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MARKING MATERNITY IN MIDDLE ENGLISH ROMANCE

MOTHERS, IDENTITY, AND CONTAMINATION

Angela Florschuetz
# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgments*  xiii  

*Introduction: The Mother’s Mark and the Maternal Monster*  xv  

1. Women’s Secrets and Men’s Interests: Rituals of Childbirth and Northern *Octavian*  1  

2. “That Moder Ever Hym Fed”: Nursing and Other Anthropophagies in *Sir Gowther*  33  

3. “Youre Owene Thyng”: The *Clerk’s Tale* and Fantasies of Autonomous Male Reproduction  67  

4. “A Mooder He Hath, But Fader Hath He Noon”: Maternal Transmission and Fatherless Sons: The *Man of Law’s Tale*  95  

5. Forgetting Eleanor: *Richard Coer de Lyon* and England’s Maternal Aporia  121  

6. Monstrous Maternity and the Mother-Mark: Melusine as Genealogical Phantom  155  

*Afterword: Abjection and the Mother at the End of this Book*  187  

*Notes*  195  

*Bibliography*  219  

*Index*  229
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INTRODUCTION: THE MOTHER’S MARK
AND THE MATERNAL MONSTER

Classical and medieval medical texts refer to a biological phenomenon known as the “mother’s mark,” in which the evidence of a pregnant woman’s connection to her unborn child becomes visibly manifest upon her child’s body. The mother’s mark comes into being as a result of the mother’s state of mind either at the moment of conception or at some point during pregnancy. Made up of and nourished by its mother’s menstrual material, a substance increasingly treated as poisonous and corrupting from the thirteenth century on, the unborn child was seen as susceptible during pregnancy to the influence transmitted through this medium, and to some extent after birth through the medium of breast milk. Simply speaking, the mother’s mark writes upon the child’s body the unruly and unpredictable content of his mother’s mind and emotions. A stray thought, a desperate craving, or an abject terror might give rise to the phenomenon, which manifests as an imprint of the woman’s mind upon the child’s body—a birthmark in the shape of a longed-for pickle, a deformed nose reminiscent of a wolf’s muzzle. More subversively, an adulterous wife’s guilt at the moment of her illicit tryst might bring her husband’s image to mind, falsely imparting the likeness of her husband upon her illegitimate child. To avoid the potential occurrence of the mother’s mark, a pregnant woman and her community were expected to shield the woman from the potential effects of her body’s unruly effects upon her unborn child, preserving intact the desired paternal imprint: pregnant women were to avoid upsetting places and experiences, bedchamber hangings and tapestries were to be free of suggestive shapes to avoid inadvertent maternal transmission of their images upon unborn children, and pregnant women’s cravings were to be placated, within reason.

Even such a brief discussion of the mother’s mark reveals a great deal regarding attitudes toward maternal biological influence: the imagined permeability between maternal and infant bodies, the division of those
bodies into two separate yet not entirely discrete entities who were believed to have potentially competing interests, the construction of the unborn child as simultaneously distinct from his mother, possessing his own predetermined biological destiny, a destiny vulnerable to the unwelcome influence of his ill-behaved or perhaps merely ill-disciplined mother. The topic of the mother’s mark serves as an apt introduction to the complicated questions posed by the maternal body in late medieval culture, questions concerning, among others, the nature and source of one’s identity and the boundaries between self and other. These questions in turn led to urgent pragmatic and ethical questions for mothers, their children, and more broadly, the families, communities, and bloodlines they participated within. As maternity continues to do today, medieval maternity challenged everyday ways of understanding the body, its boundaries, and their significance. The pregnant body offers a case in which one body no longer indicates a single discrete individual, demarcated by the boundary of skin and defined through its relationship to and against external others. Instead, the maternal body offers evidence of the transgression of those borders and reveals the unstable nature of somatic and temporal margins that pinpoint when an individual is recognized as a separate individual distinct from its mother. The ambiguous nature of these boundaries themselves led to serious and controversial questions of how to define and value the respective individuals involved in the process (in the case of death before or during childbirth, does one bury the child separately or still inside the mother? Is the child eligible for baptism? For burial in consecrated ground? Under what conditions?). The gestating body is at once contained and yet not discrete, hiding behind its barrier of skin and flesh the body and development of another individual whose eventual appearance is both anticipated and fraught with uncertainty and vulnerability. Medieval discussions of the mother’s mark reveal both the attempt to assert stable boundaries between one body and another, all the while acknowledging the transmissibility of influence asymmetrically from mother to child, a possibility regarded as not only unwelcome, but often contaminating and even endangering.

