

The Physician's Tale

Children, Violence, and Ethics in the *Physician's Tale*

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Introduction

The *Physician's Tale* has puzzled readers for generations. Speaking for many readers of the *Canterbury Tales* in the twentieth century, Larry D. Benson, general editor of *The Riverside Chaucer*, stated flatly, “The tale is not a success” (14). Scholars offer a number of reasons for seeing it as a failure. First, the *Tale* seems only tangentially suited to the teller. Little in the Physician's portrait in the *General Prologue* befits a tale whose origin stretches back to the ancient Roman historian Livy and whose conclusion leads to a religious lesson, for the *General Prologue* says that the Physician's “studie was but litel on the Bible” (438). The Physician is more attuned to medical and astrological texts than historical or biblical accounts. Second, the *Tale* includes several major additions, called Chaucer's “digressions” in the critical literature (PhyT 7-71, 72-117, 213-50). These selections are grafted onto the source tale and seem irrelevant to the exemplary force of the *Tale*—that is, whatever lesson or warning the *Tale* is supposed to convey. Third, the *Tale* seems to be more “pathetic” than meaningful, tugging at the reader's emotions without supplying any wisdom. Fourth, the moral the Physician attaches to the story does not adequately explain the *Tale*'s action and violence. Finally, the *Tale* seems not to know exactly what it wants to be, and its generic markers convey conflicting signals that lead to different and incompatible interpretive possibilities. However, these seeming shortcomings presuppose a different focus for the *Tale* and fail to recognize that at its heart the *Physician's Tale* depicts a traumatized girl—the fourteen-year-old Virginia (“twelve yeer was and tweye” [30])—who begs for her life from the one who should be the most protective of her, her father, Virginius. Thus, the *Physician's Tale* confronts contemporary readers with something far more challenging than a simple emotional display. The *Tale* gets to the nature of the parent-child relationship—or, even more acutely, the father-daughter relationship. This relationship forms the cornerstone of patriarchy and remains a source of constant concern for medieval (and even some contemporary) cultures. Sheila Delaney famously argued that Chaucer's version of Virginius and Virginia eliminated its political dimension; however, because of its attention to Virginia and its focus upon the social and cultural complexities of medieval childhood, the *Physician's Tale* relocates the political within the domestic sphere, not the public or judicial realm.

Tools

One reason readers misunderstand the *Physician's Tale* is the still-widespread but mistaken misconception that the Middle Ages had no clear sense of children as distinct from adults or of childhood as a distinct phase of life. Children, it is thought, were valued only for what they would become rather than individual beings in their own right with distinctive needs and particular sensibilities. This view is commonly expressed by calling medieval children “little adults” or by thinking that the Middle Ages’ high infant mortality prevented medieval parents from becoming emotionally invested in their children. Philippe Ariès made this claim in the landmark *Centuries of Childhood* (1961). One of the first scholars to call attention to the “social construction” of childhood, Ariès believed that modern ideas about children and childhood arose only in the eighteenth century. As a result, literary scholars in Ariès’s wake paid little attention to the representation of children and childhood in medieval texts. Only since the mid-1980s have historians’ findings, like those of Barbara Hanawalt, Nicholas Orme, and Ronald Finucane, countered Ariès’ claims and filtered into literary analysis. Historical study since Ariès has found that throughout the Middle Ages, including in medieval Christian, Judaic, and Islamic cultures, children were seen as distinctly different from adults, and childhood was understood to be an intensely important period with markedly different needs for nurture, socialization, and education. So, until recently, considering a medieval child as an agent capable of addressing her own situation has seemed unreasonable because the assumption was that medieval people did not have a nuanced understanding of children and childhood. Historical scholarship has revealed that medieval people did indeed understand childhood as a distinct phase of life, and they loved their children in ways that modern people can understand. That is not to say that medieval families were like our own or that medieval parents harbored the same sensibilities but that the distance between the two periods may not be as vast as many thought.

