

MY CHILD AND MY LIFE: SACRIFICIAL OBLIGATION AND CHAUCER

by

GARY SCOTT MONTAÑO

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2011

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DEDICATION

For my mother Gloria Rosita Marquez Montaña

Mom, everything that is at all good in me comes from you. Without your love and support, I could have accomplished nothing, and I dedicate this dissertation to you. I love you, mom, with all my heart.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many unknowingly inspire others when they demonstrate the power of dreaming and persistence. For that, thanks to: The Beatles, Paul Stanley, Eric Carr, Freddie Mercury, Brian May, Steven Tyler, Joe Perry, Chris DeGarmo, Katy Perry, Sammy Davis Jr., B.L, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Roger Staubach, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic Johnson, Jackie Robinson, Mike Modano, Gina Miller, Johnny Carson, Robin Williams, Bob Denver, Tina Louise, Jerry Seinfeld, Peter O' Toole, Steve McQueen, Kirk Douglas, Michael Douglas, David Caruso, Jennifer Grey, Peter Graves, Martin Landau, Barbara Bain, Sam Elliott, William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, John Malkovich, Sylvester Stallone, John Travolta, B & N B, Tom Hanks, Clint Eastwood, Thomas Gibson, Christopher & Dana Reeve, Otto Schleiben, Michael J. Fox, Ricardo Montalbán, Heath Ledger, Johnny Depp, Vito Scotti, Henry Fonda, Paul Newman, Robert Redford, Bruce Willis, Pope John Paul II, Joel & Victoria Osteen, Queen Elizabeth I, Diana, Princess of Wales, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., President John F. Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy, President Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, and President Barack Obama.

Thanks to my mentors: John Fyler, Lee Patterson, John Fleming, John Elder, Susanne Wofford, Michael Armstrong, Isobel Armstrong, Dare Clubb, Dixie Goswami, Jim Maddox, Shirley Brice Heath, Jacqueline Jones Royster, Andrea Lunsford, Paul Muldoon, Cheryl Glenn, Norvil Howell, Jim Mealy, Stephen Berenson, Brian McEleney, Cindy Rosenthal, Stephen Thorne, Ellen McLaughlin, Oskar Eustis, and Emily Bartels. Special thanks to Kevin Gustafson for your many hours of selfless and

inspiring support and guidance, and to the other members of my committee, Jackie Stodnick, and Tim Richardson. Thanks also to those many who shared a kind word during the difficult times of this process.

Finally, nothing means anything without friends and family. Without them, I could not have done this. Thanks to Fr. Gino Correa, Stephen Schadler, Doug Wood, Kevin McNulty, Abra Chernik, Chris Onken, Sandy LeGault, Robert Poe, George Mendez, and Berry Curry. My highest praise goes to my beautiful and perfect wife Shari (thanks Jack and Judy!), my perfect children Jillian and Scott, Shari's perfect kids, Doug and Ally, my dad Aurelio, Tío Jody and Tía Patsy, Tío Oris and Tía Betsy, Tío Larry, Tía Rosemary, Catherine Claire, the rest of my aunts and uncles, my siblings Kenny, Stan, Rick, Regan, Dominic, Ryan, and Shannon, my cousins, nieces, nephews, my grandparents Theresa, Eugenio, and José, my stepfather Max, and always, God.

April 12, 2011

ABSTRACT

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Gary S. Montaña, PhD

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2011

Supervising Professor: Kevin Gustafson

Medieval literature demonstrates that Christians of that era took their Bible seriously, particularly the Old Testament account of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. For them, the story was both fascinating and perplexing. Not only was Abraham one of the most revered figures, but he was also one of the most frustrating. He was admired for his ability to obey God's directive to sacrifice Isaac, but because he does so without displaying an ounce of emotion, that admiration is often coupled with irritation. How could a father as loving as Abraham remain expressionless and emotionless as he raised the knife to kill his son? To explain why, Church fathers espoused various methods of exegesis. But for many, the Church's teachings proved less than satisfactory, as is indicated by medieval writers, particularly the dramatists, who seized upon the Abraham and Isaac story in an effort to explain not only Abraham's lack of emotion, but also Isaac's reaction, one the Bible conspicuously omits. Among these writers was Chaucer,

who knew well the Abraham and Isaac story. His tales on religion and morality qualify as variations of the passage as presented not only in the Bible, but also in medieval drama. The Hugelyn episode in the *Monk's Tale*, the *Prioress' Tale*, the *Physician's Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Clerk's Tale* each present children as sacrificial figures. Through them, Chaucer explores the issues of his day that the Abraham and Isaac story presents: silence, affective piety, gender, salvation, and death. The tales demonstrate that sacrifice is often necessary for restoring balance on a personal and societal level. And like the Abraham and Isaac story makes obvious, those who remain steadfast in their faith through their darkest hour are rewarded by God.

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CHAPTER 1
PIECES OF THE ACTION: MEDIEVAL NOTIONS OF CHILDHOOD, SACRIFICE,
AND CHAUCER

My Child and My Life explores a topic not generally investigated in Chaucerian studies: the violence faced by children and its relationship to sacrifice in the tales of religion and morality in the *Canterbury Tales*.¹ Indeed, violence toward children seems to be an issue most literary critics tend to overlook or even ignore since very few studies take up the question of children, or more specifically, children who suffer egregiously in terms of sacrifice and violence. Daniel T. Kline accurately points out that “children, in short, have rarely been the subject of study in Middle English literature” (20).² To add to that, René Girard writes in *Violence and the Sacred*, “Why...do we never explore the relationship between sacrifice and violence?” (2).³ Girard suggests that “many modern theorists...give it only scant attention...undoubtedly because they feel that it introduces into the discussion religious and moral values that are incompatible with true scientific inquiry” (3-4). Although Girard’s question appeared decades ago, only recently has a

¹ For this study, the term “violence,” in addition to its most common association with injurious physical force, also includes as part of its meaning, the exercise of power toward the powerless in a mental or emotional manner that is abusive or unjust. Similarly, the term “sacrifice,” while commonly designating an offering or taking of physical life, also means in a broader sense, the forfeiture, submission, or destruction of that which is highly valued for the sake of something considered as having a more pressing claim or greater value.

² “Textuality, Subjectivity, and Violence: Theorizing the Figure of the Child in Middle English Literature.” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 12 (1995): 16–25.

³ Trans. Patrick Gregory. New York: John Hopkins UP, 1979.

significant corpus regarding sacrifice and violence begun to emerge.¹ That corpus, however, still remains scant when it comes to the children and the violence they face in Chaucer's tales.

Children With No Childhood

Perhaps children in Chaucer have been relatively "absent" in the study of Middle English literature because precisely defining "children" or "child" proves perplexing and controversial. Definitions found in the Bible, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and other sources² at the very least fall under the category of "broad" in the medieval West. The term "child," referring to Benjamin in a Wycliffite translation of Genesis, indicates his age to be at least thirty.³ Additionally, "child" or "bairn," according to the *OED*, in religious contexts "extended to youths approaching or entering upon manhood." Conversely, the *OED* also defines "child" as "A young person of either sex below the age of puberty; a boy or girl," and actually references Chaucer's *Prioress' Tale*.⁴ Nicholas Orme's studies of medieval children also follow along scriptural lines, classifying

¹ See René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1987; *The Scapegoat*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1986; Dudley Young, *Origins of the Sacred*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1991; Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1993; Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. New York: Crossroads, 1995; Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999; Hector Avalos, *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005.

² Dante notes about the first of the three stages of life, "As to the first, no one hesitates, but every sage agrees that it lasts up to the twenty-fifth year; and because up to that time our soul is chiefly intent on conferring growth and beauty on the body, whence many and great changes take place in the person, the rational part cannot come to perfect discretion; wherefore Reason lays down that before this age there are certain things a man may not do without a guardian of full age" (348). *Il convivio*. Trans. J.H. Wicksteed. London: J.M. Dent, 1903. See also J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989.

³ In most of Genesis, Benjamin seems to be portrayed as the little brother being watched over by his older ones.

⁴ "This is to seyn, to syngen and to rede, / As smale children doon in hire childhede" (500-501). All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

children in the age bracket spanning infancy to twenty-eight years.⁵ Barbara Hanawalt notes, “In law, twelve was the age at which a child moved into adult accountability for criminal offenses and a male child was to become a member of a frankpledge (tithing group)” (161).⁶ It appears, according to Hanawalt, that circumstance went a long way in determining the categorization of a child in the Middle Ages. If a twelve-year-old child was a victim of violence, then the tendency was to view him as a child. If this same child, however, was a perpetrator of violence, then society tended to view him as an adult. In terms of sacrifice, medieval society almost universally viewed a person of this age as a victim and almost always referred to him as a child.⁷

Prior to Hanawalt’s research, however, modern historians tended to believe that vast differences regarding children existed between medieval and modern cultures. Perhaps such a mind-set prevailed because for years, when attempting to identify medieval attitudes regarding children, scholars relied on the work of historians such as Philippe Ariès, Lawrence Stone, Edward Shorter, and Alan Macfarlane,⁸ all of whom wrote with the aim of demonstrating the differences between the medieval family and its contemporary counterpart based on assumptions that the two could not possibly be the same given the expanse of time. The focal point of difference between the two cultures

⁵ *Medieval Children*. New York: Yale UP, 2003.

⁶ “Narratives of a Nurturing Culture: Parents and Neighbors in Medieval England.” *Of Good and Ill Repute: Gender and Social Control in Medieval England*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 158-177.

⁷ Isaac, in *Cursor Mundi*, is referred to as a child: “Quat he was to his lauerd tru / þat moght na reunes do him reu, / þat he ne wald leuer his schild cole / þan of his lauerd wrath to thole, / þat schild þat was sa mani yere, / Ar it was send, soght wit praiyer” (3133-3138). London: N. Trubner, 1875.

⁸ For more recent perspectives on medieval children, see Shulamith Shahar, *Childhood in the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 1991; Colin Heywood, *A History of Childhood: Children and Childhood in the West from Medieval to Modern Times*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002; Carol Neel, *Medieval Families*. Toronto: U Toronto P, 2004; Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007; Gary Dickson, *Children's Crusade: Medieval History, Modern Mythistory*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

was an idea promulgated by Ariès, that “in medieval society, the idea of childhood did not exist” (120).⁹ For Ariès, medieval society lacked the spread of time and activity generally associated with childhood in today’s society, infancy to late teen, where children in this age group did what children in this age group do. Perhaps the perception of an absence of a childhood explains the difficulty in precisely defining the term “child.” Unfortunately, Ariès’ attitude creates the impression that medieval society treated its children as adults resulting in children who were not loved or cared for. Recently, however, historians have revealed that medieval and contemporary families, instead of being polar opposites, have many similarities, particularly regarding children. Hanawalt exposes, through her analysis of coroners’ rolls involving accidental death and through individual wills, a society that embraced its children.¹⁰ This research indicates that medieval parents demonstrated great feeling for their children, despite the absence of a period and condition known as childhood. The emerging question, then, asks if an individual indeed can be a child in a society that lacks a modern notion of childhood.¹¹ Medieval literature seems to suggest that he can.

However, a distinction must be made between Hanawalt’s portrayal of children in the Middle Ages and that of John Boswell in *The Kindness of Strangers*. The later study,

⁹ *L’Enfant et la vie familiale sous l’ancien régime*. Trans. Robert Baldick. New York: Vintage, 1965.

¹⁰ Hanawalt states about Ariès and Macfarlane: “Ariès has argued that for the medieval peasant family, community rather than family played a large role in the emotional life of individuals. In all of these works, traditional families are perceived as extended rather than as simple conjugal families...On the other hand, we have Alan Macfarlane’s equally inaccurate perception that the medieval family members behaved just like modern-day Englishman” (9). *Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

¹¹ Parental attitudes toward children help to explain the development of affective piety that surrounds them in medieval literature, almost as if the two are inseparable. Hanawalt’s research forces the scholar to acknowledge that despite the absence of a notion of childhood, medieval society viewed children and its responsibility to them as *natural*, and the association of children and affective piety seems to be an outgrowth of that.

as its title indicates, looks into the abandonment of children and what happened to them after the fact. The studies seem to present differing attitudes regarding parents and their relationship with their children in medieval times. Because it spans several centuries, Boswell's study leads the reader to believe that the abandonment of children occurred regularly. Obviously, as in today's society, abandonment did occur and for a variety of reasons. But one must remember that, in many cases, surrogate families took in these children and cared for them like their own. Neither Hanawalt's nor Boswell's study, however, explains the violence toward children in the literature of the period. For example, Hanawalt's research does not point out repeated instances of undue violence toward children, and Boswell speaks of the violence as occurring only in extreme circumstances. The result, then, is a discrepancy between attitudes toward children documented by Hanawalt and Boswell, and those exhibited in the literature of the time. The tendency of medieval literature dealing with children is to present them in violent circumstances.¹² And at first glance, it seems that such literary evidence supports the theories of Ariès *et al* that Hanawalt argues against. Even Hanawalt notes, "Medieval literature does not contain the same intensity of sentimentalization of family that modern literature does" (10). Such an attitude, however, does not mean the literature lacked emotion. Hanawalt's perspective clearly refers to literature in which children are victims of violence. In such literature, when such a situation occurs, the context is usually religious. The resulting attitude, then, appears to be that for medieval Christianity, (literal and literary) religion and violence must go together, and because they do,

¹² For example, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

children, the *loci* that bring the two together, appear to come across as unloved and unwanted by their literary creators.

Children, Violence, and Sacrifice: the Religious Perspective

There has been a long literary custom of associating sacrifice with children.¹³ Particularly fascinating was the interest in the relationship between Christ as child and the theme of sacrifice.¹⁴ Such association has its beginnings in the words of Jesus, himself, who states, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven” (John 6.51).¹⁵ St. Gregory particularly emphasized the sacrament of the Eucharist with the infant Christ.¹⁶ Such emphasis created a pattern of increasingly seeing the Christ figure in children, particularly in the drama of the period,¹⁷ with the focus on child sacrifice beginning in the 1200s.¹⁸ At that point, the movement became increasingly popular, and

¹³ Such a connection, according to Julie Nelson Couch, stems from “the medieval tradition of rendering biblical and apocryphal stories into verse. Interest in the childhood of Jesus persisted through ancient and medieval Christianity” (31) “Misbehaving God: The Case of the Christ Child in MS Laud Mis. 108 ‘Infancy of Jesus Christ.’” *Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth D. Kirk*. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. 31-43. Couch also states: “Oscar Cullman traces fascination with the *enfance* of Christ back to second-generation Christianity and notes its continued spread, especially evident in church art, through the Middle Ages” (31-32). See “‘Infancy’ Gospels.” *New Testament Apocrypha*. Ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox P, 1991.

¹⁴ Leah Sinanoglou states, “Medieval writings, from early Latin tracts to late English popularizations, persist in conflating the Incarnation and the Passion, in fusing the Babe of Bethlehem and the sacramental Victim of the Mass” (491). “The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays.” *Speculum* 48 (1973): 491-503.

¹⁵ All biblical passages in this study are from the Douay-Rheims version of the Holy Bible. Rockford, IL: Tan, 2000.

¹⁶ Sinanoglou notes, “St. Gregory’s symbolic reading of the nativity story became a medieval commonplace, repeated in England as early as the homilies of Ælfric and reflected in the frequency with which art and literature paired wheat and the Christ Child” (“The Christ Child as Sacrifice” 494). See also Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.

¹⁷ Sinanoglou states that “in the Plays of the Holy Innocents so prominent in every cycle...the audience witnessed the pitiful sight of infants put to the sword. Didactic writers emphasized that the Innocents died for the sake of the Christ Child...and the bloody spectacle of their death may well have recalled the child-host image for medieval viewers versed in Corpus Christi sermons” (“The Christ Child as Sacrifice” 501).

¹⁸ Clifford Davidson adds about the sacrificial scene, “Representations in the visual arts date back to the third and early fourth centuries. The sacrifice scene had regularly come to be regarded as one of the great instances of the foreshadowing of the Crucifixion *ante legem* long before the heyday of the vernacular drama, though of course typological interpretation had been frequently enough set aside in favor of other aspects of the story in these illustrations” (32). “The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama.”

the Church left dramatic representations alone, actually seeing such drama as beneficial to its cause.¹⁹

And while the Middle Ages emphasized the connection between the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Christ child, its literature increasingly saw the sacrifice of Isaac as the biblical source of much of its subject matter. Standard commentaries viewed Isaac as the general figure representing child sacrifice, particularly by the father.²⁰ Medieval writers drew from a long tradition of emphasizing the importance of the Abraham and Isaac story to religious dogma. Early Church authorities openly spoke of the importance of the Abraham and Isaac story. For example, St. Irenæus, writing c.180, quotes verbatim St. Paul's decree in Galatians, "Know ye therefore, that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (492).²¹ He and other Church fathers make clear that faith, as demonstrated by Abraham, is a necessary component if sacrifice is to have any meaning. That an individual can maintain that faith through the most trying of circumstances resulted in a reverence toward Abraham on the part of these early Church fathers, even those from places not traditionally viewed as Christian in the medieval world. Exclaiming the virtue of Abraham, St. Ephraim Syrus writes:

Papers on Language and Literature 35 (1999): 28-44. Sinanoglou calls this change "the first flowering of a broad movement toward the laicization of religious dogma" ("The Christ Child as Sacrifice" 497).

¹⁹ According to Sinanoglou, "portraying the victim as a young child...shift[s] the symbolic emphasis from history to liturgy" (*Ibid* 502)

²⁰ According to Ann Lancashire, "a story better known to Chaucer's audience...and also standing traditionally in Biblical commentary as a type of Christ's sacrifice [is] the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac...the sacrifice of Isaac was a key Old Testament event which, as a type of God's sacrifice of Christ for man's redemption, was included, in expanded form, in all the extant English mystery cycles: York, Chester, Towneley, and *Ludus Coventriae*" (321). "Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac." *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 320-326.

²¹ Book IV, Chapter XXI in *Against Heresies*. Trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 1. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977.

Who shall weigh the recompense of Abraham: whom I marveled at when he bound, his only son...At that time I came forth in haste, to see the marvel: how that his knife was drawn out, against his beloved. I gathered my manifold memories, from all quarters: and I collected my spirit to marvel, at the illustrious one. (215).²²

And while Abraham rightly became recognized as a patriarch, Isaac became the vehicle through which faith was recognized. Isaac's acceptance of his sacrifice, in a manner of speaking, "exonerates" Abraham and his willingness to kill his son.

Church fathers extolled Isaac²³ because, through him, Christians could see that sacrifice, depending on circumstance, need not be viewed necessarily as tragic, but rather as something necessary for the betterment of the whole. In Book II of *On the Duties of the Clergy*, St. Ambrose writes:

Suppose that things come which are accounted terrible as regards the grief they cause, such as blindness, exile, hunger, violation of a daughter, loss of children. Who will deny that Isaac was blessed, who did not see in his old age, and yet gave blessings with his benediction? (46)²⁴

The positive aspects of sacrifice and other traditionally negative circumstances were emphasized from almost the very beginnings of the Church. The First Epistle of Pope St.

²² Book V, Chapter LXIII in *The Nisibene Hymns*. Trans. J.T. Sarsfield Stopford. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. 13. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976.

²³ One should note that there was resistance by Church fathers to placing emphasis on Isaac rather than Abraham. According to Edward Kessler, "The centrality of the figure of Abraham was partly influenced by the New Testament, but also represented a reaction against the rabbinic stress on Isaac" (130). *Bound by the Bible: Jews, Christians, and the Sacrifice of Isaac*. Cambridge: U Cambridge P, 2004.

²⁴ *Three Books on the Duties of the Clergy*. Trans. H. De Romestin. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. 10. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976.

Clement of Rome to the Corinthians states, “For what reason was our father Abraham blessed? was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith? Isaac, with perfect confidence, as if knowing what was to happen, cheerfully yielded himself as a sacrifice” (13).²⁵ A residual by-product of the respect given Isaac by Church fathers was the model it created for filial obligation. St. Ambrose writes in Book I of *Duties*, “Isaac feared the Lord, as was indeed but natural in the son of Abraham; being subject also to his father to such an extent that he would not avoid death in opposition to his father’s will” (17.66). Isaac increasingly became the model for child obedience.²⁶ In fact, the biblical passage became the preeminent Old Testament model of filial obligation during the Middle Ages. In 1487, it states in the *Book of the Good Manners*:

And chyldern also owen to theyr parentes, to fader and moder and to theyr maysters, to obeye in folowyng Ysaac, the whiche obeyed in suche wyse to his fader that he was all redy to receyve the deth at his commaundement, as it appereth the xxii chapytre of Genesis; and yet he was at the tyme of the age of xxxii yere.²⁷

The Abraham and Isaac story, then, rose to prominence in the medieval era because it provided the model of faith and obedience for medieval Christians, as well as religious context for understanding sacrifice and its importance. As impressive as the faith

²⁵ Trans. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 1. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977.

²⁶ G.R. Owst notes that “Isaac is the ideal medieval son alike in his willing obedience, in his filial respect, and in his readiness to receive punishment for any wrongdoing” (493). *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England: A Neglected Chapter in the History of English Letters of the English Peoples*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966.

²⁷ Book 4, “Of the Estate of Yonge Peple, and How They Ought to Governe Themselfe.” *Le livre de bonnes moeurs*. Jacques Legrand. Trans. William Caxton. Ann Arbor: UMI.

demonstrated by Abraham was the willingness of Isaac to accept his role as sacrificial victim, even in a circumstance of which he had no understanding.

The Abraham and Isaac Story: Problematic Considerations

The biblical passage, however, created controversy still under deliberation to this very day. L.O. Aranye Fradenburg asks, “If God mandates what is good for us, then in what way does the assumption of that mandate involve sacrifice?” (31).²⁸ Medieval society wrestled with this question:

In fourteenth-century psychology, distinctions between self-love and love of god, desire and the Law, subject and object, could not be taken as self-evident. They were, in the strict sense, puzzles. (31)

The Abraham and Isaac narrative, while being relatively short (twenty-four verses), produces extreme dramatic impact, even though the story itself is void of pathos, the lack of which created these puzzles medieval society tried to solve. The dilemma occurs, as Erich Auerbach²⁹ notes, because of what the passage omits as much as what it says: “the reader is not informed...what Abraham was doing when God called to him” (8). Auerbach adds:

God appears without bodily form (yet he ‘appears’), coming from some unspecified place – we only hear his voice, and that utters nothing but a name, a name without an adjective, without a descriptive epithet for the person spoken to...of Abraham too nothing is made perceptible except the words in which he answers God: *Hinne-ni*, Behold me here – with which,

²⁸ *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2002.

²⁹ *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

to be sure, a most touching gesture expressive of obedience and readiness is suggested, but it is left to the reader to visualize it. (9)

This deconstruction of the Genesis account points out the problematical nature of the sequence of events. The story omits pathetic elements necessary and expected for understanding on purely a literal or *natural* level:

In the story of Isaac, it is not only God's intervention at the beginning and the end, but even the factual and psychological elements which come between, that are mysterious, merely touched upon, fraught with background; and therefore they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them. Since so much in the story is dark and incomplete, and since the reader knows that God is a hidden God, his effort to interpret it constantly finds something new to feed upon. (15)

And because God is hidden in the passage, questions arise as to His motivation for testing Abraham in the first place. Auerbach is only a recent example in a long line of exegetes who both question and defend the biblical story. Philo, for example, calls Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Abraham's "most important action of all" (32.167).³⁰ Responding to questions about the role of God in the story and why He would command the execution of a long-promised son, Peter Abelard, in the twelfth century, writes:

³⁰ *On Abraham. The Works of Philo Judaeus.* Trans. Charles Duke Yonge. London, H.G. Bohn, 1993. John C. Cavadini states that Philo, after recounting the Genesis passage, "spends four times as long reflecting on Abraham's action in a kind of *apologia* to unnamed 'quarrelsome critics' (33.178) who would deride Abraham's act" (38). "Exegetical Transformations: The Sacrifice of Isaac in Philo, Origen, and Ambrose." *In Dominico Eloquentio – In Lordly Eloquence: Essays on Patristic Exegesis in Honor of Robert Louis Wilken.* Eds. Paul M. Blowers, Angela Russell Christman, David G. Hunter, and Robin Darling Young. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002. 35-49.

Surely God did not command well a deed which it was not good to do? For if it was good, how was it later forbidden? If, moreover, the same thing was both good to be commanded and good to be prohibited – for God allows nothing to be done without reasonable cause nor yet consents to do it – you see that the intention of the command alone, not the execution of the deed, excuses God, since he did well to command what is not a good thing to be done. For God did not urge or command this to be done in order that Abraham should sacrifice his son but in order that out of this his obedience and the constancy of his faith or love for him should be very greatly tested and remain to us as an example. (30)³¹

And because God's motivations prove difficult to discern, the result for the reader is a sense of pathos that the account itself completely omits. Considering the sheer weight of the burden he faced, Abraham surely, just by his human nature, would have displayed some type of emotional upheaval. Combined with the extreme emotion it evokes in its readers, the passage just from a pathetic standpoint proves troublesome.

The answer for Church fathers was in the passage's interpretation. For them, the pattern of typological exegesis of Old Testament texts changed the focus of the passages in question. They became precursors to New Testament events. For example, in the *Fraction to Covenant Thursday*, attributed to St. Basil and practiced by the Coptic Church, it states:

³¹ *Ethics*. Trans. D. E. Luscombe. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971. 31. Auerbach adds that readers are not told anything of [God's] reasons for tempting Abraham so terribly...But here, in the story of Abraham's sacrifice, the overwhelming suspense is present; what Schiller makes the goal of the tragic poet – to rob us of our emotional freedom, to turn our intellectual and spiritual powers (Schiller says 'our activity') in one direction, to concentrate them there – is effected in this Biblical narrative, which certainly deserves the epithet epic...Everything remains unexpressed. (*Mimesis* 8, 11)

the slaying of Isaac was a type of the shedding of the Blood of Christ, the Son of God, on the Cross, for the salvation of the world; and as Isaac carried the firewood for the burnt offering, likewise Christ carried the wood of the Cross. And as Isaac returned alive, likewise Christ rose living, from the dead, and appeared to his disciples. (140)³²

When viewed typologically, the Abraham and Isaac story implies that the Church expected all medieval Christians to follow in the footsteps of Isaac and Christ, a type of *imitatio Christi*³³ which proved difficult if not impossible. The dilemma seems to stem from the struggles of medieval society to come to terms with a proper interpretation of Christ's body when viewed literally. Increasingly, however, Church fathers began to connect specifically the Abraham and Isaac story with Christ to the point that the Old Testament account became *the* symbolic precursor to Christ's passion.³⁴ For example, Tertullian, in *An Answer to the Jews*, writes, "Isaac, when led by his father as a victim, and himself bearing his own 'wood,' was even at the early period pointing to Christ's death; conceded, as He was, as a victim by the Father; carrying, as He did, the 'wood' of His own passion" (165).³⁵ St. Ephraim writes in Hymn VI, "Sarah had lulled Isaac, who

³² *St. Basil Liturgy Reference Book*. Ed. Abraam D. Sleman. Jersey City: CopticChurch, 2005. David C. Fowler adds, "The O.T. was seen as a foreshadowing of what was actually fulfilled in the N.T." (42). *The Bible in Early English Literature*. Seattle: U Washington P, 1976. For Auerbach, "Paul and the Church Fathers reinterpreted the entire Jewish tradition as a succession of figures prognosticating the appearance of Christ" (*Mimesis* 16).

³³ Pietistic behavior designed to aid the spirit with achievement of salvation through communion with God. See Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991; Ellen Ross, *The Grief of God: Images of the Suffering Jesus in Late Medieval England*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997; Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*. Ed. Michael G. Sargent. Exeter: U Exeter P, 2005; Thomas Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete P, 2008.

³⁴ Peter Braeger notes, "The Church Fathers argue over and over again that the sacrificing of Isaac prefigures God's perfect generosity in sacrificing his own son for man's sake" (145). "Typology as Contrast in the Middle English *Abraham and Isaac* Plays." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 2 (1985): 131-153.

³⁵ Trans. S. Thelwall. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 3. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977.

as a slave bare the Image of the King his Master on his shoulders, even the sign of His Cross; yea, on his hands were bandages and sufferings, a type of the nails” (239).³⁶ In Hymn XIII, he writes, “In the twenty-fifth year, let Isaac praise the Son, for by His goodness he was rescued upon the Mount from the knife, and in his stead there was the victim, the type of the Lamb for the slaughter” (249), a theme he repeats in Hymn II of the *Hymns for the Feast of the Epiphany*.³⁷ St. Ambrose, in particular, viewed Isaac as a precursor to Christ.³⁸ Seeing the Abraham and Isaac story in typological terms ultimately became quite commonplace in medieval society.³⁹

Viewing Old Testament stories as prefigurations did not, however, solve all of the interpretive problems faced early on by Church fathers and theologians. Many, particularly Origen, turned to allegory as the hermeneutic of choice in deriving an understanding to the Abraham and Isaac passage, particularly with the growth of the New Testament canon.⁴⁰ Much of his thinking regarding allegory stems from Paul, himself:

³⁶ *Hymns on the Nativity*. Trans. J.B. Morris. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. 13. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976.

³⁷ In the five-and-twentieth year let Isaac give thanks to the Son – who in the Mount saved him from the knife, -- and became in his stead the lamb to be slain.—The mortal escaped, and He died who gives life to all; blessed be His offering!” (268). Trans. Albert Edward Johnston.

³⁸ Cavadini notes, “Far more prominent in Ambrose’s text is the figure of Isaac, whose prefiguration of Christ receives more frequent and more protracted treatment” (*In Dominico Eloquio* 44).

³⁹ Fowler acknowledges, “Even in historical terms such as we use today it is possible...to see the typological connection between the offering of Isaac...and the sacrifice of Christ in the Gospels, a connection often made in patristic commentaries. In this sense, it is possible for a modernist to acknowledge that medieval exegesis rests on solid foundations” (*The Bible in Early English Literature* 42). For Sarah Beckwith, “The context of the understanding of the dual nature of Christ’s body lends it a greater duplicity than its mere function as a symbol alone, for Christ’s body was understood as sharing divine with human nature. Its mortality tied it to limits, to finitude, to context; its divinity freed it of that context, made it symbolically mobile. Furthermore, greater accessibility of the body of Christ through the dissemination of texts in the vernacular, and the pedagogic initiatives of the clergy also rendered the context of production, reception and consumption of the symbol of Christ’s body more mobile” (112-113). *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. London: Routledge, 1996.

⁴⁰ For Malcolm Godden, “Allegory was used to make the Old Testament safe for Christian readers or to make it consonant with the New Testament” (208). “Biblical Literature: the Old Testament.” *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*. Eds. Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge. New York: Cambridge UP, 1986. 206-226. Charles Kannengiesser notes that the symbolic interpretation of

“‘Tell me, ye who read the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons;’ and so on, down to the place, ‘which things are an allegory’” (431).⁴¹ The pattern of “Origenic” exegesis proved extremely influential,⁴² as St. Ambrose’s thoughts, in Book I of *On the Holy Spirit* suggest: “So Abraham gained God after he had dug the well. So Isaac, while walking by the well, received that wife who was coming to him as a type of the Church” (115). The allegorical approach, however, created more problems than it solved, problems noticed early on by St. Augustine:

All doctrine concerns either things or signs, but things are learned by signs. Strictly speaking, I have here called a “thing” that which is not used to signify something else, like wood, stone, cattle, and so on; but not that wood concerning which we read that Moses cast it into bitter waters that their bitterness might be dispelled, not that stone which Jacob placed at his head, nor that beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son. For these are things in such a way that they are also signs of other things. (8)⁴³

While Augustine acknowledged the legitimacy of allegorical exegesis (Abraham’s sacrificed “beast” represents the human nature of Christ), he also recognized its dangers.

biblical images is a tradition that begins with Origen (32). “Boethius, Cassiodorus, Gregory the Great.” *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period*. Ed. G.R. Evans. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001.

⁴¹ Book II, Chapter III in *Origen Against Celsus*. Trans. Frederick Crombie. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 4. Eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977. Paul’s actual words read: “Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, have you not read the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, and the other by a free woman. But he who was of the bondwoman, was born according to the flesh: but he of the free woman, was by promise. Which things are said by an allegory” (Gal. 4:21-24).

⁴² According to G.R. Evans, “Under the influence of Origen, it became usual in the West to think in terms of four senses: the literal or ‘historical’ (the plain surface meaning of words); and three ‘figurative’ senses – the allegorical or spiritual meaning, the moral to be drawn, or tropological meaning, and the anagogical or prophetic meaning” (5). *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages*. New York: Press Syndicate, 1984.

⁴³ *On Christian Doctrine*. Trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958.

In Book Two, Augustine writes, “I began...writing about things, by warning that no one should consider them except as they are, without reference to what they signify beyond themselves” (34). Augustine no doubt noticed the attractiveness of allegoresis as hermeneutic, but such beauty often spirals out of control.⁴⁴ Allegorical interpretation continued, however, despite its inherent dangers.⁴⁵ It would take St. Gregory to offer a resolution that distinguished the best methodologies.

St. Gregory realized that a singular hermeneutic could not suffice as the sole method of exegesis. He recognized that allegorical interpretation potentially threatened to remove the literal level, but he was also aware of the importance of allegory to communication with God.⁴⁶ Additionally, many biblical readers insisted on the literal as the basis for allegory. As a result, Gregory approached scriptural exegesis from multifaceted points of view, each component of which is designed to work cohesively with the others. In part three of his dedicatory letter in the *Moralia*, Gregory writes:

But be it known that there are some parts, which we go through in a historical exposition, some we trace out in allegory upon an investigation of the typical meaning, some we open in the lessons of moral teaching

⁴⁴ Fowler notes that while “typology...emphasized the importance of historical connections between the Testaments...allegory...could, if uncontrolled, undermine the historical significance of biblical events” (*The Bible in Early English Literature* 42). Similarly, Henri de Lubac also recognized the problem of potential misinterpretation of allegory: “Only, as history is not enough to contain the mystery, it is very true that Christian allegory is not contained by the historical dimension. To receive it totally and not to warp it, we must not restrict this reality ‘to come’ which is the New Testament within the bounds of ‘superficies historiae,’ the ‘surface of history.’ It overflows these boundaries. It involves another ‘dimension’” (95). *Medieval Exegesis Volume Two: The Four Senses of Scripture*. Trans. E.M. Maclerowski. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000.

⁴⁵ For Godden, “Allegorical interpretation soon became a way of using the Old Testament, and the New Testament as well, as a vast store-book of imagery, a source of riddling metaphors and imaginative parallels. The impetus here is not to save the Old Testament for Christianity but to invite the reader to see imaginative parallels between moral truths and physical actuality, or between spiritual experience and historical events (“Biblical Literature: the Old Testament” 208).

⁴⁶ Evans states that St. Gregory believed allegory and circumlocution were God’s way of “putting himself in our place” (*The Language and Logic of the Bible* 2).

alone, allegorically conveyed, while there are some few which, with more particular care, we search out in all these ways together, exploring them in a threefold method. (7)⁴⁷

Thus, Gregory's solution became the standard for medieval interpretation of Scripture. And while St. Gregory proved correct in understanding that an allegorical component was indeed present in these Old Testament passages, pure allegorical exegesis still did not solve the difficulty of obtaining a complete understanding of Old Testament Scripture.⁴⁸

While being the best known examples of interpretive misperception, biblical passages are just one form of literature that suffered from this problem. Other challenges associated with allegorical interpretation can be seen in Old English poems based on Old Testament stories. For example, in the poem *Exodus*, allegory serves as just one obvious method the poet wishes his readers to use in interpreting the poem, creating an

⁴⁷ *Morals on the Book of Job*. Vol.1. Trans. Members of the English Church. London: Oxford UP, 1844. Fowler further elaborates on Gregory's methodology: "The literal level represented historical meaning in accordance with the sacred author's intention. The allegorical level was for Gregory an extension of New Testament typology, not only including fulfillment of Old Testament foreshadowings in the history of the early Church, but also extending the frame of allegorical reference to the future, including the Day of Judgment, and life after death. The moral level, where Gregory is at his best, involves the application of the text to the life of the individual" (*The Bible in Early English Literature* 43). Evans notes: "In practice, the majority of mediaeval scholars inclined to Gregory's view that the text remained the text even in translation... Their attitude to the absolute literal truth of the Bible even in translation imposed upon them a set of strict rules in the reading of Scripture. Every word had to be accounted for, in its context. Specific explanations had to be found for every oddity of expression or grammatical superfluity; for each statement which, taken at face value, presented some anomaly of Christian teaching had to be reconciled with orthodoxy. It was the interpreter's task, by prayer and thought, to penetrate to God's intention in framing the text as he had it before him in Latin, employing allegorical explanations where they seemed illuminating" (*The Language and Logic of the Bible* 7).

⁴⁸ Ultimately, as Godden notes, "One of the characteristic questions for modern readers of Old English versions of Old Testament story is how far allegorical meanings are implicit in the text, and what kinds of meaning" ("Biblical Literature: the Old Testament" 209).

uncertainty in the ultimate meaning of the poem.⁴⁹ Such is the case with biblical passages as well. St. Gregory's application, then, of his three-fold exegesis insured the best way of complete and total understanding of a biblical text. It created uniformity in how to interpret Scripture, provided a sense of understanding of the self, and it eliminated the tendency to use one hermeneutic as *the* sole method of interpretation.⁵⁰

It was this sense of continuity that remained a preeminent way of interpreting texts down through the late medieval period of the Middle Ages and it affected how others viewed Scripture. For example, to minimize any potential misuse of Scripture, Church figures such as Ælfric, despite his predilection for avoiding biblical translation in the first place, translated biblical passages fairly straight forwardly. Ælfric, however, saw the value of allegory as a hermeneutic and like most, tended to view the sacrifice of Isaac as a precursor to New Testament events. Such a view eliminated the possibility that the sacrifice should be viewed as a precedent for father / son relations. Ælfric's translation of the Abraham and Isaac passage, a passage that remains for the most part very unembellished, does provide an exception. As Abraham prepares for his son's sacrifice, Ælfric adds one line not found in the original Latin. The altar is built "on ða ealdan

⁴⁹ Godden correctly asserts, "much of the poetry seems to have little to do with such a way of reading the text; it is rather as if allegory is just one of a number of ways in which the poet invites us to read his poem" (*Ibid* 217).

⁵⁰ Godden notes about such interpretation: "The sense of continuity is the characteristic note of Anglo-Saxon literary treatments of the Old Testament. For the Anglo-Saxons the Old Testament was a veiled way of talking about their own situation...the Old Testament offered them a means of considering and articulating the ways in which kingship, politics and warfare related to the rule of God" (*Ibid* 225).

wisan.”⁵¹ Ælfric repeats the phrase later, but this type of phraseology was not the norm for this Old English figure.⁵²

Medieval Literature: The Aftermath

The effect of Gregory’s exegetical approach to Scripture began to filter into medieval preaching with Peter the Chanter’s influential *Verbum Abbreviatum*, and its three-fold approach of *lectio*, *disputatio*, and *predicatio*.⁵³ Other writers, too, took up the preaching cause. For example, Thomas of Chobham’s *Summa de Arte Praedicatoria* helped to develop the medieval idea that saw preaching as the preeminent method of exegesis.⁵⁴ As a result, medieval literature, particularly its drama, began to reflect this interpretative approach. Medieval poets and dramatists struggled to find a balance between the simplicity of the message and the complexity of the preaching style. The result is the emotion contained in the literature and the emotional effect it had on the

⁵¹ “in the method old.” Fowler notes that the “phrase...remind[s] us that this kind of sacrifice was proper only under the old dispensation” (*The Bible in Early English Literature* 102).

⁵² The actual passage reads: “Īsaac þā āscode Abraham his fæder: ‘Fæder mīn, ic āscie hwær sēo offrun sē; hēr is wudu and fær.’ Him andwyrde sē fæder, ‘God forescēawað, mīn sunu, him self þā offrunge.’ Hīe cōmon þā tō þære stōwe þe him ġesweotolode God, and hē þær wēofod ārærde on þā ealdan wīsan, and þone wudu ġelōgode swā swā hē hit wolde habban tō his suna bænette siððan hē ofslægen wurde. Hē ġeband þā his sunu, and his swōord ātēah, þæt hē hine ġeoffrode on þā ealdan wīsan” (178). *A Guide to Old English*. By Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson. Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2001.

⁵³ According to Evans, *lectio* is “the reading of the text with a commentary, either written in the margin and between the lines for convenient reference, or given by a master as he expounded his text to his pupils in a lecture. *Disputatio* is the discussion of the questions which arise in the exposition of difficult passages, and which prove to require fuller treatment than can be given in the course of the lecture. *Predicatio* is the highest form of exegesis, to which the others form a preliminary; it is a method of teaching by preaching. The preacher expounds the passage in a way which will show his listeners not only what it means, but how they are to apply its teaching to their own lives, bringing in other texts to illustrate and support what he says” (*The Language and Logic of the Bible* 8-9).

⁵⁴ See Evans, p. 9. H. Leith Spencer notes that medieval “moralists remarked tirelessly upon the discrepancy which they perceived between the simplicity of Christ’s preaching and his apostles’, and the mannered complexity favoured by preachers of their own time, more anxious to parade their learning than to impart essential doctrine to the laity” (228). *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.

audience. In any event, it all stemmed from the Church.⁵⁵ Much of the period's literature took on sermonistic qualities which emphasized the *predicatio* aspect of exegesis.⁵⁶ And of course, the Abraham and Isaac story in Genesis became the focal point of the dramatic literature.⁵⁷ The exegesis of the Abraham and Isaac passage lent itself easily to drama since the stage offered a medium for *predicatio* to be explored. It exemplified the quest to find balance missing from the biblical account. Medieval dramatists saw their plays as didactic representations accessible to the general public in a manner not possible through the traditional Latin mass.⁵⁸ In the end, the dramatic representations of the Abraham and Isaac passage provided the balance sought between simplicity and complexity preachers of the Middle Ages struggled to find.⁵⁹ The plays also offered guidelines in parent-child relationships. Providing the model for parent-child relations and understanding also

⁵⁵ See Robert Huntington Fletcher, "Medieval Drama: An Introduction to Middle English Plays." *A History of English Literature*. Boston: Richard G. Badger, 1916. 85-91.

⁵⁶ Such qualities, according to Sabine Volk-Birke, included "various forms of interaction between preacher and audience, a small number of formulas, clear and explicit structures at every level of the architecture of the sermons, well told narrative passages...skillfully integrated into the requirements of the sermon, and a small number of rhetorical figures that were used to great and appropriate effect" (304). *Chaucer and Medieval Preaching: Rhetoric for Listeners in Sermons and Poetry*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Gunter Narr Verlag Tübingen, 1991.

⁵⁷ Owst notes: "The expanded parts of the Abraham and Isaac Plays can be shown likewise to be a dramatization of current pulpit themes setting forth the right and dutiful relations between parent and child" (*Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* 493). According to Davidson, "the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham [is] one of the most popular of the Old Testament stories to appear on the late medieval stage" ("The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama" 28).

⁵⁸ Sinanoglou argues that many of the plays, particularly those related to the sacrifice of Isaac, "were shaped to fulfill a specific didactic function – to offer visual 'proof' of the doctrine of the Real Presence by evoking the tradition linking the Christ Child with the sacrifice of the Mass" ("The Christ Child as Sacrifice" 501). See also Craig Hardin, *English Religious Drama of the Middle Ages*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood P, 1978.

⁵⁹ Spencer states: "By preaching in the primitive manner, a man might hope to ally himself with the perennial nostalgia for the primitive Church, but his audience and other preachers were more likely to despise him as an ignoramus. Ancient homilies carried a social stigma. They had come to be thought suitable only for unsophisticated common people, whereas the new methods were a skill which a preacher needed to learn to win over educated and critical audiences. In this intensely élitist society, preaching was an instrument for maintaining the *status quo*, not merely by counselling patience to the havenots, but by reserving particular varieties of sermon for particular classes, just as the Longleat friar thought 'good communication' should belimited to the 'gentils'" (*English Preaching* 231).

explains why medieval dramatists often saw their work as didactic in nature and why the Church left them alone when tackling this and other complicated biblical passages. In essence, staging the Abraham and Isaac story provided a way for dramatists to answer very difficult questions posed by the narrative. Medieval dramatic representations of the Abraham and Isaac story attempt to “fill in the blanks” created by the short biblical account, namely the lack of pathos. These omissions invite exegesis in a manner which gives medieval dramatists the opportunity to include outside elements in their versions of the story, namely the emotion.⁶⁰

The expansion of the biblical scene in medieval drama demonstrates a culture attempting to come to an understanding of sacrifice and its role in medieval Christian theology. Medieval writers and dramatists, in an effort to make more human the often naturalized Old Testament scenes, lengthened the storyline in their poetry and plays giving the characters a more human dimension, theoretically aiding in the medieval audiences’ understanding of the biblical passage.⁶¹ Medieval society found it difficult to explain how any father could behave in such a manner as the way Abraham is portrayed

⁶⁰ Lancashire notes the commonality, including the pathetic elements, of the extant versions of the story produced for theatre: “In the seven British Abraham and Isaac plays still extant today...details of the story vary, but within an outline common to all: God’s ordering of the sacrifice, Abraham’s acceptance of God’s will, Abraham’s sorrow at what he must do, a lengthy dialogue between Abraham and Isaac, which includes Abraham’s announcement to Isaac that Isaac must be killed by his father, Isaac’s (ultimate) acceptance of God’s will (except in the Towneley play), and God’s intervention at the moment of sacrifice, to save Isaac.” Additionally, “some details, though not found in all seven, are in a majority of the plays: for example, Isaac’s extreme youth and innocence, Isaac’s initial terror when told by Abraham of the necessary sacrifice, Isaac’s request for a quick or easy death, and reference to a sword as the instrument of sacrifice. In every play, at the heart of the drama is the dialogue between Isaac and his father: a dialogue highly emotional, and emphasizing the mutual love of father and child” (“Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac” 321).

⁶¹ Davidson states that the work of the Church Fathers “was thus instrumental in bringing the Abraham and Isaac story into the consciousness of Christian Europe in the Middle Ages” (“The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama” 28). Allen J. Frantzen suggests that Abraham “emerges in medieval literature as the paradigm of faith and obedience” (445). “Tears for Abraham: The Chester Play of Abraham and Isaac and Antisacrifice in Works by Wilfred Owen, Benjamin Britten, and Derek Jarman.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 445-476.

in the Bible. The result is a proliferation of affective piety in medieval literature, particularly where children are involved.

In the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*,⁶² Abraham's language reflects the quandary of medieval society as it, and others later, struggled with the biblical presentation and the instinctive behavior of humans. Genesis presents Abraham without emotion and unwavering in his obedience to God and his directive.⁶³ The play, however, incorporates the missing element of the biblical story – Abraham's humanity.⁶⁴ Almost from the point at which Abraham receives his command, the father in him laments what he knows he must do:

I lovyd never thyng soo mych in erde,
And now I must the chyld goo kyll.
Ah, Lord God, my conseons ys strongly steryd!
And yyt, my dere Lord, I am sore aferd
To groche ony thyng ayens yowre wyll. (76-80)⁶⁵

No such words come from Abraham in the biblical text, yet one can understand why the dramatist attributes them to him in the play. On some level, conflict between killing his

⁶² John S.P. Tatlock and Robert G. Martin refer to as “the most pathetic of all the miracle plays” (4). *Representative English Plays: From the Middle Ages to the End of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Century, 1917.

⁶³ The Cycle plays differ on the age of Isaac with some emphasizing that he is a child and therefore innocent. Others however, depict him as an adolescent which better serves to allegorize him as a Christ-like figure.

⁶⁴ Braeger notes, “Abraham in these plays does offer a human, even dynamic response to God's unusual test.” Braeger goes on to state, “precisely for rendering the plays theologically even typologically valid, the dramatists of the Middle English mystery plays needed to portray Abraham as a fully human character. By showing Abraham's tremendous virtue, the plays offer to the audience a model of human charity. But at the same time, by showing Abraham's weaknesses and doubts, the plays remind the audience that God's is an infinitely superior charity. Seeing Abraham as dynamic as moving from partial to fuller love and understanding helps the audience to consider simultaneously Abraham's goodness and his human frailty” (“Typology as Contrast in the Middle English” 132, 136).

⁶⁵ The tradition of affective piety ultimately derives from the *Cur Homo Deus* of Anselm of Canterbury. Trans. Sidney Norton Deane. Ed. Richard D. McCormack. Fort Worth: RDMc, 2005.

son and obeying God's command must compete within Abraham.⁶⁶ And while no emotional variance appears in the Bible, the entire play resonates with Abraham's lamentation, made more audible by the addition of Isaac's voice to the situation, a voice virtually missing from the biblical account.

The Northampton Abraham and Isaac play, sometimes referenced as the Dublin play, follows the pattern of its Brome counterpart in enhancing the voice of Isaac. Additionally, the play, unlike its counterparts, adds to its emotional content by including Abraham's wife, Sarah, as a character in the storyline. Feeling the fear of the situation overwhelm him as he begins to understand its magnitude, Isaac asks his father, "Hauē I displesid you any thing?" (171). Once Isaac accepts his role as sacrifice, he then goes on to add, "Let neuer my moder se my clopus" (205). Such statements only augment the anxiety Abraham feels.⁶⁷

However, the omission of anxiety from the biblical version of Abraham's story does not mean that Abraham does not feel it internally. Only Abraham knows. He does manage, nevertheless, to push it aside and act totally on faith. His ability to do so separates him from all other human beings because for them, they could never achieve such a state of mind. Because of Abraham's uniqueness, medieval dramatists shifted the

⁶⁶ Tatlock and Martin state that the dramatist "holds the situation till he gets the maximum emotional response, but the tension of suspense is undeniable" (*Representative English Plays* 4). According to Braeger, "the dramatist shows Abraham in a growing state of perplexity and consternation even after Isaac has accepted his death" ("Typology as Contrast in the Middle English" 132). Robert M. Longworth states that Abraham's "outbursts of anguish regularly arise from his paternal reaction to the feelings to which Isaac gives utterance" (123-124). "Art and Exegesis in Medieval English Dramatizations of the Sacrifice of Isaac." *Educational Theatre Journal* 24 (1972): 118-124.

⁶⁷ Davidson notes, "Isaac willingly takes on the role of the sacrificial victim, but the horror of the impending sacrifice is invoked not only by his father's grief at what he feels he must do but also by the son's continued mentioning of his mother. Like none of the other plays on the subject of the sacrifice of Isaac, Sarah focuses the theatrical effect of the scene so that the conflict between obedience and morality is presented with forcefulness and even brilliance" ("The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama" 37).

focus from Abraham to Isaac.⁶⁸ To this end, medieval dramatists took license with the biblical narrative giving Isaac, who says little in the biblical version, the most important voice in the dramatic accounts.⁶⁹ Just from a logical point of view, the child status⁷⁰ of Isaac insures an emotional impact on the audience. Medieval drama made the association of childhood with sacrifice a common theme that filtered into the writings of other medieval writers. With the Abraham and Isaac biblical ordeal as the primary blueprint, the connection of child sacrifice with affective piety followed quite naturally, and many writers began exploring such connections, leading to some of the most important literature of the time.

