

Moghaddassi, Fanny. 2025. *Space in Medieval Romance: Constructing Narrative Space in the Middle English Breton Lays*. Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. xv + 304. ISBN 9783031809521.

Reviewed by Anne Laskaya 
University of Oregon
laskaya@uoregon.edu

In her recent monograph, *Space in Medieval Romance: Constructing Narrative Space in the Middle English Breton Lays*, Moghaddassi aims “to bring medieval literary studies more firmly within the grasp of contemporary spatial literary theory and to introduce the specificities of medieval narrative treatment of space into contemporary theoretical discussion” (19–20). Her study of medieval romance thus incorporates interpretations of space and place emanating from many disparate fields and explores ways spatial studies can impact manuscript studies, gender studies, reader-response studies, the socio-political realm (both contemporary and medieval), narratology, and more. The analysis draws on theoreticians like Henri Lefebvre (1991), Michel de Certeau (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1994), Michel Foucault (1986, 2004), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), Thomas Pavel (1989), Gérard Genette (1980), and Marie-Laure Ryan (1991), among many others.

Addressing two distinct audiences (medievalists and spatial studies scholars), Moghaddassi’s project must define terms and concepts well-known to medievalists that are not likely well-known among scholars in contemporary spatial studies and vice versa. Furthermore, because she addresses spatial studies scholars from all periods and from various international geographic regions, Middle English quotations are accompanied by modern translations. Medievalists will also notice the argument locates its evidence in primary texts drawn from both medieval romance and the Middle English Breton lays. The slippage between what we identify as *romance* and its subgenre, *lay*, allows Moghaddassi to shape her arguments without being constrained by the limited number of lays. Eliding genre and subgenre does not derail the argument’s main claims, but it is important to note that romance and lay are often used here interchangeably (NB: This review mirrors this practice). At times, however, medieval romances serve as contrast to the Middle English Breton lays. For example, in Chapter Five, “Social Encodings,” Moghaddassi highlights the lays’ emphasis on merchant-class concerns rather than aristocratic ones, even as they simultaneously retain elements common to courtly and chivalric romance.

Negotiating spatial studies, Moghaddassi not only borrows concepts from contemporary theory, she also clarifies ways space carries conceptual content and associations for late medieval culture that do not easily map onto contemporary uses of the term. *Mandeville's Travels* (a text straddling romance and travel literature) serves as an entry into her argument, and it features a fictional knight-narrator identified in ways familiar to contemporary understandings of space: both by his place of origin (St. Albans) and by his imaginary travels far from home (Northern Africa, the Middle East, India, southeast Asia, and China). But the centrality of both place and space, both stasis and motion in *Mandeville's Travels*, are also central to a specifically medieval Christian understanding of transitory human experience as a journey through time and space to the afterlife. Citing Jean-Claude Schmitt (2016), Moghaddassi reminds readers that the human being was ubiquitously "defined as . . . *homo viator*, a traveller, whose ephemeral existence was but a passage (*transitus*) towards an uncertain end, a *peregrinatio* aiming at salvation" (Schmitt 2016, 368–69; cited and translated by Moghaddassi, 2).

Moghaddassi's book unfolds thematically, with chapters examining "Bibliotopies," "Storyworlds," "Christian Encodings of Space," "Bio-Geographies," "Focalised Space," and more. This has the effect of structurally foregrounding spatial theory rather than individual literary texts, even though close textual readings of the primary sources comprise significant attention and value within each chapter. The Index, oddly, does not provide an easy way to find theoretical references even when they are central to the argument. To locate where Thomas Pavel is mentioned, for instance, one must read the full monograph. Footnotes, on the other hand, are clear and offer important conceptual and contextual information; the reasons for their inclusion are clear and useful.

