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Mothers, Space, and Power in *Athelston*¹

Kirsty Bolton

Abstract: The late fourteenth century Middle English romance *Athelston* explores the extent and propriety of monarchic power. Integral to this exploration are the characters of two women whose enactments of motherhood reveal the very human failings of the divinely elected king and contribute to the romance's advocacy that law and the church should temper monarchic power. This article focuses on the use of space in relation to power, authority, gender, and motherhood, arguing that the writer of *Athelston* uses the disruption of gendered spaces, particularly in relation to pregnant women, to comment on systems of power and authority in the late fourteenth century, challenging the concept of infallible royal power.

Keywords: motherhood, mothers, space, gender, monarchy, London, power, authority

1 Many thanks to Laura Kalas, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and the Gender & Medieval Studies Group for the special commendation in the GMS Graduate Essay Prize that led to me submitting this article to the *Medieval Feminist Forum*. Thanks also to the peer reviewers, who provided enthusiastic and supportive reviews which led to a much-improved article.

The late fourteenth century Middle English romance *Athelston* explores the extent and propriety of monarchic power.² The king, Athelston, attempts to execute a wrongly accused traitor without trial; when his queen tries to intercede, he deals her a blow to the stomach, killing their unborn child. A trial of the accused is subsequently arranged, in which he is found innocent, and his wife, Countess Edith, Athelston's sister, gives birth outside St. Paul's Cathedral. Athelston realizes his folly and makes the child, his nephew, heir to the English throne.³ Integral to the exploration of adjudicating kingly power are the characters of two heavily pregnant women whose enactments of motherhood reveal the very human failings of the divinely elected king; the mothers actively contribute to the romance's advocacy of law and the church to temper monarchic power. This article focuses on the use of space in relation to power, authority, gender, and motherhood, arguing that the writer of *Athelston* uses the disruption of gendered spaces, particularly in relation to pregnant women, to comment on systems of power and authority in the late fourteenth century. The romance considers different kinds of performative resistance to absolute power in public and private contexts through the actions of two heavily pregnant women, and finds that the gendering of space, both bodily and otherwise, is significant in these negotiations.

There are two scenes in the romance in which the enactment of motherhood emphasizes the intricate interplay of gender, space, and power, and the author uses these scenes to interrogate the impact of public versus private spaces on the construction of royal authority. First, is the scene midway through the narrative in which the pregnant queen publicly attempts to intercede with her husband for the fair trial of his accused brother-in-law, and Athelston responds with a violent kick. The resulting miscarriage of their son and heir occurs in the queen's private chambers. Then, the romance concludes with

2 *Athelston* is dated to 1375–1400 and survives in a single early fifteenth century manuscript, Gonville and Caius College Cambridge MS 175/96.

3 "Athelston," in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1986), 130–53. Citations will give line numbers from this edition.

another very public enactment of motherhood when the pregnant countess, Edith, is subjected to trial by fire in defense of her husband and subsequently gives birth. As Helen Young discusses, *Athelston* uses English and French law to explore kingship and power, but I argue that, further to this, the poet uses both gender and space in pitting two parturient mothers in opposition to Athelston's will in public settings.⁴

This article works from the premise, established by theorists from both philosophy and geography, that space is a social construct. Henri Lefebvre and Doreen Massey agree that space and place are created in accordance with social need and social hierarchies, including the powerful factors of class and gender.⁵ Not only does human interaction create spaces specifically for certain groups of society, but those spaces also influence behaviors and interactions, supporting the hierarchies that initially created them. The connection between space and power is, then, evident, "since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification."⁶ The work of these theorists is complex, nuanced, and focused toward modern capitalist society, but it is a useful catalyst for a separate discussion about space in societies of the past that were built on similar models of value and exchange. The hegemonies of gender and class were integral to the construction of society in medieval England, but, as with any society, the binaries were more flexible and mutable than may previously have been considered. Analyzing literary representations of power and gender within specific spaces reveals the complex interplay between social categorization, space, and power in contemporary society.

4 Helen Young, "Athelston and English Law: Plantagenet Practice and Early Medieval English Precedent," *Parergon* 22, no. 1 (2005): 95–118.

5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, ed. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), and *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

6 Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 3.

THE QUEEN'S PUBLIC INTERCESSION

The queen's intercession is one element of an intricate exploration of the intersections between space, power, and identity in *Athelston*. Athelston's sense of his own authority as king is strongly connected to physical spaces, and it is this that the queen disrupts in the hall, as will be shown in this section. Robert Allen Rouse, in his examination of spatial hermeneutics in medieval romance, notes that London is a complex site of negotiation in a developing fantasy of English nationhood; this is particularly evident in *Athelston* in terms of how space is used to interrogate power, gender, and law.⁷ The complexity of *Athelston's* exploration of the connections between space and power is evident through even a brief synopsis, which emphasizes the juxtaposition of specific places with enactments of power and authority. In this Middle English romance, four messengers become sworn brothers. One of their number, Athelston, inherits the English throne, bestows earldoms on Egelond (who marries Athelston's sister, Edith) and Wymound, and invests Alryke as archbishop of Canterbury. In time, Wymound becomes jealous of Egelond's wife and sons, and tells Athelston that Egelond is plotting to poison him. Athelston vows to kill Egelond and his family, summoning them to the capital on a pretext, bringing them into a space of his power and authority in order to challenge Egelond. Although Edith is heavily pregnant, they travel to London and are imprisoned by the king. Athelston's wife moves from her private chamber to the public hall and attempts to intercede, inducing her husband's wrath. The queen sends a messenger to Alryke, who hurries to Westminster, a spatial symbol of legal and proportional power. Alryke orders a great fire of nine plough lengths to be laid outside St. Paul's Cathedral, reminding the reader of the power of the church. Egelond endures the trial without harm, followed by his two sons. His wife, Edith, then walks across the fire and goes into labor. She publicly gives birth to St.

