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Article

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Collins, C. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5574-8935>
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Middle English romances as sources for the experience of pregnancy and childbirth in late medieval England

Claire Collins

University of Reading

Written accounts of pregnancy and childbirth from the late Middle Ages are scarce; pregnancy and birth were considered a routine, and therefore unremarkable, part of life and most (usually male) writers did not think the reproductive aspects of women's bodies appropriate topics of discussion. Our richest sources are medical treatises on women's health, which contain a wealth of information about birth management practices and medical interventions for childbirth complications, but these texts tell us very little about the experiences and emotions of the pregnant or parturient woman. It is also difficult for the modern scholar to assess the extent to which the treatises represent the knowledge available to the average birth attendant, and thus the treatments available to the average woman in childbirth. The study of pregnancy and childbirth in medieval England must necessarily, therefore, look to a wide range of texts and other sources to locate and examine any available evidence. This interdisciplinary approach also serves to provide a more holistic understanding, important given pregnancy and childbirth had social, emotional, spiritual, physical, and political implications. This article focusses on one such source, Middle English romances, to examine the insights they yield into pregnancy and childbirth in late-medieval England. Individual examples of other sources - medical texts, private letters and pastoral manuals - are also briefly discussed where they provide corroboration for evidence drawn from the romances, illustrating the benefit of an interdisciplinary approach.

Middle English romances have received little attention from scholars of pregnancy and childbirth in the Middle Ages, understandable given that romances rarely discuss aspects of pregnancy or childbirth in any depth. Nevertheless, there are insights to be yielded from these works which, as will be shown, can prove a fruitful addition to the discussion. Though often concerned with tales of magic and marvel, romances offer insight into the everyday practices, norms and customs of their readers and writers. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in England saw many texts being produced in Middle English, making them available to a wider audience which could now include those who did not read Latin or French. The range of materials available in English during this period expanded significantly, and poetry and romances began to be more frequently written in English rather than French.

This article examines several Middle English romances, written in England between 1300 and 1500, to demonstrate the insights these literary works reveal about the experience of pregnancy and childbirth in late medieval England. The works discussed are: *Romans of Partenay* (c. 1500); *King Alisaunder* (early fourteenth century); *Athelston* (late fourteenth century); *Bevis of Hampton* (c. 1300); *Emaré* (late fourteenth century); *King of Tars* (early fourteenth century); *Lay le Freine* (early fourteenth century); *Merlin* (1420s); *Octavian* (c. 1350); *Sir Degare* (early fourteenth century); *Sir Gowther* (c. 1400); *Sir Tryamour* (late fourteenth century); Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur* (late fourteenth century); and Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale', 'Clerk's Tale' and 'Merchant's Tale' from *The Canterbury Tales* (late fourteenth century).

The term 'romance' is difficult to define 'because the genre was so ubiquitous and various.'¹ Broadly speaking, it refers to works of fiction whose original texts were written in the romance languages which developed from Vulgar Latin. In medieval England, romances circulated in French, Norman French, or Middle English. Some of the Middle English romances discussed in this article, such as *Athelston* and *Sir Tryamour*, were original

compositions, but others were Middle English translations or imitations of older works in other languages: Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale' was borrowed from Petrarch's Latin translation of Boccaccio's *Decameron*; Malory's *Morte Darthur*, though an original composition in Middle English, was based on the French Vulgate Cycle and other Arthurian works; *Lay le Freine* is a Middle English translation of Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*; *Romans of Partenay* is an adaptation of La Coudrette's *Roman de Melusine*; and *Octavian* is a Middle English version of the Old French *Octavian*. Both the original compositions and those based on earlier works can reveal details about daily life in late medieval England, as even the derivative works tend to include new material that exhibits the contemporary knowledge and experience of the writer.

Roberta L. Krueger has noted that in late medieval Europe a new trend of more 'realistic' romances emerged and began to be circulated among a wider audience, outside of noble courts and households.² The increasing numbers of romances written in Middle English contributed to this wider circulation in England. As they spread to more modest households, Krueger observes that 'chivalric fiction presented itself less as a panel for the advertisement of social ideals than as a forum for the construction and contestation of social identities and values.'³ This trend for more realistic romances, which focused on more ordinary problems, might explain why the texts discussed in this article contain a surprising amount of detail about pregnancy and childbirth. Though many of the tales involve the marvellous exploits expected from medieval romances, the authors include details which give insight into normal contemporary practices around pregnancy and childbirth. The ways in which pregnancy and birth are often given importance and employed as key components of the narrative suggest that the late-medieval audience were expected to respond to such depictions, perhaps because most readers would have been all too familiar with the drama, comedy and tragedy of childbirth in their own lives.

The suffering of women in childbirth

Where childbirth is discussed in the Middle English romances there is almost always a description of the pain of childbirth, or an acknowledgement of the danger posed to both mother and child and an expression of gratitude for their survival. In *Athelston*, a description of Egelond's wife, Edith, going in to labour says that 'Hard schourys thenne took here stronge / Bothe in bak and eke in wombe';⁴ The writer shows familiarity with the location of labour pains, which some Middle English medical texts advised were felt in the back.⁵ In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Tristan's mother, Elizabeth, gives birth in great pain, after many 'grimly throwys', and subsequently dies:

And so by myracle of Oure Lady of Hevyn she was delyverde with grete paynes, but she had takyn suche colde for the defaute of helpe that the depe draughtys of deth toke hir, that nedys she muste dye and departe oute of thys worlde; there was none other boote.⁶

Elizabeth gives birth in the forest, without the help of a midwife or birth attendant. Readers would recognise that this was highly unusual and that these were terrible circumstances in which to give birth. Women of higher socioeconomic status, such as Elizabeth (who is a queen), would expect to retire to a lying-in room to give birth, and to have birth attendants and a midwife present. Róisín Donohoe notes that this lying-in room would be carefully prepared by the expectant mother's birth attendants, women who were usually the family members and friends of the expectant mother and would each be given a specific role as dictated by the midwife.⁷ Most of these women would have their own experience of childbirth and of being present at the birth of other women's children.

