn about other lands, as is first suggested, but also to conquer them, thus sidestepping the problems caused by the superfluity of heirs in the Lusignan line. Uryan suggests that with eight sons already, and

a potential total of twice that number in the future, Lusignan's ability to both support all of Melusine's progeny and to preserve the power, precedence and significance of the heir to the patrimony, is stretched far beyond its present capability. This concern is voiced by a predictable character; Uryan, the eldest son, is the person one might well expect to be most concerned by the frittering away of the patrimony through reproductive attrition. However, Uryan's proposal to alleviate the burden on Lusignan himself renders this potential motive moot. In the conclusion of Uryan's speech to his mother, Uryan and Guyon both offer to disinherit themselves:

Wherefore as to my brother & I my self, we quytte our parte / except alonely your good grace, thugh thayde that ye now shall doo to us for our vyage, yf god wyl gyue vs grace to acomplysshe. (108)

Uryan and Guyon represent themselves as extraneous drains upon the patrimony, when according to primogeniture, Uryan at least ought to be the beneficiary of the unilateral logic of patrilineal inheritance. By banding with his younger brother to seek his fortune, Uryan rejects the privileges of primogeniture, choosing to acquire land in other ways; namely through either marriage or war. In doing so, he reveals a tension within genealogical ideology whereby the link between patrilineage and the patrimony is doubly severed. His rejection of the patrimony signals one sort of rejection of the privileges of primogeniture; however, his desire to acquire land that must necessarily belong to another bloodline suggests an even stronger disruption of the discourse of patrilineal genealogy. War or conquest suggests the rupture of a patriline through violent means, while land acquisition through marriage suggests the demise of a male line and the opportunistic acquisition of its patrimony through marriage to an heiress. In effect, Uryan and several of his brothers will employ both means to gain lands. Through their

martial prowess in the defense of territories whose heirs are sole daughters, Melusine's sons become attractive marital prospects for the endangered women, their fathers, and their advisors.

The disastrous potential of overproduction of heirs reemerges later in *Melusine*, when Geoffray criticizes his parents in absentia over his brother Froymond's investiture as a monk. Geoffray accuses his parents of sacrificing one of his brothers because they cannot afford to support all of their sons. He exclaims, "how deuell! had not my fader & my moder ynough for to entreteyn & kepe thestate of Froymond my broder, & hym to haue maryed some noble lady of the land / and not to haue made hym a monk" (307). Geoffray's belief that the investiture of Froymond was motivated by financial concerns is not his only, or even his primary cause of complaint at this moment. While his anger with his parents seems driven by a belief in their unfilial abandonment of their son, his greatest rage is reserved for the monks themselves, who have taken Froymond out of the genealogical system by enclosing him within a life of celibacy. By all rights, Geoffrey claims, Froymond should have gotten married and produced a family of his own. Geoffrey's concern with the continuity and preservation of noble bloodlines, and his resentment towards monasteries that remove young noblemen from marriage and reproduction is reiterated in Geoffray's declaration that he will so repay the monks of Mailleses, "that they shall neuer haue neyther lust ne talent to withdraw no noble man to be shorne monke with them" (308). Geoffray's complaint seems driven by the problem that cloistering in effect eliminates young nobles from the economy of reproduction, and therefore from lineal narrative. His response to this outrage is to make that removal

literal and permanent, burning the abbey down, with all members, including Froymond, inside.

This episode highlights some of the tensions surrounding the problem of overproduction of heirs. Geoffray suggests that overproduction of heirs beyond their means has driven his parents to “sell” one of their excess sons to the church. This, as we can see in the case of Henry of Bourbourg, was one way to ensure the livelihood of a son who was not slated to inherit land from his father. While Geoffray’s attitude towards this possibility is one of utter incredulity, it is balanced by the fact that two of his elder brothers, Uryan and Guyon, have already in effect forfeited their patrimonies in order to preserve the integrity of the estate. However, once a son has been entrusted to the church, he cannot be recalled to the reproductive branch of the family, which, in the case of the failure of the rest of the male line, might be considered a particularly cruel irony.²³ Geoffray’s concern seems focused mainly on his brother’s abdication from the aristocratic responsibility to marry and continue the line, saying that it is “an affayre of myn that toucheth me moche” but at the end of his tirade, he expands his focus to include

²³ The sense that the church in effect stole virile potential progenitors is addressed, albeit humorously in the *Canterbury Tales*, when Harry Bailly bemoans the loss of the Monk to the all-important project of generation:

I pray to God, yeve hym confusioun
That first thee broghte unto religioun!
Thou woldest han been a tredefowel aright.
Haddestow as greet a leeve as thou hast myght
To parfourne al thy lust in engendrure,
...
God yeve me sorwe, but, and I were a pope,
Nat oonly thou, but every myghty man
Though he were shorn ful hye upon his pan,
Sholde have a wyf; for al the world is lorn!
Religioun hath take up al the corn
Of tredyng, and we borel men been shrympes.” (VII 1943-56)

Later, he returns to this lament, this time eulogizing the Nun’s Priest as another “trede-foul aright” who would have need of seven times seventy “hennes” to exhaust his now-wasted virility (VII 3450-54).

all nobility; he hopes to dissuade all monasteries in the future from transforming noble men into shorn monks (308).

An overabundance of male heirs is represented as a particularly Lusignanian concern in *Melusine*. Much more typical in the world of the romance is the absence of male heirs, frequently coupled with the problematic presence of an only daughter. Daughters, particularly only daughters, present patrilineal genealogies with problematic breaks, since they do not transmit the paternal name or inheritance, except in the case of the lack of another heir. Lynda E. Boose characterizes the status of daughter in a father's family as that of "alien," a transient presence who is always expected eventually to leave the family home and name.²⁴ A daughter is problematic in that she cannot complete the seamless transition from father to son, and the only way in which such a transfer might take place is in the break between patrilineal markers— name, family coat of arms, and land inheritance— and the blood of the family that each of these markers is said both to embody and immortalize. An aristocratic daughter who has brothers poses little problem genealogically when she is absorbed into her husband's family. Her ties with her birth family are certainly not insignificant, as they function as a major part of her value in the alliance formed by marriage. However, barring extraordinary circumstances, that value is generally constructed as located specifically in the marriage alliance, and not in the later identity of her descendants. Thus, a woman might enter a new family through marriage and maternity, but her children would be seen as belonging to her husband's lineage, rather than her own. While this woman would have a role in perpetuating that

²⁴ Gail Ashton, "Her Father's Daughter: the Realignment of Father-Daughter Kinship in Three Romance Tales," *Chaucer Review* 34(2000): 417.

lineage, she would not be a part of it.²⁵ On the other hand, an only daughter transmits all the markers of her father's line—including surname, property, and heraldic markers—to her husband (or to their children), who will inherit the title of his father-in-law, preserving the appearance of consistency at the point of rupture.²⁶ Yet at this moment, her husband's apparent absorption into her father's line elides her own participation in her father's line and heritage as her husband essentially functions as if he were his father-in-law's son, whose individual identity becomes eclipsed by his role upon the death of the former lord.