⁷ Robert Allen Rouse, "Reading (in) Medieval London: Emplaced Reading, or 'Towards a Spatial Hermeneutic for Medieval Romance,'" in *The Materiality of Medieval Romance*, ed. Nicholas Perkins (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 41–57, at 41.

Edmund, whom the penitent Athelston immediately makes his heir. Specific contemporary landmarks are emphasized throughout the narrative, each with strong connotations of the power and authority of particular institutions, such as the church and Parliament. The poet uses the characters' actions within these spaces to temper the power of Athelston, who is presented as believing that his authority extends omnipotently across England.

Spatial practice, both public and private, is integral to the queen's characterization as an opposing force to Athelston's unabashed displays of monarchic power. Rosalind Field calls for a textual recentering of *Athelston*, whose title is an eighteenth-century imposition upon the text.⁸ Field argues that approaching the text through the birth of St. Edmund repositions the queen and Edith as the focus, suggesting a biblical model for the focus on the two pregnant women—that is, the Visitation of the pregnant Mary to the pregnant Elizabeth described in Luke's Gospel.⁹ The reading I propose that centers the two mothers of the text emphasizes even further the gendered spaces utilized within the narrative.

The queen is introduced to the narrative with a flight from her chambers to the hall, when Countess Edith's squire "tidings tolde here soone" (quickly told her news) of the king's unlawful attempt to execute the accused traitors without trial.¹⁰ The comfort and seclusion of her chambers is evoked with the detail of the "[g]erlondes of chiries" (bunches of cherries) that she casts off her lap, as eating in private chambers was in the fourteenth century reserved for elite nobility.¹¹ Casting the cherries from her suggests the haste with which she exits her chamber and hurries to the hall to intervene in her husband's decision to punish her brother-in-law and his family. It also indicates how she moves through space,

8 Rosalind Field, "*Athelston*, or the Middle English Nativity of Saint Edmund," in *Christianity and Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Rosalind Field, Philippa Hardman, and Michelle Sweeney (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 139–49.

9 Luke 1:39–46, referenced in Field, "*Athelston*," 145.

10 "*Athelston*," l. 255.

11 "*Athelston*," l. 256.

from the comfort of her chambers to the hall, where she launches into a speech, presenting herself to the king with the formalities of public interaction that befit the space she is now in: “Sere King, I am before thee come / With a child, doughter or a sone, / Graunte me my bone” (Sir King, I come before you with a child, daughter or son. Grant me my request).¹² Various archaeologists have attested, as Jan Shaw also confirms, that the rooms assigned as queens’ chambers were increasingly positioned ever deeper within the castle, removing her from the immediacy of the political action in the hall.¹³ Space within the castle is, therefore, gendered and separated according to socially constructed hierarchies of power and authority. Massey theorizes that while social interaction creates gendered space, the adherence to those concepts of space influences social interaction, and perpetuates divisions of gender, class, and power.¹⁴ This is starkly evident in *Athelston*’s use of space and gender to explore specific workings of power.

The queen acknowledges that she enters the king’s space, a formal, public, masculine-coded space, with the line “Sere King, I am before thee come” (Sir King, I come before you)—she shows awareness here that she is the anomaly, entering a space in a context that is not expected. Emma O’Loughlin Bérat argues that the queen presumes her status as both the king’s spouse and the mother of his unborn heir to carry influence, indicating that this was an accepted view of women’s domestic authority.¹⁵ Even if she does expect her intercession to be successful, the queen recognizes the hierarchies of space and power as part of the ritual. Mary Housum Ellzey contends that female speech, especially advice, can only go

12 “Athelston,” ll. 259–61.

13 Jan Shaw, *Space, Gender and Memory in Middle English Romance: Architectures of Wonder in Melusine* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 97. See also Jane Grenville, *Medieval Housing* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1997), and Amanda Richardson, “Gender and Space in English Royal Palaces c.1160–c.1547: A Study in Access Analysis and Imagery,” *Medieval Archaeology* 47 (2003): 131–65.

14 Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*.

15 Emma O’Loughlin Bérat, “Transformative Genealogies: Childbirth and Crises of Succession in *Athelston*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 42 (2020): 183–212, at 200.

unchallenged in romance if the female character's power is somehow discounted, through, for example, comedy or divine assistance. In her analysis of the advice of wives in three romance texts, Ellzey argues that Athelston alone violently rejects his wife's advice because the queen operates here outside of the bounds imposed by the genre.¹⁶ In this way, the romance reflects historical spatial practice, as a wife's influence over her husband was supposed to be private, subtle, and unacknowledged, except when sanctioned as a public ritual of intercession. The queen's influence through intercession was a delicate process that was used both to temper and to support the king's authority. Court documents of the era, for example, reveal that Anne of Bohemia, in her first act as Richard II's queen, submitted a "special request ... in this parliament" that participants in the Peasants' Revolt be granted pardons.¹⁷ Mark Ormrod views this as a carefully constructed perception by the crown to ensure that Richard did not appear lenient on rebels.¹⁸ Whether she did intercede or not, "Anne of Bohemia was being publicly portrayed as the conscience of king and people, the harbinger of peace, and the guarantor of domestic harmony."¹⁹ This is the role that the queen attempts to fulfill, yet her instigation of the intercessory process is disrupted by Athelston.

Crucially, the queen has not broached this space alone. She has come with her unborn child; her pregnant state is introduced with the uncertainty of the sex of "a child, daughter or a sone" (a child, daughter or a son), indicating that it is still in the queen's belly. The poet prompts the audience to expect the queen's status

16 Mary Housum Ellzey, "The Advice of Wives in Three Middle English Romances: *The King of Tars*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Athelston*," *Medieval Perspectives* 7 (1999): 44–52, at 51.