The medieval maternal body comes into view for the contemporary scholar as a site of profound anxiety, defined through both prohibition and desire. This ambivalence regarding maternity and its simultaneous promise and threat permeates medieval discourse regarding mothers and their biological influence. The moral and spiritual status of women’s reproductive bodies had always posed complicated questions for Christian communities, as on the one hand, biblical texts identified childbearing as a major condition of a woman’s salvation, while on the other hand, Levitican proscriptions labeled the pregnant and postpartum body as
polluted, dangerous to mother, child, and community. At the same time, according to Christian doctrine, the Virgin Mary’s legacy of humanity passed on to her son enabled the salvation of the faithful through Christ’s Incarnation—though, as Carolyn Walker Bynum has observed, the popularity of the Virgin Mary in her role as young mother does not seem to have elevated the status of lay mothers in any clearly demonstrable way. In secular aristocratic contexts, a similar pattern emerges in that aristocratic women were recognized as crucial to marital alliances and to procreation, yet their frequent status as outsiders in their husbands’ domains and their potential to subvert patrilineal descent through infidelity frequently exposed them to hostility and suspicion throughout their adult lives. Thus, the maternal body represented a complicated nexus of a large complex of overlapping yet often contradictory discourses of desire and anxiety in the Middle Ages.

In the late Middle Ages, the biological role of the mother increasingly became the subject of anxious questioning and urgent debate as against this backdrop of anxiety regarding the childbearing body, political, medical and religious changes intensified the urgency of the problems posed by the maternal body. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed a hardening of attitudes toward women’s bodies in theological and medical texts, as epitomized and encouraged by the hugely influential De secretis mulierum, a text that identified the materia or menstrual material believed to make up the substance of the child as a monstrous moral and physical poison that potentially threatened unborn children, hapless husbands, and by extension, a wider community of male interests. The shifting and permeable boundaries between women’s bodies and those of their children and the difference they represented within their husbands’ homes associated the female body in general and the maternal body in particular with monstrosity and the derangement of categories and boundaries the monster embodies as recent scholars have eloquently suggested. Yet at the same time, the heightened attention to Mary’s childbearing body, which accompanied affective piety rendered maternity and maternal imagery a focus of adoration, strongly linked to Eucharistic imagery that itself capitalized on the permeability of maternal and infant bodies manifest in gestation and nursing. The dynastic failures and crises endemic across Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries focused attention on the increasingly elusive promise of lineal continuity and led to shifts in attitudes toward the role of maternity as well as the possibilities for women to transmit threatened bloodlines as opposed to merely providing vessels for their husbands’ patriline. The stakes of this shift in thinking about maternal influence were perhaps most dramatically realized in the discourses that attempted to validate English claims to the French
throne during Hundred Years War, claims predicated on the premise that
women could pass on their father’s bloodlines to their sons, a proposi-
tion at best inconsistently acknowledged in medical and legal texts. The
maternal body in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries simultaneously
threatened instability, shame, and disaster while promising continuity,
regeneration, and even salvation.

This project argues that Middle English romances confront and resist
the urgent and increasingly contradictory discourses through which
maternity was defined, understood, feared, and desired in the late Middle
Ages. The rapid proliferation of family romances in England throughout
the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries speaks to the persistent fascination
with and anxiety concerning the family and its role in biological and
political reproduction. These texts focus on family crises of fertility,
legitimacy, separation, reunion, and recognition, in which a vulnerable
bloodline’s disruption threatens disaster and tragedy. Quite frequently,
the disruption of these families centers on the moment in which the
family’s future appears to be secured—the moment of childbirth—and
the body that makes this continuity possible—the mother’s. As a con-
sequence, Middle English romance abounds with narratives of women
accused, usually falsely, of adulterating or diverting the patriline, whether
through adultery, monstrosity, or the foreignness they threaten to impart
to their children. In these texts, families, communities, and polities are
frequently revealed to be vulnerable not only to the vagaries of biological
reproduction, but also and perhaps more profoundly, to the anxieties such
reproduction engenders.

