Chaucer's (Anti-)Eroticisms and the Queer Middle Ages

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Surely D. S. Brewer is correct in his assertion, “Love of children is one of the orthodoxies of human nature which Chaucer takes for granted.” The evidence for his interpretation abounds: Griselda’s multiple swoons upon reuniting with her lost children at the close of the *Clerk’s Tale* illustrate the depth of a mother’s love, and the “poure wydwe” of the *Prioress’s Tale* likewise exemplifies maternal tenderness as she seeks her lost son with “moodres pitee in hir brest enclosed” (7.586, 593). The Parson frets that fathers may love their children so excessively that they will succumb to filial idolatry (10.860), and Chaucer’s gentle dedication of his *A Treatise on the Astrolabe* to “Lyte Lowys my sone” (1) testifies to a father’s affection for his son and concern for the boy’s education. Such moments showcase parents’ sincere feelings for their progeny, yet love is an ever protean, never stable emotion, and the loving concern that Chaucer expresses to his own child finds a surprising counterpart in the abuse, death, and torment meted out to many of the children depicted in his fictions.

In considering the psychological meaning of violence against children, Sigmund Freud notes the frequent appearance of an abusive fantasy—“It

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is surprising how often people who seek analytic treatment for hysteria or an obsessional neurosis confess to having indulged in the phantasy: ‘A child is being beaten’”—and this commonplace psychological trope is repeatedly realized in depictions of violence against children throughout Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. The examples of parental affection cited above have their counterparts in such scenes as Walter’s sequestering of his children from their mother for her psychological torment in the Clerk’s Tale; the vicious execution of the “litel clergeon, seven yeer of age” in the Prioress’s Tale (7.503); and the Parson’s anxiety over parents who murder their offspring, whether these children are born or unborn, whether the parents act accidentally or purposefully (10.575–80). The narrative treatments of many other of Chaucer’s child characters are equally violent: sexual assault (Maline in the Reeve’s Tale), banishment (Mauricius’s fate, alongside his mother’s, in the Man of Law’s Tale), death (Thomas’s son in the Summoner’s Tale), decapitation (Virginia in the Physician’s Tale), severe wounding (Sophie in the Tale of Melibee), and starvation (Ugolino’s children in the Monk’s Tale). Children suffer in the tales of the Canterbury pilgrimage, providing a painful counterpoint to the eventual pleasure of the narrative’s resolution. Freud argues that the fantasy of a beaten child stimulates erotic pleasure, that “at the climax of the imaginary situation there is almost invariably a masturbatory satisfaction,” and so too do the beaten children of Chaucer’s tales frequently engender narrative pleasure by serving as erotic surrogates in conflicts between adults (and mostly between men). By enduring the narrative pain that necessarily counterbalances the tales’ resolutions, these children queerly reconceptualize the meaning of families predicated upon the fantasy of inviolate paternal authority.

Freud also observes that the fantasy of the beaten child is inherently variable in its effects and orientations, declaring that “it was impossible at first even to decide whether the pleasure attaching to the beating-phantasy was to be described as sadistic or masochistic.” As the valence of this


3. Sigmund Freud, “‘A Child Is Being Beaten,’” 179. For the masturbatory pleasure implicit in reading, see Thomas Laqueur, Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation (New York: Zone, 2003), in which he explores moralists’ fears that “the fictional qualities of the characters in a novel or masturbatory fantasy made them more real, more compelling, more able to arouse sentiments than so-called real characters or real sexual partners” (322).

pleasure teeters between sadism and masochism, the beaten and eroti-
cized child becomes interchangeable with the one fantasizing about this
violence: “The child who is beaten has been changed into another one
and is now invariably the child producing the phantasy. The phantasy is
accompanied by a high degree of pleasure, and has now acquired a sig-
nificant content. . . . Now, therefore, the wording runs: ‘I am being beaten
by my father.’ It is of an unmistakably masochistic character.”
From this perspective, the father’s role in the child’s beating is critical. Although
children’s mothers can beat them as viciously as their fathers, Freud’s
account of this psychosexual fantasy underscores the ways in which pater-
nal violence reveals paternal affection: “The idea of the father beating
this hateful child is therefore an agreeable one, quite apart from whether
he has actually been seen doing so. It means: ‘My father does not love
this other child, he loves only me.’” For Chaucer’s child characters as well
as for his readers, the father becomes implicated with the pleasure of the
abused child, for it is the father’s desire that drives the narrative forward,
as it is the ultimate regendering of the father that precipitates the narra-
tive’s queer resolution. This subversive narrative pleasure in the fantasy
of beaten children paradoxically emerges when suffering children, if only
through their passivity and suffering, counterbalance the patriarchal struc-
tures that claim to reward their pain with paternal love. Might not chil-
dren queerly reimagine the contours of paternal masculinities that bolster
their fathers’ cultural privilege through their own torment and death?

One might hypothesize that the predominant desire surrounding
beaten children is to rescue them, to save them from the minatory forces
punishing them, but such a simplistic assessment of these violent fanta-
sies ignores the multiplicity of desires circulating around the figure of the
Child—often erotic, but also spiritual, familial, and economic—and the
ways in which Chaucer depicts these desires to queer aspects of medieval
masculinity. The following analysis proceeds in line with two of Chaucer’s
preferred literary modes—fabliau (Reeve’s Tale and Summoner’s Tale) and
exemplary tales (Clerk’s Tale and Physician’s Tale). One might well assume
that these genres share little in common: exempla are intended to illus-
trate important spiritual lessons, whereas fabliaux, despite the valedic-
tory epigrams ironically positing moral meanings to narratives insistently
divorced from didacticism, are intended for comic pleasure. Nonetheless,
children are instrumental figures in many such tales, revealing fault lines

5. Ibid., 185.
6. Ibid., 187; italics in original.
of desire and erotic energy that circulate around them as the adult characters negotiate the wider world surrounding their offspring. These four tales showcase the ways in which fathers’ relationships with their children, which are latently eroticized, illuminate the adult (and frequently homosocial) antagonisms at the core of their respective narratives. As Eve Sedgwick’s pioneering work in queer studies amply demonstrates, as has the work of her many followers, rivalries are often fought over the figure of a desired woman; so too may such aggressions be enacted through the figure of the desired, beaten, and/or dead child, for children frequently serve as apparently asexual surrogates in rivalries nonetheless fraught with eroticism. In her discussion of Chaucer’s treatment of parent–child relationships, Jill Mann notes “the cruelty apparently inherent in the parent’s right to exercise power over the child,” and this analysis expands upon her and others’ work to explore the ways in which misspent paternal authority bears the potential to queer the father wielding such power. If readers see the fantasy of the beaten child not as the child’s masochistic ploy for the father’s love but as a chink in the armor of his inviolate paternity, the potential sadism afforded to the father in the family drama becomes the means of his own undoing.

Before proceeding to the various Canterbury tales and their beaten children, the challenges of discussing medieval children and childhood must be considered. Like other markers of personal identity that are largely socially constructed, such as gender, sexuality, and race, children and childhood, as incarnated in the phantom ideal of the Child, are in many ways more reflective of cultural perceptions than of inherent truths, and so the Child shifts in the cultural meanings it produces within the various chronological frameworks it appears. Philippe Ariès famously proposed that the people of the Middle Ages did not perceive of childhood as a

7. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to address all of Chaucer’s fictional children and the various roles they play in his narratives, and so I concentrate on his depictions of children in the Canterbury Tales in which a father’s desires for his child(ren) become implicated in fantasies of eroticism, violence, and death. This strategy thus omits the child protagonist of the Prioress’s Tale, whose father has died prior to the narrative’s beginning. Due to the brevity of their portrayal, I also do not address Ugolino’s starving children in the Monk’s Tale. Other children, such as Mauricius in the Man of Law’s Tale, do not interact sufficiently with their fathers to draw conclusions about the psychosexual paternal dynamics in the tale.

sphere of life distinct from adulthood: “in the Middle Ages . . . children were mixed with adults as soon as they were considered capable of doing without their mothers or nannies, not long after a tardy weaning (in other words, at about the age of seven).”9 His ideas, however, have been widely discredited by more-nuanced readings of source materials. In particular, Barbara Hanawalt succinctly puts forth her thesis—“The Middle Ages did recognize stages of life that corresponded to childhood and adolescence. These two life stages . . . appeared in learned medical and scientific texts, in literary works of the ‘ages of man,’ and in the folk terminology of the period”; she then demonstrates from a wide range of primary sources that medieval people considered childhood as a period of life with social, religious, and legal expectations that were notably distinct from those of adulthood.10

Pinpointing the exact parameters of childhood in the Middle Ages is difficult (as it remains difficult in modern times), but several recurrent themes assist in mapping out the terrain. Foremost the Christian Church recognized the concept of the age of reason, as recorded in such documents as Canon 21 of the Fourth Lateran Council: “Everyone who has attained the age of reason is bound to confess his sins at least once a year to his own parish priest . . . and to receive the Eucharist at least at Easter.”:11 In his impressive overview of classical and medieval theories of childhood, Nicholas Orme summarizes the beliefs of such theorists as Aristotle, Isidore of Seville, and Giles of Rome. Aristotle argues that children should remain at home for their first years, observe education and exercise at the age of five, and then commence their schooling at seven (with their education lasting until the age of twenty-one). Isidore of Seville posits that the early years of life are divided into three stages (infantia, from birth to seven years, pueritia, from seven to fourteen years, and adolescentia, from fourteen to twenty-eight years). Giles of Rome proposes in his On the Rule of Princes that the first stage of life runs from birth to seven years, the next stage from seven to fourteen years, and the subsequent stage from fourteen to twenty-one, twenty-three, or twenty-seven

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years. The Middle English *Ratis Raving*, a conduct book for a son written in the voice of his father, divides the ages of life from birth to three, from three to seven, from seven to fifteen, from fifteen to thirty (at which age “perfeccioune / Of resone and discreccioune” is achieved), from thirty to fifty, from fifty to eighty, and from eighty to death. These taxonomies of medieval life illustrate various views concerning the stages of a child’s development, but it is also important to remember that a particular child’s experience would in large part depend on numerous social and economic factors, as Charles Owen points out: “Adolescence was in some sense a privilege, explicitly denied to peasantry of both sexes . . . , accorded in variable terms to those destined for handicrafts, businesses, and professions, assured to men of gentle birth who aspired to knighthood.”