The space was fully enclosed by covering the walls and floors with tapestries and carpets (if the family was wealthy) and blocking windows, keyholes or any other crack in the

room. The room was lit only by candles, as it was believed too much light would damage the newborn and strain the eyes of the labouring woman.⁸

Elizabeth dies for ‘defaute’ of help from a midwife or other knowledgeable birth attendant. Though her gentlewoman is present and, we are told, ‘halpe hir all that she myght’, the gentlewoman likely had little experience of childbirth herself.⁹ Malory does not suggest that giving birth in the forest is a contributing factor to Elizabeth’s death, but readers would be aware that these circumstances made her situation all the more dangerous.

In the Middle English romances, women often give birth alone outside, usually in a forest. This makes for a shocking contrast to the lying-in space in which they, usually noble or royal women, would expect to give birth, and makes the survival of the infant (often the romance’s protagonist) all the more marvellous. In *Sir Tryamour*, Queen Margaret gives birth in such circumstances. She is entirely alone, however, having been exiled and her travelling companion having been killed:

Sche rode forthe, noght forthy,
To the londe of Hongary,
Tyll sche come thedur wyth woo.
When sche come undur a wode syde
Sche myght no lenger abyde,
Hur peynys were so throo;
Sche lyghtyd downe, that was so mylde,
And there sche travaylyd of a chylde,
Hyrselfe allon, wythowtyn moo.
[...] When sche herde the chylde crye hur befor
Hyt comfortyd hur full swythe;’

[...] What for febulnes, wery and woo,

Sche felle aslepe and hur sone alsoo;¹⁰

The birth is very painful. Margaret is exhausted afterwards and lies down to sleep but not before hearing the child cry, which gives her great comfort. Like Elizabeth, Margaret knows that giving birth outside and alone, without the help of a knowledgeable midwife or other attendant, means that she and her baby may not survive. Her relief that the baby lives, as evidenced by his crying, is relief not only for his life but for his soul, as a baby who dies without being baptised will not go to heaven.¹¹ If Margaret had given birth in the usual circumstances, a midwife would have been present and would have been able to perform the baptism if the baby was thought unlikely to survive.¹²

In *Octavian*, Octavian's mother, the Empress, 'wexe with paynnes sore' when going into labour.¹³ She presumably gives birth in a properly equipped birthing chamber, as befitting her status, as there is no indication otherwise. Nevertheless, her mother-in-law, hearing the news of Octavian's birth, expresses relief that the Empress has survived: 'I am full blythe / That the Empryse sall haf hyre lyfe.'¹⁴ Even when giving birth in a safe room, with the appropriate attendants and supplies, the risk to both mother and baby was high. That the writer saw fit to include this expression of relief indicates that the fear of a mother dying in childbirth was commonplace and would have been familiar to readers.

Similarly, in *Lay le Freine*, a knight (the first, unnamed, knight) sends news of the birth of his twins to his friend (the second, unnamed, knight). The second knight asks after the health of the first knight's wife, saying 'Is his levedi deliverd with sounde?'¹⁵ An unremarkable question, perhaps, but it suggests that the risk of childbirth was such that it was customary to ask if all was well with mother and baby. This is supported by private letters from the fifteenth century, which include numerous examples of family members or friends

commenting on the health of pregnant women and thanking God for their health, or sending news of a birth.¹⁶

Hearing of the birth of the twins, the second knight's wife maliciously accuses the first knight's wife of adultery.¹⁷ She then herself gives birth to twins and the writer informs the reader that the birth happened without complication:

When God wild, sche was unbounde

And deliverd al with sounde.¹⁸

The emphasis on the woman giving birth without complication appears to have been added by the Middle English writer, and not copied from the original French source, Marie de France's *Lai le Fresne*, in which there is no mention of the potential dangers of childbirth when the second knight's wife gives birth:

La dame que si mesparla

En l'an meïsmes enceinta,

De deus enfanz est enceintie;

Ore est sa veisine vengie.

Desque a sun terme les porta;

Deus filles ot; mut li pesa,

Mut durement en est dolente;

A sei meïsmes se desmente.¹⁹

[The same year the slanderer herself conceived twins and now her neighbour was avenged. She carried them until her time came and then had two daughters, which grieved and distressed her greatly].²⁰

That the composer of the Middle English version considered it important to add a comment on the birth happening without complication suggests that a late-medieval audience would recognise the significance of this detail. Though the general lack of reference to pregnancy and childbirth in medieval sources more widely suggests the topic was deemed too ordinary to merit discussion, such descriptions of the pain and danger of childbirth in the Middle English romances suggests the opposite; danger and agony were a reality for all who gave birth, as was the worry of loved ones waiting to hear whether mother and baby had survived. Even people without personal experience of childbirth knew that childbirth could be fatal and that it was inherently agonising, as the Bible taught that such suffering was a punishment for Eve's transgressions in the Garden of Eden.²¹ One Middle English medical treatise on women's health, discussing the 'anguysch' of childbirth, advises that no medicines can be offered to stop the suffering of childbirth, and that the only way to avoid this suffering is to avoid receiving man's seed.²² Note that the advice is not to refrain from sexual intercourse completely, only to avoid receiving men's ejaculate, perhaps hinting at coitus interruptus as a common method of contraception at this time. Chaucer's 'Parson's Tale' also discusses coitus interruptus as contraception, the fictional parson condemning it as manslaughter along with other methods of contraception or abortion: 'or elles dooth unkyndely synne, by which man or womman shedeth hire nature in manere or in place ther as a child may nat be conceived'.²³ It is little wonder that women in medieval England tried to prevent pregnancy, knowing how agonising and dangerous childbirth could be.