In this book, I argue that while Middle English family romances
often reference and occasionally participate in contemporary discourses
that identify the maternal body with contamination, pollution, and
miscegenation, the lineal and spiritual imperatives that underlie the
romances render the actual status of maternal transmission secondary
at best. In particular, I suggest that these mostly anonymous late medi-
eval romanciers reject the proposition that maternal lineal or biological
influence is inherently damaging to individual, lineal, or community
identities, instead offering a more complicated treatment of the various
outcomes of such transmission on both individual and communal lev-
els. While these texts often reference the suffering of individual moth-
ers and to some extent their families, the true losers in this dynamic,
these texts suggest, are, first, the men whose bloodlines are threat-
cened by their own attempts to maintain lineal insularity and, second,
the larger institutions and polities whose stability is linked to women’s
reproductive bodies yet which profoundly distrust them as sources of
contamination.
Each chapter of this book highlights a particular cluster of anxieties regarding the permeating influence of the mother’s body on her children’s identities and thus on her husband’s bloodline: Octavian and Sir Gowther confront discourses of contamination focusing on gestating and lactating bodies; Chaucer’s Clerk’s and Man of Law’s Tales dismantle the flawed logic and negative consequences of the ideal of an autonomous patrilineal genealogy free from maternal interference; and Richard Coer de Lyon and the Middle English Melusine reveal the willful aporias of, respectively, political and lineal identity formation, each predicated on a suppression of self-evident and productive maternal contribution.

The first chapter of this book, “Women’s Secrets and Men’s Interests: Rituals of Childbirth and Northern Octavian,” introduces key secular and sacred discursive and ritual contexts through which the event of childbirth was understood, managed, and performed in late medieval England. In this chapter, I argue that while the gendered secrecy of childbirth rituals increasingly became approached with suspicion and hostility by philosophical, medical, and theological scholars, the Octavian poet identifies this suspicion itself as a much more pernicious threat to the stability of dynasties and polities. The late fourteenth-century romance Octavian represents the violation of these childbirth rituals and suggests that, while these violations are motivated by a desire to protect the patriline and thus the larger political community of Rome, masculine attempts to reveal, observe, or control the “secrets of women” ultimately jeopardize patriarchal interests by constructing the maternal body and its reproductive products as sites of biological, sexual, and lineal contamination. However, this 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 contamination, a threat inimical to the status of that space as a legitimate zone of political stability.

If pregnancy and childbirth were imagined as a site of contamination of bloodlines and infants, nursing also invited both scrutiny and anxiety in the way it blurred the boundaries between maternal and infant bodies and identities. However, this very fluidity of bodies between infant and mother or nurse offered potent imagery through which theologians and lay people alike imagined and understood two of the deepest mysteries of Christianity, Christ’s human Incarnation and the sacred ritual of anthropophagy, Communion. Thus the second chapter of this book argues that the discursive proximity of fetal and infant feeding, Eucharistic feeding, and the monstrous violence typically associated with anthropophagy forms a central concern in the late fourteenth-century romance Sir Gowther. To
this end, I examine theological and medical constructions of the nursing body, as well as its various literary, theological, and artistic associations with Eucharistic theology and imagery, all of which drew upon understandings of the nursing body as metaphorical and literal analogies to the Eucharist. The late-fourteenth-century romance *Sir Gowther* plays out the ramifications of this interpenetration, foregrounding tensions and contradictions in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century discourses concerning human bodies and their consumption in literal and figurative senses. The poem presents a world in which transgressive and sacred forms of anthropophagy have become promiscuously conflated, with horrific results for individuals and communities, lay and sacred alike. Ultimately, the text presents a resolution that seems to offer hierarchized boundaries between categories earlier violated with gleeful abandon by the poem’s reformed protagonist, yet the solution offered—a clear division between sacred and secular bodies—is undermined by the curious barrenness of the poem’s conclusion, suggesting that such a division, while undoubtedly more comfortable for its audience, ultimately remains untenable due to the very nature of salvific logic and the Incarnational logic upon which it is dependent.