Chapter Two covers a lot of ground: manuscript histories, inspirational origins of texts, the insufficiency of common categories used to discuss romance, and distortions facing contemporary readers in our time. Moghaddassi names these topics, constraints, and influences "bibliotopies" (meaning spaces within, surrounding, and touching a text, as well as spaces a text touches). Bibliotopies become a capacious term, referring to various contexts that shape a text's creation, circulation and reception. The analysis does not include what Stephen Nichols (1990) terms *the manuscript matrix* which emphasizes the physicality of particular manuscripts including the use of folios, colors, scripts, layouts, organization, etc., to perform a text and shape a reader's interaction with it. Instead, Moghaddassi explores geographic, political, linguistic, and regional connections between various Breton lay manuscripts themselves and documents the difficulties we face (some insurmountable) when trying to locate a text's spatial (or material) context. Of course, medieval manuscript production,

circulation, and provenance may be well-known for some romances and lays, but for others, material context can be difficult to establish; she writes, “The bibliotopies of romance are characterised by mobility, diversity, and oral/written hybridity” (34).

Beyond the concrete spaces acting on (or being acted upon by) a Breton lay or its manuscript, Moghaddassi investigates the lays’ “inspiration,” something akin to their space of origin which arises from and within a mixture of languages, locales, cultural practices, written texts, as well as the oral tradition. Shifting from material contexts (which, by themselves, can be difficult to map accurately) to the imaginative origins of a text makes the chapter a bit diffuse. Imaginative origins, after all, can include known sources but also, always, will include oral culture and its vast potentialities. Even with demarcated section titles that help readers navigate the discussion, understanding how each section precisely connects with the others in the chapter is often left to the reader.

This chapter also evaluates categories that have been useful (though limited and distorted) for scholars studying medieval romance and the Breton lays. For example, Moghaddassi points to the way romances have often been placed by subject into convenient categories: “The Matter of Rome,” “The Matter of France,” and “The Matter of Britain” (and then later, “the Matter of England”), even though many texts abridge or exceed these categories. Some, like the short lay-romance *Floris and Blancheflour*, as well as the crusading romances, highlight cultures, geographies, and worlds well-beyond Greco-Roman, French, or English contexts.

In addition to four foci comprising this chapter—the challenges of manuscript histories, inspirational origins, academic categories, and the uniqueness of medieval text performance and reception—Moghaddassi concludes Chapter Two with a persuasive and concise “Note on Spatialising the Critic.” This note reminds us of the anachronistic space in which readers today encounter medieval texts: namely, in print or digital editions that typically erase the complexities of manuscript sources and that make the lays appear as one collection, whereas during the Middle Ages they were dispersed across numerous manuscripts. Furthermore, Moghaddassi notes, “no two manuscripts contain identical versions of romances” (25). Editors arrange a chronology of texts for presentation, and print inevitably hides what was often produced by several very distinct scribal hands in the apparent sameness and normalizing appearance of print or digital edition, creating a distorted space within which modern readers encounter these poetic narratives.

Chapter Three, “Romance Hyperspace,” investigates physical spaces represented within fictionalized romance worlds and the imaginary spaces they conjure within the minds of audiences/readers. Realistic representation and mimesis are set aside to explore the theory of possible worlds (borrowing from

Pavel 1989, Doležel 1998, Rust 2007, Lavocat 2010, and others).¹ Moghaddassi uses the terms *hyperspace*, *storyworld*, *enunciative space*, and *hermeneutic space* to describe cultural allusions and resonances, conjured fictional places, performance spaces where texts were read, recited and heard, and lastly, the hermeneutic, or interpretive invitational spaces embedded in the lays. Examining medieval enunciation space, Moghaddassi demonstrates that an intimate and immediate relationship between performer/narrator (the I) and audience is often inscribed within the texts. Lines from *Sir Orfeo* provide one example: “Ac herkneth lordings that ben trewe,’ and ‘Ichil you telle of Sir Orfewe” (*Sir Orfeo* ll. 23–24, cited by Moghaddassi, 56). Besides grounding themselves in a performative space, romances and lays often mention real or imagined oral or literary sources to increase their authority by placing themselves within a network of texts. And narratives often turn directly outward (breaking through fictional space) to address and shape their audiences’ emotional reactions.