Language

The language used to describe the pregnant body in the romances also hints at the perilous nature of pregnancy. Pregnant women are often described as ‘growing’ rather than as pregnant. In *Sir Gowther*, we are told of the Duke’s wife: ‘Ylke a day scho grette fast’.²⁴ In *Merlin*, we are told that Ygwerne ‘barnesched wondir faste’.²⁵ Malory employs the same wording for the mothers of both Arthur and Tristan, saying of Igrayne ‘Thenne quene Igrayne waxid dayly gretter and gretter’, and of Elizabeth ‘wythin a whyle she waxed grete with chylde’.²⁶ This association of pregnancy with the physicality and visible growth of the body suggests a conscious noting of the progression, and therefore health, of the developing baby. A growing body is usually positive, signifying a healthy pregnancy, but it can also be a cause of anguish if a woman wishes her pregnancy to remain secret. In *Sir Degare*, Sir Degare’s mother is described in a similar way to Igrayne, but in this case she tries to hide her pregnancy because of her shame at having been raped and impregnated by a fairy knight, and her worry that people will think that, as she unmarried, her own father must be the father of the baby.

Here wombe greted more and more;

Therwhile she mighte, se hidde here sore.²⁷

Her body betrays her, revealing her secret as she becomes visibly pregnant. There is a sense of a lack of control over her body growing with the developing pregnancy, especially in this case where the pregnancy is the result of rape and conceived without her consent. We also see this in *King Alisaunder*: Olympias is seduced and impregnated by Neptabanus. Though the sexual act is consensual, it is under false pretences as Neptabanus is disguised as a dragon. We are told of Neptabanus’ impregnation of Olympias: ‘grete he laft hire with

child'.²⁸ Like Degare's mother, Olympias has been abandoned in this condition, against her will and beyond her control.

Frequent descriptions in the romances of the pregnant body as growing may indicate that miscarriages were common. Pregnancy is not so easily perceived by others in the early months, and a noticeably growing body is a sign that the baby has survived past the early months. This language may have been borrowed from the earlier French romances from which many of the English romances derive, as the French word for pregnancy is 'grossesse'. This language was not limited to the romances, and there survive examples of such language being used in late medieval England, which support the assumption the language used in the romances represents language used by their audiences. Two letters from the Paston correspondence use such language. In one letter Margaret Paston, writing to her husband during her pregnancy with their first child, tells him that 'I ham waxes so fetys þat I may not be gyrt in no barre of no gyrdyl þat I haue but of on.'²⁹ In another, written during her fifth pregnancy, Margaret appears to sign off 'youre growyng wyff'.³⁰

The language used to describe the birth of a child also suggests the perilous nature of childbirth. In *Lay le Freine*, when the second knight's wife gives birth, we are told: 'When God wild, sche was unbounde'.³¹ The word 'unbounde' implies liberation from the confines of pregnancy, a state of danger, pain and fear for the physical and spiritual health of the mother and her baby. In *Sir Degare*, the birth of Degare is described similarly:

Her time come, she was unbounde,

And delivred al mid sounde;

A knaveschild ther was ibore:

Glad was the moder tharfore.³²

As with earlier examples in this article, *Sir Degare*'s writer chooses to express that Degare's mother is relieved to have survived childbirth with no injury to herself or her baby (and is happy that the baby is male). Like the wife of the second knight in *Lay le Freine*, Degare's mother is 'unbounde', and she is also described as being 'delivred'. In modern parlance, we speak of the baby being delivered, but in the romances the now-archaic usage is employed: it is the mother who is delivered from childbirth. The verb is used in the same way, applied to the mother rather than the child, in other Middle English sources.³³ As with the word unbound, this evokes a sense of liberation from the dangerous state of pregnancy. In the case of Degare's mother, this must be a particular relief as we learn early in the text that her own mother died giving birth to her.³⁴ This was also the fate of Elizabeth, Tristan's mother, discussed above. Many people reading or listening to these romances likely knew someone who had died in childbirth, in some cases their own mother, and the language used to talk about childbirth reflects this danger.

The lying-in period

Another example of the use of the word 'delivered' is found in *Morte Darthur* where Malory writes that Elayne, having been pregnant with Galahad, 'was delyverde and churched.'³⁵ The reference to churching acknowledges the importance of this medieval custom, in which women who had recently given birth attended a purification ceremony, as Sue Niebrzydowski explains:

The ceremony was conducted by a priest and took place in the new mother's parish church, in the presence of her female friends, the midwives who attended the birth, and her husband. Although not obligatory, undergoing churching was considered a pious and praiseworthy custom that a woman should undergo, after each of her confinements.³⁶

In *Octavian*, churching is obligatory. Octavian, Emperor of Rome, has been led by his mother to believe his wife guilty of adultery but does nothing about this until she has been churched, as is the law. Such is Octavian's respect for the ritual, he waits until after the ceremony to exile her as punishment for the adultery.

Wordis of this were spoken no mo

To that lady to the kirke solde go

Als the lawe was in that lede.³⁷

Though churching was not compulsory in late-medieval England, the romance's audience would recognise the importance of the ceremony and Octavian's rational in waiting until after the ceremony to punish his wife. As Niebrzydowski observes: 'In the Middle Ages men understood the purification of women ritual as stemming from necessity to cleanse the pollution of the female body after childbirth.'³⁸ After childbirth, a woman's body was spiritually polluted until she could be cleansed at the purification ceremony. Until purification, it was customary for the woman to confine herself at home for up to forty days.³⁹ This period, beginning shortly before she was expected to give birth and ending when she left the home to attend her purification ceremony, was called confinement. Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale' explains that Constance is in confinement and notes the spiritual importance of the custom.