17 *Calendar of the Close Rolls, Richard II, 1381–1385*, ed. H. C. Maxwell Lyte, 2nd ed. (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920), 105.

18 W. M. Ormrod, "In Bed with Joan of Kent: The King's Mother and the Peasants' Revolt," in *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain. Essays for Felicity Riddy*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Rosalynn Voaden, Arlyn Diamond, Ann Hutchison, Carol Meale, and Lesley Johnson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 277–92, at 288.

19 Ormrod, "In Bed with Joan of Kent," 288.

as the incubator of the king's heir to carry some import, as it is linked linguistically with her request for the king's mercy toward the accused (discussed above): "Sere King, I am before thee come / With a child, daughter or a sone, / Graunte me my bone." Announcing her pregnancy verbally, she seeks to add strength to her intercession. She acknowledges her own status as a space which houses a child; she states that she is in the king's space and that their child is within her body as precursors to her request for Athelston's mercy. Hierarchies of gendered space are emphasized, since the queen exists as a "heterotopia" for her unborn child even as she negotiates her status in the hall as a space of masculine authority.²⁰ The queen's presence in the hall also emphasizes the importance of private, domestic space in upholding the seeming authority of public, state space, as the king's authority as monarch relies upon his ability to secure an heir, which happens in the chamber, with the queen. As Angela Florschuetz has explored, the notion that patriarchal succession is entirely dependent upon the actions that occur within the female gendered space of the birthing room requires acknowledging the tension between the necessity of allowing women this space and the anxiety about their agency within it.²¹ As such, birthing rooms are an example of the negotiation of gendered space that was implicit in social interaction and that is interrogated by the romance genre. *Athelston*, then, questions the masculine space of the hall, reminding the reader of its connections to and dependence upon domestic spaces within the castle through the queen's movement from private to public areas.

Invoking the proper use of public space and law, the queen pleads to move the decision regarding the supposed traitors to "the

20 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27. Foucault categorized heterotopias as spaces that served specific functions for particular groups of people yet mirrored the wider world, such as cemeteries and prisons. The queen is, physically, an enclosed world for her child, even as she herself exists in the hall and the London of the text.

21 Angela Florschuetz, "Women's Secrets: Childbirth, Pollution, and Purification in Northern *Octavian*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 235–68.

plaine parlement” (open Parliament), suggesting, perhaps, that this change of venue would result in a different outcome from Athelston’s decision to hang his sworn brother.²² She does not ask that the king pardon the accused, but that he consent to a fair trial under the law and “comoun sent” (common assent).²³ When she enlists the archbishop of Canterbury’s assistance via letter,²⁴ he also urges the king “weten all be comoun assent / In the plaine parlement” (be certain of common assent in open Parliament) in exactly the same language as did the queen.²⁵ Dominique Battles argues that both the queen and Alryke are referring to “the great innovation of post-Conquest English law: the jury system.”²⁶ Significantly, Battles cites this contrast between pre- and post-Conquest legal practice in the poem as emphasizing private and public approaches to justice. Wymound’s nefarious accusations within the king’s chamber and the unratified justice that Athelston attempts to implement contrast starkly with the queen’s enactment of motherhood as she breaks out of the sanctioned, enclosed space of the domestic setting in a bid to correct the course that Wymound and Athelston were attempting to set for the law.

The archbishop legitimizes the queen’s intervention; her request is echoed by both a man and the church. In both cases, however, it has the effect of reminding Athelston, and the reader, of the limits of his power, as both the queen and the archbishop have not only challenged his authority within the hall but demanded that the decision be moved to a space that diffuses the king’s authority. As Elaine Treharne notes, Athelston regards the suggestion of “comoun assent” as “a direct challenge to his own authority and as resistance to

22 “Athelston,” l. 266.

23 “Athelston,” l. 265.

24 There is much travel of people and information in the narrative, for which no time frame is given, but a sense of urgency prevails as characters and messengers cross London on horseback.

25 “Athelston,” ll. 447–48.

26 Dominique Battles, “The Middle English *Athelston* and 1381, Part I: The Politics of Anglo-Saxon Identity,” *Studies in Philology* 117, no. 1 (2020): 1–39, at 26.

his royal will.²⁷ Parliament holds a different public authority from that of the king's court, one which does not confer absolute power to the king. While French kings held absolute monarchic power, the English king never had this kind of absolute power and was obliged to act within the law.²⁸

It is not only the tension between the English and French legal systems that is interrogated by the author's exploration of gendered space, but also the early English past, which he evokes in the names of key characters. That the fictional Athelston is based on the historical king Athelstan is acknowledged to varying degrees by scholars, with the broad consensus being that the early medieval English names found in the romance seek to evoke that past age without the Athelston character being a direct representation of Athelstan.²⁹ The author places the early medieval English names in a fourteenth-century geography, emphasizing contemporary places, such as St. Paul's Cathedral and Fleet Street.³⁰ In the text, he uses intersections of space and time to comment upon law and monarchic power, as the familiar fourteenth-century London landscape is populated with characters who evoke a past age through their names and associations. This further centers the queen and Edith and their negotiations of gendered space. Liz Herbert McAvoy notes that medieval theorists conceived of time as masculine and space as feminine, with linear progression of time, such as primogenital succession, being prioritized over women's more cyclical experiences of time.³¹ In evoking

27 Elaine Treharne, "Romanticizing the Past in the Middle English *Athelston*," *Review of English Studies* 50 (1999): 1–21, at 13.