Medieval society also found other avenues to emphasize the importance of the Abraham and Isaac story. The prefigural scheme of Isaac representing Christ, increasingly adopted by Church fathers, also appeared in works of art.⁷¹ And the Abraham and Isaac story proved to be only the most well known of Old Testament typological characters. Job, Daniel, Jonah, and Jephthah, as well as other biblical accounts, were all troublesome for medieval Christians, and all found their way into the period's drama or art. For example, the mystery play *The Pageant of the Shearman and*

⁶⁸ Longworth notes, "To satisfy the typological demands of the prefigural scheme, the analogy of Isaac's victimization with Christ's crucifixion demanded that the focus of the earlier story be the sacrificial victim, not the father or the priest" ("Art and Exegesis in Medieval English" 120). Braeger states that the emotional portrayal of Abraham "does not really conflict with the typological relationship between Abraham and God. For patristic typology invites at once a comparison and a contrast between the Old and New Testament events it links" ("Typology as Contrast in the Middle English" 132). See also V.A. Kolve's *The Play Called Corpus Christi*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1966.

⁶⁹ Braeger points out, however, that Abraham has twice the number of lines as Isaac ("Typology as Contrast in the Middle English" 131).

⁷⁰ As many have noted, the York dramatist portrays Isaac as a lad in his thirties, which from a typological perspective, makes him closer to the age of Christ at his death.

⁷¹ Regarding a thirteenth century stained glass representation of Isaac's sacrifice found in Canterbury Cathedral, Davidson notes, "Isaac is placed on bundles of wood in the shape of a cross on the altar. The positioning of the scene is also typological, for the panel is placed in a window that also illustrates not only scenes of the Passion but also other types which foreshadow specific Passion scenes" ("The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama" 32).

Tailors reworks Herod's massacre and includes the "Coventry Carol," a musical representation of the troubling biblical passage recounted in Matthew where mothers cradle their infant children singing a lullaby as the children are put to death and delivered into God's hands. Additionally, by the end of the fifteenth century, artists had painted no less than eight works⁷² depicting Herod's act of violence toward children.⁷³ The standard, however, was always the Abraham and Isaac story.⁷⁴ The Abraham and Isaac story in Genesis proved to be the most influential biblical passage to theologians and writers of the medieval era. It became the model for not only the drama of the period, but the poetry as well, and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* were no exception.

Implications for Chaucer

Chaucer's approach to children seems to parallel critics' study of children in medieval society in that very little seems to have been written about the subject. Although a number of the *Canterbury Tales* contain some mention of children, only five focus significantly on them: the Hugelyn episode in the *Monk's Tale*, the *Prioress' Tale*, the *Physician's Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Clerk's Tale*. The critics who have noticed the problem seem to agree. Because children appear sparingly in the whole of the tales, some suggest that Chaucer may not have had a thorough understanding of how children functioned within his society. They question Chaucer's attitude toward them. Thus, Jane Cowgill writes, "The striking absence of children from the majority of these

⁷² For example, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, Master of Gerona, 1275; *Slaughter of the Innocents*, Duccio de Buoninsegna, 1300; *Herod Ordering the Massacre of the Innocents*, Unknown French, 1300; *Massacre of the Innocents*, Giotto di Bondone, 1304-1306; and *Slaughter of the Innocents*, Duccio de Buoninsegna, 1308-1311.

⁷³ Art, perhaps even more than literature, best personifies not only the artist's, but also the society's preoccupation with controversial subject matter. Davidson's article also examines the history of stained glass art reproducing famous biblical themes, among which is sacrifice.

⁷⁴ According to Davidson, "historical primacy must be given to visual representations of the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in the visual arts" ("The Sacrifice of Isaac in Medieval English Drama" 32).

tales raises questions about what Chaucer and his medieval audience understood the role or status of children to be, especially in literary texts” (26).⁷⁵ However, it would be difficult to accept the notion that a writer of Chaucer’s stature would not know what he intended regarding the role of children in his poetry.⁷⁶ Cowgill’s comment more accurately represents scholars’ inability to come to terms with the apparent lack of representation of children in Chaucer’s poetry, and their violent treatment when they in fact do appear. She suggests that Chaucer’s literary children suffer so because he confines them primarily to the tales of religion or morality: “we ‘rede it naught’ whether the characters in his romances and fabliaux had children...They are absent, not because children were an unimportant component of the lives of married people in the Middle Ages, but because they are inappropriate to the literary genres of romance and fabliau” (27). The problem is compounded when one tries to classify children within a specific age group.

Categorizing these five works as tales about children becomes problematic because of the wide disparity in the terminology scholars use regarding them. For example, Chaucerians rarely consider or treat Custance in the *Man of Law’s Tale* and Griselda in the *Clerk’s Tale* as children since both participate in the traditionally adult institutions of marriage and childbirth. At first glance, Custance and Griselda cannot be readily categorized as children.⁷⁷ But in both tales, they either classify themselves as

⁷⁵ “Chaucer’s Missing Children.” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 12 (1995): 26–36.

⁷⁶ Although Chaucer addresses his *Astrolabe* to a child, his methodology - outlining the use of an important instrument in medieval society to his child in the vernacular - indicates that Chaucer did in fact understand the importance of children in his society and took them seriously.

⁷⁷ While both of these tales do feature children in the traditional sense, they are not the protagonists. Custance’s child is essentially a background character, even as he assumes the emperorship at the tale’s end. Griselda’s children are taken away by Walter and do not appear again until the climactic final scene

children or their parents treat or refer to them as children, despite their chronological age. Custance describes herself to her father as “thy wretched child Custance, / Thy yonge doghter fostred up so softe” (274–275). The Clerk says about Griselda in his tale, “And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on lofte / With everich obeisaunce and diligence / That child may doon to fadres reverence” (229–231). The same terms, however, also apply to children certainly younger than Custance and Griselda. The Monk refers to Hugelyn’s children as “litel children thre” (2410), and the narration of the Prioress refers to the little clergeon as “This litel child” (516).⁷⁸ Finally, shortly after his *effictio* of Virginia, the Physician says, “Swich thynges maken children for to be / To soone rype and boold” (67–68). Perhaps most telling, in all five of the above-mentioned tales, the narrative refers to those who suffer violence as “child” or “children.” Clearly, Chaucer’s definition of “child” and “children” encompasses a wide age range. Furthermore, the age group of these children is consistent with the findings of medieval historians regarding the age range documented by Hanawalt *et al.* Chaucer’s use of a wide range of age for his literary children is entirely consistent not only with the poetry of the time, but also with medieval religious views⁷⁹ as seen in official writings of Church fathers, and the dramatists of the period.

when they are reunited with their mother. At the very least, Custance and Griselda represent the transitional stage from adolescent to adult. Because of this, a study on Chaucer’s literary children would be incomplete without the inclusion of these two characters.

⁷⁸ It should be noted that in cases of the word “litel,” Chaucer most likely intends a tragic meaning, associating the word with children treated violently. In his Introduction, the Man of Law notes, “The crueltee of the, queene Medea, / Thy litel children hangynge by the hals, / For thy Jason, that was of love so fals!” (72–74).

⁷⁹ For example, as mentioned previously, *Cursor Mundi* refers to Isaac as a child, yet the *Book of Good Manners* states Isaac was 32 years old. The same age range is seen in the drama of the time as well.

One way of dealing with the problem is to take linear time out of the equation.⁸⁰ For those who argue that Custance and Griselda are not children, I would like to suggest that these two protagonists function in an “untime,” where chronology is not as important as what happens during that passage of time. Such a designation is consistent with viewpoints that traditionally see Custance and Griselda as saintly figures. Hagiographic literature in general, is famous for “collapsing” linear time which helps to explain the behavior of these two women. In both tales, they operate outside the bounds of given temporal norms in situations they face and how they respond to those situations. While it is true that Custance and Griselda are much older than the Christ child portrayed in the “Infancy” poem (or the children of the other tales), the idea is the same.⁸¹ Additionally, if Isaac can be classified a child at the age of thirty-two, Custance and Griselda certainly can be classified as such.⁸² With Custance and Griselda free from the restriction of age, the omnipotence of God receives its proper due. In Chaucer, both tales serve primarily to demonstrate the power of God through the sacrifice of these main characters. Neither tale functions along an established biblical or social history, which allows the viewing of both Custance and Griselda as children. Adjusting the accepted notion of “child” or “children” enables one to classify Custance with the little clergeon, and to place Griselda in the same group as Virginia or Hugelyn’s children, thereby creating an association for

⁸⁰ Couch notes that the Christ-child: “wreaks havoc in an “untime,” a time outside orthodox, biblical history, a time when the omnipotent power of God is given free rein to break laws of morality and nature. In this poem, that time-off-the-record is equated with the time of childhood. “Infancy” appropriates a particular literary trope of childhood—one that inscribes a marginal, undefined space not limited by a character’s social or historical identity—to experiment narratively with the nature of God’s power” (“Misbehaving God” 31).

⁸¹ Couch states that Christ “as a child lingers in a rhetorical space free from official identity” (*Ibid* 36).

⁸² As to the casting of Isaac in an Abraham and Isaac play, Theodore MacLean Switz states, “Isaac [is a] happy-go-lucky boy, probably about twelve years of age (although he may be played by any young actor between eight and sixteen” (5). *Great Christian Plays*. Ed. Theodore MacLean Switz and Robert A. Johnston. Greenwich, CT: Seabury P, 1956.

all five tales which otherwise prove difficult to link. Creating a wide scope in terms of their classification as children allows for a more cohesive connection among the tales than just the violent treatment they face. In the end, thanks to the wide categorization of the term “child” or “children,” these five tales present a progression of childhood from the pre-adolescence of Hugelyn’s children and the little clergeon, to the adolescence of Virginia, to the late adolescence or pre-adult stage of Custance and Griselda.⁸³ All face varying degrees or manifestations of sacrificial violence. Additionally, each tale illustrates the development of particular attitudes regarding the violence or hostile treatment they encounter entirely consistent with the religious thinking of the time.

Each tale also offers a specific reaction by the children to their circumstance, a reaction that grows progressively more sophisticated as the children become older, and one dictated by their violent treatment and sacrificial status. First, the Hugelyn episode in the *Monk’s Tale* clearly specifies the age of Hugelyn’s youngest child entrapped with him in prison: “His yonge sone, that thre yer was of age” (543). After his death, the remaining children demonstrate an acute awareness of their roles as sacrificial victims: “ete the flessh upon us two. / Oure flessh thou yaf us, take our flessh us fro / And ete ynogh” (562-564). In the *Prioress’ Tale*, the little clergeon, only seven years of age, must explain his situation *post mortem*, to those who do not understand: “But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde, / Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde, / And for the worship of his mooder deere, / Yet may I synge *O Alma* loude and cleere” (200-203). Virginia,

⁸³ In addition to being a progression of age and maturity, each of Chaucer’s tales about children read like a template on gender. They reveal medieval attitudes about children from the perspective of gender. For example, the Hugelyn episode in the *Monk’s Tale* and the *Physician’s Tale* represent the perspective of the father. The *Man of Law’s Tale* and the *Clerk’s Tale* represent primarily the motherly perspective. The *Prioress’ Tale*, despite its narrator, is told from the supernatural perspective, an “agenderal” approach where gender is not central to the actions of the characters.

in the *Physician's Tale*, having entered the threshold of pure adolescence and beauty, comforts her father about the seemingly impossible decision he must enact: ““Blissed be God that I shal dye a mayde, / Yif me my deeth er that I have a shame. / Dooth with youre childe youre wyl, a Goddes name!”” (248-250). Custance, in the *Man of Law's Tale*, first appears when she is about the same age as Virginia, but by tale's end she has emerged from adolescence to young adulthood, and her maturity reflects her physical growth and understanding of the price she has paid: ““Now goode fader .../ Sende me namoore unto noon heathenesse”” (1111-1112). Griselda, the most mature of Chaucer's literary children, stands on the verge of adulthood. Consequently, her attitudes to her predicament prove the most mature: ““One thyng biseke I yow, and warne also / That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge / This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo”” (1037-1039). Combining the acceptance of these characters as children with the medieval mindset toward spirituality – *imitatio Christi* – indicates that the children who suffer the violence resemble sacrificial victims, which in turn suggests that like his biblical sources, Chaucer intends a positive reading of his children's tales. Furthermore, Chaucer's children's tales read like biblical narrative.⁸⁴ The application to Chaucer, then, is that the violence in these tales must occur in order to achieve a greater and unifying whole. Such an attitude consistently emerges in medieval renderings of the Abraham and Isaac story and in Church fathers' interpretations of the story. And while most instances of the literary representations of the child as sacrifice theme appear in medieval drama, Chaucer's use

⁸⁴ Hermann Gunkel notes about biblical narrative, “We see that the narrative always opens in such a way that one recognizes that something new is about to begin; and it closes at the point where the complication that has arisen is happily resolved: no one can ask, what followed?...the unity of the separate legends is shown in the fact that they are in each case filled with a single harmonious sentiment. Thus, in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, emotion is predominant” (44). *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*. Trans. W. H. Carruth. New York: Schocken, 1964.

of the theme is clearly evident in these tales to the point that one can classify these five stories as variations on the Abraham and Isaac theme. The representations are the same in that his use of this sacrificial theme follows a pattern in the Middle Ages where ultimately a child's sacrifice is used to demonstrate the power of God.

Each of these tales reveals the power of God at work through the violent situations the children face. In each case, when the parent seemingly cannot solve the predicament, God's power either directly or indirectly comes into play to demonstrate the necessity of the sacrifice, an issue that often plagued medieval audiences.⁸⁵ Additionally, the popularity of the drama, a popularity Chaucer no doubt noticed, demonstrates the effectiveness of telling a story involving children. The children connected easily to biblical themes important to medieval culture. More importantly, children became the vehicle for the channeling of emotion, allowing for didactic and typological exegesis.⁸⁶ From the church service sprang the medieval drama and the emotional impact created by these biblical stories. Chaucer takes it to the next level with his tales, incorporating the authoritarian status often associated with men of God, into the personalities of his narrators. In one example, in his Prologue, the Pardoner states:

For whan I dar noon oother weyes debate,
Thanne wol I styngre hym with my tonge smerte
In prechyng, so that he shal nat asterte
Hath trespassed to my bretheren or to me.

⁸⁵ Even the *Physician's Tale*, as evidenced by the comments of Virginia, contains Christian overtones despite the pagan setting of the story.

⁸⁶ Fletcher notes why such literature impacted its audience in the extreme: "Emotions easily aroused to fever heat. Of the Latin words of the service they understood nothing; and of the Bible story they had only a very general impression. It was necessary, therefore, that the service should be given a strongly spectacular and emotional character, and to this end no effort was spared" ("Medieval Drama" 85-86).

For though I telle noight his propre name,
Men shal well knowe that it is the same,
By signes, and by othere circumstances. (412-419)

The Pardoner, speaking from a position of authority, alludes to the controversy surrounding preaching from the pulpit, a controversy alive during Chaucer's time,⁸⁷ and Chaucer no doubt understood this controversy for it filters into his poetry, particularly the tales regarding children.⁸⁸ The tales of religion and morality, particularly the *Prioress' Tale*, read like a sermon given by each of the narrators.⁸⁹ Indeed, in a manner consistent with medieval preaching, each of the narrators passes judgment on the events described, and while some are more successful than others, each speaks from a position of authority, as if given a special dispensation from God to do so.⁹⁰

Of course, reading these particular tales as sermons opens them up to criticism from a number of viewpoints. First, such a reading puts the narrators in the role of

⁸⁷ Nicole R. Rice adds, "The authority to preach, a public form of 'religious interpretation' and always a contested element of clerical discipline, had rarely been more controversial than during the last decades of the fourteenth century" (105). *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2008. According to Spencer: "There may have been other preachers like Mirk, and the type may well have seemed highly suspect among the educated court circles in which Chaucer moved, where a more austere, evangelical piety seems to have prevailed (a piety, which it may be said again, was entirely reconcilable with orthodoxy). Thus the pilgrims' reaction to the *Tale* plausibly enacts, at least in part, the kind of hostile response by the fastidiosi to ancient sermons which Basevorn and Gascoigne described" (*English Preaching* 115).

⁸⁸ According to Owst, "we need not look far beyond the English pulpit and its records to account for the realism which blossoms so freely in Langland and Chaucer" (*Preaching in Medieval England* 40). In an interesting note, Owst writes, "The truth of the matter is that scholars for so long have been poking their noses into every conceivable foreign source-book and every kind of domestic record in their endeavour to throw fresh light upon the poet that they have entirely overlooked this modest field of the sermons which lies as it were at their very feet" (*Ibid* 230).

⁸⁹ For more on Chaucer's sermonistic qualities, see C.O. Chapman, "Chaucer on Preachers and Preaching." *PMLA* 44 (1929): 178-185; A.L. Kellogg and L.A. Haselmayer, "Chaucer's Satire of the Pardoner." *PMLA* 66 (1951): 251-277; S. Wenzel, "Chaucer and the Language of Contemporary Preaching." *Speculum* 73 (1976): 138-161.

⁹⁰ Owst validates the authenticity of Chaucer's portrayals to actual preaching and sermonizing. Referencing the trouble of preaching from the pulpit often encountered in medieval society, he states, "Our English poet had obviously seen the practice at work in his day" (187). *Preaching in Medieval England: An Introduction to Sermon Manuscripts of the Period c.1350-1450*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1965.

preacher, resulting in the individual tales being read as products of those who tell them.⁹¹ More to the point, critics who adopt this strategy (often referred to as the “dramatic principle”) as a way of looking at these tales tend to generalize them idiosyncratically according to some eccentric trait of the narrator generally found in satire and mentioned in their description in the *General Prologue*. The result, of course, is a distancing of Chaucer from the tales he wrote which, in some ways, exonerates him from any controversy contained in the tale. For example, the dramatic principle often serves as a way to protect Chaucer from those who would accuse him of the anti-Semitism found in the *Prioress’ Tale*. Another, different criticism is that the dramatic principle tends to ignore the heavily conventional nature of these tales.⁹² Perhaps critics can lessen their apathy to a dramatic reading of the *Tales* if they will remember that the tales function in an oral capacity, like a sermon, in addition to being a piece of written poetry. The orality of the tales alone *invites* a dramatic reading.⁹³ Additionally, the public nature of these tales – a narrator reciting a story in front of a very diverse group – along with the subject

⁹¹ G.L. Kittredge states, “The Pilgrims do not exist for the sake of the stories, but *vice versa*. Structurally regarded, the stories are merely long speeches expressing, directly or indirectly, the characters of several persons” (155). *Chaucer and His Poetry*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1915.

⁹² Derek Pearsall nicely sums up the critics disdain for this approach: “The ‘dramatic principle’ in the *Canterbury Tales* has been much overworked” (207). *Old English and Middle English Poetry*. London: Routledge, 1977.

⁹³ David A. Lawton points out, that “Middle English poetry, whether or not it was composed for actual public recitation, sees itself essentially as performance. If only for the private reader, the conditions of public performance are enacted in the poem...the relation between reader and writer occupies a space that is oral as well as textual” (1, 2). *Chaucer’s Narrators*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985. Lee Patterson notes the legitimacy and historicity of such an ideal: “Ellesmere accomplished this *ordinatio* both by its careful rubrics, which identify each element of the text according to its speaker, and by its illuminations: in the margin next to each *Tale* is a portrait of the pilgrim as described in the *General Prologue*. At the beginning of each *Tale*, then, the reader is not only reminded that it is to be told by someone other than the poet – who thus functions as the compiler of the words of his authors, the pilgrims – but is referred back to that pilgrim’s description in the *General Prologue*. A ‘dramatic reading’ of the *Canterbury Tales*, which understands each *Tale* primarily in terms of its teller, can certainly permit extravagances, as recent critics have complained. But it is not by definition anachronistic, and its legitimacy should be assessed in each individual case” (44-45). *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1991.

matter of these tales, qualifies them as homiletic in nature. The narrators, then, preach a homily based on popular medieval religious themes, essentially rendering Chaucer the director or orchestrator, or to continue the religious analogy, the pope.⁹⁴ Viewing the narrators as preachers and seeing the stories they tell as homiletic representations of biblical themes produces one constant with the medieval drama dealing with Abraham and Isaac: the emotion. In fact, there was a proliferation of affective piety in the period's literature derived from biblical exegesis and it resonates strongly in these five tales.

These tales are among the most overtly emotional in the entirety of the *Canterbury Tales*. In each instance, the child or children create the pathos made manifest in the attitudes of the parents that are necessary to make the overall point. This pathos stems almost in its entirety from the Abraham and Isaac story as seen in the Middle Ages, particularly in the historicity attached to the story and how it serves as a model for parent-child relationships.⁹⁵ Such relationships demonstrate the power and uniqueness of God, a theme found in all five of these tales thanks to Chaucer's use of affective piety, and storytelling that makes these tales overtly dramatic.

Furthermore, each of Chaucer's children's tales contains one powerful, unifying facet: the love of those parents toward their children, particularly in instances when the

⁹⁴ Lawton notes, "In the case of a...sermon, a written text is presumed to memorialise an authentic original performance. With a poem the first performance may be merely an imaginary event embedded in the poem together with an imaginary audience. In legal or homiletic contexts where the speaker and author are one, a direct address to the audience is generally made more or less *in propria persona*, and whatever strangeness may infect the speaking voice will come from the conventions of rhetoric employed. Drama, in which the speaker is always a fully developed *persona*, still resembles such contexts more than poetry in one important respect: the speaker is always physically present in view of the audience" (*Chaucer's Narrators* 9).

⁹⁵ Switz notes, "Abraham and Isaac are not ancient historical figures remote from our own experiences; they are living representations of the tender relationship of faith and trust that always exists between good parents and good children and that must grow out of the faith relationship with God" (*Great Christian Plays* 5).

child suffers violently.⁹⁶ Chaucer demonstrates such attitudes in the *Clerk's Tale* with the responses given by Griselda when Walter initially takes her children away and then again later, when the children return. The Hugelyn episode in the *Monk's Tale*, the *Physician's Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Prioress' Tale* all emphasize parental love and such reactions validate Hanawalt's research regarding parent-child sentiment in the Middle Ages. Although the society represented in the tales apparently harbors negative attitudes toward children, the affection and loyalty of the parents reveal the reality.⁹⁷ The parents' strong affection indicates that Chaucer felt children to be important despite their apparent relative absence from his poetry. At the very least, he saw them as an appendage to an adult. If one considers their representation based on the type of the tale in which they appear, it becomes clear that Chaucer has adequately represented them in the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*. And while not being drama in the strictest sense, the tales certainly create the same response as their medieval dramatic counterparts, and they end up being didactic representations of religious ideas considered important to Chaucer and to medieval society in general.

Chaucer clearly understood the effect his tales would have upon his readers. In addition to the sermonistic qualities of each of these tales, Chaucer writes his poetry in a manner consistent with artistic representations of these themes. The artistic representations prove important in that the artist's aim was to go beyond the logic of the everyday sermon and imbibe the portrayal with as much reality as possible, reality only

⁹⁶ This behavior, of course, counters the seemingly unexplainable behavior of Abraham during his ordeal regarding Isaac's sacrifice. The dramatic rendering of these tales, however, explains their overt emotional behavior or expression of love.

⁹⁷ Chaucer does not seem interested in depicting children apart from their relationship to one or both parents (although typically one other-sex parent).

achievable through overtly dramatic renderings, which in turn creates the sought after emotion.⁹⁸ Additionally, with respect to moral law, it is important to remember that none of Chaucer's characters in these tales is free of fault. In fact, their vices are precisely the elements that make their connection to their biblical counterparts more authentic.⁹⁹ Because of the interaction of vice with virtue, it becomes even more important that Chaucer's stories be explicated in a manner that is consistent with the period in which they are written.

St. Gregory's methodology for the exegesis of Scripture not only offers a well-rounded and logical approach to the interpretation of Old Testament stories like Abraham and Isaac, it also offers a valid way of interpreting the writings of medieval poets who ostensibly knew Gregory's technique and took it to heart. Gregory's methodology proves even more important when one considers that except for the *Prioress' Tale*, none of Chaucer's tales regarding child sacrifice deals overtly with the biblical exegesis that helps to explain the tale's intention. Religious themes found in the tales result from the circumstances faced by these children or from the interpretation of the tales by their narrator or critic. If the goal is a complete and total understanding of the tale and what

⁹⁸ Elbert Russell notes the importance of such representations: "It is not only the mission of art to make truth *look* true but also to give it the *feel* of reality and it is of more importance in religion to make the truth *feel* true than to make it *look* true. Religion must move the will, as the mere apprehension of fact and the assent of the reason can never move it. Abstract statements of religious truth, such as creeds and catechisms are relatively sterile. Religious truth must have the power which art gives to stir the imagination and emotions before it becomes spiritually effective. It is the function of religious art, particularly of the story, lyric, and drama, to create imaginary worlds in which God rules as He does in the world of outward experience, where the moral law is valid and where good and evil choices are seen to work themselves out to the inevitable destiny" (3). Foreword. *Old Testament Dramas*. By H.E. Spence and A.T. West. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1936.

⁹⁹ Gunkel notes the importance of remembering that patriarchs of the Old Testament are not saints: "the very Abraham who thrust his son Ishmael into the wilderness, who does not hesitate to turn Sarah over to the foreign king and even to accept presents for her, we are asked to regard as the same who is the lofty model of faith for all ages!" (*The Legends of Genesis* 114).

Chaucer intended, such an approach such as St. Gregory's should be applied. While it is true that some of Chaucer's tales lend themselves more readily than others to Gregory's hermeneutic, such interpretation ultimately is possible for all the tales of religion and morality.

While the tales themselves are not actual historical events, Chaucer's interpretation of children and attitudes regarding them prove they are historically grounded.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, religious themes and ideas conveyed by the tales are also historically precise. In fact, Chaucer's religious and moral tales reflect the medieval mindset toward biblical sacrifice in that the children who suffer violence represent "paragons of virtue" when viewed allegorically. Custance and Griselda, in particular, tend to be viewed allegorically since it proves the most comfortable hermeneutic to explain their behavior. Yet Hugelyn's children, Virginia, and the Prioress' little clergeon all wore the cape of allegory quite comfortably. As Gregory suggests in his letter, total understanding of literature is arrived through multiple lenses of interpretation: "These being handled with the alternate application of various methods, we serve up the viands of discourse in such sort as to prevent all disgust in the reader" (7). This study, then, examines Chaucer's tales of religion and morality from a perspective that suggests Chaucer wrote in an historically accurate manner that is entirely consistent with the period, and with the attitudes of his society in mind, particularly regarding the Abraham and Isaac story.

¹⁰⁰ Some feel Chaucer based the murder of the little clergeon in the *Prioress' Tale* on the murder of St. Hugh of Lincoln in 1255. See Alban Butler, *Lives of the Saints*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical P, 1996. 3:421-422. Additionally, Dante's Ugolino, on whom Chaucer based Hugelyn, was imprisoned in 1288. See Piero Boitani, "The Monk's Tale: Dante and Boccaccio." *Medium Ævum* 55 (1972): 50-69; Frances A. Yates, "Transformations of Dante's Ugolino." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 14 (1951): 92ff.

Gregory's methodology, however, really serves as a means to an end. After all, his goal was the interpretation of Scripture in a manner that ultimately brings glory to God. What it does not explain, however, is the inherent pathos found in these passages, particularly the Abraham and Isaac story, when they are viewed literally. The conflict is easily dispensed with in favor of a desired ending. This elimination of emotional aspects of the story also explains the conflict between simplicity and complexity in preaching discussed by Spencer. Without the emotion, a story is much easier to explain and seemingly much less complex. To aid in and even validate Gregory's hermeneutic as a means of interpreting these tales, then, it becomes useful to examine the characters using a modern theoretical approach. Kierkegaard, among others, has stated that the emotional aspect of the Abraham and Isaac story is inherently present. The same is true with Chaucer's children's tales; the pathos cannot be dispensed with if the complete meaning of the story is to be made clear. Another problem with Gregory's hermeneutic is that it fails to explain why the glory of God must be brought about through the sacrifice of children. It would seem that demonstrating God's reverence is possible in a plethora of ways the least of which is the sacrifice of a child. Specifically, theory allows the reader to gain insight into a character's thinking, something not possible with traditional readings of the Abraham and Isaac passage, but something that is necessary since Chaucer obviously based much of the content of these tales on the biblical story. Modern theory provides models for seeing the emotional aspect, and through this pathos demonstrates the validity of the questions raised in the drama of medieval society and its attempt to understand the questions the biblical passage poses. This theory counterbalances the "simple" approaches to exegesis demonstrated by Christ and early

Church fathers and the complex approach to sermons practiced by medieval preachers and writers who tried to incorporate the emotional aspect with the faith issue.

The primary theorists used in this study, Kierkegaard, Derrida, Rubin, Girard, and Glenn, are not Chaucerians or medievalists, and they did not write with the aim of helping the exegete understand the violence children face in the *Canterbury Tales*. Yet their theories are useful in explaining features of Chaucer's narratives, in particular why children suffer violently. Additionally, the theory accounts for all interpretative approaches to the tales. Moreover, their theory offers a response that is important to Chaucer but relatively absent in the Church fathers. It is not that the children *must* suffer, so much as that Chaucer persistently presents children either suffering or on the verge of suffering, a characteristic very much in line with the Abraham and Isaac story.

Ultimately, then, Chaucer presents five stories characteristic of medieval interpretations of the Abraham and Isaac story. All take on aspects of the story from either the biblical or the medieval dramatic perspective. The Hugelyn episode of the *Monk's Tale* is interesting because it presents its characters from both positions: the children are presented as very young versions of the dramatic Isaac, while Hugelyn himself is a representation of the biblical Abraham. Like the dramatic Isaac, the children are highly emotional and unclear as to the necessity of their treatment. Furthermore, while not initially understanding their father's strange, stoic behavior, they ultimately accept it and their own predicament, offering themselves, in the end, as a sacrifice. Despite the emotional pleas that the Monk attributes to Hugelyn, his behavior clearly indicates a perspective in line with the biblical Abraham. Hugelyn remains, for the most part, silent, even in the face of the distress and anguish pathetically displayed by his

children. He will not answer their questions and his behavior proves to be most unsettling given his own status as a father. His children suffer because of his actions yet he offers them no reassurance or comfort.

The *Prioress' Tale* presents its sacrificial figure, the little clergeon, as a slightly older version of the dramatic Isaac figure than what is seen in Hugelyn's story. Because the Prioress' story is highly charged with affective piety, the little clergeon, in the end, emerges as a revered and respected sacrifice. He is exalted in a way that would not have been possible had he lived. Like the medieval dramatic Isaac, he does not fully understand the circumstances around him, but that lack of understanding only drives him to act. While his murder is horrific, the little clergeon himself understands the result: salvation of the primary figures involved, including his own mother and the Abbot. Because his death results in the salvation of those closely involved, the little clergeon, like medieval exegesis of Isaac suggests, becomes an allegorical representation of Christ.

It is with the *Physician's Tale* that Chaucer begins a transition of sorts. The sacrificial figure, Virginia, is markedly older than the children in the previous stories. While the story is set in the era before Christianity, it nonetheless retains a Christian feel. Virginia herself even makes an allusion to a biblical tragedy similar to her own. As an adolescent, Virginia demonstrates an awareness and understanding of her impending death. Her use of emotion, however, is more like the dramatic Isaac in that she questions why she must die. It is the first time in these tales that the sacrificial figure uses emotion in this manner. But rather than making her a figure of pity, her pathos, like that surrounding the little clergeon in the *Prioress' Tale*, serves to enhance her character. But unlike Hugelyn's children and the little clergeon, who are pitied as much as they are

revered, there is no sense of pity associated with Virginia, particularly after her father has made his decision as to the course of action. Like the children in the other tales, she accepts her death, and like Isaac, she emerges triumphant. Another important element in the story is that this is the first of the tales of religion and morality where gender affects the behavior of the other characters. Virginia's female status determines the decisions of Apius, Virginius, and indeed, the entire town. The tale demonstrates how gender helps to enhance the emotional aspect of the sacrificial figure, making her a more revered character by tale's end.

The *Man of Law's Tale* is the first tale that presents a character who transitions from the medieval dramatic Isaac figure to the biblical Abraham in the course of her adventures. Early in the tale, Custance faces her parents' decision to make her marry a foreigner, the Sultan of Syria. Everything about the impending marriage is wrong to Custance. Like the medieval dramatic Isaac, she is highly emotional and questions the decisions of her father. Typically, as is the case with the biblical Abraham, the Emperor responds to his daughter's pleas essentially with no response. But Custance is a different character because her response to crises changes with each one she faces. In a covert way, her behavior is shaped by the female figures involved, primarily the Sowdanesse and Donegild, both duplicitous figures intent on destroying the patriarchal system that prevents them from achieving their goals. Both these women unknowingly demonstrate to Custance that it is possible to achieve victory through subversion, even if it is a temporary victory in their case. But unlike these evil figures, Custance holds no malice and has no overt agenda she seeks to achieve. Instead, she is saint-like in her behavior. Every trial increases her faith, a trait mostly characterized by silence. As her suffering

grows, so does her faith, and so does her use of silence. After the birth of her child, Custance essentially becomes the biblical version of Abraham. She behaves in a calculated manner determined to resist the dictates of the male authority surrounding her. Like the biblical Abraham, her silence is accompanied by a lack of emotion, particularly in the face of the negative or the seemingly impossible. And like him, because of her steadfast faith, God protects her and rewards her. Silence for her, actually becomes a tool that enables her to emerge at the end of her ordeals, triumphant and in control.

With the story of Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, Chaucer brings his portrayal of children to completion. She is the oldest of the sacrificial figures in the tales of religion and morality and her age is mostly responsible for her very calculated and quite unbelievable behavior. Griselda is the only child figure to mirror strictly the biblical Abraham. Such a view has the effect of casting Walter in the role of God since like God does with Abraham, Walter puts her through seemingly impossible circumstances, not just once, but repeatedly. But unlike God, Walter is dishonest with Griselda as she is put through her tests. Like Abraham, however, Griselda's response is characterized by two things: silence and the lack of emotion, even in the face of the impossible. And like God does with Abraham, Walter rewards Griselda at the end of her ordeal. Only then, does the Griselda regain the humanity her trials took away from her. She is free, in the end, to express her emotion succinctly and directly.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROAD TO EDEN: HUGELYN'S RESIGNATION AND THE ABSURD

While St. Gregory's approach to the exegesis of Old Testament texts involved reading from multiple perspectives that medieval Christians took seriously, his methodology did little to explain those texts, particularly the Abraham and Isaac story, on the most basic, literal level. His approach to the exegesis of the passage essentially ignored the literal, favoring instead typological, allegorical, and didactic interpretations. Using one of these methodologies in essence "saved" Church fathers from having to answer what, until centuries later, was a seemingly unanswerable question: given the enormity of God's request for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, how can Abraham's silence be explained on a literal level? Even if one accepts the story on complete faith, that faith falls far short of what Abraham exhibited that day on Mount Moriah. And while St. Gregory's hermeneutics demonstrate an attempt to come to a thorough understanding of the passage, Abraham's behavior in this most trying circumstance continued to perplex exegetes for centuries until medieval writers began to explore those aspects of the story that traditional exegesis omitted. Dramatists in particular seized upon Abraham's lack of emotion. In fact, the Abraham and Isaac story became highly influential in Chaucer's day as dramatists wrote play after play and artwork surrounding the subject proliferated. Chaucer, as a poet interested in medieval religious goings-on could not help but notice the attention the biblical story as his tales on religion and morality indicate.

Of the tales on religion and morality, the *Monk's Tale* seemingly has the least in common with the Abraham and Isaac theme since the entirety of the tale is a series of exempla meant to convey the Monk's belief in and understanding of the role of Lady Fortune in the lives of sometimes less-than-desirable people. The names are familiar, as are their tragic stories, and the Monk himself says, "I have an hundred in my celle" (1972).¹ Most critics agree that there is little literary worth to the *Monk's Tale*, and the commentary has been at times, quite callous.² Until the Knight interrupts him,³ the Monk⁴ appears as if he could go on telling such tragedy *ad infinitum* (50), as Piero Boitani suggests.⁵ There is no denying that the Monk's storytelling leaves much to be

¹ All quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* come from *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

² L.O. Aranye Fradenburg notes that the "Monk's Tale does not in fact get as much critical attention as it should, even in studies whose particular concerns would seem to make it relevant" (144). *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2002. Yet readers (and listeners) often have trouble "digesting" the constant moralization of the Monk. Richard Neuse acknowledges such: "...at least part of the reason for the low estimate of the *Monk's Tale* in Chaucer criticism, which has rarely even taken the tale seriously, is that, like its teller, it flaunts its disregard for tradition and the 'rules' to which a tale told by a religious should conform. The tradition, at least as far as Chaucer scholarship is concerned, has meant a rather narrow band of religious and intellectual orthodoxy beyond which a medieval text was not supposed to stray" (142). "Chaucerian Intertextuality: The *Monk's Tale* and the *Inferno*." *Chaucer's Dante: Allegory and Epic Theater in the Canterbury Tales*. Los Angeles: U California P, 1991. 140-200. See also R.K. Root, who affixes a number of harsh adjectives in his assessment referring to the tale as "intolerable," calling it an "unspeakable monotony" with "dry unspeakable character" (207-208). *The Poetry of Chaucer*. New York: Riverside P, 1906. Scott Norsworthy says of the Monk's narrative ability, "Though the clearer must not sadden or annoy the brothers, nothing in the Rule prevents him from boring them" (321). "Hard Lords and Bad Food Service in the *Monk's Tale*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001): 313-333.

³ "Hoo!...good sire, namoore of this! / That ye han seyde is right ynough, ywis, And muchel moore; for litel hevynesse / Is right ynough to much folk, I gesse" (2767-2770). Of the Knight's judgmental decree, R.E. Kaske argues that "the interruption itself is essentially a device for cutting short a tale whose very nature forbids much narrative development, and so providing a climax of sorts to a story that has promised none" (249). "The Knight's Interruption of the *Monk's Tale*." *ELH* 24 (1957): 249-268.

⁴ For more on the Monk's persona, see Robert M. Lumiansky, *Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in The Canterbury Tales*. Austin: U Texas P, 1955. 97-101; Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1973. 17-37.

⁵ "The Monk's Tale: Dante and Boccaccio." *Medium Ævum* 55 (1972): 50-69.

desired.⁶ He speaks from a desire to elicit understanding from his fellow travelers on a topic he feels authorized to discuss.⁷ With a large supply of emotion in hand, the Monk in effect preaches on the role of fortune during the telling of his tale much the way a medieval preacher would discuss Scripture from a pulpit in front of a large crowd.⁸ Theodore Spencer shrewdly notes, “in Chaucer’s time it is chiefly to religion that we must turn if we are to define the unconscious habits of feeling which lie behind his work” (299).⁹ And if the Monk is indeed preaching, the Hugelyn episode of the tale particularly seems distant from any biblical story, especially Abraham and Isaac. After all, Hugelyn sits imprisoned, a condemned criminal, while Abraham stands as the paramount example of faith to the major religions of the world. Of course, Chaucer reworks the already famous story included in Cantos 32 and 33 in Dante’s *Inferno*. With Dante, however, there is less confusion in the literary world as to the intent of his story. Ugolino, while in

⁶ For Ann W. Astell, the *Monk’s Tale* “consists of an aggregate of tales, unlinked and atomistic” and functions as “mere substance without style; content without form; the raw, undeveloped *materia* of art” (191). *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1996. Donald Fry writes, “the tale itself seems to be an artistic failure, dreary, formless” (355). “The Ending of the *Monk’s Tale*.” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 71 (1972): 355-368. For other harsh treatments of the *Monk’s Tale*, see Renate Haas, “Chaucer’s *Monk’s Tale*: An Ingenious Criticism of Early Humanist Conceptions of Tragedy.” *Humanistica Lovaniensa* 36 (1987): 44-70; Douglas J. Wurtele, “Chaucer’s Monk: An Errant Exegete.” *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1 (1987): 192-209. One should note, however, that the Monk’s narrative ability (or lack thereof) rather than the subject matter of his tale creates the sense of frustration associated with both the pilgrims’ and the critics’ inability to make sense of its entirety.

⁷ The emphasis on fortune in medieval literature is in large part due to Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which profoundly influenced Chaucer. For example, Chaucer’s tragic love poem, *Troilus and Criseyde* presents the dual nature of Fortune. Pandarus continually extols Fortune’s virtues to Troilus while the events themselves, which end in Troilus’ demise, indicate Fortune to be something other than virtuous. See Book 1:841ff. See also Edward M. Socola, “Chaucer’s Development of Fortune in the ‘Monk’s Tale.’” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 49 (1950): 159-171; Douglas L. Lepley, “The Monk’s Boethian Tale.” *The Chaucer Review* 12 (1978): 162-170; Marilyn Corrie, “Fortune and the Sinner: Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*.” *Literature Compass* 5 (2008): 207-219; H. Patch, *The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Philosophy and Literature*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010.

⁸ According to H. Leith Spencer, Monks, on festival days, would often “preach to a lay congregation...Preaching solemn sermons in cathedrals” (61). *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993.

⁹ “The Story of Ugolino in Dante and Chaucer.” *Speculum* 9 (1934): 295-301.

hell, is obsessed with exacting revenge on Ruggieri, his betrayer, the man responsible for his imprisonment. He makes clear to Dante his emotional state, and his entire narrative resonates with pathos directed not only toward his unjustly imprisoned children, but also to himself. In the case of Chaucer, his motivation for reworking this well-known tale of sacrifice and revenge is less clear. He deliberately omits certain key scenes in the Dante version, and freely incorporates other features in his rewrite. The result is a retelling that is often interpreted as less majestic than the original. Chaucer creates a central character who, like himself in regard to this tale, is difficult to perceive. Because of the difficulty in understanding his behavior, Hugelyn resembles Abraham as depicted in the Bible while his children, the sacrificial victims, are consistent with renderings of Isaac in medieval drama. Chaucer's handling of the account of Hugelyn is also a reflection of medieval society's difficulty in understanding the Abraham and Isaac sacrifice passage. Whether the attention paid to Chaucer's version of Hugelyn's story stems from its association with Dante or because the motivations of the poet prove elusive, it stands apart from the collection of narratives in the *Monk's Tale* and deserves more analysis, particularly concerning the story's connection to the Abraham and Isaac story.¹⁰

The chief difference between Chaucer and Dante¹¹ is the narration of the pathetic element. While Dante's version resonates with emotion from all the characters involved,

¹⁰ See Howard H. Schless, *Chaucer and Dante: A Reevaluation*. Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1984.

¹¹ Daniel Pinti notes, "Scholarship on the relationship between Chaucer and Dante...has generally proceeded on the tacit assumption that, in contrast with Italian readers, the English poet neither encountered nor desired any such explication, and further, that Chaucer – despite what we know about his reading of Boethius, Virgil, and the Vulgate – read Dante in an unmediated way" (277). "The *Comedy* of the *Monk's Tale*: Chaucer's Hugelyn and Early Commentary on Dante's Ugolino." *Comparative Literature Studies* 37 (2000): 277-297. For more on the connections between Chaucer and Dante, see also Schless, "Transformations: Chaucer's Use of Italian." *Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. D.S. Brewer. Athens, OH: U Ohio P, 1975; R.A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word: Money, Images, and Reference in Late Medieval Poetry*. Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1983; Tim William Machan, *Techniques of Translation:*

Ugolino, his children, even Dante, Chaucer's draws a distinct emotional line. The pathos in Hugelyn's story comes from two sources: the children and the Monk. Hugelyn, however, exhibits a strange lack of emotion entirely inconsistent with the predicament of which he is a part. Pathos is also the major difference between the biblical and medieval accounts of the Abraham and Isaac story. Traditional exegesis of Abraham and Isaac fails to explain the missing emotional element, which medieval drama so vividly portrays. Kierkegaard, however, provides a theory that explains the lack of the biblical Abraham's emotion given his son's impending sacrifice, distinguishing between the realm of emotion – the universal – and the realm of faith, the absurd.¹² That theory, when applied to Chaucer's Hugelyn, demonstrates how he gradually undergoes a metamorphosis from a character firmly situated in a realm dominated by pathos, to one entrenched, at story's end, in a realm where the individual operates totally on faith and no form for emotional outlet exists. Kierkegaard's theory actually allows for an understanding of Chaucer's story comparable to that of Dante's.

Regarding Abraham and Isaac, Kierkegaard repeatedly mentions his struggle with the idea that a father, one as devoted¹³ to his son as Abraham is, could follow through, without a word of question or protest, on God's command to sacrifice that son. Except for his response to a brief inquiry from Isaac at the time of sacrifice,¹⁴ Abraham talks

Chaucer's Boece. Norman, OK: Pilgrim, 1985; Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads "The Divine Comedy."* Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989; David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.

¹² *Fear and Trembling. Kierkegaard's Writings*. Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

¹³ Referencing the joy Abraham feels toward Isaac, Genesis 21 states, "And the child grew and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast on the day of his weaning" (8). All biblical quotations come from the Douay Rheims version of the Bible. Rockford: Tan Books and Publishers, 2000.

¹⁴ Isaac, noticing the unusual circumstances, asks, "My father...Behold...fire and wood: where is the victim for the holocaust?" Even such an honest inquiry fails to stir Abraham. Kierkegaard reasons: "...if

with no one and never hesitates, even at the point where he raises the knife to kill his son. Had not the angel of God stopped him, it seems Abraham would have sacrificed his son. Abraham's actions, an unnatural behavior according to Kierkegaard, lie beyond comprehension: "I cannot understand Abraham – I can only admire him" (112). His admiration stems from the Christian acceptance that Abraham actually did follow through with God's directive in the only manner possible, *sans* emotion. Realistically, however, in the natural world, it seems that no father could follow through with such a command without, at the very least, questioning it, even if the command did come from God. Speaking about the norm, Kierkegaard notes, "I would have held back at the very last minute...by my behavior I would have spoiled the whole story...What was the easiest for Abraham would have been difficult for me" (35).¹⁵ The norm, for most fathers, would be for the emotion to get in the way and affect the outcome. In fact, in other Genesis passages the patriarch of faith demonstrates himself to be quite an emotional man.¹⁶ The

Abraham were to say to Isaac in the decisive moment: You are the one intended – this would simply be a weakness. For if he could speak at all, then he ought to have spoken long before this, and the weakness then would be that he had not had the spiritual maturity and concentration to think through the whole agony beforehand but had shoved something aside in such a way that the actual agony was more than that in thought...if he actually wished to speak with Isaac, he would have had to change his position to one of spiritual trial, for otherwise he could say nothing, and in that case he would not even be a tragic hero" (*Fear and Trembling* 118). Essentially, Abraham's response to Isaac with a "non-answer answer" allows him to avoid spiritual trial. Abraham replies to Isaac's inquiry, "God will provide himself a victim for an holocaust, my son" (Gen. 22.8). Kierkegaard says of the response, "First and foremost, he does not say anything, and in that form, he says what he has to say" (*Fear and Trembling* 118). Any other answer on the part of Abraham would have resulted in an untruth and a destruction of his faith in God.

¹⁵ Kierkegaard's protestations echo centuries of similar interpretations regarding Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Bachya ben Asher states, "If Abraham had had a hundred bodies, it would have been suitable to give them all up for the sake of Isaac, but this act was not like any other, this trial was not like any other, and nature cannot bear it, nor the imagination conceive it" (128). *Commentary on the Torah*. Trans. Jon D. Levenson. *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity*. Binghamton: Yale UP, 1995.

¹⁶ For example, prior to God's directive to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham's emotions come to the forefront when Sara orders the exile of Ishmael and Agar: "Abraham took this grievously for his son" (21:11). Additionally, in Genesis God tells a very emotional Abraham, "'I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her.'" Then

display of emotion is what medieval exegetes imagine Abraham to experience, especially in the seemingly dire situation surrounding his son. Kierkegaard, too, expects a natural reaction manifested in what should have been Abraham's paternal instinct to take over the situation, resulting in the protection at all costs of his son, the one he has waited a lifetime to have. He states, "Many a father has thought himself deprived of every hope for the future when he lost his child, the dearest thing in the world to him" (21).¹⁷

To derive meaning from Abraham's behavior, Kierkegaard delineates precisely how a person, at least one with the same mettle as Abraham, can follow through with such conduct. He quotes a passage from Descartes' *Opera philosophica*:¹⁸

'...we should impress on our memory as an infallible rule that what God has revealed to us is incomparably more certain than anything else; and that we ought to submit to the Divine authority rather than to our own judgment even though the light of reason may seem to us to suggest, with the utmost clearness and evidence, something opposite.' (6)

Descartes' "judgment" and "light of reason" point to the realm of "normal" human thought and comprehension. Humans deal with a situation only as far as their intelligence and understanding permit. Happiness depends on their intellectual capacity, which is precisely why faith becomes problematic in the world of the natural. Faith often requires acceptance and trust, rather than understanding. It is hard to rely on a non-corporeal being when something as corporeal as a beloved child is at stake, even if the

Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (17:16-17).

¹⁷ Medieval drama of the Abraham and Isaac story often focuses on the emotional aspect of Abraham being torn by two directives to which he feels bound: following God's command and protecting his child.

¹⁸ *Opera philosophica. Fear and Trembling.* By Soren Kierkegaard. *Kierkegaard's Writings.* Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983.

non-corporeal entity has demonstrated his reliability on numerous occasions. Kierkegaard, referring to this inherent need he has to comprehend, says that understanding resides in the world of the ethical or universal:

The ethical is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone...at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself ...it goes not further. [For] the single individual, it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal. (54)

In Kierkegaard's world, the universal equals comprehension. Yet he says of Abraham, "Abraham I cannot understand; in a certain sense I can learn nothing from him except to be amazed" (37).

Descartes' passage, however, also makes clear the existence of a level of thinking unfathomable to most, a realm that exists beyond the voices of common sense and intelligence. If an individual achieves this profound yet immeasurable knowledge, he probably seems quite ignorant to most, perhaps even insane. Kierkegaard believes that Abraham's behavior means that the patriarch of faith has reached a level beyond the universal, a level achievable by almost no one, making it difficult to fathom. Kierkegaard refers to this level that Abraham has reached as the "absurd." About the absurd and about Abraham following God's directive, Kierkegaard writes, "human calculation was out of the question," and that Abraham "had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago" (35, 36). Kierkegaard refers to the point of crossover from the universal to the absurd as the point of "infinite resignation," a complete and total surrendering to God regardless of the circumstance, a point at which

human nature becomes irrelevant and no longer interferes with the actions of an individual.¹⁹ For Kierkegaard, “Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith” (46). The achievement of infinite resignation relies on strength, energy, and spiritual freedom (47). Once the individual achieves infinite resignation, he crosses over into the realm of the absurd, which in Abraham’s situation manifests itself as faith. The achievement of faith, then, creates a perplexing paradox. When one operates in the realm of the absurd, emotion, on any level, cannot be present. Yet, for Abraham, as pointed out repeatedly by medieval writers, his emotion must be there, internally, on some level. It seems inconceivable that he could act in the life and death situation surrounding his son without emotion. Kierkegaard declares, “What is omitted from Abraham’s story is the anxiety” (28). The “omission” of anxiety implies that Kierkegaard believes anxiety had to be present at some level, but Abraham somehow manages to push it aside where it becomes irrelevant. Only operating in the realm of the absurd, as Kierkegaard suggests Abraham does, makes it possible for one to push aside the emotion completely.