In one major section of Chapter Three, Moghaddassi focuses on “hermeneutic space,” highlighting allusions to religious figures and supernatural beings and events that commonly dot romance narratives. Although scholars once viewed all medieval fiction as forms of religious allegory, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century scholars have typically abandoned strict one-to-one allegory when interpreting secular romance narrative. Moghaddassi writes that scholars thus tend to either disregard or downplay supernatural figures or events “thereby flattening romance space to one dimension only (the actual world),” or simplify such figures and events by constructing unnuanced allegory, “splitting space into two levels (a model in which each event is interpreted as a sign pointing towards a truth hidden behind the text), in other words to either read too little or too much into the text” (61). Instead, Moghaddassi encourages us to look for “the ontological complexity of medieval space” and recognize the presence of multiple potential “interpretative paths.” She adds, “The interpretative impulse which both romance narrative and religious thought trigger (though along different lines) . . . fuel[s] the dimension of romance space which can be termed ‘hermeneutic space’” (61). The claims are grounded in astute readings of *Emare*, *Sir Orfeo* and *Sir Gowther* (and occasionally religious vision literature) to illustrate the lays’ use of medieval Christian symbolism and meanings. These texts enact both a closeness and a distance from simple allegorization and effectively support Moghaddassi’s claim that each narrative is a unique rhetorical, fictional, and imaginative performance where resonance rather than simplistic reductive allegory provides an open invitation to interpretation.

¹ Notably, Chapter Four focuses more extensively on “Storyworlds” and Chapter Six on “Christian Encodings,” both of which receive some preliminary attention in this chapter. The strategy of briefly introducing a key concept in one chapter and then unfolding it later in another chapter creates a recursive discussion; it is a feature throughout the book.

Space inside the fictional world (the storyworld) of the Breton lay becomes the primary focus in Chapter Four. Despite the ubiquitous trope of travel and/or quest that typically structures romance narrative, landscapes and the realities of travel are rarely described. Moghaddassi insightfully writes: "In their discontinuity, romance storyworlds are composed of juxtaposed spatial frames which exist alongside each other, separated by seemingly intangible but potent lines (like the sea), in a manner that recalls the juxtaposition of scenes in medieval narrative tapestries" (84). She points to illogical and contradictory directional orientations in medieval romance and explains these abstract and barely represented spaces, writing: "The discontinuous and malleable world of romance unsurprisingly expands and shrinks in correlation to plot development, or to use Deleuze's (1992) metaphor, folds and unfolds as the story proceeds" (87); this chapter contrasts space as it commonly is handled in realistic novels with the abstract, evacuated spaces found in romance and lay. Romance, Moghaddassi writes, "take[s] it for granted that the world cannot be fully known and accounted for, and make[s] no show of hiding its poetic spatial inconsistencies" (87). Close readings of several Breton lays attest to storyworlds that oscillate between fictional human spaces and magical or religious spaces, weaving what Moghaddassi terms *metaspaces* and *intertextual spaces* into a kind of *romance polyspatiality* storyworld.

A growing late-medieval merchant world is, to some extent, reflected in the Middle English Breton lays which both reinscribe and revise traditional chivalric and courtly spaces central to aristocratic, elite romance. This dynamic is the focus for Chapter Five "Social Encodings of Romance Space," where Moghaddassi traces a changing attitude toward the aristocratic heroic masculinity emphasized in romance: "In [aristocratic] romance, space is used to demonstrate chivalric prowess through military conflict," (98) and "in such a landscape, certain features of the real world are of no relevance to . . . [that] heroic achievement" (102). The subgenre of Breton lay, on the other hand, typically "promotes mercantile values, celebrates the city as a place for exchange, social life, and the display of wealth, while stressing the importance of free circulation and peace of the roads, as necessary for prosperous trade" (98). But this shift is nuanced. Moghaddassi notes that the lays of *Sir Gowther*, *Sir Degare* and *The Erle of Tolous* inscribe typical chivalric values, growth patterns, and violence, but even within these particular texts, the chivalric is not blindly lauded. *Sir Orfeo*, *Emare*, and *Le Freine*, and even, to some extent, *Sir Launfal*, more overtly challenge the primacy of chivalry so central for aristocratic romance narrative. Orfeo's efforts to use a military strategy to protect his queen (Heurodis) utterly fail in the face of the supernatural; instead, his music and song eventually effectuate her release from the underworld. Launfal does succeed in tournaments (even one against a giant), but this and other challenges to his masculinity and his life are mediated by his

