

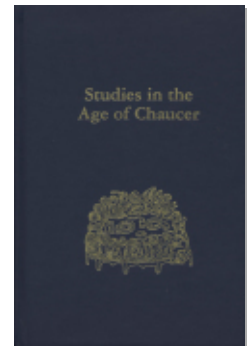


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Women's Secrets:

Childbirth, Pollution, and Purification in Northern *Octavian*

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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.¹ 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

¹The Middle English (Northern) *Octavian* romance is extant in two manuscripts, the Thornton manuscript (Lincoln, Dean and Chapter Library, MS 91), and the closely related Cambridge manuscript (Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38. A third version exists in a fragment of an early print by Wynkyn de Worde, Huntington (San Marino, Calif., Huntington Library 14615; STC 18779), containing less than half of the romance. Editions of all three can be found in Frances McSparran, ed. *Octavian*, 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, London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, available in Frances McSparran, ed. *Octavian Imperator* (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 account of Clement's adventures with the Sultan's flying horse. Internal evidence of the 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 (*Octavian*, p. 42). The 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 refer to the Thornton text in McSparran's EETS edition.

slandered empress thus emerges from a premonitory nightmare only to enter a far more horrifying reality of violence, blood, and disgrace.

Octavian's violation and misrepresentation of the empress's lying-in room precipitate the central crisis of the plot: the scattering of the royal family and consequent endangering of the patrilineal line. His intrusion breaks the codes through which births, particularly aristocratic births, were culturally constructed and represented in medieval culture. Aristocratic births were configured within a matrix 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 ambivalence of her political and spiritual status within her community. Ultimately, by staging an unjust violation of the lying-in room, which takes to extremes cultural suspicions centering on female sexuality in general and the reproductive body in particular, *Octavian* challenges both secular and sacred discursive and ritual practices that 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 that 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 that focuses on women and children and often features the estrangement or separation of aristocratic families and the consequent problem of recognizing true heirs.² As such, this romance includes

²Middle English popular romances and related genres almost obsessively return to the problems and vicissitudes of producing and retaining viable heirs to continue valued

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 that would be familiar to the audience 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 more chivalric and martial romances, foregrounding conventional female behavior and virtues rather than masculine endeavor.⁵ David Salter has identified *Octavian* as a "represen-

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 *Chevelere 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), pp. 29, 185. Felicity Riddy also notes the centrality of families to fourteenth- and fifteenth-century popular English romance, but she avoids the term "family romance," preferring instead to associate the romances with the idea of the "domestic." "Middle English Romance: Family, Romance, Intimacy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 235–52. In several of these romances, as in *Octavian*, the threat to dynastic stability comes as a result of the false accusation of the mother of sexual misconduct or monstrosity, leading to repudiation and/or exile. Nancy B. Black notes that the pattern of the falsely accused virtuous noblewoman, often referred to as the "calumniated wife" motif, was increasingly popular in Continental and English narratives from the early thirteenth through the fifteenth century. See Nancy Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), pp. 2–3. Black notes the prevalence of this theme in both romance and hagiography, in which women are frequently represented as suffering for choosing to be obedient to God or morality rather than men who desire them sexually (14–15). In addition to medieval narratives of female virtue under threat, Black links this motif to the biblical narrative of Susanna and the classical narrative of Lucretia (12, 18).

⁴ Helen Cooper, *The English Romance in Time: Transforming Motifs from Geoffrey of Monmouth to the Death of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 324. Cooper links the rise of romance in Europe with the rise of primogeniture, suggesting that the genre and the legal practice each strive "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*, p. 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:

tative" 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 on 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 that the poem offers as potential barriers to the smooth

D. S. Brewer, 2002), pp. 41–59 (44); Jennifer Fellows, "Mothers in Middle English Romance," in *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150–1550*, ed. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 40–60 (43–44).