Chaucer’s conception of childhood would thus likely be influenced by such considerations, and for the purposes of this analysis, I concentrate on children as defined both by their relative youth in comparison to their parents and other adult characters and by their dependency on their parents. For example, some may argue that Maline of the *Reeve’s Tale* is no longer a child because she is twenty years old (l.3970). Nonetheless, her status as Symkyn’s daughter determines her position in the narrative: she is unmarried, lives at home, and relies on her parents for her sustenance despite her somewhat advanced years. As this example demonstrates, childhood is often not defined by one’s age as much as it is defined situationally with respect to a host of other factors. This matter is further complicated by Chaucer’s frequent use of the word “childe” to refer to characters who appear no longer sufficiently young to be considered children, such as in his description of Absolon in the *Miller’s Tale* as a “myrie child” (l.3325). Notwithstanding the occasional semantic difficulties


15. The *Middle English Dictionary* offers as its primary definition of *child* a “young child, a baby,” or a “boy or girl (usually to the age of puberty).” The term also refers to individuals typically considered older than children, such as in its meanings as “a young man; youth, lad” or “a youth in service”; “spiritual or moral descendant; follower, disciple, or devotee”; or a “child regarded as innocent or immature,” “an immature, unwise, or foolish person.”
in determining whether a particular character of the _Canterbury Tales_ is a child, Chaucer’s frequent depictions of suffering children showcase the tortuous and torturous routes to narrative pleasure as mediated through children’s pain, as well as the ways in which the fathers’ roles in their children’s suffering redound to the undermining of their own gendered privilege.

Understanding medieval fatherhood presents challenges similar to understanding medieval children, and Derek Neal observes the historical record’s relative silence concerning cultural expectations for medieval fathers: “Late medieval England may have been a patriarchal society, wherein fatherhood was a pervasive metaphor; ironically, however, from the historical record, we can know its men better as masters than as fathers.” Perspectives on medieval fatherhood can nonetheless be gleaned from boys’ conduct books, which define cultural expectations for masculinity. Primarily imagined as the advice of fathers to their sons, such texts highlight the cultural expectations of masculinity for boys growing into adulthood and, presumably, fatherhood as well. Most of these volumes proffer standard advice on proper Christian masculinity, such as following the Ten Commandments, privileging meekness and patience over pride and anger, and avoiding taverns and gambling. Such exhortations encourage boys to follow the proper path to culturally sanctioned masculinity and to respect their elders, but the early-fifteenth-century conduct book “Myne Awen Dere Sone” registers a father’s latent fear that sons will avenge themselves upon their parents:

> For be thy chylder neuere so dere,  
> And thou be put in thaire power,  
> And thay thy gude in hande hafte hente,  
> That wolde not rek if thou ware wente.

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With this father (as narrator of the text) cautioning his son against the boy’s children who are as yet unborn, he points to the limits of paternal masculinity. The violence occluded in this fantasy of the child taking revenge against his father reveals the tensions inherent in father–child relationships and the threat that it will erupt between the two. As a dominant metaphor of patriarchal power, fatherhood holds the male body as the incarnation of paternal beneficence and care, yet these words allow the possibility that children might seek their own advantage against their parents. After all, the fantasy of the beaten child is only a fantasy, one that Freud primarily assigned to masochists tormented by unresolved Oedipal complexes, but nothing prohibits a child within Chaucer’s fictions—even a raped, beaten, or dead child—from beating back against their paternal tormentors and confronting these fathers with the queer limits of patriarchal privilege.

CHILDREN IN CHAUCERIAN FABLIAUX:
REEVE’S TALE AND SUMMONER’S TALE

In concentrating on sexual farce among adults, Chaucer excludes children from most of his fabliaux altogether. John and Alison of the Miller’s Tale are childless, and Perkyn Revelour of the Cook’s Tale, although sufficiently young to serve as a “prentys . . . of a craft of vitailliers” (1.4365–66), is not typically viewed as a child both because his parents are absent from the story and because his narrative hints strongly of adult sexuality when he moves in with his friend whose wife “swyved for hir sustenance” (1.4422). Alison of Bath tells a romance in the tale-telling competition, yet the many bawdy elements in her portrait, in both the General Prologue and her Prologue, warrant her inclusion in discussions of Chaucer’s fabliaux, and she too has borne no children, in blatant contradiction to her declared appreciation of God’s command: “God bad us for to wexe and multiplye; / That gentil text kan I wel understonde” (3.28–29).21 Despite January’s desire for an heir, as expressed repeatedly in the Merchant’s Tale (4.1267–76, 4.1433–40, and 4.1446–50), he and May are childless; discerning Chaucer’s pointed irony, some critics suggest that Damian succeeds in impregnating May, due to these suggestive lines: “This Januarie, who is glad but he? / He kisseth hire and clippeth hire hir

ful ofte, / And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe" (4.2412–14). The merchant and his wife in the *Shipman’s Tale* are also childless, but the narrator remarks that a “mayde child” (7.95) accompanies the merchant’s wife on her garden rendezvous with the monk John. This child seems to be a young serving girl, not the merchant’s daughter, and here again the situationality of childhood is suggested: should we see this minor character as a child or as a young woman learning her trade? She appears to straddle between childhood (as indicated by her youth) and nascent adulthood (as indicated by her domestic service in another’s household). Of Chaucer’s fabliaux, only the *Reeve’s Tale* and the *Summoner’s Tale* include children and, through these portrayals, query their role in defining their fathers’ masculinity.

If the fantasy of a beaten child reveals desires circulating in a narrative, in the *Reeve’s Tale*, it ironically appears that Maline’s father Symkyn no longer succumbs to eroticism. When John, jealous of Allen’s sexual success with Maline, copulates with Symkyn’s wife, readers learn that this miller does not exact payment of the marital debt with any frequency: “And on this goode wyf [John] leith on soore. / So myrie a fit ne hadde she nat ful yoore” (1.4229–30). These lines imply conflicting yet converging views of Symkyn’s sexual prowess: he may be impotent, or lack interest in intercourse, or he may perform the sexual act with less erotic vigor than young John. Due to the presence of the “child that was of half yeer age” (1.3971), readers know that Symkyn impregnated his wife approximately fifteen months earlier, but little textual evidence attests to his continuing sexual attraction to her. The roughly nineteen years between the births of their children also points to Symkyn’s reluctance to copulate with his wife (or conversely, although unlikely, a particularly effective form of medieval birth control). A defining irony of the *Reeve’s Tale* arises in its emphasis on erotic rivalries among men when its main character expresses little erotic desire.


23. For the possibility that this “mayde child” is indeed the child of the merchant and his wife, see Peter Beidler, “Medieval Children Witness Their Mother’s Indiscretions: The Maid Child in Chaucer’s *Shipman’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 44.2 (2009): 186–204.

24. Some readers propose that Symkyn and his wife’s son may, in fact, be Maline’s. The apparent anti-eroticism that characterizes their marriage supports this view; at the same time, Chaucer does not provide sufficient evidence to confirm such a supposition.
To point out that Symkyn does not sexually desire his wife is not to suggest that he does not desire, and in the opening lines of his tale, the Reeve introduces Symkyn and his family while focusing on this miller’s social aspirations, which he hopes to achieve through his wife and daughter. As a narcissistic reflection of her husband’s masculinity, Symkyn’s wife registers the family’s status within their community:

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\begin{align*}
A \text{ wyf he hadde, ycomen of noble kyn;} \\
The \text{ person of the toun hir fader was.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{For Symkyn wolde no wyf, as he sayde,} \\
\text{But she were wel ynorissed and a mayde,} \\
\text{To saven his estaat of yomanrye. (1.3942–43, 3947–49)}
\end{align*}
\]

Chaucer includes numerous ironies in this passage, notably that Symkyn’s father-in-law is the town’s parson, and his wife’s parentage enhances his social position and empty narcissism by preserving his “estaat of yomanrye.” Within the terms of this depiction, he desires her in regard to his pecuniary and social ambitions, not in response to any erotic attractions, which appear to be readily sacrificed in favor of his non-erotic objectives. His ridiculous aspiration to the ranks of yeomanry—either in its sense as a retainer in a noble household or as a lower member of the landed gentry—highlights the follies of his desires while simultaneously establishing them as the focal point of a life mostly devoid of eroticism.25

To underscore Symkyn’s predominantly asexual desires, the narrator pays little attention to Symkyn’s wife’s physical features, a narrative strategy standing in stark contrast to the lengthy portrait and mock blazon of Alison in the Miller’s Tale that establishes her as the object of desire in John, Nicholas, and Absolon’s erotic rivalry (1.3233–70). With the description of Symkyn’s wife lacking, she registers not as a desirable woman in herself but more as a means for Symkyn to monitor other men’s desires for her, despite the dearth of evidence that such attractions are simmering throughout their town. The Reeve details Symkyn’s violent plan

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25. In Douglas Gray’s Oxford Companion to Chaucer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), “yeoman” is defined simply as “a servant ranking in a feudal household below a squire” (499). The Middle English Dictionary offers a secondary definition of “a member of the landholding class below the rank of squire; a man holding a small landed estate.” It appears to be the latter definition of yeomanry to which Symkyn aspires, in contrast to such Chaucerian yeomen as the Knight’s yeoman and the Canon’s yeoman, who serve in secondary positions to their social superiors.
to quell any erotic interest in his wife—“Was noon so hardy th at wente by the weye / That with hire dorste rage or ones pleye, / But if he wolde be slayn of Symkyn” (1.3957–59)—and equips this character with numerous phallic blades and weapons to paint him as an overbearing, intimidating, and aggressive man (1.3929–33). The foundational structure of the erotic triangle guides the tale’s opening and unfolding, yet ironically so, as Symkyn aggressively seeks to preserve for himself the woman for whom he expresses little erotic attraction, and without any suitors for her affections to spark the sexual competition at this tale’s heart.

In contrast to the missing portrait of Symkyn’s wife, the narrator’s description of his daughter Maline focuses primarily on her physical appearance. The passage implies that, as her mother fails to attract her father sexually, she too is unlikely to spark erotic attractions from any potential suitors:

The wenche thikke and wel ygrowen was,
With kamus nose and eyen greye as glas,
With buttokes brode and brestes rounde and hye.
But right fair was hire heer; I wol nat lye. (1.3973–76)

The closing compliment to her hair damns Maline with faint praise, and one sees primarily a chubby young woman with a pug nose and dishwater eyes. Because the majority of girls in the Middle Ages married while teens, her age of twenty years also points to her unattractiveness, or at least her difficulty in finding a mate. As Barbara Hanawalt observes, “Young women with wealthy parents still alive married even earlier [than sixteen]. Among the merchant class, marriage occurred for girls at age seventeen or younger,” and Shulamith Shahar documents marriage for

26. W. W. Allman and Thomas Hanks, in “Rough Love: Notes toward an Erotics of the Canterbury Tales” (Chaucer Review 38.1 [2003]: 36–65), argue that these blades contribute to the aggressive valence of eroticism in the Canterbury Tales (43–45).