Melusine highlights the problematic status of daughters in patrilineal genealogies. The narrative of Melusine's own identity as a daughter seems to follow the logic of patrilineal discourse: Melusine and her sisters (the only explicitly mentioned female children of Elynas) are extraneous to their father's lineage, superfluous children of a second marriage, tacked on after the many eligible children produced in Elynas's first marriage (6). Their stay in their father's household is so brief as to fade into insignificance. Elynas's refusal to accept the loss of his wife and daughters leads his people to the conclusion that he is insane, "assoted," and in terms of genealogy, his priorities do seem deranged or disordered (12). The alien status of daughters is carried out literally and figuratively in the text. The fairy nature of the daughters highlights their essential difference from their father and his line, and their patricidal action of confining their father in a Northumberland mountain signals their own rejection of their father and of their biological connection to him.

²⁵ John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, "Introduction: Medieval Mothering, Medieval Motherers," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, (New York: Garland, 1996), xi.

²⁶ Charlotte Bauer-Smith, "Mapping Family Lines: A Late-Fifteenth-Century Example of Genealogical Display," In *Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe*, eds. Douglas L. Biggs, Sharon D. Michalove, and A. Compton Reeves (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 130.

The stories of fairy wives and mothers attributed to “Gervaise” at the beginning of the romance also corroborate and downplay the alien status of outsider wives and their offspring. First mentioning the pranks of fairies who appear as “wymen with old face, of low and lytil stature or body” who perform servants’ tasks “without dooyng of ony harme,” the romance goes on to describe the more serious problems posed by the fairies who assumed “the fourme & the fygure of fayre & yonge wymen / of which many men haue hadd some doughtirs, and haue take to theire wyues by meanes of some couenauntes or promysse that they made them to swere vnto them” (4). This introduction juxtaposes two major categories of fairies: those who appear old and who mischievously perform the deeds of servants and then disappear, and those who perpetrate the more serious incursions into the families of noblemen. The second category suggests a more insidious threat to the mortal realm by the latter group of fairies. However, the implication that the fairy bride only produces “some doughtirs” suggests that the patrilineal bloodline is somewhat safe against the fairy other. This sense is highlighted in the example of “Sir Robert du Chestel Roussel of the prouince of Asy” who married a fairy and “grew & wexed prosperous fro day to day” until he committed the crime of seeing her naked, which he had sworn not to do (5). True to form, the affronted fairy transforms into a serpent, and Robert from that point on “wexed pouere and declyned from his prosperyte” (6). No mention of lineal consequence for the problem of misalliance is made; the influence of the fairy seems limited to financial matters—her presence increases his wealth, while her absence cancels this effect. The potential problem of the fairy daughters described in the beginning of the lesson on fairy habits never arises in this representative sample of the doom that awaits men who marry fairies. The ephemeral

role of the daughter in her father's bloodline seems to eliminate the sense of fairies as threats to the bloodline through miscegenation. Since fairy wives apparently produce only daughters, and daughters are at most temporary or invisible markers in their patriline, the fear of a tainted patriline is tentatively held at bay. Melusine, of course, problematizes this pattern because of her excessive production of sons, rather than daughters.

Medieval theories of generation corroborated the notion that a daughter only partially participated in the paternal line, and only temporarily, at that. Following the Aristotelian model of generation, medieval medical theory claimed a substantial difference between the contribution of mothers and fathers to their children, but also suggested significant social and perhaps biological differences between the significance of those contributions for male and female offspring. According to these theories, both parents contributed to the formation of the child and both contributions were composed of a type of blood. However, maternal "blood" and paternal "blood" were distinguished hierarchically, as were their respective roles in the formation of the child.²⁷ Paternal "seed," or semen, was the most highly refined type of blood, and its purpose was to shepherd or form the amorphous menstrual blood or "matter" within the mother's womb. According to Allyson Newton, the basic qualities of the mother herself were rendered meaningless in the final product of the child due to the "Aristotelian devaluation of the maternal role in reproduction: the inferiority of the mere matter to be shaped is

²⁷ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 23. The term "blood" could denote many different types of hierarchically organized body fluids, which were considered to be more or less refined. Other liquids that fell under this rubric included mother's milk, menstrual/parturition blood (the female blood of generation), as well as semen. See also McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*, especially p. 4, for discussions of biological and religious discourses on the different forms of blood and their relative values.

irrelevant, given the paramount, inherent superiority of the active, formative male principle” of the father’s organizing seed.²⁸ While the seed of the father always carries specific qualities of the father and his line, the menstrual matter of the womb acquires form, substance, and meaning only with the organization and imprint of the father’s seed or blood. Matter is imagined as inert, formless, chaotic and dangerous, while the seed is associated with order, organization, and stability. Formative influence in shaping the specific identity and shape of the child ideally rests only on the influence of the male seed. However, mothers were also seen to be able to influence the form of their unborn children, but only in problematic ways seen as deviations from the intended natural form of the child as coded in the father’s seed.²⁹ Maternal biological influence upon sons and daughters, then, is imagined as limited to deviation and deformity, rather than biological resemblance. Specific resemblance or biological continuity, can only be accomplished through the active organizing principle of the father’s seed upon his offspring.

According to the understanding of generation outlined above, when sons are born, they are not only shaped by the father’s seed, which marks them as part of the father’s blood, or bloodline; they also inherit the ability and duty to transmit that seed to another generation themselves, thereby preserving the line intact. Daughters, however, fated to be the vessel through which other lines are perpetuated, do not transmit their father’s seed

²⁸ Allyson Newton, “The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*,” in *Medieval Mothering*, eds. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), 6.

²⁹ Douglas Kelly notes that “According to folklore and legend, ancient medicine and medieval genealogy, the mother-mark comes about during pregnancy. It occurs as an effect of an unusual or extraordinary desire—the *envie de mère*—or fear that accompanies the pregnancy. The strong emotions leave a mark on the child, a mark that usually resembles the object of desire or fear. In its usual manifestation, the desire is gastronomic, and the mark is an image of the object of desire: a strawberry, an olive, a pickle. It may also express anxiety by the image of a wolf, rat, or other frightening encounter or threat” Douglas Kelly, “The Domestication of the Marvelous in the Melusine Romances,” *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, eds. Donald Maddox and Sarah Sturm-Maddox (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 39-40.

in the generation of children. As Kelly suggests, “Daughters are also the product of the father’s seed, but they do not transmit that seed.”³⁰ They therefore carry the property of the line away from the biological consistency of the paternal seed. Daughters function essentially as incomplete sons; a daughter is shaped by her father’s seed, but she cannot effect the replication of her father. Thus, a daughter cannot step into her father’s role and therefore complete the illusion of continuity as her brother can. Like her mother, she provides the amorphous matter to be shaped by the seed of another’s bloodline—that of her husband.