Dante and the Absolute Universal

The emotion surrounding the Ugolino episode in Cantos 32 and 33 of Dante’s *Inferno* accounts for a long enjoyed popularity that separates it from the entirety of the poem itself.²⁰ Much of the magnetism of the story comes from the pain Ugolino feels

¹⁹ Abraham felt great loss at his forced casting out of Ishmael after the birth of Isaac. Sara tells him, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with my son Isaac” (Gen.21.10). Abraham’s reaction becomes his point of infinite resignation. Ishmael’s destiny, however, like his half-brother Isaac’s, ends with greatness. God tells Abraham, “I will make the son also of the bondwoman a great nation, because he is thy seed” (21.13).

²⁰ Frances Yates notes “that before any complete translation of Dante exists in English there are already three verse and three prose renderings of the Ugolino episode, and a picture of the subject by one of the

regarding what he feels is the unfair imprisonment of his children. Their slow and tragic death proves to be compelling and sympathetic, particularly when they offer themselves as sacrifice. As Ugolino narrates to Dante the events of his family's imprisonment, his pathos toward his children and his hatred for his jailor again ignites, resulting in one of the most vicious scenes in all of literature. Very few of Hell's inhabitants have the vibrancy and complexity of character found in Ugolino.²¹ Such poetic construction serves only to entrap the reader, despite his best efforts, within the character's pathos.²² Two things in particular strike the reader about this passage in the *Divine Comedy*. First, before Ugolino has spoken a word, what Dante the traveler sees engages him emotionally:

“O tu che mostri per sì bestial segno
odio sopra colui che tu ti mangi,
dimmi 'l perchè...per tal convegno,
che se tu a ragion di llui ti piangi,
sappiendo chi voi sete e la sua pecca,
nel mondo suso ancora io ten e cangi,

greatest of English artists” (94). “Transformations of Dante’s Ugolino.” *Journal of Warburg and Courtald Institutes* 14 (1951): 92-117.

²¹ John Sinclair states of Dante’s sinner: “Nowhere...is Dante more vividly realistic, more harshly responsive to the sins, or so savagely antagonized by the sinners. Some of his lines are deliberately ‘harsh and grating’ in their syllables and far more are so in their sense, which at some points startles and horrifies us” (414). Notes to *The Divine Comedy*. By Dante. New York: Oxford UP, 1961.

²² Spencer writes, “...if we pity him, our pity is to be only a passing emotion. The manner of his death has increased his bitterness, and the thought of it only whets his hunger for revenge. He is himself as terrible as the experience he has undergone. That is why his story, as Dante tells it, is perhaps the most intensely shocking in literature” (“The Story of Ugolino”295-296). Yates adds, “the passage *is* very striking and never fails to make an unforgettable impression on every reader” (“Transformations” 95).

se quella con ch' io parlo non si secca.” (32.133-139)²³

Part of that emotion stems from Dante's highly volatile encounter with Bocca immediately prior to his exchange with Ugolino in *Inferno* 32.²⁴ But unlike Bocca, Ugolino demonstrates a willingness to talk, the second item that makes the passage unique. Ugolino prefaces his story with, “Ma se le mie parole esser dien seme / che frutti infamia al traditor ch'i'rodo, / parlare e lacrimar vedrai in seme” (33.7-9).²⁵ Much like a medieval preacher talking about Christ's passion, he makes clear that he is eliciting and expecting Dante's understanding and compassion, despite the backdrop of Hell. He wastes no time in explaining to the traveler why he gnaws the nape of Archbishop Ruggieri. In fact, the renewed vigor with which Ugolino attacks the archbishop²⁶ after his explanation indicates how desperately he wishes his story known *and understood*, even if only temporarily, because Dante's commiseration essentially puts both characters in the same world. The key ingredient in that understanding is the pathetic element of the narrative made manifest in the main character himself; Ugolino's pathos keeps his story firmly anchored in the realm of the emotional and it is the chief reason the narrative gained prominence in the Middle Ages.²⁷

²³ “O thou who by so bestial a token showest thy hatred against him thou eatest, tell me the cause...on this agreement, that if thou hast reason in thy complaint against him I, knowing who you are and what his sin, shall yet requite thee in the world above, if this tongue I talk with be not withered.” *Inferno. The Divine Comedy*. Trans. John Sinclair. New York: Oxford UP, 1939. All translations of Dante are Sinclair's.

²⁴ “Allor lo presi per la cuticagna, / e dissi: ‘El converrà che tu ti nomi, / o che capel qui su non ti rimagna” (97-99). “Then I took him by the scalp and said: ‘Thou must name thyself, or not a hair will be left on thee here.”

²⁵ “But if my words are to be seed that may bear fruit of infamy to the traitor I gnaw, thou shalt see me speak and weep together.”

²⁶ See William R. Cook and Ronald B. Herzman, “Inferno XXXIII: The Past and the Present in Dante's Imagery of Betrayal.” *Italica* 56 (1979): 377-383.

²⁷ For other interesting perspectives on Dante's Ugolino, see Werner P. Friedrich, *Dante's Fame Abroad 1350-1850*. Chapel Hill: U North Carolina P, 1950; Ronald B. Herzman, “Cannibalism and Communion in *Inferno* 33.” *Dante Studies* 98 (1980): 53-78; Jackson Campbell Boswell, “Dante's Fame in England:

Like the medieval dramatists who recognized the desire and need for literal exegesis of biblical text to account for the pathetic element, Dante uses pathos to make Ugolino's story compelling and dramatic. Ugolino's passion emerges from his standing as a father. That he is a criminal and deserves to be punished is not the point, as Ugolino himself notes: "“Che per l'effetto de' suo' mai pensieri, / fidandomi di lui, io fossi preso / e poscia morto, dir non è mestieri”" (16-18).²⁸ His resentment at his jailor²⁹ derives from the suffering the situation has caused his children, along with his inability to do anything about it. The premonition in his dream followed by its fulfillment proves to be more than a father can bear:

“In picciol corso mi parieno stanchi
lo padre e' figli, e con l'agute scane
mi pareo lor veder fender li fianchi.
Quando fui desto innanzi la dimane,
pianger senti' fra 'l sonno i miei figliuoli
ch'eran con meco, e domandar del pane.” (34-39)³⁰

To further the emotional impact, Ugolino adds, ““Ben se' crudel, se tu giànon ti duoli / pensando ciò che 'l mio cor s'annunziva; / e se non piangi, di che pianger suoli?”" (40-

1536-1586.” *Dante Studies* 111 (1993): 235-243; Aida Audah, “Englishness, Ambiguity, and Dante's Ugolino in 18th-century France.” *Identity, Self, and Symbolism* 1 (2006): 95-115.

²⁸ “How by means of his evil devices, confiding in him, I was taken and then killed, there is no need to tell.”

²⁹ See William Franke, “The Death and Damnation of Poetry in Inferno XXXI – XXXIV: Ugolino and Narrative as an Instrument of Revenge.” *Romance Studies* 28 (2010): 27-35.

³⁰ “...after a short run the father and sons seemed to me spent and with the sharp fangs I seem to see their flanks torn open. When I awoke before morning I heard my children, who were with me, crying in their sleep and asking for bread.”

42).³¹ Medieval readers, as readers of today, and like Dante the pilgrim, cannot help but feel entrapped by Ugolino's narration of his children's quandary. Ugolino reacts to his children the way medieval society feels a father should or would in such a circumstance.³² Even the reader's best attempt to demonstrate any emotional stoicism proves fruitless, given the children's predicament. However, despite the narration by the father depicting his children's suffering, the focus of Dante's passage remains on Ugolino, whose narrative voice muffles the emotional element of the children's dialogue.

Another key element for the generation of pathos in *Inferno* 33 is Ugolino's first-person narrative. When Dante encounters Ugolino's shade engaged in its barbaric act, he witnesses the consequence of the account Ugolino will shortly describe. Such a perspective proves vitally important in allowing Dante the Pilgrim, as well as the reader, to understand precisely why Ugolino suffers in hell and why he feels justified in his behavior despite its brutality. Dante, as poet, creates a situation where his readers *feel* the horror of the circumstance. For Ugolino, his narration guarantees that the significant pathos generated remains directed toward him, the *locus* of the passage, which creates a sense of the sublime,³³ that which provokes terror and fear. For the story to have any

³¹ "Thou art cruel indeed if thou grieve not now, thinking what my heart foreboded, and, if thou weep not, at what dost thou ever weep?"

³² Yates says of Ugolino's narration: "in telling his story he is allowed to excite our passionate sympathy and to arouse our hatred of his oppressor. For it is as a father that he suffers in the story, forgetting his own fate in his agony that he can do nothing for his helpless children. And that was a suffering which ought not to have been inflicted upon him" ("Transformations" 93). Similarly, Sinclair points out that "Nothing is said here of Ugolino's own offence and we are absorbed in the treachery of which he was the victim and is forever the avenger. Yet he too is one of the traitors in the ice, and though we forget his sin in his 'desperate grief' Dante does not allow that even such wrongs exculpate from such guilt as his" (Notes to *The Divine Comedy* 416).

³³ Sublime, in this context, is a manifestation of power, the idea that "pain, in its highest degree, is much stronger than the highest degree of pleasure...the idea that suffering must always be prevalent." See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Ed. Adam Phillips. New York: Oxford UP, 1998. 59.

“shock” value, Dante must keep the narrative on a level his readers can comprehend, which is to say in the realm of the universal. Ugolino’s children prove vital:

“e io senti’ chiavar l’uscio di sotto
all’orribile torre; ond’ io guardai
nel viso a’ mie’ figliuoi senza far motto.
Io non piangea, sì dentro impetrai...” (33.46-49)³⁴

On the surface, because of his comment that he refuses to speak regarding the expressions he sees on the faces of his sons, it appears that Dante’s Ugolino is the most selfish of characters. *He* remains the focus, despite the fact that those expressions move him tremendously. Even the inclusion of direct speech by one of the children, preceded by the seemingly perfunctory, “piangevan elli,”³⁵ serves as a set up to Ugolino’s own response:

“e Anselmuccio mio
disse: ““Tu guardi sì, padre! che hai?””
Perciò non lacrimai nè rispuos’ io
tutto quel giorno nè la notte appresso,
infin che l’altro sol nel mondo uscìo.” (50-54)³⁶

Again, the focus remains on the Count. Yet his narrative voice, his willingness to share with Dante his frustration and anger, demonstrates that despite his behavior in the cell, he does harbor a large degree of compassion toward his children and their predicament. By

³⁴ “...and I heard below the door of the horrible tower nailed up; at which I looked in the faces of my sons without a word. I did not weep, I so turned to stone within.”

³⁵ “They wept.”

³⁶ “...and my little Anselm said: ‘Thou lookest so, father, what ails thee?’ At that I shed no tears nor answered all that day nor the night after, till another sun came forth on the world.”

the end of his narration, the emotional element stands firm as the key to the story, as Ugolino's behavior indicates: "Quand'ebbe detto ciò, con li occhi torti / riprese 'l teschio misero co' denti, / che furo all'osso, come d'un can, forti" (76-78).³⁷ Sinclair writes that Dante, through Ugolino (along with Francesca and Ulysses earlier), "penetrates to the heart of the sinner so that his sin is forgotten and he is, as it were, restored for his sheer human worth to the human fellowship" (415). Sinclair's comment demonstrates the need for the concrete narration of Ugolino's story, a major characteristic of the universal. The first-person narrative makes it possible. Ugolino desires to belong in Dante's world, and while he narrates his story, he does. Additionally, he not only makes himself a part of Dante's world for a few moments, but he does the reader as well. Doing so allows for the comprehension of the bitterness and hatred Ugolino feels toward Ruggieri. Only in that way can Dante's focus on his character's treachery remain intact. Any other behavior on Ugolino's part results in the narrative losing its credibility, since Dante as poet cannot describe what he envisions Hell to be in anything other than concrete terms.

The universal understanding Ugolino successfully reaps appears through Dante's continual emotional reaction to the story. At the conclusion of Ugolino's narration, Dante includes a very emotional remonstrance against Pisa:

Ahi Pisa, vituperio delle genti
del bel paese là dove 'l sì sona,
poi che i vicini a te punir son lenti,
muovasi la Capraia e la Gorgona,

³⁷ "When he had said this, with eyes askance he took hold of the wretched skull again with his teeth, which were strong on the bone like a dog's."

e faccian siepe ad Arno in su la foce,
sì ch'elli annieghi in te ogni persona!
Chè se 'l conte Ugolino aveva voce
d'aver tradita te delle castella,
non dovei tu i figliuoi porre a tal croce.
Innocenti facea l'età novella,
novella Tebe, Uguiccione e 'l Brigata
e li altri due che 'l canto suso appella.” (79-90).³⁸

The mention of the children in Dante's conclusion of this episode demonstrates the success of the pathetic element. Ugolino expects Dante's commiseration and he gets it. Dante directs his anger toward Pisa, not the condemned sinner, whose fatherly qualities show him in the end to be quite human, despite the barbaric nature of his hellish act.

The emotional response to the children's predicament exhibited by Ugolino and Dante is the missing element of the Abraham and Isaac parallel. Ugolino's behavior concerning his children is what exegetes expect Abraham to display as the sacrifice of Isaac approaches. Dante's story suggests that at least some in medieval society wanted a universal understanding as to why Abraham did *not* behave as expected. Ugolino's is the same reaction desired from Abraham in terms of passion, and it is what medieval dramatists incorporated into their interpretations of the story. In Dante, the result is an unexpected compassion toward a hardened sinner forever condemned to hell.

³⁸ “Ah, Pisa, shame of the peoples of the fair land where sounds the *si*, since thy neighbours are slow to punish thee may Capraia and Gorgona shift and put a bar on Arno's mouth so that it drown every soul in thee! What if Count Ugolino had the name of betraying thy strongholds, thou shouldst not have put his children to such torment. Their youthful years, thou new Thebes, made them innocent, Uguccione and Brigata and the other two named already in my song.”

Additionally, the first-person narration of the emotional elements of the story, a major characteristic of the universal, is another aspect missing from Abraham's and Isaac's account in the Bible. An unknown narrator, presumably with no emotional attachment to the story or its characters, tells their story. Readers of the biblical passage, however, want to *feel* what Abraham must be going through, but his lack of emotion instead only creates feelings of frustration and bewilderment, emotions compounded by the passage's third-person narrative. Emotional narration is what readers desire of the Abraham and Isaac passage. They want to see the look in Isaac's eyes as he realizes he is about to be killed by his father. Important also is the look in Abraham's face as he is about to kill his son. Except for the reactions found in medieval drama and the artwork surrounding the passage, those expressions remain untold. In the end, Dante's telling of Ugolino's story is so striking because of the story's emotional content. The Count's narrative puts on display the full range of emotion he feels, from the love he holds for his children to the hatred he harbors for his jailor. Nothing is held back emotionally, and because of that, the reader, and in Dante's case the listener, are completely absorbed by the story and more importantly, Ugolino is universally understood.

Chaucer's Interpretation

While Ugolino's behavior proves more explicable in Dante's version, the Monk's narration changes how one views that same behavior in Hugelyn. Chaucer, through the Monk, complicates the story with an added point of view that reveals the unusual behavior of Hugelyn. His conduct does not conform to conventional late-medieval approaches to fatherhood and sacrifice. Nevertheless, contrary to the claim that "the Monk's tragedies are unmotivated by any sense of human choice or divine purpose"

(191),³⁹ Hugelyn, like Abraham, behaves in a manner that begins with human choice and ends beyond human understanding.⁴⁰ This particular narrative functions at a much higher level than what is described as “the mechanical turning of Fortune’s wheel” (191).⁴¹ Both Hugelyn and Abraham face the uncompromising death of their children for what initially appear to be less-than-desirable reasons, and both behave atypically given the situation they face. Chaucer’s reworking of Hugelyn’s predicament actually puts the Count in the same category as the biblical Abraham, his children in the same dilemma as medieval dramatic representations of Isaac, and Chaucer’s readers and the Monk’s listeners in the same quandary as Kierkegaard and medieval Christians. They must try to make sense out of a seemingly unfathomable situation, but do so in terms recognized in medieval Christianity.

Because of how the Monk’s narrates the plight of the children, which creates much of the emotional element of the story, the Hugelyn episode of the *Monk’s Tale*⁴² reads much like the period’s drama.⁴³ On one level, like his medieval contemporaries from the world of drama as well as his predecessors, Chaucer focuses his version of the story on children, a subject always sure to charge a medieval audience. On another level,

³⁹ Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*.

⁴⁰ Larry Benson presents a more balanced view: “The world as it appears in *The Monk’s Tale* is a grim and discouraging place in which happiness is to be avoided since it inevitably leads to tragic misery. Such a view fits well with the Monk’s profession; it embodies the monastic imperative to flee this miserable world and seek God in the security of the cloister. Chaucer’s hearers, and Chaucer himself, were probably more sympathetic to this idea than are many modern readers” (18). *The Riverside Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

⁴¹ Astell, *Chaucer and the Universe of Learning*. See also p. 43, n. 6.

⁴² Neuse states that the *Monk’s Tale* “is the pivotal tale by which Chaucer aligns his own epic project with Dante’s in its refusal of theodicy, the attempt, in Milton’s words, to ‘assert eternal Providence, / And justify the ways of God to men’” (“Chaucerian Intertextuality” 141).

⁴³ According to Spencer: “Character and will, because they are impotent, will be neglected, and as a result there will be no ‘terror,’ in either the Aristotelian or the Dantesque sense. The only emotion that can be extracted from a tragedy in Chaucer’s meaning of the word, is the emotion of pathos. And this is just what we find in Chaucer’s account of Ugolino” (“The Story of Ugolino” 296).

the Monk himself, acting like a medieval dramatist, in large part supplies the pathos attached to these children:

And with hym been his litel children thre;
The eldest scarsly fyf yeer was of age.
Allas, Fortune, it was greet crueltee
Swiche brides for to putte in swich a cage! (2411-2414)

The Monk's emotional proselytizing shifts the focus of the pathos from Hugelyn (as it is in Dante's story) to the children themselves (298).⁴⁴ With the emphasis on the children from the very beginning of the exemplum, Chaucer no doubt wants to elicit pathos from his readers,⁴⁵ which he does by giving the age of Hugelyn's children⁴⁶ (not specified by Dante)⁴⁷ rather than their names (given by Dante).⁴⁸

As in the biblical passage, however, Chaucer's father figure for the most part remains stoic during the predicament of his children.⁴⁹ There lies the interpretive problem. What is to be made of a father who essentially ignores the pleas of his children when they are desperate for his assistance? The Ugolino in *Inferno* 33 explains his

⁴⁴ Spencer, "The Story of Ugolino."

⁴⁵ Boitani notes that Chaucer, in writing the *Monk's Tale*, "was stressing the pathetic element" (57). "The Monk's Tale: Dante and Boccaccio." *Medium Ævum* 55 (1972): 50-69.

⁴⁶ "And with hym been his litel children thre; / The eldest scarsly fyf yeer was of age" (2411-2412), and "His yonge sone that thre yeer was of age" (2431).

⁴⁷ Many artistic representations of Ugolino's predicament present his children as much older than mentioned by the Monk. For example, see Joshua Reynolds, "Count Ugolino and his Children in the Dungeon," 1773, and J.H. Fuseli, "Ugolino and his Children in the Hunger Tower," 1811.

⁴⁸ "Anselm" (50), and "Gaddo" (68). The third and fourth children's names, "Ugucione" and "Brigata," (90), are not provided until Dante's emotional summation to Ugolino's story.

⁴⁹ Much artwork dedicated to the depiction of this character presents Hugelyn / Ugolino in precisely this manner. See for example, the works of Sir Joshua Reynolds, "Count Ugolino and his Children in the Dungeon" 1773; William Blake, "Ugolino in the Hunger Tower" 1793; J.H. Fuseli, "Ugolino and his Children in the Hunger Tower" 1806; Pietro Benvenuti, "Ugolino" 1828; Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, "Ugolino and his Children" 1861; Eugène Ferdinand Victor Delacroix, "Ugolino" 1865.

behavior. In Chaucer, it is up to the Monk.⁵⁰ His narrative takes away Hugelyn's ability to tell his own story, a major difference in the two versions. The result is a glum character with no voice to plead his case, a father-figure not easily forgivable by those who feel the children need comforting. The third-person retelling deliberately distances the Monk's listeners and Chaucer's readers from Hugelyn himself.⁵¹ Third-person narrative, by its very nature, makes the comprehension of the character's motivations more difficult. Hugelyn's motives for remaining silent at first glance appear to be frustration at his inability to aid the predicament of his children. Such an interpretation, however, because it keeps the focus on Hugelyn, makes him more one-dimensional, simple, and universal – that is, more *Dantesque*.⁵² Taking on such a figure and his story requires Chaucer to change the point of view, since viewing Hugelyn as merely one-dimensional reduces Chaucer's writing to a *recreation* of a very talented poet's character rather than a *reinterpretation* of that character.⁵³ The Monk indicates as much when he begins by informing his listeners, "Off the Erl Hugelyn of Pyze the languor / Ther may no tonge telle for pitee" (2407-2408). Although the statement seems simple enough, in actuality the Monk establishes Hugelyn's predicament as beyond the realm of understanding, suggesting that because of the pathos created by his situation, no tongue

⁵⁰ Chaucer's use of a Monk to retell a story rooted in political struggle proves very interesting in that from a monastic point of view, the story would seem to be a waste of time and effort.

⁵¹ Neuse argues that this creates "a strangely abstracted, self-concerned character" ("Chaucerian Intertextuality" 157).

⁵² In an opposite opinion, Winthrop Wetherbee states that Hugelyn's "feelings are only for himself" and that his initial emotional response "describe a selfishness as complete as that of Dante's Ugolino" (171). "The Context of the *Monk's Tale*." *Language and Style in English Literature. Essays in Honor of Michio Masui*. Ed. Michio Kawai. Tokyo: The Eihosha Ltd, 1991. 159-177.

⁵³ Pinti argues that "Chaucer, a fourteenth-century, learned reader of Dante, may have read the Ugolino story and rewritten it into his own poem as a commentary on the construction of poetic authority" ("The *Comedy of the Monk's Tale*" 278). According to Astell, "the close parallels to Dante's work which emerge reveal the *Canterbury Tales* to be Chaucer's entry in an astonishing storytelling contest with the Dante of the *Paradiso*" (*Chaucer and the Universe of Learning* x).

can accurately describe what Hugelyn feels internally. The inability to understand or explain a certain behavior is a situation upon which Chaucer's narrators often comment.⁵⁴ As soon as the Monk states that no tongue can express accurately the woe Hugelyn faces, he takes Hugelyn's situation, as well as the tale, out of the realm of the universal, since understanding and ethics lie within this sphere. Chaucer does not expect his readers to make sense out of Hugelyn's internal quandary since it lies beyond understanding – an attitude quite contrary to Dante.

At the beginning of the story, however, Hugelyn has not yet reached infinite resignation. According to the Monk, Hugelyn is overwhelmed with pathetic displays of emotion at the apparent hopelessness of his situation, particularly when he realizes that his jailer permanently has imprisoned him with his sons by nailing shut the doors:

And in his herte anon ther fil a thought
That they for hunger wolde doon hym dyen.
“Allas!” quod he, “Allas, that I was wrought!”
Therwith the teeris fillen from his yen. (2427-2430)

Here, Hugelyn's emotion, emphasized through the word “they,” serves as a transition of emphasis from Hugelyn to his children so that the remaining pathos of the story centers entirely on them.⁵⁵ This transition also permits Chaucer to create a situation that will allow Hugelyn to operate in the realm of the absurd. This passage establishes Hugelyn's

⁵⁴ For example, in the *Clerk's Tale*, the Clerk alludes to the people's inability to comprehend the motivations of Walter in continually trying Griselda: “The rude peple, as it no wonder is, / Wenden ful wel that it hadde be right so” (750-751). And like the Monk, the Clerk puts himself in the group unable to comprehend: “But whan this tidynges came to Grisildis, / I deeme that hire herte was ful wo” (752-753). He can only assume since Griselda's behavior makes no sense to him.

⁵⁵ For Boitani, Chaucer writes so that “the tone of the episode [changes] from horror to pathos” (“The Monk's Tale” 58).

emotion, certainly a characteristic of the universal. But the words Chaucer attributes to Hugelyn most likely represent internal thought, a continuation of what the Monk narrates prior to Hugelyn's words: "And in his herte anon ther fil a thought" (2427). Such an interpretation remains consistent with Hugelyn's behavior in the rest of the tale. Indeed, after this passage, Hugelyn's emotion disappears. Allowing Hugelyn's words to be a part of his thinking rather than speaking them aloud again allows for emphasis on the children. In the next stanza, reacting to his father's tears, Hugelyn's youngest son asks his father, "Fader, why do ye wepe?" (2432). The child does not ask about the father's wish never to be born because Hugelyn never speaks the words aloud.

From this point on, the children dominate the story and it is here where their connection to the medieval dramatic accounts of Isaac is made clear. Throughout the next stanza, Hugelyn's youngest child pleads with his father to answer his questions: "Whanne wold the gayler bryngen oure potage? / Is ther no morsel breed that ye do kepe?" (2433-2434). The questions correspond to the only time Isaac speaks in the biblical account; he asks his father as Abraham prepares the sacrificial altar: "My father...Behold...fire and wood: where is the victim for the holocaust?" (Gen. 22.7). While the questions are similar, the emotional content is not. Isaac's biblical question, as is typical of the entire story, is void of emotion. It is perfunctory, a question that arises from the logic of what he sees. The question from Hugelyn's youngest child, however, resonates completely with the pathetic. His hunger is made clear, as is his desire for assistance from his father. But Hugelyn never answers this, nor any of the pleas of his children. Abraham, at least, answers his son's inquiry untraditionally as noted previously. If Abraham gives his son a conventional response, he removes himself from

the realm of the absurd and re-enters the universal, and his faith becomes merely a spiritual trial. Hugelyn's silence in the face of such questioning indicates his approaching entrance into the absurd. Any answer to his son constitutes a prevarication on Hugelyn's part and his acquiescence to the world of the universal, since a lie told in an effort to provide comfort is an effort to channel emotional response. Hugelyn's silence indicates his impending departure from the universal to the world of faith made manifest in the belief that God will take care of his children, since like Abraham, he can do nothing to help his children's predicament.

For Hugelyn, this point of infinite resignation nears with the death of Hugelyn's youngest child. The death occurs, according to the Monk, several days after the initial interaction between Hugelyn and his son. Presumably, during that time, the child has continued to ask his father for some sort of answer to their predicament, for as the Monk says, "Thus day by day this child bigan to crye" (2439). Hugelyn apparently chooses silence as his reaction to this quandary. The child dies, and Hugelyn, in an action modeled after the Dante passage "his armes two he gan to byte" (2444).⁵⁶ At this point Hugelyn reaches infinite resignation, exiting the realm of the universal, entering into the world of the absurd. In Dante's passage, because the entire appreciation of the situation depends upon the pathos Ugolino provides, Ugolino's position remains situated firmly in the universal, despite what he says of his own emotional state while locked in the cell with his children.⁵⁷ His story never leaves the emotional arena.⁵⁸ In Chaucer's version,

⁵⁶ The Dante passage reads: "e io scorsi / per quattro visi il mio aspetto stesso, / ambo le man per lo dolor mi morsi" (56-58). "and I discerned in four faces my own look, I bit both hands for grief."

⁵⁷ Ugolino tells Dante that he remained silent for two days following the child's request for food. After the sixth day, however, Ugolino reveals his emotional state: "ond' io mi diedi, / già cieco, a brancolar sovra

this is the point of emotional departure.⁵⁹ Essentially, Chaucer has created in words the image of a grieving Mary holding the body of her dead son the crucified Christ.⁶⁰

There seems to be an inconsistency in Hugelyn's predicament, however. Apparently, after Hugelyn crosses over at his point of infinite resignation, the Monk attributes a very emotional response to him: "“Allas, Fortune, and weylaway! / Thy false wheel my wo al may I wyte”" (2445-2446). This comment appears to be a relapse into the universal realm on Hugelyn's part, something that never happened to Abraham in the biblical account. Granted, the death of his son must resonate profoundly within, but it makes no sense that at this point Hugelyn would "break character" and re-enter the realm of the universal, now that he has reached the absurd, and blame Fortune for all his troubles when he clearly recognizes his responsibility for the situation he faces. It is true that Fortune is a topic of extreme importance to the Monk,⁶¹ but at this point, it holds little or no meaning for Hugelyn. Besides, insight into Hugelyn's conduct at the point of infinite resignation cannot rest solely on his apparent blaming of Lady Fortune for his quandary, as the Monk would have his listeners believe. With a very perfunctory

ciascuno, / e due di li chiamai, poi che fur morti" (72-74). "therefore I gave myself, now blind, to groping over each and for two days called on them after they were dead."

⁵⁸ Spencer, on the power of the transition from the universal to the absurd, states, "In Dante the thought of starvation, and the reflection of his own face in those of the children, is enough to cause this almost involuntary action; in Chaucer's version, it is caused by the death of the child" ("The Story of Ugolino" 297).

⁵⁹ Boitani shrewdly notes, "Before dying, they all reach Hugelyn and, in contrast to Ugolino's solitude, the family forms a group. The crouching of the children in their father's lap is the climax of pathos" ("The Monk's Tale" 62).

⁶⁰ The earliest artistic impressions of the Madonna holding the dead Christ appeared in the 1300s and are referred to as "Versperbild."

⁶¹ Of course, the theme of Fortune resonated strongly in medieval culture, and the Monk has decided to make his entire tale a compendium of individuals out of favor with Lady Fortune. The Monk's tends to view Fortune almost as a deity. His depiction of her strongly resembles representations in other works of the gods of ancient Greece and Rome in that she, like them, should be feared and respected, never crossed. Angering such a powerful force, whether intentionally or otherwise, only results in the downfall of the individual.

attitude, the Monk presents the Fortune theme as a negative force, a point of view opposite to the traditional medieval viewpoint.⁶² From the very beginning of the tale, the Monk's words appear ominous: "For certain, whan that Fortune list to flee, / Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde" (1995-1996). Immediately, the Monk establishes the role of Lady Fortune in the lives of the ill-fated he describes, and his tone indicates a somewhat sullen view of the lady. Of the seventeen exempla he narrates, the Monk uses the word "fortune" in fourteen. Clearly, the Monk wants to establish a link between the characters he describes. But when Hugelyn makes his emotional lament to the treachery of Fortune, the Monk in effect speaks for Hugelyn, stating through him what he has narrated in the other stories. The other thirteen exempla that mention Fortune do so in the narrative, never in the dialogue.

Chaucer's Monk has allowed himself to become involved in the pathos of the situation he describes to his fellow travelers.⁶³ In the manner of the monastic mode typical of *de casibus* tragedy, he cannot help but say what he feels Hugelyn should be thinking at that point.⁶⁴ The Monk, clearly a part of the realm of the universal, behaves in such a manner because he needs to comprehend the lead character's behavior.⁶⁵ Silence

⁶² As Kaske notes, "whatever precise analysis one cares to make of the individual stories in the *Monk's Tale*, they certainly fall short of the Boethian philosophy of Fortune" ("The Knight's Interruption" 262). Kaske's comment stems from his argument that Boethian philosophy intends Fortune's elucidation to be positive, a viewpoint hardly present in the Monk's narrative.

⁶³ That the Monk is aware of his narration to his fellow travelers is one likely interpretation of the complaint to Fortune in the *Monk's Tale*.

⁶⁴ The Monk speaks from "a similarity too close for comfort" (227), a characteristic, according to Larry Scanlon, of the *de casibus* genre. *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.

⁶⁵ According to Neuse, "the Monk seems more preoccupied with the incomprehensible violence and death endured by the children as part of his argument" ("Chaucerian Intertextuality" 158-159). Boitani notes, "Hugelyn is recreated by a humble Monk, who excuses himself for his ignorance" ("The Monk's Tale" 56). At the end of the Prologue to his tale, the Monks states, "As it now comth unto my remembraunce, / Have me excused of myn ignoraunce" (1989-1990).

does not suffice for the Monk, or anyone else for that matter, so the Monk “provides” dialogue for Hugelyn at this juncture to satisfy not only his desire for understanding, but also the desire of his listeners who no doubt struggle with comprehending Hugelyn’s behavior. Even the Host, in the Prologue of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, remarks to the Monk immediately after the Knight states his objection, ““Youre tale anoyeth al this compaignye. / Swich talking is not worth a boterflye”” (2789-2790). The Host’s words may just be an attempt to affirm the Knight, a figure he supposedly holds in high estimation. But his words may also indicate his and the group’s inability to comprehend what they have just heard.

Hugelyn’s silence, during his children’s suffering, creates the same problem for the reader that Kierkegaard has with the biblical Abraham. On first reading, Hugelyn behaves in a manner inconsistent with established medieval parental attitudes toward children, particularly when his youngest child, “that thre yeer was of age” (2431), turns to him and states, “I am so hungry that I may not slepe. / Now wolde God that I myghte slepen evere! / Thanne sholde not hunger in my wombe crepe” (2436-2437). Despite the hopeless situation, the paternal instinct would suggest that Hugelyn should, at the very least, take the role of prevaricator if only to ease his child’s mind. His behavior, however, indicates that he does not suffer the slightest bit of discomfort. In medieval drama, Isaac’s words serve to intensify Abraham’s anguish. Unaware that he is to serve as sacrifice, Isaac tells his father, “I am full fayn to do þowre bedyng” (119). Abraham responds, “A! Lord of Heuyn, my handys I wryng, / Thys chydys wordys all towond my harte” (120-121). Later, in another aside, Abraham cries, “A! Lord, my hart brekyth on

tweyn, / Thys chyldys wordys, they be so tender” (127-128).⁶⁶ In the case of Hugelyn, although he remains powerless to aid his children’s physical suffering, he can indeed at least try to alleviate their mental anguish by giving them a false sense of hope and comfort. In fact, a strong emotional reaction would be the natural and typically medieval conduct of any father who loves his child, particularly a child about to become a sacrifice, as the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* demonstrates.⁶⁷ Hugelyn, however, does nothing to aid the suffering of any of his children. Instead, he remains, for the most part silent, despite their pleas, until they all die, hiding his agony and anguish.

Of course, Hugelyn’s woe extends beyond that of Abraham in that, unlike Abraham, his children actually die. Hugelyn’s experience in the realm of the absurd actually becomes more difficult than demonstrated by the biblical Abraham. Because Hugelyn is criminal, a status that neither Chaucer nor the Monk ever heavily emphasizes, his children can have no redemption on earth.⁶⁸ And unlike Abraham, Hugelyn must endure the death of more than one child. For Hugelyn, his solace must rest with the faith that his children’s afterlife holds the Eden he cannot give them, a point never emphasized in Dante’s story, since there, Ugolino, not his children, remains the focus. Through his faith, Hugelyn views his children as sacrificial victims in the way Abraham views Isaac, all evidenced by the silence surrounding both men. The possibility of salvation arises

⁶⁶ *Abraham and Isaac* (Brome MS). *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*. Ed. A.C.Cawley. London: J.M. Dent, 1974. 49-64.

⁶⁷ See also Rosemary Woolf, “The Effect of Typology on the English Medieval Plays of Abraham and Isaac.” *Speculum* 32 (1957): 805-825; John R. Elliott, Jr. “The Sacrifice of Isaac as Comedy and Tragedy.” *Studies in Philology* 66 (1969): 36-59; John Gardner, “Idea and Emotion in the Towneley Abraham.” *Papers on Language and Literature* 7 (1971): 227-241.

⁶⁸ Exodus 20:5 states, “I am the Lord thy God, mighty, jealous, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.” For that reason, Hugelyn’s children must pay the price for the sins of their father. Only in heaven, can they achieve salvation. It should be noted, however, that Deuteronomy 24:16 says, “The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor the children for the fathers, but everyone shall die for his own sin.”

because Hugelyn suffers in an earthly hell, in prison, unlike his Dantean counterpart, who forever must suffer the frozen cold of the Hell created by the beating of Satan's wings. Chaucer certainly presents the children as sacrificial victims. In some of the most pathetic lines, Hugelyn's children, trying to aid their father's anguish, tell him:

“Fader, do not so allas!

But rather ete the flesh upon us two.

Oure flesh thou yaf us, take our flesh us fro,

And ete ynogh.” (2449-2452)

The lines are very similar to Isaac's after he accepts his role as sacrifice. He becomes the comforter: “Do on þowre lyst for me hardly, / My fayer swete fader, I þeffe þow leve” (253-254). The words of Hugelyn's children also recall the words of Christ during the Last Supper: “Take ye, and eat. This is my body” (Matt. 26.26). Christ offered Himself as sacrifice and so too do Hugelyn's surviving sons. Chaucer no doubt invites this comparison.⁶⁹ Although Hugelyn's sons do not offer verbally their blood, the passage implies that Chaucer intends the drink to represent the blood of Christ. In this manner, Chaucer aligns himself more along Dantesque thinking since Ugolino's sons, as Neuse points out, create “Eucharistic implications” by “offering themselves to be eaten by the father” (155), and the sons' willingness to serve as sacrifice connects Chaucer's story to the Kierkegaard theory. Even Isaac, after understanding his role in the sacrifice,

⁶⁹ Boitani notes that in “*Inferno* XXXIII it is clear that Ugolino had no food. But it is Chaucer who specifies [he had no] food and drink” (“The Monk's Tale” 56).

offers himself as sacrifice, a point emphasized in the biblical story through his silence, and in medieval drama through his words.⁷⁰

Because the sons offer themselves as sacrifice, they (rather than Hugelyn himself) become the focus of the Monk's exemplum and the vehicle through which Chaucer allows his readers to feel emotion. Yet Hugelyn functions as more than a mere secondary character. Viewing Hugelyn solely a mouthpiece for the espousal of a theory on Fortune reduces him to the one-dimensional character Dante created. Clearly, Chaucer sees a difference between his Hugelyn and Dante's Ugolino. One can see such a difference through Chaucer's ending to the Hugelyn story. Chaucer's ending suggests that his readers cannot understand the behavior of his Hugelyn in the conventional sense because they, his readers, belong to the realm of the universal. The Monk says to his listeners:

Of this tragedie it oghte ynough suffice;
Whoso wol here it in a lenger wise,
Readeth the grete poete of Ytaille
That highte Dant, for he kan al devyse
Fro point to point; nat o word wol he faille. (2458-2462)⁷¹

Essentially, the Monk states to his fellow pilgrims that if they desire an understanding comparable to their level of thinking, the universal, then they should consult Dante's version of the story. Ugolino's story, as pointed out earlier, lends itself to comprehension

⁷⁰ Of course, in *Inferno* 33, there is no reason not to see Ugolino and the Archbishop as engaged in a perversion of Eucharistic ritual – and perhaps that is the point: in Dante's universal presentation, the Eucharist is presented, apparently, only as parody.

⁷¹ Chaucer uses similar phraseology in *Troilus and Criseyde*: "But how this town cam to destruccioun / Ne falleth nought to purpos me to telle, / For it were here a long digressioun / Fro my matere, and you too longe to dwelle: But the Troyan geestes as they felle, / In Omer or in Dares or in Dite / Who so that can may reden hem as they write" (141-147).

on the universal level since its emphasis, despite the religious implications, is not religious. According to Hollander, “Perhaps nothing is more disturbing in Ugolino’s heart-breaking narrative of woe than the absence of any reference to the spiritual food which might have saved, if not the speaker, then at least his children” (552).⁷² Chaucer elevates that version to a plane unreachable by most others, the realm of the absurd. He does not expect his readers to understand Hugelyn’s behavior because like Abraham’s, the behavior makes no sense.

Ultimately, then, for readers of and listeners to Hugelyn’s story, any level of understanding depends on comprehending the role of the children on whom the tale focuses. Their behavior proves easier to comprehend because Chaucer sees them as sacrifice and he models them after medieval dramatic accounts of Isaac in terms of the emotional content of the story. But if the link to the biblical Abraham is to have any validity, then Hugelyn’s children must represent sacrifice in the biblical sense, the positive sense, which is more difficult in medieval drama because of the large amount of pathos attached to both characters. The pathetic reduces the sacrificial act to a spiritual trial rather than making it a test of faith. Biblically speaking, the sacrificial act gains credence because the emotional content does not get in the way. For Chaucer then, the

⁷² “*Inferno XXXIII, 37 – 74: Ugolino’s Importunity.*” *Speculum* 59 (1984): 549–555. Neuse argues, “the father and his sons in the Ugolino episode represent a somewhat grotesque parody of Christianity, with the covert suggestion that the hell idea implies a vengeful God who is, in a manner of speaking, a cannibal to his own creation. Singleton has noted two allusions to the Crucifixion, the first when the fourth son, little Gaddo, throws himself at his father’s feet and implores him, ‘Father, why do you not help me?’ (‘Padre mio, ché non m’aiuti?’ 69), recalling Christ’s words on the cross (Matthew 27.46). Later, when Dante denounces Pisa for its cruelty, he says...that it need not have put the little sons to such a cross: ‘non dovei tu I figliuoli pore a tal croce’ (87). These allusions gain force from the Eucharistic implications of the sons offering themselves to be eaten by the father” (“Chaucerian Intertextuality” 155).

need for the children's sacrifice becomes clear.⁷³ Hugelyn's behavior must stem from his faith or the sacrifice of the children is in vain. When explaining why children often serve as sacrifice and why it proves difficult to comprehend, René Girard writes, "Sacrifice deals with humankind, and it is in human terms that we must attempt to comprehend it" (90).⁷⁴ Since Hugelyn's behavior, in Kierkegaardian terms, lies in a sphere incomprehensible to most, the story must contain an element of which listeners and readers can make sense, in this case the importance of seeing Hugelyn's children pathetically and sacrificially. By focusing on the children's age rather than their names, Chaucer makes clear the innocence of the children. The dialogue he assigns them functions as *imitatio Christi*. In that way, the story of Hugelyn in Chaucer's *Monk's Tale* stays compatible with known medieval attitudes regarding children documented by historians of medieval culture, and it resonates with the religious attitudes of Chaucer's day.

Hugelyn clearly loves his children, and their innocence at his side in the face of death means eternal glory from a spiritual point of view, something Hugelyn obviously understands. The only way for the plan of eternal glory to come to fruition, however, rests in Hugelyn's ability to stay out of the realm of the universal and rely totally on faith, something that would seem absurd to most every other parent with their children's lives at stake. For that reason, Hugelyn emerges from his story far more elevated than the

⁷³ Norsworthy adds, "As retold by Chaucer's Monk, the Ugolino story has everything to do with the scandalization of 'little ones,' who may be seen metaphorically as not only children, but all souls under the care of the Church and its leaders" ("Hard Lords and Bad Food Service" 325).

⁷⁴ *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. New York: John Hopkins UP, 1979.

Ugolino in Dante's Hell.⁷⁵ Hollander states about Ugolino in Dante, "Powerless to give the children the bread which they crave, he did have the ability to offer them the spiritual bread which satisfies a more significant hunger. Therein lies his failure as a father" (554).⁷⁶ The third-person narrative and the ability to remain in the sphere of the absurd separate Hugelyn from the "failed father" of Dante's world. Hugelyn's situation is tragic, but the result of the sacrifice is not. He remains silent because he has to, and like Abraham, his children reap the rewards.

⁷⁵ Generally, modern readers would most likely see Ugolino elevated as a literary character because of Dante's emphasis on the universal; Chaucer's Hugelyn, however, is elevated in a religious sense because he resides in the absurd.

⁷⁶"Ugolino's Importunity."

CHAPTER 3
AND THE CHILD SHALL LEAD: THE LITTLE CLERGEON
AND HIS GIFT

The Monk, in his narration of Hugelyn's story, takes it upon himself to supply much of the pathetic element present in the characters, particularly in situations where he feels it is needed most. In that aspect, the Monk follows the pattern of medieval dramatists when rewriting the Abraham and Isaac account in the Bible. Like the Monk, the dramatists insert emotion into their plays, particularly at points where Abraham's obligation to follow through with God's directive logically demands an emotional response. Yet the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac is completely void of emotional content. Those who read the story seem to feel that it needs the emotion, particularly since a father is being asked to kill his son. Unfortunately, the narrator of the biblical passage is as emotionless as the characters themselves. Perhaps it is the human need for emotion within a religious context, especially in tragic or potentially tragic situations, that the use of affective piety on the part of the narrator has become commonplace in devotional or sacrificial literature. Nowhere in Chaucer is affective piety more ubiquitous than in the *Prioress' Tale*, all thanks to its most controversial of narrators.

For a variety of reasons, no tale in the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* perplexes or angers modern readers as much as the *Prioress' Tale*. In some respects, the hostility toward the tale seems somewhat surprising. While biblical accounts of martyrdom are

often seen as tragic, they do not generally elicit such enmity. Instead, the sacrificial figures in the Bible are seen as characters who give their lives in the service of God for the benefit of others. Additionally, these biblical figures are not usually children. The account of the little clergeon is different. It is true that he can be viewed as a martyr, but unlike most of his biblical counterparts, he does not meet his death knowing he is going to die. He only knows he wants to honor Mary through song. When he dies, his child status, along with the hideousness of his murder, make his death particularly revolting. The circumstances of his death then create a desire for revenge on the part of the little clergeon's Christian brethren, which the Prioress makes sure her listeners understand. The result is that the Jews responsible for the little clergeon's death pay a price as hideous as the one paid by the little clergeon. Perhaps it is contemporary Jewish history that has made modern readers¹ uncomfortable not only with the anti-Semitism² of the plot, but also with the emotional way in which the Prioress tells her story. Her hatred of the Jews coupled with her emotional volatility when she discusses them seem very much

¹ One should note that to medieval readers the anti-Jewish rhetoric espoused and practiced by the Prioress would not be as controversial given that anti-Judaism, in its early form, was, in fact, official Church policy. Because of this, some critics tend to be more compassionate in their judgment of the Prioress and her tale.

² A distinction must be made regarding the terms "anti-Semitism" and "anti-Judaism." In some ways, "anti-Semitism" is an inaccurate term since it did not come into existence until the 19th century. According to Gavin I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*. Los Angeles: U California P, 1990, "'Antisemitism' was invented about 1873 by Wilhelm Marr to describe the policy toward Jews based on 'racism' that he and others advocated" (311). For Langmuir, anti-Semitism refers not only to "racist manifestations[s]...but all instances in which people, because they are labeled Jews, are feared as symbols of subhumanity and hated for threatening characteristics they do not in fact possess" (301-302). Recent history has demonstrated the Prioress' attitudes regarding Jews to be consistent with modern definitions of that term and Langmuir notes that the practice of anti-Semitism in fact grew out of the Middle Ages (302). Prior to the beginning of the second millennium, Jews faced doctrinally directed discrimination more accurately defined as "anti-Judaism," which Langmuir notes came into existence because Jews "could not recognize Christ's truth and had killed him" (305). The Church-imposed ideas resulted more in restrictions designed to separate Christians and Jews rather than actual racist attitudes. From those beginnings, however, grew the hatred characteristic of the Prioress' rhetoric in her tale.

at odds with the somewhat gentle personality described in the *General Prologue*,³ and with how she presents herself in her own Prologue to her tale. On one level, she gives the impression that she is an adult version of the major character of her tale, the little clergeon, and all that he personifies. On another, she appears to be the complete opposite, a Christian authority who would, if she could, begin a pogrom. The result is a duality characterized by the “pure” child and the “demonic” Jews in the tale. What troubles some critics is the intentionality of the Prioress’ motives, and it explains the many psychoanalytical approaches to criticism of the Prioress and her tale. Some accuse her of hypocrisy; others excuse her of any self-awareness, attributing the harsh nature of her tale to the conventions often found in hagiographic or Mariological literature.⁴ Such an approach tends to make the characters one-dimensional, products of the genre being emphasized by the poet. However, if Kierkegaard’s psychoanalytical deconstruction of Abraham’s motives gives credence to the understanding of the controversial biblical passage, then this tale, certainly a variation on the Abraham and Isaac theme, *invites* a psychoanalytical reading of the characters, including the narrator, that goes beyond the function required of the genre to which they belong. Such an approach clearly reveals the binary nature of the tale’s narration. For example, the Prioress’ characterization of the little clergeon presents a child on the cusp of accountability, yet very much within the domain of innocence. His journey to sacrifice actually represents the model of salvation

³ Some argue that the portraits of the pilgrims in the *General Prologue* should not be used as a guide in determining motivating characteristics of the tale’s narration. Because of the dramatic principle, central in the reading of this particular tale, the Prioress becomes an exception since her description in the *General Prologue*, a description that at times appears “staged,” fits nicely with much of her narrative manner, which often appears overtly dramatic.

⁴ See *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*. Ed. Amy-Jill Levine. New York: T and T Clark International, 2005.

the Prioress believes in. Her own life, however, fails to adhere to such a model, assuming the Prioress of the Tale is to be read against the Prioress of the *General Prologue*.⁵ In the end, she presents herself as a character knowledgeable about the requirements of salvation. Her personal attraction to the worldly, however, prevents her from acting on those requirements. Unfortunately, her behavior causes her not only what some refer to as cognitive dissonance,⁶ but also a similar feeling in those who read the tale as they struggle with her apparently contradictory attitudes.⁷

This article, then, returns to the apparent contradictions of the Prioress' performance by way of the contemporary theorist, Jacques Derrida who expands on a theoretical formula proposed by Jan Patočka that explains much of the duality present not

⁵ Robert W. Hanning affirms that, "scholars have argued endlessly about Chaucer's attitude toward the Prioress" (586). "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun: Chaucer's Insight into the Roles Women Play." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2 (1977): 580-599. Chaucer's portrait of the Prioress in the *General Prologue* seems to stem in part from Matthew 23:25-27. While the *General Prologue* presents her as gentle and somewhat squeamish, her rhetoric in her tale proves just the opposite. William Orth similarly states, "The point of the ambiguity of the Prioress's portrait is to make final conclusions impossible...Chaucer very much intends us to puzzle over the details of her behavior" (200). "The Problem of the Performative in Chaucer's Prioress Sequence." *The Chaucer Review* 42 (2007): 196-210. Michael Calabrese notes, "The Prioress cannot mean; she can only feel, and she feels all the wrong things" (73). "Performing the Prioress: 'Conscience' and Responsibility in Studies of Chaucer's Prioress's Tale." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (2002): 66-91. Carol F. Heffernan adds, "She says more than she knows" (113). "Praying Before the Image of Mary: Chaucer's Prioress's Tale, VII 502-12." *The Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 103-116. Daniel Pigg, in an interesting article, argues the understanding of the Prioress lies outside her portrait in the *General Prologue*. "Refiguring Martyrdom: Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 29 (1994): 65-73.

⁶ See Joel Cooper, *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007.

⁷ Like the tale, the criticism on the Prioress tends to center on her own duality, as Hardy Long Frank alludes to: "The critical wrangling inspired by the gentle figure of Chaucer's Prioress seems not only ironic but irresolvable" (229). "Seeing the Prioress Whole." *The Chaucer Review* 25 (1991): 229-237. Paul G. Ruggiers summarizes the struggles many have with the Prioress' dual nature: "It is difficult, in handling problems of interpretation, to resist falling into the trap opened up many years ago by G. L. Kittredge...of viewing the Prioress as a psychological case of 'thwarted motherhood,' and of allowing such a view to awaken in us the more sentimental responses. It is more difficult to resist the other view, equally 'psychological,' of 'the overt streak of cruelty masked as pious hatred which is the visible obverse of the rather shallow sensibility that marks this nun's temperament'" (183). *The Art of the Canterbury Tales*. Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1965.

only in the Prioress' character, but also in the tale itself.⁸ The theory offers a model that, when applied, clarifies the dramatic principle present in the *Prioress' Tale* and perhaps even exonerates its narrator from her duplicitous attitude. It provides a way of looking at the Prioress that merges the binary aspects of her personality, enabling the reader to see her as whole rather than as an extreme version of something negative or positive, especially when she is juxtaposed with the little clergeon, a juxtaposition made possible through the passionate narration of his story.