27. Several romance heroines have grey eyes, such as Guinevere in The Awntyrs off Arthur (in Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales, ed. Thomas Hahn [Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995], 160–226, at line 599), but Chaucer appears to parody this tradition in his depiction of Maline. The Prioress also has grey eyes (“Hir nose tretys, hir eyen greye as glas” [1.152]), but her overarching physical portrait, like Maline’s, casts her as unattractive. By depicting Maline and the Prioress with grey eyes, Chaucer satirizes these female characters’ fantasies of courtly love and romance. Also, in the Romaunt of the Rose, Chaucer’s portraits of the morally suspect characters Idleness (546), Mirth (822), and Gladness (862) feature grey eyes.
girls taking place during their *adolescentia*. Similar to Symkyn’s anti-erotic treatment of Maline’s mother, so too do no male suitors pursue Maline to sate their erotic desires; rather, her father and grandfather hope to satisfy their narcissistic desires for social aggrandizement through her: “His purpos was for to bistowe hire hye / Into som worthy blood of auncetrye” (1.3981–82). Both pandering his daughter to an appropriately wealthy suitor and restricting other men’s access to her, Symkyn attempts to negotiate uxorial and filial eroticism to his advantage, while remaining unaware of its explosive force and its queer potential to undermine his performance of paternal masculinity. Indeed, the reference to Symkyn and his wife’s infant son as “a propre page” (1.3972) further expresses his sense of the economic value of his children, foreseeing the child’s rise in an aristocratic household as reflective of his own parental puissance.

Because Symkyn is less concerned with pursuing his amatory desires than in regulating his wife’s and daughter’s sexuality, he attempts to control the sexual instincts of any young men who might court them. And so as much as the *Reeve’s Tale* focuses on Symkyn’s humiliation when Allen and John respectively fornicate with his daughter and wife, thus depriving him of the commercial value of his daughter’s hymen and cuckold him, this sexual farce is complemented by the conflict between the generations that plays out over stolen grain. It is worth remembering that Allen and John do not initially embark on a sexual quest; instead, they are ensnared in an intergenerational battle between young and old that they resolve through their violent eroticism. Like Symkyn, then, Allen and John initially appear unconcerned with their erotic drives; they focus first on stopping Symkyn from stealing grain and only later on Allen’s vengeful desire to copulate with Maline (to punish Symkyn) and on John’s anxious desire to copulate with Symkyn’s wife (lest Allen’s sexual adventures shame him, once the story is shared within the homosocial environs of their Cambridge college). Numerous scholars have commented on the tale’s depiction of men’s traffic in women, but I


would add to this discussion that each man’s initial objective is not erotic but rather simply to preserve the status quo of homosocial stasis: for Symkyn, not to lose his social position (ambiguous as it is), and for Allen and John, to remain within their university setting (from which they would not have departed without Symkyn’s disruption of their food supply). These three men initially evince no desire for intercourse, nor any desire for women, but instead focus first on preserving and then on aggrandizing their standing among men through sexual acts, albeit sexual acts in which the desire to copulate with a female is secondary to the desire to defeat a male adversary.

For Symkyn, controlling other men entails establishing himself in a dominant position over them and thereby regulating their access to sexual pleasure, and his particular fantasy of masculine control revolves around his narcissistic belief that he can beat these young men, if not in the literal sense of a physical thrashing, then in the authoritarian sense of establishing his will over theirs. In these scenes Chaucer unites the intergenerational battle between old and young with the rivalry festering between town and gown. Despite Allen and John’s superior education, Symkyn sees them as his intellectual inferiors, musing inwardly: “The gretteste clerkes been noght wisest men,’ / As whilom to the wolf thus spak the mare” (1.4054–55). Given this tale’s treatment of animal sexuality (as discussed shortly), it is ironic that Symkyn casts himself in the feminized position of a mare in these lines; moreover, although recognizing Allen and John as predatory “wolves,” he can protect neither his wife nor his daughter from their imminent sexual assault, nor himself from the subversion of his masculinity. Social-class strife emerges in these lines as well, with Symkyn chuckling over his ability to outwit two university students, but their mutual enmity is further predicated on their disparity in age and Symkyn’s dismissive attitude toward young people. Complementary to this chapter’s opening discussion of childhood and the stages of life, Susanna Greer Fein analyzes how the Reeve’s Tale “borrows freely . . . from the iconography of the life cycle, placing the characters implicitly upon a wheel, where they vie for dominance at the topmost position,” and Symkyn aims to best these young men through his devious tactics to ensure his continued dominance.30 When he unties their horse so that he can steal their grain, he scorns Allen and John as

children: “Lo, wher he gooth! Ye, lat the children pleye. / They gete hym
nat so lightly, by my croun” (14098–99). Because he believes Allen and
John to be as manipulable as children—as manipulable as his daugh-
ter—Symkyn blinds himself to the men’s and his daughter’s erotic ener-
gies, a point Chaucer ironically underscores in the sexual adventures of
Allen and John’s horse. Horses often symbolize sexuality and lust,31 and
Allen and John’s horse runs off, with an expressive “wehee,” to where the
“wilde mares renne” (14065–66). Symkyn’s wife reiterates to the young
men, “Allas! Youre hors goth to the fen / With wilde mares, as faste as
he may go” (14080–81), and the insistent gendering of these wild mares
(as female, obviously) hints at the animal lust, in the literal sense of the
term, driving Allen and John’s horse.32 Symkyn manipulates bestial eroti-
cism in his ploy to defeat Allen and John, yet he merely foreshadows that
he will soon be hoisted on his own petard, as he unwittingly unleashes
Allen and John’s erotic energies on his daughter and wife.

Before Symkyn receives his narrative punishment, Allen rapes his
daughter, and thus the miller’s daughter becomes the surrogate who suf-
fers for her father’s transgressions. The fantasy of the beaten child, in this
instance, represents the father’s desire to preserve himself through the sac-
рифice of his daughter, sadistically scapegoating her to shield himself from
retribution. The Reeve’s Tale occludes the sexual violence inflicted upon
Maline through its fabliau humor, but it is clear that she is assaulted:

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.
This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,
Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
That it had been to late for to cry,

31. For a brief overview of the symbolism of horses, see Lucia Impelluso, Nature and
Its Symbols, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2003), 257. A tell-
ing biblical example of the eroticism correlated with horses occurs in Jeremiah 5:8: “equi
amatores et admissarii facti sunt, unususique ad uxorem proximi sui hinniebat” (“They
are become as amorous horses and stallions: every one neighed after his neighbor’s wife”).
32. Based on her studies of medieval animal husbandry, Sandy Feinstein, in “The
Reeve’s Tale: About That Horse” (Chaucer Review 26.1 [1991]: 99–106), convincingly ar-
gues that the clerk’s horse “is more than likely a gelding” (100). The fabliau, however, is
not a genre constrained by realism, and Allen and John’s horse appears sexually motivated,
even if it is unlikely, given their socioeconomic status, that these university students would
have access to a stallion.
And shortly for to seyn, they were aton.
Now pley, Aleyn, for I wol speke of John. (1.4193–98)

The narrator reports that, as Allen attacks Maline, “it had been to late for to crie.” This line contrasts sharply with similar events narrated in the Miller’s Tale, when Alison threatens Nicholas that she “wol crie ‘out, harrow’ and ‘allas!’” (1.3286) before she then decides to copulate with him. Alison demonstrates agency in her erotic decision-making (even if such agency supports the male fantasy that attempting to rape women serves as a successful tactic in seducing them), but no such possibility of consent, however etiolated, is available to Maline. The violence against Maline excites much critical attention, as do the ways in which Chaucer deflects attention from rape’s violence through Maline’s mock aubade after her deflowering. 33 Troublingly, some critics do not see rape in this scene at all, but Heidi Breuer forcefully rebuts this view and declares that the “Reeve’s Tale . . . suggest[s] rape/seduction is simply a male form of revenge against other men, reducing women’s suffering to a mere side-effect of men’s relationships to one another.” 34 In a similar vein, Nicole Nolan Sidhu rightly notes the ways in which the Reeve’s Tale “confronts the paradoxical status of women’s desire in late-fourteenth-century English society, where Christian doctrine granting women’s right of consent in matters of marriage and sex runs up against a lineage-based social system that renders women both the objects and the vessels of male power.” 35 Holly Crocker cautions, however, that, as much as a man climbing into a woman’s bed and copulating without her consent appears to be rape, the act depicted falls into a legal limbo: “Between Aleyn’s stealth and Malyne’s affection, neither the girl nor Symkyn has a legal claim to rape.” 36


34. Heidi Breuer, “Being Intolerant,” 10. See also Daniel Pigg, “Performing the Perverse: The Abuse of Masculine Power in the Reeve’s Tale,” Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in the Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde, ed. Peter Beidler (Cambridge: Brewer, 1998), 53–61, who concludes that “Chaucer . . . would have known the law regarding rape, and he encoded it into the incident” (58), as well as Pamela Barnett, “‘And shortly for to seyn they were aton’: Chaucer’s Deflection of Rape in the Reeve’s and Franklin’s Tales,” Women’s Studies 22 (1993): 145–62.

35. Nicole Nolan Sidhu, “‘To late for to crie,’” 4.

paternal fantasy of the Reeve’s Tale, then, is that one can figuratively fuck the father by literally fucking the daughter, with the former remaining unscathed by the violence at hand and the latter suffering for his transgressions.

But can there be power, however tangential, however fleeting, in appropriating another’s fantasy? Can Maline act as she is acted upon? Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari posit that children resist their tokenized status in the realm of adult sexuality through unexpected confluences of possibility and action: “Psychoanalysis has no feeling for unnatural participation, nor for the assemblages a child can mount in order to solve a problem from which all exits are barred him: a plan(e), not a phantasy.”\(^\text{37}\) By reconfiguring the purported desires of the beaten child, Maline disavows her father’s proprietary claims over her body, particularly her hymen, through her rape. Readers receive little insight into this child’s fantasy life, but one can see the formulation of a plan, as she moves the narrative to another plane—from fabliau to romance, at least from her perspective. Symkyn perceives Maline as a pawn in his ambitions for social advancement, yet she queers her father by enjoying the violence that befalls her. The morning after their night together, Maline addresses her lover in a mock alba, one that registers her nascent, if limited, control of her erotic destiny:

> “Now, deere lemmman,” quod she, “go, far weel! But er thow go, o thyng I wol thee telle: What that thou wendest homward by the melle, Right at the entree of the dore bihynde Thou shalt a cake of half a busshel fynde That was ymaked of thyn owene mele, Which that I heelp my sire for to stele. And, good lemmman, God thee save and kepe!” And with that word almoost she gan to wepe. (1.4240–48)

Albas, as Gale Sigal outlines, “tacitly criticize the stultifying gender roles and expectations that the love they create/portray seeks to transcend and that the characters in the alba heroically decry.”\(^\text{38}\) Although within the


parodic context of a fabliau, Maline’s alba functions similarly, allowing her to speak to her lover and against her father, thereby undermining the gendered and familial roles that her father expects her to perform. As Tamarah Kohanski remarks, “Chaucer makes no clear statement about [Maline’s] character or her complicity,” and since Maline is indeed a cipher, readers must search through the gaps and silences of her actions to hypothesize her wishes. Still, Chaucer’s primary sources for the Reeve’s Tale do not depict the Maline character speaking after intercourse with her lover, and, by giving Maline speech at this moment, the narrator allows her parting words to Allen to reveal her desire to act against her father by renouncing his petty crimes and freeing herself from association with him. In disclosing to Allen the location of the cake made out of the clerks’ meal, she restores to its proper owner that which her father has taken.