This logic seems to be carried out in the cases of Melusine’s sons’ advantageous marriages, which link the sonlessness of lords with martial impotence and the subsequent vulnerability of the land to women’s fungibility through marriage. Uryan acquires the hand of Ermine, the daughter and heir of the King of Cyprus by defending Cyprus from the Sultan of Damascus, whose attacks upon Cyprus are motivated by his thwarted lust for the “moch fayr doughter” of the king (121). Guyon is begged by the dying King of Armenia to marry his daughter Flory since he has no heir but her, and because of this fears the return of his lands “to the paynemes handes” (179). Likewise, Christine, the orphaned heiress of Luxembourg, is attacked by the just widowed king of Anssay when she rejects his advances because of his recent bereavement and his status as a man who has already been married (187). After his defense of Christine, Anthony is then begged by her barons to make a gift of himself by accepting *their* gift of Christine as a wife. Eglantine, heiress to Bohemia, marries Regnald after he defeats the Sultan Zelodius, and returns her land to her. In each of these cases, the lack of a male heir and the presence of

³⁰ Kelly, 42.

an unmarried daughter makes a vulnerable land available to one of the unlanded sons of Melusine's line.

Upon the heiresses' marriages to Lusignanians sons, their lands then consistently become associated not with the heiresses' bloodlines, but rather with the line of Lusignan, as evidenced in the first inventory of Melusine's brood and their accomplishments (6). This appropriating tendency in *Melusine* highlights and undermines one of the major ways for eliding the break in a patrilineal system, allowing a son-in-law to become in effect his father's son through the transition of title from father-in-law to son. But the persistence of Lusignan in descriptions of the new lords and kings after their marriages, despite their apparent social promotions, and the assertion that they represent the line of Lusignan makes clear the termination of those lines, if not their titles. Melusine's line superficially supplements faltering lines, but in a way that makes it impossible to ignore the demise of the previous lines, because the Lusignan connection refuses to be eclipsed or absorbed into the more prominent bloodline connected by alliance.

Felicity Riddy notes that the pattern of the vulnerable heiress who marries her unlanded protector is a common one in Middle English romance. However, she points out that while

Many Middle English romances are, like *Emaré*, about the marriages of heiresses . . . they are usually told from the perspective of the hero's lineage and not hers: the failure of the male line in her family is not seen as a disaster but as an opportunity. Failure of the male line in the hero's family is a different matter entirely and produces a different kind of story: the tragedies of descent are presented as catastrophes of sonlessness.³¹

³¹ Riddy, 245.

Melusine clearly adheres to the possibility that heiresses provide excellent opportunities to be exploited by landless sons who wish to gain property without burdening the patrimony. However, the romance's approach is more nuanced than Riddy's account might suggest. While the romance repeatedly highlights the need for Melusine's sons to acquire property through a means other than marriage, it also suggests some sense of the potential "catastrophes of sonlessness" inherent in these episodes. *Melusine* acknowledges the mobility of daughters in order to foreground not only the opportunity it provides to heroic young men in search of an adopted patrimony, but also the threat such malleability presents to a land whose fate is linked to an heiress' sexual destiny. The daughter's essential formlessness and its dire consequences are made more evident by the racial and religious otherness of the opportunistic invaders, who are described as "paynims," "Sowdanes," etc. While it is fortuitous for Lusignan's extraneous scions to happen upon unmarried Christian women whose absorption through marriage enriches not only the individual heirs of Melusine, but also the bloodline's overall prestige, the ability of these women, their lands, and their lands' identities to be absorbed into the ever-present neighboring Saracen bloodlines is revealed to be a persistent threat. When it affects a ruling family or bloodline, the tragedy of sonlessness is not only a family's concern, but an entire community's. In the case of *Melusine*, that larger community is revealed to be Christendom itself.

Melusine and the problems of the mother

Melusine makes its most outrageous interventions into patrilineal genealogical narrative in its portrayal of Melusine herself as a maternal founding figure who usurps most of the functions and roles of the patriarch. Throughout the romance, family name,

patrimony, and line all become associated with Melusine, rather than Raymondin. The romance frequently enacts Melusine's ascendancy and implicitly diverts or replaces patrilineal impulses. For example, Lusignan, both the land holding and the fortress, are created by Melusine's stratagems and supernatural power. It is Melusine's ruse that Raymondin uses to trick his cousin into giving him the land upon which Lusignan is built (39). After Melusine builds the splendid fortress through her supernatural agencies and influence, and a celebratory feast is held to inaugurate the new holding, she is asked to name the new territory because of her great power and superior "wyt" (63). When Melusine demurs, the Earl of Poitiers insists upon Melusine's authority over the fortress and its marvelous creation: "sethen ye haue so moche doon as to haue achyeued & made the moste stronge and fayre place thae aver man sawe in this Countree/ ye owe to gyue name to it your owne self aftir your playsire" (64). Melusine's then commemorates her creation of the land that will be her family's primary seat in her explicit naming of the land after her "owne name," calling it Lusignan (64). This name is also adopted as the name of the line that Melusine founds, marking not only her fortress, but her descendants and their conquests as part of her legacy, rather than Raymondin's. Family name and inheritance thus become explicitly and implicitly linked to Melusine. The romance juxtaposes this representation with the apparent breakdown of patrilineal structures described above. At the same time, allusions to the abjectified and even monstrous maternal body suggest a complicated approach to the foregrounded tensions the romance illustrates between patrilineal and matrilineal genealogies.

Mothers present patrilineal genealogies with the most obvious challenge to the illusion of unilateral and autonomous male succession. As Ruth Evans notes, "if women

make trouble for the nation, they also trouble the notion of a pure origin.”³² A mother is necessary to the reproduction of male heirs, yet the dictates of patrilineal genealogy require that her role be minimized in constructions of the heir’s identity. For this reason, “patriarchal structures *first* deny the maternal in order to absorb it into illusory autonomous male succession.”³³ There are two major discourses which lend authority to this denial of maternal contribution and legacy: the biological and the genealogical.

As in the case of daughters, for the most part, biological discourses of the Middle Ages associated mothers with the passive matter, derived from abjected menstrual blood, or *menstruum*, which was shaped by the active principle of the father’s seed. *Menstruum*, like sperm, was considered to be a species of refined blood, but it was considered a lesser blood, even, in some cases, a polluting blood. For example, conceptions which occurred while the mother was menstruating were thought to result in deformed or otherwise monstrous children.³⁴ Leaving aside forbidden sexual practices, menstrual blood was thought to be inherently dangerous to unborn children. Albert the Great explained the relative underdevelopment of human babies compared to newborn animals by suggesting that it was the use of menstrual blood in their creation that put human newborns at such a disadvantage.³⁵ He suggests that human females, unlike animals, are burdened by menstruation, and therefore effectively stunt the growth of their children due to the

³² Ruth Evans, “The Devil in Disguise: Perverse Female Origins of the Nation,” in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 183.