“Fragments” are the common groupings of stories that occur in the *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts, and scholars have identified, or sometimes devised, different arrangements for the *Canterbury Tales* based upon the manuscript evidence. Traditionally, ten fragments make up the *Canterbury Tales*, with Fragment I (the *General Prologue* and the *Tales* of the Knight, Miller, Reeve, and Cook) and Fragment X (the *Parson's Tale* and Chaucer’s *Retraction*) remaining consistent, like bookends, throughout the manuscript tradition. The fragments below, following the order of the famous Ellesmere (EL) manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales* (circa 1405), appear together consistently throughout the primary manuscript groups, and the *Physician's Tale* kicks off the following provocative collection:

Fragment VI (Group C)

- The *Physician's Tale*
- The *Pardoner's Introduction, Prologue, and Tale*

Fragment VII (Group B²)

- The *Shipman's Tale*
- The *Prioress's Prologue and Tale*
- The *Prologue and Tale of Sir Thopas*
- The *Tale of Melibee*
- The *Monk's Prologue and Tale*

- The *Nun's Priest's Prologue, Tale, and Epilogue*

Scholars have attempted over the years to find an organizing principle for Fragment VII (B2), calling it, for example, “the literature group” (Gaylord). However, each tale in *both* Fragments VI and VII attends significantly to the representation of children and childhood, as well as their social and cultural complexities. Together, the tales in these fragments can be considered the *Canterbury Tales*’ “Children’s Cluster.” Children appear centrally in these tales, function metaphorically or symbolically in others, and problematize the interpretive possibilities throughout, even though their status in each of the tales has been widely overlooked:

- The *Physician's Tale*—Virginia is killed by her father Virginius (252).
- The *Pardoner's Tale*—The knave boy serves as a moral norm and counterpoint to the Old Man (670-84).
- The *Shipman's Tale*—The “mayde child” bears silent witness to her mother’s “tailling” (95).
- The *Prioress's Tale*—The Litel Clergeon is murdered by a “cursed Jew” but is miraculously resurrected (570-71).
- The *Tale of Sir Thopas*—The main character is called “Child” (810), and Chaucer the Narrator is characterized as “a popet” (701).
- The *Tale of Melibee*—Melibeus’s daughter Sophie (969) is mortally wounded and serves her father Melibeus as an allegorical lesson against retributive violence.
- The *Monk's Tale*—Hugolino’s children are cannibalized (2412) and others are abused.
- The *Nun's Priest's Tale*—Now recognized as one of Chaucer’s greatest achievements, the *Tale* is itself a beast fable—a children’s story or “curricular parody” (Travis 54-74) whose themes transcend the genre and wrap up the Children’s Cluster.

In each tale of the Children’s Cluster, children feature prominently in the action, and even in silence (*Shipman's Tale*), the figure of the child has a central place. In the case of *Sir Thopas*, Chaucer employs one of his favorite techniques of stretching the denotation and connotation of a word like “childe,” which can indicate a young person as well as a youthful knight. The Children’s Cluster finds Chaucer likewise exploring the social, cultural, and political dimensions of medieval childhood in all its complexities and contradictions.

In the Children’s Cluster, as in Middle English literature generally, children are presented as being threatened, violated, or already dead. Children in Middle English literature—and throughout Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*—are invariably linked to violence. From a contemporary perspective, this association with violence raises the question of ethics: How are we to conceptualize and respond to this violence? The tales in Fragments VI and VII, which appear together in every major manuscript tradition of the *Canterbury Tales*, each feature a threatened child or significantly wrestle with some element of medieval childhood. It is common in Chaucerian scholarship to examine groups of tales in terms of their common thematic emphases, as in George Lyman Kittredge’s celebrated “Marriage Group,” in which he argued that a series of *Canterbury Tales* examine the theme of marriage before concluding with the *Franklin's Tale*. Fragments VI and VII are linked in their multifarious examination of medieval children and childhood, particularly through different forms of violence which the children are exposed to, are the subject of, or are associated with. It is common now for readers to consider

the role of women, the complexities of gender, the depiction of race and ethnicity, the vicissitudes of class, or the place of animals and objects, but age (or what is currently called “life-span development”) has so far escaped these considerations of “intersectionality” (Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s term for multiple-overlapping dimensions of culture and society that create relationships of domination and subordination), and until recently, critics have largely overlooked children in medieval texts, reproducing the age-old stereotype that “children should be seen but not heard.”