⁶McSparran, *Octavian*, pp. 40–42. There were two French verse versions of the Octavian story, *Octavian* (FO) and *Florent et Octavian de Rome* (F&O), which later were rendered into prose versions. McSparran suggests that the French prose versions of the Octavian narrative were translated into Italian and German, and that the German version subsequently became the source for the Danish, Dutch, Icelandic, and Polish versions of the story. F&O is nearly three times as long as FO, and McSparran suggests that it is an expanded version of FO, though their exact relationship is unclear. The English versions of *Octavian* (both Northern and Southern) are closer to FO, typically following FO rather than F&O when the French versions diverge and the English redactions share the abduction by lioness and griffin and the island den scene, which is absent in F&O. Both English versions include the scene of Octavian throwing the kitchen servant's head at his wife, absent in FO. The empress's apparent barrenness is included in FO and Northern *Octavian* but is replaced in Southern *Octavian* with a long-single Octavian, who is eventually exhorted by his people to marry in a motif reminiscent of *The Clerk's Tale*. However, Northern *Octavian* shares some features with F&O absent in Southern *Octavian* and FO, notably the insinuation by the dowager empress that the empress's alleged infidelity is motivated by Octavian's sterility. In FO and Southern *Octavian*, the presence of twins alone is given as the initial proof of infidelity, as two children imply two fathers. Also, Northern *Octavian* elaborates on the empress's life in Jerusalem as an honored guest in the king's household, absent in FO. Both versions of Northern *Octavian* emphasize the long barrenness of Octavian's marriage. This essay focuses exclusively on Northern *Octavian*, as it seems to focus more consistently on the figure of the empress and the representation of maternity than either Southern *Octavian* or the French versions of the narrative.

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 does not ensure the smooth arrival and legitimation of the twin heirs. The birth is very difficult, leaving not only the exhausted mother, but also her companions, swooning and unconscious. This provides the opportunity for Octavian's mother to trick her son into believing her slanderous accusation of 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 longestranged family members. With the lion that 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 domestic and public 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 practices of lying-in and

of churching feasts are represented as being subverted, which sabotages 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.

This essay will examine 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 will then juxtapose 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 that were paradoxically made evident by the insistence on 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 (line 161). Much emphasis is placed at this moment in the text on 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 recasting of royal blood as contamination, staining everything within the area, literally and metaphorically (159). Soon thereafter, as the empress awakens, the first thing she sees is "þe 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 childbed 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 gruesome death and disorder. The transformation of “þe rechese þat scho [the empress] jn laye” 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 that 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 that seems to parallel the even more transgressive presence of the kitchen servant within the empress's bed. The very 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 that 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 During the lying-in period, which consisted of the

⁷ 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*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 139–54 (144); see also Adrian Wilson, “The Ceremony of Childbirth and Its Interpretation,” in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England*, ed. Valerie Fildes (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 68–107.

last four to six weeks of pregnancy and the period leading up to churching, men, including the woman's husband, were forbidden entry into the enclosed room.⁸ The contained 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 often new furniture was purchased 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 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 and 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 pregnant woman simultaneously close off and titillate, reminding those shut out that there is indeed something occurring in the forbidden space that

⁸ Kay Staniland notes that "all of the late fifteenth-century accounts of court ceremonies simply use the formula 'when it plessthe 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 [BL, Egerton MS 985, fol. 98] suggests that four to six weeks were normal." See Kay Staniland, "Royal Entry into the World," in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Daniel Williams (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1987), pp. 297–313 (301).

⁹ Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp. 8–9; see also Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth," pp. 73–78.

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

is both tempting and important to know, yet inaccessible. If, as Karma Lochrie argues, secrecy is a practice that 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 but 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 that he must finance but is 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*, when we are told: "The lady slept and wyste hyt noght: / Hur comfort was the mare" (C.179–80). Here ignorance and blindness are forced on the empress; she is completely (and apparently happily) ignorant of the actions within the lying-in space, but nevertheless subject to its consequences on her emergence from confinement. While she presumably awakens later to find a severed head in the bed and "the ryche clothys . . . all bybledd," this rude awakening is not represented in the Cambridge text and the empress's knowledge of events is left completely unexplained (C.176). Her ignorance, compounded by her innocence of the sexual crime imputed to her, seems monstrous and horrifying, highlighting the inversion 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 ritually and emphatically 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

¹¹ Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), p. 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," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1996), pp. 39–62 (46).

¹² Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth," p. 73.

banished male servant and retainer.¹³ The quotidian gendered division of household tasks, as Kim Phillips 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 the midwife, who was frequently involved in legal inquisitions regarding the probable legitimacy of children of questionable paternity.¹⁵

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 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.¹⁶ The expulsion of males from this space contributed to the

¹³Staniland, "Royal Entry into the World," p. 302.