³³ Newton, 67.

³⁴ As McCracken notes, “Intercourse during menstruation is proscribed by Christians as well as Jewish law in the Middle Ages. The early church fathers forbid coitus during a woman’s menstrual period, and, although abstinence is also required during pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation, it is intercourse during menstruation that seems to have the most severe consequences. Early medieval penitentials claim, for example, that conception during menstruation result in a hideously deformed child.” Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero*, 63.

³⁵ Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 41.

menstrual impurities out of which human babies were thought to be formed. In this way, the *menstruum*, which is shaped by the paternal seed, also inhibits that seed from fully completing its formative function, suggesting that while the maternal matter is constructed as passive, it is also imagined as inherently inimical to the privileged male seed of the father. Its putatively passive nature is actually figured not so much as inert, but rather as resistant to the ordering principle of the sperm. Even this resistance, however, cannot overthrow the stronger and more active principal of the sperm. Instead, as Albert suggests, it might inhibit or retard it, possibly divert it in minor ways.

Because of the association of sperm with order and maternal matter with chaos or lack of organization, medieval biological discourse often figures maternal biological contribution as monstrous deformity, the mother-mark. The prevalence of exogamous marriages among the nobility ensured that aristocratic wives, especially royal ones, were often regarded with suspicion as foreign elements in their husbands' households. As Barefield suggests, "the figures of traded women draw many different anxieties about difference in terms of nation, blood, ethnicity, and race. In historical and mythic discourses, such marriages can become the "origin" of conflict and the mark of a foreign presence."³⁶ The otherness of the aristocratic bride often made her the object of suspicion in terms of her potential divided loyalties as well as a figure of national, even racial difference. Boose suggests that the trajectory of the traded woman is an unenviable one, from alien in her father's home to perpetual foreigner in her husband's.³⁷ Such a trajectory suggests the liminal position of the aristocratic woman in any patrilineal

³⁶ Barefield, 75.

³⁷ Lynda E. Boose, "The Father's House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture's Daughter-Father Relationship," in *Daughters and Fathers*, ed. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 21, 53.

genealogy: her presence in her father's line in temporary and, as a daughter, fundamentally incomplete, and her arrival in her husband's family might suggest political ties between her father's family and her husband's, but those very ties make her the object of mistrust and a specter of foreign influence in her new home. Her children, moreover, are accepted into her new home inasmuch as they are regarded as her husband's children, rather than her own.

Medical discourse recognized the biological contribution of mothers in one crucial area: blood. All genital bleeding in women was defined as menstrual blood.³⁸ As indicated above, this categorization included the blood in the womb which formed the material of the unborn child. While authorities treated menstrual blood as abject and suggested that to some extent it operated as a sort of poison or inhibitor of a child's development, they also recognized that same blood as the medium through which a fundamental factor of identity was transmitted to the unborn child. While the father's blood (sperm) organizes maternal matter in order to produce a member of a male bloodline, the menstrual matter itself determines what Kelly calls the child's "order:" "[the mother's blood] carries the order to which one belongs. It is more or less blue—or fairy—blood. It determines therefore whether the child will be ducal or royal, burgher or peasant, fay or human."³⁹ This logic is suggested in the figures of Melusine and her sisters, who are each considered fairy women, despite their human paternity.

In practice, the politics of brokering aristocratic marriages made the importance of the mother's blood and the information it was thought to convey redundant: like

³⁸ McCracken, ix.

³⁹ Kelly, 42.

generally married like.⁴⁰ In the wake of the “crisis” of male succession, however, this became a little less certain, as the paucity of eligible male heirs sometimes allowed younger sons or less elevated heirs to marry heiresses whose bloodlines and/or fortunes might otherwise be considered out of reach.⁴¹ For the man who married advantageously, the elevated status of his wife would then not only elevate himself, but also his children, and the ensuing line. His children would inherit his wife’s order, just as he himself, through marriage, would (in the absence of a male heir) become the heir of his father-in-law. The coincidence of these two effects effaces the visibility of the mother’s legacy to her children. As the husband becomes the structural son of his father-in-law, the fact that the order of his children derives from his wife’s status, rather than his own, becomes less apparent, seeming instead to follow from paternal inheritance. In this way, patriarchal discourses minimize the role of maternal biological inheritance.

Melusine foregrounds this elision of maternal lines of inheritance while undermining its validity—and its wisdom. At the time of Melusine’s marriage to Raymondin, she encourages her lover to invite his cousin, the Earl of Poitiers, and all of his other friends to their wedding. Raymondin’s connections are understandably taken aback at the suddenness of his betrothal, and the Earl remonstrates, “How . . . fayre cousyn Raymondyn, are ye as now so strunged of vs that ye marye you without that we know therof tyl the day of weddyng” (48)? Beyond the question of estrangement, the Earl’s major concern is that he has not had the chance, as Raymondin’s closest relative, to examine Raymondin’s choice and to approve the new family connection: “For we wende yf your wylle had be to take a wyfe/ to haue be they of whom ye shuld first haue

⁴⁰ Walter’s marriage to Griselda is a notable literary exception.

⁴¹ Riddy, 239.

takyn counseyll” (48). Raymondin assures his cousin that it was not estrangement, but the sudden power of love that has necessitated the hasty invitation. Appeased, the Earl resumes the role of examiner of potential family member, asking Ramondin to report on Melusine’s identity: “telle vs what she is and of what lynee” (48). The dual nature of his question is apt; “what she is”—Melusine’s order—is an aspect of her identity that derives from her maternal inheritance, while her “lynee” refers to her father’s family line and name. The Earl thus demands a full accounting of Melusine’s identity, one that recognizes both lines of parental inheritance. Raymondin, of course, is largely ignorant of this vital information, and can only repeat the invitation to the wedding, which is accepted.

After the wedding, the Earl again attempts to ascertain Melusine’s identity, but this time focuses only on bloodline and resulting requisite social niceties:

“Fayr Cousyn telle me, yf ye goodly may, of what lyne or kynred is your wyf . . . but yet I demande it of you / bycause that we gladly wold knowe the certaynte of it. For of asmoche that we may perceyue by her estate & behauynge, nedes it must be, that she be yssued & comme from moch noble ryche and mighty lynee. And the cause whiche moeueth vs for to desyre and be willing to knowe it / is bycause that we doubte to have misprysed anenst thonour that apparteyneth to be doo vnto her noble & goodly persone”(59-60).