fairy lover and the power of her magic. In a reversal of a typical romance topos, the female fairy lover in this lay enters Launfal's trial scene to rescue him from execution at the last minute.

Moghaddassi's argument, here, includes evidence from *Emare* and *Le Freine*, lays that place female characters in the protagonist's role where, predictably, triumph stems from quiet, long-suffering patience rather than prowess. These titular figures strengthen her claims about a shifting attitude in the lays about the chivalric. One wonders: if the chivalric is both reinscribed and, at times, critiqued within the lays, might the treatment of major female characters (with both reinscription but perhaps also critique) complement or complicate the claims made about social class and the central male figures?²

Chapter Six explores the interweaving of Christian and secular aristocratic spaces within romance. Interpretations and analyses are effective and well-supported by both primary texts and historical context. Moghaddassi outlines the complex and fraught status church figures and church authority had in fourteenth-century England, including power dynamics arising from the Western schism, the well-known and reviled corruption of indulgences, the wealth of monasteries, and (for England) the overt and ongoing conflict between secular state and church power. The chapter begins by describing the varieties of aristocratic-clerical relationships found in *Sir Degare*, *Le Freine*, and *The Erle of Tolous* where religious institutions and spaces complement and assist secular courtly and chivalric aims. Then, turning to lays that place religious themes and institutions at the center of their narratives, she focuses on *Emare* and *Gowther*, texts that qualify as secular hagiographies (the long-suffering Emare as a Constance-Griselda figure and Gowther as a penitential knight in search of redemption). Moghaddassi concludes: "Christian encodings of romance space in fact vary subtly . . . , providing us with fascinating glimpses into the multifaceted and diverse understandings medieval writers and audiences had of the complex and ambiguous interactions and interconnections between profane and sacred life, between human and supernatural beings, between human life and divine designs, as well as between clerical authority and the workings of Providence" (144).

Returning to the social storyworlds represented in romance, Moghaddassi's seventh chapter describes the enmeshment of space with the protagonist and with the social structures represented in narrative. Moghaddassi builds on earlier chapters and notes that medieval romance spaces are strikingly unlike spaces

² Kristy Bolton's (2026) recent book, examining *Motherhood and its Spaces in Medieval Romance*, published in 2026 after Moghaddassi's, uses French and English romance, alongside just a few Breton lays, to analyze the active roles of women in particular spaces: birthing rooms, at sea, in forests, in castles, and even as castle-builders. It is a fascinating study of female figures and romance spaces; however, Bolton's book does not take on the challenge of wrestling with contemporary Spatial Studies to the depth Moghaddassi does.

constructed in later literary history; as she explains, they seem remarkably flat or undeveloped in comparison. Consequently, these storyworlds are “phenomenal”; in other words, “they cannot be conceived independently from human experience” (146). She borrows from Merleau-Ponty’s (1962) work *Phenomenology of Perception* to illustrate: “the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if I were God, it is lived by me from a certain point of view. I am not the spectator, I am involved” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 304; cited by Moghaddassi, 146). But rather than focus on an individual’s perception, Moghaddassi uses this enmeshment of space and self to understand collective aristocratic and religious spaces: “space and its social uses emerge conjointly” (147). Spaces encountered in these narratives can be understood as fused, not just with major character’s activities and plot events, but also with collective practices that include battles, trials, banquets, tournaments, castles, processions, great halls and other elements conveying social prestige. Moghaddassi’s excellent analysis of processions and parade touches on both aristocratic and religious practices, a thread that develops out of the two previous chapters: “Social Encodings of Romance Space” (primarily examining chivalric identities, activities, and spaces) and “Christian Encodings of Romance Space” (primarily examining religious institutions, identities, practices and spaces). And this chapter also emphasizes ways romance finds the origins of storyworld and its plot spaces in disruption and disturbance: an unknown visitor, the intrusion of faery, the summons to war against an adversary, an abandoned or lost child: each of these disrupted social spaces sets up the possibility for story. Disturbance creates a desire communicated by the narrative to restore the social space to an imagined unity and wholeness, and to restore individuals alienated from community back into what is imagined to be an ideal social order.