In addition to the strong and sometimes volatile emotional element, the Prioress' narration also creates very sobering attitudes as her audience, then and now, tries to make sense of what it has just heard (read). Chaucer notes at the conclusion of the *Prioress' Tale*, in the Prologue to the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, "Whan seyde was al this miracle, every man / As sobre was that wonder was to se, / Til that oure Hooste jape[n] tho bigan" (691-693). The reaction of the pilgrims parallels the initial response of most modern readers,⁹ and the Prioress' use of affective piety accounts for much of this silent reaction. Many just are not sure about the degree of sincerity surrounding such usage.¹⁰ Those who defend the tale tend to do so because of their belief that the Prioress' use of emotion

⁸ *The Gift of Death*. Trans. David Wills. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1996.

⁹ John M. Hill states, "This is a hard tale for twentieth [twenty-first] century readers" (109). "The Shipman and the Prioress: Low Prudence and Triumphant Feeling." *Chaucerian Belief: The Poetics of Reverence and Delight*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991. Calabrese notes, "*The Prioress's Tale* poses a very confusing and uncomfortable set of problems for critics and for readers" ("Performing the Prioress" 66).

¹⁰ Hill remarks concerning some reactions, that the Prioress' story is "a tale mainly defended as a testament to an affective piety that was sincere and moving in its time" ("The Shipman and the Prioress" 109). See R.J. Schoeck, "Chaucer's Prioress: Mercy and Tender Heart." *Chaucer Criticism: Volume I, The Canterbury Tales*. Eds. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor. South Bend: U Notre Dame P, 1960. 245-258; Geoffrey Shepherd, "Religion and Philosophy in Chaucer." *Writers and Their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. Derek Brewer. London: HarperCollins, 1974. 262-289; Albert B. Friedman, "The Prioress's Tale and Chaucer's Anti-Semitism." *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1974): 118-129; John Archer, "The Structure of Anti-Semitism in the Prioress's Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 46-54; Stephen Spector, "Empathy and Enmity in the *Prioress's Tale*." *The Olde Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex, and Marriage in the Medieval World*. Eds. Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector. Albany: SUNY P, 1991.

comes from her heart. Such a defense at the very least proves safe since it avoids the larger and more volatile issue of the Prioress' anti-Semitic rhetoric. For some, it elicits a satisfactory response in that the miracle of the little clergeon attests to the greatness and the glory of God. To others, however, the Prioress and her harsh attitude toward Jews loom like a giant cloud over the entire tale, resulting in a condemnation of the Prioress,¹¹ her anti-Semitism,¹² and even Chaucer himself.¹³ Of course, the *Canterbury Tales*

¹¹ For more perspectives on Madame Eglentyne, see Carolyn P. Collette, "Sense and Sensibility in the 'Prioress's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review* 15 (1980): 138-150; Joseph A. Dane, "The Prioress and Her Romanzen." *The Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 219-222; Allen C. Koretsky, "Dangerous Innocence: Chaucer's Prioress and Her Tale." *Jewish Presences in English Literature*. Eds. Derek Cohen and Deborah Heller. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1990. 10-24; Douglas Loney, "Chaucer's Prioress and Agur 'Adulterous Woman.'" *The Chaucer Review* 27 (1992): 107-108; Philip S. Alexander, "Madame Eglentyne, Geoffrey Chaucer and the Problem of Medieval Anti-Semitism." *John Rylands Library Bulletin* 74 (1992): 109-120; Sheila Delany, "Chaucer's Prioress, the Jews, and the Muslims." *Chaucer and the Jews*. Ed. Sheila Delany. New York: Routledge, 2002. 43-57; Thomas J. Farrell, "The Prioress's Fair Forehead." *The Chaucer Review* 42 (2007): 211-221.

¹² For an interesting but ultimately incorrect reading of the role of anti-Semitism in the *Prioress's Tale*, see Sherman Hawkins, "Chaucer's Prioress and the Sacrifice of Praise." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 63 (1964): 599-624.

¹³ Even with the passage of time, critics and Chaucerians, old and new, have always remarked about this duality the tale presents and represents. For example, E.T. Donaldson stated, "*The Prioress's Tale* is a strange mixture of delicacy and horror, so that it is capable of producing two entirely different impacts" (1096). *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*. New York: HarperCollins, 1975. Beverly I. Boyd noted the very divided responses of the critics to the tale: "In 203 lines, Chaucer produced one of the most moving, by some lights, one of the most horrifying, by other lights, and in any case one of the most controversial pieces of religious fiction ever written" (60). *A Variorum Edition of the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Norman: U Oklahoma P, 1987. Lee Patterson wrote, "the dynamic that controls the *Prioress's Tale* is created by a tension between two extremes. On the one hand is an absolutist desire for purity, on the other the obstinate historicity to which these temporal strata witness" (507). "'The Living Witnesses of Our Redemption': Martyrdom and Imitation in Chaucer's Prioress's Tale." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 507-560. Four years later, Greg Wilsbacher accurately encapsulated the frustration and problems many have with this tale: "Of all of Chaucer's poems, 'The Prioress's Tale' is perhaps the most prominent example of a difficult or problematic text that challenges medievalists' ability to 'do our job' without conflict" (1). "Lumiansky's Paradox: Ethics, Aesthetics and Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale.'" *College Literature* 32 (2005): 1-29. The job he refers to is being able to explicate a text in such a manner that the author's intention is clear. Finally, Merrall Llewelyn Price noted, "The Prioress's tale of the little clergeon fascinates and appalls for its very medievalness. Its paradoxical blend of earthiness and spirituality and its unsettling attitude to both children and Jews make the tale a profoundly uncomfortable experience for a modern reader" (197). "Sadism and Sentimentality: Absorbing Anti-Semitism in Chaucer's Prioress." *The Chaucer Review* 43 (2008): 197-214. Interestingly, Price's notation of the paradox between "earthiness" and "spirituality" corresponds to Derrida's contention that the demonic emanates from the earth and that salvation is possible only through "earth's" expulsion. Hanning's excellent article, "From Eva and Ave to Eglentyne and Alisoun," presents several possibilities as to Chaucer's intention regarding his Prioress (as well as the Wife of Bath).

presents no shortage of religious hypocrites. But unlike the Pardoner, the Prioress' approach to religious matters appears less easily discernible.¹⁴ While her worldly cravings, personified by the brooch¹⁵ she wears, do come to the forefront when one looks for them, Madame Eglentyne disguises them, regardless of her intentionality, with her affective piety.¹⁶ Even with the tender nature of most of her religious musings, however, her anti-Semitism reveals a bitter and perhaps misguided hatred that counters the modern perception of the very basic "love conquers all" doctrine of Christianity preached by Christ¹⁷ and engraved on her brooch.¹⁸ But making anti-Semitism the sole focus of analysis denies the tale's totality and obscures other facets of the Prioress' personality such as her dramatic tendencies toward narrative.

Many modern scholars tend to read the tale dramatically, an interpretation that is certainly viable. In fact, the *Prioress' Tale*, more so than its counterparts, encourages a dramatic reading because the affective piety, in her hands, makes it difficult to view the tale in any other way, at least from a modern perspective.¹⁹ But unlike the Monk, who seeks to present himself as an authority figure in relation to Lady Fortune, or the

¹⁴ At the very least, the Prioress appears unaware of her own contradictions.

¹⁵ See E.T. Donaldson. "The Masculine Narrator and Four Women of Style." *Speaking of Chaucer*. London: Athlone P, 1970. 59-62. John Finlayson, "Chaucer's Prioress and Amor Vincit Omnia." *Studia Neophilologica* 60 (1988): 171-174; Joseph P. McGowan, "Chaucer's Prioress: Et Nos Cedamus Amori." *The Chaucer Review* 38 (2003): 199-202.

¹⁶ Anna Czarnowus defines affective piety as "The type of religiousness based on primary human emotions" (260). "Chaucer's Clergeon, or Towards Holiness in *The Prioress's Tale*." *Studia Anglicà Posnaniensia* 43 (2007): 251-264.

¹⁷ See Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 6:27-35; John 15:9-37.

¹⁸ What or whom love conquers, of course, are part of what makes the tale uncomfortable for many readers. One should acknowledge that medieval readers would not necessarily have seen their anti-Judaic attitudes in disagreement with Christian doctrine regarding love.

¹⁹ Even the very public mourning following the death of the little clergeon takes on an heightened dramatic effect because of the Prioress' anti-Semitic language.

Physician, who only searches for credibility as a storyteller, or the Wife of Bath,²⁰ whose cogent personality leaves little doubt as to the meaning of her tale, the Prioress, based on her portrait in the *General Prologue*, appears to tell her tale out of a personal desire to present herself as a religious expert while disguising her sensual machinations.²¹ The irony occurs in the subject matter of the tale itself. The Prioress interestingly (and perhaps unknowingly) promotes a theological discourse on salvation, one that involves the sacrifice of the little clergeon and the affective piety associated with this sacrifice. The theological discourse, made clear through Derrida's theory, provides the answer to the possible salvation of not only her own misunderstood soul, but also the souls of medieval Christians in general. Her discourse is important because of her use of affective piety.

There is no shortage of emotional language in the *Prioress' Tale* despite its brevity.²² This exclamatory use of affective piety works on two levels. First, it is a tool used to demonstrate the intense devotion and responsibility of the little clergeon to Mary.²³ Central to the little clergeon's emotions is the understanding that his passionate tendencies are completely natural, motivated by a desire and responsibility to serve and

²⁰ Although the Wife of Bath (the Pardoner too) is characteristically more dynamic as an individual, her narrative style and the relatively recognizable thematic content of her tale make the understanding of the tale less problematic.

²¹ The result, according to Hanning, is that "the Prioress is fated to look if not silly then at least ambivalent in all she does and says" ("From Eva and Ave" 587). Such a viewpoint is traditionally the way critics see the Prioress. See chapter seven by Robert O. Payne. "Geoffrey Chaucer." *Twayne's English Authors Series Online*. New York: G.K. Hall, 1997; Mei-Ling Chao. "Female Voice in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*." *General Education and Transdisciplinary Research* 1 (2007): 75-92.

²² Patterson observes, "The tale is ostentatiously exclamatory, including no less than twelve separate outbursts" ("The Living Witnesses" 509).

²³ Referring to the manifestation of the *Alma redemptoris* as emotion, Czarnowus notes, "In Chaucer's text the anthem becomes the source of emotions so intense that they overcome the child to the point of his being unable to control them" ("Chaucer's Clergeon" 256).

love God (Mary) through song.²⁴ But the Prioress herself demonstrates equally well how such pathos can be used as an emotional tool to espouse a particular philosophy. Such espousal occurs with the Prioress' brutal description of the little clergeon's death, which she uses to express her condemnation of those responsible.²⁵ It is precisely the pathos produced by this description that the Prioress counts on, and she uses it to promote not only her anti-Judaic (as she and modern readers see it) rhetoric, but also a theological philosophy on salvation based on sincere sentiment. For the Prioress' idea of salvation to work, one must view the little clergeon's death in terms of religious pathos and its connection to responsibility, where the gift of death serves as the final component of a vigorously traveled and difficult path. It is a journey the Prioress has yet to undertake, but one, as Derrida's theory helps to explain, that the little clergeon begins well ahead of most, at the point of responsibility.

The Demonic, Responsibility, and the Gift of Death

Jan Patočka²⁶ probes the relationship between responsibility and death by tracing the historicity of modern decadence beginning with Plato and his "Form of the Good"²⁷ philosophy to which, Plato believed, the soul must strive. Such striving becomes necessary to escape what Patočka refers to as the "orgiastic" or sacrificial violence (101) inherent in human behavior. This move toward responsibility, a non-intrinsic action, relates directly to Christianity, the medium that Patočka sees as the most important for

²⁴ For an interesting article noting the connection between music and pathos, see J. Stephen Russell, "Song and the Ineffable in the Prioress's Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 33 (1998): 176-189. See also Anthony Bale, "Miracle: Shifting Definitions in 'The Miracle of the Boy Singer.'" *The Jew in the Medieval Book: English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2006. 55-104.

²⁵ As Czarnowus states, "The beheading of a child seems to be a particularly loathsome crime and the event carries with it a huge potential for pathos" ("Chaucer's Clergeon" 260).

²⁶ "Is Technological Civilization Decadent, and Why?" *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*. Trans. Erazim Kohák. Chicago: Open Court, 1996.

²⁷ See *Republic*, Book 6, 502c – 509c.

overcoming the orgiastic since responsibility implies an acknowledgement of, and duty toward, God. For responsibility to surface, one must dispense with or jettison the orgiastic in the Platonic sense, or the demonic in the Christian sense. Derrida, in his account of Patočka's essay, states that the demonic "confuses the limits among the animal, the human, and the divine, and...retains an affinity with mystery [or] the secret of the sacred" (2). Derrida also notes that the demonic equates to irresponsibility or "nonresponsibility" that occurs because an individual has not felt the desire nor understands the need to make an accounting of his / her behavior. The demonic "belongs to a space in which there has not yet resounded the injunction to *respond*; a space in which one does not yet hear the call to explain oneself [*répondre di soi*], one's actions or one's thoughts, to respond to the other and answer for oneself before the other" (3). In essence, one retains a connection with the demonic because it is most natural to do so. The individual fails to recognize or deliberately refuses to concede the role of responsibility, a role, Patočka delineates, that occurs when the individual acknowledges the historicity of the demonic, an acknowledgement that, quite frankly, most struggle with because, according to Derrida, "historicity must remain open as a problem" (5). In the end, most fear acknowledging that which others would criticize or see as weak. Additionally, some fail to reveal their demonic because they do not recognize themselves as having demonic "baggage" that they must unload.

From responsibility emerges "religion,"²⁸ which cannot exist until the abolishment of the demonic occurs.²⁹ The unwillingness of the individual to

²⁸ It is important to note that when Patočka and Derrida use the term "religion," they use it to designate the purest possible relationship one can experience with God. The proper term is "spirituality," since "religion," by definition, refers to something man-made. Logically, something man-made cannot be

acknowledge and then jettison the secret demonic and their desire to avoid responsibility creates the façade by which (s)he hides or disguises the self. Essentially, those who knowingly try to pass themselves off as “religious” before attaining responsibility amount to nothing more than hypocrites, although they may indeed consider themselves “religious.” Of course, one can understand why so many choose that road, because, as Derrida notes, “there is always a risk in acknowledging history or responsibility” (5), and history, both real and literary, is filled with examples of those who paid the price for the acknowledgement of theirs and others’ sins.³⁰ Often such acknowledgement leads to violence on the part of others.³¹ The question then centers on humanity’s willingness to share that which exposes it the most. Is an individual willing to acknowledge the deep, dark secrets of the demonic if it means the exposed self will never be more vulnerable? If the answer is yes, then the result is God-created “religion” in its purest possible sense, as God intended.³² Derrida states that “Religion is responsibility or it is nothing at all...In the authentic sense of the word, religion comes into being the moment that the experience of responsibility extracts itself from that form of secrecy called demonic

without taint. In essence, spirituality comes from God. Religion comes from man. Henceforth, religion or religious, referring to the spiritual, will be noted with quotation marks. When the terms represent that which is purely of man, they will be designated without the quotation marks.

²⁹ The paradox, though, as Derrida defines it, occurs with the acknowledgement, in the Platonic sense, of the impossibility of total and complete responsibility: “Although it is incorporated, disciplined, subjugated, and enslaved, the orgiastic is not annihilated. It continues to motivate subterraneously a mythology of responsible freedom that is at the same time a politics” (*The Gift of Death* 19). He also reminds us, “that the mystery that is incorporated, then repressed, is never destroyed...history never effaces what it buries; it always keeps with itself the secret of whatever it encrypts, the secret of its secret” (*Ibid* 21). True responsibility, then, according to Derrida, never can occur for it cannot be effaced.

³⁰ See, for example, the tales of Arthurian romance regarding Lancelot and Guinevere.

³¹ Acts 7:52-59, the martyrdom of Stephen, demonstrates how uncomfortable people become when they are encouraged to practice responsibility as Patočka defines it.

³² Referring to the paradox, Derrida notes that this God-intended religion has not yet reached fruition: “Something has not yet arrived, neither at Christianity nor by means of Christianity. What has not yet arrived at or happened to Christianity is Christianity. Christianity has not yet come to Christianity. What has not yet come about is the fulfillment, within history and in political history...of the new responsibility announced by the *mysterium tremendum*” (*The Gift of Death* 28).

mystery” (2, 3). And while one cannot tie responsibility to secrecy, it is exactly what most try to do, resulting in the demonic never truly being jettisoned, and responsibility never being achieved. Consequently, because of the affinity of responsibility with secrecy, true “religious” freedom or faith lies on the other side of the very fine line that separates it from religious hypocrisy. Faith, then, “a form of involvement with the other that is a venture into absolute risk, beyond knowledge and certainty” (5), results from a process of spiritual growth and maturity, what Derrida refers to as a “passage” that “involves traversing or enduring the test by means of which the ethical conscience will be delivered of the demonic, the mystagogic and the enthusiastic, of the initiatory and the esoteric” (2-3).³³ The test results in the gift of death that puts the individual “into relation with the transcendence of the other, with God as selfless goodness” (6).³⁴

Death as a gift is made manifest on a number of levels. It may refer to the freedom that is achieved through the eradication of the worldly, including those trappings that prevent one from experiencing true “religious” freedom and peace. Nothing in this world holds meaning for the “religiously” free and the divine becomes the sole focus. In this sense, death is a gift bestowed by God. One can only attain this form of the gift, however, through the complete expulsion of the demonic. Another manifestation of the gift refers to actual physical death, the final, necessary component for the revelation of the presence of God. Physical death symbolizes the expulsion of the worldly; it is the point through which God rewards faith and reveals His greatness. The point of physical

³³ For similar points of view, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*. Eds. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: U California P, 1978; Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*. Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2006.

³⁴ In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard refers to this point of operating outside the understanding of man as the “absurd.” For a discussion of Kierkegaardian theory in greater detail, see chapter 1.

death is welcomed without fear because “this conscience that looks death in the face is another name for freedom” (15).

Finally and perhaps most importantly, death is a form of the gift that relates to the effect that the second manifestation has on others. The death of the individual results in the epiphany, the *dénouement* of the situation at hand, as well as the salvation of the other. This form is the gift that is bestowed upon the other, made possible when the “bestower” has obtained the previous forms of the gift. This point of *dénouement* coincides with yet another secret based in Christian ideals, the *mysterium tremendum*,³⁵ the “more” required for the elimination of the demonic. For Derrida, such a moment reflects

the terrifying mystery, the dread, fear and trembling of the Christian in the experience of the sacrificial gift. This trembling seizes one at the moment of becoming a person, and the person can become what it is only in being paralyzed [*transie*], in its very singularity, by the gaze of God. (6)

It is a “passage from exteriority to interiority” as well as “from the accessible to the inaccessible” (6). This *mysterium tremendum*, then, is the overwhelming and emotional culmination of a process that creates or authenticates a historicity not only for the self on a microcosmic level, but also for the Christian religion as a whole, a progression from the Platonic, pagan ideal to the unanswerable but believed ideals of Christian salvation.

³⁵ The point at which the *mysterium tremendum* occurs would correspond to the point of *infinite resignation* in Kierkegaardian terms. See chapter 1.

The Prioress, the little clergeon, and Spiritual Journey

The theoretical model offered by Patočka and Derrida provides an explanation of the Prioress' spiritual situation through the examination of the spiritual state of the little clergeon. Essentially, he serves as the model of behavior necessary for salvation. He is, in essence, a microcosm of spirituality.³⁶ And while the Prioress, who certainly delineates the model, may understand what she has described, she ultimately falls short of attaining its goal. The little clergeon, then, if viewed through the Patočkian / Derridean lenses of responsibility and spirituality, provides the model for salvation that the other characters of the tale, including the narrator, need. Additionally, the *mysterium tremendum* serves as the key connector between Derrida's views on responsibility and the Prioress' use of affective piety, since its other chief characteristic is the emotion associated with it. Derrida notes of the emotional impact of the *mysterium tremendum*: "The free and responsible self on the part of a mortal or finite being can indeed be expressed maniacally" (18).

On some levels, one can describe the Prioress' rhetoric, at the very least, as maniacal. Her anti-Semitism appears somewhat revolutionary given the "gentle" nature of her *effictio* in the *General Prologue*. According to Derrida, "every revolution, whether atheistic or religious, bears witness to a return of the sacred in the form of an enthusiasm or fervor, otherwise known as the presence of the gods within us" (21). Such is precisely what the Prioress tries to project, and her rhetoric, if viewed through Derridean theory, demonstrates how Chaucer may have felt regarding the topic of affective piety. Unlike

³⁶ Patterson shrewdly notes, "the clergeon triumphs over a hyperbolic image not just of 'foule usure and lucre of vileyneye' (491) but of a world in which boys are beaten for learning an antiphon in honor of the Virgin and in which monks are not as holy as they 'oghte be' (642) – over, in short, a historical world stubbornly resistant to redemption" ("The Living Witnesses" 511).

the other tales containing violence toward children, the *Prioress' Tale* begins with pathos from the negative side of the emotional scale. From the Derridean perspective, the negative emotion, characterized by the Prioress' hatred of the Jews, would equate to the demonic that one must jettison before the attainment of salvation.³⁷

The Prioress begins her tale on a negative note with reference to the existence of a dangerous Jewish sector within "a greet citee" (488) in Asia³⁸ where the little clergeon lives, an area filled with "foule usure and [the] lucre of vileyneye / Hateful to Crist and to his compaignye" (491-492). Even worse, as the Prioress later notes, this Jewish ghetto contains a population whose hearts host Satan's "waspes nest" (559). Unfortunately, for the little clergeon, this Jewish neighborhood lies between his home and the school he attends. Nothing rouses emotion more quickly than hatred, as the relatively compact opening description demonstrates. Emotion, characterized in the negative by the use of "foule," "lucre," and "hateful," sets up the dynamic from which the Prioress will operate. After only one stanza, by introducing children into the backdrop she has created, the Prioress has begun her binary approach to characterizing the emotion. Once she mentions the little clergeon specifically, she allows for the emergence of pity and awe by noting the elimination of patriarchal authority in favor of the divine. In biblical text, revered figures such as Abraham are precisely those who are able to step away from worldly influence and dedicate all to divine authority. While the story of Abraham's

³⁷ One should note that among her company the rhetoric the Prioress uses at this point is not uncommon, given the anti-Judaic dictum of the Church at the time. She does not see her words as demonic.

³⁸ For a perspective on Chaucer's possible source material for the Jewish aspect of the tale, see Sarah Stanbury, "Host Desecration, Chaucer's 'Prioress's Tale,' and Prague 1389." *Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth D. Kirk*. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 211-224. See also Eli Valley, *The Great Jewish Cities of Central and Eastern Europe*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999.

sacrifice of Isaac is void of emotion, much of the rest of their story is filled with it. Exegetes get to see the human part of Abraham and his son, men whose emotions stem from the events in their life. The result is an audience who finds itself emotionally attached to the character they read about. This relationship between the audience and the characters is what medieval dramatists attempted to build in their plays. The audience could understand more about the characters they saw onstage if they could identify with those characters emotionally.

The Prioress, in her characterization of the little clergeon, acts much like the medieval dramatist. First, the little clergeon has no father figure, and Mary, Christ's mother, represents the divine to which he prays. The lack of a father figure creates pity for the child and the use of the divine helps to emphasize it. Such a beginning continues the pattern of affective piety begun in the Prologue to her tale that the Prioress uses to "sell" her story. Next, the Prioress "peppers" her Prologue with a very emotional vocabulary that emphasizes the innocence of the child figure. She juxtaposes "precious" (455), with "ravyshest" (469), the former being associated with the child and the latter being connected to the mother figure. Additionally, her emphasis on Mary, begun in the second stanza and continued to the Prologue's end, in effect establishes the template of the single parental unit, often a reality in the Middle Ages because of plague³⁹ and violence, that leads to sympathy for the child figure(s) present. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the tale's beginning establishes the purity of the child, creating the

³⁹ See Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. 21ff.

vehicle to channel emotion, and removing gender as a motivating factor in the decisions the character makes.⁴⁰

The positive aspects of emotion, however, do seem to be aligned with the feminine. Once the tale proper begins, the Prioress makes clear that the little clergeon's purity and responsibility stem from the women figures in his life:

...where as he saugh th'ymage
Of Cristes mooder, hadde he in usage,
As hym was taught, to knele adoun and seye
His *Ave Marie*, as he goth by the weye

Thus hath this wydwe hir litel sone ytaught
Oure bilsful Lady, Cristes mooder deere,
To worshipec ay, and he forgat it naught,
For sely child wol alday soone leere. (505-512)

As the birth of Christ through a pure virgin establishes His earthly purity, so too does the little clergeon, through his prayer to Mary and through the absence of a father figure, retain his. Essentially, because of his already pure nature, the little clergeon begins his journey ahead of Derrida's demonic mystery, thus allowing Chaucer to eliminate the paradoxical nature of the demonic that Derrida suggests one can never completely abolish. The little clergeon assumes responsibility, consistent with Derrida's definition, in that the choices he makes come outside of knowledge or understanding. Instead, they lie completely in faith. And the text suggests that responsibility is divinely inspired:

⁴⁰ It is possible that the innocent child actually stands as a substitute for the monastic woman's gender.

“The swetnesse his hearte perced so / Of Cristes mooder” (555-556). For example, when he hears the singing of the *Alma redemptoris* at school, the little clergeon feels, without understanding or knowing why, the need to memorize the hymn’s first verse. He asks a schoolmate for its meaning and then learns the remainder of the song despite the possible consequences, so that he may honor the glory of Christ’s mother.⁴¹ He reacts instinctively.⁴² Additionally, the little clergeon’s mastery of the song occurs in private, an act consistent with the mysterious sacred. To achieve salvation according to the Derridean model, complete and unwavering determination is necessary. And while this “instruction” may be generically determined rather than psychological, the point is the same: the scene establishes the resolve of the little clergeon. Additionally, the scene signifies that true salvation comes with the discarding of worldly influence, which the little clergeon’s determination to learn the song demonstrates:

‘Now, certes, I wol do my diligence
 To konne it al er Cristemasse be went.
 Though that I for my prymer shal be shent
 And shal be beten thries in an houre,
 I wol it konne Oure Lady for to honoure!’ (539-543)⁴³

⁴¹ Demonstrating how the little clergeon’s song is a reworking of Revelation 14:1-5, Patterson states about the Prioress, “her tale is itself an effort at such a *canticus Agni*. It is a song both to and about the Lamb and-insofar as the Innocents are assimilated to their divine exemplar-by the lamb as well” (“The Living Witnesses” 509). Essentially, the tale is the Prioress’ effort at *imitatio canticae*.

⁴² Price affirms, “The boy and his schoolfellow (and presumably also his mother) understand only the vernacular, or the mother tongue” (“Sadism and Sentimentality” 204). Sarah Beckwith notes, “Late medieval piety was both the product and symptom of the drive towards vernacularity and this resulted in a fracturing of authority...It became increasingly clear that a God in the vernacular was a different God from a God in Latin” (38). *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

⁴³ On an interesting note: the beating the little clergeon claims he would willingly take counters the personality affixed the Prioress by Chaucer in the *General Prologue*: “She wolde wepe, if that she saugh a

The little clergeon's willingness to learn the song, despite the threat of being beaten for neglect of his regular studies, indicates that the worldly no longer has (if it ever had) any meaning for him. With his purity and honest motives established, the Prioress can proceed to direct her audience's attention to the next section of her tale, which not only continues the emotional beginning she has created but also complicates it immensely by demonstrating the perils involved in faith-based ideals.

The little clergeon's faith becomes evident not only while he is walking through this treacherous part of the great Asian city, but also because he is singing the praises of Christ's mother when he does it: "thurghout the Juerie / This litel chil, as he cam to and fro, / Ful murily than wolde he syng and crie / O Alma redemptoris everemo" (551-554).⁴⁴ As Derrida's definition of faith suggests, the little clergeon does indeed venture into an absolute and real risk as he walks through the ghetto singing aloud. And his innocence, which the Prioress reminds her listeners of through the phrase "This innocent" (566), indicates that the child operates outside the bounds of knowledge or understanding. There is no certainty that he will traverse the distance safely.⁴⁵ The little clergeon operates only with the thought of singing the praises to Christ's mother. For him, responsibility and faith have merged to the point where he obtains the first form of the gift, the rejection of the worldly. God rewards the little clergeon's faith, as the child reveals later, when right before his death Mary appears to him and tells him to continue

mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde" (144-145), a juxtaposition of spiritual and worldly values.

⁴⁴ Another manifestation of the little clergeon's faith is that he sings in a language he does not know or understand, trusting that the song itself is a form of praise to his divine spiritual mother.

⁴⁵ Of course, as the tale's genre indicates, the little clergeon stands no chance of traversing the ghetto unharmed.

singing her praises. Later, while lying in state, nothing the child relates to the Abbot indicates a fear of impending death.

His brutal murder brings the little clergeon to the next stage of salvation, the gift of physical death. Christian theology teaches repeatedly that the glory of God often surfaces through the martyred,⁴⁶ who are made types of Christ.⁴⁷ And while the little clergeon, like Isaac, is certainly a sacrificial Christ type, in the Prioress' hands he serves more as a vehicle to establish her narrative credibility. His innocence enables her to narrate from the position of credible preacher: "Mordre wol out, certeyn, it wol nat faille, / And namely ther th'onour of God shal sprede" (576-577), and "O grete God, that parfournest thy laude / By mouth of innocentz, lo, heere thy might!" (607-608). While the Prioress alludes to the upcoming revenge upon the Jews, in essence saying that they will get what they deserve, the lines also indicate that the little clergeon's death, although brutal, ultimately serves as an instrument of God. Her attitude mirrors the Crusades mentality that if one commits vengeance in the name of the Lord, then such vengeance brings about the Lord's glory. Her words also let the audience know that the story does not end with this death. Given that the little clergeon's death works for the glory of God, one should not view it negatively, since it results in the child's spiritual freedom:

O martir, sowded to virginitee,

⁴⁶ Besides Jesus Christ, John the Baptist and Stephen, other preeminent accounts of martyrdom include James, the brother of John, ordered beheaded by Agrippa I around 43 or 44; James, the brother of Jesus, is ordered stoned to death by Anan in 62; Peter, martyred in Rome in 64 or 67, and the beheading of Paul in Rome in 67.

⁴⁷ Patterson affirms: "In the Middle Ages, the Holy Innocents were traditionally understood as types of Christ, who was himself in turn often represented in late medieval religious writing and drama as a sacrificial child" ("The Living Witnesses" 510). For historical basis, see Gavin Langmuir, "The Knight's Tale of Young Hugh of Lincoln." *Speculum* 47 (1972): 459-482. See also Leah Sinanoglou, "The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays." *Speculum* 48 (1973): 491-509; Barbara Hanawalt, "Narratives of a Nurturing Culture: Parents and Neighbors in Medieval England." *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979. 154-157.

Now maystow syngen, folwyng evere in oon
The white Lamb celestial..
Of which the grete evaungelist, Seint John,
In Pathmos wroot, which seith that they that goon
Biforn this Lamb and synge a song al newe,
That nevere, fleshly, wommen they ne knewe. (579-585)

The revelation of the gift that the little clergeon's death represents must now occur so that it will work for the benefit of others, the third form of the gift of death, through the *mysterium tremendum*.

Up to this point, the Prioress has engaged in the use of affective piety made manifest in two ways: the pity she elicits concerning the little clergeon's innocence and devotion, and the hatred she espouses toward the Jews. The use of the pathetic, however, reaches a new level with the murder of the little clergeon and the discarding of his body. The Prioress interrupts her narrative to heighten the pathos of such an act.⁴⁸ Her attention turns from the singular, "This cursed Jew" (570), to the all-inclusive "thise Jewes" (573), hypothesizing the history of such behavior with the ahistorical "O cursed folk of Herodes al newe" (574), referring of course, to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Clearly, the Prioress uses emotion as part of a sustained and calculated effort to make a much larger

⁴⁸ Price states, "The clearest example of the Prioress's invocation of the contaminating nature of the Jews in her tale is the brutally rapid and monosyllabic account of the throwing of the wounded child into the sewage produced by the Jewish community...an occurrence so horrifying to the Prioress that she feels compelled to reiterate her description, even breaking the frame of her narrative to do so performatively, in the linguistic as well as the theatrical sense" ("Sadism and Sentimentality" 200-201).

point regarding the later effect of the little clergeon's treatment. Price, for example, sees the defilement of the little clergeon's body⁴⁹ as an inverse form of baptism:

The pollution of the child's body by the sewage in the privy recalls the purification ceremony of infant baptism, which would have been performed on the child as a newborn to ensure his entrance into grace, and which is performed again in the tale when the holy water is cast on the body, reaffirming his initial baptism as well as washing away the Jewish feces. (201)⁵⁰

Perhaps it is fitting that Price sees this scene as a "baptism" of sorts, since baptism coincides with spiritual renewal and new beginnings. At this point in the narrative, the Prioress has combined her two manifestations of affective piety. She points her listeners in the direction that will lead to the ultimate emotional moment in the *mysterium tremendum* and its connection to the divine.

The idea that God often works through the death of the innocent is made manifest in the supernatural circumstances succeeding the little clergeon's own death. Despite the brutality of his murder – he cries out that “My throte is kut unto my nekke boon” (649) – and the foul location of his body – “I seye that in a wardrobe they hym threwe / Where as thise Jewes purgen hire entraille” (572-573) – the little clergeon reveals his whereabouts through his singing of his beloved *Alma redemptoris*. Clearly, the

⁴⁹ For a fascinating read on the role of defilement in Chaucer, see Susan Signe Morrison's *Excrement in the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics*. New York: Palgrave-McMillan, 2008. Specifically, chapter six, “Sacred Filth: Relics, Ritual, and Remembering in *The Prioress's Tale*.” 73-88.

⁵⁰ Price notes the historical precedent for such behavior, “The thirteenth-century Caesarius of Heisterbach records the idea that Jews could reverse the effects of baptism by repeatedly drawing converts to Christianity through a latrine, and he is not alone in describing a noxious smell peculiar to Jews, the *fetor Judaicus*, which new Christians would notice for the first time after their baptism...there is a significant history of tales of Jews casting the holy things of Christianity into their privies” (“Sadism and Sentimentality” 201).

viciousness of the wound indicates that the child is dead, as does the response of the Christians following his body's discovery. The singing of the song despite the obvious physical state of the little clergeon demonstrates the divine at work. It is a miracle that reveals death as a temporary state, something not to be feared. Death is, in fact, a gift. With their arrival, the Christians notice as much and the scene marks the first signs of the approaching *mysterium tremendum*: "The Cristene folk that thurgh the street wente / In coomen for to wondre upon this thyng" (614-615). But their wonder is tempered, almost by an attenuating attitude. Upon his arrival at the scene, the Provost's declaration, "Crist...is of hevene kyng" (618), serves more as a rallying cry than it does a reaction to the little clergeon's singing. The Provost's reaction is consistent with the idea that the physical remains of martyrs brings about miracles.⁵¹ However, the little clergeon's fellow Christians have a responsibility to punish those guilty of his murder. Like the drum that stimulates the soldier to battle, the Provost's acknowledgement of the divine provides justification for the revenge they seek. At this point, the little clergeon's death seems like an attenuated version of the death of a saint.

Like the Prioress' binary approach to emotion, the Christian attitude toward the little clergeon's death reveals a dual nature. Almost immediately, the attitude of the Christians changes, keeping with the duality of the tale. On one level, there is the presumed fervor with which the Christians seek the responsible Jews. At the same time, they retrieve the little clergeon's body with "pitous lamentacioun" (621). At the abbey,

⁵¹ See Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*. Trans. Helen Weaver. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981; Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1982; Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1996; Anneli Rufus, *Magnificent Corpses*. New York: Marlowe, 1999.

“His mooder swownynge by his beere lay” (625), and the Prioress compares her with the biblical figure of the inconsolable Rachel.⁵² Immediately afterward, however, the Prioress spends an entire stanza describing the result of the manhunt for the Jews:

With torment and with shameful deeth echon,
This provost dooth thise Jewes for to sterve
That of this mordre wiste, and that anon.
He nolde no swich cursednesse observe.
“Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve”;
Therefore with wilde hors he dide hem drawe,
And after that he heng hem by the lawe. (628-634)

The emotion operates between extremes of sadness and vengeance. The Prioress’ twofold description creates the atmosphere necessary for the *mysterium tremendum* to occur. The perplexing issue, though, is the Christians’ doleful state of mind when they witness the miracle of the little clergeon’s singing *after* his horrific murder. No doubt there still exists a degree of horror with regard to the brutality of the crime and the disposition of the little clergeon’s body. Yet they do not react in a manner consistent with the nature of the miracle, because they do not understand it in terms of their own salvation.⁵³ As the Patočkian / Derridean model indicates, the little clergeon operates at a point ahead of the secret demonic. His youth and innocence, clearly established by the

⁵² Alfred David alludes to the binary aspect of this tale through the Rachel comparison noting Chaucer’s awareness of history’s two-fold view of Jews as “monsters” and as “children of God” which exculpates Chaucer from his character’s anti-Semitism. See *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer’s Poetry*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976. 210ff.

⁵³ L.O. Aranye Fradenburg states, “The sacrificial body... captivates us because it gives us a fixed, constant image of sentience in transference, not only with respect to the passage from life to death, but also from one ‘neighbor’ to another via the unconscious group on whose behalf sacrifice, the antidote for the group’s lack of sentience, is putatively endured” (34). *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2002.

Prioress, demonstrate that the little clergeon has no demonic to admit to or jettison. That simply cannot be said of the tale's other characters. Because they have not reached the point of responsibility, they cannot understand what they witness. Quite simply, in Derridean terms, the little clergeon's "gift" has yet to reach the point of the rapidly approaching *mysterium tremendum*, the point to which the Prioress' use of the pathetic has been building. It is a point that occurs in this instance when those who need salvation indeed recognize and understand the little clergeon's death as a gift. Such a moment transpires after the funeral procession, when the little clergeon's body lies in state at the church.

As noted earlier, the sprinkling of water by the Abbot onto the body of the little clergeon represents a baptismal moment. More importantly, it also marks the moment that initiates the *mysterium tremendum*: "And whan they hooly water on hym caste, / Yet spak this child, whan spreynd was hooly water, / And song O *Alma redemptoris mater!*" (639-641). The Derridean definition of *mysterium tremendum* describes the moment as one that transcends the worldly, that moment when one finds himself in the direct presence of God. Essentially, the little clergeon bestows his gift at that moment. Patočka notes that at this point "we are *enraptured*, where something more powerful than our free possibility, our responsibility, seems to break into our life and bestow on it meaning which it would not know otherwise" (98-99). Because the little clergeon begins his journey ahead of the secret demonic, he is at the point where he can bestow his gift on others since he has already acquired the other forms of the gift. But to receive the final form that another offers, the recipient must assume responsibility and eliminate the demonic. The Prioress notes that, "This abbot...was an hooly man" (642), a description

far different than the negative way Chaucer or his pilgrims depict most of the religious figures in the *Canterbury Tales*. Presumably, based on the Prioress' judgment⁵⁴ of him, this Abbot has gone through the journey on the verge of completion by the little clergeon, although he does not fully understand all that he sees or hears. Indeed, Derrida's definition of responsibility indicates a degree of miscomprehension at the acts witnessed, and the text alludes to such a moment when the Abbot asks the reanimated child, "Tel me what is thy cause for to synge, / Sith that thy throte is kut to my semyng?" (647-648). Here, the Abbot recognizes the divine nature of the miracle of the child's singing, but his logic does not permit him to understand the event in its totality.⁵⁵ The reason is because the Abbot lacks the responsibility associated with the little clergeon's pure state. As previously stated, the child never proceeds from the secret demonic, so worldly understanding has no meaning for him. However, as an adult who has come from the secret demonic on his spiritual journey and because of the worldly influence of his past, the Abbot requires an explanation of the events he now witnesses, one willingly provided by the little clergeon.⁵⁶

During his explanation, the child reveals the path to salvation. His account suggests that at the point of transcendence from faith to the gift, the point where all three forms of the gift come together, the divine will reveal itself – the point of *mysterium tremendum*. Earlier, Mary appears to the little clergeon and commands him to sing, and

⁵⁴ As the Prioress openly and freely states her opinions throughout, there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of her judgment of the abbot.

⁵⁵ The grain could represent the abbot's inability to perceive the miraculous.

⁵⁶ Although many have called into question the sincerity of the Prioress' piety, she willingly acknowledges the abbot to be a good man. Because the abbot earnestly enquires into the nature of the miracle of the little clergeon, and because of the abbot's reaction when the grain is removed from the little clergeon, it is reasonable that he earnestly seeks spirituality and salvation. Had he not been sincere, he could not have had the overwhelming emotional response according to the characteristics of the *mysterium tremendum*.

she rewards his faith with two acts. First, she places the grain upon his tongue, the “Eucharistic moment.”⁵⁷ This action, like the same that takes place during the communion part of the Mass, is a reminder that the divine now resides within the host. Additionally, her final words to him, ““Be nat agast; I wol thee nat forsake”” (669), reminds the little clergeon that his sacrifice is not in vain. With the removal of the grain from the child’s tongue, the child’s death becomes the Abbot’s gift, the third variety, since the little clergeon now resides with the Christian divine, a validation of the sacrifice. The resulting “chaos,” revealed through the Abbot’s actions and the point where all emotion reaches its climax, demonstrates the *mysterium tremendum* in action:

And whan this abbot hadde this wonder seyn,
His salte teeris trikked doun as reyn,
And gruff he fil al plat upon the grounde,
And stille he lay as he had ben ybounde.

The convent eek lay on the pavement
Wepyng, and heryng Cristes mooder deere,
And after that they ryse, and forth been went,
And token away this martir from his beere...(673-680)

⁵⁷ For a perspective on the symbolic meaning of the “greyn,” see Sister Nicholas Maltman, “The Divine Grenary, or the End of the Prioress’ ‘Greyn.’” *The Chaucer Review* 17 (1982): 163-170. See also Sarah Stanbury, “The Clergeon’s Tongue.” *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 2008. 153-171; Conversely, Albert B. Friedman argues that the grain has no real symbolic meaning and the critics tend to over-analyze its importance in the tale. See “The Mysterious ‘Greyn’ in the *Prioress’ Tale*.” *The Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 328-335. Kathleen Oliver states, “Chaucer’s ‘greyn’ is ambiguous; the *Prioress’s Tale* seemingly provides few, if any, clues as to the true nature of the ‘greyn’” (357). “Singing Bread, Manna, and the Clergeon’s ‘Greyn.’” *The Chaucer Review* 31 (1997): 357-364.

At that point, he lies in commune with God, a manifestation of Patočka's definition. The little clergeon's gift of death results in the salvation of not only the Abbot, but also any others around him who have taken the path from the secret demonic to responsibility to faith. Their actions lie beyond the scope of understanding, and they find themselves "transfixed" by the power of God. The weeping that occurs afterward takes on a joyous tone since the little clergeon now resides with God, a journey that all present hope to complete.⁵⁸

The Road to Salvation: Other Implications

Derrida's model of salvation, because of its requirements, also reveals a "double standard" of sorts. On the one hand, the model demands from the individual an absolute historicity through the complete jettisoning of the secret demonic. For the little clergeon, this is not an issue since his journey begins ahead of the secret demonic. The attainment of responsibility for him is demonstrated through his faith, which ultimately God, through Mary, rewards. Yet, as Derrida states on numerous occasions,⁵⁹ the attainment of a

⁵⁸ Faith is also seen in characters outside the focus of the narrative. For example, earlier in the tale, after the physical death of the little clergeon, his mother demonstrates, in her search for her son, the idea of faith defined by Derrida and expressed by the child. Placing her trust in Mary, the mother ignores absolute risk that is generated when one assumes responsibility in the Derridean sense, in order to find her son: "Among the cursed Jues she hym soghte. / She frayneth and she preyeth pitously, / To every Jew that dwelte in thilke place, / To telle hire if hir child wente oght forby" (599-602). Jesus himself rewards the mother's faith by directing her to the location of her son's body. Although she finds him murdered, the gift immediately comes to the forefront, since the child begins to sing his beloved *Alma redemptoris* not only to honor Mary, but quite possibly his mother as well, who like Mary demonstrates unending faith and devotion to her son. The lesson in the miracle, then, lies in the idea that the Prioress' story seeks not to convert anyone to her theology – most listening already share that and she shows absolutely no interest in converting the "accursed" Jews as she sees them – but instead to save those already Christian, but unwilling to part with the secret demonic. Such a characteristic inhibits true Christian responsibility necessary for the faith required of the gift of death.

⁵⁹ For example, "One must never forget, and precisely for political reasons, that the mystery that is incorporated, then repressed, is never destroyed...history never effaces what it buries; it always keeps within itself the secret of whatever it encrypts, the secret of its secret" (*The Gift of Death* 21); "We must continually remind ourselves that some part of irresponsibility insinuates itself wherever one demands

comprehensive historicity is impossible; thus, true responsibility remains elusive at best. Derrida's model, it would appear, demonstrates salvation to be out of reach for most, including the Abbot. The circumstances of the *mysterium tremendum*, however, suggest that he has successfully completed the Derridean journey. Such becomes possible if one remembers that his "religious" personality is more in line with the little clergeon's than with the Prioress'. She acknowledges him a good man, and there is no duality to his personality or in his questions. And, as his actions demonstrate, he earnestly seeks the answers to what he has difficulty understanding regarding the little clergeon's miracle. Although Derrida states that one cannot eliminate completely the secret demonic, any vestiges of the Abbot's secret demonic, if not discarded, at least has been subjugated within the assumption of responsibility insofar as he is able to achieve it. Derrida states:

there is the structure of secrecy that keeps that mystery hidden, incorporated, concealed but alive, in the structure of free responsibility that claims to go beyond it and that in fact only succeeds by subordinating mystery and keeping it subjugated. The secret or responsibility would consist of keeping secret, or "incorporated," the secret of the demonic and thus of preserving within itself a nucleus of irresponsibility or of absolute unconsciousness. (20)

The key rests with the little clergeon when he bestows his gift to the Abbot. The negative use of pathos on the part of the Prioress suggests that she views the little clergeon as a victim, a view many readers of the tale share. The Prioress' reference at her tale's end to

responsibility without sufficiently conceptualizing and thematizing what 'responsibility' means" (*Ibid* 26); "one is never responsible enough" (*Ibid* 51).

the child martyr Hugh of Lincoln indicates as much. But the miracle surrounding the little clergeon's "resurrection" implies that Chaucer intends his readers to see this child like Isaac, as more than a victim. The little clergeon's purity and the circumstances at this moment indicate that he, like Christ, *is* the divine. In essence, the Abbot receives the gift directly from God, and the Abbot's reaction affirms the miracle taking place at that moment. It appears that salvation in the Derridean sense, while not attainable from a purely human perspective, can be achieved only through the intervention of the divine. It occurs first when Mary appears to the little clergeon, then again when the little clergeon bestows the gift on the Abbot. So while the Abbot presumably has not completely eliminated his secret demonic, he has acknowledged it and sought responsibility with all earnestness. In the end, the little clergeon himself rewards the Abbot's faith. This act is what gives the Prioress' listeners and Chaucer's readers hope in terms of salvation.

Unfortunately, although the little clergeon's death becomes the gift of salvation for those who witness the miracle, it only serves as a story for its narrator. It appears that for her, personally, the saint's life is a ritual for the faithful rather than a tool of conversion. As many have noted over the years, the Prioress' personality appears to be, at the very least, duplicitous. Her description in the *General Prologue* reveals, on many levels, the two-fold nature of her persona. Although she speaks "bastardized" French elegantly, she does not know French as spoken in Paris.⁶⁰ Her table manners indicate a love of fine eating inconsistent with the traditional and expected fasting practiced by those in the service of God. Even her brooch, engraved with *Amor vincit omnia*, reveals

⁶⁰ Of course, the Prioress' French, rather than it being evidence of the duplicity, could be a matter of English gentry and aristocracy speaking a distinct French. In either case, her use of language indicates a personality inconsistent with her role as a nun.

a double nature.⁶¹ Most importantly, however, the two manifestations of her affective piety explained earlier stand in stark contrast to each other. In the Prologue to her tale, she identifies with and even claims the innocence of a child – “But as a child of twelf month oold, or lesse, / Than kan unnethes any word expresse / Right so fare I” (484-486) – but then she assumes the authority of a high Church official as she tells her tale: “Yvele shal have that yvele wol deserve” (632).⁶² It should come as no surprise, then, that the Prioress focuses on a tale involving an innocent child. If one is trying to obscure undesirable personality facets or promote unspecified agendas, children’s innocence often provides the pathos that helps to keep eyes elsewhere. At the very least, the Prioress demonstrates a multi-faceted personality, particularly her desire for worldly trappings and her tendency to ignore her “religious” responsibility. When compared to the main character of her story, she does not demonstrate the same type of spirituality. In essence, one can simply say that the little clergeon represents spirituality and the Prioress symbolizes religiosity. The two are not the same. Quite simply, the Prioress falls short, even if she does not think so or does not recognize it.

Derrida points out that because of their affinities, it is easy to confuse the demonic and the sacred. Whether the Prioress confuses the two on purpose, the confusion nonetheless enables her to keep one foot firmly planted in her worldly cravings while at the same time appearing righteous, which seems to be the state with which she is most

⁶¹ The *Riverside Chaucer* indicates, “the phrase could apply to either divine or earthly love” (26).

⁶² Hill notes of the child comparison, “Her identification with very young children...is an identification with innocence and superiority both, as well as with helplessness and succor – something that turns into brutality and evil when separated from the exalted Mother” (“The Shipman and the Prioress” 105).

comfortable.⁶³ The little clergeon becomes the key, since he symbolizes the Prioress *to* herself – perhaps how she would like to view herself. In the end, he represents the behavior necessary for salvation. As his age indicates, despite being on the cusp of accountability and reason, the temptations of the world have not corrupted the little clergeon as they have the Prioress.⁶⁴ Seven, in Christian numerology, represents perfection,⁶⁵ and undoubtedly the Prioress intends her listeners to see the child as Christians see Christ, perfect. Moreover, based on how the Prioress goes to great lengths to mention the importance of age in her Prologue, the number represents innocence. Although she identifies with such youth and innocence in her Prologue, the Prioress remains quite content with the worldly trappings, usually devoid of innocence, this life offers her. Her description in the *General Prologue* indicates as much.⁶⁶ For whatever reason, she demonstrates no inclination to undergo the spiritual journey, and the trials that go along with it, toward the salvation that her tale espouses and the little clergeon’s life demonstrates.⁶⁷ The little clergeon, then, ends up serving as a metaphor for what she will never be, spiritually perfect, as well as for the journey she seems reluctant to take.