So longe is goon with childe, til that stille

She halt hire chambre, abidyng Cristes wille.⁴⁰

The confinement period was not only spiritually necessary, however. Róisín Donohoe notes that incremental stages of confinement were observed, and that these stages testify to the extreme physical danger experienced by a woman giving birth, and the time it took to

heal afterwards: for up to two weeks after giving birth, depending on her post-partum health, the new mother remained in bed and was tended to by her birth attendants. She then went through a process of ‘upsitting’, in which she received female visitors, for a period of a week to ten days. Then, once able, the woman could leave the lying-in room and move about the house, though she would not leave the house.⁴¹

When entering confinement, then, the expectation was for a woman to remain confined until purification. In *Athelston*, we see a woman leaving confinement before giving birth but the writer, presumably knowing the audience will find this questionable, stresses the irregularity of the situation. Egelond and his wife Edith are invited by Athelston to London so that their two sons may be knighted. Egelond says that his wife is heavily pregnant and that he does not think she will be able to leave her chamber to make the journey until she has given birth,

My wyff goth ryght gret with chylde,
And forthynkes me,
Sche may nought out of chaumbyr wyn,
To speke with non ende of here kyn
Tyl sche delyveryd be.⁴²

Edith wishes to go to London despite being in the late stages of pregnancy, and seemingly in confinement, and she does indeed make the journey. Edith’s attendance is necessary to the story as, having arrived in London, she walks through a fire blessed nine times by the archbishop (along with the members of her family, as a trial to prove their innocence) and then gives birth to St Edmund. The writer likely felt it necessary to explain why Edith makes this journey so late in pregnancy, by pointing out that Edith insists on going. Readers would know that not only was it unusual for a woman to leave confinement at

this stage, it was inadvisable for a woman to travel late in pregnancy.⁴³ Entering confinement was a sign that the birth was imminent, so it is no wonder Egelond protests that she should not leave her chamber.

The romances also reveal details about who might be present in the lying-in room, to attend a woman during and after childbirth, and how they might help. In *Sir Degare*, Degare's mother, ashamed of having been impregnated by the fairy knight, gives birth in secret with only one maid present. The maid helps by binding the child in clothes and laying him in a cradle.

Her time come, she was unbounde,

And delivred al mid sounde;

A knaveschild ther was ibore:

Glad was the moder tharfore.

The maiden servede here at wille,

Wond that child in clothes stille,

And laid hit in a cradel anon,

And was al prest tharwith to gon.⁴⁴

These are not the usual conditions for a king's daughter, who would usually hope to give birth in suitably equipped chamber with multiple attendants, but the maid's actions suggest that in usual circumstances the baby would be swaddled and laid in a cradle, and that the maid knows this. In Malory's retelling of the birth of Tristan, as we have already seen, Elizabeth gives birth in the same circumstances as Degare's mother - in the forest, with only a gentlewoman present. Like Degare's mother's servant, Elizabeth's gentlewoman helps as much as she can though, unlike Degare's mother, Elizabeth does not survive. Sir Degare's

mother survives despite the circumstances in which she gives birth, and Elizabeth dies as a consequence of those circumstances.

Elizabeth dies because of a lack of help from a midwife or other knowledgeable birth attendant. In *Lay le Freine*, the status of the midwife is made clear. The wife of the second knight wishes to conceal the fact that she has given birth to twin daughters; having accused the first knight's wife of adultery for giving birth to twins, she will either have to contend with people thinking she is also adulterous or admit that she lied about the other woman. She therefore asks the midwife to kill one of the twins and claim that she only has one baby, but the midwife refuses.⁴⁵

Yete me is best take mi chaunce,

And sle mi childe, and do penaunce.”

Hir midwiif hye cleped hir to:

“Anon,” sche seyde, “this child fordo.

And ever say thou wher thou go

That ich have o child and namo.”

The midwiif answerd thurchout al

That hye nil, no hye ne schal.⁴⁶

The gentlewoman then suggests she takes one baby to a convent instead, which she does. We know, therefore, that both a midwife and a gentlewoman are present. Other birth attendants may also be present, but this is not stated. The presence of a midwife and at least one other attendant is in line with the usual practice in late medieval England and would be recognisable to the audience. The midwife has the position of authority, being the person who will announce the birth and also the person who could conceivably kill one of the babies and

have the credibility to deceitfully announce that only one had survived. This position of authority is also what we would expect as usual practice at this time. Though midwives were not licensed in England until the sixteenth century, they had enormous responsibility in the birthing room;⁴⁷ the midwife could perform physical interventions or apply medicines to help deliver the baby, and would instruct the other birth attendants. Additionally, as we have already seen, midwives would be expected to perform an emergency baptism if they thought a newborn unlikely to survive. Given it would have been her responsibility to assess whether a baby had survived, it is feasible that the midwife would be the person who announced whether the baby, and mother, lived.

The role of men

As well as offering insights into who might be present in the birthing chamber, the romances also indicate who would typically not be present: men. In *Lay le Freine*, as we saw above, the father must not have been present as, if he were, the mother's proposed deception to kill one of the twins and pretend she had given birth to only one child would not have been possible. *Octavian* also shows that Octavian was not present for the birth of his child as he is brought news of the birth by servants.⁴⁸ In fact, we are explicitly told in other romances that the fathers should not be present. In *Athelston*, we are told that the custom was for men to leave women alone during childbirth:

They comaundyd men here away to drawe,

As it was the landys lawe;⁴⁹

And in *Bevis of Hampton*, when Bevis' wife Josian goes into labour in the forest, Bevis and Terri, their page, construct a hut for her, not knowing what else to do. Bevis offers to

help further but Josian tells both he and Terri to leave because no woman should give birth with men present. In order to be decorous, they move far enough away that they will not even be able to hear her cries of pain while she labours:

And Josiane, Crist here be milde!