The third and fourth chapters of this project shift from the contamination of infant bodies to the disruption of patrilines by maternal influence. Thus, in the third chapter of this work, I turn to Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* to suggest that in his revision of the familiar narrative of patient Griselda, Chaucer examines the ideological fiction of a discrete and autonomous male genealogy and reveals that the pursuit of this fantasy leads to an obsessive anxiety that foreign maternal influence will manifest in the heir, displacing paternal influence. Walter’s increasingly self-destructive search for Griselda’s interiority, the “secret” or hidden self that he imagines as potentially corrupting his patriline through his children, draws upon and imitates the discourses of “Secrets” literature, particularly in the tradition of the *Secrets of Women* texts, which locate in the sexual and reproductive bodies of women pernicious sources of contamination that can only be defended against by the revelation of their hidden truths by and to the men imagined as threatened in both body and bloodline by female secrecy. Griselda’s insistence that she conceals no such interiority participates in Walter’s fantasy of exclusive patrilineal influence by in effect emptying herself out of existence, so that Walter essentially reproduces with his double, rendering not only Griselda, but also the children she produces by him, exclusively his, his “owene thynge,” as she repeatedly names herself and her children. In this narrative, I argue, Chaucer identifies these strategies as self-defeating and destructive to individuals,
bloodlines, and, ultimately, polities, as they lead to the lineal disasters presented by infertility and incest.

In chapter 4, “‘A Mooder He Hath, But Fader Hath He Noon:’ Maternal Transmission and Fatherless Sons: the Man of Law’s Tale,” I examine the nightmare of maternal transmission that forms the mirror image of the fantasies of autonomous male transmission discussed in the previous chapter. In the Man of Law’s Tale, Chaucer interrogates the reflex to label maternal contribution as a source of monstrosity, and suggests that this impulse ultimately leads to genealogies themselves more monstrous than the supposed progeny of such a mix. Whereas in the Clerk’s Tale Chaucer does not appear to settle the question of maternal transmission, instead focusing on the ultimately self-destructive patriarchal impulse to negate or deny its possibility, in the Man of Law’s Tale, he represents in Constance—the heiress of Rome—an unmistakable and uncanny maternal inheritance, as evidenced by Maurice’s near-identical resemblance to his mother. In the Man of Law’s Tale, I argue, maternal influence passes beyond hybridity or contamination to instead represent a maternal hijacking of the patriline as Maurice’s resemblance to his mother makes manifest his relationship to his mother and fully obscures his ties to his father, a pattern that is maintained in his inheritance, as he becomes his maternal grandfather’s—rather than his father’s—heir. Chaucer’s dismantling of narratives of autonomous patrilineal reproduction, I argue, resonates with and participates in contemporary propagandistic struggles between England and France over the nature and value of female biological transmission and the ability of women to transmit bloodline that were at the heart of English claims to the French throne during the Hundred Years War.