If the Prioress cannot reach spiritual perfection, then the next best thing would be to pretend or believe that it already lies in her possession. Derrida notes that since the

⁶³ Hill puts it, “She would...have a spiritual superiority, understood as the child’s innocence, and therein the superior worship guided by the Virgin” (*Ibid* 105).

⁶⁴ The terms “child” and “woman” are not synonymous. “Woman” implies worldliness as the Wife of Bath demonstrates to some degree, as does May in the *Merchant’s Tale*, Alison in the *Miller’s Tale*, and Malyn in the *Reeve’s Tale*. It could be argued, then, that the *Prioress’ Tale*, rather than being a tale that focuses solely on sanctity, also participates in a medieval idea of anti-feminism. For more on what constitutes children, see Chapter 1, page 2ff.

⁶⁵ See E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1967.

⁶⁶ Specifically, lines 158-162. Additionally, the narrative of her tale invites a dramatic reading making her description in the *General Prologue* plausible if joined to the tale itself.

⁶⁷ Although the Prioress undergoes a “religious” journey, it is not the same as the little clergeon’s. See n. 28.

demonic resembles the sacred, the journey to salvation begins with a responsibility made outside the parameters of knowledge that the responsible do not necessarily recognize. Clearly, the Prioress fails to assume responsibility, in the Patočkian sense, and acknowledge what could be perceived as her own shortcomings as a Christian. At the same time, however, she does take responsibility, since she indirectly concedes that all except the innocent fall⁶⁸ short of the glory of Christ;⁶⁹ only through the innocent can one obtain salvation, and the greatest personification of innocence was Christ. In short, the Prioress, without realizing it, provides her own formula for spiritual deliverance, in effect accomplishing her duty as a nun.⁷⁰ She begins her tale with the little clergeon, whose virtue and perfection obviates her acknowledgement of her own responsibility. But the Prioress remains locked in the demonic mystery because she refuses to acknowledge that her worldly desires should not be a focus of her life for they interfere with her spiritual duties as a nun.⁷¹ Although compassion, which the Prioress tries to exhibit as a personality trait, remains a virtue worthy of Christians, it serves as a device that conceals the demonic. It all sounds good but amounts to very little.

⁶⁸ For an example of how innocence relates to responsibility, see Genesis 2:25.

⁶⁹ See Romans 3:23.

⁷⁰ Arthur Vermeersch notes, "The institution of nuns and sisters, who devote themselves in various religious orders to the practice of a life of perfection." "Nuns." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton, 1911. The Prioress, because she provides as a model a character who does symbolize perfection, in effect demonstrates the necessities of salvation and fulfills a mainstream of her religious duties.

⁷¹ As an example, Chaucer says of the Prioress, in her *effictio* in the *General Prologue*, "Hire gretteste ooth was but by Seinte Loy" (120), making clear that spiritual responsibility is not as important to her as worldly desires. St. Eligius, after his acceptance of Christianity, demonstrated his devotion to God by tending specifically to the poor in accordance with Matthew 19:21: "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come follow me." The Prioress, however, associates with the qualities of St. Eligius prior to his conversion. According to Jacqueline de Weever, "he was famous for his gold chalices, for his courtesy and refinement. He incurred King Dagobert's displeasure for refusing to swear." He wore "fine clothes and adornments." The rest of the Prioress' description identifies more with that type of living than anything else. See *Chaucer Name Dictionary: A Guide to Astrological, Biblical, Historical, Literary, and Mythological Names in the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

On the spiritual journey, the individual's responsibility, once obtained, is made manifest in acts of faith, Derrida's "venture into absolute risk beyond knowledge and certainty." Except in the telling of the little clergeon's tragedy, nothing about the Prioress, her portrayal in the *General Prologue* or her invocation in the Prologue to her tale, demonstrates the faith required of Christians who wish to obtain salvation.⁷² Unlike her counterpart in the narrative, the Prioress remains unwilling to venture into a state of absolute risk required of those on the spiritual path to salvation. Faith usually becomes obvious in situations of despair. The Prioress, however, avoids such situations at all costs, as her portrait makes clear. Even in her "journey" to Canterbury, a sort of affirmation of faith in itself, she finds herself in the "protection"⁷³ of those around her. Little lies at stake except maybe her hypocrisy, which the other, more overt religious pilgrims unknowingly screen through their outrageous displays of selfishness. They, rather than the Prioress, seem to garner much of the attention.

If judgment by her cohorts concerns the Prioress, then she can only display faith through the telling of her tale and the example of the little clergeon. And she does this in the methodology familiar or most comfortable to her, her narration. For example, she describes the beauty of how God works purely in worldly terms, referring to the little clergeon as "this gemme of chastite, this emeraude, / And eek of martyrdom the ruby bright" (609-610), using terminology characteristic of examples found in Revelation⁷⁴

⁷² Although it is difficult to assume Chaucer intends his readers to cast judgment on the Prioress to the same degree as perhaps the Summoner or the Pardoner, her harsh rhetoric and duplicity clearly invite such judgment.

⁷³ In the communal sense. No one on the pilgrimage is really out to judge her, in the critical sense.

⁷⁴ For example, 21:19-27.

and even in *Pearl*.⁷⁵ The Prioress tries to demonstrate the power of faith and how God rewards it, but her use of worldly language demonstrates her inability to assume responsibility and escape the demonic. It makes sense that the Prioress would use this language. After all, she wants to present the little clergeon as a saint, and hagiography often notes the connection between religious achievement and secular riches. The irony occurs when the little clergeon, relaying the same version of events to the Abbot, uses the terminology of true salvation,⁷⁶ made possible through his spiritual journey:

“I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon.
But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde,
Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,
And for the worship of his Mooder deere,
Yet may I synge *O Alma* loude and cleere.” (651-655)

Because the Prioress speaks for the child, she too demonstrates the knowledge and understanding required of salvation. But if the use of her worldly language is any indication, she fails to apply it to herself. It seems that the Prioress puts her faith, if she has any at all, in the idea of God’s mercy. At the conclusion of her tale, she says:

Preye eek for us, we sinful folk unstable,
That of his mercy God so merciabile,
On us his grete mercy multiplie,
For reverence of his mooder Marie. Amen. (687-690).

⁷⁵ See lines 991-994. For more on the use of such language in the description of the divine, see Rosalind Field, “The Heavenly Jerusalem in *Pearl*.” *The Modern Language Review* 81 (1986): 7-17. Also Sarah Stanbury, “The Body and the City in *Pearl*.” *Representations* 48 (1994): 30-47.

⁷⁶ The little clergeon’s usage in this passage focuses entirely on the divine without regard to the worldly, unless one considers “bookes” a worldly manifestation. In fact, anytime the little clergeon speaks, there is no mention of worldly trappings to which the Prioress is clearly drawn.

But the little clergeon's journey to his salvation clearly demonstrates the necessary path, one the other characters of the tale recognize, but one that the Prioress herself refuses to take. In the end, everything about the Prioress reveals a binary nature.

Although the Prioress understands what it takes for true and eternal salvation, her affinity for the worldly will make it difficult for her to achieve it. Regardless of her intent, she has not assumed responsibility in the Patočkian and Derridean sense and abandoned her secret demonic. Like the model suggests when applied to her, there is a duality to her character. In one sense, she actually demonstrates how the attainment of an absolute historicity of the self is impossible; her demonic, the worldly, is so much of her personality. And for whatever reason, she will not acknowledge or does not see the demonic *as* demonic. Failing to achieve true responsibility, however, is not indicative of the negative. After all, the Prioress acts and speaks in a manner quite consistent with her time. She seems quite content to live her life in the dual role she reveals to those around her. Despite the model of salvation that she discloses through the little clergeon, she perhaps recognizes that such a life is, in fact, impossible to lead. And without those like the little clergeon around to help guide and ultimately bridge the gap from religion to spirituality, it seems problematic even to try. The individual cannot complete the journey without God's direct assistance. Trying to reach salvation solely through the self, in the end, only makes the situation more difficult. Derrida's model makes clear that an individual never can truly eliminate the demonic. Rather than being completely discarded, the demonic is instead absorbed into the self, and helps to shape it. Accepting that makes reaching out to God much easier and less problematic. Perhaps that is why so many struggle with the Prioress as a literary figure. In the end, with all her flaws, she

reminds her audience of itself, a reminder made clearer through her emotional narration of the perfection of the little clergeon. And few enjoy being reminded of their own shortcomings.

CHAPTER 4
TOMORROW BRINGS YESTERDAY: VIRGINIA AND THE CURSE
OF THE GOLDEN AGE

While Kierkegaard believes Abraham's behavior in the face of his son's impending sacrifice is due to the qualities of the absurd, Church fathers have always implied in their exegesis of the passage that, had it actually come down to it, Abraham would have killed Isaac.¹ In fact, one midrashic tradition² insists that Abraham actually *did* kill Isaac since Genesis clearly states that after the angel commanded him to kill the ram instead, he descended from the mountain and "returned to his young men" (22:19),

¹ For example, Augustine writes, "James in his letter opposed those who would not act rightly but relied on faith alone; and so he reminded them of the good works of this same Abraham whose faith was commended by Paul. The two apostles are not contradicting each other. James dwells on an action performed by Abraham that we all know about: he offered his son to God as a sacrifice. That is a great work, but it proceeded from faith. I have nothing but praise for the superstructure of action, but I see the foundation of faith; I admire the good work as a fruit, but I recognize that it springs from the root of faith. If Abraham had done it without right faith it would have profited him nothing, however noble the work was. On the other hand, if Abraham had been so complacent in his faith that, on hearing God's command to offer his son as a sacrificial victim, he had said to himself, 'No, I won't. But I believe that God will set me free, even if I ignore his orders,' his faith would have been a dead faith because it did not issue in right action, and it would have remained a barren, dried-up root that never produced fruit" (364-365). "Exposition 2 of Psalm 31." *Writings of St. Augustine*, Part 3, Vol. 15. *Expositions of the Psalms 1-32*. Trans. Maria Boulding. Ed. John E. Rotelle. Hyde Park: New City P, 2000. Likewise, commenting on the meaning of James, Oecumenius, in the sixth century, states, "Abraham is...approved because of his works, since he offered up his son Isaac on the altar. Of course he did not do this work by itself; in doing it, he remained firmly anchored in his faith, believing that through Isaac his seed would be multiplied until it was as numerous as the stars." (33). *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, Vol. XI, James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*. Trans. Joel Scandrett. Ed. Gerald Bray. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 2000.

² According to Louis Jacobs, one Jewish prayer in conjunction with Rosh Hashanah reads: "remember unto us, O Lord our god, the covenant and the loving-kindness and the oath which Thou swore unto Abraham our father on Mount Moriah; and consider the binding with which Abraham our father bound his son Isaac on the altar, how he suppressed his compassion in order to perform Thy will with a perfect heart. So my Thy compassion overbear Thine anger against us; in Thy great goodness may Thy great wrath turn aside from Thy people, Thy city, and Thine inheritance" (18). *The Jewish Religion: A Companion*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.

presumably alone.¹ It therefore should come as no surprise to medieval or modern audiences when Virginius actually sacrifices his only daughter in a horrific scene in the *Physician's Tale*. The tale's pagan backdrop actually makes the possibility of a sacrificial scene less surprising given that pagan stories often dealt with fathers sacrificing their virgin daughters.² Nevertheless, many have often struggled with this particular Chaucerian offering.

It makes sense that the Physician would spend the first third of the tale comparing Virginia to nature, since he sees her as pure and as beautiful. It also makes sense that the town judge, Apius, would be instantly attracted to her when he sees her for the first time when she wanders through the streets with her mother on her way to worship her god. Because the Physician connects Virginia's beauty to high moral standing, she comes across as a forbidden fruit so tantalizing, it would be hard for Apius to resist her even if he tried. It comes as no surprise, then, when Apius concocts his scheme to satisfy his lust at Virginia's expense. What is a surprise is Virginius' reaction when he learns of the apparent fate Apius has imposed upon his daughter. The scheme results in a power struggle between the two male figures for control of Virginia's body. That Virginius wins this power struggle is not unexpected. How he wins it, however, is shocking.

What Virginius faces in regard to his daughter, as described by the Physician, appears to make little if any sense on so many levels. Critics for years have noted the confusion surrounding the *Physician's Tale*, pointing out as examples the tale's apparent

¹ See Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*. Volume 1. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003. 228ff.

² For example, the *Oresteia* trilogy by Aeschylus.

disjointed structure, its illogical content, and the lack of reliability on the part of its narrator.³ From a purely secular and literal point of view, even the behavior of the characters proves difficult to explain.⁴ They certainly have “provoked emotional responses” (1) according to Marta Powell Harley,⁵ not the least of which is Harry Bailey’s in the Introduction to the *Pardoner’s Tale*.⁶ Besides the seemingly unfathomable circumstance that besets Virginia, Chaucer’s version appears at points incoherent or illogical in regard to the Physician’s telling.⁷ He often comes across as

³ Walter Clyde Curry, noting the inconsistencies in the Physician’s personality states, “we cannot be absolutely sure about anything in the Doctor’s character” (36). *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960. Richard Hoffman states, “Both the character of the Physician and the tale which he tells have long provided Chaucerians with vexing problems” (20). “Jephthah’s Daughter and Chaucer’s Virginia.” *The Chaucer Review* 2 (1967): 20-31. R. Howard Bloch claims: “critics...have noted the poorly developed motivation of this narrative account of yet another virgin martyr, an inattention that accounts no doubt for the tale’s relative critical disrepute and even neglect...the characters...act so inexplicably and even illogically that not even the weight of psychologistic Chaucerian criticism can recuperate their intent” (101-102). “The Poetics of Virginité.” *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1992. Lianna Farber writes, “While some Chaucerians have simply condemned the *Physician’s Tale* (it is, one succinctly stated, ‘the faultiest’ of the *Canterbury Tales*), many more have analyzed the problems with the tale, providing a variety of diagnoses” (151). “The Creation of Consent in the *Physician’s Tale*.” *The Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 151-164. Thomas B. Hanson nicely encapsulates critical regard of the tale: “Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale*, one of the shortest of the *Canterbury* sequence, has suffered a fate most of the other complete tales have been spared: critical dismissal” (132). “Chaucer’s Physician as Storyteller and Moralizer.” *The Chaucer Review* 7 (1972): 132-139.

⁴ Jerome Mandel, regarding Virginius’ apparently heinous action, states that “most audiences find [it] unpleasant regardless of the attempts to defend it in terms of Medieval Christianity and the parallel behavior of certain heroines in the *Legend of Good Women* and Dorigen’s complaint...in the *Franklin’s Tale*” (322). “Governance in the *Physician’s Tale*.” *The Chaucer Review* 10 (1987): 316-325. Lee C. Ramsey argues that Virginia’s demise results from the ills of society rather than from the personality of Apollonius. “‘The Sentence of It Sooth Is’: Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale*.” *The Chaucer Review* 6 (1972): 185-197.

⁵ “Last Things First in Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale*: Final Judgment and the Worm of Conscience.” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 91 (1992): 1-16.

⁶ Reacting to the Physician’s story, Harry Bailey, beside himself, says, “‘Harrow!...by nayles and by blood! / This was a fals cherl and a fals justice. / As shameful deeth as herte may devyse / Come to this juges and hire advocatz! / Algate this sely mayde is slayn, allas! / Allas, to deere bought she beautee! / Wherefore I seye al day that men may see / That yiftes of Fortune and of Nature / Been cause of deeth to many a creature. / Hire beautee was hire deth, I dar wel sayn. / Allas, so pitously as she was slayn! / Of bothe yiftes that I speke of now / Men han ful ofte moore for harm than prow. / But trewely, myn owene maister deere, / This is a pitous tale for to heere” (287 – 302).

⁷ Mandel states, “Most Chaucerians find [the tale] dull, inferior, crude, routine work, surely not originally composed for the *Canterbury Tales*, at best akin to the narratives in the *Legend of Good Women*, at worst irrelevant to the character of the Physician defined in the General Prologue” (“Governance” 316). See also

confused or unclear, or at the very least unable to relate the points he initially raises early on.⁸ The Physician also seems on occasion to digress from the main storyline to emphasize points for which he seems to have little or no authority, or expertise. Unfortunately, such negativity on the part of the tale's detractors⁹ toward the tale or its narrator implies a poet not at his best in reworking the story.¹⁰

The negative response to the *Physician's Tale* proves somewhat surprising given that the story of Virginia's demise remained popular from Livy's initial version all the way to its inclusion in Reformation drama.¹¹ Some critics have offered an explanation for Chaucer's apparent "mishandling" of the story. Margaret E. Owens correctly states that Chaucer removes the "voicelessness" of the women in Livy's tale and reduces the story "to a confrontation between three agents: corrupt judge, loyal citizen, and chaste daughter. In medieval texts...the story is presented as a moral exemplum celebrating the virtue of chastity" (88-89).¹² Owens notes, however, that Reformation drama, such as R.B.'s *Apus and Virginia*, "advances the transformation of Virginia from a pretext in a political narrative to the heroine of a moral exemplum, a paragon of chastity whose

Robert Longworth, "The Doctor's Dilemma: A Comic View of the 'Physician's Tale.'" *Criticism* 13 (1971): 223-233; Daniel Kempton, "'The Physician's Tale': The Doctor of Physic's Diplomatic 'Cure.'" *The Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 24-38.

⁸ Emerson Brown Jr. argues that the Physician "as a storyteller reveals himself to be unable to apply a skill which is singled out in the General Prologue as essential to the process of healing" (137). "What is Chaucer Doing with the Physician and His Tale?" *Philological Quarterly* 60 (1981): 129-149. Hanson notes that "the Physician's moral was irrelevant to the tale he created" ("Chaucer's Physician" 138).

⁹ F.N. Robinson states, "*The Physician's Tale* is by no means without art, but it is certainly not in what we have come to recognize as Chaucer's latest manner" (10). *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.

¹⁰ According to Thomas L. Kinney, Chaucer has "lost control of the total effect of the tale" (83). "The Popular Meaning of Chaucer's 'Physician's Tale.'" *Literature and Psychology* 28 (1978): 76-84.

¹¹ For more on Chaucer's narrative structure and source material, see Anne Middleton, "The 'Physician's Tale' and Love's Martyrs: Ensamples More than Ten as a Method in the 'Canterbury Tales.'" *The Chaucer Review* 8 (1973): 9-32.

¹² "The Revenge of the Martyred Body: R.B.'s *Apus and Virginia*." *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama*. Cranbury, NJ: U Delaware P, 2005.

sacrifice closely resembles that of the virgin martyrs of Christian hagiography” (89).¹³ Corinne J. Saunders calls the tale “a stark depiction of classical society...where the only choice to be made is between death and shame, and where grace is replaced by the corruption of authority in a mechanistic world” (277).¹⁴ Such a view, however, reduces Chaucer’s retelling to the same barbaric attitudes present in the initial version of the story told by Livy. Saunders correctly refers to Virginia as a “pagan martyr” (278), and Virginius, in his mind, has no choice when he decides she must die. But in any reworking of her story, Virginia’s martyrdom must have value beyond what Livy demonstrates if the newer version is to reflect attitudes contemporary with the author and his time.

One of the keys in making sense of the *Physician’s Tale* is to view the story as a version of the Abraham and Isaac ideal taught by New Testament authors and so prominent in Chaucer’s time. In fact, more so than the other tales of religion and morality, the *Physician’s Tale* is the closest to allegory. One advantage of an allegorical interpretation is that it makes the characters’ actions less problematic. Although the story is apparently set¹⁵ prior to the birth of Christianity, certain elements indicate that Chaucer wants this “homiletic exemplum” (142), as Brian S. Lee refers to it,¹⁶ to be viewed with the Christian parallel in mind. Hanson notes that “the Physician paints Virginia in terms of Christian virtues, that is in terms of qualities that are held by Christian writers to be

¹³ For parallels between Virginia and medieval views of chastity, see Denise Baker, “Chaucer and Moral Philosophy: The Virtuous Women of the *Canterbury Tales*.” *Medium Ævum* 60 (1991): 241-256.

¹⁴ “‘A Dede of Men’: Chaucer’s Narrative of Rape.” *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2001.

¹⁵ According to Hanson the tale is “set neither in pagan nor in Christian times” (“Chaucer’s Physician” 139).

¹⁶ “The Position and Purpose of the ‘Physician’s Tale.’” *The Chaucer Review* 22 (1987): 141-160.

virtuous” (133).¹⁷ Anne Lancashire claims that in regard to the Abraham and Isaac story as presented in the period’s drama, “Chaucer apparently uses [it] especially in his ‘original’ dialogue between Virginius and Virginia” (321).¹⁸ For her, the dialogue between Virginius and his daughter “is a vital part of the Abraham-and-Isaac ‘child-sacrifice’ dramatic tradition” (321). Chaucer models Virginia, because of her age and her use of pathos surrounding her impending death, after medieval dramatic representations of Isaac, who also questions but ultimately accepts his role as sacrificial figure. But while the Abraham and Isaac aspect of the *Physician’s Tale* proves important in the explication of the tale itself, the pagan elements of the story demonstrate the need for an approach that accounts for both Christian and pagan aspects, an accounting made possible through the teachings of St. Augustine.

Many of St. Augustine’s works¹⁹ document his opinion that literature of antiquity can and does have relevance for medieval Christians as long as it is used to attain Christian truth. Perhaps more importantly, Augustine’s ideas keep classical literature and the ideas promulgated by its authors alive in a world which increasingly searches for an understanding of truth that somehow reconciles God with notions of the self and sacrifice. An example of one prominent classical idea found in the Middle Ages and echoed extensively in Chaucer is the concept of the Golden Age society and its relation to the notion of *imitatio naturae*. For instance, toward the end of the *Clerk’s Tale*, the Clerk tells his listeners, “This world is nat so strong, it is no nay, / As it hath been in olde tymes yoore” (1139-1140). About the Clerk’s words, Donald Howard states, “This articulation

¹⁷“Chaucer’s Physician as Storyteller and Moralizer.” *The Chaucer Review* 7 (1972): 132-139.

¹⁸“Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac.” *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1974): 320-326.

¹⁹ For example, *Confessions* and *De ordine*. See also Camille Bennett. “The Conversion of Vergil: The *Aeneid* in Augustine’s *Confessions*.” *Revue de Augustiniennes* 34 (1988): 47-69.

of the passing of time is uniquely Chaucer's but the picture it provides is a fundamental medieval conception, that of a world in decline from the 'former age' or the Golden Age, growing old, becoming physically and morally weak" (100).²⁰ Chaucer shares this obsolescence with Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, where Gower emphasizes the focus of renewal:

After the world that whilom tok
Long tyme in olde daies passed:
Bot for men sein it is now lassed,
In worse plit than it was tho,
I thenke forto touche also
The world which neweth every dai...(55-59)²¹

Howard notes that "both poets agreed that the senescent world of medieval thought was not an emblem of despair. While the world is winding down from its first Golden Age, it also 'neweth every day,' and men can follow ideals of conduct which would impose upon the world a corrective and civilizing influence. It was not the Church alone which was to accomplish this but the state and the individual" (100). Chaucer understands the concept of renewal and the need to keep alive the past,²² for, as Howard so wonderfully delineates, "Remembered time and recorded time are the stuff of narrative, and narrative creates a microcosmic eternity which outlasts the present day" (99-100). However, if the past is to have any meaning, the "corrective and civilizing influence" must be structured

²⁰ *Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1985.

²¹ *Confessio Amantis*. Ed. Russell A. Peck. Toronto: U Toronto P, 1980.

²² One also can see such attitudes reflected in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*: "For out of olde felde, as men seyth, / Cometh al this new corn from yer to yere" (22-23). *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

so that prominent ideals from that past take root in the present. For Chaucer, *imitatio naturae* serves as a key to the civilizing influence medieval society sought for the attainment of order and a return to Golden Age ideals.

The medieval idea of the Golden Age has its roots in Ovid.²³ Humans, innately good, respected each other and the need for a justice system had not become necessary. Ovid's well-known pastoral metaphor describing the Golden Age carries particular import in that it establishes that age's fragility in the face of intrusion. In fact, when a disturbance does present itself in such an environment, the inhabitants feel obligated to eliminate the disharmony in an effort to return, if possible, to their stasis. Such an idea harkens back to Vergil's *Eclogues*, a work Chaucer may have known through the *Roman de la Rose*, which heavily incorporates Vergil's words and ideas. In *Eclogue I*, Tityrus alludes to the remedy when the Golden Age society does encounter problems: "deus nobis haec otia fecit. / namque erit ille mihi semper deus, illius aram / saepe tener nostris ab ouilibus imbuet agnus" (6-8).²⁴ Paradise can only remain if sacrifice is a part. Tityrus maintains his Golden Age environment by his commitment to sacrifice to his god. However, the passage also implies that if disharmony penetrates the Golden Age community, then sacrifice is the only remedy for restoring cultural order.

The attainment of cultural order, however, depends on the quality of the sacrifice and the conditions in which it is enacted. The circumstances often appear chaotic, the result of emotion and misinterpretation. Confusion surrounds the participants.

²³ Ovid writes, "Aurea prima sata est aetas, quae vindice nullo, / sponte sua, sine lege fidem rectumque colebat" (89-90). "Golden was that first age which unconstrained, / With heart and soul, obedient to no law, / Gave honour to good faith and righteousness." *Metamorphoses*. Trans. A.D. Melville. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

²⁴ "...a god has made this leisure ours. / Yes, he will always be a god for me; his altar / A tender ram-lamb from our folds will often stain." *Eclogues*. Trans. Guy Lee. New York: Penguin, 1984.

According to René Girard, “The sacrificial process requires a degree of misunderstanding. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act” (7).²⁵ Girard’s statement alludes to the involvement of the principal characters. But for primitive societies, sacrifice serves as a necessary function in order to suppress violence or potential violence that threatens the stability of the culture.²⁶ The prevention of violence necessitates its use as a stabilizing factor. More importantly, he states that “the purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric” (8). Because of the importance of sacrifice, the victim must be, in the strictest sense, sacred. According to Girard’s definition, “sacred” equals “pure,” and if the sacrificial victim lacks purity, the sacrifice itself will only perpetuate the violence, not quell it for “the least contact with infection can contaminate the entire community” (36). Impurity then, becomes a concept imposed upon the pure by the tainted individual. Girard notes, “All concepts of impurity stem ultimately from the community’s fear of a perpetual cycle of violence arising in its midst” (36). It remains possible then, for the pure individual to remain pure despite the impurity forced upon her. In fact, she must be pure or she becomes merely the victim of violence, a “scandalous accomplice in the process of pollution, even a kind of catalyst in the propagation of further iniquity” (39). In Girard’s thinking, impurity is manifest primarily in sexual desire or, to put it more succinctly, lust, a characteristic brought on by the purity and gender of the victim. In medieval society, nothing is seen as more pure than a child, particularly a virgin female. For that reason, only sacrifice can serve as the instrument

²⁵ *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. Patrick Gregory. New York: John Hopkins UP, 1979.

²⁶ Girard states, “The function of sacrifice is to quell violence within the community and to prevent conflicts from erupting” (*Ibid* 14).

for a return to the purity of before:

sexual interpretations of the sacred invariably ignore or play down the role of violence, whereas an interpretation based on violence readily grants sexuality the prominent place it occupies in all primitive religions. We are tempted to conclude that violence is impure because of its relation to sexuality. Yet only the reverse proposition can withstand close scrutiny. Sexuality is impure because it has to do with violence. (34)

In essence, sexual desire masks the violence imposed upon the sacrificial victim and the perpetrator actually derives a justification in the violent outcome. Sexual desire allows the victim to justify the use of violence in order to quell that desire.

Purity and gender make the sacrificial victim vulnerable within societal constructs such as oppression and social subordination. Of course, such constructs result from the sense of morality that permeates the society, the “‘mode of enjoyment,’ one of the many shapes taken by desire” (2), according to L.O. Aranye Fradenburg.²⁷ Normally, when morality and desire become intertwined, the moral sense can “fall ill: become persecuting, obsessive, self-punishing...cause, and ease suffering” (2, 3). For most individuals, morality and desire create an enormous conflict within the self that proves difficult to solve. For that reason, Fradenburg argues, “we are...much more likely to ‘give way’ on our desire than we are to pursue it thoughtlessly – much more likely to live the way we think we are ‘expected’ to live” (3). There are individuals, however, who live quite comfortably, at least on the surface, with the intertwining of morality and desire, namely those in power. For them, there is little or no conflict because they control

²⁷ *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2002.

the societal construct in which desires are enacted. Indeed, according to Fradenburg, “Most of our ethical systems, certainly those with strong debts to classical culture, were developed for and by elites: ‘masters’ whose entitlement to pleasure was axiomatic” (3). The result is the oppression or subordination of those individuals who pose a threat to the ethics within the system. Unfortunately, those most likely to fall prey to the sense of entitlement experienced by those in power are women. Gayle Rubin asks, “What then are these relationships by which a female becomes an oppressed woman?” (158).²⁸ The answer emerges from the sex / gender systems²⁹ already in place that contribute to the view of women as “raw materials and...products” rather than independent, intelligent human beings (158).³⁰ Such systems often account for the stereotypes of women in literature in whatever capacity the society sees appropriate.³¹ Perhaps more than any other longings, two of the rawest, most aggressive, and necessary of desires, having sex and having children, are channeled into or satisfied by what Rubin refers to as “the exchange of women” (175).³² Although one may view the need for sexuality and procreation as “natural,” the term hardly applies to the method in which one goes about satisfying such needs. As a result, the restoration of what one deems “natural” only

²⁸ “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.” *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review P, 1975. 157-210.

²⁹ “The set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (*Ibid* 159). For Rubin, the “sex / gender system...refers to the domain and indicates that oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organize it” (*Ibid* 168).

³⁰ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Boston, Beacon P, 1969; Sigmund Freud, “Concerning the Sexuality of Women.” *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 1 (1932): 191-209; “Femininity.” *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis*. Ed. J. Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton, 1965.

³¹ Rubin states, “All manifest forms of sex and gender are seen as being constituted by the imperatives of social systems” (“The Traffic in Women” 179).

³² Rubin writes: “The needs of sexuality and procreation must be satisfied as much as the need to eat, and one of the most obvious deductions which can be made from the data of anthropology is that these needs are hardly ever satisfied in any “natural” form, any more than are the needs for food” (*Ibid* 165).

comes about through one of the most difficult and “unnatural” of acts seemingly impossible to accept: sacrifice,³³ the only way to restore cultural order. Therein lays the connection of Girard to Rubin, since sexuality functions as a construct of the system that defines it and the reactions to it – violence, pure and impure – result from such a construct.

When dealing with purity and virginity, medieval writers clearly borrowed from their predecessors, particularly Church fathers who wrote explicitly on the subject. Particularly intriguing were notions of what exactly constituted virginity. Tertullian, for example, lists three states of virginity: virginity from one’s birth, virginity from one’s second birth, and monogamy.³⁴ He also states the condition when virginity is lost: “a virgin ceases to be a virgin from the time it becomes possible for her not to be one” (4.34). For Augustine, virginity is closely associated with the state of mind: “For it was not deceitfully that the angel said to Joseph: ‘Fear not to take unto you Mary your wife.’ She is called his wife because of her first troth of betrothal, although he had had no carnal knowledge of her, nor was destined to have.”³⁵ St. Jerome emphasizes the importance of virginity: “I will say it boldly, though God can do all things He cannot raise up a virgin

³³ Owens corroborates Rubin’s theory: “narratives of father-daughter sacrifice encode a pervasive cultural ambivalence surrounding the exogamous imperative that requires fathers to surrender their daughters to marriage” (96). “The Revenge of the Martyred Body: R.B.’s *Apius and Virginia*.” *Stages of Dismemberment: The Fragmented Body in Late Medieval and Early Modern Drama*. Cranbury, NJ: U Delaware P, 2005. For Boose, “In the Agamemnon-Iphigenia and Jephthah-his daughter model, the father sacrifices his daughter to the perceived demands of the patriarchy and thus affirms his membership in it. By sacrificing the virginal blood of his family to the divine will, he ensures the success of the cultural project” (40). “The Father’s House and the Daughter in It: The Structures of Western Culture’s Daughter-Father Relationship.” *Daughters and Fathers*. Eds. Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989. 19-74.

³⁴ *On Exhortation to Chastity*. Trans. S.Thelwall. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Vol. 4. Eds. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977.

³⁵ *On Marriage and Concupiscence*. *St. Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings*. Trans. Peter Holmes, Robert Ernest Wallace, and Benjamin B. Warfield. *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Vol. 5. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976.

when once she has fallen” (5).³⁶ These ideas gave rise to the very complicated medieval view that for females, a virgin is one who has not been desired by a man.³⁷ Chaucer, despite the tale’s pre-Christian setting, no doubt experiments with the various notions of purity and virginity in the *Physician’s Tale*.³⁸ These notions certainly apply to Virginia, who ends up becoming a microcosm of medieval society itself.

The complicated views of virginity and purity come into play with the paradoxical idea that Virginius must return his society to its edenic ideals through the sacrifice of his “edenic” or pure daughter. One may argue that Virginius’ society never really leaves its Golden Age, since Virginia, if one applies Girard’s definition, retains her pure status³⁹ throughout the entire ordeal, thereby making her sacrifice an unnecessary one. Such can only be true, however, by viewing Virginia and her society as the same. They are not the same. Instead, Virginia symbolizes the ideal society to which Virginius wants to return. Yet Virginia maintains her pure status, while her society has not. Apicius, then, represents the taint imposed upon the ideal that Virginius must eliminate in order to effect the change. For Virginius, Apicius has destroyed his *jouissance*, since the more controlling the society, the more repressed *jouissance* becomes. Virginius’ edenic world is a pure world

³⁶ *On Marriage and Virginity. Letter XXII to Eustochium. Against Jovinian. St. Jerome: Letters and Select Works.* Trans. W. H. Fremantle. *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.* Vol. 6. Eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976.

³⁷ Bloch, “The Poetics of Virginity.”

³⁸ It is possible that Chaucer relies on these Christian expectations to help him “sell” this retelling of a tale set in pre-Christian times.

³⁹ See Linda Lomperis, “Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices: Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale* as Socially Symbolic Act.” *Feminist Approaches to the Body.* Eds. L. Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury. Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P, 1997. 21-37. See also Angela Jane Weisl, “‘Quiting’ Eve: Violence Against Women in the *Canterbury Tales*.” *Violence Against Women in Medieval Texts.* Ed. Anna Roberts. Gainesville: UP Florida, 1998. 115-136.

brought about through discipline.⁴⁰ Only discipline, demonstrated through sacrifice (itself a form of desire) can restore it. In Virginia's world, the "pure" violence she faces at the hands of her father results from the impure notions of sexuality her tainted society imposes upon her. Removing that taint is the only way Virginius can regain order in his world. The *Physician's Tale*, then, controversy and popularity aside, becomes a story that emphasizes change through Virginia's sacrifice, rather than being a tale in which her sacrifice serves no purpose other than to gain mastery of the established pagan sex / gender system. In essence, Virginia's martyrdom enables her society to find meaning outside the boundaries of life, which, from a Christian perspective, makes her sacrifice a necessary one for the betterment of the whole. Her death allows her, in Chaucer's retelling, to restore the elegance of a "once pure" society. According to Fradenburg, "Sacrifice means to get back, with interest, whatever it renounces" (15). Such is the result that Virginia's death makes possible. Chaucer essentially creates a character in the Abraham and Isaac ideal, whose sacrificial death negates "the corruption of authority." Just as Abraham and his family retain their favored status with God by unconditionally surrendering to God's will, Virginius and his family regain theirs through the sacrifice of his daughter. Virginia's sacrifice displaces the "mechanistic world" and returns it to its prior state of *imitatio naturae*.

Virginia's Patriarchal Beginnings and Chaucer's Changes

It is interesting that Virginia's story, as presented by Livy, does not receive as harsh a reaction from critics as Chaucer's version.⁴¹ Although Livy's tale abounds with

⁴⁰ Fradenburg notes, "Discipline enhances *jouissance*; it multiplies and extends its possibilities" (*Sacrifice Your Love* 7).

⁴¹ Of course, Livy's version is not as well known to modern audiences as is Chaucer's.

patriarchal notions of right or wrong, including stereotypical or misogynistic themes, readers have come to expect those notions from a writer whose story takes place in a period generally considered barbaric by modern standards. For example, when Virginia realizes she must become the property of Apius' pawn, Livy notes that "terror made the maiden speechless, but the cries of her nurse imploring help of the Quirites quickly brought a crowd about them" (224).⁴² The narrative implies that Virginia, because of her gender, cannot speak, since stereotypically women frighten more easily than their male counterparts. Later, when Virginius arrives to defend himself against the charges, Livy remarks, "After them came the matrons crying aloud, 'Was it on these terms that children were brought into the world? Were these the rewards of chastity?' – with such other complaints as are prompted at a time like this by a woman's anguish and are so much the more pitiful as their lack of self-control makes them the more give way to grief" (230). Livy's stereotypical portrayal of woman's pathos tends to be less troubling for modern readers given the setting of the story.

One variation in the *Physician's Tale* occurs with the feminine behavior of the male figure, conduct remarkably consistent with the description Livy provides of the women of his tale's era. In Chaucer, Virginius initially behaves much more melodramatically than his daughter, lamenting the decision that Apius forces upon him. It is here that the tale's connection to the drama of the period reveals itself. If the pathetic element is to be impactful, Virginius' initial behavior must be stereotypically feminine. Medieval drama deliberately models Abraham's emotional reaction to the

⁴² *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of the Ab Urbe Condita*. Trans. B.O. Foster. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005. Although most likely female, Virginia's nurse, due to her status as a servant, is in effect, genderless.

order to sacrifice his son after the biblical female,⁴³ a reaction ironically absent in the biblical account. Like Abraham, Virginius finds himself forced into a decision with awful consequences. And like the Abraham and Isaac drama of Chaucer's period, the overt display of pathos on the part of Virginius occurs because Chaucer, unlike Livy, gives Virginia a major voice in the story; hers, in addition to that of the feminine personification Nature, controls the narrative structure. Even the earlier medieval version of the story, found in the *Roman de la Rose* over a century before Chaucer, nicely encapsulates Livy's version, but it does not allow Virginia her own voice. Gower's account in Book Seven of the *Confessio Amantis*, like its predecessors, also emphasizes the male characters rather than the female. In fact, Virginia never says a word in this version essentially void of dialogue.

The description of society in the tale accounts for another major difference between the *Physician's Tale* and Livy's original. Livy presents the Rome of Virginius and Apius as already chaotic and unstable, a world that remains unhinged well after Virginia's death.⁴⁴ Livy's version also focuses on the socio-political aspect of the male characters, and Virginia finds herself without a voice, surrounded by their hostility.⁴⁵ In Chaucer, the Physician begins his story in a Golden Age that only erodes after Apius sees Virginia for the first time. But unlike Livy, he brings the tale to a swift end after the sacrifice of Virginia and returns the society to the harmonious balance that existed before

⁴³ For example, regarding Christ's impending crucifixion, Luke 23:27 states, "And there followed him a great multitude of people, and of women, who bewailed and lamented him."

⁴⁴ For example, in Book III, chapter LV, Livy writes, "Marcus Duillius, the tribune of the plebs, then proposed to the plebs, and they so decreed, that whosoever should leave the plebs without tribunes and whosoever should declare the election of a magistrate without appeal should be scourged and beheaded" (*The Early History of Rome* 241).

⁴⁵ As Owens points out, "In Livy's history of Rome, the tragic story of Virginia's sacrifice is analogous to that of Lucrece in that (threatened) sexual violation serves as a catalyst to political change" ("The Revenge of the Martyred Body" 88).

Apius' "cherlish" behavior. How ironic that Chaucer, the first writer to give Virginia her own voice in her own story, would find his tale criticized as being disjointed or gender biased when the opposite proves to be true.

Giving Virginia her own voice is the method through which Chaucer resists familiar patterns of Roman *paterfamilia* found in his predecessors' versions as well as the biblical text. Chaucer begins his emphasis on Virginia by making her a child, and her status as a young girl on the verge of womanhood complicates the parent-child dynamic immensely since emotionally filled sex / gender attitudes, along with reputation, determine the course of action of the dominant male figures. And in Chaucer's tale, Virginia, despite her fate, maintains a degree of emotional autonomy absent in Livy's version and only hinted at in the *Roman de la Rose* and in Gower. On the surface, it appears that the *Physician's Tale* portrays Virginia as essentially the same as her counterpart in the previous versions of the story, since she seems to function as a powerless, token figure – a pawn – in a larger sex / gender system in which Virginius and Apius vie for control. She is, in essence, an oppressed being whose sacrifice prevents her "exchange" to another man. But it is the reactions of Apius to her beauty, and Virginius to his circumstance, which give rise to Virginia's emotional autonomy.

Apius' behavior lies within the construct of the system rather than a biological need.⁴⁶ Apparently, in Chaucer's tale, Apius, prior to his espial of Virginia, functions in the capacity of an honest judge, a characteristic of the Ovidian Golden Age. He does not overtly demonstrate any biological desire to procreate or satisfy sexuality. Only when he

⁴⁶ Rubin notes, "The 'exchange of women' is a seductive and powerful concept. It is attractive in that it places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology" ("The Traffic of Women" 175).

sees Virginia for the first time does he experience longing, made possible by the construct of the system. In that sense, the Golden Age would appear to be a sex / gender system characterized by patriarchal attitudes and desires, and in fact the Golden Age literature of antiquity found in the writings of Vergil and Ovid consistently display such attitudes. Furthermore, consistent with Girard and Rubin, Virginia's potential "exchange" demonstrates that sexuality and the need to satisfy it create the unnatural desire that results in the suppression of women and the violence that surrounds them. Essentially Apius' need to satisfy his lust results in his scheme to force Virginia's exchange. But Chaucer's Virginia is more than just a pawn. Her autonomy actually enables her to subvert the system that condemns her to die. The *Roman de la Rose* implies such behavior, noting that Apius "was unable to intimidate the maiden, who wanted nothing to do with him or his lustful desires" (86). In the *Roman de la Rose*, then, Virginia's death actually prevents her oppression. In Chaucer's text, like earlier versions of the story, Apius believes that he can control and manipulate Virginia simply because of her female status and his position of power. He knows that she would refuse any seduction attempt by him or any other man, and this refusal is what initiates the horrible chain of events resulting in her death. But Chaucer expands her autonomy and makes it credible by allowing a higher female voice to precede Virginia's, the voice of Nature herself.

Nature on Display and the Function of Beauty

In the *Physician's Tale*, nature exists in a double capacity. First, nature represents, in the Ovidian sense, the earth in its purest form, void of human contamination – what Ovid refers to as the Golden Age. Second, Nature functions in the

tale as the personification of the Ovidian ideals, and her voice makes clear the necessity of Virginia's sacrifice. Though Virginia's world revolves around patriarchal notions of right and wrong in a pagan environment, the heart of her story remains deeply rooted in the Christian mindset of Chaucer's era. That mindset sees the Golden Age environment as "edenic" in the Ovidian sense. "Eden" denotes contentment or enchantment, a harmony existing between nature and the humans who inhabit it, a harmony that the Physician clearly wants his listeners to understand at the beginning of his tale. One should note, however, that those living in a Golden Age environment do, inevitably, experience "intrusions" upon their harmony with nature, and the Physician warns about such: "Under a shepherde softe and necligent / The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb torent" (101-102). Even with the potential danger, however, the Physician and his tale invite a reading where the characters imitate the harmony of nature and humanity with the merging of Christian ideals in a pagan setting. Such imitation reflects the Augustinian humanism beginning to influence Chaucer's society.

Chaucer prepares for Nature's musings by having his narrator establish, in the first five lines of his tale, the peaceful environment of the community before its infection with disharmony. The Physician describes Virginius as a knight "Fulfilde of honour and of worthynesse, / And strong of freendes, and of greet richesse" (3-4). Beginning the tale with a brief description of Virginius establishes the idea that the knight's society to this point lives in harmony – a Golden Age microcosm of sorts emphasized with the words "honour," "worthynesse," "freendes," and "richesse," all of which accentuate the stasis of Virginius' community. Here, Chaucer takes the classical notion of the Ovidian Golden Age and transposes it to the medieval ideal of chivalry. The Physician, however, reveals

nothing of his philosophy regarding Virginius' ability to effect change early on, since at this point change remains unnecessary. Except for the brief mention of the tale's source and the scant attention the Physician gives of Virginius' personality, Chaucer's unusual narrator begins his story with an encomium to Virginia and her connection to the idea of *imitatio naturae*.

To demonstrate this idea of imitation, the Physician personifies nature, allowing for its comparison to Virginia. This comparison creates the harmonious aspect of the two in a Golden Age environment. In effect, nature created Virginia. Through the Physician, Mother Nature says, “Lo! I, Nature, / Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature, / Whan that me list; who kan me countrefete?” (11-13). Virginia's beauty can be created only by a pure element such as nature and her beauty lies beyond the scope of mere humans. Essentially, Nature brags that the beauty she created in Virginia compares to that of Eve before the Fall, her authority given to her by God: “For He that is the formere principal / Hath maked me his vicaire general...I made hire to the worshipe of my lord” (19-20, 26). Ironically, Nature's *effictio* of Virginia parallels the description Chaucer's narrator gives of Nature in *Parliament of Fowls*:

Whan I was come ayeyn into the place
That I of spak, that was so sote and grene,
Forth welk I tho myselven to solace.
Tho was I war where that ther sat a queene
That, as of light the somer sonne shene
Passeth the sterre, right so over mesure

She fayrer was than any creature. (295-301)⁴⁷

One almost can hear Apius reciting these very lines the first time he sees Virginia since she, like nature, literally concerns the phenomenal. Such a comparison of nature's and Virginia's beauty cannot be underestimated because Nature's description of Virginia effectively establishes the unity of the two. Additionally, the tale emphasizes Virginia's connection to nature by what is absent at this point. Neither Chaucer, nor any of the story's characters, reveals Virginia's name or her association with Virginius' commitment to ideals over shame. Only *after* Apius enacts his scheme does Chaucer make known her name, almost as if naming her serves as a metaphor for the "taint" now upon her, thanks to Apius. Not emphasizing her name allows for the seamless symbiosis of nature and Virginia. They cannot be more the same. The omission of her name in the early part of the tale allows for the emphasis of Virginia's chastity in every sense of the word. Her complete purity truly represents nature, untouched by human hands – the true Golden Age environment. Virginia, however, eventually finds herself pulled in opposite directions, since the one thing that connects her to nature, her beauty, also effectively separates her from it.

In the purest sense, beauty, if one is to enjoy it, must be on display, a characteristic of the Ovidian Golden Age, and one that Chaucer clearly demonstrates in this tale. Virginia, as an extension of nature, should not shun her society. Unfortunately, the enjoyment of beauty does not stop at just that point. Enjoyment often degenerates into lust created and characterized by the need to possess such beauty. Apius, when he

⁴⁷ *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

sees Virginia, cannot simply admire her, he must possess her. For Virginia, Apicius' lust creates the paradox that lies at the heart of the *Physician's Tale*. For her community to function ideally and remain in balance, the extraordinarily beautiful Virginia must shun that society as much as possible, despite the Golden Age prerequisite that society enjoy and admire beauty. The Physician understands this requirement:

And of hir owene virtue, unconstreyned,
She hath ful ofte tyme syk hire feyned,
For that she wolde fleen the compaignye
Where likely was to treten of folye,
As is at feestes, revels, and at daunces,
That been occasions of daliaunces. (61-66)

Because of her beauty, Virginia becomes a threat to the balance enjoyed by her Golden Age society. The harmony cannot survive if her beauty is on display. The Physician, however, through his description of her, at least partially fulfills the obligation of art and puts her on display. As when he spoke for Nature, the Physician's portrayal of Virginia immediately makes clear the connection of her to nature:

For right as she kan peynte a lilie whit,
And reed a rose, right with swich peynture
She peynted hath this noble creature,
Er she were born, upon hir lymes fre,
Where as by right swiche colours sholde be. (32-36)

By referring to her as essentially a painting created by the master artist Nature (as well as the gods Phoebus and Pallas later on), the Physician allows for Virginia's safe and

honorable display. But the Physician can only “control” Virginia’s image to a point. For Virginia, the problem arises when she and her mother decide to go into town presumably to worship at a temple.

If there exists an inconsistency in the Physician’s description of Virginia’s behavior, it occurs here. Earlier, the Physician goes into great detail to point out to his listeners that, to avoid potential problems her beauty could cause, Virginia “wolde fleen the compaignye / Where likely was to treten of folye” (63-64). If the term “folye” implies madness as well as folly, it seems unlikely Virginia would put herself in any circumstance where her presence potentially could cause either, even if she intended only to worship her god. Her decision to be out in public, then, creates a staggering paradox. As the beauty from which the unnatural could result, Virginia cannot go out in public. As a manifestation of nature itself, she must be viewed. The result is either a “false” harmony in that Virginia is not fulfilling her obligation as a work of art, or the destruction of the harmony. Either way Virginia, it seems, cannot win. Indeed, only four lines after the Physician resumes his story of Virginia, the lecherous judge emerges – almost, from the Physician’s point of view, as if he has been hiding in the shadows, waiting like the wolf. However, if Virginia functions as a work of art, then Apius should not shoulder all the blame for his initial admiration of her beauty. The Physician says of the reaction, “And so bifel this juge his eyen caste / Upon this mayde, avysynge hym ful faste” (123-124). In essence, Apius reacts quite normally when he sees Virginia for the first time in that initially he admires the beauty of nature as it should be admired. Like the effect art often creates, her beauty completely stuns him. The admiration is only fleeting, however, and afterward nothing is the same. From the moment Apius decides ““This mayde shal

be myn, for any man!” (129), he begins the destruction of the Golden Age harmony of their community and unknowingly condemns Virginia to the death she eventually suffers at the hands of her father.

Realizing that trying to woo Virginia on his own would not prove fruitful, Apius expands his influence over those such as Claudius the pawn who would not see the true function of Virginia. Like Apius, Claudius sees her as a work of art to violate rather than to admire, if he even sees her at all. Much of his motivation in helping Apius comes from his greed, and from Apius’ threat to this “cherl” with his life. At this point, although Virginia and her family fail to recognize it, events have escalated beyond their means to manage them. When the public learns of Apius’ false accusations against Virginius and his daughter, all traces of the Golden Age society vanish. All involved change, particularly Virginius, who must now behave in a manner seemingly inconsistent with the environment from which he came. Because Apius disrupts the harmony of his society, only Virginius, paralleling medieval philosophy bound in the Abrahamic tradition, can effect the change necessary for a return to “olde tymes yoore.” Although Apius has not yet physically violated Virginia, she nonetheless remains violated, a viewpoint consistent with that of the Church fathers.⁴⁸ Since Virginia has in effect been raped, only a violent action will restore the social order, but it is an act not easily attainable.