In a wode was bestonde of childe

Beves and Terri doun lighte

And with here swerdes a logge pighte;

Thai broughte Josiane ther inne,

For hii ne kouthe no beter ginne.

Bevis is servise gan hire bede,

To helpe hire at that nede.

"For Godes love," she saide, "nai,

Leve sire, thow go thee wai,

God forbede for is pité,

That no wimman is privité

To no man thourgh me be kouthe.

Goth and wendeth hennes nouthe,

Thow and thee swain Terry,

And let me worthe and Oure Levedy!"

Forth thai wente bothe ifere,

For hii ne mighte hire paines here.⁵⁰

Observing the proper custom of giving birth without men present is, it seems, more important to Josian than having their help at such a dangerous and frightening time. It is not the only romance to convey the importance of men staying away from the birthing chamber. In *The Romans of Partenay*, Melusine's father is cursed by his wife, Presine, after spying on her in childbed despite explicitly promising not to do so and to never inquire about her or see her until she has recovered. When he breaks his covenant, Presine flies away with her three daughters and curses her husband to remain shut in a cave forever:

Thys noble kyng was full Amerous ay;
Couenaunt me had, er spoused were Alway,
That neuer day, whiles he gan endure,
The time that I in Gesian ly sure,
He shuld noght enquire by no maner way
Off my dedes, neither no wise me se,
Towardes me noght come ne go no day,
Till ceason And time I reised shold be.
Tho it fel and cam, of my belay thre
Full faire doughtres had in this same yere,
Which right gracyous And full hable were.
Helmas so gan do that he me gan se
In such wise As I in my childbed lay.
Anon ther fro hym I uanished me,
Such wise departed and thens fly my way;⁵¹

Presine does not want her husband to see her during childbirth or until she leaves childbed, suggesting that it was customary for husbands to stay away not only for the birth but also for the period of confinement. This was usually the case in late medieval England, though in practice men were sometimes present in the lying-in room; male physicians or surgeons sometimes attended alongside the midwife to help deliver the baby, if the parturient woman's family was wealthy enough to afford their service. A priest might also be present to administer baptism to a baby thought unlikely to survive (though midwives were also trained to administer an emergency baptism).⁵²

Though the lying-in room was usually an exclusively female space, and this is depicted in the romances, these texts do show men helping women in other ways and taking an interest in the pregnancy and birth. As discussed above, in *Bevis of Hampton* Bevis helps Josian when she goes into labour by building a hut, though his offers to help further are declined and he is asked to leave. In *Sir Gowther*, the Duke takes Gowther to the church to be christened and sends for the best wet nurses in the country. This may have been common practice, but the Duke is also presented as being affectionate to his wife, comforting her when Gowther quickly becomes a fierce and violent child, killing three wetnurses.

Tho Duke hym gard to kyrke beyre,
Crystond hym and cald hym Gwother,
That sythyn wax breme and brathe.

Tho Duke comford that Duches heynde,
And aftur melche wemen he sende,
Tho best in that cuntré,
That was full gud knyghttys wyffys.
He sowkyd hom so thei lost ther lyvys,

Sone had he sleyne three!⁵³

In Chaucer's 'Man of Law's Tale', King Aella goes to fight in the North while his wife, Constance, is pregnant, but leaves her in the care of a bishop and constable. When Constance gives birth, a messenger is sent to him with news of the birth.⁵⁴ The message is intercepted by the king's mother, and swapped for a counterfeit letter which says Constance has given birth to a fiend and is herself an 'elf', or supernatural being.⁵⁵ King Aella is anguished to read this, but keeps his sorrow to himself, saying he is now in Christ's hands, and instructs that Constance and the child should be kept safe and that hopefully he will be rewarded for his piety with another, non-fiendish child.⁵⁶ Similarly, in *Emaré*, the king goes away to war but asks his steward and the other lords to 'Take good hede to my qwene', seemingly showing care for her and her impending labour. In *Sir Tryamour*, Margaret, having given birth alone on the ground outside, is discovered by the knight Barnard, who takes her back to his home and gives her everything she needs, including 'skylle' women to tend her. Barnard also helps Margaret christen the child and procure a wet nurse.

He toke hur up full curtesly
And hur sone that lay hur by
And home he can them lede.
He let hur have wemen at wyllle
To tent hur, and that was skylle,
And broght hur to bede.
Whatsoevyr sche wolde crave
All sche myght redyly hyt have,
Hur speche was sone spedd.

They crystenyd the chylde wyth grete honowre

And callyd hyt Tryamowre;
Of hyt they were full gladd.
A norse they gatt hyt untyll
Sche had mekyll of hur wyll;
They dud as sche them badd.⁵⁷

In this case, the man is not the father of the child or a relation, but a courteous knight who helps a woman and her new-born child. There appears to be no hesitation in the romances in presenting men as caring and interested in the birth (even if the woman in question is a stranger, as in the case of *Sir Tryamour*), and helping however they might, given they cannot be present for the birth and confinement. This reflects the reality, that men were interested in the wellbeing of pregnant and parturient women, even if they were excluded by propriety from the birthing chamber itself. We know that this was the reality in medieval England from the numerous letters from the Paston correspondence in which men express interest, worry, or joy in the pregnancies of their family members or women in their social circles.⁵⁸

In Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale' we also see a man doting on his pregnant wife by trying to sate her food cravings. January, an elderly knight, is married to a beautiful young woman named May. While walking in January's secret garden, May tells him she has a great craving for pears and, knowing that he will not be able to climb into the tree himself to pick some because he is blind, asks him to let her climb atop his back so that she can climb into the tree to pick some pears.