28 Young, "Athelston and English Law," 115.

29 Laura A. Hibbard, "Athelston, a Westminster Legend," *PMLA* 36 (1921): 223–44. Dominique Battles argues for a direct representation of Athelstan and the glorification of the early English past. Battles, "The Middle English *Athelston* and 1381, Part I" and Dominique Battles, "The Middle English *Athelston* and 1381, Part II: The Road to Rebellion," *Studies in Philology* 117, no. 3 (2020): 469–87.

30 Treharne, "Romanticizing the Past," 14.

31 Liz Herbert McAvoy, "In Principio: The Queer Matrix of Gender, Time and Memory in the Middle Ages," in *Reconsidering Gender, Time and Memory in Medieval Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Cox, Liz Herbert McAvoy, and Roberta Magnani (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2015), 1–12.

England's past and juxtaposing it with fourteenth-century concerns of power and authority, the text disrupts lineal time in favor of a potentially more feminine experience. The author draws historical parallels with the contemporary king, Richard II, through which, as Elizabeth Ashman Rowe argues, the poet explores the nature of monarchic authority.³² Bérat emphasizes Richard's interest in symbolic and non-agnatic succession, connecting it with the narrative outcome of *Athelston*.³³ Field also acknowledges the text's connections to Richard II and the exploration of non-patriarchal, non-agnatic forms of legacy and futurity, as she sees the character of Athelston as "consistent with Ricardian propaganda and the aesthetic claims of the feminine, the regal and the childlike."³⁴ As a king who, long before the end of his reign, was clearly unlikely to provide an agnatic heir, Richard's similarities to Athelston emphasize women's essentiality to lineage and offer alternatives to masculine perspectives of time and space. That Athelston could represent either Athelstan or Richard, or both, adds myriad layers of meaning to the political commentary of the romance as the parallels with a nostalgic past and a tumultuous present show the concerns of the poet and the audience.³⁵

In invoking Parliament, the queen challenges Athelston's attempt to wield unlawful monarchic authority. That she does so in a public space with witnesses may be an attempt to validate her request that Athelston adhere to the law, but instead it causes him to assert his divine royal power through "Him that were the coroune of thorn" (he who wore the crown of thorns), insisting that "I be king of lande!" (I am king of this land).³⁶ The language here equates the king's power with the landscape, adding a further spatial dimension to the power struggle. Matthew Innes has shown that land rights

32 Elizabeth Ashman Rowe, "The Female Body Politic and the Miscarriage of Justice in *Athelston*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 17 (1995): 79–98, at 80.

33 Bérat, "Transformative Genealogies," 192.

34 Field, "*Athelston*," 148.

35 The end of Richard's reign was, arguably, characterized by vengeful tyranny. Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 203. He was deposed in 1399, so the comparison in *Athelston* may have emphasized the fragility of even divinely invested monarchic power to the romance's fifteenth-century audience.

36 "Athelston," ll. 270, 272.

were essential to the development of identity in medieval Western Europe.³⁷ The symbiosis of land and identity is connected with the complex relationship between social interaction and space, creating spaces that are synonymous with, and necessary to uphold, particular identities. The author, however, focuses on the interplay between intangible power and quantifiable land; the text's use of specific physical geography tempers the divinely invested power of the king by placing it in the context of practical governance. Athelston invokes his kingship over the physical element of England in order to support his actions, but the romance's focus on physical geographical markers, such as Westminster and St. Paul's Cathedral, instead places his power in a wider context in which kingship is only one source of authority and one element of a communal national identity. Athelston's attempts to substantiate his power through reference to land requires a narrative agreement that the other characters challenge by invoking the same spatial markers in the context of their own agendas of authority; the London and the England of the text become palimpsests of identity and power, as Rouse notes that narratives play a role in constructing and reconstructing geography.³⁸ Here, geographies reconstruct narratives, and not in the king's favor.

Athelston's response to his pregnant queen begins in equally spatial terms to her intercession: "'Dame,' he saide, 'go fro me! / Thy bone shall nought y-grauntid be'" (Lady, he said, go from me! Your request will not be granted).³⁹ In denying the queen's request, he insists on physical distance between them; he insists that she removes herself from his space, the space of the hall that he is supposed to command. Kim Phillips notes that "it was within the great houses and castles of the elite that the hall acquired its deepest associations with power and display."⁴⁰ Here Athelston attempts to assert his

37 Matthew Innes, "Land, Freedom and the Making of the Medieval West," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 16 (2006): 39–74.

38 Rouse, "Reading (in) Medieval London," 42.

39 "Athelston," ll. 267–68.

40 Kim M. Phillips, "Public and Private: Women in the Home, Women in the Streets," in *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Kim M. Phillips (London and Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2016), 105–26, at 113.

power in a public display of dismissing his queen and her request by barring her from the space that she has entered. He expects his command to be carried out because he expects to hold the power in the hall, as a space of public and masculine-coded authority—that is, gendered spaces perpetuate gendered behaviors and interactions. By organizing social spaces to support a gendered display of power and authority, those structures become entrenched. This contributes to Athelston's expectation that his authority will be revered within the space of the hall and emphasizes the queen's disruption of the equilibrium in defying that authority.

Athelston's commandment also, however, challenges that supposed equilibrium, as Athelston's attempt to wield unlawful absolute power is shown, both by his violence toward the queen and by his repentance at the end of the narrative, to be wrong. If the *Athelston* poet uses the queen to contest kingly authority, the poet also uses her to question hierarchies of gendered space by bringing her motherhood and her intercession into her public defiance of the king's misguided sense of his own authority. Another contemporary Middle English romance, *Sir Degrevant*, incorporates a wife's defiance of her husband's authority within his hall, as the countess ignores the earl's command that all within should remain in the hall and goes outside to engage with Degrevant from atop the castle walls:

The Erle ansuerd in hy,
 “Here es nane so redy
 þat schames þat ilk doghety
 Sir Degreuant dedis.”
 The Countas went to þe walle,
 And hir dogheter with-alle.⁴¹

(The earl answered in haste, “there is no one here who advises me to deal with that brave Sir Degrevant.” The countess went to the wall with her daughter.)