So too does Maline, at least nominally, restore her body to herself through her alliance with Allen. After Allen rises from her bed, she vanishes from the fabliau’s final scenes, and so she acts by not acting: unlike her mother, who assists Symkyn in the melee with the clerks, Maline witnesses but does not participate in defending either her lost hymen or her father’s lost honor. As Jane Burns suggests of women in the Old French fabliau, “a variety of instances [in which] the female body [is] represented as a site of patriarchy’s most reductive definitions of woman can also be a site for possible revision,” one in which readers can “see the terms of a new female subjectivity emerge, a subjectivity in which the body makes a crucial difference.” With her agency occluded throughout the text, Maline’s reconception of rape as romance, which she rapturously celebrates in her postcoital alba, and her return to passivity at the tale’s climax are troubling visions of a woman’s agency, yet as a child who sees no escape from her father’s control, she inverts masculine fantasy by reas-


40. Ribald tales of two men deceiving their host and sleeping with his wife and daughter are found in “Le meunier et les. II. cler: Text A” (MS 354 Bibliothèque de Berne, 1275–1300); “Le meunier et les. II. cler: Text B” (Hamilton MS, Berlin, 1275–1300); “Een bispel van .ij. clerken” (MS KB 15.589–623, Royal Library, Brussels “Hulthem Collection,” 1350–75), and Boccaccio’s Decameron (day 9, story 6); these sources are available in Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Brewer, 2002), 1.23–73.

sessing its prerogatives and acts by resignifying her narrative as romance while allowing her father's plotline to proceed to its fabliau climax. She finds a modicum of power through the eroticism that sparks her father's beating: she is first the beaten child, the surrogate suffering for her father’s transgressions as a stranger in her home jumps upon her in the assumed sanctity of her bed, but she beats back against the paternal strictures that cast her as a prosthetic figure who preserves his masculine privilege by suffering in his place. She only inhabits her initial role as scapegoat for paternal fantasies of inviolate masculinity until this fantasy proves untenable, due to its conflict with her nascent erotic desires. Finally, as the tale establishes a punning parallel between the flour that Symkyn steals from Allen and John and the flower of Maline’s maidenhead, she bestows upon Allen the “mele” that she helped steal. Without her father’s approval of this gift, Maline further establishes that she will set the economic terms of her maidenhead and that she deems this trade mutually satisfying for herself and her lover, if not for the father who attempts to traffic in her sexuality.

For the Reeve, the beaten child reveals homosocial rivalries and queers the paternal masculinity of his protagonist, yet in many ways, his exploitation of children correlates with similar fault lines in his own gender. As is well established, the Reeve tells his tale to “quite” his fellow pilgrim the Miller by speaking “right in his cherles termes” (1.3916–17), and his tale therefore allegorizes the Miller as Symkyn, casting his enemy as the cuckolded protagonist of his story through the numerous parallels between them: their swords (1.558, cf. 1.3929–31), their piping (1.565, cf. 1.3927), and their thievery (1.562, cf. 1.3998). Beyond these similarities, Chaucer’s protean irony creates additional parallels between Symkyn and the Reeve himself both in the description of the Reeve in the General Prologue and in the Reeve’s self-description in his Prologue; undermining the allegory the Reeve attempts to establish against the Miller, Chaucer multiplies its satiric register through these additional congruencies. In terms of his sexual desires, the Reeve portrays himself as sexually voracious yet unhappily impotent—“for thogh oure myght be goon, / Oure wyl desireth folie evere in oon. / For whan we may nat doon, than wol we speke” (1.3879–81)—and these words of erotic longing align ironically with Symkyn’s reluctance to copulate with his wife.42 Likewise, as Symkyn believes himself

42. One may quibble that the Reeve describes old men’s impotence, whereas the depiction of Symkyn does not evince impotence as much as a lack of sexual interest. Their mutual lack of erotic activity nonetheless links the teller of the tale with his character, in a manner ultimately derisive of his proclaimed masculinity. For the Reeve’s metaphors of old
capable of manipulating Allen and John due to the folly he ascribes to their youth, so too does the Reeve take advantage of his young lord, and he has done so “syn that [he] was twenty yeer of age” (1.601). Chaucer as narrator reports how the Reeve deceives his inexperienced master: “His lord wel koude he plesen subtilly, / To yeve and lene hym of his owene good, / And have a thank, and yet a cote and hood” (1.610–12). Even Symkyn’s many phallic knives, daggers, and swords find their counterpart in Oswald’s “rusty blade” (1.618). These points of congruency between the Reeve and Symkyn do not overshadow the allegory between the Miller and Symkyn that the Reeve’s Tale instantiates, yet they simultaneously highlight the inherent instability of allegory and the ways in which readers can uncover threads tying together disparate characters and themes that Chaucer’s surface allegories otherwise obscure. As Symkyn learns in the Reeve’s Tale, controlling his daughter and attempting to control the young men he sees as children cannot put the shine back on his rusty blade, and so too does the Reeve’s performance of erotic desire and masculine puissance ring hollow, despite his apparent success in defrauding his immature lord, who is apparently unaware of the abuses that the old inflict upon the young.

As the Reeve’s Tale exposes the frustration of paternal desire through the queering force of a raped child, the Summoner’s Tale similarly undermines the authority of paternal masculinity through its treatment of Thomas’s dead son. Beyond their mutual genre of fabliau, these tales share additional key features in regard to the erotic competitions at their heart, particularly in the ways in which the Reeve and Summoner tell their tales with the explicit purpose of humiliating their respective enemies, the Miller and the Friar, by depicting the sexual humiliations of their tales’ protagonists. The unctuous friar of the Summoner’s Tale parallels Symkyn in his humiliating narrative fate, yet the bedridden curmudgeon Thomas also aligns with Symkyn in regard to their mutual abasement through their children. With deft touches Chaucer hints that Thomas may not be the father of his deceased son (in much the same manner that May’s potential pregnancy sparks doubts regarding January’s paternity in the Merchant’s Tale), and this possibility diffuses and multiplies the questions of paternal identity surrounding the narrative’s dead child.

In a narrative moment akin to the Reeve’s emphasis on Symkyn’s impotence, the Summoner stresses Thomas’s failures to satisfy his wife’s

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erotic desires, with the tale’s anti-eroticism further subverting any image of masculine or paternal authority that Thomas might attempt to embody. John Fleming argues of Thomas’s wife that “[she], like all of Chaucer’s ‘characters,’ exists only to externalize certain intellectual propositions,” and her function in this narrative is to undermine assumptions of conjugal fidelity and paternal prerogatives. She details her difficulties in exciting her husband’s passion, exposing his amatory failings to his rival:

“Chideth him weel, for seinte Trinitee!
He is as angry as a pissemery,
Though that he have al that he kan desire;
Though I hym wrye a-nyght and make hym warm,
And ove hym leye my leg outher myn arm,
He groneth lyk oure boor, lith in oure sty.
Oother desport right noon of hym have I;
I may nat plese hym in no maner cas.” (3.1824–31)

Despite these amorous advances, as his wife writhes about him in their bed, Thomas evinces little interest in the conjugal pleasures of marriage. Such anti-erotic behavior would be more appropriate for the tale’s friar, yet in this tale of misplaced and mismatched desires, the husband rejects what the friar seeks and evacuates the heterosexual eroticism presumably at the core of this triangulated affair.

In light of Thomas’s anti-eroticism, the subsequent mention of his dead son is surprising, for it compels readers to hypothesize sexual activity in Thomas and his wife’s bed, where it has been sketched as virtually unimaginable. Many readers therefore suspect that Thomas is not the child’s father; in contrast, the friar’s amorous embrace of Thomas’s wife accentuates his erotic desires for her. The Summoner reports that, at Thomas’s house, the friar “was wont to be / Refresshed moore than in an hundred placis” (3.1766–67), and Chaucer’s frequent use of refresshed as a double entendre for sex (as evident in the Wife of Bath’s Prologue 3.38 and 3.146) hints at the friar’s enjoyment of sexual pastimes with her. Also, before she mentions her child’s death, he flirts shamelessly with her:

The frere ariseth up ful curteisly,
And hire embraceth in his armes narwe,
And kiste hire sweete, and chirketh as a sparwe
With his lyppes: “Dame,” quod he, “right weel,
As he that is youre servant every deel,
Thanked be God, that yow yaf soule and lyf!
Yet saught I nat this day so fair a wyf
In al the chirche, God so save me!” (3.1802–9)

With his compliments to her beauty, his courteous embrace of her, and
his avowed dedication to perform as her servant, the friar assumes the role
of the chivalric lover befitting a tale of courtly romance. Contrasted with
the attention paid to Thomas’s anti-eroticism, these lines imply that the
friar may be the dead child’s father, for his erotic and pecuniary drives pro-
pel his every action in the tale. By confusing the dead child’s parentage,
Chaucer muddies the trajectory of narrative vengeance set in motion: with
the specter of this dead son haunting both men’s assumptions of paternity,
all fantasies of inviolate masculinity are undermined, for he, no matter
who his father might be, ultimately symbolizes the failures of both men to
negotiate their erotic drives to enhance their masculine identity.

Furthermore, by painting the friar as lascivious and Thomas as impo-
tent, the Summoner establishes a tension between the two men that plays
out in a submerged homoeroticism reflected in the friar’s attempts to claim
brotherhood with Thomas. As explored in chapter 3, sworn brotherhood
between two men often carries a latent tinge of eroticism within other-
wise normative homosocial bonds, and the friar relies on such language
of brotherhood to win Thomas’s trust. He declares to Thomas, “And by
that lord that clepid is Seint Yve, / Nere thou oure brother, sholdestou
nat thryve” (3.1944–45), and he concludes his lengthy exhortation with a
similar appeal to brotherhood: “Now, Thomas, leeve brother, lef thyn ire”
(3.2089). On the surface, the friar’s words refer to monastic brotherhood
and Thomas’s position as a lay member of the order, but there is no need
to circumscribe their connotations solely to the monastic, rather than the
courtly, milieu. As John Bowers points out, “In the Summoner’s Tale the
wealthy and ailing Thomas is most aggressively solicited as ‘oure brother’
when the friar learns of the death of his infant child, his only male heir.
The friar ushers the wife out of the sickroom and attempts to seduce the
bed-ridden Thomas into a more generous compact of confraternity.”

As the friar’s flirtatious words to Thomas’s wife expose his proclivity for

rhetoric affiliated with chivalric romance, his appeals to brotherhood with Thomas similarly carry a valence beyond the monastic and into the romance realm of knightly brotherhood. This is not to suggest a specifically homoerotic cast to the simple yet repeated use of the word “brother” but to point to the ways in which masculine bonds are exploited in an attempt to deepen the men’s relationship. Certainly, Thomas ironically responds in kind to the friar, asking him, “Ye sey me thus, how that I am youre brother?” (3.2125) and referring to him as “my deere brother” (3.2133) before exacting his flatulent revenge upon him.