The Earl implicitly lays to rest the question of Melusine’s order; she must, he states, have come from a very rich and mighty line to behave as she has and to have provided such luxury to her guests at the wedding. Instead, the focus turns upon the exact “lynee” from which Melusine has “yssued & comme.” The Earl courteously but firmly demands to know the precise identity of Melusine’s paternal line, so that he might be sure of his proper deportment to her as a representative of that line. In this moment of social maneuvering and pressure, the Earl reveals the priority of paternal over maternal

bloodlines, as well as the consciousness of social connection and obligation that underpins the moment of alliance, which is made starkly apparent at the performance of that alliance, the marriage.

Raymondin's response underscores the manner in which paternal identity is problematically inserted as the entirety of meaningful source of inheritance by figures in this romance. He assures his cousin that "so moche I knowe, and may wel say of her, that she is a kyngis doughter . . . And I requyre you as to my lordes and frendes, that ye ne enquiry nomore therof" (60). Raymondin identifies what to him is the only pertinent (and only available) information: her father is a king. Paternal legacy defines identity. Of course no actual line, the very information the Earl is seeking, is identified. No specific alliance is charted. Instead, Melusine's procreative value is determined solely by her order, which, in Raymondin's view, is determined by her paternal derivation.

In his response to Raymondin's demand that he relinquish any further attempts to more specifically identify Melusine's heritage, the Earl alludes to the way in which patrilineal discourse elides the bride's premarital identity by annexing her to her husband's kin group: "For as ye haue putt vnto vs wysely the high honours, riches, maneres, and behauyng of my Cousin, your wyf, we oughte to conceyue of ourself, that she is of noble birth & extraction, and of right high and mighty lynce" (61). The Earl reconfigures the source of Melusine's identity: rather than searching out her premarital kin, he acknowledges her new ties to Raymondin, and, hence, himself. Melusine is defined as "my Cousin, your wyf," and her previous status is both acknowledged and rendered a nontopic in the assertion that both he and Raymondin can tell "of ourself" that she is patently noble and that no other inquiry need be made into her identity. Melusine's

identity is thus constructed by husband and cousin as deriving first from her relationship to these men, and then from their willingness to recognize her as self-evidently noble.

Melusine's marriage to Raymondin thus does not end with an alliance between her family and Raymondin's, but rather with a "Couenaunt" between Raymondin and his family not to look into her own heritage. The absorption of the woman into her husband's family is accomplished by the collusion of his family to ignore her previous identity, and it is the breaking of this "covenant," the romance is quick to note, that results in the loss of Raymondin's wife and, as a direct consequence, the Earl's life (61).

The foreshadowing of the broken covenants (Raymondin's covenant with Melusine not to observe Melusine or to learn her secrets, and the Earl's covenant with Raymondin not to inquire into Melusine's family), serves as a potent reminder of the ironic difference between what Raymondin and his cousin think they should know about Melusine, and the pertinent information about her and her genealogy which has a direct impact upon the later generations of the Lusignian line. The missing information, is not, of course, the identity of Melusine's father, and the line he represents, but rather, the order or identity of her mother, Pressine the fairy. Because order, and not line, is what passes through the mother, this is the issue Raymondin and his family ought to be most concerned with in the case of an alliance with an unknown party. And to some extent, they are; the revelation that Melusine's father is a king reassures both Raymondin and his cousin that Melusine's progeny will inherit a sufficiently noble order. However, in their fixation upon Melusine's paternal legacy, both men conveniently forget, even as they examine Melusine's past for this very reason, that order functions as a maternal legacy, not only in the present case (Raymondin's marriage to Melusine and thus the identity of

their children), but also in the case of Melusine's own identity. Relieved to have placed Melusine as the daughter of a king, they ignore, to their later sorrow, that she is also, and more significantly, the daughter of a fairy.

Melusine's fairy nature is implied in her fantastic fortress-building ability and her mysterious riches, made evident at the feasts to celebrate her wedding and the birth of her first son, but her otherness is most strongly alluded to in the marking of each of her sons with a prominent congenital deformity. While Geoffrey gets off relatively lightly with a protuberant inch-long fang, many of his brothers are afflicted with misplaced, miscolored, missized, missing and superfluous eyes and ears. The connection between Melusine's fairy legacy and these oddly formed sons is left implicit until Raymondin's accusation of Melusine after the death of Froymond, when he publicly accuses Melusine not only of having been a fairy, but also of being a bad mother, not in the social, but in the biological sense: "Goo thou hens, fals serpente / by got! Nother thou nor thy birthe shalbe at thende but fantosme / not none child that thou hast brought shal come at last to perfection . . . goode fruyte yssued neuer of the" (314). While Raymondin does make an exception for the monk Froymond, who was apparently purified by having taken holy orders, his basic accusation against Melusine is not only that she herself is a "fantosme" and serpent, but that the children that she "brought," her "fruit" is irredeemably spoiled because of her diabolical nature. Raymondin calls upon the notion of the mother-mark to make evident to those in his court what has been hidden behind closed doors: Melusine's progeny are monstrous, hence Melusine is also hiding a monstrous nature.

Raymondin's accusation against Melusine recalls a category of romances which focus on the maternal body and bloodline as a source of monstrous otherness. This

category includes the *Man of Law's Tale*, *Emaré*, and, to a lesser extent, the *Clerk's Tale*. Significantly, in each of those narratives, the accusation of infant monstrosity (and hence maternal otherness) is slanderous, whereas in *Melusine*, Melusine's fairy nature does in fact mark her as other. In addition, Raymondin's accusation is based on a certain amount of empirical evidence: Melusine's hybrid body and the irregularities in her children's physical appearance. Peggy McCracken suggests that narratives about monstrous children reflect anxieties about maternal difference and legacies because, typically, "narratives about monstrous births recognize that a child shares its mother's blood as well," blood which often represents geographical and cultural otherness in exogamous aristocratic marriages.⁴² McCracken points to narratives which focus specifically upon the birth scene as the forbidden event where the prominence of the mother's blood and its connection to her child is revealed and thus must be hidden from view.⁴³ *Melusine* follows this pattern in the first generation of paternal transgression: Elynas's forbidden sight of his wife in childbed results in the immediate removal of Pressine and "her" daughters. The blood of parturition, visible on the sheets and coupled with the appearance of the newborn infant, makes clear the blood bond between mother and child and renders the patriarchal fantasy of autonomous male reproduction impossible. This problematic blood is doubled in its significance: it can represent the bloodline, or heritable order of the mother, as Raymondin later insinuates, and it can also stand in for the disruptive *menstruum* from which all children are formed. In both cases, the child is represented as diverted from its proper course, even, to some extent, from legitimacy. As

⁴² McCracken, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, x.

one figurative blood and biological legacy is displaced by the other, the child's identity in terms of bloodline becomes associated primarily, and pejoratively, with the mother.