¹⁴Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 116–17. Phillips 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.'"

¹⁵Denise Ryan, "Playing the Midwife's Part in the English Nativity Plays," *RES* n.s. 54 (2003): 435–48 (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).

¹⁶Romances and gynecological texts both suggest that female shame or embarrassment prohibit 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 that 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*). Heldris de Cornuälle, *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992), lines 2004, 2007. The same desire to avoid slander or embarrassment at the hands of

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."¹⁷ 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 of the 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 it, a privilege men are not invited or 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 that it contained produced the lying-in room's liminal status. According to John Carmi 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.¹⁸ As a result, late pregnancy was often regarded as a time of miracles and prophetic revelations. Accordingly, *Octavian* emphatically constructs the empress's lying-in room as a place of mystery, even of miracles. This comes as a result of the empress's apparently miraculous impregnation, which occurs after her foundation of an abbey in honor of the Virgin Mary. The empress establishes the abbey as part of an explicit plan to seek Mary's intervention to help her conceive an heir. Thus, the pregnancy itself carries the weight of divine intervention. Further, the lying-in room is also the site

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), pp. 40–42. 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.

¹⁷ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Scene and Obscene: Seeing and Performing Late Medieval Childbirth," *JMEMS* 29 (1999): 1–24 (8–9).

¹⁸ Parsons, "The Pregnant Queen," p. 43.

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 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 at times to 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 de Silence* and the Middle English *Melusine* and suggested in medieval mystery plays concerning the birth of Christ.¹⁹ 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."²⁰ 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."²¹ It is not simply a man's physical presence in the lying-in room that is forbidden; he is not supposed to know or witness what occurs within that space. Transgression entails not only the violation of the space, but a reflection on the man's 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."

¹⁹ For a reading of this trope in mystery plays, see Gibson, "Scene and Obscene."

²⁰ Louis Théo Maes, "Les Délits de Mœurs dans les Droit Pénal Coutumier de Malines," *Revue du Nord* 30 (1948): 5–26 (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," *JMRS* 21 (1991): 285–329 (290).

²¹ Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 94.

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 that constructed and maintained 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."²² 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 over-indulgence 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.²³ The month or so of postpartum isolation is revealed to be nothing other than an expensive excuse for women to get together and drink copious amounts of good wine and eat hard-to-find and extravagant delicacies while assassinating the character of the pregnant woman's husband.²⁴ With this in mind, wife, gossips, and midwife are 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 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, the husband of the pregnant woman in particular. Secrecy is thus equated not only with power, but with deception and the shame

²²"She becomes pregnant, and perhaps not by her husband, which often happens." *Les .XV. Joies de Mariage*, ed. Jean Rychner (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1967), p. 18 (my translation).

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 19–26.

²⁴The 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 his *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 14–22, 65.

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. The figure of the slanderous mother-in-law whose lies result in the expulsion of her grandchildren is a familiar character, from Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* and its analogues. As a privileged intimate, the mother-in-law stands in an excellent position to betray trust by undermining her daughter-in-law. In *Octavian*, the dowager empress's 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 household 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 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 allow her to sabotage the apparent legitimacy of her grandsons. Instead of acting as a witness to the birth and hence 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 on 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 of the mother, but not the children. Then she informs her son that his wife's sons are not his:

"Sone," scho said, "I am full blythe
That þe empryse 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."

(103–8)

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 well-being 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, in which she bemoans the fate of Rome's inheritance by an illegitimate bastard, juxtaposes and contrasts her allegiance to the empress as a gossip and a woman with her allegiance to Rome. The dowager empress constructs a competition between the interests of the empress (and her sons) and of Rome, in direct contradiction of Octavian's rationale, earlier in the romance, for desiring his wife to conceive. 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 of his land are mutually exclusive and contradictory.

In doing this the dowager empress inverts the suspicions cast on gossips in *Les Quinze Joies*; whereas in the satire the solidarity of gossips, prolonging 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. 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 that 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 on 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 þere was wrought" also underscores the common interests of polity and the childbearing empress by conflating two betrayals into one.