Amid this triangulated wrangling appears the narrative’s dead child, an unexpected yet telling signifier of the friar and Thomas’s homosocial antagonism. Primarily, this dead child signifies a spectral eroticism in the tale—at some point, one of these men must have copulated with his mother—yet he also sparks these erotic tensions anew. Although Thomas’s wife reminds the unctuous friar of her recent loss—“Now, sire . . . but o word er I go. / My child is deed withinne thise wykes two, / Soone after that ye wente out of this toun” (3.1851–53)—he continues his sexual pursuit of her and his pecuniary pursuit of her husband’s riches without pause, despite his subsequent acknowledgment that the death of a child should curtail his effusive rhetoric. After recounting the story of Cambises’s murder of his advisor’s child, and thus concluding his litany of examples that condemn the sin of anger, the friar remarks upon the inappropriateness of speech following the devastating death of a beloved child: “His sone was slayn; ther is namoore to seye” (3.2073). Words are of little avail against the loss of a child, yet the friar’s pursuit of Thomas’s wife and riches leads him to continue speaking when he should remain silent; furthermore, the possibility that the friar should be grieving his own child magnifies the enormity of this social transgression. The story of Cambises and his advisor mirrors the narrative action of the Summoner’s Tale, in which two men debate the relative merits of anger with a dead child marking their homosocial conflict. The death of the advisor’s innocent son symbolizes his father’s lack of power in his subservient position to Cambises, and the dead child of the Summoner’s Tale similarly symbolizes both Thomas’s lack of erotic control over his household and the friar’s unrestrained sexuality that subverts his commitment to his fraternal order. In both instances, the children’s deaths are central to their narrative meaning, for the image of their lifeless bodies proves their callous expendability within a social milieu predicated upon homosocial antagonisms between adult men.
As the two men battle for pecuniary advantage and paternal revenge, the fabliau climaxes as Thomas prepares his humiliation for the friar:

“No thanne, put in thyn hand doun by my bak,”
Seyde this man, “and grope wel bihynde.
Bynethe my buttok there shaltow fynde
A thyng that I have hyd in pryvetee.” (3.2140–43)

Ratcheting up the sexual farce of his source text “Li Dis de le vescie à prestre” (“The Tale of the Priest’s Bladder”), in which a dying man bequeatheth his bladder to greedy friars for them to store their pepper, the Summoner sends his unctuous friar to another man’s anus.\footnote{45} Chaucer’s polysemous humor arises in multiple levels in this moment of graphic fabliau humor: the grotesque physicality of the scene with its vulgar focus on anal excavations; the friar’s privileging of physical, rather than spiritual, groping, despite that in his religious duties he should “grope tenderly a conscience” (3.1817); and the inversion of heterosexual romance (as presumably the friar achieved with Thomas’s wife) in this tableau of antagonistic homoeroticism. Catherine Cox interprets this scene as a parody of anal intercourse: “The Friar’s groping gesture therefore evokes a conventional satiric association of friars and sodomites, described by writers as diverse as Walter Mape and William Langland... The fart is, in effect, shown to be the bastard fruit of unnatural coupling.”\footnote{46} Furthermore, as Susan Signe Morrison notes, the fart functions homeopathically, in that the body’s filth purges and punishes those who transgress.\footnote{47} The Summoner’s Tale focuses on the friar in its closing scenes, as he seeks advice on the enigma of how to share the fart equally with members of his fraternal order, but one should not overlook the emptiness of Thomas’s revenge: as the fecundity of his wife failed to create lasting life, so too does his fart highlight that his desires impotently dissolve into nothingness. Thomas failed to copulate with his wife and to sire living chil-
dren, and his simulated intercourse with the friar only produces a noxious explosion suggestive of the hollow eroticism behind paternal aggression.

Unlike Maline, the dead child of the *Summoner’s Tale* cannot participate, even through inaction, in the tale’s closing; the narrative nonetheless highlights, through the ingenuity of the squire Jankyn, the friar’s final humiliation and the triumph of the Child as an imaginary construct. Jankyn, too, is one of Chaucer’s innovations in this tale, for the humiliation of the greedy friars in “Li Dis de le vescie à prestre” occurs while town officials are watching but without the intervention of a child to resolve its spiritual conundrums. In solving the intricate riddle of “arsmetrike” (3.2222), Jankyn resignifies the tale’s anal eroticism into a positive valence. The lord and his company first agree that Thomas behaved boorishly to the friar, with the lord wondering, “How hadde t his cherl yimaginacioun / To shewe swich a probleme to the frere?” (3.2218–19), and his wife declaring, “I seye a cherl hath doon a cherles dede” (3.2206), thereby condemning Thomas’s flatulent humor and registering their distaste for adult men fixated on anality. Jankyn’s solution to the riddle of dividing a fart among thirteen friars, however, returns the friar to the anus, at least hypothetically, but instead of condemning the squire for this vulgar solution, as they condemned Thomas for his rudeness, the lord and his company now see the wisdom and justice of anal eroticism as a necessary solution to a complex problem. As Alan Levitan elucidates, Jankyn’s directives parody Pentecost—“From the point at which Thomas bestows his gift upon Friar John, to the proposed solution of its division by Jankyn, what appears as a merely ribald anecdote is, in fact, a brilliant and satirical reversal of the descent of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost”—and thus the diffusion of the spirit that marks the evangelical beginnings of Christianity are inverted into the diffusion of the *flatus* that brings not merely the unctuous friar but all of his brotherhood into spiritual adulation of the anus.48

Other than his service as a squire in this lord’s household, readers know little about Jankyn, but in this position, it is clear that he must be young, at

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48. Alan Levitan, “The Parody of Pentecost in Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 40.3 (1971): 236–46, at 236; see also Penn Szittya, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), who concludes that “Chaucer scatters Pentecostal allusions throughout the tale; and he repeatedly links Friar John to the apostles, not only to prepare for the pseudo-Pentecost at the end, but to parody the controversial claim of the historical fraternal orders to be imitators of the first apostles, reviving the spiritual purity of the primitive church” (245).
least in contrast to his elders. A young man in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood, Jankyn incarnates the figure of the Child that the Summoner’s Tale hides in its subconscious structures. Thomas’s dead son barely registers in the tale’s plot, for even the cause of his death is unexplained, yet as a symbol of corrupted and abusive erotics—whether the friar’s bastard son from illicit coupling or Thomas’s legitimate offspring in an anti-erotic marriage—he points to the paternal failures of both men to move beyond their homosocial conflicts as waged through the anus. With Jankyn as the dead boy’s proxy, the figure of the Child triumphs against the text’s adult figures, winning the award of the “gowne-clooth” (3.2247) by returning the friar to the anus from which he seeks to escape. Jankyn exposes the shallow fantasy of paternal puissance asserting itself through a discarded son, a vision that renders both the friar and Thomas queered through their anal fixations.

CHILDREN IN CHAUCERIAN EXEMPLA:
CLERK’S TALE AND PHYSICIAN’S TALE

As Maline and Thomas’s dead son register their fathers’ failed masculinities in the humorous genre of fabliau, embodying the ways in which these men wage homosocial conflicts tainted by submerged eroticisms, Griselda and Walter’s children in the Clerk’s Tale and Virginia in the Physician’s Tale likewise highlight the limitations of paternal authority in narratives that are, at least ostensibly, exemplary and allegorical in theme and genre.49

49. The term squire is somewhat ambiguous in Middle English, as it can refer to servants or to boys training for knighthood. The physical location of the squire in the Summoner’s Tale—“Now stood the lorde squier at the bord, / That karf his mete” (3.2243–44)—recalls the description of the Squire in the General Prologue: “Curteis he was, lowely, and servys-able, / And carf biforn his fader at the table” (1.99–100). For accounts of the transition from squire to knighthood, see Maurice Keen, Chivalry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); and Katie Stevenson, Chivalry and Knighthood in Scotland, 1424–1513 (Suffolk: Boydell, 2006), 19–22.

50. Critical assessments of the Clerk’s Tale and Physician’s Tale often grapple with the tension between their exemplary and allegorical dynamics, as both tales can be allegorized into arguments for patiently suffering adversity only by overlooking the cruel fates endured by their protagonists. Charlotte Morse forcefully argues for reading the Clerk’s Tale as an exemplary narrative in “The Exemplary Griselda” (Studies in the Age of Chaucer 7 [1985]: 51–86), and Linda Georgianna observes the tacit function of the tale’s allegory for its readers, suggesting that, “as with other numinous religious narratives, our experience of the tale serves precisely as the Clerk says adversity does in God’s scheme, ‘as for oure excercise’ (1156), so that by our pity we may at least come to know our own frailty” (“The Clerk’s
The Clerk’s Tale affirms its theme in an exhortation to suffer patiently (“every wight, in his degree, / Sholde be constant in adversitee” [4.1145–46]), and the Physician’s Tale advises its readers to eschew sin: “Heere may men seen how synne hath his merite. / Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte” (6.277–78). As numerous scholars observe in relation to both tales, any narrative expectation of a pat moral is undone by the tales’ failures to signify themes proportionate to their protagonists’ suffering. Elaine Tuttle Hansen argues of the Clerk’s Tale, “whatever its specific significance, this poem appears to many to be bound up with its ambiguities and contradictions, the insolubility of its many problems,” and Helen Cooper tartly observes of the Physician’s Tale, given the disparities among Virginia’s virtue, her fate, and the purportedly exemplary nature of the narrative, “If the tale as a whole is an exemplum, it is very hard to see what it exemplifies.” The hermeneutic cruxes that confront readers in the Clerk’s Tale and the Physician’s Tale hinder interpretive clarity, yet as Larry Scanlon observes, the failure of Chaucer’s exemplary texts to deliver a moral paradoxically enables the texts’ morals to cohere: “Chaucerian narrative resembles the exemplum in its striving after a moral authority which it implies, but which lies beyond it. It finds its own authority in precisely this striving; in what we can call its self-conscious acknowledgment of its own incompleteness.” Such a sense of incompleteness, in addition to its relevance to these narratives’ unfolding, also inheres to the paternal masculinities on display. In the Clerk’s Tale and Physician’s Tale, the impossibility of depicting a just moral authority arises in large measure due to Walter’s and Virginianus’s failures to protect their children. These fathers attempt to enhance their incomplete sense of masculinity through their children but doing so requires sacrificing their offspring to their narcissistic images.


From the outset of this analysis of the Clerk’s Tale, it must be acknowledged that no child is physically harmed in the narrative (except perhaps for any psychological scars inflicted on Walter and Griselda’s daughter when she realizes how close she came to copulating with her father). At the same time, few tales—both Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale and its immediate source, Petrarch’s Historia Griseldis—ask readers to visualize so graphically the image of young children’s bodies ravaged by wild animals. The two children’s murders are staged for their mother’s torment, and these fantasies of dead children, along with Griselda’s unfathomable yet always patient suffering, undermine Walter’s performance of benevolent fatherhood with its immediate subversion. Freud’s infamous formulation that “a child is being beaten” speaks to the prevalence of this fantasy, but as Lee Edelman observes, “the phrase strategically elides the agency by which this end is achieved.”