41 L. F. Casson, ed., *The Romance of Sir Degrevant: A Parallel-Text Edition from Mss. Lincoln Cathedral A.5.2 and Cambridge University Ff.1.6* (London: Early English Text Society, 1949), ll. 413–18.

The earl expects to be able to control his wife's movement through space and her disregard challenges his authority and reveals the folly of his behavior.

Like *Degrevant's* countess, the queen unnerves Athelston when she does not retreat, but appeals further to God to intervene in the situation: "And whenne the Quene these wurdes herde ... On here bare knees doun she felle, / And praide yit for hem alle" (And when the queen heard these words, she fell on her bare knees and prayed for them all).⁴² This action not only disregards his command that she leave the hall, but it further questions his authority within that space; in praying, she appeals to the only power that the king acknowledges to be higher than himself. Athelston has drawn upon the image of the crucified Christ to justify his own hegemonic power, and the queen here responds by emphasizing her connection to the Virgin Mary, mother of God and conduit between Earth and Heaven. Grenville notes that masculine, public spaces were open to women in the fourteenth century but argues that communality does not necessarily imply equality.⁴³ This means that although women may have been admitted to the masculine space of the hall, it was expected that the gendered hierarchy of authority, power, and influence would continue to exist, and that women's private influence would not affect the gendered authority of the space.

This power struggle is between Athelston's authority and the queen's influence, though the queen also represents the laws that temper the king's authority. Athelston's queen challenges that hierarchy when she attempts to assert her influence over the king in this space and his reaction is to that challenge. Athelston warns the queen "Hast thou broke my commaundment; / Abid full dere thou shall" (You have broken my commandment, and you will pay dearly), before "With his foot he wolde nought wonde; / He slough the child right in here wombe" (He did not hesitate with his foot; he killed the child in her womb).⁴⁴ The public nature of this violence is emphasized when the queen swoons "amonges hem all" (among

42 "Athelston," ll. 273, 277–78.

43 Grenville, *Medieval Housing*, 66.

44 "Athelston," ll. 280–83.

them all), indicating an assembled court.⁴⁵ She is then carried by her ladies back to her chamber, where she gives birth to a stillborn son:

Ladiis and maidenis that there were
 The Quene to here chaumbir bere,
 And there was dool y-nough.
 Soon withinne a litil spase
 A knave-child y-born ther wase,
 As bright as blosme on bough;
 He was bothe white and red.
 Of that dint was he ded;
 His owne fadir him slough!⁴⁶

(The ladies and maidens there carried the queen to her chamber and there was much sorrow. A boy child was soon born, as bright as blossom on the branch; he was both white and red. He died of that blow; his own father killed him.)

The contrast between the queen's chamber and the hall is emphasized again; textually, because the queen is carried to her chamber in a new stanza, and also with the sense of space that is evoked in each location. The hall, the site of Athelston's display of power and violence, is associated in the text with commandments and masculine authority. God and Jesus are both invoked in the hall, first by Athelston, who links his divine kingship with Jesus's sacrifice, as quoted earlier. Athelston's invocation of Christ is intended to support his authority as king, reminding the queen and the reader of the divine nature of this royal rule. The queen challenges this directly when "she praide yit for hem alle" (she prayed for them all), effectively attempting to bypass the authority of her husband and king by invoking God.

⁴⁵ "Athelston," l. 284.

⁴⁶ "Athelston," ll. 285–93.

THE QUEEN'S PRIVATE TRAGEDY

In contrast to the large, public space of the hall, the queen's intimate private chamber is the scene of the resulting stillbirth.⁴⁷ It is here that she is supposed to perform the second of the two roles associated with queens—providing an heir—yet this private labor is as disastrous as her public intercession. When he is born, the infant is described as “bright as blosme on bough ... bothe white and red” (as bright as blossom on the branch ... both white and red), reminding the reader of the cherries—symbol of fertility, fruitfulness, and Mary—that the queen previously held in her lap, but equally evoking the destruction engendered by Athelston's kick. Before the queen's pregnancy is revealed in line 260, the “gerlondes of chiries” (bunches of cherries) that she discards foreshadow both her motherhood and the violence that will undo that motherhood, as the fruit is linked to the Virgin Mary in the *Cherry Tree Carol*. In this carol, first recorded in the *N-town Plays* around 1500 but likely from an earlier era, a pregnant Mary asks Joseph to pick some cherries for her and he spitefully suggests that the father of her child should undertake the task.⁴⁸ The discord between Mary and Joseph foreshadows that between Athelston and his queen, culminating in Athelston's violent outburst. The poet casts the queen as the ultimate mediator and mother, Mary, but her return to her chamber, hastily redressed as both birthing chamber and morgue, emphasizes the destruction that Athelston has perpetrated upon his wife and his lineage.

The space is familiar to the audience as a birthing room and, as a space of female authority, it contrasts with the masculinity of the hall.⁴⁹ Felicity Riddy argues that, in Middle English romance,

⁴⁷ Bedchambers were routinely appropriated and redefined as birthing chambers in elite households, creating an enclosed space of female agency within the castle or house.

⁴⁸ Douglas Sugano, ed., “Nativity,” in *The N-Town Plays* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), ll. 24–42.