This fresshe May, that is so bright and sheene,
Gan for to syke, and seyde, "Allas, my syde!
Now sire," quod she, "for aught that may bityde,

I moste han of the peres that I see,
Or I moot dye, so soore longeth me
To eten of the smale peres grene.
Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit
That she may dyen but she of it have⁵⁹

That May is implying a pregnancy craving is not made explicit, and Chaucer plays on the ambiguity, but given her reference to a pain in her side, her ‘plit’ and to ‘hevene queene’, pregnancy is implied.⁶⁰ Chaucer also implies May is pregnant when he writes that ‘on hire wombe he [January] stroketh hire ful softe’ when she descended from the tree, January’s sight having been restored.⁶¹ Carol Falvo Heffernan, however, has also suggested that the pear might in fact represent contraception.⁶² May’s request for pears, regardless of the implied meaning, is in fact a ruse to get her into the tree, where she can fornicate with her young lover, Damian, and sets up the motif of the elderly husband cuckolded by a younger man. If May is implying pregnancy she is likely lying, doing so only to engineer her plan. But if Chaucer’s intention here was to show May insinuating pregnancy cravings, it suggests his audience would recognise January’s desire to placate these cravings, showing care for her wellbeing and desire to comfort her during the pregnancy, and also that May knew he would want to do so, and took advantage of this. Again, we have evidence from a private letter which illustrates that this was the reality in late medieval England: in a letter written in February 1478, from John Paston III to his mother, John talks of procuring dates for his wife, who is pregnant with her first child. He writes: ‘She thynkys at thys season datys ryght good mete, what so ever it meanyth.’⁶³ The apparent play on words references both the ‘season’ of

the pregnancy and the fact that the season of Lent is approaching, during which meat will not be eaten. It is unclear whether the dates are a pregnancy craving or just a food considered beneficial in pregnancy, but the letter illustrates that, as in the ‘Merchant’s Tale’, a husband taking such interest in the wellbeing of his wife during pregnancy was normal in late medieval England.

A discussion of pregnancy cravings in the Latin *Trotula*, a medical treatise which includes advice and treatments for pregnancy and childbirth and which was widely circulated in Middle English translations, advises:

Nota quod quando mulier incipit inpregnari, cauendum est ne nominetur coram ipsa hoc quod non possit haberi, quod si postulauerit et non detur ei, dat occasionem aborciendi.

[Note that when a woman is in the beginning of her pregnancy, care ought to be taken that nothing is named in front of her which she is not able to have, because if she sets her mind on it and it is not given to her, this occasions miscarriage].⁶⁴

If January had read such advice, he would surely be at pains to make sure May was given the pears she craved, so as to avoid the risk of miscarriage.⁶⁵ We know that he has read medical texts, as Chaucer tells us he has read Constantinus Africanus’ *De Coitu*, though it is specifically for the text’s advice on electuaries which combat impotence.⁶⁶ This is a tongue in cheek suggestion from Chaucer that January, because of his age, needs medical help to consummate his marriage with May, but it suggests that Chaucer’s audience would expect a wealthy man in later medieval England to have read these sort of texts, potentially including texts which contained information on women’s health. Perhaps the author of *King of Tars* had also read these sorts of medical texts, as he exhibits possible knowledge of medical details about pregnancy and childbirth. The story tells of the daughter of the King of Tars, who is

married to the Sultan of Damascus and falls pregnant. When she gives birth, the child is a lifeless lump of flesh with no limbs, bones, blood, or facial features.

Atte fourti woukes ende

The levedi was deliverd o bende

Thurth help of Mari milde.

And when the child was ybore,

Wel sori wimen were therfore,

For lim no hadde it non,

Bot as a rond of flesche yschore

In chaumber it lay hem bfore

Withouten blod and bon.

For sorwe the levedi wald dye,

For it hadde noither nose no eye

Bot lay ded as the ston.⁶⁷

Natalie Goodison (et. al.) suggest that this lump of flesh is a hydatidiform mole, or molar pregnancy.⁶⁸ This occurs when the placenta does not develop as it should and a tumour or mole forms instead of the placenta.⁶⁹ If this is a molar pregnancy, it indicates that the author knew about such things. He also knows the approximate length of the gestation period, writing that the woman gives birth after 40 weeks. Readers would likely not have found such interest, or such a level of knowledge, unusual.

Conclusion

Though written accounts of pregnancy and childbirth from the late Middle Ages are generally scarce, the romances illustrate that insights are forthcoming if we expand our focus to include a wide range of sources. This approach yields further insights when a range of sources are examined, so that evidence can be compared and corroborated; though the Middle English romances are fictitious tales, by comparing the details they disclose this article has shown that they reveal much about the practices around pregnancy and childbirth in late medieval England. Despite being understood as routine, not meriting mention to the mind of many writers, the romances show that pregnancy and childbirth had significant personal meaning to people; many readers would have experience of family members dying in childbirth, or their own traumatic experiences of giving birth. The perilous nature of childbirth and the relief when mother and baby survive unscathed are clear in these texts, as is the concern and attentiveness of the men around them. Audiences likely responded emotionally to such depictions in the Middle English romances, and thus the writers of these romances considered such details worthy of inclusion. After all, as well as depicting adventure and wonderful events, romances were also tales about relationships and emotions.

NOTES

¹ C. Chism, 'Romance', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100-1500* (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 57-70 (p. 57).

² R. L. Krueger (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5.

³ R. L. Krueger (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 5.

⁴ 'Athelston,' in R. B. Herzman, G. Drake and E. Salisbury (eds.), *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1999), ll. 636-7.