When the desiring agent who envisions a beaten child is obscured beyond identification, this vision appears as a spectral fantasy, one present only as an image from a cruel imagination rather than as the physical embodiment of a suffering child, yet the horror of the Clerk’s Tale arises because this abhorrent fantasy structures the narrative yet apparently does so to Walter’s ultimate triumph. In contrast, Chaucer stresses Griselda’s efforts to preserve her children’s bodies, rendering their ready sacrifice even more troubling. She requests that the sergeant ostensibly dispatched to execute her daughter grant her body merely the dignity of a modest burial: “Burieth this litel body in som place / That be estes ne no briddes it torace” (4.571–72). She soon repeats this plea for her newborn son:

Save this, she preyede hym that, if he myghte,
Hir litel sone he wolde in erthe grave
His tendre lymes, delicaat to sighte,
Fro foweles and fro beestes for to save. (4.680–83)

This repeated image of a mauled infant functions metatextually—readers often react in horror to the Clerk’s Tale due to its focus on Griselda’s patient suffering through these emotional torments—but it appears to

54. For the Historia Griseldis, see Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, ed., Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales, 1.108–29.
56. Thomas Van characterizes the Clerk’s Tale as engendering “pleasurable exasperation” for its readers (“Walter at the Stake: A Reading of Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale,” Chaucer
have little effect on the narrative’s affective register: Griselda patiently abides; Walter, with equal patience, continues testing her.

Throughout the Clerk’s Tale, the narrator illustrates that the Child is a cultural construction bestowed on some young bodies (but not on others) to make them perpetuate their society; that is to say, the Child is a social fantasy that obscures the fact that young people are groomed to respond to their culture’s ideological imperatives to reproduce the social order. As Lee Edelman observes of the Child’s function, “The Child . . . marks the fetishistic fixation of heteronormativity: an erotically charged investment in the rigid sameness of identity that is central to the compulsory narrative of reproductive futurism.” Under such a paradigm, children are necessary not for their individuality within a family unit but for their instrumentality within their community, and Chaucer emphasizes the Child’s social construction when Griselda’s progeny arrive in Lombardy for her daughter’s marriage to Walter. The narrator refers to them as children—“Abouten undren gan this erl alighte, / That with hym broghte thise noble children tweye” (4.981–82)—but despite this young girl’s status as a child and her age of twelve years (4.736), the townspeople anticipate not a girl but a lady:

Thus seyden sadde folk in that citie,
When that the peple gazed up and doun,
For they were glad, right for the noveltee,
To han a newe lady of hir toun. (4.1002–5)

Marriage bears the potential to transform Griselda’s daughter instantly from child to lady (as it can also elevate her in social status from her counterfeit position as an earl’s daughter into a marquis’s wife). To illustrate this point conversely, the Clerk returns her to the status of a child when she is released from her engagement to her father. In explaining his test to Griselda, Walter refers to their child(ren) as “thy doughter” (4.1065)

Review 22.3 [1988]: 214–24, at 214), but readers are generally troubled by the text, such that Anne Middleton views it as a “supreme test of its readers’ interpretive power” (“The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 2 [1980]: 121–50, at 121).

57. Lee Edelman, No Future, 21. Edelman’s study has greatly influenced my thoughts on children and their cultural construction, but whereas his analysis primarily focuses on how the figure of the Child regulates adult sexuality, I am interested here in the ways in which children are conscripted into the role of the Child to serve cultural ends dependent upon the destruction of the children employed in this position.
and “thy children tweye” (4.1071), and the narrator calls them “hire yonge children” (4.1081). Likewise Griselda apostrophizes them as “O tendre, o deere, o yonge children myne” (4.1093). These lines indicate that these children’s very status as children is never assured but always variable in relation to the demands placed upon them to perform for their father and their community. When Walter needs a bride to test his wife, when the townspeople demand a new marchioness to breed an heir, a young girl’s body is appropriated as a lady’s, despite the transience of this vision by the tale’s conclusion.

Whether compelling readers to imagine the desecrated bodies of murdered children or the incestuous vision of a young girl conscripted into matrimony with her father, Walter’s perverse desires establish husbandly and paternal authority as sacrosanct within the Clerk’s Tale, as his repeated fantasies of his children also reveal him to be the monster of the text. Freud observes that “a father is the prototype of the bogies that people see in anxiety-states,” and in the Clerk’s Tale, Walter’s monstrous desires spark the anxieties of death that haunt Griselda. Due to his apparent willingness to execute his children according to his whims, he fathers not only children but the corresponding images of their deaths, yet he must be rehabilitated from this horrific image to function simultaneously, if unconvincingly, as the benevolent paterfamilias of the tale’s conclusion. As Mark Miller explains of this paradox,

Like Job’s love for God, Grisilde’s love for Walter is supported only by her faith that he does in fact love her and will so reveal himself; and, as Paul puts it, such faith is “hope in things unseen,” not a rational appraisal of the available evidence. But then, if Walter must show every sign of being unloving for Grisilde’s patient love to confront the extremes that reveal its essential features, and if one of those features is that it refuses to count an unloving act as expressive of Walter’s will, then patient love must involve a willingness not to count anything the beloved does as expressive of their will. And that is just what Grisilde does.

From Griselda's perspective, it is impossible to believe evil of Walter, and when his test of her ends, she continues viewing him as beneficent and encourages her children to view him in the same manner:

“Youre woful mooder wende stedfastly
That cruell houndes or som foul vermyne
Hadde eten yow; but God of his mercy
And your benyngne fader tendrely
Hath doon yow kept.” (4.1094–98)

What must Griselda's children think of their parents as this scene unfolds? Most critical commentary focuses on Griselda and her long-delayed emotional release, but her children learn in these lines that, while they were sequestered with their aunt for the entirety of their young lives, their mother believed them to be not only dead but consumed by wild animals. Confronted with the image of their defiled bodies—the foraged proven-der of “foul vermyne”—these children realize their callous expendability within their family unit at the same time they are expected to celebrate its reconstitution.

Chaucer's narrator refrains from allowing Griselda's children to voice any reaction to their parents: they condemn neither their father for employing them as tokens in his test nor their mother for sacrificing them to his whims. Through this silence, they tacitly enact their emotional alienation from the family that renders them instrumental yet also extraneous to the psychodrama between their mother and father. The narrator records in his description of their mother’s embrace a scene of contrasting emotions:

And in hire swough so sadly holdeth she
Hire children two, whan she gan hem t’embrace,
That with greet sleighte and greet difficultee
The children from hire arm they gone arace. (4.1100–103)

“Arace” is a powerful verb, and in its meanings of “to remove by force, pluck, pull, tear out or away; to snatch,” it suggests that the children are wrenched away from their mother. Readers are encouraged to be swept away in the cathartic release that this scene illustrates in its excessive emotionality, and subsequent lines depict such pleasure in the affective

61. These definitions are taken from the Middle English Dictionary. Secondary definitions of “aracen” include “to lacerate, to flay or skin (an animal), esp. by drawing the pelt off over the head” and “to erase or obliterate.”
responses of Walter’s many guests: “O many a teere on many a pitous face / Doun ran of hem that stoonen hire bisyde; / Unnethe abouten hire myghte they abyde” (4.1104–6). Because these lines focus “on many a pitous face,” not exclusively on the countenances of Griselda and her children, the narrator appears, in cinematic terms, to move his eye backward from a close-up of Griselda and her children to a long shot of the shocked wedding guests. The narrator subsequently adds, “And every wight hire joye and feeste maketh / Til she hath caught agayn hire contenauce” (4.1109–10). Given the ambiguity of these lines in regard to these many “pitous faces” and the joy of “every wight,” it is by no means certain that Griselda’s children share in the guests’ outburst commemorating their mother’s steadfast rejection of them, as their violent pulling away from her suggests discomfort with their parents’ views on child-raising and familial affection.

When Walter restores Griselda to her prior status as his wife, and concomitantly restores his daughter to her position as his child, he denies the possibility of incestuous desire for the girl. Erasing his dark fantasies from view, he cloaks his paternal deviance under the façade of a test of Griselda’s womanly virtue:

> “And folk that ootherweys han seyd of me,  
> I warne hem wel that I have doon this deede  
> For no malice, ne for no crueltee,  
> But for t’assaye in thee thy wommanheede,  
> And nat to sleen my children—God forbeede!—  
> But for to kepe hem pryvely and stille,  
> Til I thy purpos knewe and al thy wille.” (4.1072–78)

Walter rejects implications of malice or cruelty on his part, but he elides the possibility of incestuous desire for his daughter as a motivating factor in his test of his wife. Because Griselda does not fail Walter’s test of her, he does not marry and copulate with his daughter. This possibility nonetheless persists within the subconscious of the Clerk’s Tale, disrupting

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62. Tara Williams reads this passage as indicative of Chaucer’s formulation of new ways of representing women and womanhood, in her “‘T’assaye in thee thy wommanheede’: Griselda Chosen, Translated, and Tried” (Studies in the Age of Chaucer 27 [2005]: 93–127). In terms of Walter’s abuse of fatherhood, Williams posits that “silence about Griselda’s motherhood allows Walter to fabricate the reaction of his people to his children” (121), which testifies further to his manipulation of paternity and childhood to prove his manhood in marriage.
the moral telos of the narrative: incest cannot be dismissed from Walter’s desires, for it sparks an alternate and impossible ending that the tale’s resolution forecloses but cannot fully overwrite. His daughter, as a figure of the Child, is an object of sexual instrumentality, for he would need to consummate his marriage with her if Griselda failed the test that their daughter’s young body enables. Within the realm of reasonable speculation, his daughter would then be conscripted to bear him a son/grandson to serve as his heir. Because she must serve as the Child, rather than merely being a child, Walter’s daughter represents the brute force of ideology to conscript the young into adult sexuality, no matter the repercussions for them, and for ensuing generations as well. This vision of Walter’s incestuous child/grandchild, who cannot exist within this narrative yet who can neither be entirely removed from it, represents the depravities that adults inflict on children, in its straddling between such standard familial roles as child and grandchild and its eradication of the border between father and grandfather.