Just as communities are disrupted, incomplete, and then often healed in the narrative by a restoration of order, the same dynamic applies to individual protagonists. Chapter Eight, “Bio-Geographies,” takes us into the space of psychology, character development, plot events, and the methods romance uses to construct its main characters. Moghaddassi writes, “Romance heroes exist in their ability to submit to what space offers along the way, and . . . what they mostly do is practise self-exposure, not develop control over their surroundings . . . theirs is, in many ways . . . a *reactive*, rather than an *active* form of heroism” (180; Moghaddassi’s emphasis). She adds that, in a sense, “space becomes the main protagonist: spatial dynamism, rather than temporal development or the hero’s will, structures the hero’s adventures” (180). This assertion might challenge modern readers who have assumed, for decades, that romance heroes are simply active figures. Foregrounding the importance of space in romance, Moghaddassi creates not a negation but a nuanced challenge to that assumption.

The “Bio-geographies” chapter also investigates space in relation to female titular figures: especially those in *Le Freine* and *Emare*. Unlike knights who place themselves on the road (so to speak), female characters are overwhelmingly represented in confined interior domestic spaces and chambers. Moghaddassi’s thoughtful readings of these female figures (and knightly figures who are also occasionally isolated or alone) lead her to propose that they may reflect the gradual development of private spaces (or more numerous private spaces) within bourgeois households. They may also be precursors, she suggests, to a more extensively developed interiority found in early modern fictional characters.

Chapter Nine, “Romance Geographies,” takes us into the world of cartography and asks us to consider romances as a special kind of map. Moghaddassi explores the very different understanding of mapped spaces, of geography, dominant during the Middle Ages. Although both medieval maps and literary narratives seem little concerned with topographic accuracy, with measurable distances, clear directional orientations, and travel routes, and although they certainly do not provide a panoptic, bird’s-eye view of land and sea the way modern maps do, they nevertheless contributed to medieval audiences’ understanding (and misunderstandings) of the physical world. Because narrative, far more than images or visual maps, constructed most medieval people’s understandings of the world, romances and lays participated in constructing their sense of geographical space. A place, Moghaddassi claims, was part of a conceptual map in the Middle Ages most often because some event occurred there; and “romance provided audiences with narratives that typically stretched over the earth, linking audiences to far-away places through the magic of narrative” (204). Although lays typically erase geographic specificity, and although they offer stock conventional maps within their fictional worlds, “romance must have contributed . . . to the fashioning of the geographical knowledge in audiences whose acquaintance with the world [was limited]” (204). Moghaddassi evaluates several primary texts that construct fictional worlds consisting of the stability, safety, and familiarity of home set in contrast with the chaos, danger, and otherness of foreign and unknown spaces. Evidence from *Sir Orfeo*, *Le Freine*, *Launfal*, and *The Erle of Tolous* leads Moghaddassi to observe yet another development in the corpus of Middle English Breton lays: namely, a shift from unidirectional representations of time and space that move narratives in strictly paratactic fashion found in early lays, to later lays where narratives conjure up scenes presented as though occurring simultaneously in multiple locations.