The representation of the mother as a figuratively illegitimate parent is repeatedly suggested in *Melusine*. After many of the martial and marital triumphs of Raymondin and Melusine's sons, Raymondin is visited by his brother, now the Earl of Forest. It is a Saturday, and when the Earl notices and comments upon Melusine's absence from dinner, Raymondin explains that she is away. The Earl takes this opportunity to explain his reason for visiting:

Ye are my brother / I owe not to hyde to you your dyshonour. Now, fayre brother, wete it that the commyn talking of the peple is, that Melusine your wyf euery satirday in the yere is with another man in auoultire / & so blynd ye are by her sayeng that ye dare not enquire nor knoweth where she becommeth or gooth / and also other sayen, & make them strong that she is a spyryte of the fayry, that on euery satirday maketh hir penaunce.

Throughout this warning, the Earl links masculine shame—coded alternatively as cuckoldry or a miscegenated bloodline—with blindness, or the willful refusal to see what is plain for everyone else to see. The conflation of the two possibilities, that Melusine takes a weekly lover, or that she, as a fairy, takes a break from her human form, suggests the parallel repercussions of either of these secrets to a “blinded” Raymondin. Both have material consequences for the identity of Melusine's children, who at this moment can be imagined as Melusine's children, rather than Raymondin's children, or either Raymondin and Melusine's children. Revelation of a lover reveals the likelihood of illegitimacy in the brood, while a fairy mother reveals the fairy nature of the children despite the organizing power of Raymondin's sperm. Either way, an appropriation of paternal prerogative and control has occurred. Only by witnessing what is hidden, the Earl

suggests, may Raymondin protect himself from his wife's illegitimate tampering with his bloodline and honor.

The Earl's equation of the fairy secret with adultery and thus miscegenation and illegitimacy is reinforced by the romance's early association of fairy secrets with female sexual revelation, especially related to childbirth. The fairy wives described in the opening of the romance each carry a secret that their husbands are forbidden to seek out. First, the romance lists the weekly absence of the fairy wife, with the warning that she never be sought out on that day, and then the poem cites the prohibition against seeing a fairy wife in childbirth, Pressine's prohibition (4-5). The romance goes on to list one wife's refusal to let her husband see her naked, and her subsequent transformation into a serpent when he breaks his promise. The categorization of each of these proscriptions as equivalent examples of a species of wonder, and one related to the exposure of (fairy) women's "secrets," alternatively located in nudity, exposure, childbirth, and monstrous bodies conflates all of these revealed secrets so that the exposure of one such secret resonates with the rest of the list. This tendency is reinforced by the sequence of fairy prohibition and violation that is most graphically displayed in Melusine's own three-generation familial history. Pressine's forbidding of Elynas's looking upon her in childbed is later recalled in Raymondin's promise to Melusine. Childbed, and its hybrid products are inextricably linked in this romance and particularly in this maternal bloodline to the fairy secret.

If maternal contribution, figured in the prohibited scene of childbirth, is conflated with a sort of illegitimacy where the mother figures as a sort of clandestine father to her children, and thus appropriating her husband's role, *Melusine* continues this logic through

the hijacking of the markers of patrilineal identity by its heroine. *Melusine* links its heroine's appropriation of paternal markers of authority and identification with the simultaneous severance of the father from patrimony. When Raymondin himself is given the opportunity to reclaim his own patrimonial lands in Britain, thus providing an inheritance in his own name, he inexplicably turns the land over to his paternal cousins, returning home to Melusine (86). This moment suggests an even more radical departure from patrilineal primogeniture, as Raymondin does not merely accept Lusignan as a newly created patrimony for his children brought to him by his wife, but also cavalierly abandons his own patrimony, not only for himself, but also for his children. Raymondin and his children are permanently severed from his patrimonial name and property, and the British connection never reappears in the romance. The appropriation of the Lusignan line away from Raymondin's patriarchal identity is also more subtly foreshadowed by Melusine's promise to Raymondin upon their first meeting "I shal make the for to be the gretest lord that euer was of thy lynage" (31). For the most part, however, Raymondin abjures his own lineage, and many of his sons achieve greater ranks and fame than he does as they defend/conquer the Near East. The opening of the romance firmly claims the title of lineal founder for Melusine herself, and Raymondin's position as patriarch is severely compromised by Melusine's status as founder of line, property and name. This is emphasized even at the moment of Melusine's departure, when she delegates which of their sons will inherit the widespread properties under her jurisdiction (318). Raymondin might well be described as the greatest of his line through his connection to Melusine, but he is also effectively the last of that line as Melusine takes over all the roles and responsibilities of the patriarch in founding her own legacy.

In *Melusine*, maternal contribution is most clearly invoked in Raymondin's accusation against Melusine, though it is hinted at throughout the romance in the frequent references to the odd appearances of her children. Raymondin's accusations against Melusine—that she is unnatural and thus has produced unnatural children—participate in biological discourses which constructed maternal contribution as aberration, an illegitimate deviation from the natural course of paternal organization and resemblance. Raymondin insists that the sons' mother-marks bear witness to her demonic nature and to the unsatisfactory results of her childbearing. The expectation of continuity with a formative parent, he suggests, has been transferred from his own legitimate expectation that his sons will take after him, to a crisis in which his son's problematic bodies resemble and point back to their mother's monstrous hybrid body. In his accusations, he thus positions himself as a wronged patriarch, and exposes the already marked difference of the children as a result of their mother's illegitimate contribution to their formation.

While Raymondin's accusation of Melusine marks her as a monstrous mother who can only create imperfect children through her influence, the romance problematizes his implication that the sons' deformities mark a racialized difference through the maternal line. For example, while Melusine's semiweekly transformation marks her physically as other, her physical aberration is the result of Pressine's maternal curse rather than a manifestation of inherent fairy monstrosity. Thus, the mother-marks do not mark a racial difference that echoes Melusine's half-serpentine nature, since her tail does not indicate fairy race but rather familial misconduct.⁴⁴ It is significant that Raymondin's accusations against Melusine are not initially centered on the biological strangeness of

her children, even though he submits their deformities as evidence against her, along with Geoffrey's fratricidal behavior. His condemnation of Melusine and her children is described as being the result of "yre" and the loss of his "rayson natural," and is also conveniently selective. While Raymondin states the both Melusine and her children "shalbe at thende but fantosme," he excludes Froymond, whose death is the occasion of the tirade against Melusine. He repeatedly suggests that Geoffrey explicitly, and the others implicitly work through "arte demonyacle," obeying "the comandementes of the prynces of helle" (314-5).⁴⁵ The significant exclusion of Froymond undercuts Raymondin's condemnation of the rest of Melusine's children, as Froymond, like his brothers, is marked with a deformity, a large hairy mole on his nose. Raymondin's dark suggestions that Melusine and her children operate under demonic orders or influence is likewise undercut by his own suggestion that "all they that are foursenyd with yre" obey the devil, since the romance explicitly points out that he is driven by his own ire to accuse his wife (314-5). In this way, Raymondin's accusations against Melusine and his suggestion that her difference and that of her children is unnatural, even diabolical is undermined and represented as at best irrational and at worst hypocritical. In any event, these accusations have catastrophic results—they initiate the loss of Raymondin's wife and the decline in his family's line and prosperity.