In this way, the disciplinary force of fatherhood guides the Clerk’s Tale while camouflaging incestuous eroticism as a husband’s test of his wife, but Walter’s power to wrench his daughter into adult sexuality lies unchecked, as does this power for the culture at large. As monstrous a father as Walter may be, his actions concerning his daughter mirror his people’s treatment of his own sexuality, in that he was compelled to shift his attentions from youthful pastimes and pleasures to sexual maturity when they demanded that he take a wife. He too illustrates the pains of being compelled to fill the role of the Child conscripted into adulthood and thus constructed for sexual utility beyond any immanent and interior desires. The tale’s initial characterization of Walter concentrates on his youth, with the narrator describing him as “a fair persone, and strong, and yong of age” (4.73) and then reiterating that “Walter was this yonge lorde’s name” (4.77). His counselor describes him as blossoming in youth—“youre grene youthe floure as yet” (4.120)—but he must accede into manhood through matrimony: “That for to been a wedded man yow lest; / Thanne were youre peple in sovereyn hertes reste” (4.111–12). Although without the specter of incest, Walter’s predicament at the narrative’s beginning parallels those of Griselda and their daughter subsequently in the tale: marriage and marital sexuality are fates forced upon the young rather than internal and coherent erotic desires that children act upon through their own volition. Before the specters of dead children and incest haunt the narrative, heterosexuality emerges as the text’s defining and queer trauma that Walter’s subsequent cruelty reenacts. Freud notes the persistence of child-
hood perversions and the ways in which they are reenacted throughout adulthood—“A perversion in childhood, as is well known, may become the basis for the construction of a perversion having a similar sense and persisting throughout life, one which consumes the subject’s whole sexual life”—and Walter’s destruction of his daughter’s childhood merely reenacts the perverse destruction of his own youth, as a new generation is forcibly conscripted into premature eroticism.

Similar to Walter, Griselda evinces little desire for marital sexuality at the tale’s beginning. She lives contentedly with her father, and this familial arrangement accentuates her youth and innocence, as well as her status as a child: “And ay she kepe hir fadres lyf on-lofte / With everich obeisaunce and diligence / That child may doon to fadres reverence” (4.229–31). The many descriptors stressing Griselda’s youth—“this yonge mayden” (4.210), “thogh this mayde tendre were of age” (4.218), “Of so yong age” (4.241)—also encourage readers to see her as a child more than as a young woman. In contrast to brides who joyfully accept their suitor’s proposal of marriage, Griselda visualizes and vocalizes a vision of death in response to Walter’s request for her hand in matrimony:

... “Lord, undigne and unworthy
Am I to thilke honour that ye me beede,
But as ye wole youreself, right so wol I.
And heere I swere that nevere willyngly,
In werk ne thoght, I nyl yow disobeye,
For to be deed, though me were looth to deye.” (4.359–64)

The generative promise of marital erotics, although realized in the subsequent births of their children, are occluded through Griselda’s premonitions of death at the very moment of her engagement. Griselda’s age is unspecified yet clearly young, and this girl finds herself conscripted into marital service more to produce children than to serve Walter’s erotic or amatory desires, let alone her personal wishes in this regard. The Child is sacrificed sexually and bodily to the culture that demands her fertility to perpetuate the social order.

For Walter’s people do not really care about a wife as much as they are concerned with the necessity for him to produce an heir; thus, a female—any female—is merely a means to this greater end by which they hope to preserve their own future. Indeed, their shallow vacillations in response

to Griselda indicate that she is necessary only to fill the role of wife rather than to be appreciated as an individual for any benevolent qualities she might possess. They first believe “That she from hevene sent wa s, as men wende, / Peple to save and every wrong t’amende” (4.440–41), but they soon forget the salvific cast of Griselda’s character and conclude of Walter’s new fiancée: “For she is fairer, as they deemen alle, / Than is Grisilde, and moore tendre of age, / And fairer fruitwene hem sholde falle” (4.988–90). Walter’s people desire the Child as a means of ensuring the reproduction of their present into the future. In this manner, the narrative emphasizes Griselda’s sexual instrumentality when her daughter is born: the people “had hire levere have born a knave child,” but they realize that she “may unto a knave child atteyne” although “a mayde child coome al before” (4.444, 446–47). The Clerk’s Tale reveals the torsions of individual identity and psychosexual agency necessary to reproduce the future: the grisly image of dead children transforms at the narrative’s close into the image of a happy family, but in this family, all members must be ever ready to sacrifice themselves to a vision of the Child as reflective of a cultural desire to reproduce the social order, even when they are the Children to be so sacrificed.

Despite the strained happy ending of the Clerk’s Tale, the fate of Walter and Griselda’s children remains obscure, and if one envisions them as reliving the ideological constraints placed upon their parents, their futures look increasingly bleak. In detailing their prospects, the narrator assures his audience that these two young children grow and prosper into happy adulthood at the tale’s conclusion. Readers learn that “richely his doghter maryed [Walter] / Unto a lord, oon of the worthieste / Of al Ytaille” (4.1130–32), and their son “succeedeth in [Walter’s] heritage / In reste and pees, after his fader day, / And fortunat was eek in mariage” (4.1135–37). These “happily ever after” endings for Walter and Griselda’s children, however, merely mask the unknowability of their fate, and may suggest as well that they simply follow in their parents’ unfortunate footsteps: just as Griselda married a worthy lord of Italy, and just as Walter succeeded into his father’s lordship only to be compelled to pursue the fruits of marriage, readers have little reason to believe that these children escape the torturous fates of their parents, who married in response to societal desires about their reproductive futures, foreclosing their Childhoods for adult sexuality in a mutually undesired marriage more striking for its fantasy of dead children than for its live ones.

Whereas the graphic image of dead children in the Clerk’s Tale is proved untrue, the fantasy of the sacrificed child is rendered strikingly
real within the fictions of the *Physician’s Tale*, in which Virginia’s decapitation provides its gruesome and ostensibly moral climax, despite the unimpeachable virtue that defines her as an illustrative daughter. In many ways the *Physician’s Tale* and its classical source, Livy’s *Ab urbe condita*, are less concerned about a specific child than with the Child’s instrumentality in instigating governmental reforms.\(^6\) The narrative focuses on her two roles that ultimately overlap—dutiful daughter and erotic prey—and to this end, the tale’s opening stresses that Virginia is Virginius’s lawful daughter: “This knyght a doghter hadde by hi s wyf” (6.5). Unlike the doubtful paternity issues in the *Summoner’s Tale* and *Merchant’s Tale*, Virginius’s paternal claim to Virginia is certified by the narrator, but the strength of this bond affords her insufficient protection from him. She is sinless, blameless, and the epitome of maidenly virtue, yet the sexual innocence associated with her maidenly modesty is merely a façade. Although she appears ignorant of sexuality due to the narrative’s focus on her virtue, the narrator reveals that she is aware—and wary of—amorous pursuits. Merely fourteen years old (6.30), Virginia retains her youthful modesty: “Shamefast she was in maydens shamefastnesse” (6.55). She avoids alcoholic drink to protect her virginity due to her awareness that “wyn and youthe dooth Venus encresse, / As men in fyr wol casten oille or greesse” (6.59–60). The narrator also mentions that “she floured in virginitee / With alle humylitee and abstinence” (6.44–45), but this pairing of humility and abstinence marks her virtuous chastity as both a central feature of her identity and as a performance on display for her fellow Romans to admire. To be humble about her abstinence, she must recognize that she has won the right to perform this virtue. Furthermore, Virginia is sufficiently cognizant of the licentious atmosphere at “feestes, revels, and . . . daunces” to avoid them because they are “occasions of daliaunces” (6.65–66). As murky as Virginia’s knowledge of sexuality may be, she is aware that flirtations are illicit pastimes for her and other young girls to pursue because of the threats they pose to their chastity. Perhaps the most telling line in Virginia’s description is that she acts so modestly due to “hir owene vertu, unconstreyned” (6.61), but that Virginia herself acts in accordance with cultural constructions of maidenly virtue merely hides that she has interiorized her society’s sexual mores to the extent that she performs them without additional pressures. Lianna Farber sees Virginia as indoctrinated into a social order that convinces

\(^6\) For Livy’s *Ab urbe condita*, see Robert Correale and Mary Hamel, ed., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 2.540–47. Chaucer’s retelling of this legend is also influenced by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose*, lines 5589–658.
her to acquiesce to her death, in that she is sexually innocent insofar as she self-regulates in accordance with the ideological construction of her innocence. She is thus the Child who has interiorized cultural projections of virtuous childhood, as yet unaware of the violence necessary to prop up this fantasy.

The cultural fantasy of the Child, as enacted upon young boys and girls, cannot be perpetuated forever as they grow into adulthood, and the narrator underscores that young girls’ ignorance of sexuality must yield to sexual knowledge:

Swich [dalliances] maken children for to be
To soone rype and boold, as men may se,
Which is ful perilous and hath been yore.
For al to soone may she lerne loore
Of booldnesse, whan she woxen is a wyf. (6.67–71)

Knowledge deemed illicit for children is appropriate for wives, but the Physician allows no indication of when young girls are to receive instruction in sexuality, other than on their wedding nights when their metamorphosis from child to woman (as they also transform from their father’s daughter into their husband’s wife) is complete. Such a transformation is lamented as occurring “al to soone,” yet it is not clear within this cultural fantasy when sexual knowledge should be imparted to the young. Latent pedophilia lurks in these lines of the Physician’s Tale, as men watch children (“men may se”) for incipient signs of adult sexuality. At the same time that the narrator recoils at the possibility of pedophilia, exhorting that children should not be treated as sexual objects, he also highlights the contingency of the status of children. When sexual innocence in childhood is abrogated, as evident in Apius’s desire to rape Virginia, children are compelled to become adults overnight.

The narrator’s lengthy digression on child-rearing by nurses and parents (6.72–104) contains many paradoxes and thematic lapses, particularly because Virginia, as a model child, ostensibly needs little governance in pursuing her sound moral path. In this excursus, the Physician explores the utility both of chastity and of sexual transgression for nurses raising young children. Whether through sexual innocence or their past licentiousness, nurses are better able to preserve their young charges from sin, but this necessitates, at least for the unchaste nurses, that their own sexual inno-

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cence be sacrificed prior to their employment. The sexual knowledge from
which nurses preserve young girls is thus ideologically functionable, for
their transgressions of these mores establish them now as suitable guard-
ians of other people’s children:

Outher for ye han kept youre honestee,
Or elles ye han falle in freletee,
And knownen wel ynough the olde daunce,
And han forsaken fully swich meschaunce
For everemo; therfore, for Cristes sake,
To teche hem vertu looke that ye ne slake. (6.77–82)

It matters little whether these nurses sexually transgressed in their youth,
for their knowledge is now deployed to preserve children. “Of alle tresons
sovereyn pestilence / Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence” (6.91–92), the
Physician then declares, but this betrayal of children’s innocence does not
extend retrospectively in consideration of these nurses, only in the present
and into the future to protect current children. The cultural signifier of the
Innocent Child who must be preserved from sexual knowledge fluctuates
in regard to its target: always a child but never the adults who were chil-
dren before, who must now devote themselves to children so that children
will not grow up to be adults like them. Furthermore, issues of social class
circulate in this passage, for the lost sexual innocence of nurses and other
servants can be lamented yet transformed into a benefit to the family and
thus to society as well; for girls of higher status such as Virginia, no path
to reformation allows them to be cleansed of the ostensible transgression
of intercourse.