In the scene mirroring the difficulty of the predicament that most exegetes imagine Abraham to have experienced with God’s command to sacrifice Isaac, Chaucer demonstrates Virginius’ quandary. Initially, Virginius tries to behave in the manner most

⁴⁸ Bloch states that in medieval society “a virgin is a woman who has never been desired by man” (“The Poetics of Virginitie” 99). He adds, “A virgin, in short, is a woman who has never been seen by a man” (*Ibid* 100). For him, “a virgin is a woman who is not thought not to be one in the thought of another. The virgin is above suspicion” (*Ibid* 101).

would expect from a father. He shows up publicly to respond to the charges levied against him. Like God, who really allows no voiced reaction from Abraham if faith is to have any meaning, Apius denies Virginius his voice, leaving him little leverage and even fewer options. It is then that Virginius decides that his daughter's death is the only viable alternative. His decision, like Abraham's, frustrates those who try to understand why he must sacrifice his daughter. Virginius, however, reacts quite logically given the circumstances. He must sacrifice his daughter as part of a process that has two directives. First, he must take vengeance on those who make the false accusations, which he knowingly tries to do. Second, he must restore the harmony within the community. However, because of the pains the Physician takes earlier to establish Virginia's complete purity, coupled with her status as the beloved and only child of an honorable knight, what Virginius decides seems harsh and unnecessary from a secular and religious point of view, at least from the point of view of some critics who feel he has other alternatives.⁴⁹ As in medieval dramatic versions of the Abraham and Isaac story, though, he does not arrive at his decision easily. Like the medieval dramatic Abraham, Virginius' obligation causes him much grief and consternation.

Another complicating factor is that Virginius does not know and at least initially does not recognize that his daughter's death serves the higher purpose of restoring the community to its Golden Age status. He does not necessarily view his daughter as an extension of nature, or more accurately, as Nature herself, just like Abraham fails to

⁴⁹ For example, historical research documents instances of medieval families apprenticing their sons and daughters to other family members or friends resulting in a relocation of the children. See Hanawalt, Chapter 10. *The Ties that Bind: Peasant Families in Medieval England*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986. Also Boswell, Introduction in *The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Chicago, U Chicago P, 1988.

recognize the symbolic representation of Isaac portrayed by medieval dramatists. Like Abraham, he only knows that he must act, and he does so in the manner instilled by the attitudes of his society. Virginius tells her, ““Virginia, by thy name, / Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame, / That thou most suffer”” (213-215). He obviously thinks it better that his daughter die rather than be made impure, probably because such impurity reflects on him as much as on his daughter. Once he decides that Virginia must die, Virginius, like Abraham, sets in motion the events that will result in his victory. Unlike Abraham, however, who completely resigns himself to the world of faith, Virginius seeks control through his actions. He believes his decision to sacrifice his daughter will restore to him the authority that Apius denies him earlier when the latter does not give him the opportunity to respond to the charges levied against him. In that sense, Virginia’s purity, the nature of the Golden Age, dominates how Virginius behaves. To return to a Golden Age environment in this society, Virginius has no other choice but to sacrifice her. It does not prove easy, however. Virginius laments what he must do, telling Virginia, ““My pitous hand moot smyten of thyn heed. / Allas, that evere Apius the say! / Thus hath he falsly jugged the to-day”” (226-228). But he operates according to what he senses to be the best and only course of action.

Virginia, Jephthah’s Daughter, and the Physician

The part of the *Physician’s Tale* that most resembles medieval dramatic versions of the Abraham and Isaac story is seen in Virginia’s response to her father’s decision to kill her. Like Isaac’s, Virginia’s speech is replete with pathos. For thereader, the inability to comprehend her father’s reasoning demonstrates her totally pure nature. After initially hearing her father’s edict, she does not know what to make of it. Medieval

dramatic representations of Isaac also demonstrate his initial confusion as he slowly recognizes his impending doom.⁵⁰ Once Virginia understands her predicament, her emotion becomes overwhelming. She reacts very much like Jephthah's daughter (she even compares herself to her) when her father says he must kill her.⁵¹ Crying profusely, she embraces her father exclaiming, "O mercy, deere fader!" (231). As with Hugelyn's children, Virginia's instinct for survival takes over. Her shock becomes fear and she seeks a solution asking him, "Goode fader, shal I dye? / Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?" (235-236). Much like the silence Hugelyn gives his children after their pleas, Virginius' response, after he has accepted what he must do, appears stoic and unmoving, his response perfunctory and void of emotion – "No, certes, deere doghter myn" (237) – because he, like Hugelyn, has entered the realm of the absurd which enables him to behave in a seemingly illogical manner without emotion getting in the way of what he has to do. When Virginia senses her father's determination to carry through his intention, she asks for some time and begins to resign herself to her impending destiny: "Thanne yif me leyser, fader myn...My deeth for to compleyne a litel space" (238-239). Her acquiescence, however, is on her own terms. Interestingly, this point is when the pagan Virginia invokes the Old Testament story of Jephthah's daughter as a comparison to her own predicament:

"For pardee, Jепte yaf his doghter grace

For to compleyne, er he hir slow, allas!

And, God it woot, no thing was hir trespass,

⁵⁰ The difference is that Isaac demonstrates much concern for his mother and how his death will affect her. The biblical account, of course, almost completely silences Isaac's point of view.

⁵¹ After learning of her sacrifice, Jephthah's daughter tells her father, "Let me go, that I may go about the mountains for two months, and may bewail my virginity with my companions" (Judges 11:37).

But for she ran hir fader first to see,

To welcome hym with greet solempnitee.” (240-244)

If, as many critics suggest, an inconsistency exists in the Physician’s telling of the story, then it occurs here.⁵² Although Christians tend to blend Old Testament figures with classical ideals, no logical explanation exists for Virginia to invoke on her behalf a well-known Christian story unless one remembers the narrator.

Chaucer’s narrators often present an awareness of their own dramatic narrative abilities. Some, like the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, succeed wonderfully. But the apparent disjointedness of the *Physician’s Tale*, demonstrated by this scene, accounts for why many of the tale’s readers do not view the Physician as a credible storyteller.⁵³ Like his counterparts, Chaucer’s Physician uses many dramatic elements in the narration of his tale. But unlike them, his narration appears much less cohesive. Less cohesive, however, does not mean less effective. The pilgrimage, with its many Christian pilgrims, intends to pay honor to a revered saint at journey’s end. The Livy version of Virginia’s story

⁵² E. Talbot Donaldson notes that the comparison of Virginia to such a figure “may be a pure accident though a wry one” (1090-1091). *Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader*. New York: HarperCollins, 1975. Alcuin Blamires writes, “What is odd is her last request, to be given some time to lament like Jephthah’s daughter...the Judaic precedent of lamenting because one is to die while still a virgin is utterly incompatible with her situation as she sees it” (202). “Men, Women, and Moral Jurisdiction: ‘The Friar’s Tale’, ‘The Physician’s Tale’, and the Pardoner.” *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006. Brown, Jr. refers to Virginia’s comparison to the biblical figure as a “wild incongruity” (“What is Chaucer Doing” 136). Hoffman (“Jephthah’s Daughter”) offers an explanation for how the biblical reference proves vital in understanding the Physician’s *effictio* in the General Prologue and for the placement of the tale in relation to the *Franklin’s Tale*. His analysis, however, fails to consider Virginia’s pagan status when her reference to Jephthah’s daughter occurs.

⁵³ Hoffman, trying to account for everything attributed to the Physician’s personality, adds, “we have never really been able to agree upon Chaucer’s reason, in the *General Prologue*, for inserting between an observation on the Physician’s moderate diet and a description of his rather rich apparel the seemingly irrelevant comment, “His studie was but litel on the Bible” (“Jephthah’s Daughter” 20). Elaine E. Whitaker makes the point that, “as a storyteller, Chaucer’s physician undermines his own credibility by continuously frustrating the expectations of his audience. As digression follows digression, Chaucer calls attention to the Physician’s responsibility for the narrative, noting that the Physician ‘maketh this descripcioun’ of Envy’s pleasure in the ill health of others” (2). “John of Arderne and Chaucer’s Physician.” *ANQ* (1995): 1-5.

lacks a Christian element. If the Physician narrates his tale as presented in Livy, or the *Roman de la Rose* for that matter, the result would be a lack of credibility not only in the Physician, but also in the tale itself. Although the *Knight's Tale*, another pagan account of desire much like the *Physician's Tale*, lacks a Christian element, the Knight, unlike the Physician, does not have to establish his ethos. The pilgrims already accept him as a credible storyteller. Chaucer's Physician best enhances his ethos as storyteller by adding the Old Testament element into the dialogue of Virginia. The Physician invoking the story of Jephthah's daughter also makes sense in that if the Physician knows as little about the Bible as Chaucer suggests,⁵⁴ then he naturally would choose a story that only resembles Virginia's fate on the surface. After all, Jephthah's daughter laments the fact that she will die a virgin. Such a mistake keeps in character with the description Chaucer gives of the Physician in the *General Prologue*.

In the tales of religion and morality, the display of overt emotion directed toward the self results in a loss of ethos. In medieval drama, the pathos of Abraham never resonates with a "why me?" attitude. His emotion comes from the love, concern, and regret he has for his son. While Isaac seeks an understanding of the events about to take place, his emotion demonstrates concern for his mother, not for himself. Virginia initially and logically responds very dramatically when she learns her fate. Her pathos, however, climaxes when she swoons after the comparison of herself to Jephthah's daughter. When she awakens, she seemingly has accepted what must happen to her: "Blissed by God that I shal dye a mayde! / Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame; / Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!" (248-250), an attitude usually

⁵⁴ "His studie was but litel on the Bible" (438).

attributed to Isaac by Church fathers and medieval dramatists and consistent with the way the Physician has defined her character, through complete obedience to the wishes of the father, a necessary characteristic for this society to function. Because of the sex / gender system of her society, Virginia has no choice but to accept her father's edict. While she does not recognize it, continuing to plead for another alternative prevents Virginius from restoring the balance to his society, and more importantly it takes Virginia from her totally pure Isaac-like state and places her within the realm of the ordinary, unworthy of the descriptions given her by the Physician and Nature. Understanding her duty to her father, Virginia implores him to act in God's name, and she does consent to her death, seemingly without much of a struggle, despite her emotional pleas and two fainting spells. Noting Virginia's acquiescence to her father's decision, Farber writes that, "in placing Virginia's acceptance of his right to govern her, Chaucer makes clear that the responsibility does not lie entirely with Virginius: Virginia embraces her father's logic as well as his power and, voicing both, consents to her own death" (159). Such a reading however, oversimplifies the struggle Virginia faces. If she indeed embraces her father's conclusion (as Farber suggests), there would be no need for the comparison to Jephthah's daughter.

On another level, Virginia's reaction to her father's edict falls in line exactly with the expected behavior of a child in one of Chaucer's tales of morality. In fact, readers and listeners alike easily forget Virginia's child status. Her pathos becomes completely understandable from that point of view, but only because the Physician, in an attempt to gain credibility in what to that point seems a disjointed story, adds the emotional impact in the form of Virginia's very Job-like attitude. Chaucer wants the readers to feel the

impact of Virginia's death, which explains one reason the tale moves so swiftly to its conclusion after her decapitation. Like the Hugelyn episode of the *Monk's Tale*, Chaucer wants the focus to be the child. Indeed, for the tale to work in terms of how the Physician defines it, the last voice heard must be Virginia's. Perpetual dialogue after this point dilutes the emotional impact the Physician hopes to establish with his tale, since Virginia serves as the tale's focus, rather than Virginius or Apius.

With the exception of the Hugelyn story in the *Monk's Tale*, each of Chaucer's tales of religion and morality end with essentially a public scene. In many ways, the *Physician's Tale* is the most public. For the first time the action in the tale moves from the *locus* of Virginius' family to the *Plataea* of the entire society, all because of Virginia's decapitation. Now, the Physician's audience gets to see the entire society and how it functions. Only the beginning of the tale gives any hint at how this society lived, and it is clear that before Apius sees Virginia, they are at peace. The opening, however, is very localized and private. After Virginia's death, the action must become public in order to demonstrate the return to the Golden Age stasis that existed at the beginning. Its restoration, ironically, occurs only through the public exhibition of this work of art. Virginius has no choice but to display his daughter since her exhibition in the first place, no matter how unwittingly, condemns her to eventual death. In the way that Virginia's beauty affects Apius when he first lays eyes upon her, so too does Virginia's decapitated beauty affect the public, compelling it to act. Even in death, Virginia's beauty inspires action. The Physician does not provide his listeners with the exact reaction of the judge when he sees what has happened to Virginia, except to say that Apius "bad to take hym and anhangen hym faste" (259), as if Virginius has committed murder. The people's

reaction shows otherwise: “But right anon a thousand people in thraste, / To save the knyght” (260-261). Additionally, the Physician’s narration makes clear that the public suspected Apius of improper behavior regarding Virginia. But only someone of Virginius’ status can effect change that will return that society to its Golden Age. Quite simply, the people as a whole remain powerless until a qualified individual rises to the forefront. Virginius, then, falls in line with prototypes found in Vergil and Ovid who have the power to effect change.⁵⁵ That individual must be someone of integrity or no change takes place and the result is chaos. The fact that the people rebel against Apius’ lecherous behavior and not against Virginia’s death indicates the honor of Virginius’ decision. The Physician also states that Apius, upon imprisonment, slays himself.

Girard notes that violence stemming from the hands of another serves no real point except to perpetuate that violence, unless the victim is sacrificially pure. Without the sacrificial victim, violence seeks a surrogate: “the murderer is the one who does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal” (4). While many would support Virginius if he decided to kill Apius himself, for Virginius, it would serve no purpose except to escalate the violence he is, in effect, trying to quell. Girard notes:

A frequent motif in the Old Testament...is that of brothers at odds with one another. Their fatal penchant for violence can only be diverted by the intervention of a third party, the sacrificial victim or victims. Cain’s “jealousy” of his brother is only another term for his one characteristic

⁵⁵ In essence, Virginius functions along the lines described by Vergil in *Aeneid* Six when Anchises, revealing the future of Aeneas’ progeny Caesar Augustus, tells him and the Sybil ““hic est... aurea condet / saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arua / Saturno quondam”” (791-794). ““this is the man...Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold / To Latium, to the land where Saturn reigned / In early times.”” *Aeneid*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald. New York, Vintage, 1983.

trait: his lack of a sacrificial outlet. (4)

Because Cain is a tiller of the soil, he has no outlet to sacrifice for God, unless one considers Cain's "fruits of the earth" as "gifts to the Lord" (Gen 4:3). God obviously does not. But Virginius is not in Cain's position. If Virginius and Apius are viewed as "brothers," then the sacrificial outlet exists in the form of Virginia. Virginius, despite what many feel and expect, has no reason at this point to kill Apius. His attitude is also consistent with the Abraham and Isaac story. Girard writes:

According to Moslem tradition, God delivered to Abraham the ram previously sacrificed by Abel. This ram was to take the place of Abraham's son Isaac; having already saved one human life, the same animal would now save another. (4)

Virginia's death not only "saves" her father, it also saves her society. If Virginius kills Apius, then there is no return to the Golden Age. Therefore, Apius' death must be by his own hands.⁵⁶

With Apius' suicide, Virginius has successfully returned his society to its Golden Age state. His intercession on behalf of Claudius the "cherl" demonstrates this idea. Rather than following through with the sentence "to hange upon a tree" (271), Virginius instead exiles him. Because Virginius has regained his Golden Age mentality, his society must as well. According to the Physician, "Virginius, of his pitee, / So preyed for hym

⁵⁶ The suicide allows the focus to remain where it belongs, on Virginia. According to Owens, "Through medieval adaptations of the legend, most prominently the *Roman de la Rose* and 'the Physician's Tale,' Virginia had undergone a transformation from Livy's silent, almost marginal, figure into a more actively courageous martyr" ("The Revenge of the Martyred Body" 91). Saunders points out "the tale of Virginia depicted a dramatic escape from rape through martyrdom" (267). "A Dede of Men': Chaucer's Narrative of Rape." *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*. Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2001.

that he was exiled; / And elles, certes, he had been bigyled” (272-274). Such an act maintains the reclamation of the Golden Age that has just occurred, and Claudius essentially becomes one with Vergil’s Meliboeus in that their exile causes more distress than his death as the last part of the passage suggests. Exile amounts to death, but it is not violence. Ironically, Harry Bailley’s words at the conclusion of the *Physician’s Tale* indicate that the tale itself has thrown the host’s microcosmic world out of order, and he desires a return to the normalcy of his group: ““Myn herte is lost for pitee of this mayde. / Thou beel amy, thou Pardoner...Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon”” (317-319). Unfortunately for the Host, the only joy in what the Pardoner is about to relate comes from his hypocrisy. At least the Physician proved an honest storyteller.

CHAPTER 5

SHE WHO SURVIVES: CUSTANCE FROM ISAAC TO ABRAHAM

When analyzing the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac, many note the lack of emotion expressed by Abraham as he follows through with God's directive to sacrifice Isaac. St. Augustine offers at least a partial explanation for this absence of the pathetic: "Abraham, of course, could never have believed that God takes pleasure in human victims. Still, when the divine command thunders, we must obey without disputing its orders" (151).¹ Augustine makes clear the chief characteristic of sacrifice and how it relates to emotion: obedience. And while medieval drama nicely makes up for the absence of the pathetic while still incorporating Abraham's obedient nature, it rarely deals with the aftermath of Isaac's sacrifice, the result of that obedience, unless one considers the sacrifice of Christ as the logical conclusion to the story.² Indeed, many Church fathers taught that the Abraham and Isaac story was a symbolic precursor to the

¹ From *The City of God*. Vol. 5. Trans. Eva Matthews Sanford and William McAllen Green. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965.

² Medieval Jewish commentators note that in the sacrifice of Isaac, the *Akedah*, God is merely testing the loyalty of Abraham. Rabbi Yona Ibn Janach, in the eleventh century, refers to the sacrifice as symbolic. See Rav Chaim Navon, Lecture #24: The *Akeida*. *The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash*. Trans. David Strauss. <<http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/bereishit/24bereishit.htm>>. In the early fourteenth century, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Caspi essentially claims that Abraham misinterpreted what God asked of him since God could never command something so revolting. See Basil Herring, *Joseph Ibn Kaspi's Gevia Kesef: A Study in Medieval Jewish Philosophic Bible Commentary*. Ann Arbor: Ktav, 1982. Modern scholars seem to agree with the former. For example, Lippmann Bodoff writes, "we are being told, God will never ask for this proof of loyalty or fear of God again. He asked it only of Abraham, the first Jew, the first forefather of the Jewish people, to demonstrate Abraham's boundless fear of God" (1). "The Real Test of the *Akedah*: Blind Obedience versus Moral Choice." *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought*. The Free Library 01 January 1993. 18 February 2011. <[http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The real test of the Akedah: blind obedience versus moral choice.-a013796423](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+real+test+of+the+Akedah:+blind+obedience+versus+moral+choice.-a013796423)>.

sacrifice of Christ. Augustine, quoting the teachings of Paul, sums up the general attitude about Isaac's sacrifice:

“Wherefore he also made him a type.” A type of whom? Surely of him whom the apostle says: “Who did not spare his own son, but delivered him up for us all?” For this reason, even as the Lord carried his own cross, so Isaac himself also carried to the place of sacrifice the wood on which he too was to have been placed. Finally, since it was not fitting that Isaac should be slain, now after his father had been forbidden to strike him, who was that ram whose immolation completed the sacrifice by blood that was fraught with meaning? Note that when Abraham saw the ram it was caught in a thicket by its horns. Who, then, was symbolized by the ram but Jesus, crowned with Jewish thorns¹ before he was sacrificed? (153)

But even from a literal viewpoint, the two events are connected, as Augustine suggests: “By faith Abraham, when he was undergoing temptation, walked before Isaac, and offered up his only son, who received the promises, to whom it was said: ‘In Isaac shall your seed be called’” (153). Christ, the “seed” of Abraham, through His resurrection serves as the payoff because Abraham does obey God and dutifully offers his son as sacrifice; he and his family receive the blessings of God for generations to come. God tells Abraham after satisfying the requirement:

Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not spared thy only begotten son for my sake: I will bless thee, and I will multiply thy seed as the stars

¹ Mark and John state that Roman soldiers crowned Christ with the thorns. Augustine clearly follows the tradition of blaming the Jews for the entirety of Christ's suffering.

of heaven, and as the sand that is by the sea shore: thy seed shall possess the gates of their enemies. And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because thou hast obeyed my voice. (Gen. 22:16-18)

But whether the Abraham and Isaac story is viewed literally or allegorically, the reparation for seemingly impossible acts of faith is the same: the birth and resurrection of Christ.

The biblical account of the sacrifice of Isaac, however, does not combine emotion with faith. Medieval drama aims to rectify that problem. What medieval dramatists make clear with their inclusion of the pathetic is that Abraham's ordeal is more a spiritual trial than a test of faith, a conflict between his human nature and his spiritual duty. And while it can be argued that Abraham's prominent displays of emotion in medieval drama do not necessarily lessen the importance of Isaac's sacrifice, they do, at the very least, suggest that the medieval Abraham seems closer to a kind of later paternal sensibility than what the biblical passage seemingly intends. The biblical account of Abraham's behavior, as Kierkegaard points out, lies outside the realm of logic and understanding, since throughout the ordeal he remains so verbally reticent. The patriarch speaks only to satisfy the basic demands of the questions he is asked, and never displays emotion.

Such silence is, ironically, the behavior most expected by patriarchal societies from its women.² The silence is characterized by the use of language only in specific circumstances for specific reasons, and by the lack of emotion in particularly trying

² Mei-ling Chao elaborates: "This demand of silence was further reinforced by negative caricatures of women as chattering, gossiping animals. Regulating who spoke became crucial for those who wanted to possess power. To reduce a woman to silence was to reduce her to powerlessness and, thus, to guarantee men's sovereignty" (77). "Female Voice in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*." *General Education and Transdisciplinary Research* 1 (2007): 75-92.

moments. Patriarchal societies did not expect rational or authoritative speech from its women, and if women tried to speak in such a manner, their male counterparts, (and some of the women too) viewed them, at the very least, as less than authentic. Western culture views the world of language, when used rationally and authoritatively, as exclusively male. Women who attempt this type of language generally are not taken seriously from their audience. Such happens with the Wife of Bath, who attempts the language of males in her Prologue. She demonstrates that garrulous (and irrational) speech is often associated with women,³ as the Pardoner's interruption suggests: "Dame, I woulde praye yow, if youre wyl it were /... as ye bigan, / Tell forth youre tale, spareth for no man, / And teche us yonge men of youre praktike" (184-187). Later, at the conclusion of her Prologue, the Wife faces the sarcastic response of the Friar, who says laughing, "Now dame...so have I joye or blis, / This is a long preamble of a tale!" (830-831). Whether authoritative speech is the domain of the male or female, both viewpoints center on issues of power and identity. Cheryl Glenn notes, "Rhetoric always inscribes the relation of language and power at a particular moment...canonical rhetorical history has represented the experience of males, powerful males, with no provision of allowance for females" (1).⁴ The result is a tendency to view silence as a weak and expected characteristic of women that permeates all levels of society.⁵ And on those few occasions when women try to assert their voice, they are met often with hostility, ridicule, and condescension, as

³ Of the established system, Chao notes: "With the patriarchal social structure...every medieval woman needed to cultivate...obedience; in no way were women to assert themselves as equals to men. They were to recognize, accept and uphold male sovereignty. Women who stepped beyond proper roles prescribed by the society were called "mannish" or labeled "viragos" and were severely chastised. Role-refusal was met by violent responses, as in the trial of Joan of Arc" (*Ibid* 77).

⁴ *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

⁵ As Glenn makes clear, women are notably absent from the histories of education, politics, law, and religion (*Ibid* 1).

reactions to the Wife of Bath demonstrate, since they are not behaving with the implied feminine weakness associated with silence; then they are not allowed that voice at all.⁶

Yet one should note that silence, despite the tendency to view it as such, is *not* weakness. It is an essential part of communication. Because communication of the suppressed is seen as a threat to the power structure, those who employ silence must do so in a manner that is not seen as threatening.⁷ If one is careful in how silence is used, then it can result in the reversal of the power structure, since silence essentially dictates the use of language on the part of others.⁸

Chaucer no doubt recognizes the implications and influence of silence on the Abraham and Isaac story, as well as on sacrifice in general. In his tales of religion and morality, silence and the lack of pathos are at the center of efforts by primary sacrificial figures to be obedient. The exception is Virginia in the *Physician's Tale*. Perhaps because the tale is set in the era before Christianity, Virginia does not overtly model the Abraham and Isaac events as described in the Bible, but instead is beset with pathos regarding her impending sacrifice. But the pathetic, in her case, actually *enhances* her character. Virginia becomes a more exalted figure because of her expressions of

⁶ Jacqueline Jones Royster puts it: "I have been compelled on too many occasions to count to sit as a well-mannered Other, silently, in a state of tolerance that requires me to be as expressionless as I can manage, while colleagues, who occupy a place of entitlement different from my own talk about history and achievements of people from my ethnic group, or even about the perceptions of our struggles" (30). "When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 29-40. Royster adds, "These types of close encounters that disregard dialectical views are a type of free touching of the power-less by the power-full" (*Ibid* 32). Glenn states that those who try to exercise their right to speech but are not recognized within the accepted power structure are viewed by those in power as less than human: "speech became the authorized medium of culture and power, and its seeming obverse a sign of 'animality'...Little wonder then, that speaking or speaking out continues to signal power, liberation, culture, or civilization itself. That seeming obverse, silence, signals nothingness...language is all, silence is nothing" (*Unspoken* 3).

⁷ Robert L Scott states, "To speak is to assert one's position. To remain silent is to defer to the position of another. One must do both thoughtfully and carefully" (3). "Dialectical Tensions of Speaking and Silence." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79 (1993): 1-18.

⁸ See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. I. New York: Vintage, 1990. 62.

emotion. And while the story does not overtly follow the Bible's portrayal of Abraham and Isaac, Chaucer most likely had the story in mind when writing the *Physician's Tale*, for Virginia does resemble the pathetic representations of Isaac in medieval drama. Like Isaac, she questions the intentionality and necessity of her sacrifice, but in the end accepts what must befall her, and in doing so becomes, like him, a more revered figure.

Comparing Virginia to the dramatic representations of Isaac also provides a way for Chaucerians to transition from the previous tales where the children have not reached the age of accountability or reason, (the Hugelyn episode in the *Monk's Tale*, and the *Prioress' Tale*), to the more mature children in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*. In fact, the *Man of Law's Tale* is the first tale in Chaucer's tales of religion and morality to have one character embody both the child and parental role in the biblical and dramatic accounts of the Abraham and Isaac story. This embodiment is characterized by Custance's use of rhetorical concealment, which grows more astute with every trial she faces. At the outset of her tribulations, she is clearly an adolescent, her age approximately the same as Virginia's. As the Physician does with Virginia, the Man of Law characterizes her youth mainly through her external beauty. But both also are described in terms of their internal makeup, which is mostly characterized by pure and innocent attitudes. And while the two women would seem to be quite different because of the general setting of their stories and the circumstances they face, in many ways Custance remains as much of a child as Virginia. It would seem unlikely because of her relatively youthful status that Custance is capable of the deliberate silence or verbal manipulation

that subverts the male-dominated system already in place.⁹ Her age would seemingly make her more like Virginia, who after all fails to undermine the system despite her protests. In the face of her early crises, Custance behaves like Virginia, a child, more in line with the medieval dramatic versions of Isaac. Like them, she is very emotionally charged, but ultimately accepts what must happen. While Custance comes from a position of privilege, it is precisely because of that position that silence would have been an ordinary part of her life.¹⁰ Essentially, she is a child who learns through experience. As the years pass and she enters adulthood, the lessons of her youth serve her well and she understands the situations she encounters.¹¹ Through her adventures, she goes from being the emotional Isaac-like character found in medieval drama, to a version of the biblical representation of Abraham, characterized mostly through her use of verbal reticence. Her world treats her in a manner consistent with the dominant male domain, true to ancient and biblical principles. Custance only speaks when necessary and only to achieve a pre-determined end,¹² a use of silence counter to the traditional views of

⁹ While the lives of saints provide a model for the young and innocent woman to resist male domination through silence, they are not a model for deliberate subversive action. Saints live primarily through faith, in the hope that their tribulation will end through their practice of it. They do not use silence in a deliberately manipulative fashion so that they can rise above their oppressors. In that sense, Custance is not saint-like, since her use of silence is calculated. For her, the use of silence is designed to achieve a pre-determined end.

¹⁰ Carolyn Dinshaw states, "Constance's defining characteristic, her virtuous suffering, is, indeed, not her own; it results from her father's 'governance...'" (110). "The Law of Man and Its 'Abhominations.'" *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. Madison: U Wisconsin P, 1989. 88-112.

¹¹ It must be acknowledged that the Custance story, while a staple of medieval romance with its characteristic tropes including long journeys and long lapses of time, does not easily lend itself to a psychological analysis of the major character. However, if her character is to be faulted for her passivity in regard to the circumstances she faces (which scores of critics have done over the years), then it is fair to explore why that character is indeed so passive. And while it may not initially seem as such, Custance (like Griselda) does grow psychologically, her saintly attributes notwithstanding, and emerges more confident and powerful in relation to her male counterparts.

¹² The use of her prayers is necessary to the development of the religious themes of the tale, but they are not necessary to its main, literal development.

women and silence promulgated through history.¹³ Her silence is calculated, a pattern of communication consistent with the Abrahamic biblical model. Custance speaks very deliberately in the face of her trials, revealing very little of her true nature to her interlocutors. For her, such strategic and premeditated use of silence allows her to resist the power structure that tries to control her, and she emerges at the top of a redefined power pyramid.¹⁴ While the cause of her suffering certainly differs from Abraham's, her demonstration of faith and obedience through each of her ordeals is indeed Abrahamic in nature. And like Abraham, her unswerving devotion to God is rewarded.

Of course, for many, the biblical behavior demonstrated by Abraham in the face of the seemingly impossible command from God does not prove satisfactory. This less than satisfactory attitude is also applied to Custance. Regardless of the payoff, many find problematic not only her trials but also the tale in general.¹⁵ The result has been a mass of commentary and speculation as to what Chaucer intended.¹⁶ As with Abraham, much

¹³ See Unger Ljung, *Silence or Suppression: Attitudes Toward Women in the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Coronet, 1989.

¹⁴ Glenn states, "When silence is our choice, we can use it purposefully and effectively" (*Unspoken* 13). Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes, "Woman's insubordination is...a derivative of her subordination" (189). *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: U California P, 1992.

¹⁵ For example, Don-John Dugas argues, "The *Man of Law's Tale* is...unsatisfactory as a 'plot of action' or 'plot of character'" (27). "The Legitimization of Royal Power in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*." *Modern Philology* 95 (1997): 27-43. A.C. Spearing nicely summarizes the tendencies of recent criticism of the tale: "In the 1960s and 1970s...we find a cluster of readings of the *Man of Law's Tale* that are energized by a sense of the power of the narratorial voice, once recognized, to allow us to attribute all that we dislike about the tale and its heroine to its narrator rather than to Chaucer" (722). "Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*." *New Literary History* 32 (2001): 715-746.

¹⁶ Bernard I. Duffey writes, "Although it has been dismissed as one of the minor achievements of its author, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* has called forth a scattering of critical comment, the variety and inclusiveness of which pose an inviting problem in the definition of the poet's intention and art" (181). "The Intention and Art of the *Man of Law's Tale*." *ELH* 14 (1947): 181-193. Edward R. Block sees the *Man of Law's Tale* as a work building on Trivet to emerge more original than its source. "Originality, Controlling Purpose, and Craftsmanship in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*." *PMLA* 68 (1953): 575-616; Anna Baldwin argues the *Man of Law's Tale* as an extension of Boethian philosophy affirming the purveyance of God. "'The Man of Law's Tale' as a Philosophical Narrative." *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 181-189; Roger E. Moore's excellent "Nominalistic Perspectives on Chaucer's 'The Man of Law's Tale.'" *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 23 (1992): 80-100, discusses the

of the conflict is the result of the inability to understand Custance's psychological behavior, which when viewed literally prompts many to view her tale as an allegory or exemplum. No evidence, however, suggests that Chaucer's medieval audience would have viewed Custance solely as an allegorical figure.¹⁷ Furthermore, using allegorical interpretation as the sole hermeneutic for the understanding of the tale is not consistent with the use of multiple hermeneutics for biblical exegesis so prominent in Chaucer's time. Part of the problem is that while Abraham must endure his suffering internally, Custance suffers physically as well. She refuses openly to resist her harsh treatment, as most modern readers want her to, particularly after the birth of her child. Such behavior, from a modern perspective, is not maternal. Although there is no consensus on what constitutes proper womanly behavior, the hostile commentary regarding Custance's actions makes it clear that, except toward the men in her life, she does not behave in a manner consonant with modern perceptions of what it means to be a "woman."¹⁸ She may fit the "chaste, silent, and obedient" model prescribed by Paul,¹⁹ but that model does not appear to suffice for modern readers. This criticism makes clear that the notion of

elusive nature of God within the tale; on the intertextuality of Chaucer's moral relationship with Gower, see Elizabeth Allen, "Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading." *ELH* 64 (1997): 627-655.

¹⁷ John Frankis, noting the historical significance of the naming of Custance, states that "in...later versions, the name of Tiberius's daughter had changed: (after her father Tiberius Constantinus, and presumably implying a connection with the emperor Constantine the Great), by the time of Giraldus she has become *Constantia* (the form of the name underlying Trevet, Gower and Chaucer), a name charged with allegorical potential, so that she becomes an exemplum of constancy" (84). "King Ælle and the Conversion of the English: The Development of a Legend from Bede to Chaucer." *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*. Eds. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg. New York: Cambridge UP, 2000. 74-92. Chaucer's name, "Custance" would indicate, at the very least, a near allegory.

¹⁸ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990. See also Sheila Delany, "Womanliness in the 'Man of Law's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1974): 63-72, and Paul M. Clogan, "The Narrative Style of *The Man of Law's Tale*." *Medievalia et Humanistica* 8 (1977): 217-233.

¹⁹ The medieval view of the silencing of women had its beginnings in the New Testament theology of St. Paul: "Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man; but to be silence" (1Tim. 2:11-12). See also First Corinthians 14:34-35.

how a woman should behave has changed over time, but that there is a relentlessly consistent expectation of this modern conduct in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Only the male figures surrounding Custance seem to have an idea of expected and proper feminine behavior, and her comportment causes the controversy in the critical world precisely because she appears to behave the way the men in her life expect. In the end, modern criticism of Custance's behavior is really a modern criticism of the Pauline ideal that held sway in much medieval writing, and, one could argue, the virtue of passivity more generally.

From a modern perspective, Custance's passivity is less than virtuous. Her behavior is certainly in line with the suffering biblical female,²⁰ but many modern critics do not see it as sufficiently strong,²¹ particularly when she is juxtaposed with the tale's other central women, the Sowdanesse and Donegild, who, because they are cast as villains, behave more aggressively, as modern readers seem to expect.²² In an effort to explain this lack of aggressive action, most relegate her to the stock female literary

²⁰ For example, Ruth, and of course, Mary.

²¹ Yvette Kisor declares Custance's behavior to be a reaction to the control her father tries to exert over her body, making the tale one which discomforts its readers. "Moments of Silence, Acts of Speech: Uncovering the Incest Motif in the *Man of Law's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 40 (2005): 141-162. Robert B. Dawson states the matter more succinctly: "few critics seem to like Custance very much" (294). "Custance in Context: Rethinking the Protagonist of the *Man of Law's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 26 (1991-1992): 293-308.

²² This article, while exploring Custance's use of rhetorical concealment, does not investigate its implications to the incestuous relationship often attributed to Custance and her father the emperor, and alluded to by the Man of Law in the Prologue to his tale. For more on the incest angle and its relationship to Custance's language, see Kisor. See also Margaret Schlauch, *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens*. New York: Gordian P, 1969; Elizabeth Archibald, "Fathers and Daughters." *Incest and the Medieval Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001. 145-191, also "The Flight from Incest: Two Late Classical Precursors of the Constance Theme." *The Chaucer Review* 20 (1986): 259-272; Elizabeth Scala, "Canacee and the Chaucer Canon: Incest and Other Unnarratables." *The Chaucer Review* 30 (1995): 15-39; R.A. Shoaf, "'Unwemmed Custance': Circulation, Property, and Incest in the *Man of Law's Tale*." *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 287-302; D. Thomas Hanks, Jr., "Emaré: An Influence on the *Man of Law's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 18 (1983): 182-186.

figures characterized by passivity and acquiescence to stock situations.²³ Or, if she is elevated at all, it is by those who view her as a saint or quasi-saint, enduring her suffering in the service of God. Such a viewpoint essentially eliminates gender as a motivating factor, since the lens of hagiography tends to blur certain behaviors characteristic of a particular gender. In either case, whether Custance is viewed as a stock character or as a saint, the common denominator is that neither representation allows for her womanliness or humanity. Ultimately, it is incorrect to view Custance purely as a stock character. And while she does exhibit saint-like behavior, she clearly is not a saint according to typical hagiographic virtues.²⁴ Besides being interested in any kind of individuated humanity, Chaucer ostensibly uses the Man of Law to narrate Custance's trials in such a way as to develop the sense of suffering and triumph found in sacrificial figures, although the tale resists being read only in this way when viewed literally.

Custance, then, represents the world of the extraordinary. She admirably endures what the world throws at her, her gender notwithstanding. Unfortunately, the controversy surrounding ordinary women who do not behave in ordinary ways proves difficult to escape. Readers tend to bring common rules to their judgment of women who behave like Custance. Because of the extraordinary circumstances she faces, Custance is not a typical young woman. Perhaps that is the point. Women are not ordinary, even though

²³ As an example of a stock situation, Dinshaw shrewdly notes, "Christianity [is] an ideology that subsumes patriarchy" ("The Law of Man" 237, n.39).

²⁴ For example, Ælfric describes Zosimus, after encountering St. Mary and hearing her speak, "Ðas word witodlice gebrohton on Zosime micelne ege .and fyrhtu .and he wæs byfigende; And hé wæs geondgoten mid þæs swates dropum; Ða ongen hé sworetan swá swá eallunga gewæced on þam oreðe belocen..." (231-235). Custance, in and of herself, does not inspire this type of reaction from anyone in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Later, Zosimus asks of St. Mary, "Geþinga me nu of þam geongran dæle for þysere worulde dead gefremed on þam geswutelað on þe .seo godcunde lufu ealra swiðost þæt þu mé be naman naemdest .þone þu næfre ær ne gesawe" (237-240). Zosimus' request for Mary to intercede on his behalf is another example of reverence toward saints that Custance does not experience. See *Lives of the Saints*. Charleston, SC: Nabu P, 2010.

they are often treated that way. Maybe resistance to Custance and her tale would diminish if readers viewed her behavior as less unbelievable and less gender-based, and instead looked upon her conduct as unusual or different in light of what she faces and what others expect her to do.²⁵ The problem of knowing or understanding a woman is a product of the fact that the Western tradition casts her (like the child) as mute. Given her upbringing and perilous circumstances, it is not surprising that Custance often responds with silence.

Ultimately, then, Chaucer creates in Custance a transitional character patterned after medieval dramatic representations of Isaac, who then takes on the characteristics of the medieval biblical understanding of Abraham. Such characterization is made manifest early on through Custance's use of pathos when she is a child on the cusp of adulthood. Once a mother, she dispenses with the emotional in favor of rhetorical concealment characterized by her deliberate verbal reticence. Given the patriarchal attitudes Custance faces, such rhetorical concealment²⁶ is an important viable option for communication and protection. Her use of rhetorical concealment also gains credibility through the assistance from the divine. God's miraculous interventions help to free her from the barriers in the male domain created by her gender, and they help her to survive the

²⁵ For example, Chao presents a more practical, albeit a less flattering, picture of these women: "Good and virtuous women are silent, obedient and self-sacrificing ones, such as Emylie in the *Knight's Tale*, Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale*, and Gresilde in the *Clerk's Tale*. They are passive ornaments or objects of men's exchange and exhibit the ideal feminine response to adversity: acceptance, silence, patience, and piety. Bad and wicked women are those who violate or threaten the codified ideals men impose upon them and are ridiculed flagrantly...In almost every case in male narratives, women are in inferior positions and are defined in their relation to men" ("Female Voice" 77).

²⁶ Of Custance, Kisor explains, "Her silence regarding particular aspects of her history is predicated upon speech that insists on concealing her identity" ("Moments of Silence" 142).

intense isolation her trials create.²⁷ The result is a woman who emerges triumphant, in the Abrahamic ideal, with all due reverence and respect that carries through to her child.

The Problem of Beauty

Beauty has long been a foundation for displays of the pathetic, and it is through beauty that Chaucer links the emotional characteristics of Virginia and Custance. The *effictio* of Custance closely resembles that of Virginia in that both heroines surpass even the highest form of beauty physically and internally. More importantly, as the narrators of these tales demonstrate, beauty deeply stirs the emotions of others. For example, the Man of Law notes Custance's "excellent renoun" (150), in addition to "hir goodnesse as beautee" (158) that "Nas nevere swich another as is shee" (159):

In hire is heigh beautee, withoute pride,
Yowthe, withoute grenehede of folye;
To alle hire werkes vertu is hir gyde;
Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tirannye.
She is mirour of alle curteisye;
Hir herte is verray chamber of hoolynesse,
Hir hand, minister of fredam for almess. (162-168)

This emotional description (which borders on hyperbole) proves important. Her portrayal, as is the case with Virginia's, implies that female beauty is synonymous with weakness. She cannot help that she is a beautiful creature, nor can she stop the emotional reactions her beauty causes in her male counterparts, including the Man of Law himself.

²⁷ While this is a commonplace of hagiography, especially lives in which a young woman rejects marriage to a pagan in order to commit herself to God, the difference for Custance is that like Abraham, she vows faith and obedience to God, but she lives her life according to the events that befall her rather than openly vowing service to God.

Unfortunately, that beauty also initiates the emotional reactions that result in her downfall. Such is demonstrated early on in the *Man of Law's Tale*. According to the Man of Law, the merchants of Syria are in Rome “for chapmanhod or for disport” (143). From a business perspective, these merchants certainly have much of value to offer: “spicerye, / Clothes of gold, and satyns riche of hewe” (136-137). They are businessmen used to the commodification of goods. It is no surprise, then, that when they hear of “th'excellent renoun / Of the Emperoures doghter, dame Custance” (150-151), they in essence see her as commodity that is worth bringing back to their homeland. According to the Man of Law, “And whan they han this blissful mayden sayn, / Hoom to Surrýe been they went ful fayn, / And doon hir nedes as they han doon yoore / And liven in wele” (172-175). The passage is important because it establishes that these men, as merchants, constantly think in terms of business. Shortly thereafter, they bring their Sultan word of Custance's beauty.²⁸ Even though he has not met her, the Sultan then decides to make Custance his bride, regardless of location, social status, and surprisingly, even religion. In fact, he begins to suffer essentially from lovesickness, something, he says, that cannot be cured until he makes Custance a permanent part of his life: “Saveth my lyf, and beth noght recchelees / To geten hire that hath my lyf in cure, / For in this wo I may nat longe endure” (229-231). As is evident by the way in which the Man of Law describes Custance, beauty creates a strong emotional reaction that completely consumes its victims. With the Sultan, the connection of beauty and emotion actually proves more interesting since he has not, up to this point, even *seen* Custance. More importantly,

²⁸ In a wonderful observation, Dinshaw says of this situation, “the parallel narration of loading their ships with merchandise and loading their eyes with Constance underscores her position as a thing-a tale, a commodity-that merchant's trade” (“The Law of Man” 95).

Custance's beauty serves as a foundation from which her emotionality later emerges when she learns of her impending marriage to this man she does not know and has not seen.

In connecting beauty with emotion, Chaucer draws upon the precedent found in medieval drama. The correlation between the physical and emotional is found in the Brome *Abraham and Isaac*, when Abraham, on the verge of killing Isaac, comments not on the spiritual significance of the act, but on the physicality of it: "A, dere chyld, lefe of thy monys; / In all thy lyffe thow grevyd me neuer onys; / Now blyssyd be thow, body and bonys, / That thow were bred and born to me!" (269-272). Later, after God sends the angel and Abraham realizes that his son will be spared, he remarks, "An hundyrd tymys, my son fayer of hew, / For joy þi mowth now wyll I kys" (346-347). The entire play resonates with this type of pathos connected to the physical. For Chaucer, establishing the importance of this type of pathos early in tale helps to juxtapose Custance's Isaac-like characteristics with biblical Abrahamic qualities she later demonstrates. By the end of the tale, beauty (and emotion) does not carry the same significance since she has become a more thoroughly spiritual figure. Interestingly, there is no indication that Custance's beauty has faded or changed by the end of the tale, but her emotional comportment sure has. In the end, she resembles nothing of her former self emotionally. The impending marriage, then, is the starting point for the connection of Custance to the medieval dramatic Isaac. Like Isaac, her voice is seemingly relegated to the stereotypical emotional pleas of desperation once she learns of her father's intentions. In essence, Custance has become a sacrifice for political reasons. Even the Man of Law marks the emotionality of the events surrounding her when he laments, "Now, faire Custance,

almighty God thee gyde!” (245).²⁹ The apostrophe, however, also points his listeners in the direction Custance is headed, the emotionless spirituality that results from sacrifice.

While the youthful Custance certainly shares many characteristics with Virginia, Chaucer goes on to develop them differently. For example, the pathos Custance demonstrates upon her departure to Syria remarkably resembles Virginia’s after Virginius decides her fate. Like Virginia, Custance “was with sorwe al overcome, / Ful pale arist, and dresseth hire to wende; / For wel she seeth ther is noon oother ende” (264-266). On the surface, her reaction resembles that of an adolescent who does not get her way, particularly since she, like Virginia, is youth of privilege: “I, wrecche woman, no fors though I spille! / Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governance” (285-287).³⁰ Like Virginia Custance seems to be an insignificant part of a much larger sex / gender system that she cannot control.³¹ Yet unlike Virginia, Custance shows an intellect not quite so passive as she leads her audience to believe. This scene also represents the point where her similarity to her maiden counterpart diverges. After all, she is not sentenced to death.³² Custance demonstrates the ability to understand both sides of an issue regarding verbal communication by making her point of

²⁹ This use of apostrophe characterizes the Man of Law’s tendency (and Custance’s as well) to use such a device for the express reason of stimulating pathos. Walter Scheps states “The apostrophes indicate his degree of emotional involvement with his story” (290). “Chaucer’s Man of Law and the Tale of Constance.” *PMLA* 89 (1974): 285-295. See also Thomas H. Bestul, “The *Man of Law’s Tale* and the Rhetorical Foundations of Chaucerian Pathos.” *The Chaucer Review* 9 (1975): 216-226.

³⁰ Patricia J. Eberle notes of this passage, “In calling herself a **wrecche**...Custance is probably using the word in its original sense, an outcast or exile, since she feels herself to be cast out of her homeland, and since her next words echo God’s reproach to Eve before casting her out of Eden (Genesis 3:16)” (858). Explanatory Notes. *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.

³¹ For many critics, Custance’s passivity makes her one of Chaucer’s less attractive females. Delany notes Custance’s “repulsive masochistic qualities of extreme humility and silent endurance” (“Womanliness” 63).

³² Although her words indicate that she views her situation as exile, a condition often worse than death.

view clear without openly challenging the system that creates her predicament.³³ Her response suggests that when she recognizes her problem, she identifies a strategy that allows her to speak emotionally without fear of condemnation.³⁴

It is not strange that a woman in Custance's predicament would try to use the established system to make her point. In Custance's time, guidelines as to the proper woman's behavior have been well-established, meaning that she cannot openly defy her apparent destiny. But because her life is not in immediate danger, she has the opportunity to voice her unhappiness, especially since she believes that she is already being punished. Because she has nothing to lose, her words have a pathetic tone tinged with sarcasm:

“Custance youre child hire recomandeth ofte
Unto youre grace, for I shal to Surrye,
Ne shal I nevere seen yow moore with ye.

“Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun
I moste anoon, syn that it is youre wille;
But Crist, that starf for our redempcioun

³³ Dawson notes, “the power with which Custance subtly yet insistently portrays herself as pathetic...by emphasizing her filial duty and obedience, Custance clarifies for her parents their heartlessness without openly challenging the validity of their actions or motives” (“Custance in Context” 296-297). See also J. Stephen Russell, “Dido, Emily, and Constance: Femininity and Subversion in the Mature Chaucer.” *Medieval Perspectives* 1 (1986): 65-74. He states, “Constance does not openly revolt against the world view of the text; she suffers to live in it while testifying to the falseness, unreality or injustice of that genre, that image of the world” (72).

³⁴ Kisor states that Chaucer “reintroduces the possibility of disobedience through Custance's voiced unwillingness to obey, even as she asserts the inescapable reality of her obedience” (“Moments of Silence” 148). She frames her excellent article in the context of how Custance's use of language figures in the larger incest motif present in most versions of the Custance story but to which Chaucer only alludes in his tale. She notes, “it is through Custance's awareness of her own position that Chaucer makes his exposure of the incest motif manifest” (*Ibid* 144).

So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfulle!” (278-284)³⁵

Custance’s words and thus her strategy also receive validation in that no action, verbal or otherwise, is taken against her for what she says. It is an acquiescence of sorts to her point of view on the part of her parents and other authorities who might be present at the scene. More importantly, the pathos characteristic of the medieval dramatic Isaac is jettisoned in favor of a higher authority. Custance takes her first steps toward becoming a version of the biblical Abraham. Her appeal to Christ demonstrates that the authority represented by her parents is no longer the dominant model she will follow. From this point on, faced with patriarchal dictates, Custance grows more forward in her use of rhetorical concealment and she becomes more and more like the biblical Abraham. Such is necessary if Custance is to emerge victorious at the end. Ironically, when she boards the ship bound for her new destination, the Man of Law states, “Ther nys namoore, but ‘Farewel, faire Custance’” (319). The first part alludes to the impending silence, as if the Man of Law implies that Custance has made her point and that nothing more needs to be said. The second half of the quotation indicates that for those who know her, the next time they see her, the child will be different.

When Good Emerges From Evil

The Bible often demonstrates how good can be emphasized even more when it is juxtaposed with evil, especially in the context of sacrifice. Such juxtaposition takes place when Chaucer introduces the first example of evil in the tale by ending the first part of the *Man of Law’s Tale* with the plotting Sowdanesse, a character who makes clear the

³⁵ It is interesting to note that in her plea, Custance, despite her invocation to God, does not see her upcoming trip to Syria as an opportunity for missionary service in the name of God, another indication of her quasi-saint status.

difference between Custance and other women. Once the Sowdanesse learns of the intended marriage between Custance and her son, she schemes to kill the participants, driven by her jealousy and ambition, traditionally masculine characteristics that suggest an almost bitter hatred of her own womanhood.³⁶ According to the Man of Law, the Sowdanesse's plotting stems from her desire: "For she herself wolde al the contree lede" (434),³⁷ an implication of perceived weakness in females since no woman in this society would be able to achieve power legitimately. The idea that the Sowdanesse operates from a masculine perspective gains credence following Custance's arrival in the Sultan's homeland after her effective and emotional departure. At that point, Custance all but disappears from the storyline. From a narrative perspective, practicality demonstrates the need for her "voicelessness," since Custance assumes the role of secondary figure to the Sowdanesse throughout this episode. Custance's silencing at this point proves logical and necessary in order to reveal clearly the ideal of womanhood that Custance represents and to explore fully the harsh nature of the Sowdanesse. Thus, Chaucer renders Custance silent.³⁸ Her absence from the narrative emphasizes the Sowdanesse's ultimate use of traditionally masculine schemes³⁹ to gain her ultimate goal of power, a goal unattainable

³⁶ Dinshaw notes of this situation, "The Sultanesse resents her son's decision to convert to Christianity and refuses to join him in the new religion...Her violent refusal to accept a change of 'creance' should be adequate to explain the desire to eliminate the Syrians who do renege their faith" ("The Law of Man" 104).