The dowager empress has committed two separate acts of treason against communities of which she is a member. 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's associations with Rome and later Jerusalem, both identified by medieval exegetes with "the Christian Church and soul," render this betrayal a reenactment of Judas' paradigmatic betrayal of Christ.²⁵ Late medieval identifications of Rome as the daughter of Sion and *synagoga* as the mother of Sion reinforce the status of the mother-in-law as a treacherous and perverse betrayer associated with the enemies not only of imperial Rome, but of Christianity itself.²⁶ 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 into the birthing room is terribly distorted, with serious domestic and political consequences attached. Presumably, it is the threat to his masculine identity that induces Octavian to violate the lying-in room in the first place in order to discover its otherwise obscured truths. He approaches the 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. Octavian's mother taunts her son, saying, "'sone myn . . . / For þou myght no childir haue, / Scho has takyn thy kokes knaue'" (112–16). 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.

The room is therefore linked 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

²⁵ Suzanne M. Yeager, "The *Siege of Jerusalem* and Biblical Exegesis: Writing About Romans in Fourteenth-Century England," *ChauR* 39 (2004): 70–102 (94, 89).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

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 room's polarities—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.”²⁷ The political function of the royal lying-in room was often emphasized in the material construction of the space, and the room's enclosing hangings and rugs were to 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.²⁸ Gifts associated specifically with the room and its purpose, including the ritual *deschi* platter, were often decorated with images of the desired product of the birth, a young male child.²⁹

In contemporary instructions for midwives, emphasis was placed on the comfort of the room, its consistency with the nobility of the woman's endeavor, its value to the family, and on the need to keep men out rather than on keeping 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.³⁰ This injunction underlines the prevalent ambivalence that characterized social interpretations of childbirth, as well as an authoritative attempt to limit or control that ambivalence, imposing a positive value on birth. Hence, the initial conversion of the lying-in room had the effect of a sort of dramatic staging for an aristo-

²⁷ Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” p. 11.

²⁸ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, p. 9.

²⁹ Gibson, “Scene and Obscene,” pp. 11–13.

³⁰ Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, p. 16.

cratic or royal birth 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 should he and his wife die without children "theire landis to rewle one ryghte," which creates his fear that the land will exist "in werre and in kare" should he fail to produce an heir (44–45, 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 into 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 lying in his wife's (and his own) bed (156). The presence of a kitchen 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 at just this moment of inversion that the text reminds us emphatically that, whatever Octavian's interpretation of the scene he finds in the room, his reading is incomplete and his actions unjust. The Thornton 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," and later refers to "The grete treson that pere was wrought" (L.158, C.156, 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.³¹ As such, the blood of childbirth was generally repudi-

³¹ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), pp. ix, 3.

ated as a pollutant in the same way as menstrual blood. In *Octavian*, the decapitated servant's blood seems simultaneously to 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 Peggy 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, *Octavian* takes this logic a step further.³² Blood on the bedsheets, associated paradoxically with both virginity and 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 the servant's body and into the emperor's bed implicitly suggests the fall of the royal head from the body politic, emphasized by Octavian's beastlike status as speechless and unreasoning: "wode."

The literal consequences of Octavian's "discovery" potentially mirror these details of the nightmarish 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

Within its political context, *Octavian* constructs the lying-in room as a positive space of state reproduction, although one that is nonetheless marked by anxieties concerning the unilaterally patrilineal character of that reproduction. However, the introduction of the discourse of sexual contamination into the lying-in room is further related to the medieval Christian church's frequent identification of this space as a site of particularly pernicious sexual contamination, a discourse that clearly resonated with aristocratic anxieties regarding the potential contamination of the patriline. In the case of church discourses regarding the woman's reproductive body and the rituals that were informed by them, however,

³²Ibid., p. 58.

a woman's sexual contamination represented not merely potential, but inherent threats to both her husband and to the larger community of the faithful.

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 the sacraments. The close association of childbirth with sexuality and therefore with sin rendered the pregnant body 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"³³ At the same time, the association of childbearing with women's spiritual salvation problematized an outright condemnation of the gravid woman.³⁴ 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 the sacraments. Gregory's letter to Augustine, dated 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 than purification, and therefore a woman should be allowed to enter the church to give thanks immediately after birth, without sin.³⁵ In this message, Gregory also reminds Augustine that "the fruitfulness of the flesh is no sin in the eyes of Almighty God," and refers to pregnancy itself as God's "gift of grace."³⁶ For this reason, he explains, pregnant women are eligible to be baptized.