But what happens, then, when we attend to the voice of a young girl, the child Virginia, in the *Physician’s Tale*? More specifically, given that medieval childhood has emerged from the historical shadows only recently, what, then, are readers of Chaucer to make of the violence that characterizes Virginia and Virginius’s relationship in the *Physician’s Tale*? The question of violence—whether personal, interpersonal, cultural, or symbolic as articulated by René Girard, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jacques Derrida, among others—raises the question of how to respond to that violence. Put more broadly, the problem of violence requires an ethical response. Here, I distinguish “morality” (a system of cultural codes or rules that dictate proper behavior and condone violent responses) from “ethics” (more fluid, less systematized possibilities that allow for non-violent, or less-violent, behavior described by Emmanuel Levinas). Unlike moral behavior, ethical behavior respects our relationship to the freedom of those with whom we come in contact (to use Emmanuel Levinas’s formulation). In the *Physician’s Tale*, Chaucer gives the fourteen-year-old Virginia a voice, and she calls upon her father to respond to her ethically—protectively—rather than violently: She asks, “Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye” (236). In the simplest terms, patriarchy regards women as objects—as less than fully human—to be controlled for men’s needs, and Virginia probes her father’s motives and seeks an alternative to sacrifice. Thus, within the boundaries of what is possible, Virginia opposes her father’s patriarchal violence, which is based upon a shame/honor system. “Shame/honor” cultures institute social control over children, especially women and girls, and simultaneously shape masculine attitudes and behaviors by asserting that a girl’s value is in her chastity or virginity and that a man’s responsibility is to protect the girl’s virginity at all costs, even at the cost of her life. Even today, “honor killings” are increasingly common against women and girls who “violate” their culture’s conservative social—especially sexual—moral norms (Lindisfarne). Perhaps because we are socialized to regard children as less than (or not quite) fully human, we find it both difficult to discern a child’s unique voice within the din of culture and easy to inflict upon children the things we would never do to anyone else, and Virginius regards his daughter this way. Even today, many adults cling to the notion that striking or inflicting physical pain (“corporal punishment”) on a child is not only a right but a moral necessity of good parenting. Parents and others often explain their violent behavior against children by arguing that a “little discipline” serves a greater purpose—to teach the child an important lesson, perhaps—or rationalizing that their intentions were noble.

Text

Genre and Sources

One of the first questions that a reader confronts in the *Physician’s Tale* is its genre: What kind of story is it? As is true with any text, the kind of story we believe it is helps us figure out what it

means, but the *Physician's Tale* gives contradictory indications from the outset. It initially claims to be a historical tale drawn from Roman historian Livy ("Ther was, as telleth Titus Livius, / A knyght that called was Virginius" [PhyT 1-2]), but it then turns to mythic references to great artists (Pigmalion, Apelles, Zansis) voiced by a personified Nature, and the fourteen-year-old Virginia ("twelve yeer was and tweye" [30]) is described as a creation whose purity and inbred nobility cannot be "countrefeted" (51). History gives way to myth, and the references to ancient authorities yield to two long descriptions, Chaucer's "digressions." The first details medieval childrearing concerns for mistresses "That lordes doghtres han in governaunce" (73), and the second turns to mothers and fathers whose children have "been under youre governaunce" (96). Within this ancient Roman setting, the *Tale* encloses medieval childrearing advice and other details so specific that earlier generations of scholars thought that Chaucer might be criticizing specific events from his own lifetime (Tatlock). The *Tale* then turns toward a brief but detailed narrative overlain with biblical overtones and theological possibilities of a girl, Virginia, who on the way to a temple is spied by a lecher, Apius, the local judge, who is moved by "the feend" (130) to seize Virginia for his illicit desires. Apius then uses a fraudulent child-custody case—explained in detail—brought by his accomplice Claudius to seize the girl. In response to this threat of *raptus*, a legal term which can mean both *rape* and *seizure* in the medieval period, Virginia's father Virginius takes control of the situation: Rather than allow Virginia to be taken and despoiled, Virginius decides to kill Virginia himself to save her from shame and preserve his honor. Father and daughter engage in an emotional dialogue in which Virginia unsuccessfully begs for her life, and then Virginius beheads Virginia. The *Tale* comes to a swift conclusion when the conspirators are brought to justice—though Virginius intervenes to save Claudius's life (273)—and the Physician offers a moral to the *Tale* as an *exemplum*, or moral warning (by example) against sinfulness. So, the *Tale* moves into and out of different genres but ends with a series of moralizations. It begins as a historical anecdote and then moves into an explication of medieval childrearing and custody, particularly the oversight young women need. It then returns to a medieval historical framework before moving to an unclear theological lesson. The ending of the *Physician's Tale* does not seem to emerge naturally from the narrative or provide a satisfying conclusion to a tale of child sacrifice.