⁴⁵ Melusine's hybrid body invites much speculation as to the particular associations it might arouse in a medieval audience. According to Colwell, "Mélusine's serpentine form would have been strongly reminiscent of the Eden serpent for medieval readers, especially with the developing tradition of the serpent possessing a female face" Tania Colwell, "Mélusine: Ideal Mother or Inimitable Monster?" *Love, Marriage, and Family Ties in the Later Middle Ages*, eds. Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 181-204). Also note Sue Niebrzydowski's description of medieval images of the scorpion in "Monstrous (M)othering: The Representation of the Sowdanesse in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," in *Consuming Passions: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, eds. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 203. She notes that the scorpion was described as a sort of serpent with a womanly face, who practices flattery and stings its victim with its tail. Interestingly, the scorpion, in a curious inversion of Melusine's maternal behavior, was thought to produce 11 offspring and devour all but one.

Conclusions: Melusine as Genealogical Specter

Melusine is a self-proclaimed genealogical romance which is riddled with challenges to the patriarchal genealogical project, particularly to the belief that father, son, line, and property are (or ought to be) closely related and in fact, at times, indistinguishable from one another. *Melusine* disrupts these expectations by presenting a line that is eventually divorced from its own property, and which is associated not with the father, but with the mother. Maddox notes that some of the more fantastic genealogies sometimes incorporate an outstanding female figure through marriage, thus appropriating the social capital she represents through her own bloodline for the agnatic line of her husband.⁴⁶ Barefield also suggests that in romance, “women possess bloodties for the purposes of marriage and political alliance, but do not in terms of subsequent accountings of lineage,” suggesting that in such genealogical accounts, a woman functions as a wife who may bring prestige to her husband, but that her husband thereafter transfers that prestige to his offspring.⁴⁷ Women thus function only as wives, never as mothers, founders, or progenitors. *Melusine* only imperfectly fits these patterns, and its difference is significant: Raymondin is already somewhat divorced from his line when he marries Melusine, and he and his offspring seem to be coopted into Melusine’s own self-referential family name and coterminous genealogical line. Whereas in the types of genealogies described by Maddox, a superlative female ancestor transfers her superior social capital upon her husband, his line and his heirs through the act of alliance, in *Melusine*, such capital resides in Melusine herself, her body, and her presence, literal

⁴⁶ Donald Maddox, “Domesticating Diversity: Female Founders in Medieval Genealogical Literature and *La Fille du Comte de Pontieu*” in *The Court and Cultural Diversity: International Courtly Literature Society: 1995*, eds Evelyn Mullally and John Thompson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 97-8.

⁴⁷ Barefield, 23.

or spectral, continues to be the marker of her line's identity, legitimacy, and prestige long after her marriage is dissolved by Raymondin's death.

In addition to the cooptation of the patrilineal line by the founding maternal figure, *Melusine* presents other striking challenges to the expectations of genealogical logic: Instead of featuring a long vertical line of exemplary male heirs, or, as is more common in the genealogical romance, a brief interlude where lineal continuity is threatened then restored, Melusine offers a broad horizontal line of male heirs, who do not on the whole, come to take their father's position, but rather establish their own in the bosoms of (male) heirless lands. Line and hereditary patrimony become vaguely linked with one other, if at all. The romance gives much attention throughout to the extraneous narratives that are peripheral to, if not wholly ignored by, genealogies: the daughters of a second marriage, the superfluous sons, the brotherless female heir, and the foreign wife are all featured at some length in this narrative, making the illusion of a truly lineal family "line" somewhat difficult to maintain. Finally, *Melusine* breaks its own explicit promises, as well as the implicit promise of genealogy, by refusing to offer lineal continuity as the source of social continuity. The catastrophic outcome of Raymondin's broken promise to Melusine ensures the inevitable dwindling of the Lusignan line and fortune, despite the romance's assurance that Melusine's line "shall regne for euer vnto thend of the world" (6).

Despite this multitude of genealogical shortcomings, excesses, and interventions, for the most part, until Raymondin's accusation against Melusine, communities in Melusine seem to weather the inconsistencies between genealogical expectations and "reality" rather well, largely through the abundant excess of sons that Melusine produces

and which fill the need of beleaguered Christian nations for virile male leaders in the absence of legitimate male heirs. Ironically, the real mark of difference that sets Melusine's line apart from other human lines and from those of fairies in this romance is its self-reproduction and amplification through the successful production of male heirs. In a romance littered with heirless and vulnerable territories often threatened by internal and external factions waiting to capitalize on the lack of heirs, Melusine's prodigious production of heirs, however strange-looking, seems just as marvelous as her speedy building of Lusignan. While the actual institution of patrilineal primogeniture seems to be perpetually on the brink of collapse in this narrative, no one seems particularly concerned that it might not actually work in the ways that it claims to. Raymondin, "greatest of his line" and putative patriarch, can even see the evidence of his wife's essential otherness (and therefore that of his sons), and the framework retains its hold in the romance. According to *Melusine*, however, the limit of this system's flexibility is the public utterance that mothers matter, that an other wife, and by extension, any wife, contributes significantly to the generative, and thus, the genealogical product. Private realization, though traumatic, does not bring the walls tumbling down until it is publicly announced and acknowledged. Faced with this contradiction at the core of its identity, the Lusignan line is doomed. The relegation of Melusine from spectacular founder to piteous specter that forever haunts both the territory and the line of Lusignan (never again assumed to be identical) marks the change in role that Raymondin thrusts upon her in his accusation. While primogeniture can evidently survive a multitude of infelicities, overt recognition of the founding mother and her significance marks her line as hybrid, and thus unstable, unlineal, necessitating its collapse. The line's essential connection to

Melusine is marked by her perpetual spectral presence, which first appears to nurture her two infant children, and then to mark the separate transitions of lineal and propertied lordship over the line and territory of Lusignan. In several contexts, Melusine's spectral returns can be seen as her most transgressive acts in the romance. In them, her role as mother is prioritized over that of wife, as Raymondin longs for his wife as she appears to their youngest sons, but remains invisible and inaccessible to him (322). Even more problematically, Melusine's later appearances, at the deaths of her descendants, and at moments of transition of authority over the Lusignan fortress (destroyed at the time of the Middle English redaction of the romance) makes visible the separation of patrimony and of line. The two events, the death of a Lusignan lord, and the transference of the Lusignan fortress, and her return to mark each, makes publicly evident the fallacy that line and property transfer are identical. Much like Raymondin's accusation, Melusine's public appearances at these moments makes visible and unavoidable the painful distance between social truth and empirical evidence that characterizes this romance's representation of a society invested in patrilineal primogeniture. The inexorable decline includes uncoupling of all of the strands of lineal identity: name and family line, line and property. All that remains is Melusine's image, indelibly marked on the fortress, line, and name and returning to haunt the scattered remains of the formerly cohesive unit.