Virginia’s reference to the biblical narrative of Jephthah and his daugh-
ter similarly registers the potential to reframe fallen female sexuality as
beneficial to society, despite the paradoxes of this rhetorical move. Fore-
most, Jephthah, as described in the Book of Judges, is a “vir fortissimus
atque pugnator filius meretricis” (11.1; “a most valiant man and warrior,
the son of a woman that was a harlot”). In this biblical narrative, a sexu-
ally transgressive woman produces a heroic child, but Jephthah’s heroism
as a warrior is compromised by his rash vow that results in his daughter’s
execution. Virginia alludes to Jephthah’s daughter to momentarily stay her
father’s hand when her own death approaches:

“For, pardee, Jepte yaf his doghter grace
For to compleyne, er he hir slow, allas!
And, God it woot, no thyng was hir trespas,
But for she ran hir fader first to see,
To welcome hym with greet solempnitee.” (6.240–44)

Numerous medieval Jewish and Christian commentators criticized Jephthah for adhering to his rash vow despite the price his daughter must pay,66 but Virginia does not cite such textual authorities to plead for her life (in contrast to, for example, Dorigen in the Franklin’s Tale, who convinces herself not to commit suicide despite the numerous examples of virtuous women who choose death over sexual dishonor). Both Jephthah and Virginius sacrifice their daughters to reflect their inherent honor, yet in neither story is such a sacrifice warranted within its theological logic. Within its erotic logics, however, in which a woman’s virginity reflects positively on her father who has guarded this commodity, such a sacrifice is essential to the tales’ androcentric resolutions.

The eroticism of the Physician’s Tale is ultimately interconnected with the death drive, for it is based on the impossibility of stasis within childhood and virginity. Despite the assumed desirability of her sexual innocence, Virginia cannot remain a virginal child forever, but even the hypothetical possibility of endless childhood would render sexuality moribund. Within Chaucer’s corpus, the inherent potential of the death drive intersecting with virginity is famously voiced by the Wife of Bath—“And certes, if ther were no seed ysowe, / Virginitee, thanne wherof sholde it growe!” (3.71–72)—and Virginia symbolizes a potential rejection of the social order through her very virtue that leads to her death. As Howard Bloch argues, “a certain inescapable logic of virginity, most evident in medieval hagiography, leads syllogistically to the conclusion that the only good virgin—that is, the only true virgin—is a dead virgin.”67 To describe Virginia as perpetuating an ideological system that requires her sacrificing her very self is troubling, as it reeks of misogynist discourses labeling victims of sexual violence as complicit in their suffering; however, such is the power of ideology to conscript subjects into acquiescence with their own sacrifice that Virginia agrees to her father’s request to kill


her. If readers believe that Virginia too readily cedes her life to paternal claims over her body and its social significations, by perpetually upholding her virginity in death, she sacrifices her fertility to the grave and thus her father’s potential to perpetuate his bloodline. The fantasy of the beaten child again redounds to the detriment of the father in a public venue, in this instance when Virginius wagers his battle with Apius. Michael Uebel argues that “Virginity seems always to be a matter of public rather than private affect,” and so too is Virginius’s performance of fatherhood publicly undone through his daughter’s sacrifice of herself. Preserving her maidenhead entails losing her maiden’s head, as Bloch affirms, yet in losing her head, she publicly reveals her father’s privileging of the public over the private and destroys the possibility of propagating his bloodline. As the narrator affirms when proclaiming that Virginia is Virginius’s lawful offspring, “No children hadde he mo in al his lyf” (6.6), and so her death registers, at least metaphorically, as his own.

The Physician’s Tale is built on the myth of female passivity and pliancy, the fictions that daughters are molded to the pleasure of men for paternal self-aggrandizement. Anne Middleton sees Virginia as representing a “paradoxical mixture of active courage and passive forbearance,” and Holly Crocker observes of the Physician’s Tale that “the politically unifying fantasy of feminine passivity turns into a domestically divisive nightmare of masculine violence.” Virginius’s actions, although horrific, acquire a logical equanimity: as his name makes apparent, he is the progenitor of Virginia but also her masculine counterpart. When Apius and Virginius jockey for control of Virginia, their homosocial struggle exposes Virginius’s desire not merely to preserve his narcissistic image through his daughter but to assume Apius’s authority within the social order. When he passes judgment on his daughter and condemns her to death, he mirrors Apius in his role of judge:

“O gemme of chastitée, in pacience
Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence.
For love, and nat for hate, thou most be deed;
My pitous hand moot smyten of thyn heed.” (6.223–26)

70. Holly Crocker, Chaucer’s Visions of Manhood (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 64.
As Apius perverts the law in his corrupt pursuit of Virginia, Virginius similarly corrupts his paternal authority in sadistically executing his daughter. Gilles Deleuze points out that sadism resists reproduction—“The ultimate end of the sadist is to put an effective end to all procreation, since it competes with primary nature. . . . Sadism is in every sense an active negation of the mother and an exaltation of the father who is beyond all laws”—and such are the results of Virginius’s punishment of his daughter for sins she never committed. (Congruent to this logic, Virginia’s mother is mostly absent from the text, as readers only see her when she accompanies her daughter to the temple where Apius’s lust for her is inflamed.) Moreover, as Virginius asserts governmental authority over his fellow Romans after Apius’s suicide, his arbitrary dispensation of justice and mercy—pardoning Claudius but executing the “remenant . . . / That were consentant of this cursednesse” (6.275–76)—exposes that the exercise of power takes precedence over his familial obligations. In assuming the position of the law, Virginius proves his fantasy of inviolate masculinity true, until his death, when it finally arrives, will ironically recall that he sacrificed his daughter’s fecundity and coupled her virginity to his death drive. If readers recall the Physician’s excursus on fallen nurses and the protections afforded by their illicitly gained knowledge, Virginia’s final words—“Blissed be God that I shal dye a mayde! / Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame” (6.248–49)—ironically indicate an alternative fate for her in a life of protecting children, and the children whom she might preserve from similar fates are themselves sacrificed to her father’s fantasy of inviolate masculinity. As Harry Bailly concludes of Virginia, “Hire beautee was hire deth, I dar wel seyn” (6.297). In arousing Apius’s erotic interests, Virginia inadvertently signs her death warrant, one that her father executes: to preserve the Child, he sacrifices his child. In the end, Virginia cannot access her sexuality except through the negative affect of perpetual virginity, a cycle that promises only additional sacrifices and never future fecundity.

CONCLUSION

In these queer families of the Canterbury Tales, the children of the Reeve’s Tale, Summoner’s Tale, Clerk’s Tale, and Physician’s Tale suffer through rape,
death, and their sexual instrumentality, but through the images of their suffering and/or their dead bodies, the hollow bravado and empty eroticism of their fathers’ masculinities are made manifest for the world to see. In the *Reeve’s Tale*, Symkyn faces humiliation at the hands of Allen and John, who rape his daughter and wife and then beat him as they escape, and the *Summoner’s Tale* concludes with Thomas’s invitation to another man to excavate his backside, with the friar facing further come-uppance due to the ingenuity of the young squire Jankyn. The dark fantasy of murdered children in the *Clerk’s Tale* exposes Walter’s tyrannical authority, as well as the limits of his powers during his youth when he was unable to pursue the asexual (and likely homosocial) pleasures of hunting and other such disports and was himself sacrificed to the demands of cultural reproduction. The *Physician’s Tale* concludes with a vision of paternal masculinity so vicious that fatherhood is rendered morbidly unattractive and death emerges as Virginia’s only weapon against her father, which denies him the possibility of furthering his bloodline. In grand ironies, in each of these tales the father confronts narrative fates as violent, humiliating, and/or despairing as his child(ren)’s. Gilles Deleuze reformulates Freud’s formula that “a child is being beaten,” positing instead a masochistic desire to reenact the father’s abjection: “we have seen that what is beaten, humiliated and ridiculed in him is the image and the likeness of the father, and the possibility of the father’s aggressive return. It is not the child but a father that is being beaten.”72 To desire masochistically is to desire the pleasure of punishment, and so it is the father who must be disciplined in these tales, despite their attempted performances of their inviolate power. For to describe a fantasy of a beaten child is only to describe a desire, one that circulates destructively around the dreamer and the dreamed, and the intersecting desires between them.

To push this interpretation further, might these fathers represent the Father? The role of the Divine in each of these tales is occluded yet persistently present. Maline in the *Reeve’s Tale* descends directly from “hoolly chirches blood” (1.3982), and in the *Summoner’s Tale*, the possibility that Thomas’s dead son was fathered by the friar likewise links the child to a religious bloodline. The *Clerk’s Tale* finds an uneasy parallel in the biblical tale of Job—“Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse” (4.932), the narrator declares—but reading the *Clerk’s Tale* as an allegory necessitates that Walter’s role in the tale parallel God’s role in the Book

72. Ibid., 66.
of Job, rendering Walter a callous incarnation of divine love. Despite Virginius’s clear paternal claims over Virginia, the narrator stresses as well her position as God’s child when Nature describes herself as God’s chief deputy—“For He that is the formere principal / Hath maked me his vicaire general” (6.19–20)—and then declares that she created Virginia for his pleasure: “I made hire to the worshippe of my lord” (6.26). Furthermore, Virginia conflates her earthly and spiritual fathers in her final words to Virginius: “Dooth with youre childe youre wyl, a Goddes name!” (6.250). Chaucer conflates these children’s fathers with the Father, and thus Christianity is implicated within an erotic system that undermines borders between the normative and the perverse, the just and the cruel. As these child characters of the Canterbury Tales suffer for an erotic pleasure suffused throughout their narratives, so too does Chaucer’s conception of an erotic God subvert paradigms of gender and sexuality in an array of texts, as the next chapter explores.

73. The potential analogy between Walter and God has been explored in numerous nominalist studies of the tale, such as Elizabeth Kirk’s poignant reading: “What the Clerk’s Tale reflects especially is the predicament of a religious thinker in a world whose discourse is shaped by the assumption of nominalism: what desperate straits must be dared to affirm the goodness of God and the organic role of ethics in the fulfillment of the whole creature” (“Nominalism and the Dynamics of the Clerk’s Tale: Homo Viator as Woman,” Chaucer’s Religious Tales, ed. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson [Suffolk: Brewer, 1990], 11–20, at 118). See also Rodney Delasanta, “Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 31 (1997): 209–31; Robert Stepis, “Potentia Absoluta and the Clerk’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 10 (1975): 129–46; and David Steinmetz, “Late Medieval Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 12 (1977): 38–54.

74. Barbara Newman addresses the relationship between the feminized deity Nature and the Christian God in her God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), exploring how Nature represents the “goddess of biological life, and specifically of sexuality and reproduction.” In this role she “remains God’s daughter” while she “authorizes the scientific and philosophical study of ‘nature,’” despite the confusion she engendered for some “medieval authors [who] disagreed as to how fully she is initiated into her Father’s secrets” (53).