⁴⁹ For more on women's agency within birthing rooms, see Fiona Harris-Stoertz, “Remembering Birth in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century England,” in *Reconsidering Gender*, ed. Cox, Liz McAvoy, and Magnani, 45–

feminine private spaces were spaces where both men and women could express feelings and develop intimacy and identity.⁵⁰ Hollie Morgan concurs that “characters deliberately go to their chambers in order to be able to physically succumb to their emotions,” which suggests that there was an understanding between authors and audiences that the most appropriate space for the physical display of emotions was the chamber.⁵¹ As such, the performative privacy of the chamber sets the expectation that it is more emotion laden than the hall; it is a space of “dool y-nough” (much sorrow).⁵² The queen gives birth “withinne a litil spase” (within a small space [of time]), referring to how quickly Athelston’s heir is stillborn, but the words could also evoke the closeness and privacy of the chamber.⁵³ Molly Kelly reasons that the “interplay between experience and space infuses space with an emotional charge and value beyond that

60; Fiona Harris-Stoertz, “Midwives in the Middle Ages? Birth Attendants 600–1300,” in *Medicine and Law in the Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy J. Turner and Sara M. Butler (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 58–87; Fiona Harris-Stoertz, “Lying-In in High Medieval England and France,” in *Pregnancy and Childbirth in the Pre-modern World: European and Middle Eastern Cultures, from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Costanza Gislon Dopfel, Alessandra Foscati, and Charles Burnett (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 227–48; Monica Green, “Making Motherhood in Medieval England: The Evidence from Medicine,” in *Motherhood, Religion, and Society in Medieval Europe, 400–1400: Essays Presented to Henrietta Leyser*, ed. Lesley Smith and Conrad Leyser (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 173–204.

50 Felicity Riddy, “Middle English Romance: Family, Marriage, Intimacy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235–52, at 238, 240.

51 Hollie L. S. Morgan, *Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England: Readings, Representations and Realities* (York: York Medieval Press, 2017), 131.

52 “Athelston,” l. 287.

53 “Athelston,” l. 288. In the entry for “space” in the *Middle English Dictionary*, many of the examples refer to time, but there are also examples of “space” meaning distance or the time allowed for particular activities; it is this last translation that links the medieval “space” with modern conceptions of space and place, as an appropriate time for an activity also speaks of an appropriate place.

of a neutral receptacle for our lives.”⁵⁴ This acknowledgment of the emotional currency of space builds upon both Massey and Grenville’s theorizations in showing that human interactions both imbue space with meaning and are affected by the meaning of the space that has been created. The contrasting spaces of *Athelston* disrupt the gendered hierarchy of power and space, as the queen and, later, Edith use their presence in public spaces to challenge the king’s attempts to wield unlawful power. The romance confronts Athelston’s unlawful authority and destabilizes these hierarchies through the spectacle of gendered actions that are deemed to belong in private spaces.

The author sets the queen in opposition to the king in multiple ways: entering his space, emphasizing her pregnancy to show Athelston’s dependency on his queen to perpetuate his lineage, and invoking God to challenge the king’s earthly authority. In a historical example, Lois Huneycutt notes that Henry III became angry with Eleanor of Provence in 1252 when she overstepped her authority in public.⁵⁵ This is a historical precedent for the inappropriate nature of Athelston’s queen challenging him in a public space, yet the romance presents Athelston as wrong, misusing the power conferred upon him. The queen’s challenge, though unsuccessful, presents the correct course of authority and justice. Given the apparent success of Philippa of Hainault’s intercession with Edward III on behalf of the Burghers of Calais when she was purportedly heavily pregnant, it might be expected that Athelston’s queen’s pregnancy would, if not secure the positive outcome of her request, at least protect her from her husband’s wrath. Chroniclers Jean Froissart and Jean le Bel both emphasized that Edward was unhappy about acquiescing to his wife’s plea. The chroniclers imply that the king had no choice but to agree, but whether this was because of her pregnancy or her public

⁵⁴ Molly Robinson Kelly, *The Hero’s Place: Medieval Literary Traditions of Space and Belonging* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 1.

⁵⁵ Lois Huneycutt, “Power: Medieval Women’s Power through Authority, Autonomy, and Influence,” in *A Cultural History of Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Phillips, 153–78, at 167.

intercession is not stated.⁵⁶ In employing her impending motherhood to intervene, contesting the hegemonic masculinity in the space of the hall, Athelston's queen challenges him beyond his limits and his ineffective leadership is revealed. The queen's motherhood is used, then, to show Athelston's irrationality as he attempts to wield his unlawful authority without proper regard for due course of law. John Carmi Parsons states that the duties of intercession and childbearing are linked in the queen's coronation *ordo*, as her perceived power is inextricable from her fertility, which in turn supports the king's authority: "without a queen to give licit proof of his powers' survival, a Christian monarch had no legitimate way to manifest them."⁵⁷ Athelston has become so insecure in his authority at this point in the text, convinced as he has been that he is the victim of treason by one of his sworn brothers (thus eroding his grasp on the tenets of brotherhood and oath that secured his power) that he destroys the futurity of his own power and lineage by killing his unborn heir.

The combination of the potential traitor and his wife's challenge to his authority in the space that is supposed to support his leadership leads to his own destruction of that authority. As Sarah Rees Jones notes, the ways in which a ruler was seen to govern himself and his own household were instrumental to his success as a ruler.⁵⁸ This theory holds that the household and the kingdom

⁵⁶ Jean Froissart, *Histoires de Froissart* (Paris: La Cite des Livres, 1931), 69; Jean de Bel, *Vrayes Chroniques* (Paris: Libraire de la Societe de l'Histoire de France, 1905), 167.

⁵⁷ John Carmi Parsons, "The Pregnant Queen as Counsellor and the Medieval Construction of Motherhood," in *Medieval Mothering*, ed. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1996), 39–61, at 44.