⁵ See for example: A. Barratt (ed.), *The Knowing of Woman's Kind in Childing: A Middle English Version of Material Derived from the Trotula and Other Sources* (Turnhout, 2001), p. 98, ll. 877.

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- ⁶ *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. by E. Vinaver, 3rd edn, 3 vols (London, 1971), I, p. 372.
- ⁷ R. Donohoe, ‘“Unbynde her anoone” the Lives of St. Margaret of Antioch and the lying-in space in late medieval England’, in *Gender in Medieval Places, Spaces and Thresholds*, ed. by V. Blud, D. Heath, E. Klafter (London, 2019), pp. 139-156 (p. 139).
- ⁸ *Ibid*, p. 139.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p. 372.
- ¹⁰ ‘Sir Tryamour’ in H. Hudson (ed.), *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour or Artois, Sir Tryamour*, 2nd edition (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2006), ll.400-19.
- ¹¹ ‘Ȝyf a chylde be dedë bore / Þogh hyt were quyk yn wombe byfore / And, receyue nat þe bapteme, / Of heuene may hyt neuer cleme.’, cited in: F. J. Furnival (ed.), *Robert of Brunne’s “Handlyng Synne”, A.D. 1303 : with those parts of the Anglo-French treatise on which it was founded : William Wadington’s “Manuel des pechiez”*, EETS (London, 1901), p. 299, ll. 9557-9560.
- ¹² Middle English guides to parish priests stated that priests should teach the midwives in their Parish how to correctly baptise an infant and instruct that they should be ready to do so during or after delivering a baby if the baby looked unlikely to survive. See for example E. Peacock (ed.), *Instructions for Parish Priests by John Myrc*, 3rd edn (Chippenham, 2000), p. 3.
- ¹³ ‘Octavian’ in Harriet Hudson (ed.) *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour or Artois, Sir Tryamour*, 2nd edition (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2006), l. 83.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, ll. 103-4.
- ¹⁵ ‘Lay le Freine’, in A. Laskaya and E. Salisbury (eds.), *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1995), l. 51.
- ¹⁶ N. Davis, *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1971), letter 19, i. pp. 31-2, ll. 1-2; *Ibid* letter 20, i. pp. 32-3, ll.1-3; *Ibid* letter 613, ii. pp. 216-7, ll. 35-6.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, ‘Lay le Freine’, ll. 69-72. See Laskaya and Salisbury’s note to ll. 69-72 for a discussion of the belief that twins were sign of adultery among some in the Middle Ages, though condemned as an ignorant belief by others.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, ‘Lay le Freine’, ll. 85-6.
- ¹⁹ ‘Le Fresne’, in P. Walter (ed.), *Marie de France: Lais édition bilingue de Philippe Walter* (Paris, 2000), p. 116, ll. 65-72.
- ²⁰ Translation from G. S. Burgess and K. Busby (trans.), *The Lais of Marie de France*, 2nd edition (London, 1999), p. 62.
- ²¹ Genesis 3. 16. See also C. Rawcliffe, *Medicine & Society in Later Medieval England* (Far Thrupp, 1995), p. 171.
- ²² A. Barratt (ed.), *The Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing: A Middle English Version of Material Derived from the Trotula and Other Sources*, (Turnhout, 2001), pp. 48-50, ll. 130-8.
- ²³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, L. D. Benson (ed.), 3rd edition, (Boston, Mass, 1987), p. 306.
- ²⁴ ‘Sir Gowther’ in A. Laskaya and E. Salisbury (eds.), *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1995), l. 103.

²⁵ E. A. Kock, *Merlin, a Middle-English metrical version of a French romance* (London, 1904), p. 163, l. 6129.

‘Barnesched’ means to grow big with child or to become pregnant, see R. E. Lewis (ed.) et al., *Middle English Dictionary*. (Ann Arbor, 1952-2001), <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED3694>> [accessed 1 August 2023].

²⁶ *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, I, p. 10 and p. 371.

²⁷ ‘Sir Degare’, ll. 157- 8. Note that the word ‘wombe’ is interchangeable for stomach and may not refer here specifically to the uterus.

²⁸ ‘King Alisaunder’ in H. Weber (ed.), *Metrical Romances of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Centuries*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1810), I, p. 19.

²⁹ Davis, *Paston Letters*, I, Letter 125, pp. 216-7, ll. 15-6.

³⁰ Davis, *Paston Letters*, I, Letter 151, pp. 254-5, l. 23. Davis transcribes the word as ‘gronyng’, but it is likely that the word is in fact ‘growyng’, which would fit with both Margaret’s language in her earlier letter and the language regularly adopted in the Middle English romances, as discussed. See London, British Library, MS Add 34888, fol. 23r.

³¹ Ibid, ‘Lay le Freine’, l. 85.

³² ‘Sir Degare’ in A. Laskaya and E. Salisbury (eds.), *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1995), ll. 181-4.

³³ See for example M. H. Green and L. R. Mooney, ‘The Sickness of Women’ in M. T. Tavormina (ed.), *Sex, Aging, & Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe* (Tempe, Arizona, 2006), pp. 455-568, (p. 521, ll. 1094-1101); M. M. Banks (ed.), *An Alphabet of Tales: An English 15th century translation of the Alphabetum narrationum of Etienne de Besançon, from Additional MS. 25,719 of the British Museum* (London, 1904), pp. 11-12; F. Brie (ed.), *The Brut or Chronicles of England* (London, 1906), p. 521, ll. 10-12.

³⁴ Ibid, ll. 24-5.

³⁵ *Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, II, p. 797.

³⁶ S. Niebrzydowski, ‘Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo: male voices, female interpretation and the medieval English purification of women after childbirth ceremony’, *Early Music* XXXIX.3 (2011), pp. 327-333 (p. 327).

