

A “Gemme of Chastitee”: Death as Medium for Holy Communication in Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale* and *Prioress’s Tale*

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In Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale*, Virginia accepts her death at the hands of her father, asking that he “yif [her] deeth, ere that [she] have shame / Dooth [his] child [his] wil, in Goddes name” (250-51). In this statement, Virginia showcases that the father-daughter relationship depends wholly on God’s will rather than on the survival of the virgin daughter herself. Virginius sees his daughter Virginia only as an extension of himself and his needs, and he attempts to obliterate her subjectivity through violence, justifying his actions under “Goddes name” (*Physician’s Tale* 251). He minimizes his physical participation in his daughter’s bloodshed through synecdoche, blaming his “piteous hand” for her murder (226). However, in the *Physician’s* narration, we come to see Virginius as “the wolf” that rips apart the sheep while the shepherd is not paying attention, which subsequently reveals the family as the ultimate institution of violence (102). The thread of familial bonds continues into the *Prioress’s Tale*, where the Prioress allies herself with the young boy and his mother. The Prioress makes no attempt to create a

realistic setting in her tale. The setting, the Jews, and the characters are shadowy but not real. This ambiguity allows the prioress to focus in on her relationship to the young boy and thus the Virgin Mary. Like Virginia's body, the body of the Prioress's young boy is violated and used as a tool to reach the divine. Both characters are "[gemmes] of chastitee," or religious abstractions that distance the brutal realities of their deaths from their individualities (223), while the control taken over their bodies acts as a medium for communication with God.

Building on the discussion started by various researchers, this essay aims to explain Chaucer's graphic representation of violence in *The Canterbury Tales* as I propose that Chaucer both assimilates and rejects the idea of theologically rationalized murder, interrogating received notions about martyrdom, and exploring their contradictions. In 1980, Carolyn P. Collette published an article entitled "Death and Dying in the Canterbury Tales" where she stated that "the sensible world, and an immediate response to it, rather than any abstract philosophy, seems to form the basis of faith" in the *Physician's Tale* (141). Over 20 years later, John A. Pitcher contradicted Collette, asserting that "the testimony of the actual tale contradicts the Physician's original diagnosis regarding the social origin of religion" (15). An immense array of scholarship borders these two arguments. Scholars such as Daniel T. Kline, Angus Fletcher, and Anne Lancashire collectively argue that

death in the *The Canterbury Tales* does more than comment on the abuse of authority, but suggests that Virginia and the young child become “casualties of the defensive regime advocated by faith” (Fletcher 142). Complementing the research of these scholars, this essay engages the *Physician’s Tale* and the *Prioress’s Tale* as grounds to expose death’s significance as the triumph of the divine over nature, consequently revealing how we seek to understand the divine through actions of violence and death that foster a relationship to God through the breaching of the human body. More specifically, I analyze both the child in the *Prioress’s Tale* and Virginia in the *Physician’s Tale* and their symbolic roles as means to understand the divine through the human body.

In the *Physician’s Tale*, subjectivity orders the relationship between Virginia and her father Virginius. Virginius sees Virginia only in relation to himself— she is a man-made object of desire who Virginius lays claim to through his paternal line. Even the similarity in their names signifies that Virginia exists only as an extension of her father. When Apius overrides Virginius’s paternity with claims that Virginia is his stolen servant, Virginius gives his daughter two choices: “death or shame” (*Physician’s Tale* 214). Virginia succumbs to her father’s rhetoric and validates her subsequent murder under “Goddes name” (251). While Virginius kills his daughter so that she “shal die a maide,” Virginia’s

words and actions show that her father's sacrificial gesture is just a "socially convenient murder" (248; Kline 78). Virginius kills his daughter for fear that Apius's claims will blemish the purity of his paternity instead of fear that she will be sexually violated by Apius. Virginius's superficial reasoning for killing his daughter before her maidenhood is violated is ironic because, like Apius, Virginius gazes violently upon his daughter and seeks control over her body. Instead of considering how he might use his power to counteract Apius's claim on Virginia, he focuses on the person most easily controlled: his daughter. To Virginius, Virginia is an object and not even a person. Even when she is the subject of his sentence, she is the sufferer of the action at the hands of a man. In Virginius's murder of Virginia, he imitates Apius's forceful demeanor by violating Virginia's body to free his conscience under the will of God.