⁵⁸ Sarah Rees Jones, "The Public Household and Political Power: Preface," in *The Medieval Household in Christian Europe c.850–c.1550: Managing Power, Wealth, and the Body*, ed. Cordelia Beattie, Anna Maslakovic, and Sarah Rees Jones (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 11–18, at 15–16.

were images of each other, and that the king's management of his household reflected his ability as a monarch. Athelston's crumbling grasp on authority in his hall mirrors that of his power and authority as monarch of his country, which the author shows in the remainder of the text as Athelston is challenged by Alryke and the assembled lords.⁵⁹ The queen's perceived power is also damaged by her husband's infanticidal act, as her influence is linked to her ability to provide an heir, which has just been taken from her by her husband's violence. In this way, Athelston's actions disrupt both public and private spaces, as well as harming his authority, his monarchic power, and his patriarchal lineage.

The author broaches the boundaries of what is appropriate in certain settings, necessarily altering the spaces in which these actions occur. In bringing her impending motherhood into the masculine-coded, public space of the hall, Athelston's queen not only attempts to use her influence to change the king's mind, but she also disrupts the nature of the space in which he performs his authority, thereby challenging that authority. The romance concludes with Athelston's repentance, vindicating the queen's intervention, but the queen is not restored to her role as wife, co-regent, or mother—she disappears from the narrative without restitution.

EDITH'S PUBLIC LABOR

There is another mother who is integral to the king's repentance and the restoration of legal order in the romance. Edith, Athelston's sister and the wife of the accused Egelond, ultimately re-establishes both the legal status quo and the lineage of Athelston, when she gives birth in public to the king's closest living heir after surviving a trial by fire "unblemeshid foot and hand" (unharmed on foot and hand).⁶⁰ While the queen and the archbishop requested a trial in Parliament, which was the correct contemporary legal system when the romance was composed, the trial by "Nine plough-lengthe on rawe, / As red as ony glede" (Nine plough lengths in a row, as red as

⁵⁹ "Athelston," ll. 528–29.

⁶⁰ "Athelston," l. 642.

any fire) is presented as a suitable alternative to Athelston's attempt to wield absolute monarchic power.⁶¹ Christopher Fee states that the early medieval English practice of trial by ordeal was still deeply entrenched in the popular imagination.⁶² Some scholars have read this scene as indicating that it was preferable to the characters and the audience that an archaic form of public trial is upheld, rather than the injustice and abuse of power demonstrated by the character of King Athelston.⁶³ Rowe contends that the trial by ordeal supports the king's right "to act *without the need for counsel*."⁶⁴ I disagree, however, as the trial by ordeal is a very public intervention in Athelston's attempt to act individually, without due process of law. Although such a trial represents an ultimately divine decree, two mothers and the church have been instrumental in securing it, and the public space involves witnesses that Athelston sought to avoid.

The public nature of the ordeal contrasts with the privacy and secrecy of Wymound's treacherous "Counsail" (advice) in the king's "chaumbir" (chamber).⁶⁵ The accusations of treason are brought against Egelond surreptitiously, in an enclosed private space that does not allow for due process. Patriarchal fear of women's agency within the birthing room is paralleled by secret male spaces used by Wymound and Athelston, while Edith gives birth in public. The public trial not only brings these accusations into the public domain, but also reveals the treachery of the accuser, restoring justice. As described above, the ordeal takes place near "Sainte Poullis" (St. Paul's) Cathedral, and the length of the coals indicates that it must be outside.⁶⁶ Egelond and the children, who are subjected to the trial

61 "Athelston," ll. 571–72.

62 Christopher R. Fee, "Trial by Ordeal and the Nature of the Soul: Influences of Popular Justice in the Middle English Verse Romance of *Athelston*," in *The Growth of Authority in the Medieval West: Selected Proceedings of the International Conference Groningen 6–9 November 1997*, ed. Martin Gosman, Arjo Vanderjagt, and Jan Veenstra (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999), 27–37, at 28.

63 Fee, "Trial by Ordeal," 31.

64 Rowe, "The Female Body Politic," 83.

65 "Athelston," ll. 123, 122.

66 "Athelston," l. 592.

by fire alongside the king's pregnant sister, all emerge "unblemeshid, foot and hand" (unharmed on foot and hand) to "milde chere" (merciful God) before Edith, "gret y-gon with childe" (heavily pregnant), is subjected to the flames.⁶⁷ In contrast to the queen, who had been taken away to her chamber to give birth to her stillborn child, Edith "knelid down upon the ground / And there was born Saint Edemound" (kneeled down on the ground and St. Edmund was born there).⁶⁸ When the "painis" (pains), "Bothe in bak and eke in wombe" (In her back and her womb), show that Edith is about to give birth, "They comaundid men here away to drawe, / As it was the landis lawe" (they commanded the men to leave, as was the law of the land).⁶⁹ Men are removed from this public space to give the birthing mother an approximation of the privacy that is usually conferred upon women in childbirth, but the very public spectacle of the birth still remains.

Even if the physical birth is not seen by an assembled crowd, the space had been set for the public witness of the trial by ordeal, and it is in this space that Edith labors. In clearing the space of male witnesses, "they inadvertently provide legal authority for women alone to witness the birth of England's heir in the same public area that the trial was held, and for men to be excluded from a political act in the public space."⁷⁰ The contrast between the queen's labor and Edith's is stark, not only in their differing outcomes, but how the spaces of their enactments of motherhood communicate to the audience. The queen's labor is enclosed in numerous senses: within the birthing room, within her grief, and because the resulting stillbirth of her murdered child destroys a family and the potential for agnatic succession. Edith's labor, in contrast, is about openings, as she gives birth in an open space and her enactment of motherhood opens the succession of England to a wider context of cognatic succession. The public birth of "Saint Edemound" (St. Edmund), who emerges "both hool and sound" (both whole and well) heals the broken royal

67 "Athelston," ll. 612, 615, 622.