Digressions

Rather than being a distraction, the digressions form the *Tale's* central focus. They indicate Chaucer's unique contribution to this widely-circulated tale, which appeared not only in Livy's *Ab urbe condita* (Book III) from ancient Rome, but also in the Middle Ages in Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* (ll. 5589-794), Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* (Chapter LVI), and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (VII. 5131-306). The first digression (PhyT 7-71) details Virginia's natural goodness, noble beauty, and unparalleled virtues—"hir owene virtue, unconstreyned" (61). Here, the emphasis is on her uniqueness and superior qualities. The second (72-117) turns to childrearing and the necessity for mistresses (those who look after the children of aristocrats) as well as fathers and mothers to maintain "governance" (73) or *control* over their charges to engender virtue and discourage immorality. Here, the emphasis is upon the challenges of raising a virtuous child within the strictures of the minor aristocracy and among the earthly—often sexual—temptations that beset the culture. In effect, these two initial "digressions" examine the complexities of medieval childrearing and the sources of socialization or, in effect, stage a debate

between *nature* and *nurture* in childhood development, or even more precisely, in the challenge of virtuous maidenhood. However, Virginia

So kepte hirself hir neded no maistresse,
For in hir lyvyng maydens myghten rede,
As in a book, every good word or dede
That longeth to a mayden vertuous,
She was so prudent and so bountevous. (106-10)

In fact, Virginia is herself a living “courtesy book,” the medieval equivalent of a childrearing manual. Found in sources like *The Babees Book (or a “lytyl Reporte” of how Young People should behave)*, these courtesy books contain advice like this:

Whenne yee Answere or speke, yee shulle be purveyde [“prudent”]
What yee shalle say / speke eke thing fructuous [“edifying”];
On esy wyse latte thy Resone be sayde
In wordes gentylle [“well-mannered”] and also compendious [“concise”],
For many wordes ben rihte Tedious
To ylke [“the same”] wyseman that shalle yeve audience;
Thaym to eschewe therfore doo diligence [“attention”]. (ll. 71-77)

In other words, Virginia’s virtue belies the advice the Physician gives, for she is so good that she does not need the instruction he recommends. This incongruity gives us a clue to a “resistant” reading of the *Physician’s Tale*; that is, an interpretation that goes against the *Tale*’s own conclusions. The third “digression” (PhyT 213-50) entails Chaucer’s re-envisioning of Livy’s open confrontation between the virtuous knight and the corrupt judge in the public square before the entire community as a cloistered encounter between a seemingly stoic father and desperate daughter in their private home. Here, the emphasis is upon the broader personal, parental, and social dynamics at work in late-medieval England rather than in the public forum of ancient Rome. Read in concert with one another, the “digressions” reveal a social logic of their own. The first centers upon and elaborates Virginia’s individual psychological and spiritual make up; the second moves outward into an explication of the primary caregivers’ responsibilities; and the third only then engages Virginius’s botched responsibilities in the public realm (the legal challenges he fails to meet) and his failed accountability within his own private domicile (the parental challenges that he fails to recognize) in his final dialogue with Virginia. In this third digression, Chaucer gives Virginia a voice of her own, and her ethical response to her father’s violence protests against his violent rationalizations.