The final two chapters of Marking Maternity turn from representations of how maternal influence marks individual bodies and identities to the larger concern of how mothers trouble larger collective systems of identity formation and historical self-fashioning. The fifth chapter, “Forgetting Eleanor: Richard Coer de Lyon and England’s Maternal Aporia,” focuses on the representation of relatively recent history in the Middle English Richard Coer de Lyon. While the poem’s earliest redaction closely corresponds to chronicle accounts of the national hero’s crusading career, later versions interpolate fantastic episodes into Richard’s biography, which trouble the romance’s claiming of Richard as the paradigmatic exemplar of pure English identity. Indeed, the urgent problem of how to define a cohesive and discrete English identity haunts the text as it presents a series of potential markers of Englishness (physiological, geographic, culinary, religious, lineal), each of which is destabilized in turn, compromised in
ways that insistently point back to Richard’s foreign mother(s). Richard’s substitution of the historical Richard I’s well-known, even infamous mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, by Cassodorien, a mysterious supernatural mother from Antioch, focuses attention on the ways that mothers trouble unitary theories of identity in political and patriarchal narratives, theories of an English “naciouhede” that the romance simultaneously seems to desire and undermine. As a result, though the romance’s fantastic representations of Richard’s lion-slaying, demon steeds, and cannibalism may serve to temporarily draw attention away from its early genealogical interventions, they, and the model of the creation of a discursive English “naciouhede” they provide also reveal the key to understanding this earlier episode and its ultimately more ambitious historical project: an account of how historical narratives of collective identity are built upon the complicit suppression of memories of the presence of maternal otherness within the identity group, memories that conflict with the fantasy of internal cohesion and homogeneity within an English “people.”

While Richard Coer de Lyon draws attention to the ways in which the collusive effort to deny and marginalize maternal contributions enables and produces new formulations of collective political identity, the Middle English Melusine suggests the catastrophic potential for these same mechanisms to destabilize lineal structures and the communities that are defined through and benefit from these structures. In the final chapter of this project, “Monstrous Maternity and the Mother-Mark: Melusine as Genealogical Phantom,” I argue that Melusine repeatedly reveals itself to be a genealogical romance that defaults on its promises, calling into question the stability and thus validity of genealogical discourse. In this romance in which patrimonies are frequently created from nothing, lost, reclaimed, then rejected, the genealogy most scrutinized is associated not with a founding father, but rather with a supernatural founding mother, Melusine the fairy. Despite Melusine’s monstrous nature, her reproductive excess is shown to supplement a catastrophic lack in virtually every patriline the text mentions; in a landscape devoid of Christian heirs, Melusine’s prolific production of chivalric sons becomes linked not only to the preservation of her own line, but also to the success of Christian communities in the Levant. Her beneficial influence over her family and larger Christian community, however, is eventually interrupted and reversed by her husband’s accusation that she is a corrupt and monstrous mother, an accusation that literally transforms Melusine into the dreaded phantom she is accused of being, dooming not only herself, but also her line. Melusine’s repeated dismantling of the patrilineal ideal and substitution of a hybrid, albeit monstrous, alternative suggests the ideological strain brought upon the system of patrilineal primogeniture in the late
fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a period in which England suffered what has been called a “crisis in male succession.”

Melusine suggests that the most threatening challenge to patrilineal primogeniture is not in fact the fully articulated gaps and excesses that biological reproduction imposes on a relatively strict genealogical imperative, but rather the public acknowledgment by a patriarch that women are not only the vessels of, but also contributors to, lineal reproduction.

Woven through these concerns specific to individual texts, several frequent related issues persistently emerge in these texts—in particular, secrecy and concealment, hybridity, monstrosity, and contamination. Of the six romances most closely examined in this project, for example, four explicitly invoke real and/or imagined monsters, all present questions of hybridity and miscegenation, and all involve the problems posed by secrets both kept and revealed. These preoccupations are themselves revealing in the way that they situate maternity within a system of concerns regarding not only the bodies maternity produces, but also the ideas and questions that cluster around maternal bodies. The persistent tendency to attribute monstrous births to maternal influence via menstrual contamination has its typographic parallel in the manuscript tendency to conflate menstruum, menstrual blood, with monstrum, or monster. In turn, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, “monstrum is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns,’” associating monstrosity with its tendency to reveal categories and norms through their violation. Accordingly in these romances, maternity’s monstrous nature often emerges or is asserted most overtly when it demonstrates the gaps, flaws, and fictions central to the patriarchal institutions and discourses through which maternity is defined, valued, and perhaps most tellingly, devalued. Maternity, these texts suggest, is not itself inherently monstrous, but is rendered monstrous through its inconvenient necessity within a patrilineal system that attempts to ignore, elide, and abjectify it, often to its own detriment. If patrilineal discourses demand the maternal monster, these texts suggest, it is a monster that inevitably turns on its creator.