68 "Athelston," ll. 648–49.

69 "Athelston," ll. 639, 637, 645–46.

70 Bérat, "Transformative Genealogies," 209.

lineage caused by Athelston killing his heir, setting it on a different course.⁷¹ In tacit acknowledgment that his actions have broken the line of succession, the king declares that he will give his newborn nephew “all aftir my dede, / Ingelond to wisse and rede” (after my death, England to rule).⁷² His sister’s child is not his direct heir, but instead represents an amalgamation of monarchy and church, as he is of Athelston’s bloodline but also sanctified by his mother’s miraculous ordeal and his later incarnation as St. Edmund. Edith’s public enactment of motherhood has restored both legal order and the patriarchal lineage of the monarchy.

The pursuit of justice that the pregnant queen begins when she challenges Athelston in the hall is concluded by Edith when she gives birth “upon the ground.” Despite the clear parallels, these women and their actions are not interchangeable, and the success of their intervention is specific to their enactment of motherhood and their use of space. The queen uses her motherhood to actively challenge the king in a space over which he expects to hold authority. She disrupts the hierarchy of gendered space, and though her intentions are good she is punished with violence and the loss of her child, and relegated to silence. In contrast, Edith shows a deference to royal authority, overruling her husband in order to comply with the king’s wishes when Egelond excuses them with “My wif goth right gret with childe ... She may nought out of chaumbir win” (my wife is heavily pregnant and may not leave her chamber).⁷³ She insists that the king’s summons to the court overrides the accepted practice of lying-in “Till she deliverid be” (until she gives birth).⁷⁴ Through her ordeal “before the feer” (before the fire), she is a divine instrument to correct the king’s abuse of justice—she does not challenge him verbally as the queen does, nor does she attempt to assert power in an inappropriate space.⁷⁵ She is “fetten forth” (brought) to comply with the archbishop’s direction that “Now shall the Countasse go

71 “Athelston,” l. 653.

72 “Athelston,” ll. 660–61.

73 “Athelston,” ll. 218–20.

74 “Athelston,” l. 222.

75 “Athelston,” l. 631.

the way / There that the children were” (the countess will now go the same way as the children).⁷⁶ In submitting to the flames, she complies with God’s will, and her public childbirth is a divine miracle. Edith is both a deific vehicle and an advocate for the twin legal pillars of monarchy and court, but she does not directly challenge Athelston. Christopher Fee contends, in reference to Edith’s trial by fire, that such appeal to divine justice “reflects a popular fear of the miscarriage of justice at the hands of one’s fellow man.”⁷⁷ Both of the mothers in this romance represent divinely sanctioned justice in contrast to Athelston’s “abuse of power.”⁷⁸ That their motherhood is enacted in public spaces attests to Rowe’s assertion that the poet vindicates the model of society as family, as the maternal role is linked to governance and law.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

Athelston is a Middle English romance that challenges the concept of absolute monarchic power and insists upon a society subject to the rule of law. I have shown how the romance uses concepts of space, gender, motherhood, and divine intervention to tackle issues of justice, monarchic power, and social responsibility. The two mothers in the text breach spatial boundaries and challenge gendered hierarchies in an effort to attain that justice. One mother, the queen, is punished for her challenge to her husband’s authority while the other, Edith, is rewarded with a son who becomes both king and saint. Ultimately, both women, through their enactment of motherhood in public spaces, are integral to the restoration of law, justice, and properly tempered monarchic power.

Written about kings for an audience with a wider breadth of lived experience than the chivalric nobility, *Athelston* interrogates

76 “Athelston,” ll. 621, 619–20.

77 Fee, “Trial by Ordeal,” 37.

78 Fee, “Trial by Ordeal,” 31.

79 Rowe, “The Female Body Politic,” 83.

hegemony from perspectives outside of the patriarchal elite.⁸⁰ While it is common in Middle English romance for interlopers to disrupt the equilibrium of the courtly milieu, such as the famous example in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a sustained examination of how spaces are disturbed, interrupted, dislocated, and ultimately changed by these intrusions reveals the complexity of medieval social roles, hierarchies, and interactions.⁸¹ Women have often been invisible or overlooked in historical study of the Middle Ages due to a dependence on sources such as charters and chronicles which did not record their involvement in either government or family life. Applying spatial studies in Archaeology and History, Karen Dempsey and Rachel Delman are revitalizing castle studies by showing how women existed in and contributed to spaces previously only analyzed from a masculine perspective.⁸² Likewise, using a spatial analysis of literary sources can provide a wealth of information about how women contributed to both private and public life. Approaching Middle English romance from a spatial perspective reveals ways in which women negotiated gendered space and social hierarchies, contributing in complex and nuanced ways to family, government, and other aspects of society, which provides a fuller picture of fourteenth-century English society.

80 In his introduction to the text of *Athelston*, Donald Sands describes the audience of the romance as “small tradesmen, very conscious of the history of their country, very well aware of its traditions, and very sensitive to the authoritarian habits of kings.” Sands, *Athelston*, 131.

81 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. W. Barron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

82 Karen Dempsey, “Gender and Medieval Archaeology: Storming the Castle,” *Antiquity* 93, no. 369 (2019): 772–88; Rachel Delman, “Gendered Viewing, Childbirth and Female Authority in the Residence of Alice Chaucer, Duchess of Suffolk, at Ewelme, Oxfordshire,” *Journal of Medieval History* 45, no. 2 (2019): 181–203; Rachel Delman and Anna Boeles Rowland, “Introduction: People, Places and Possessions in Late Medieval England,” *Journal of Medieval History* 45, no. 2 (2019): 129–44.