Ethical Response

Drawing from the thought of René Girard, I call “sacrificial readings” those literary interpretations that justify or rationalize violence against others as natural, necessary, or even in the name of God. In this sense, sacrifice is seen as a necessary part of culture, and Christianity—because of the centrality of the crucifixion of Christ—has an ability to justify violence when it is for a “higher purpose” (although this process is not unique to Christianity). Conveniently

perhaps, the sacrificial imperative generally calls for *others* to be sacrificed for the higher good, rather than oneself. This is Virginius's claim over his daughter:

“Doghter,” quod he, “Virginia, by thy name,
Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame,
That *thou* [emphasis added] most suffer, allas that *I* [emphasis added] was bore!” (213-15)

Notice Virginius's language: His killing Virginia causes him to bewail *his own* situation. His thought is essentially about himself, not his daughter. Patriarchy sees only two ways out of Virginius's situation: the death (to maintain the honor of the patriarch) or shame (that the patriarch is ever questioned). The other's death is really about remedying shame the patriarch might suffer. A *sacrificial* reading justifies this violence and even argues that the one being killed is complicit with this violence. A recent article makes exactly this claim by saying, “In the *Physician's Tale*, Chaucer tells of a young woman who actively believes she must die because she accepts both her father's understanding of her situation and his right to govern her” (Farber 159).

However, Virginia's own language in the final “additions,” unique in Chaucer's version of the tale, questions her father's arguments, critiques his actions, and argues against a sacrificial reading. Virginia asks if there is neither “grace” (a theological answer) nor “remedye” (a legal solution) to her fatal situation (236), offering her father different ways to consider her fate. She twice calls her speech a *complaint* (239, 241), or a protest against personal misfortune with a long literary history. She makes clear that her father is doing *his* will “a [*in*] *Goddess* [emphasis added] name” (250). Most damningly, she compares him to “Jepte” (240), or the biblical Jephthah (Judges 11) who in medieval understanding foolishly killed his innocent daughter to keep a tragic, reckless, and impious oath to God. She cannot physically save herself from her father's stiff, unyielding commitment to save his own honor (by killing her), but with her body and her voice she opposes him as fully as possible. Virginia asks her father to reconsider his decision and not to become a new Jephthah. Rather than reading Virginia's reference to Jephthah as her acquiescence to Christian martyrdom, we can see how Virginia opposes her father's actions and rationale by becoming a biblical interpreter and referring to a father whose fidelity to a misplaced vow earned condemnation.

Ending and Moral

The first two digressions—the core of Chaucer's version of the tale—convey a paradox: Virginia is so virtuous that she becomes a living “courtesy book” and an example to others. Medieval courtesy books were the childrearing manuals of their day, detailing proper behavior, comportment, and attitude for the children of families that sought to increase their social status (Bailey). Taken together, the three “digressions” (or better, “additions”) clearly center upon the father-daughter relationship, the father's fatal reaction to the threat against his daughter, and, by extension, his overarching concern for his own status. The central contradiction the *Tale* attempts to rationalize through its spiritualized application is that by killing his daughter, Virginius has himself snuffed out his family line. Put simply: By “protecting” his daughter's virtue and his personal reputation, Virginius dooms his family lineage. The *Tale*'s multiple attempts to provide closure and a tidy moral fail to make sense of this central contradiction. The dis-ease that many

readers find with the conclusion of the *Physician's Tale* emerges from two related misapprehensions. First, the failure to recognize that the *Tale* is concerned with patriarchy's self-destructive preference for violence disguised as morality. The second is the failure to understand that Chaucer has turned a story of political violence into: (1) the failure to identify the proper locus of concern and (2) the inability to reconcile Chaucer's focus on medieval childhood with the putative exemplary "spiritual" moralization. In other words, without attending to these features of the tale, the spiritual lessons the Physician attempts to derive from the tale do not really make much sense.