Using synecdoche to minimize his physical participation in Virginia's death, Virginius suggests that her death minimizes his shame in the eyes of God. After Virginius murders his daughter, he relents his actions and curses his "piteous hand" for carrying out the murder (*Physician's Tale* 226). In this way, Virginius commits a self-serving murder. Virginius's execution of Virginia takes place as an extension of his language. Before he beheads her, Virginius pleads for Virginia to accept her death in place of shame, calling her his "deere

daughter, endere of [his] life” (218). In this statement, Virginius indirectly blames Virginia for his fate. Her death ends his life; she is his final source of grief. As Anne Lancashire suggests, “like Abraham and Isaac, Virginius and Virginia talk together in private about the necessary killing, the dialogue between them is both emotional and religious, with their mutual love being stressed” (141). Although Virginius does not murder Virginia under order from a deity, his actions follow a religious narrative and he excuses his actions as necessary through God’s eyes.

Before the “necessary” killing of Virginia is carried out, the Physician suggests Virginia’s rape is theologically justified by referring to a wolf’s slaughtering of a lamb under the negligent watch of a shepherd. The allusion to the careless shepherd at the beginning of the tale foreshadows Virginius’s violation of Virginia’s body. The image of the lamb’s body torn apart in voracious feeding equates sexuality and purity with violence and death. In the *Physician’s Tale*, Virginius becomes the wolf mutilating the lamb-like Virginia. In many senses, this illusion signifies an image of rape. Although sexually intact, Virginia’s body is cleaved open by her father under the watchful eyes of God. Only after she is violated “and to the jüge [Virginius] gan [her head] to presente” does her father feel shame at the hands of God (256). A “consentant of this cursedness,” Virginius is finally

confounded with a “ful sorweful herte and will” (276, 254). In her death, Virginia is allied with the Virgin Mary because both Mary and Virginia are violated by their fathers in situations they cannot control. In this way, the *Physician’s Tale* elucidates the family as the ultimate institution of violence that is justified by God’s teachings.

Like Virginia, the little boy in the *Prioress’s Tale* is a “gemme of chastitee,” in that his death will become an example for the reader of true love and devotion (223). The Prioress sets her tale in a small, nameless town in Asia many years in the past. The vague setting of the tale makes the narrative appear illusory. Although it is a tale of affective piety, it appears as a fable, or a romance with “no effort [made by the Prioress] to create a realistic setting, no attention to the possibilities and inevitabilities of life in such a place” (Colette 142). Perpetuating the vague nature of the tale, the Prioress fails to describe the Jews in the Jewish quarter. This lack of description makes the Jews appear as inhuman creatures, “a convenient backdrop, a catalyst for the necessary action” of the tale (146). Even the boy’s school and what he is taught is ambiguous. Similarly, the widowed mother remains a shadowy figure in the background until the end of the tale. The Prioress’s elusive style ignores the backdrop of the tale, which allows her to focus on the center of the narrative that holds her reality: the widow’s son that becomes the

martyred child. For the Prioress, what is real is the child's "natural affinity for religious beauty" (142). Through the death of the child, the Prioress comes to realize that the soul seeks what nourishes it and that true innocent faith is to outwardly learn "by rote," not to gain a full understanding (*Prioress's Tale* 522).

In the child's death, the Prioress's tale depicts liturgy's triumph over the human soul and natural body. Through divine grace, God gives the young boy the will to perform prayer "al by rote" (522). By enabling the boy to pray, God indirectly praises himself through the boy's body. The boy's song seems all the more miraculous when he is murdered and cannot sing naturally. In order for the boy's corpse to sing his body must be violated by an exterior source. The boy's prayer recalls the Virgin Mary, whose body was also pierced by divine penetration. In her prologue, the Prioress compares Mary to the bush of Exodus, which is burned but not consumed: "O bussh unbrent, brenninge in Moises sighte / That ravisedest doun fro the deitee / Thurgh thin humbles" (468-70). This allusion signifies the paradox of both the Virgin and the young boy. While both are sexually intact, a divine force violates their bodies. Thus, the *Prioress's Tale* shows how we come to know the sacred through violence. More specifically, the divine is revealed through the way bodies are breached. In this way, the boy's murder sets the miracle of God's grace into motion. While the cut obstructs both voice

and breath, the gash itself is overcome by divine grace that allows the boy to continue singing his song. The disturbing image of the child's murder suggests that divinity has the power to override nature, showcasing that God's use of the boy's body as a medium for communication is the true miracle of the *Prioress's Tale*.

Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer allows readers to discover the divine in the space between life and death. The necessity of death to experience God, as implied by both the *Physician's Tale* and the *Prioress's Tale*, shifts attention away from the somber reading of these two tales and encourages readers to focus on the necessity of death in understanding the divine. The distinction between body as physical and body as vehicle for divine communication fosters a deeper understanding of Chaucer's brutal representation of violence in the *Tales*. Death is a mediator between God and humanity. As Virginia and the child are murdered, God develops a relationship with those around them: Virginius and the widowed mother taking comfort in the purity of their relationship to God. As bodies are violated in the *Tales*, they become a medium of communication for God to work through. In effect, death is a mode through which Chaucer allows readers to develop a relationship with God.

Works Cited

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