³⁷ Of the Man of Law's comment, Dinshaw says, "This too, is a plausible motive, conjuring up the figure of the usurping female, the overweening mother; but the combination of the two explanations seems excessive and casts her determining motives into doubt" (*Ibid* 104).

³⁸ For more on the silencing of Custance, see William C. Johnson, Jr., "The *Man of Law's Tale*: Aesthetics and Christianity in Chaucer." *The Chaucer Review* 16 (1982): 201-221. See also Elizabeth Archibald, "Contextualizing Chaucer's Constance: Romance Modes and Family Values." *The Endless Knot: Essays on Old and Middle English in Honor of Marie Borroff*. Eds. M. Teresa Tavormina and Robert F. Yeager. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1995. 161-176.

³⁹ In the classic sense, masculine scheming is represented by the duplicitous behavior of the Sowdanesse. She feigns one attitude while enacting on another, a characteristic of several of Chaucer's pilgrims as well as the characters in the tales they tell.

through traditional feminine methods. For her scheme to work, however, the Sowdanesse must initially feign womanly submission because the men surrounding her expect no less. Eventually, her plan succeeds. The Man of Law notes such prior to all the carnage:

O Sowdanesse, roote of iniquitee!
Virago, thou Semyrame the secounde!
O serpent under femynnytee,
Lik to the serpent depe in helle ybounde!
O feyned woman, al that may confounde
Vertu and innocence, thurgh thy malice,
Is bred in thee, as nest of every vice! (358-364)

But the Man of Law's emotional apostrophizing calls attention to the Sowdanesse's pattern of working within a system to achieve a greater end. This sacrifice is dishonorable, as the use of the term "virago" demonstrates. The Sowdanesse seems more determined to get the office held by her son than she seems upset at his impending marriage. The marriage, to her, is an excuse to get what she wants. The Sultan, then, becomes the sacrificial figure. And while the Sowdanesse's plot is evil in nature, the Sultan's ultimate sacrifice is not, for it serves as a lesson for the innocent bystander in all of this, Custance.

Given her proclivity to state what she feels without openly challenging the system already in place, Custance cannot help but notice the behavior of the principal figures involved, particularly after the carnage when the Sowdanesse's true intentions become clear. Initially, the overtures of the Sowdanesse toward her son's marriage and her

meeting with Custance fall along the lines of traditional and expected feminine behavior: “The mooder of the Sowdan, riche and gay, / Receyveth hire with also glad a cheere / As any mooder myghte hir doghter deere” (395-397). The Sowdanesse knows that to make her plan work, she must behave as her son expects her to. Such expectations provide the perfect ruse for achieving a desired means. But the Sowdanesse, unbeknownst to herself, sets an important example for Custance by showing how language can be manipulated when it is used for a specific means. Unfortunately for the Sowdanesse, her success in eliminating her competition comes at a very high price. Many must die. Such is the result of self-centeredness. The Man of Law’s heroine, outside her initial emotional outburst when she learns of her impending marriage, never behaves selfishly. Perhaps it is her selfless nature that prevents her murder in the first place. When she is placed on the ship, the Man of Law notes that it is loaded with “A certein tresor that she thider ladde, / And, sooth to seyn, vitaille greet plentee / They han hire yeven, and clothes eek she hadde, / And forth she sailleth in the salte see” (442-445). Custance seems to be the beneficiary of some unexpected compassion from the Sowdanesse. But unlike her, Custance is not deliberately manipulative for any evil purposes, and her faith prevents her from exercising any scheme so drastic. That faith, however, does not prevent her from learning the lesson that one can subvert, through the careful use of language, the male power structure.⁴⁰ When comparing Custance’s eventual strategy to that of her mothers-in-law, the Sowdanesse and later Donegild, hers must be a more subtle

⁴⁰ Of the precedent the Sowdanesse sets, Dinshaw notes that her “abilities to manipulate language in cunning plots...demand a verbal act of fealty from her followers” (“The Law of Man” 103).

approach⁴¹ enacted naturally from her experiences involving these women. Custance, in the end, emerges more triumphantly than her counterparts.⁴² But like the biblical Abraham, the closer she gets to her triumph the more isolated she becomes.

Abraham, from the moment God commands him to sacrifice his son, displays a unique and solitary attitude all the way to the point where he raises the knife. In fact, it is hard to imagine that he could feel more alone given the magnitude of what God asks him to do. Such an attitude in the face of impending death makes Abraham unique among Old Testament sacrificers. Chaucer, through Custance, adapts this singularity of the father of faith, joining it to isolation and loneliness. The Man of Law alludes to the impending isolation when Custance survives the Syrian massacre only to be set adrift on the sea:⁴³

Custance han they take anon, foot-hoot,
And in a ship al steerelees, God woot,
They han hir set, and bidde hire lerne saille
Out of Surrye agaynward to Ytaille. (438-441)

Once she is set adrift with seemingly no hope, she begins to feel the isolation of her predicament, so she turns to her only source of comfort: prayer. The prayer proves important in demonstrating Custance's growing rhetorical awareness. Unlike the last time she spoke, there is no lamenting about her situation, and she shows no pity regarding

⁴¹ Kisor points out "The necessity of Custance's less direct approach in achieving some measure of control...Both women function as negative exemplars of womanhood and stand in contrast to Custance herself, and both take direct action in attempts to assert power and control their own destinies" ("Moments of Silence" 147).

⁴² Because, according to Kisor, "she is more subtle in her approach" (*Ibid* 148).

⁴³ For more on the woman cast adrift, see V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales*. London: Edward Arnold, 1984.

her status as a woman. Instead, she focuses on God and her faith's ability to preserve her. Gender now has little relevance for her. Custance, in her invocation, identifies with the often lonely nature of such negative circumstance: "Victorious tree, proteccioun of trewe, / That oonly worthy were for to bere / The Kyng of Hevene with his woundes newe" (456-458).⁴⁴ The invocation proves important because, in suggesting that the tree alone can bear the burden thrust upon it, Custance takes loneliness,⁴⁵ a trait most associated with women, out of the context of gender, and makes it universal.⁴⁶ In the final lines of her invocation – "Flemere of feendes out of hym and here / On which thy lymes faithfully extenden, / Me kepe, and yif me myght my lyf t'amenden" (460-462) – she puts her faith in Christ, the banisher of evil spirits, and His ability to help her overcome. The invocation is also important because it marks the point where Custance and her association with the world of saints begins. Her prayer coincides with her suffering typical of saint-like figures.

Many see literary representations of hagiography as a textual system that explores the virtue of Christ's suffering through the suffering of passive women. Such is true of the *Man of Law's Tale*, which is filled with events characteristic of the world of hagiography all centered on Custance.⁴⁷ But the suffering she faces or the miracles later

⁴⁴ Christianity as a whole tends to view the Trinity in terms of the male. Christ is the son of God. Yet references to God should be taken to mean omni-sexual – a God who incorporates all that He has created.

⁴⁵ The masculine ideal of loneliness refers to males who explore the unknown. In such situations, loneliness often characterizes such journeys.

⁴⁶ Maureen Fries, in "Female Heroes, Heroines, and Counter-Heroes: Images of Women in Arthurian Tradition." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*. Ed. Thelma Fenster. New York: Garland, 1998. 59-73, equates this ideal with female heroism. These are women who "assume the usual male role of exploring the unknown beyond their assigned place in society" (60). If applied to Custance's situation, the implication, then, is that despite being in a masculine-created predicament, she nonetheless overcomes through prayer, even though technically, she is still entrapped in that predicament.

⁴⁷ See Michael Paull who views the *Man of Law's Tale* as strictly hagiographic. "The Influence of the Saints' Legend Genre in the *Man of Law's Tale*." *The Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 179-194.

associated with her hardly qualify Custance for sainthood. In the Middle Ages, the world of hagiography seems primarily the domain of the male,⁴⁸ particularly in a xenoglossic context. Very few medieval women have been granted the gift.⁴⁹ With Custance, there is a xenoglossic ambiguity surrounding her arrival in Northumberland which further clouds the issue of her saintly status.⁵⁰

But while neither Chaucer nor the Man of Law outright declare Custance's sainthood, both certainly invite the comparison. For purposes of gender, then, her saintly characterization proves important. Custance must operate within the domain of the male, and her suffering often results from male-initiated actions. But if "saintly" is not a particularly accurate designation when referring to Custance, "holy" certainly is. At the very least, "holy" puts her at a level closer to the masculine ideal while not outright declaring her sainthood.⁵¹ More importantly, her "holy" acts demonstrate how Custance, with the assistance of the divine, operates within the sex / gender system that seeks to dominate her life, and how she is able to overcome such a system.⁵² The patriarchy surrounding Custance makes her appear helpless. The divine, however, enables her to

⁴⁸ As Christine F. Cooper notes, many "prominent holy men receive the gift including Saint Dominic, Anthony of Padua, Norbert, and Vincent Ferrer" (30-31). "'But algates therby was she understonde': Translating Custance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*." *Yearbook of English Studies* 36 (2006): 27-38.

⁴⁹ Exceptions, according to Cooper, include St. Lutgard of Aywières, St. Colette of Corbie, St. Clare of Montefalco, St. Bridget of Sweden, and Margery Kempe. (*Ibid* 31 n.16). Cooper also notes, "The women's gifts are never granted for the purpose of public preaching, but rather for individual spiritual guidance, often when they are approached by another in need" (*Ibid* 31).

⁵⁰ According to Cooper, "either Chaucer is imagining that the Saxons' language is quite similar to Custance's and can therefore be mutually understood, or that the Northumbrians are actually bilingual, since Latin was the lingua franca of merchants, or that perhaps there was an interpreter on hand, one rendered 'invisible' in the annals of history" (*Ibid* 32).

⁵¹ William Johnson Jr. notes, "The wonder is not that a miracle has possibly been performed, but that human beings performed it" (61). "Miracles in the *Man of Law's Tale*." *RMMLA* 28 (1974): 57-65.

⁵² Cooper shrewdly notes, "Whereas many critics see her as a figure of utter passivity, subject to male authority, both earthly and divine, as she is translated across the Mediterranean and the English Channel in a rudderless boat and likewise unable to control her own path on land...the implication of the xenoglossia emphasizes her importance not as a passive listener but rather as an active preacher, much like renowned xenoglossic holy men" ("Translating Custance" 34).

cross the barrier of gender by allowing her to take part in the miraculous, something that the medieval world generally views as the domain of the male.⁵³ Such assistance allows her to use later on and more effectively, her rhetoric of concealment since she sees herself as accountable to God rather than man. The gender system, while controlling what happens to Custance, has little bearing on why she behaves as she does. As if to emphasize this fact, the Man of Law compares Custance and her predicament to primarily well-known masculine saint-like biblical figures such as Daniel and Jonah,⁵⁴ who, while being examples that emphasize God's protection (Jonah is even an allegorical precursor to Christ's resurrection), are men placed in similar situations: "Who saved Danyel in the horrible cave / Ther every wight save he, maister and knave, / Was with the leon frete er he asterte?...Who kepte hire for the drenchyng in the see? / Who kept Jonas in the fishes mawe / Til he was spouted up at Nynyvee?" (473-475, 485-487). The Man of Law's narration at the very least prepares for Custance's upcoming encounter once she arrives

⁵³ While women saints are plentiful in the Middle Ages, their characterization often comes from patristic notions of power and awareness, which makes them either supernatural or "more male" in nature. According to Miranda Hodgson, "Hagiography has been labeled as a form of religious propaganda, and therefore, as propaganda, does not actually coincide with the experiences of historical women, and instead presents an idealized portrait of the saint and her situation. The...concepts of *admiranda* and *imitanda* – that is simply admiring a saint's actions versus actually attempting to imitate them oneself – were carefully constructed and controlled by the Church in order to ensure that the saintly feminine ideal would always be out of reach for historical women. The only realistic option that was therefore open to the female audience was pious appreciation, but not actual reenactment, since the latter action would be dangerously disruptive to the bonds of society. It is because of this paradoxical and unattainable characterization of female saints, as well as other positively represented women in religious texts, that I designate them as Impossible Women. Such characterization also leads to a further duality of interpretation: on the surface, female saints' personal struggles can be read as truly praiseworthy, but on a more critical level, the realization that these saints are constructed according to propagandistic patriarchal desires makes it impossible – for the feminist at least – to continue to view them in such a simple light" (12-13). "Impossible Women: *Elfric's Sponsa Christi* and "La Mysterique." *Medieval Feminist Forum* 33 (2002): 12-21. See also Clare A. Lees, "Engendering Religious Desire: Sex, Knowledge, and Christian Identity in Anglo-Saxon England." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 17-46; Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society, ca. 500 -1100*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1998.

⁵⁴ See Daniel, chapter 6 and Jonah chapters 1 and 2.

in Northumberland, where gender becomes paramount to her perception as a holy woman who has suffered horribly.

Very few of Chaucer's characters appear to go through a gradual transformation of sensibility. Custance, however, is an exception. Three years after being set adrift by the Sowdanesse, Custance arrives at the next destination.⁵⁵ By this time, her speech and her behavior indicate that she seems to have learned when to display the behavior men expect from a female, just like the Sowdanesse did with her son when Custance arrived in their homeland. Once her boat beaches in England, Custance's pleas and actions, despite the language barrier with her Northumberland counterparts, are typically feminine.⁵⁶ According to the Man of Law, "In her langage mercy she bisoghte, / The lyf out of hir body for to twynne, / Her to delivere of wo that she was inne" (516-518). Custance's behavior hardly seems that of a woman who has grown rhetorically.⁵⁷ What the Man of Law narrates next, however, indicates otherwise: "But what she was she wolde no man seye, / For foul ne fair, thogh that she sholde deye. / She seyde she was so mazed in the see / That she forgat hir mynde, by hir trouthe" (524-527).⁵⁸ Custance's actions clearly indicate that her thinking has changed. Her behavior at this point is very calculated. She

⁵⁵ It is interesting that this is one of the few occasions in Chaucer where linear time is expressed succinctly. Much of the time, Chaucer's heroines do not seem to wear the effects of time, such as Dorigen in the *Franklin's Tale*. An exception would be Criseyde, who clearly has "aged" after her ordeal with Troilus. For Chaucer, time seems to be more in line with that often found in romance. Such explains why Custance and Griselda, in the *Clerk's Tale*, seem as youthful after their ordeals as they were before. Clearly, however, time has passed in a logical, chronological manner.

⁵⁶ In fact, this miracle, as well as those that follow, marks one of the major differences between Chaucer's version of the story and his main source Trivet. Chaucer makes Custance more "saintly." See Cooper, "Translating Custance," page 30.

⁵⁷ Interestingly, the Man of Law does not give his listeners Custance's precise words, only a summation of what she says. He silences her, as if her words at this point would only return her to her previous status as helpless female rather than growing rhetorical master. For a perspective of how gender can affect the use of rhetoric in the Middle Ages, see Jenny R. Redfern, "Christine de Pisan and *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*: A Medieval Rhetorician and Her Rhetoric." *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition*. Ed. Andrea A. Lunsford. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 1995. 73-92.

⁵⁸ Kisor refers to this scene as "uncomfortable" ("Moments of Silence" 141).

deliberately chooses to hide her identity from those who inquire, even if, as the Man of Law suggests, not revealing her identity results in her death. More revealing is the suggestion that Custance deliberately misleads her interlocutors, blaming her inability to remember on her troubles while at sea. This premeditated behavior, while certainly not evil in nature, nonetheless follows the pattern established by the Sowdanesse earlier. Because she knows no one at this point, she is very careful with what she reveals to complete strangers. The passage is marked by what Custance does not reveal, rather than what she says. Because of her behavior, coupled with the miraculous events about to occur, Custance is often associated with the world of saints by this point.⁵⁹ Such a link provides an explanation for what many perceive as increasingly perplexing behavior, just as allegory is used to explain why Abraham behaves illogically given his directive. Custance, however, clearly knows what she is doing, and her strategy works. The Constable and Hermengyld pity her, in essence making her a part of their family.⁶⁰

Once Custance takes up residence with the Constable and Hermengyld, her growth as a female in a male's world is made clearer with the appearance of the blind

⁵⁹ Of Custance's ability to communicate despite the language barrier, Cooper says, "Chaucer creates a monolingual, Latin speaking woman whose words are translated into English by means of a miracle usually experienced by medieval saints, the gift of xenoglossia, or the miraculous ability to speak, understand, or be understood in a foreign language that the recipient has never learnt formally...Custance's experience of xenoglossia, however, is not openly declared a miracle, and her ability to speak, understand, or be understood by the Saxons in Northumberland has several possible explanations; this is a purposeful ambiguity on Chaucer's part that points to larger issues of translation in the tale and in Chaucer's work in general, specifically his ongoing exploration of how translation is imagined to function through various means, mundane or miraculous, depending on the genre of the text at hand" ("Translating Custance" 28).

⁶⁰ Kisor notes: "Custance's silence about her history does not refer to a literal silence, a failure to speak, but rather represents a silence created through speech-acts...and this silence-creating speech differs from her other speech-acts in significant ways. Nor is this silence about her history the only kind of silence identified with Custance, as she is described as silent at significant moments in the narrative, and she simply functions as such when her response is not given. Such instances when Custance does not speak when she might be expected to register her response to events, particularly events that are imposed upon her, are especially suggestive" (*Ibid* 142). Kisor goes on to state, "While she generally cannot act decisively in her own interest, she can, through her speech, manipulate the role of victim to her advantage" (*Ibid* 147).

man. His plea for assistance is a reversal of the traditional power structure. The “blinde Britoun”⁶¹ implores Hermengyld for help despite the presence of her husband, the Constable. The Man of Law does not explain how the blind man recognizes Hermengyld; suffice it to say that Hermengyld meets his plea with silence – the traditional feminine behavior in that she fears to speak without permission: “This lady weex affray’d of the soun / lest that hir housbonde, shortly for to sayn, / Wolde hire for Jhesu Cristes love han slayn” (563-565). Hermengyld’s silence results from learned expectations brought on by the masculine ideal. Apparently, speaking without permission could result in death. Had the nature of Custance not changed, she too would have remained silent amid such fears and expectations. Yet, unlike the episode involving the Sowdanesse, Custance, in a preview of the tale’s ending, assumes control by revealing only the necessary, and in a quite authoritative manner: “Custance made hire boold, and bad hire wirche / The wyl of Crist, as doghter of his chirche” (566-567).⁶² Custance knows Hermengyld’s fear, but her words emerge purely from choice. Such choice abides almost exclusively in the male domain. The use of rhetorical concealment up to that point has empowered Custance. Not only is the blind man’s sight restored, but the Constable is converted.⁶³ One also sees the importance of choosing to remain mute after Hermengyld’s murder and Custance’s subsequent arrest. She never professes her

⁶¹ While never explicitly explained, the blind man being a “Britoun” perhaps refers to the idea that the country in this time is “dark” since it is inhabited by pagans: “In al that lond no Cristen dorste route; / Alle Cristen folk been fled fro that contree / Thruh payens, that conquereden aboute / The pages of the north by land and see” (540-543).

⁶² Kisor says of the scene, “Even the miracle is depicted as coming through the intervention of Custance, and specifically through her verbal command, and not through Hermengild alone...Custance’s words have power here in this Christian context in a direct and forceful way” (“Moments of Silence” 147).

⁶³ Kisor notes, “In Chaucer’s treatment the constable’s conversion is portrayed as a direct result not of Hermengild’s miracle in restoring the blind man’s sight, but of Custance’s testimony, her words” (*Ibid* 147).

innocence. The Man of Law does report an invocation she apparently gives once she learns of her death sentence, but even here one must acknowledge the possibility of Custance's words being internal. The words in any case do little more than affirm her faith publicly. When she states in her prayer, "If I be giltlees of this felonye" (643), she takes control from her interlocutors and leaves her fate to the divine. In the end, her concealment of her innocence subverts the masculine justice system, allowing her to emerge victorious and empowered, her authority given to her by God.

Custance soon faces another predicament that tests her emerging sense of self. First, the Man of Law validates her rhetorical metamorphosis: "Sathan, that evere us waiteth to bigile, / Saugh of Custance al hire perfeccioun" (582-583). Here, the focus is taken off gender with the implication that Satan, wanting to bring about the fall of Custance, "...us waiteth to bigile." The inclusive "us," suggests that, in supernatural matters, gender becomes irrelevant since success in resisting Satan is more a matter of will than gender.⁶⁴ At the very least, Custance now operates at a level that equals the traditional domain of men. Her control of the "blinde Britoun's" miracle and the Constable's conversion constitutes examples of such. Second, the Man of Law's comment that Satan "saugh of Custance al hire perfeccioun" indicates that Custance no longer functions on a level traditionally associated with women. The "perfection" of her inner being, which now matches the "perfection" of her outer self, alludes to a balanced mind. Such a description also implies her to be a servant of divine will. Her xenoglossic

⁶⁴ Biblically, at least, Satan appears to target women more than men. Johnson states, "Satan himself is subject to Chaucer's psychologizing, especially in view of the tale's presentation of women. In a lengthy apostrophe (358-71), Satan is called a beguiler of women. Elsewhere, however, the tale offers an ironic, highly complex, view of women (see 286-87, 358-71, 652-58, 708-14, 841-63, 1023-29). Satan then cannot be taken literally, as the old orthodox fiend, but must be understood as a symbolic analogue of inner experience" ("Miracles" 63 n.15).

association, which removes gender from the equation, puts Custance on a saintly pedestal.⁶⁵ Consequently, when she later behaves in a traditionally feminine way, she does so out of choice. After Hermengyld's murder, when the Man of Law states about Custance, "what myghte she seye?" her apparent inability to say anything results from her decision not to speak. During Custance's "trial," the only appeal she makes is directed to God:

"Immortal God, that savedest Susanne
For false blame, and thou, merciful mayde,
Marie I meene, dighte of Seint Anne,
Bifore whos child angeles synge Osanne,
If I be giltlees of this felonye,
My sucour be, for ellis shal I dye!" (638-644)

In a shrewd move, Custance takes the judgment out of the hands of the court. Because she invokes women whom God saved, she deliberately positions herself as helpless

⁶⁵ According to Cooper, Custance "is the only medieval example of a xenoglossic holy woman who possesses a complete access to and mastery over Latinity" ("Translating Custance" 32). Cooper correctly notes, however, "Much as she acts like one, Custance is not truly a saint; she becomes a married woman who must have sex as good wives do...and can follow her religious life only after being released from the duties of marriage by widowhood. Because she belongs to the literary worlds of history, romance, and *vita*, Custance's xenoglossia cannot be fully developed as it is in the lives of medieval saints" (*Ibid* 35). It is precisely this point that keeps Custance chained to the dominant sex/gender system. The intervention of the supernatural is not enough to overcome the system that entraps her. Glenn states, "Like the anchorites, Chaucer's wholly romanticized and fictionalized characters are edifying examples of womanhood, not as fierce, perhaps, as the female saints, whose vitae were so popular at the time, but every bit as steadfast in their faith and devotion" (*Rhetoric Retold* 86). Thomas Heffernan states, "Before Christian women could turn to Christ, they first had to turn away from those totemic figures in whom the society had invested power and charisma – father, lover / husband, state / emperor" (267). *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. As Moore notes, "Custance willingly submits to all of these, and the conclusion of her story depends not upon separation from these entities and a preparation for life with Christ, but upon her impassioned reconciliation with father, husband, and state (origin)" ("Nominalistic Perspectives" 95 n.9). For more on the perspective of the saintly, see Elizabeth Robertson, "The 'Elvyssh' Power of Constance: Christian Feminism in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Man of Law's Tale*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 23 (2001): 143-180.

female.⁶⁶ In fact, her interlocutors could not see her in any other way. She neither denies nor affirms her guilt officially, except by referring to her scriptural counterparts, and she states her willingness to die. God does in fact secure her deliverance with the miraculous and dramatic slaying of her accuser. Once again, behaving in a nontraditional manner results in her liberation and the conversion of all present, including her soon-to-be husband, King Alla.

The Child Becomes a Parent

The culmination of Custance's rhetorical metamorphosis occurs after the marriage and birth of her child. Up to that point, she is essentially the Isaac figure, a character controlled by the male parental figure in her life as the Bible demonstrates, who initially reacts emotionally to her predicament, as is seen in medieval drama. With the birth of her son and after hardships that would have felled most, Custance assumes an Abrahamic nature both dramatically and biblically. While her early life as a parent is characterized by the emotion medieval dramatists attributed to Abraham, her return to Rome reveals a woman much more in line with the biblical father of faith after God has commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. She displays little emotion, and seems in complete control of her circumstances.

The qualities of the dramatic Abraham can be seen when Custance is the victim of Donegild's duplicitous behavior. Upset at her son's marriage to Custance, Donegild, like the Sowdanesse before her, becomes aggressively deceitful in trying to bring about the

⁶⁶ Both stories do involve gender, and specifically sexual purity: Susannah was falsely accused of adultery by lascivious elders, and Saint Anne gave birth to the Virgin Mary. For the story of Susannah, see Daniel 13. Saint Anne's story is found, among other places, in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of James*, chapter 4.

young woman's demise. Even the Man of Law recognizes Donegild's duplicity in one of his strongest apostrophic condemnations of evil:

O Donegild, I ne have noon Englissh digne
Unto thy malice and thy tirannye!
And therefore to the feend I thee resigne;
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie!
Fy, mannish, fy!—o nay, by God, I lye—
Fy, feendlych spirit, for I dar wel telle,
Though thou heere walke, thy spirit is in helle! (778-784)

Custance chooses not to respond to this treachery and instead embraces her fate: ““Lord, ay welcome be thy sonde!”” (826). In one of the few times in the tale in which Custance enjoys extended dialogue, she addresses her spiritual mainstays and her child. Toward God, Custance shows complete faith, and it is here that she begins to take on the characteristics of the dramatic Abraham. Like him, and in a very saintly manner, she relinquishes all control to God, “In hym triste I” (832), and her attitude in this replay of previous events marks her rhetorical change.⁶⁷

Much of this new attitude comes from motherhood.⁶⁸ Her speech clearly reflects a growing confidence, “Pees, litel sone, I wol do thee noon harm” (836), that emerges not only from each ordeal she faces, but also from the growing maturity that motherhood brings. By accepting her fate, Custance denies the authorities' power over her, and thus

⁶⁷ Spiritually, Custance's attitude remains consistent with earlier behavior. What has changed is her use of language.

⁶⁸ See Kathy Lavezzo, “Beyond Rome: Mapping Gender and Justice in the *Man of Law's Tale*.” *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community 1000-1534*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006.

no longer behaves in a way consistent with Pauline expectations of womanhood. In fact, when she addresses Mary, Custance is most like the medieval dramatic Abraham rhetorically since like him,⁶⁹ she is about to undergo another trial of faith, this time with her child:

“Sooth is that thurgh wommanes eggement
Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
For which thy child was on a croys yrent.
Thy blissful eyen sawe al his torment;
Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene
Thy wo and any wo man may sustene.” (842-847)

This attitude on her part is much more mature than what she presented the day of her departure to Syria. Here, Custance is much more accepting of her predicament. While she knows that what she is about to endure will be tough, she recognizes that her suffering will be miniscule compared to what Christ himself suffered. Again addressing her child, her concern for him still resonates emotionally. Like the dramatic Abraham, who questions God’s motivations in asking for the sacrifice of Isaac, Custance questions the King’s directive: ““O litel child, allas! What is thy gilt, / That nevere wroghtest synne as yet, pardee? / Why will thyn harde fader han thee spilt?”” (855-857). Her speech to her child demonstrates a reversal of gender roles, since she assumes the role of mother *and* the Abrahamic father. The child, then, is an infant manifestation of the innocent Isaac and Christ, who also suffer apparently unjustly. A mere baby, the child obviously

⁶⁹ Waiting for God to come through on His promise to deliver a child to Abraham and Sarah was a major test of faith.

cannot understand his mother except maybe on an instinctive level. But the male authority figures at Custance's departure likely find themselves unable to understand either the motivations of those who effected her banishment or her subsequent selfless behavior. At this point, Custance has emerged from the shell of fearful childhood to become a strong mother, faithful to God and protective of her son.⁷⁰ Her behavior corresponds more to "masculine" authority and "male" injustice, and her appeals to God lessen the impact of gender difference, since her "saintly" behavior corresponds more to the traditional view of masculine sainthood as well as motherhood. Like the Theban women who petition Theseus at the beginning of the *Knight's Tale*, the culture of the Virgin Mary and suffering Christ would associate such emotional behavior with a maternal drive, rather than a paternal one. Custance's maternal care, however, is evocative of Abraham, at least as imagined in the more pathetic retellings of the biblical narrative. It appears, then, that through the depiction of Custance's behavior after the birth of her child, Chaucer completes what medieval drama began, the feminization of Abraham.

Gender as a cultural phenomenon often seems to create more problems than it solves. The axiom proves true for Donegild. Her gender contributes to her demise after she concocts her scheme to bring about Custance's ruin. Once King Alla returns and discovers his mother's guilt, he executes her. As previously noted, both mothers-in-law, acting initially out of jealousy, attempt to subvert the established system using duplicity in order to gain power. Both temporarily succeed but eventually face violent ends. The

⁷⁰ Eugene Clasby notes that "for Chaucer, her confidence in the will of God is not inconsistent with her vigorous questioning of human authority and human justice" (225). "Chaucer's Constance: Womanly Virtue and the Heroic Life." *The Chaucer Review* 13 (1979): 221-233.

Man of Law informs his listeners of the fate of the Sowdanesse when Custance's father, for her poor treatment of his daughter, sends an army "On Surryens to taken heigh vengeance" (963). In both circumstances, the temporary nature of their success implies a return to the traditional gender system in place before their deceit. The predicaments of these three women, suggest an interesting view of God. For Custance, God obviously is a protective deity. For the Sowdanesse and Donegild, however, He is a punishing figure. In either case, the view of God that emerges in the *Man of Law's Tale* is consistent not only with the other tales of religion and morality within the *Canterbury Tales*, but also with the Old Testament. For those who demonstrate unswerving faith, God is just and rewarding, a view promulgated in the Abraham and Isaac story by most Old Testament exegetes. This view of God emerges since it is inconceivable to most that God could be presented as negative or cruel. It almost has to be that way. If Custance (or Abraham) does not emerge triumphant in their darkest hours, then God comes across as unsympathetic and callous. Indeed, medieval commentary about Abraham and Isaac points to the conflict among theologians as to how God should be viewed in the story.⁷¹ In some cases, he is merciful; in others, harsh and judgmental. For Custance, in situations where God would appear to be harsh, such as her trials at sea, she *never* blames Him for her predicament. In fact, when logic would indicate that the pathetic would be directed explicitly toward God, Custance, for the most part, is silent. As an adult, just like Abraham, she never asks why she is the victim of such cruel treatment, and she

⁷¹ Medieval Jewish commentary, to prevent God from being interpreted as cruel for putting Abraham through such a dilemma, puts the focus on Abraham, saying the patriarch misinterpreted God's command since God, at least in the Jewish tradition, could not command the sacrifice of a son. See note 2.

accepts her circumstance. The trials, however, seem to continue in an endless progression.

Neither silence nor the power of rhetorical concealment prevents Custance from suffering. After she is set once again upon the high seas, the Man of Law notes, “I unto Custance go, / That fleteth in the see, in peyne and wo, / Fyve yeer and moore, as liked Cristes sonde, / Er that hir ship approached unto londe” (900-903). She finds herself in a “hethen” land and she must fight off, with assistance from the divine, her attempted rape by the warden’s steward. Custance, with Mary protecting her, survives the latest ordeal and emerges in control:

For with hir struglyng wel and mightily
The thief fil over bord al sodeynly,
And in the see he dreynte for vengeance;
And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custance. (921-924)

The term “unwemmed” proves important in the Man of Law’s description. While she has a child at this point, she nonetheless remains “pure” or “untainted,” as his earlier mention of Mary suggests: “But blisful Marie heelp hire right anon” (920). Such a description reminds one of Custance’s saintly characteristics, and it helps to define the differences between men and women, which the Man of Law makes clear in his next apostrophe:

O foule lust of luxurie, lo, thyn ende!
Nat oonly that thou feyntest mannes mynde,
But verraily thou wolt his body shende.
Th’ende of thy werk, or of thy lustes blynde,
Is compleyning. Hou many oon may men fynde

That noight for werk somtyme, but for th'entente

To doon this synne, been outhere slayn or shente! (925-931)

The Man of Law identifies lust as a major weakness of men when they come in contact with pure women.⁷² Here, the apostrophe draws attention to the fact that like Mary,⁷³ Custance now transcends gender. The Man of Law may not understand the dynamics at work in terms of her human nature, but he knows she is special: “How may this wayke woman han this strengthe / Hire to defende again this renegat?” (932-933). His question is exactly what many find themselves asking in regard to Abraham’s predicament. Clearly, Custance is approaching the Abrahamic ideal as presented in the Bible. The very fact that the Man of Law questions Custance’s mental fortitude indicates that she functions on a level that men simply cannot fathom, as is obvious when the Steward mistakes Custance for the “helpless” female. While Custance is rapidly becoming like Abraham (Kierkegaard would say she rapidly approaches the absurd), it is important to remember that she remains a sacrificial figure. God intervenes on behalf of Custance when “The thief fil over bord al sodeynly” (922), an action similar to His intervention for Isaac when the ram is revealed caught in the thicket. As with Isaac, God wants a different outcome for Custance.

⁷² Lust, of course, is the major weakness of Apius when he “spots” Virginia for the first time, resulting in the tragedy that follows.

⁷³ Glenn notes, “During the Middle Ages...civic drama featured the life of the Virgin, a talkative, active participant in religious life. One portion of the N-Town cycle centers on her life, as does an extant portion of the ‘Ludus Coventriae,’ which delivers the only complete life of the Virgin. All medieval cycle plays highlight her life with both visiting angels and a measure of verisimilitude, including her public conversation, questioning, and arguing” (*Unspoken* 165 n.6). Glenn acknowledges about the medieval view of Mary, “Despite her exalted place, Mary’s role in medieval Christianity did little to advance women’s place in the Church; Mary was superior in every way to all other women” (78). *Rhetoric Retold: Regendering the Tradition from Antiquity Through the Renaissance*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1997. See also Teresa P. Reed, *Shadows of Mary: Reading the Virgin Mary in Medieval Texts*. Cardiff: U Wales P, 2003.

Each trial that Custance faces results in a woman better able to operate on a level at odds with the perceived male notions of femininity.⁷⁴ Her rhetoric of concealment enables her to use the system in place to subvert it because the men surrounding her do not think her capable of such behavior. Being verbally reticent lessens the impact of gender and creates the ultimate situation in which Custance displays her complete rhetorical prowess – the reunions with King Alla and with her father. Her concealment begins immediately when she encounters her father’s Senator returning from the slaughter in Surrey.⁷⁵ The Man of Law notes, “Nothyng ne knew he what she was, ne why / She was in swich array, ne she nyl seye / Of hire estaat, although she should deye” (971-973). Custance deliberately hides her identity, as she did upon her landing in Northumberland years before, even when the Senator takes her in to live with them. Though the Senator’s wife happens to be her aunt, Custance never reveals her true identity.⁷⁶ Again, her use of rhetorical concealment removes the impact of gender, since she does not behave in a manner one would expect from someone who, after years of being gone, is finally home. Upon King Alla’s arrival in Rome, the senator, providing what little he knows about Custance’s child, says:

“So virtuous a lyvere in my lyf
Ne saugh I nevere as she, ne herde of mo,
Of worldly women, mayde, ne of wyf.
I dare wel seyn hir hadde levere a knyf

⁷⁴ Royster refers to such situations as “rites of passage to credibility” (“When the First Voice You Hear” 35).

⁷⁵ Presumably, the Emperor has been at war with the Syrians all these years.

⁷⁶ Kisor notes, “To reveal herself as the daughter of the Roman emperor would result in her being placed back under her father’s control – a position she refuses to occupy” (“Moments of Silence” 150).

Thurghout hir brest, than ben a woman wikke;

There is no man koude brynge hire to that prikke.” (1024-1029)

The Senator’s response is important. First, he essentially confirms that Custance’s behavior is atypical and unexpected. Second, the last line of his response substantiates the control she holds over the men in her life. Custance at this point completely redefines femininity. When Alla meets Custance in the Senator’s home, the traditional gender roles have reversed to the point where the King behaves in the typically feminine manner. Custance remains silent, “And she, for sorwe, as doumb stant as a tree” (1055). In fact, throughout the entire reunion with her husband, Custance does not speak a word. The King, however, conducts himself in the manner expected of Custance during her trial for the murder of Hermengyld. He pleads his innocence – “of youre harm as gilteles am I” (1062) – and he displays the customary emotion: “Long was the sobbyng and the bitter peyne, / Er that hir woful hertes myghte cesse” (1065-1066).⁷⁷ Even after their reunion, Custance maintains the power in the relationship. Of the upcoming dinner with the Emperor, the Man of Law notes, “She preyed hym eek he shoulde by no weye / Unto hir fader no word of hire seye” (1084-1085).

In the reunion with her father, Custance demonstrates her full rhetorical power and she completes the journey she began all those years earlier with the edict that she must marry the Sultan. In effect, she again reverses the traditional power structure and conducts the meeting on her own terms. Her statement, “Sende me namoore unto noon

⁷⁷ For Kisor, “Alla’s first concern in the scene is to disassociate himself from the arbitrary actions of patriarchal authority represented in the false letter banishing Custance, and this seems to be the narrator’s concern as well” (*Ibid* 152).

hethenesse” (1112), stands more as a command than a request.⁷⁸ Having King Alla present as her reunited husband enforces that command. He essentially functions as a secondary figure, the message that Custance insists on her father understanding. As her husband has learned, Custance is in complete control. The result is that the Emperor finds his masculine or patriarchal authority, unjustly dispensed earlier, now dispensed with. He no longer has influence over her. The result of her rhetorical prowess becomes clear when her son – Maurice – becomes Emperor. His “crowning” accomplishes two things. It restores the long lost proper social standing to Custance. Additionally, it ensures that, as mother, Custance maintains a degree of power over the patriarchy that she never could have had as a daughter. Both situations become possible only through her skill in rhetoric,⁷⁹ a talent she learns by the male system forced upon her in her youth and reinforced by the evil representations of strong mothers / women in the tale. Custance wins, however, because unlike the Sowdanesse and Donegild, her rhetorical silence is never used for selfish purposes.⁸⁰ Like Abraham, Custance, at the end of her ordeal, receives the blessings and rewards of God because she remained steadfast in her behavior, even if others did not understand it.

Custance’s use of rhetorical concealment ultimately serves as a form of self-sacrifice demonstrated both by Abraham in the Bible and Isaac in medieval drama. Undoubtedly, behaving in the expected feminine manner may have garnered her more compassion resulting in more favor, and perhaps even the avoidance of the accusation of

⁷⁸ Kisor points out about this scene: “She orchestrates the reunion scene so that her father has no forewarning of her coming...and makes its point of focus her empty request that he not repeat his earlier action in sending her to heathen lands” (*Ibid* 151).

⁷⁹ Thanks also in large part to the divine.

⁸⁰ In essence, Custance’s silence has become what Royster refers to as “the silence of appreciation” (“When the First Voice You Hear” 35).

murder or the attempted rape.⁸¹ Yet she senses her vulnerability at the hands of masculine ideals and understands that working within those ideals provides, at the very least, some sense of equality. Custance uses the only means available, rhetorical concealment, to her advantage.⁸² Such a strategy sacrifices immediate favor from her male cohorts but gains her spiritual and gender deliverance. Along with God's assistance, Custance's ability to manipulate language to her advantage ultimately elevates her above her male counterparts as the ending of the *Man of Law's Tale* demonstrates. Once God's involvement is made clear, gender becomes less important, as Custance's enemies discover. Like the biblical Abraham, what she ends up proving is that silence *is* voice. It is very powerful, and demands attention and appreciation, and in the end, provides a means of victory.

⁸¹ Some would argue that Custance practices a form of mimicry in that by refusing to speak at all, she takes the female ideal to the extreme.

⁸² Kisor writes, "This patriarchal authority is frequently made manifest through male determination to exercise control over her body, most tellingly figured in her father's betrothal of her to the Sultan...Her speeches serve to assert strongly both her awareness of her position in the face of male authority and her unwillingness to acquiesce to that authority" ("Moments of Silence" 141). She notes that Custance emerges "more complex and forceful...than most have acknowledged," and that "while normally obedient, [she] registers resistance through her speech" (*Ibid* 161).

CHAPTER 6

ON THIS SIDE OF PARADISE: GRISELDA AND THE PRIVACY OF SILENCE

While Chaucer's tales of religion and morality are modeled after the biblical and medieval dramatic accounts of the Abraham and Isaac story, most of these stories of sacrifice present the children from the perspective of Isaac, the sacrificial figure. They are characters of innocence; in the Hugelyn episode of the *Monk's Tale* and the *Prioress' Tale*, they resemble the portrayal of Isaac biblically. Like him, they cannot control nor do they have an understanding of their circumstance, but are victims of it. The *Physician's Tale* presents its sacrificial victim in a manner that resembles more the medieval dramatic accounts of Isaac where he is often portrayed as understanding the nature of his sacrifice. His emotional response makes him a more endearing and exalted figure. Like him, Virginia is depicted as an adolescent on the verge of adulthood, emotionally charged but helpless within the patriarchal structure. Her sacrifice makes her a child of admiration, since her use of the pathetic determines in large part how she is viewed. The *Man of Law's Tale* initially follows this medieval dramatic pattern with Custance, but she survives her tumultuous childhood to reach adulthood. Chaucer's audience gets to see the result of Custance's childhood experiences, particularly in regard to attitudes toward sacrifice. As a child, Custance follows the pattern established by the children of Hugelyn, the little clergeon, and Virginia. Once an adult, however, she demonstrates that the sacrificial attitude expected of children has

transferred to the parental figure. Such helps to explain her rhetorical concealment. As a sacrificial adult, she mirrors the biblical Abraham in that she only shares information under her terms, information she feels it is important to reveal. And like him, she emerges triumphant in the end, her silence vital to her success.

In the *Clerk's Tale*, because Griselda is in the very latest stage of childhood, her story is different. Her personality, particularly at the point of sacrifice, resembles that of the biblical Abraham, since he is characterized mostly by how he says those few words he manages to express. His behavior, expected of a parent when faith is being tested by a higher authority through the sacrifice of a child, is characterized mostly by the lack of pathos. The elimination of emotion is necessary to carry on in the face of such overwhelming circumstances, and it is essential in creating legitimacy for the act of sacrifice. Despite the attempts of medieval drama to reconcile pathos with acts of faith, the behavior of Abraham first and foremost demonstrates that emotion cannot be a factor when children are faced with sacrifice. As Kierkegaard suggests, however, the lack of emotional display does not necessarily indicate a lack of emotion. If God's command is to be carried out fully and unconditionally, the emotion cannot resonate visibly; it must remain internal, which in turn creates a temperament filled with insouciance if one views him in any context other than a biblical one. If the parental figure demonstrates emotions before the act of sacrifice, all involved lose and the child's death is purposeless. For that reason, the behavior of Abraham is itself actually sacrificial in nature. He is forfeiting his natural response for the benefit of another, his child, trusting completely that God will reward his faith. Such is the circumstance Griselda faces.

In reworking Griselda's story, Chaucer draws upon the earlier versions of Boccaccio and Petrarch. Both writers find Griselda's behavior perplexing and feel the need to comment on it. Petrarch, for example, writes to Boccaccio:

My object in thus re-writing your tale was not to induce the women of our time to imitate the patience of this wife, which seems to me almost beyond imitation, but to lead my readers to emulate the example of feminine constancy, and to submit themselves to God with the same courage as did this woman to her husband. (194)¹

Petrarch tells Boccaccio that Griselda's behavior serves as a model of the proper reverence of an individual to God. The idea of equating Griselda's behavior with the divine perhaps has its roots in Boccaccio, with Dioneo's comment at the end of his narrative: "What more can be said here, except that godlike spirits do sometimes rain down from heaven into poor homes..." (681).² But Dioneo speaks sarcastically. He finishes his comment with:

just as those more suited to governing pigs than to ruling over men make their appearances in royal palaces. Who besides Griselda could have endured the severe and unheard-of trials that Gualtieri imposed upon her and remain with a not only tearless but a happy face? It might have served Gualtieri right if he had run into the kind of woman who, once driven out of her home in nothing but a shrift, would have allowed another man to

¹ *Petrarch: The First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*. Trans. James Harvey Robinson. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1898.

² *The Decameron*. Trans. Marc Musa and Peter Bondanella. New York: Penguin, 1982.

warm her wool in order to get herself a nice-looking dress out of the affair! (681)

While Dioneo may feel Griselda's behavior is heavenly, he hardly sees it as practical. Petrarch, in his version, removes the tongue-in-cheek qualifiers present in Dioneo's accounting and makes the story more reverent. It is from the Petrarchan version that Chaucer draws upon in terms of how he wants Griselda viewed. Petrarch's influence is made obvious in the Clerk's Prologue, where the poet is named directly and referred to as "this worthy man / That taughte me this tale, as I bigan" (39-40).³ Chaucer then takes Petrarch's idea of reverence and makes Griselda more Abrahamic in nature. As a result, Chaucer's Griselda emerges as a much more complex character than she is in either Boccaccio or Petrarch. Much of this complexity is the product of Griselda's mostly emotionless persona, a quality Chaucer emphasizes more than his counterparts.

Because Griselda is presented with enormous expectations from a higher male figure,⁴ her reaction, notably her unemotional response to Walter's requirements, creates, just as Abraham's has, befuddlement in those who observe her. Yet unlike Abraham, Griselda is not given the same benefit of the doubt – as the critical commentary, often frustrated with her character, demonstrates.⁵ Part of the negative attitude toward Griselda

³ It is interesting the while Chaucer obviously incorporates much of Boccaccio's tale into his own, he does not overtly credit Boccaccio as he does Petrarch. It can be argued though, that the Clerk's attitude toward Griselda displayed in the *Envoy*, resembles the sarcastic attitude of Dioneo.

⁴ See Charlotte Morse, "Critical Approaches to the *Clerk's Tale*." *Chaucer's Religious Tales*. Eds. C. David Benson and Elizabeth Robertson. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990. 72-83.

⁵ Amy Goodwin notes that the *Clerk's Tale* "is rich with complementary, competing, and contradictory arguments about its author's intentions" (41). "The Griselda Game." *The Chaucer Review* 39 (2004): 41-69. Morse emphatically notes the problem with criticism of the tale: "the story of Griselda, beguiling and horrific, acts like a tar-baby: whatever way critics stick to the story, they leave themselves exposed, their own attitudes revealed in what often seem to me embarrassing ways" ("Critical Approaches" 71). For Linda Georgianna, "*The Clerk's Tale* is the most elusive and least reassuring of Chaucer's religious tales" (793). "The Clerk's Tale and the Grammar of Assent." *Speculum* 70 (1995): 793-821. Saul Brody harshly

is explained by her gender, since women are often characterized as more emotional than their male counterparts. Despite the fact that versions of the Griselda story by Boccaccio and Petrarch also present this character as uncommonly patient,⁶ modern readers expect her, in Chaucer's account, to react with the extreme pathos expected of such harsh trials. Another explanation for the critical derision comes from her social standing. Those from the lowest social scale are often characterized by excessive pathetic behavior brought on by their often extreme and unfair treatment at the hands of those who are socially superior.⁷ Finally, when Griselda does act or speak, the believability of her actions is often called into question. Her uncharacteristic maternal behavior leads to difficult questions about what Chaucer intended with this story. Griselda's passivity (in part the expression of traditional femininity) leaves modern readers in particular less than excited about this tale.

denounces Griselda's "criminal behavior as a mother" (127). "Chaucer's Rhyme Royal Tales and the Secularization of the Saint." *The Chaucer Review* 20 (1985): 113-131. Akiyuki Jimura does an interesting statistical analysis of Chaucer's use of the negative in "Negative Expressions in 'The Clerk's Tale.'" *Bulletin of the Faculty of the School of Education, Hiroshima University* 5 (1995): 1-9; for the intertextual connection between Chaucer and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, see John Finlayson, "Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*." *Studies in Philology* 57 (2000): 255-275; on the aspects of obedience and misgovernance, see Michael Hanrahan, "'A Straunge Succesour Sholde Take Youre Heritage:' *The Clerk's Tale* and the Crisis of Ricardian Rule." *The Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 335-350; J. Allan Mitchell explores how Chaucer intentionally uses the instability of the tale to create moral deliberation. "Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale* and the Question of Ethical Monstrosity." *Studies in Philology* 102 (2005): 1-26; see also James Sledd, "*The Clerk's Tale*: The Monsters and the Critics." *Modern Philology* 51 (1953): 73-88; in an interesting article, Laura Ashe argues that the Clerk intends his tale to be understood in part by his participation in the narration of the tale. "Reading like a Clerk in the *Clerk's Tale*." *Modern Language Review* 101 (2006): 935-944.

⁶ Boccaccio's final story in the *Decameron* also refers to Griselda as uncommonly patient. According to Dioneo, "The servant took the child and told Gualtieri what the lady had said, and he was amazed at her perseverance" (676).

⁷ For example, the Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

The tale provides several examples of Griselda's perplexing passivity.⁸ When Walter begins his game of testing her loyalty, he stoops to levels most consider unfathomable, particularly when he forcibly removes her infant children from her, presumably to be murdered. Griselda offers no resistance whatsoever except to ask Walter's servant to bury the children in a manner that will keep their bodies away from animals.⁹ Even those who accept the rigidity and unfairness of a sex / gender system¹⁰ find themselves unable to accept and understand why Griselda behaves so defenselessly in such extreme circumstances.¹¹ Unlike Hugelyn or Virginius, who initially respond emotionally to the impending sacrifice of their children, Griselda at each test comes across as unmoved, even insouciant, since she fails to fight overtly or aggressively the harsh edict of her husband. She fails to protest what happens to them despite being in a position to do so. To modern readers, no mother, particularly a queen with children in line to the throne, would allow such a situation under any circumstances. In the end, Griselda's passivity creates the same frustration that Kierkegaard experiences with Abraham, who also fails to defend the life of his child in the face of extreme circumstance.

⁸ The commentary has, for years, tried to find an answer. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas R. Lounsbury declared Griselda's situation "too revolting for any skill in description to make it palatable" (341). "The Text of Chaucer." *Studies in Chaucer*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007. Emma Campbell writes, "Hermeneutic difficulties concerning Griselda's status as a wife and quasi-saint trouble some of the earliest translations of the story, both as a text to be read and also as a text to be written and re-written" (193-194). "Sexual Poetics and the Politics of Translation in the Tale of Griselda." *Comparative Literature* 55 (2003): 191-216.

⁹ Georgianna elucidates more matter-of-factly the problems readers have with Griselda: "Readers since the end of the nineteenth century have often been repelled by the story, both because of Walter's brutal behavior and because of Griselda's failure to protect the lives of her children" ("Grammar of Assent" 793).

¹⁰ Gayle Rubin. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York: Monthly Review P, 1975. 157-210.

¹¹ See S.K. Heninger, "The Concept of Order in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*." *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 56 (1957): 382-395.