³⁷ ‘Octavian,’ ll. 184-6.

³⁸ Niebrzydowski, ‘Asperges me, Domine, hyssopo’, p. 332.

³⁹ J. W. Hellwarth, *The Reproductive Unconscious in Late Medieval and Early Modern England*, (Oxford, 2002), pp. 8-9.

⁴⁰ *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 97, ll. 720-1.

⁴¹ Donohoe, “Unbynde her anoone”, p. 140.

⁴² ‘Athelston,’ ll. 218-22.

⁴³ We see in Middle English treatises on women’s health that women were advised not to ride during pregnancy, see for example Barratt, *The Knowing of Woman’s Kind*, pp. 58-60, l. 269. And in one of the Paston letters we

see John Paston III writing that he and his wife will travel to see her father that winter ‘for I trow she wyll be ought of facyon in somer.’ In other words, by the summer she will be too heavily pregnant to travel. See Davis, *Paston Letters*, I, Letter 379, pp. 611-2, ll. 33-5.

⁴⁴ ‘Sir Degare,’ ll. 181-8.

⁴⁵ In the French source for the tale, Marie de France’s ‘Le Fresne’, a midwife is not mentioned specifically, only ‘those who were in the chamber’. Feminine pronouns are used, though, suggesting these attendants would be female. See *Ibid*, ‘Le Fresne’, p. 118, ll. 95-8: ‘ce[le]s quë en la chambre esteient la cunfort[ou]jent e diseient que eles nel suff[e]reient pas de hummë ocire n’est pas gas’.

⁴⁶ ‘Lay le Freine’, ll. 113-120.

⁴⁷ The first known English midwife’s license dates from 1588, see J. Hitchcock, ‘A Sixteenth-century Midwife’s License’, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 41 (1967), p. 75-6.

⁴⁸ ‘Octavian,’ ll. 91-6.

⁴⁹ ‘Athelston,’ ll. 645-6.

⁵⁰ ‘Bevis of Hampton,’ in R. B. Herzman, G. Drake and E. Salisbury (eds.), *Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1997), ll. 3619-3636.

⁵¹ W. W. Skeat (ed.), *The Romans of Partenay, or of Lusignan: otherwise known as The Tale of Melusine*, EETS (London, 1866), ll. 4526-40.

⁵² Monica Green refuted the claim that ‘women’s health was women’s business’ in numerous works. See, for example: M. Green, ‘Women’s Medical Practice and Health Care in Medieval Europe’, *Signs* 14 (2) (1989), pp. 434-473(p. 434); M. Green, *Making Women’s Medicine Masculine: The Rise of Male Authority in Pre-Modern Gynaecology* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 18-19, 70-117.

⁵³ ‘Sir Gowther,’ ll. 106-14.

⁵⁴ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 97, ll. 724-6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 98, ll. 750-756.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 98, ll. 757-767.

⁵⁷ ‘Sir Tryamour,’ ll. 442-456.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Davis, *Paston Letters*, letter 269, I. pp. 449-50, ll. 25-6; *Ibid*, letter 270, I. pp. 451-2, ll. 34-9; *Ibid*, II. letter 748, pp. 382-4, ll. 19-20; *Ibid*, II. letter 352, pp. 573-5; *Ibid*, letter 365, pp. 594-5.

⁵⁹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 167, ll. 2328-2337.

⁶⁰ There is some disagreement among scholars about whether May is implying a pregnancy craving here, see: Teresa Tavormina’s explanatory note in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 889; C. Falvo Heffernan, ‘Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode of Chaucer’s “Merchant’s Tale,”’ *Journal of English and German Philology* 94 (1995), pp. 31-41 (p. 31); C. A. Everest, ‘Pears and Pregnancy in Chaucer’s “Merchant’s Tale,”’ in Melitta Weiss

Adamson (ed.), *Food in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays* (New York, 1995), pp. 161-76 (p. 170); S. Katz Seal, 'Pregnant Desire: Eyes and Appetites in the *Merchant's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review* 48 (2014), pp. 284-306.

⁶¹ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 168, l. 2414. Though this also does not necessarily indicate pregnancy as 'wombe' does not exclusively refer to the uterus in medieval writing but also to the stomach or pudendum, which is where Robbins suggests January places his hand, in an intimate gesture rather than as attention to a pregnant abdomen. See explanatory notes in *The Riverside Chaucer* p. 889.

⁶² Heffernan, 'Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode', p. 31-2.

⁶³ Davis, *Paston Letters*, I, letter 380, pp. 612-4, ll. 55-6.

⁶⁴ M. H. Green (ed. and trans.), *The Trotula: A Medieval Compendium of Women's Medicine* (Philadelphia, 2001), pp. 94-7.

⁶⁵ Later, when January sees May and Damian fornicating in the pear tree, Chaucer tells us 'And up he yaf a roryng and a cry / As dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye.' Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* p. 167, ll. 2364-5. Is this a reference to the miscarriage January knew might occur if May did not get the pears she craved?

⁶⁶ Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer* p. 161, ll. 1809-11.

⁶⁷ J. H. Chandler (ed.), *The King of Tars* (Kalamazoo, Michigan, 2015), ll. 571-82.

⁶⁸ N. Goodison, D. J. G. Mackay and I. Karen Temple, 'Genetics, molar pregnancies and medieval ideas of monstrous births: the lump of flesh in *The King of Tars*,' *Medical Humanities* 45 (2019), pp. 2-9.

⁶⁹ See M. H. Green and L. R. Mooney, 'The Sickness of Women', in M. Teresa Tavormina (ed.), *Sex, Aging, & Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe* (Tempe, Arizona, 2006), pp. 455-568 (p. 554, n. 14).