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

³³ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁴ "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 Jennifer Wynne Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Medieval and Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 6.

³⁵ *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. i. 27, pp. 88, 89, 90, 91.

³⁶ Ibid., i. 27, pp. 89, 91.

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."³⁷ The earliest liturgical evidence for formalized churching ceremonies appears to date from this time, according to Rieder, who suggests 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 by which women who had died in childbirth or before churching in the church itself were buried not in the church itself but in the churchyard.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ For Taglia, the 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

³⁷ 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*, ed. Anne L. McClanan and Karen Rosoff Encarnación (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 93–114 (99).

³⁸ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 31.

³⁹ Gail McMurray Gibson, "Saint Anne and the Religion of Childbed: Some East Anglian Texts and Talismans," in *Interpreting Cultural Symbols: Saint Anne in Late Medieval Society*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Pamela Sheingorn (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1990), pp. 95–110 (96). See also Carolly Erickson, *The Medieval Vision: Essays in History and Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 196.

⁴⁰ Rieder, "Insecure Borders," p. 99.

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."⁴¹ 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 also if the ritual purification of churching, typically performed thirty to forty days after birth, had yet to be carried out.⁴² The belief that the contaminated and unpurified body of the recently pregnant woman would attract demons that could desecrate the entire churchyard constructed the pregnant woman specifically as a potential threat to the souls of the entire community.⁴³

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 go to confession, due to the physical and spiritual danger of her condition.⁴⁴ For noble and royal wives, this procedure was formalized in the ritual of houselling, in which the pregnant woman would walk from her home to a nearby chapel to confess her sins, then walk back home to her bedchamber, from which she would not emerge until thirty to forty days after she had given birth.⁴⁵ 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

⁴¹ 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 University Press, 1998), pp. 255–88 (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 Caesarean section, see Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, p. 26. See Erickson, *The Medieval Vision*, pp. 195–97, for a further discussion of church and folk beliefs concerning menstrual contamination, pregnancy, death, and burial.

⁴² Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, pp. 8–9; Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, p. 26; See also Gail McMurray Gibson, *Theatre of Devotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 61.

⁴³ Erickson, *The Medieval Vision*, p. 196.

⁴⁴ Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ 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, "Royal Entry into the World," p. 309.

to the temple forty days after she had given birth.⁴⁶ En route to the churching, the woman to be thus purified was accompanied by a number of the gossips who had attended her 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.⁴⁷

This ritual sequence of feminine separation, containment, and reintegration in many ways resembles the ritualistic domestic activity surrounding the domestic and dynastic lying-in room, yet it 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 on the confinement and the creation of a ritualized space of childbirth that is nevertheless characterized by each discourse in radically different ways. Like the domestic ritual of childbearing, the dominant 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

⁴⁶ Danièle Alexandre-Bidon and Didier Lett, *Children in the Middle Ages, Fifth Through Fifteenth Centuries* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), p. 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," p. 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, lines 15–35 and 57–90. John Lydgate, *A Critical Edition of John Lydgate's Life of Our Lady*, ed. Joseph A. Lauritis, Ralph A. Klinefelter, and Vernon F. Gallagher, Duquesne Studies Philological Series 2 (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961).

⁴⁷ Gibson, "Blessing from Sun and Moon," p. 149; Wilson, "The Ceremony of Childbirth," p. 78.

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 ambiguous position. For example, the interdiction against pregnant women leaving the birthing-room made their exclusion from the church somewhat redundant. In effect, a divergence developed in the church between doctrinal authorities, who 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 that 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 postpartum 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 be granted only after a public ritual and after a certain amount of time had passed during which, presumably, the malignant effects of the 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 a 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 Postpartum 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 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

Purification or churching feasts and banquets appear to have become widespread in England during the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries.⁵⁰ The post-churching celebration of a royal or aristocratic birth could be and often was 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 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.⁵¹

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 child-bearing, offering a counterdiscourse that reconfigured the positive aristocratic interpretation of the lying-in room and its function within

⁴⁸ Staniland, "Royal Entry into the World," p. 308.

⁴⁹ See Gibson, "Blessing from Sun and Moon," p. 147; Staniland, "Royal Entry into the World," p. 308. For accounts of expenditures concerning churching and post-churching festivities, see also Jennifer Ward, *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry, 1066–1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 68–70.