Melusine presents a weakened institution at its most fragile and interrogated moment. As a narrative, it systematically undermines patriarchal genealogies by telling each of the narratives that it must structurally deny or ignore. The patriarchal illusion is propped up by the fantastic appearance of a fairy mother who supplies all that is missing, leaving behind clues to her true nature, which are duly ignored. What patriarchy cannot

survive is the acknowledgement of its dependence upon other lines, the lines of women who contribute to children and thus expose the myth of patriarchal self-reproduction. Maternal legacy and influence can be acknowledged in all of the areas of patriarchal self-recognition, except the biological, the point at which women are absolutely indispensable. *Melusine* consistently associates husbands with curiosity and the desire to see, and wives with the desire to maintain a form of secrecy which protects not only themselves, but, the romance suggests, patriarchal structures and genealogies. This romance finally suggests that the patriarchal urge to reveal the secrets of the wife is a self-destructive impulse which endangers the patriline by revealing its vulnerability to maternal influence upon bloodlines. *Melusine* represents the simultaneous desire to see, and the imperative not to acknowledge these fundamental inconsistencies in medieval ideas about reproduction and society, as the inevitable failure of patrilineage itself.

Because the Middle English *Melusine* is not widely known, I here provide a summary of the narrative that retains the flavor and complexity of this convoluted romance, which spans three generations and three major bloodlines. The romance begins a generation before Melusine, with her mother, the fairy Pressine, who seduces and marries the Albanian (Scottish) King Elynas (ancestor of Alexander the Great) after his first wife has died. Pressine's promise to marry Elynas is given on condition that he never looks at her in childbed, nor attempt to do so. Predictably, acting on bad advice from a son of his first marriage, Elynas breaks his promise to Pressine, and as a result loses his second wife and three infant daughters, Melusine, Melior, and Palatine. The mother and newborns vanish, returning to Avalon, and Elynas, overcome with grief, is deposed and succeeded by the son who sent him into the lying-in chamber. Fifteen years later, Melusine, hearing of her father's betrayal of her mother, conspires with her sisters to avenge her mother by imprisoning their father in a mountain, where he eventually dies. Pressine is enraged at their treatment of their father, and punishes Melusine with a curse—every Saturday, she will turn into a serpent from the navel down, until she marries someone who will promise never to see her on those Saturdays. If this promise is broken, she must return to torment until Judgment Day, appearing before her human home for three days whenever a new lord is to be invested, or whenever a descendant of hers is about to die. Her younger sisters receive somewhat lighter sentences, and Melusine leaves Avalon.

The romance then introduces Raymondin, a young knight in the care of his uncle, the Earl of Poitiers, whom he accidentally kills in a hunting accident. Raymondin leaves the scene of the accident, riding off into the wilderness, hoping to find some penance for his crime, and comes upon Melusine and two other ladies. Melusine demonstrates supernatural knowledge of his name and situation and promises to change his fortunes, making him "the gretest lord that euer was of thy lynage, and the gretest and best lyuelod man of them all" (VI.13-15). Melusine proposes to Raymondin, with the attached condition that he never see her on Saturdays, and gives him instructions to return to Poitiers as if ignorant of his uncle's death. All goes well in Poitiers, and by a series of schemes orchestrated by Melusine, Raymondin comes

into possession of a plot of land granted to him by his uncle's heir. Raymondin marries Melusine, and she builds him a beautiful castle, which she names Lusignan.

After the marriage, Melusine tells Raymondin of his own lost patrimony. His father, Henry, she tells him, was the Seneschal and Captain-General of the King of Britain. The King's heir, a nephew, was made jealous of Henry by a courtier, and tried to ambush him, but was killed in the attempt by Henry, who didn't recognize his assailant. Henry, much like his son, went into exile, where he married Raymondin's mother. After the birth of Melusine's first son, Urian, Melusine urges Raymondin to go to Britain and expose the evil courtier, Josselin Dupont, who had inherited Henry's lands upon his exile. Raymondin exposes Dupont in combat and is awarded his father's lands back, but he in turn gives the lands to his paternal cousins, and returns to Melusine, and between them, they have ten sons, each of whom is deformed in some way. When the eldest, Urian, reaches the age of eighteen, he and a younger brother renounce their claims to their parents' land and go to seek their fortunes, so as not to break up the patrimony. Other brothers do the same, and fortuitously, they each find heiresses besieged by Saracens and in destroying the invaders win themselves landed brides.

However, in the meantime, egged on by a brother's insinuation that Melusine takes a lover on Saturdays, Raymondin looks in on Melusine through a peephole while she is bathing and discovers her weekly transformation. Melusine knows of his betrayal, but shows no sign of it. Later, when their son, Geoffray of the Tooth (named for his inch-long fang) objects to his brother Froymond's ordination as a monk by burning down the abbey with all the monks including Froymond inside, Raymondin publicly denounces Melusine and reveals her secret to all. His motive for the accusation is that her son's monstrous act of killing his brother, coupled with the strange deformities of all of their children, constitutes proof of the monstrous status already revealed in his glimpse of Melusine's bath. Melusine declares she must leave to her punishment, and recommends that Raymondin swiftly kill their evil three-eyed child Horrible, who has, at the age of four already killed two nurses. She then transforms into a wailing serpent who flies away. Melusine nightly visits the two youngest children until they grow up and Raymondin eventually retires to an abbey. Geoffrey comes upon his maternal Grandfather Elynas's tomb and upon his return to Lusignan, learns of his connection to Elynas, and rejoices, though he mourns the loss of his mother. Geoffrey inherits Lusignan on his father's death, and all nine of Raymondin and Melusine's remaining children become lords and kings, Geoffrey through inheritance, and the others through advantageous marriages. Melusine to this day appears above Lusignan in the shapes of a serpent with a feminine voice or a woman in a rough dress to herald the death of her descendants and to announce the investiture of a new heir.

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Literature

Medieval Romance Seminar	Fall 2007
Chaucer	Summer 2005
The Family in Crisis in Middle English Romance	Fall 2004
Principles of Literary Study: Narrative	Fall 2003

Composition

Basic Composition	2004-2005
Preparation for College Writing	2005, 2007
Expository Writing	2003-2004
Writing Program Tutor	2000-2003

Teaching Assistanceships

2005	For Christine Chism’s “Chaucer” course
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