Reading ethically—a form of "resistant reading"—exposes the ugly violence at the heart of the *Tale* for what it is (murder rather than sacrifice) and resists the attempt to normalize that violence through an appeal to a "higher" value like religion. So, it is important to look at the *effects* wrought by Virginia's death rather than the lesson the Physician attempts to ascribe. At the end of the tale, Virginius takes his daughter's head back to Apius the judge, who immediately sentences him to be hanged, but the townsfolk intercede on Virginius's behalf. The lecherous judge kills himself, but Virginius intercedes for Claudius the henchman—something he did not do for his own daughter—and sees him exiled because he had been deceived. The others who had been complicit in the plot to seize "were anhangid, moore and lesse" (PhyT 275). Virginius's murder of his daughter leads the Physician to comment, "Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte / In no degree, ne in which manere wyse" (278-79) and then, "Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake" (286). We might paraphrase the first comment to mean, "Be careful because no one knows who God will strike down or how God will do so." But God did not kill Virginia; her father did *in God's name*. We might read the second comment to indicate, "Forsake sin before sin forsakes you." But Virginia neither sinned nor did anything wrong to warrant her death, so her story cannot illustrate this conviction. In Livy's version of the story, Virginius's public execution of his daughter sparks the overthrow of an abusive ruler; in Chaucer's version, Virginia's private murder brings together the remaining powerful males in the tale. In both, the child unifies the community and provides social cohesion in a time of division. Even more pointedly, the murder of a young woman unites the masculine power structure. However, if God's treatment of humanity mirrors Virginius's treatment of Virginia, then the world itself is a hostile, chaotic place, and *theodicy*—any attempt to "justify the ways of God to [humanity]" (as Milton put it in *Paradise Lost*, l. 26)—is futile.

Transformation

1. Translations of the analogues to the *Physician's Tale* are widely available online. Compare Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* with the source tale in Livy or in any of the roughly contemporary medieval versions in Boccaccio, Gower, and the *Romance of the Rose*. What similarities and differences do you find? What is the effect of those differences between the texts?
2. Pick out one of the other tales from Chaucer's "Children's Cluster" and describe (1) who the child is, (2) how the child is the subject or object of violence, (3) how that violence is rationalized, and (4) what this violence against the child achieves. What similarities or differences do you see between how children are represented in this collection of tales? Remember a common refrain in, for example, *The Simpsons* when something bad happens: "What about the children?!"

3. Look up a variety of definitions of “violence” and see how many types you can identify in the *Physician’s Tale*. And then try to apply this provocative statement from philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*: “As soon as there is the One, there is murder, wounding, traumatism” (78) Or, as soon as there is *one* there is *violence*. Consider the question of violence along a spectrum of words to actions. At what point do you draw the line at what is “acceptable” violence? What makes violence against children feel especially egregious?
4. The mother is mentioned only once in the *Physician’s Tale* (119). What does her relative absence mean for the action of the *Tale* and its interpretation? Do a quick internet search for information on medieval mothers, and compare their conventional role in the Middle Ages as opposed to a father’s. How do these stereotypical parental roles compare with the different contemporary understandings of how families should operate?
5. Research Philippe Ariès and his statements concerning medieval children and childhood. What evidence does he draw upon to reach his conclusions? And what do his conclusions say about how people view the Middle Ages?
6. Virginia is compared to a “courtesy book,” which was a medieval childrearing manual. Take a look at some of the other examples in *The Babees Book* available online. What kinds of behaviors did these medieval manuals stress? What contemporary examples can you find about advice to parents for raising a virtuous and responsible child? What contemporary examples can you find of the debate between *nature* and *nurture* in childrearing and social problems?
7. This chapter argues that sacrificial violence (often against children) is seen as justified in certain stories when that violence is for a “higher purpose.” Can you find examples from our modern period in which parents pardon the sacrifice or death of their children for a higher purpose? What is the effect of those choices, both for children and for parents (and other adults)?
8. Readers have often been perplexed by Chaucer’s decision to give this tale to the Physician. Based on the Physician’s portrait in the *General Prologue* and this chapter’s reconsideration of Chaucer’s additions to the original tale, what might be the logic behind attributing the *Tale* to the Physician?

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