⁵⁰ 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 (2002): 224–41 (230).

⁵¹ See Staniland, "Royal Entry into the World," pp. 299–308, and Lee, "Men's Recollections," pp. 224–41, for more detailed descriptions of churching feasts in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

society. In addition, it has been suggested that the very extravagance of the feasts and celebrations functioned not only as a declaration of a 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.⁵² 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 on them were also distributed to prominent guests at the festivities in an attempt to fix the memory of the heir's date of birth and create a communally accepted fact or history of the heir's arrival and legitimacy, particularly in the memories of the more powerful guests. 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 later to call on 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.⁵³ 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 acquaint-

⁵²Lee, "Men's Recollections," p. 224.

⁵³See *ibid.*, p. 236, and Parsons, "The Pregnant Queen," p. 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 de-emphasize her sexuality.

tance, *Octavian* suggests the potential for these communities to become destructive of 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 anonymous adulteress. The formation of a specifically masculine community of "All þe lordes" who "abowte hym stode" in order to make "juggement . . . Of hir what worthy were" 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, 218–19). 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 guests at the feast (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. 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 hence 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, will be revealed. Ironically, it is this revelation that is false, engineered by the omnipresent figure of the evil mother-in-law. The dowager empress can only represent 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's 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 myn,
Wete þou wele þay [the children] are noghte thyne,
And þat lykes me full ill.
For þou myghte no childir haue,
Scho hase takyn thy kokes knaue;
I will it prove thurgh skylle."

(112–17)

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 either to 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 into the lying-in room, the disruption of the room by the discourse of contamination produces an immediate and drastic effect on 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 king-

dom. 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 on 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's 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 of which she is accused. 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 “euir he droghe hym ferre awaye / For þe rechese þat scho jn laye” (145–46). These strategies of narrative defense of the empress highlight the unwarranted

nature of her expulsion and 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 on 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 her connection to any sort of discourse of sexual contamination, the romance reconstructs the empress's relationship to religion as a positive value, emphasizing her status as the romance's only overtly pious character. Her association with religion is made a part of her character's virtues and highlights her unique religious exemplarity in a romance that includes Saracen enemies and ostensibly holy wars, but no sustained emphasis on 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 on the empress's piety is present only in the Middle English redactions of the romance; earlier versions lay pious remorse on the marginally more sympathetic Octavian.⁵⁴ 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 the imperial power of Rome's armies is fused in a Holy War with

⁵⁴ Harriet Hudson, "Introduction," in *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour of Artois, Sir Tryamour*, ed. Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo: TEAMS/Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), pp. 47–48.

Jerusalem's armies, supported and embodied by the prowess of the younger Octavian and his leonine companion.⁵⁵

The wrongful expulsion of the empress and her children causes a rupture in the political sphere of Rome. With the empress's banishment, the ruptured space of the lying-in room is repeatedly revisited in the wilderness, suggesting a need to restore the corrupted site of reproduction. Seeking solace at a fountain in a clearing, the empress's 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 own beastlike 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 (374, 376, 445–47). The lioness's 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 a function not only of its isolation, or 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,

⁵⁵Suzanne Yeager notes the medieval identification of Rome as the New Jerusalem, an association that 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. See Yeager, “*The Siege of Jerusalem* and Biblical Exegesis,” pp. 71, 93–95.

“nere wode,” by the sight of the lioness’s home, as well as by the empress’s safety within (447, 471). Like the lying-in room, the lioness’s 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 a heraldic beast.

The fact that the abductor of the heir to Octavian’s throne is not merely a 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’s re-creation 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’s necessarily sexualized body. The lioness’s 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 a 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 that 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.⁵⁶ 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

⁵⁶Clarissa Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 41.

fluid, unlike human mothers. The lioness's status as a nonmenstruating 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, putting him in a space represented by her own desexualized and totemic femininity. Thus, the lioness's 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's regal and mysterious presence serves as both the empress's vindication and her son's legitimation. The young Octavian becomes defined not as his mother's son, but as the legitimate son of a "kynge," 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 as 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 counterdiscourse 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 on the political work performed within the lying-in room and its positive impact on 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 is 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 ayerd,” 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.