The last chapter, “Focalised Space,” takes readers on a tour of 1) narrative point of view, 2) the multiple uses and meanings associated with verticality and horizontality in primary texts, and 3) representations of wilderness space in these late medieval fictions. Some lays tend to unify main character and narrator (and thus also audience) who then see the adventure landscape, events, and other

fictional characters from primarily that one viewpoint (what Genette [1980, 189] calls *internal focalization*). Lays written down later, chronologically, more often feature narrators who are somewhat omniscient, so that narrator (and audience) can jump from one scene to another when both scenes are simultaneous (close to what Genette [1980, 189–90] called *zero or non-focalization*). These strategies are central to the distinctions Moghaddassi outlined in the previous chapter when describing unidirectional plots and plots that include more complex simultaneous scenes.

Noting that views from castle walls or towers can hold symbolic or spiritual judgments and character appraisals, Moghaddassi offers nuanced readings of vertical and horizontal spaces that reaffirm the difficulties of generalization. Each primary text demonstrates a somewhat different understanding of the panoramic viewpoint. Sometimes viewing the landscape from a great height is precursor to a fall (or punishment), as though humans viewing a panorama from such a height run too close to God's perspective. (Guinevere in *Launfal* is a perfect example; Moghaddassi, 245–47). And at other times, especially within characters' dreams, a vast panorama may suggest a character's greatness, their noble future, or a religious vision.

The final section in this chapter focuses, primarily, on a close reading of Sir Orfeo's self-imposed exile in the wilderness. Although he finds refuge there, placing himself exposed in Nature, Orfeo's experience is not heroic. Moghaddassi observes that his adventure in the wilderness "is neither about heroic deeds nor about appropriating the land, but about an ability to let oneself be appropriated. Rather than domesticating the forest . . . , Orfeo experiences self-dispossession in physical terms: his hair and beard grow to his waist, his body taking vegetal appearance" (257). But only exceptional characters are granted this kind of isolation (or space of exile); it becomes just one episode on their journey back, ultimately, to the social space, the place of human community.

Moghaddassi's argument takes the reader on an extended and deep exploration into space (broadly conceived) in medieval romance. This review only reiterates some of the major assertions, and only a full and thoughtful engagement with the book will accurately reflect its gifts. Sentences are clear (occasionally, sentences are even stunningly beautiful); grammar issues and proofreading errors are minimal. The drawbacks of the analysis are also its strengths and involve first, the broad and multiple meanings of the key term *space*, and second, the recursive organizational structure that creates some repetition and that occasionally blurs chapter and conceptual distinctions. Explications of primary texts that provide support for key claims in the argument are stellar, significantly nuanced, and persuasive. Moghaddassi addresses material and social spaces that both surround these romances, as well as constitute them. She evaluates characters' enmeshment with space as it is

mirrored in both their public self-presentations and within their private psychological worlds. Political, religious, and ideological spaces are evaluated alongside domestic and intimate ones. The argument dances across perspectival vistas, sometimes dizzying in its multiplicity but always illuminating.

References

- Bolton, Kristy. 2026. *Motherhood and Its Spaces in Medieval Romance*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.
- de Certeau, Michel, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. 1994. *L'invention du quotidien. 2. Habiter, cuisiner*. Nouvelle édition. Folio essais. Paris: Gallimard.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Translated by Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Doležel, Lubomír. 1998. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1986. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16: 22–27.
- Foucault, Michel. 2004. *Sécurité, territoire, population: Cours au Collège de France (1977–1978)*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Hautes études. Paris: Gallimard / Éditions du Seuil.
- Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Lavocat, Françoise. 2010. *La théorie littéraire des mondes possibles*. Paris: Éditions du CNRS.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. London: Routledge.
- Nichols, Stephen G. 1990. "Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture." *Speculum* 65 (1): 1–10.
- Pavel, Thomas. 1989. *Fictional Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rust, Martha Dana. 2007. *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books: Exploring the Manuscript Matrix*. The New Middle Ages. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. 1991. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Schmitt, Jean-Claude. 2016. *Les rythmes au Moyen Âge*. Paris: Gallimard.

(Received 05/06/2026)