Griselda's passivity is emphasized even more when one compares her to what is arguably Chaucer's greatest character, the Wife of Bath,¹² a comparison Chaucer seems to invite.¹³ The Wife's personality and philosophy in many ways serve as a contradiction to the *Clerk's Tale* as well as its heroine. On the surface, it appears that Griselda is the exact opposite of the Wife in terms of her personality and behavior. However, if one views the tale literally, Griselda actually proves to be an example of the mastery the Wife of Bath espouses in her tale: "Wommen desiren to have sovereynetee / As wel over hir housbond as hir love, / And for to been in maistrie hym above" (1038-1040).¹⁴ And maybe on some level, Chaucer feels a wife should have sovereignty over her husband. In the *Clerk's Tale*, Walter's subjects suggest as much: "Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse, / Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlock" (113-115). And Walter himself implies that marriage results in little freedom for the male: "I me rejoysed of my liberte, / That seelde tyme is founde in mariage; / Ther I was free, I moot been in servage" (145-147). However, while it may not appear as such initially, Griselda's behavior results in mastery of her male counterpart and the trials she encounters. Her conduct qualifies as unusual because of the degree of passivity

¹² In the *Riverside Chaucer* Larry Benson notes that there is "no explicit indication of the order in which Chaucer intended the fragments to be read" (5). In fact, one could argue that the *Clerk's Tale* belongs after the Wife's Prologue, since the Clerk refers to the Wife in his Epilogue. See also Judson Boyce Allen and Theresa Anne Moritz, *A Distinction of Stories: The Medieval Unity of Chaucer's Fair Chain of Narratives for Canterbury*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1981, who argue for a new arrangement of the tales based on medieval precedent in relation to the ordering of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; in "The Order of the *Canterbury Tales*." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 77-120, Benson argues that the Ellesmere manuscript represents Chaucer's preferred arrangement of the tales; conversely, N.F. Blake argues that the tales are more than likely just a collection of fragments. "Critics, Criticism and the Order of *The Canterbury Tales*." *Archiv für das Studien der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 218 (1981): 47-58.

¹³ The Clerk states at the end of his tale, "for the Wyves love of Bath – / Whos lyf and al hire secte God mayntene / Un heigh maistrie, and ells were it scathe – I wol with lusty herte, fressh and grene, Seyn yow a song to glade yow, I wene" (1170-1174).

¹⁴ Ironically, traditional male discourse, noted for its expectation of obedience from a wife, also argues that the male ultimately finds himself bound in marriage.

required in order for her to use the established system to subvert it, a sort of implicit deception toward Walter precisely in line with what the Wife demonstrates in her tale. Griselda never would throw a book at a man who makes her angry, but her passivity serves the same purpose. Rather than disrupt values and expectations already in place, Griselda works within the system, staying inside the expected code of behavior, and emerges in line with the sovereignty over men that the Wife demands of all women, essentially making her a parable of power. Furthermore, her demeanor demonstrates that, like Abraham, she understands the enormity of what she is being asked to do. While it is an act of faith, it is faith based in controlling the situation. Unlike Abraham, however, Griselda, in gaining mastery of her situation, emerges from it at the very least with equal status to her male counterpart. Abraham never enjoys such eminence.¹⁵ Even after following God's commands essentially to the minutest of details, he emerges, still, a subject of God bound by His dictates.¹⁶

To mention Griselda alongside the Wife is not to suggest that they are the same. In fact, the Wife could not be more different.¹⁷ Her nature, as she presents herself in her own Prologue, is characterized in the Clerk's *Envoy* and in the *Merchant's Tale*.¹⁸ But Griselda, like Abraham, employs the strategy referred to by Glenn¹⁹ as the "rhetoric of

¹⁵ For this reason, viewing the Clerk's Tale solely as an allegory is limiting. Griselda achieves mastery over a fellow human being while Abraham is forced into a showdown with God.

¹⁶ It should be acknowledged, however, that among men, Abraham is venerated. After the death of Sarah, Abraham asks the children of Heth for permission to bury her. They respond, "My Lord, hear us, thou art a prince of God among us: bury thy dead in our principal sepulchers: and no man shall have power to hinder thee from burying thy dead in his sepulcher" (23:6).

¹⁷ See Donald C. Green, "The Semantics of Power: 'Maistrie' and 'Soveraynetee' in 'The Canterbury Tales.'" *Modern Philology* 84 (1986): 18-23.

¹⁸ The Wyf of Bathe, if ye han understonde, / Of mariage, which we have on honed, / Declared hath ful wel in litel space" (1685-1687).

¹⁹ *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004.

silence” (153).²⁰ In both variations, however, the female protagonist flourishes in the end despite the obstacles – namely, the sex / gender system – which she faces. In essence, Griselda’s use of silence occurs because the sex / gender system expects it.²¹

Silence and the Domains of Gender

Griselda’s use of silence does not come as anything new, since women have long been expected to display silence on most occasions. Silence, along with its counterparts chastity and obedience, have traditionally been associated with the domain of the female. The notions of gendered domains go back to antiquity and the ancient Greeks, whose belief system on gender (along with Paul’s later) became the foundation for their medieval derivative.²² Quite possibly, Paul derived much of his treatise on the silencing of women from his Greek predecessors. His words on the subject definitely point toward an inequality in the status of men and women.²³ His epistle to Timothy states that silence is the norm for women in a public world that God has ordained the domain of the male. Such a philosophy, however, becomes problematic since silence for women is often

²⁰ Georgianna notes about Griselda, “An excruciating repetition haunts her speeches, rendering them more like prayers or lyrical refrains than parts of a dialogue. The same limited vocabulary recurs again and again” (“Grammar of Assent” 807).

²¹ For more perspectives on silence, women, and history, see Max Picard, *The World of Silence*. Washington D.C.: Gateway, 1988; Sidney J. Baker, “The Theory of Silences.” *Journal of General Psychiatry* 52 (1955):145-167; Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence.” *Styles of Radical Will*. New York: Farrar, 1966. 3-34; Edwin Ardener, “The Problem Revisited.” *Perceiving Women*. Ed. Shirley Ardener. London: Malaby, 1975. 19-28; Tillie Olsen, *Silences*. New York: Delta, 1978; Robin Lakoff, *Talking Power*. New York: Basic, 1990; Victoria Leto DeFrancisco, “The Sounds of Silence: How Men Silence Women in Marital Relations.” *Discourse and Society* 2 (1991): 413-423; Dennis Kurzon, “To Speak or Not to Speak.” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 25 (1996): 3-16; George Steiner, *Language and Silence*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998.

²² Of the Greek *polis*, Jean Bethke Elshtain notes, “Neither women nor slaves were public beings. Their tongues were silent on the public issues of the day” (14). *Public Man Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981.

²³ Timothy 2:9-15.

synonymous with moral weakness, creating a double standard of sorts.²⁴ Unfortunately, however, the male domain, the public, still dictates the relations, duties, and obligations the female is expected to follow.²⁵ Ironically, the forced silencing that initially allows for male ascendancy,²⁶ eventually resulted in that which politicians and other authoritarian figures feared most, the empowerment of women. Such displacement of the traditional power model arises in part from the inability of authoritative figures to assess the meaning of silence.²⁷ In cases of overt silencing, male authoritarian figures recognized slowly that silence in and of itself does not equate to lack of intelligence and that it actually results, depending on the individual, in the empowerment of the woman who employs it as a strategy. In general, however, hubris and obduracy for centuries prevented any meaningful change in attitudes regarding the silencing of women. Despite the overwhelming patriarchal pressure that females remain silent, their use of rhetorical silence actually allows them to transcend the traditional power structure and use it to their

²⁴ Elshtain correctly points out that the “male as public” and “female as private” notion produces a quandary in that both spheres appear to “create a moral environment for individuals, singly and in groups; to dictate norms of appropriate or worthy action; to establish barriers to action, particularly in areas such as the taking of human life, regulation of sexual relations, promulgation of familial duties and obligations, and the arena of political responsibility” (*Public Man Private Woman* 5).

²⁵ Elshtain points to the reasons for female silencing: “Women were silenced in part because that which defines them and to which they are inescapably linked—sexuality, natality, the human body (images of uncleanness and taboo, visions of dependency, helplessness, vulnerability) – was omitted from political speech...because politics is in part an elaborate defense against the tug of the private, against the lure of the familial, against evocations of female power” (*Ibid* 15-16).

²⁶ Cheryl Glenn states, “Too much silence is rarely tolerated from those who are expected to speak... Silence is rewarded only when signifying obedience or proper subordination” (*Unspoken* 5).

²⁷ Elshtain writes: “A question arises: were those denied a public role and voice properly human subjects at all? The answer...depend[s] on how one assays silences: whether one presumes the silent have had nothing to say because of their limited natures and roles, or whether one believes they may have had much to say about the meaning of human life but their thoughts and reflections were severed from public speech. Those silenced by power—whether overt or covert—are not people with nothing to say but are people without a public voice and space in which to say it” (*Public Man Private Woman* 15).

advantage essentially making gender, as a motivating factor, less imperative.²⁸ Chaucer's Griselda follows this trajectory, in the end showing silence to be an empowering rather than lamentable trait, so that she at the very least emerges as Walter's equal. Her use of silence allows her, like Abraham, to emerge triumphant over her seemingly unfair predicaments.

The *Clerk's Tale* also demonstrates that silence is a derivative of low social standing. Griselda begins her journey at the very bottom of the social scale. Such a situation practically guarantees silence as a norm. Although it appears her childhood has been relatively unscathed up to the point of Walter's arrival, it is that childhood, in addition to her social standing, that determines her use of silence in her predicaments. Low social standing, along with her upbringing, would enable her to mature from a position of stealthy observation, regardless of its intentionality, and emerge with an understanding of how the world around her works.²⁹

Ultimately, Griselda represents the final "product" of rearing based on the medieval attitudes toward children. The society loves and cares for its children, but these children, like everyone else, are subject to the dictates of the world in which they live. Often, these dictates result in situations that are unfair, unfathomable, and even detestable. Griselda's story demonstrates the difficulty children have in surviving precarious circumstances created by the obstacles of gender, social standing, and age. But Griselda survives precisely because of these obstacles. Male attitudes toward gender

²⁸ Glenn corroborates Elshain's idea that society traditionally associates the private sphere with the femininity and "weakness" of women: "Not surprisingly, silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience" (*Unspoken* 2).

²⁹ Indeed, Elaine Tuttle Hansen states, "she attains certain kinds of power by embracing powerlessness" (190). "The Powers of Silence: The Case of the Clerk's Griselda." *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Los Angeles: U California P, 1992. 188-207.

assumed inherent weakness in females, weakness magnified by low social standing. These attitudes allow Griselda to operate from the point of view that she has nothing to lose, an attitude implied in Chaucer and stated clearly in Boccaccio's version of the story.³⁰ Luckily for her, Griselda encounters her trials relatively late in her adolescence allowing her to comprehend the enormity of what she faces. The results, however, are glorious. Her victory is the victory of childhood and she emerges as a young woman of class and beauty, a role model to the children of medieval Europe.³¹

The Politics of Silence

The exigency that determines silent behavior varies of course, depending upon circumstance. In the *Man of Law's Tale*, Custance's rhetorical concealment emerges from what she perceives to be the wrongdoing initiated at the hands of her father. Her initial protest results from a sense of liberty garnered by her social standing; after all, being an emperor's daughter merits at least a slight degree of freedom regardless of her gender. Griselda, however, has no such luxury.³² While she freely and openly enters into a contract with Walter, there is a sense of pressure associated with her decision made clear by her father's reaction to Walter's request: "“Lord...my willynge / Is as ye wole,

³⁰ In the *Decameron*, Griselda tells Gualtieri, "My lord, do with me what you think best for your honor and your happiness, and no matter what, I shall be happy, for I realize that I am of lower birth than they and am not worthy of this honor which your courtesy has bestowed upon me" (676).

³¹ Hansen notes that Griselda's behavior "is certainly both perverse and treacherous, not because she fails to protect her children against paternal infanticide and thus to live up to ideals (and realities) of motherhood, but because she lives up all too well to certain ideals of womanhood and thus makes manifest their latent powers. Walter cannot and does not solve the mystery or negate the threat that her perfect womanly behavior poses; he merely stops trying to do so and stops giving his wife the chance to act in ways that he cannot understand or control" (*Ibid* 194).

³² For historical context surrounding Griselda's situation, see Lee Patterson, "The Necessity of History: The Example of Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale.'" *Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth D. Kirk*. Ed. Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. 187-210. See also Michael Hanrahan, "A Straunge Succesour Sholde Take Youre Heritage: The *Clerk's Tale* and the Crisis of Ricardian Rule." *The Chaucer Review* 35 (2001): 335-350; Anne Middleton, "The Clerk and His Tale: Some Literary Contexts." *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 121-150.

ne ayeynes youre likynge / I wol no thing, ye be my lord so deere; / Right as yow lust, governeth this mateere” (319-322). For someone in her social class, it would be difficult to negate the wishes of someone socially superior. Even had she wanted to, Griselda (nor Janicula) could not have said no to Walter. Her decision, then, emerges from her social standing and gender, which make clear the anticipated behavior in any given circumstance, particularly when interacting with royalty. Because she comes from the lowest of social classes, those with high social standing never would take Griselda seriously unless, as occurs later, the extraordinary transpires. Despite being a very public figure who the people love, Griselda, because of her gender, is for the most part consigned to the world of the private, a world that is traditionally viewed as the appropriate world of the female, the world of obedience.

In most situations, the obedience of women is made manifest in weakness and silence, and from the very beginning of the *Clerk's Tale*, silence surrounds Griselda's world. Perhaps Chaucer or the Clerk designed the narrative to condition the reader to the silence that will come to characterize her personality. Although she eventually dominates the tale, Griselda does not appear until the second part, after Walter agrees to find a bride at the behest of his people. For the first part of the tale, Walter³³ finds himself in the public domain where he can exert his strength and influence not only as the Marquis, but also as a man. Although his people petition him to find a bride, Walter agrees only on his

³³ For more perspectives on Walter, see Lloyd N. Jeffrey, "Chaucer's Walter: A Study in Emotional Immaturity." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 3 (1963): 112-119; Thomas A. Van, "Walter at the Stake: A Reading of Chaucer's 'Clerk's Tale.'" *The Chaucer Review* 22 (1988): 214-224; Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*. Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2002.

own clearly stated terms. By the end of the first section, Walter appears as secure male, supremely confident and in complete control, all within the public domain.³⁴

At the beginning of the next section, another factor enables Walter to exert his influence and power: Griselda's status as a youth. In fact, it is important to remember that Griselda is at this point in the late stages of adolescence. The Clerk reminds his listeners of such early on: "A doghter hadde he, fair ynogh to sighte, / And Grisildis this yonge mayden highte" (209-210). Later, he comments on Griselda's emotional maturity despite her young age: "But thogh this mayde tender were of age, / Yet in the brest of hire virginitee / Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage" (218-220). As the biblical version of the Abraham and Isaac story reminds readers, an authority figure gains more credibility when that authority is wielded over a child. When Walter arrives at Janicula's home, his power is very evident. Granted, Walter's status as Marquis is the primary reason he can control the events, but Griselda's youth contributes to how he runs things. The Clerk notes that on occasions when Walter has seen Griselda, the Marquis "nought with wantown looking of folye / His eyen caste on hire, but in sad wyse / Upon hir chiere he wolde hym ofte avyse" (236-238). Walter holds her in such high esteem in part due to her youth: "Commendynge in his herte hir wommanhede, / And eek hir vertu, passynge any wight / Of so yong age, as wel in chiere as dede" (239-241). As a result, Walter, who as Marquis can do whatever he likes, operates traditionally when procuring his bride. He controls the situation, but he *asks* Janicula for permission to marry his child. Her status as a child, however, is fleeting at this point. She soon becomes his wife.

³⁴ According to Hansen, the Clerk characterizes Walter "as a sadistic tyrant, worst of men and cruelest of husbands (although not, he suggests, unrealistic or atypical in this regard)" ("Powers of Silence" 190).

Walter's marriage proposal takes place in the seemingly private sphere of Janicula's home; yet the situation remains public, since the citizens of Saluzzo wait outside. Beauty is essentially a work of art that is by necessity, displayed publicly. For that reason, Griselda's description follows the same pattern of Virginia's and Custance's in that the Clerk describes her as the most beautiful woman on earth: "But for to speke of vertuous beautee, / Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne" (211-212). Later, after Griselda is "made over" by Saluzzo's women, in front of her own home, the Clerk says of her beauty:

I seye that to this newe markysesse
God hath swich favour sent hire of his grace
That it ne semed nat by liklynesse
That she was born and fed in rudenesse,
As in a cote or in an oxe-stalle,
But norissed in an emperoures halle. (394-399)

But unlike Virginia's and Custance's before her, Griselda's portrayal does not imply weakness, even if her silence identifies her with the traditionally weak sphere of the private. In fact, the Clerk focuses on her strength of character, with beauty being only a part of that. Because of her humble station, and perhaps despite it, Griselda never complains about the life she leads. The Clerk also associates Griselda's situation with the tranquility found in the pastoral ideal, "A fewe sheep, spynnynge, on feeld she kepte" (223), suggesting that her life, prior to Walter's involvement, stands as an example of

Golden Age harmony.³⁵ Her daily work proves important in that pastoral living and silence subsist synonymously.

When Walter, the manifestation of empire, enters the pastoral domain, the harmony soon disappears. Until that point, silence, the result of social standing and pastoral surroundings, virtually encases Griselda's world. As if to emphasize this point, the first words assigned to Griselda remain in her mind; she never speaks them aloud. And until the end of the tale, they represent the most accurate account of what she truly feels:

She thoghte, "I wole with othere maydens stonde,
That been my felawes, in oure dore and se
The markysesse, and thefore wol I fonde
To doon at hoom, as soone as it may be,
The labour which that longeth unto me,
And thane I may leyser hire biholde,
If she this wey unto the castel holde." (281-287)

Because Griselda is used to the private, it never occurs to her that the Marquis seeks her. Although filled with natural curiosity about who Walter's wife will be, she fails to recognize the truth and remains content to continue the pastoral life she knows. When Griselda realizes that Walter intends her to be his wife, she does not react with the expected overt emotional distress. Instead, she responds in the Abrahamic manner, keeping with her station in life and for the most part remaining silent. She only responds

³⁵ For links between the pastoral and the Golden Age, see Vergil's *Eclogues* 1, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 89ff, Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, 55-59, and Chaucer's own *Parliament of Fowls*, 22-23.

to Walter's inquiries as to the location of her father.³⁶ Griselda demonstrates in her behavior, the obedience expected of a woman of her social standing.³⁷

As Marquis, Walter wastes little time in asserting his authority that Griselda's youth and social standing make possible. After procuring Janicula's permission, Walter sets out the type of relationship he expects: "For I wol axe if it hire wille be / To be my wyf and reule hire after me" (326-327). There is an interesting irony in Walter's words. He tells Janicula that he will ask Griselda what her will is regarding marriage, a statement consistent with the public. Such wording gives the impression that Griselda has free agency to accept or deny publicly his proposal. The second half of the statement, though, reveals that Walter expects a certain behavior, most of which would coincide with the private. Clearly, he does not anticipate Griselda saying no, which would validate him publicly. The result is that at least Griselda is given the appearance of being a woman who has free will. She is not trafficked in quite the same way as Custance, nor is she a possession in the same way as Virginia. He then addresses Griselda directly: "But these demandes axe I first...Wol ye assente, or elles yow avyse?" (348, 350). These lines indicate how the text swings back and forth from the public to the private. By setting the expectations for her, Walter reinforces Griselda's private domain, the very nature of which allows him, in his thinking, to dominate her later.³⁸ His harsh expectations and the trials he later puts her through in effect cast Walter in the role of God, since he essentially

³⁶ Georgianna mentions, "she addresses her 'lord' with a similar 'reverence' but with a more 'humble cheere' (298-299) as befits her station...Griselda's station...renders her powerless in this hierarchical society" ("Grammar of Assent" 797).

³⁷ See John P. McCall, "The Clerk's Tale and the Theme of Obedience." *Modern Language Quarterly* 23 (1966): 260-269.

³⁸ See Allyson Newton, "The Occlusion of Maternity in Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*." *Medieval Mothering*. Eds. John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler. New York: Garland, 1996. 63-76.

insures Griselda's silence at this point.³⁹ Such a characterization should come as no surprise, however, since God, as portrayed in the Old Testament, is often viewed as a harsh deity because of the suffering His subjects are asked to endure on His behalf.⁴⁰ But Walter's words, particularly the term "demandes," also stem from his social standing. For him to use any other language would be inconsistent with his character or the times:

"I seye this: be ye redy with good herte
To al my lust, and that I freely may,
As me best thynketh, do yow laughe or smerte,
And nevere ye to grucche it, nyght ne day?
And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,'
Neither by word ne frowning contenance?
Swere this, and here I swere oure alliance." (351-357)

Like Abraham when he hears God's edict, Griselda clearly understands the implications of Walter's stipulations. The Clerk notes her "quakyng for drede" (358), about as much emotion as Griselda displays until the tale's end.⁴¹ Despite this slight physical manifestation, however, she remains confident and she ventures into the world of the male, the public domain.⁴²

³⁹ Walter's silencing of Griselda is consistent with expected medieval attitudes toward women. See Caroline Walker Bynum's "Men's Use of Female Symbols" in *Debating the Middle Ages: Issues and Readings*. Eds. Lester K. Little and Barbara H. Rosenwein. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998. 277-289. See also Hope Phyllis Weissman, "Antifeminism and Chaucer's Characterizations of Women." *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Collection of Original Articles*. Ed. George Economou. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975. 93-110.

⁴⁰ See Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969.

⁴¹ This reaction is more in line with medieval dramatic representations of Abraham.

⁴² Georgianna correctly points out, Griselda "speaks with uncanny self-assurance and certitude" ("Grammar of Assent" 802).

The importance of the public is emphasized after Griselda agrees to be the wife of Walter. He brings her to the people and in a very public display of authority has her “translated” (385) to what he feels is the proper appearance: “he bad / That women sholde dispoillen hire right there; / Of which these ladyes were nat right glad / To handle hir clothes, wherinne she was clad” (373-376). This translation is the point where Griselda’s child status ends and she becomes an adult. How Griselda feels about this transformation is never mentioned, but the scene does coincide with her use of silence. Walter, because of his social standing, dictates the action. Since he controls this encounter, the mingling of the public and private suggests that the public, the male sphere, dominates the private.⁴³ However, as the narrative slowly moves from the external *loci* of Walter’s world to the internal domain of Griselda, she demonstrates the inaccuracy of the notion that gender alone determines the public or private characteristics of an individual. But she does so in a manner that results in enormous personal sacrifice, the loss of her children.

Patterns of Victory

Like Custance earlier in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, Griselda displays strength of character, after Walter issues his conditions for marriage, through her ability to use words to create more than just the overt meaning: ““Lord, undigne and unworthy / Am I thilke honour that ye me beede”” (359-360). Her response comes as close to a protest as she ever gets, but they also indicate Griselda’s ability to use language to her advantage when required, much the way an actor would use language on stage. This performative

⁴³ Georgianna notes that, “His demands emphasize external behavior, his own and Griselda’s” (*Ibid* 800).

quality⁴⁴ proves extremely important because it implies that Griselda operates and speaks from an ulterior motive. Indeed, as the Clerk later says, “So wise and rype wordes hadde she” (438). Realizing that Walter expects her complete and total submission, Griselda, despite this brief attempt to avoid the impending marriage, nonetheless acquiesces, promising never to disobey him ““In werk ne thoght”” (363).⁴⁵ This scene is vital to the *Clerk’s Tale* as a whole because Walter’s expectations essentially determine Griselda’s behavior for the tale to come. And because of her social standing and the honorable nature of her character, Griselda cannot behave in any other way. He guarantees her silence and her obedience. Walter does not guarantee, however, how Griselda uses that silence.⁴⁶

Through her selected use of silence, Griselda, like Custance, effectively redefines, on a personal level, the meaning of the seemingly indefinable word “woman.”⁴⁷ She never allows herself to fall within the parameters of the overt emotional display Walter expects. In the end, Griselda creates a new meaning for “woman,” one that proves uncomfortable not only for Walter, but also for the people of Saluzzo, perhaps the Clerk, and even the readers and critics of the tale. She emerges from her tribulations transformed, vastly different from what most consider the “norm.” Even though Griselda

⁴⁴ Georgianna notes, “Though she begins by professing her unworthiness, what is most remarkable about Griselda’s speech is its performative quality” (*Ibid* 802).

⁴⁵ Georgianna explains Griselda’s behavior when Walter asks her “to consider the matter further”: “Not only does her speech show no signs of the constraint that Walter’s demand assumes, but the terms of her assent eliminate the very possibility of *avysement* when she promises to obey not only in “werk,” which can be observed and verified, but in “thought,” which cannot. By internalizing the demands of the contract, Griselda moves her assent beyond the bonds of the law, beyond Walter’s power (and ours) to scrutinize or *avyse*” (*Ibid* 802).

⁴⁶ In fact, Georgianna notes of Griselda’s response, “she agrees so extravagantly in terms so unlimited that they transcend the political and moral context previously established, further disturbing (as did Walter’s proposal itself) our frame of reference and the terms of our judgment, our *avysement*” (*Ibid* 801).

⁴⁷ See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

surfaces from her trials at the very least as an equal to Walter, critics still hold her in disdain because she achieves her victory on her terms, terms not in line with what most readers expect or with their personal definition of womanly behavior.⁴⁸ By the end of the second part of the *Clerk's Tale*, Griselda's situation stands as the reverse of Custance's. She climbs from the lowest of social classes to the apex of respect, and with the birth of her first child, her position seemingly could not be stronger.

Medieval dramatic versions of the Abraham and Isaac story demonstrate that emotion, when missing, must be accounted for. It seems as if the Clerk understands such reason for by the third part of his tale, he takes it upon himself to supply the emotion that Griselda's silence hides. Generalizing Walter's desire to test his wife's patience, the Clerk states, "I seye that yvele it sit / To assaye a wyf whan that it is no need, / And putten hire in angwyssh and in drede" (460-462). Although the Clerk feels no wife should be deliberately put through pain and heartache, his statement also indicates that, if the occasion demands it, such treatment is justifiable. One can conclude that Griselda, knowing that such behavior as Walter's has precedent, deliberately hides her true emotion from Walter for a specific reason. After all, he makes it a point to remind her of her lowly origins and the apparent grumbling of the townspeople regarding her beginnings and the birth of the female child. According to the Clerk, Griselda "nought ameved / Neither in word, or chiere, or contenance, / For, as it semed, she was nat agreved" (498-500). Regardless of how Griselda verbally responds to Walter's words, the Clerk's use of "semed" indicates that Griselda must experience some kind of internal

⁴⁸ According to Hansen, "her suffering and submission are fundamentally insubordinate and deeply threatening to men and to the concepts of power and gender identity upon which patriarchal culture is premised" ("Powers of Silence" 190).

emotional reaction if his earlier use of the words “angwyssh” and “drede” has any meaning.⁴⁹ Griselda, then, deliberately conceals her true emotional reaction and responds in the manner dictated by her original social standing and her status as a woman.

Ironically, Walter seems to expect the typical female emotional reaction to stress, such as that displayed by Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale* when her father betroths her to the Sultan.⁵⁰ Now that Griselda has a higher social standing, he expects a more public demeanor consistent with how the citizens of Saluzzo treat her emotionally as a result of her new title. To them, as the Clerk dutifully notes, Griselda is tantamount to a saint: “she from hevене sent was, as men wende, / Peple to save and every wrong tamende” (440-441). When she does not react as expected, the testing of his wife becomes somewhat of a game to Walter, which he quickly escalates by removing first the infant princess from her mother, and six years later the toddler prince, under the pretense that the children be executed.⁵¹ Here, Griselda is most like the biblical Abraham in her reaction to the loss of her children. Like him, her devotion to a higher authority and her lack of pathos frustrate all who observe her, including Walter. It is also here, if one sees

⁴⁹ This is where Chaucer most differs from Boccaccio. He basically removes the implication of internal emotion in Griselda even though the Clerk at times hints of its presence. In the *Decameron*, Dioneo is much more forward with Griselda's internal feelings. When Gualtieri's servant comes to remove Griselda's daughter, presumably to be killed, Dioneo states, “although she felt great pain in her heart, showing no emotion, she placed her in her servant's arms” (676). Dioneo later states, “he wounded the lady with even a greater blow” (*Ibid*). Dioneo then notes, “When the lady heard these words, she managed to hold back her tears only with the greatest of effort (something quite unnatural for a woman)” (678). Finally, at the end of trials, Dioneo comments that Gualtieri “felt it was time to remove her from the bitterness he knew to be behind her impassive face” (680).

⁵⁰ Georgianna notes, Walter seeks an external reaction consistent with his idea of womanhood, something he can verify through Griselda's countenance and speech (“Grammar of Assent” 800).

⁵¹ Hansen notes about Griselda's personality, “Such virtue in a woman only provokes male aggression. A woman's public powers, even if they are conferred upon her through her husband and divinely sanctioned, cannot be integrated with her proper identity as a female and a wife” (“Powers of Silence” 191). She goes on to say, “One reason why Griselda's public virtues must be controlled, why the good woman of any social class must be defined as silent and submissive, seems patent. If a peasant woman can so easily rule as well as a noble man—or even better—then Walter's birthright and the whole feudal system on which it depends are seriously threatened” (*Ibid* 191).

Walter as a God figure, that the comparison loses validity, since the Old Testament does not demonstrate a God who repeatedly treats tests of faith as a game. Also, God's motives, as incomprehensible as they may seem, are not generally regarded as selfish. It is hard to make the same claim for Walter. In the biblical account of Abraham and Isaac, once Abraham proves his faith, the ram appears and Isaac is saved. With Griselda, Walter continues to test an already proven faith. For Griselda, an emotional display of heartache in either test confirms the patriarchal authority represented by Walter. He expects such a reaction, which in turn would validate his course of behavior: women must be controlled because they cannot control themselves. Instead, in both instances, Walter experiences frustration and pity when Griselda reacts otherwise, the effect being that Walter "Somewhat...hadde routhe⁵² in his manere" (579). In fact, Walter, as the Clerk makes clear, seems perplexed by Griselda's unexpected reaction: "For now gooth he ful faste ymaginyng / If by his wyves cheere he myghte se, / Or by hire word aperceyve, that she / Were changed" (598-601). When he takes her son away, Walter, according to the Clerk:

...wondred, evere lenger the moore,

Upon hir pacience, and if that he

Ne hadde smoothly knowen therbifoore

⁵² Although clearly intended to mean the pity which Griselda makes Walter feel, "routhe" also puns "Ruth," the character in the Old Testament: "Somewhat this lord has *Ruth in his home*." Griselda's behavior is much like Ruth's. When Griselda is first mentioned, she is in the fields, like Ruth when she travels to Bethlehem with Noemi. In a very Griselda-like attitude, Ruth tells her mother-in-law, "for whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go: and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. The land that shall receive thee dying, in the same will I die: and there will I be buried. The Lord do so and so to me, and add more also, if aught but death part me and thee" (1:16-17). Later, Boaz says to her, "know that thou art a virtuous woman" (3:11). After this, Boaz takes her to be his wife and her steadfastness is rewarded. Here, the Clerk, if he uses "routhe" as noun, implies that Walter recognizes Griselda's Ruth-like behavior and that such behavior will be rewarded. Like Boaz, he recognizes her virtuousness even though her reactions are not what he expects.

That parfitly hir children loved she,
He wolde have wend that of som subtiltee,
And of malice, or for crueel corage,
That she hadde suffred this with sad visage. (687-693)

Griselda cannot give him (or the reader) the hoped-for pathos, for then she becomes like the stereotype of every other woman. She, like Abraham, would lose the quality that distinguishes her from others in the first place. As Kierkegaard points out, had Abraham acquiesced to the world of the universal, then his faith would merely be spiritual trial, resulting in the loss of legitimacy of the sacrifice of his son. Although Griselda's acquiescence to Walter follows the traditional pattern of female assent to patriarchal authority, her emotion cannot be a part of it. Yet, as the Clerk makes clear, that emotion exists deep with her: "But natheles she neither weep ne syked, / Conformynge hire to that the markys lyked" (545-546).⁵³ Griselda, then, follows such a course in order to maintain her credibility and justify the faith in her that Walter has displayed by choosing her as his wife.

Only in the fourth part of the tale does Griselda, in her lengthiest speech yet, follow Custance's pattern of verbalizing her true feelings without openly displaying them. Continuing his game, Walter again presents Griselda with the apparent dissatisfaction of the townspeople regarding her low social origins. Although he tells her not to display openly any emotional reaction, his sarcasm indicates that he clearly expects one: "“This warne I yow, that ye nat sodeynly / Out of yourself for no wo sholde outreye;

⁵³ Georgianna correctly points out, "she suffers alone" ("Grammar of Assent" 793).

/ Beth pacient, and therof I yow preye” (642-644).⁵⁴ In essence, Walter challenges Griselda not to respond.⁵⁵ Her rejoinder, although officially accepting Walter’s words, ring with irony, as she begins to speak to him on his level, placing the blame on Walter’s shoulders since he has determined, from the very beginning of their relationship, the rules by which she must abide:

“Naught greveth me at al,
Though that my doughter and my sone be slayn –
At youre comandement, this is to sayn.
I have noght had no part of children tweyne
But first siknesse, and after, wo and peyne.” (647-651)

Although Griselda obviously has bonded tightly with both her children – as her response to the sergeant makes clear – the words “siknesse,” referring to pregnancy, and “wo,” and “peyne” indicate that although she has not demonstrated this overtly to Walter, she *has* suffered. But her origins, as well as the conditions set forth from the beginning by Walter, permit no other reaction except for the manifest silence she demonstrates at each crisis. Walter expects to see the “wo” and “peyne,” but Griselda will not allow such a display. Using traditionally masculine language, she essentially assumes the male role by the time she expresses firmly to Walter, ““dooth with youre owene thing / Right as yow list; axeth no reed at me...Dooth youre plesaunce”” (652-653, 658). A stubborn Griselda emerges by this point in the tale, building on her established behavior. And Walter

⁵⁴ Georgianna notes “Walter’s attempt to determine the limits of Griselda’s assent is frustratingly unsuccessful” (*Ibid* 808).

⁵⁵ According to Hansen, Walter, “Galled by the unbearable way in which this woman eludes his tyranny by refusing to resist and define it, he can only torture her again and again, seeking to determine her elusive identity as well as his own, to find the Other in Griselda, someone he can master in order to find himself” (“Powers of Silence” 192).

follows along with it, defeated,⁵⁶ as the Clerk's description makes clear: "And whan this markys say / The contance of his wyf, he caste adoun / His eyen two, and wondreth that she may / In pacience suffer al this array" (667-670). The Clerk's description of Walter at this point clearly demonstrates that Griselda's unexpected behavior creates conflict within the Marquis: "And forth he goth with drery contenance, / But to his herte it was ful greet pleasance" (671-672). Walter knows that his behavior causes Griselda deep distress, particularly because she deserves none of it, but the very fact that she behaves in the way she does also proves her worthiness to Walter, which pleases him. Yet until Griselda behaves in the expected traditional feminine manner, Walter will not cease his "game."⁵⁷

One confirmation of Griselda's emerging power over Walter by her use of silence occurs with the transition from the private back to the public. His harsh treatment of her filters to the people of Saluzzo, and now their support of the Marquis begins to wane: "Where as his peple therbifore / Hadde loved hym wel, the sclandre of his diffame / Made hem that they hym hatede therfore" (729-731). For Walter, the reaction of his people to his "tests" force him to validate his treatment of her, since now he must also prove, in the public domain, the credibility of his actions. As a result, the next test of Griselda also occurs in public. Additionally, the people's will indicates that Griselda's

⁵⁶ Hansen states, "if Walter is at first shown up, defeated, and made powerless by the position and authority he hands his wife, which she so effortlessly and successfully wields, he is again all but undone by the self-abasement that he then demands and that she, ever obedient and adaptable to her situation, so easily and successfully performs" ("Powers of Silence" 192).

⁵⁷ Georgianna correctly points out: "Walter...assumes a discrepancy between Griselda's internal and external behavior, which the text explicitly denies. The subtlety that Walter momentarily sees in Griselda's actions is instead a reflection of his own, not only the obvious subtlety of pretending to do what he does not in fact do, but also his method of probing beneath the supposed surface of Griselda's reactions to discover in her some hidden reality" ("Grammar of Assent" 812).

use of the rhetorical silence that she has steadfastly employed since the beginning of her trials has resulted in the slow reversal of the power structure.

Bringing his test of his wife into full view of the public, Walter must now seemingly appeal to an even higher authority in order to justify his plan and prevent widespread rebellion. This reactive behavior is made manifest with the shift from the private to the public sphere, a move forced by Griselda, since Walter to this point has failed to elicit Griselda's true motives. With his false papal bulls now in hand, Walter ostensibly has orders to "divorce" Griselda and marry someone more "appropriate." Although the character test shifts from the private to the public, Griselda essentially remains rooted in the private sphere since that realm offers her only real weapon, silence. As such, the Clerk again feels disposed to provide the emotion that Griselda intentionally suppresses, even in the face of such brutal treatment – "I deeme that hire herte was ful wo" (753) – referring not only to the news of the impending divorce, but also, possibly, to the fact that the "rude" (750) people go along with it, indicating that Griselda may suspect the bulls to be counterfeit. But the Clerk also notes that Griselda maintains the composure she has shown all along: "But she, ylike sad for everemo, / Disposed was, this humble creature, / The adversitee of Fortune al t'endure" (754-756). One should note that in his previous attempts, Walter fails to elicit the expected emotional response from Griselda, who is in what he perceives to be the midst of helpless situations. Both trials occurred within the private sphere. Although Griselda does behave in a perfunctory manner, obeying her husband's will without question, the lack of accompanying emotion forces Walter to change tactics and take his "game" to the public domain. In the fifth part of his tale, the Clerk notes that Walter "on a day in open audience / Ful boistously hath

seyd hire this sentence” (790-791). Yet the change in tactic hardly “breaks” Griselda. In fact, it provides her the opportunity to speak at length, and in a classic rhetorical strategy, she uses language to reveal only what she chooses – not only to Walter, but also to all who observe.

In her public speech, Griselda first reminds her listeners of her humble beginnings, a reminder in part that her behavior stems from her low social standing: “I ne heeld me nevere digne in no manere / To be youre wyf, no, ne youre chamberere. / And in this hous, ther ye me lade made” (818-820). Replete with pathos, Griselda essentially holds Walter responsible for what she has become. Her pathos gains added significance when she, like Custance, appeals directly to God: “Where as I was nought worthy for to bee, / That thonke I God and yow, to whom I preye / Foryelde it you” (829-831), as if Griselda hints that God will repay Walter for what he has done. Her appeal ends with “ther is namoore to seye” (831). Although Griselda indeed says much more, the statement essentially prevents her listeners from passing judgment on her behavior, which as Walter, the Clerk, and the critics demonstrate repeatedly, frustrates everyone. Throughout the remainder of her speech, key lines ensure that her listeners will unknowingly provide the emotion Griselda fails to display. For example, Griselda notes, “God shilde swich a lordes wyf to take / Another man to housbonde or to make!” (839-840), a sentence that reminds her listeners that Walter’s course of action and God’s law forbid her from marrying another man, even someone of her own social standing. Griselda continues with these examples of rhetorical prowess, cleverly asserting her point:

“O goode God! How gentil and how kynde

Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage

The day that maked was oure marriage!

But sooth is seyde – algate I fynde it trewe,

For in effect it preeved is on me –

Love is nocht oold as whan that it is newe.” (852-857)

The words produce the desired effect. Consenting to Griselda’s request not to be sent to her father’s place completely naked but at least covered in the rag she now wears, Walter cannot hide his emotion; as the Clerk notes, “But wel unnethes thilke word he spak, / But wente his wey, for routhe and for pitee” (892-893). And the citizens of Saluzzo openly bemoan their “fallen” heroine: “The folk hire folwe, wepyng in hir weye, / And Fortune ay they cursen as they goon” (897-898). Janicula, too, cannot control his passion: “Hir fader, that this tidynge herde anon, / Curseth the day and tyme that Nature / Shoop hym to been a lyves creature” (901-903). In the whole of the events, this scene stands paramount, cleverly demonstrating as it does the true difference between Griselda and her counterparts. All who hear her respond emotionally, and in a stunning and unexpected reversal, the traditional power structure changes. As with Custance in the *Man of Law’s Tale*, Griselda has assumed the male role, since the male characters cannot keep from displaying stereotypically feminine emotional reactions to the words they hear. Griselda, however, continues to exhibit her emotionless attitude toward the way Walter has treated her: “But she fro wepyng kepte hire eyen dreye” (899). Even after her reunion with her father, the roles remain reversed. Janicula “with hire olde coote, as it myghte be / He covered hire, ful sorwefully wepyng” (913-914), and Griselda:

neither by hire wordes ne hire face,
Biforn the folk, ne eek in hire absence,
Ne shewed she that hire was doon offence;
Ne of hire heighe estaat no remembraunce
Ne hadde she, as by hire contenance. (920-924)

The confirmation of the reversal of the power structure occurs when the Clerk compares her to perhaps the most tried of Old Testament figures, Job, suggesting that even he would have difficulty accepting the turmoil Griselda has faced:

Men speke of Job, and moost for his humblesse,
As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite,
Namely of men, but as in soothfastness,
Though clerkes preise women but a lite,
Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite
As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe
As wommen been, but it be falle of newe. (932-938)

In fact, the Clerk suggests that through her steadfastness and comportment, Griselda has redefined the meaning of “woman,” since her behavior, like Abraham’s, lies outside the comprehension of most men.

The final part of the tale reveals Griselda as a new, Abrahamic ideal. Abraham’s reward for his faith occurs with the appearance of the Angel of God, who instructs him not to kill Isaac and instead provides a ram caught in a thicket. By the end of the *Clerk’s Tale*, Griselda has also earned her return. When Walter “asks” her to serve essentially as a wedding planner for her successor, he has no doubt as to her loyalty. Her task does not

serve as another test, but instead as the basis for the big revelation. Griselda, nonetheless, following the pattern she has become quite acquainted with, acquiesces willingly and does all as expected. Her constancy remains intact, emphasized first by the inconstancy of the denizens of Saluzzo, and then by her own rhetorical prowess. When the children ride into town, the Clerk notes about the people's behavior, "And thanne erst amonges hem they seye / That Walter was no fool, thogh that hym leste / To change his wyf, forit was for the beste" (985-987). The Clerk, in a brief ekphrasis, repeats the words of others of the town who note the fickle nature of its citizens:

O stormy peple!⁵⁸ Unsad and evere untrewel!
Ay undiscreet and chaungynge as a fane!
Delitynge evere in rumbul that is newe,
For lyk the moone ay wexe ye and wane!
Ay ful of clapping, deere ynogh a jane!
Youre doom is fals, youre constance yvele preeveth;
A ful greet fool is he that on yow leeveth. (995-1001)

The infidelity of Saluzzo's population demonstrates clearly the singularity of Griselda as her own woman, a point emphasized by her rhetorical prowess. Concerning his new bride, she asks Walter, "'That ye ne prikke with no tormentynge / This tendre mayden, as ye han doon mo'" (1038-1039). Griselda's comment makes clear to Walter her singularity as a woman. Only someone of meager and humble beginnings could tolerate

⁵⁸ See Susan Yager's "Chaucer's 'Peple' and 'Folk.'" *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 100 (2001): 211-223.

the “tormenting” Walter has inflicted. Walter of course, at this point, ends his game.⁵⁹ Griselda has nothing else to prove, and he accepts her as a legitimate equal.

Critics for years have complained that Griselda never reacts in the way that a “real” mother would when faced with her circumstances, and one may argue that it is only when the children arrive and Walter reveals the truth to her that Griselda behaves in a way conversant with expectations. She faints twice, and her emotional outbursts rival any similar scene in Chaucer.⁶⁰ Her reaction, however, falls in line directly with the “new” definition of woman she has created through the years of her “silent” ordeal. Griselda’s open display of emotion when reunited with her children could not be more demonstrative of motherly behavior, yet the foundation of her character never changes. Perhaps her lack of specific behavior⁶¹ frustrates readers most at this point. Yes, Griselda does break down in a wave of emotion, but she directs all of it toward her children *and* Walter, in the most positive and loving manner. She never harbors any resentment for Walter’s trickery. Such behavior would be like Abraham questioning God as to why he was put through such an ordeal if Isaac was never to be truly sacrificed. Like Abraham, she says nothing of it.

Because of her ingenious use of rhetorical silence – knowing when to speak and when not to, as well as knowing what to say as well as what not to say – Griselda ends up reversing the traditional power structure. She emerges, at the very least, as an equal to

⁵⁹ Hansen notes about this situation: “The end of the heroine’s suffering must in a sense spell the end of her virtue, and what voice Griselda has is silenced, her story finished, when Walter finally stops torturing her. And what makes Walter stop, after the third trial, may be his eventual understanding of the paradoxical sense in which this woman continues to win, in venerable Christian fashion, by losing so fully and graciously to a tyrannical man” (“Powers of Silence” 192).

⁶⁰ Chaucer’s more emotional scenes include Troilus’ reaction to his betrayal by Criseyde, Arcite’s and Palamon’s determination to win Emelye in the *Knight’s Tale*, and, of course, the Wife of Bath’s rant in her Prologue.

⁶¹ Namely, directing any pent up frustration or hostility toward Walter for his treatment of her.

Walter, despite the fact that she suffers far more than he does, if he even suffers at all.⁶² More so than Custance, Griselda plays the game of her male counterpart, but she does so on her own terms. In some ways, Griselda exceeds Abraham, since the latter behaves in accordance with God's directive at the expense of his individuality as a man. For Abraham to succeed, he has to behave within the parameters established by God. And while the same is true for Griselda, her behavior never overshadows who she is an individual. She never loses her humanity. Abraham, as presented biblically, seems more an automaton than an individual. At the end of his ordeal, while he stands in favor with God, he is far from His equal. Griselda, from a power perspective, stands as Walter's equal, and her singularity actually makes her superior, since Walter essentially behaves as the traditional male. In fact, the Clerk closes his tale with a reminder of Griselda's inimitability: "It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes / In al a toun Grisildis thre or two" (1164-1165).

It is in the *Envoy* to the Clerk's Tale where the whole Abrahamic perspective disappears. For the entirety of the tale, the Clerk has narrated a story where the lead character, because she follows in the biblical Abrahamic ideal, behaves in an unrealistic manner considering the circumstances. It seems, however, that even the Clerk is not immune to Griselda's unbelievability, for in the *Envoy*, the tone completely changes.

⁶² Georgianna refers to it as "her transformation from poor subject to wise co-ruler" ("Grammar of Assent" 793). For equality to be achieved, one of the principles must necessarily start from a position of inequality. During her suffering, Griselda is not equal to Walter. At the end of it, however, she has become his equal. Early in the tale, when Walter chooses Griselda to be his wife, the Clerk notes, "Of hire array what sholde I make a tale? / Unneth the peple hir knew for hire fairnesse / Whan she translated was in swich riches" (383-385). The scene is repeated at the end when Walter's servants dress her in garments befit for a queen. My suggestion is that the Clerk's use of the word "translated" indicates that because of his choices, Walter changes Griselda from what he thinks she is, subordinate, to what she will become, equal. The repeat of the scene at the end of the story symbolizes Griselda's acquisition of this status. As the word indicates, she has been transformed, but she did it on her own terms. See Patterson's "The Necessity of History: The Example of Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*."

Rather than a tale replete with the serious biblical overtones of the Abraham and Isaac story, the *Envoy* instead reads like the story in medieval drama,⁶³ and the Clerk reminds his listeners of such with the line, “I crie in open audience” (1179). In fact, here, the Clerk’s attitude resembles Dioneo’s in the *Decameron*. Because the *Envoy* is a song, it is an obvious dramatic attempt at making the scene more light-hearted: “Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience, / And bothe atones buried in Ytaille” (1177-1178). Rather than the lines sounding like a somber reminder of Griselda, the reference to her patience being buried along with her make them sound instead more like a joke. The Clerk actually raises the same issues of emotion and believability with which medieval drama wrestled: “No wedded man so hardy be t’assaille / His wyves pacience in trust to fynde / Grisildis, for in certain he shal faille” (1180-1182). Later, the mention of the lean cow “Chichevache” (1188), demonstrates clearly that the Clerk really does not believe in the example of patience he has just narrated, a feeling next confirmed by the Merchant in the Prologue to his tale: “Ther is a long and large difference / Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience / And of my wyf the passing crueltee” (1223-1225). The *Envoy*, then, represents a swing from the Petrarchian ideal seen at the beginning in the Clerk’s Prologue to the dramatic reality narrated by Dioneo in the *Decameron*.

The *Envoy*, however, does not lessen the fact that Griselda’s behavior puts her in a very exclusive club. Her tribulations obviously compare with those faced by Old Testament stalwarts Abraham or Job.⁶⁴ But because the payoff for her tribulations has the effect of making her an equal, Griselda surpasses her biblical counterparts. Her

⁶³ In the *Riverside Chaucer*, Warren Ginsberg notes that the *Envoy* “belongs dramatically to the Clerk” (883).

⁶⁴ See Spearing, “Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*.” *New Literary History* 32 (2001): 715-746.

rhetorical silence frustrates Walter at each test, and her constant behavior, as unrealistic as it may be, moves her beyond the sphere of ordinary, which represents the lens most use when reading the *Clerk's Tale*. Readers want the ordinary to occur because they bring the ordinary to the reading. When the protagonist behaves extraordinarily, rather than attempt to understand it, readers condemn it. When a poet makes the protagonist a woman, the discomfort grows.⁶⁵ Griselda stands as the paramount example of the redefinition of autonomy and power.⁶⁶ To that end, perhaps out of a protective instinct for themselves and their intelligence, many, protecting their hubris at all costs, argue, "No mother would ever allow what happened to Griselda's children to happen to hers." Perhaps not, but it emphasizes precisely why one cannot view Griselda in the normal context or definition of "woman."⁶⁷ Griselda takes her challenge, works within her gender and her means to confront it, and emerges victorious with all intact, at the very least Walter's equal but more accurately, the true head of state of Saluzzo.

⁶⁵ Chao correctly notes, "The inclusion of female voice not only shows women's autonomy but also challenges and questions the legitimacy of male domination and female subordination" (75). "Female Voice in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*." *General Education and Transdisciplinary Research* 1 (2007): 75-92.

⁶⁶ Georgianna explains, "as critics we pride ourselves on not being taken in by the text...we, like Walter, resist what is often labeled 'facile sympathy' or 'mindless identification' with texts authors, or characters" ("Grammar of Assent" 815).

⁶⁷ Tuttle Hansen states: "Viewed as a poem about either a woman's subversive silence or her silenced subversion, the *Clerk's Tale* thus affirms two conclusions about the history of masculine and feminine power in Western culture. It suggests that 'maleness,' as Catharine MacKinnon has put it, has often been perceived as 'a form of power that is both omnipotent and nonexistent, an unreal thing with very real consequences.' It also explains why Woman, identified as absence, is a fearsome ideal for both real women and masculine presence" ("Powers of Silence" 195).

EPILOGUE

Just from the standpoint of a parent, most acknowledge the difficulty Abraham must have had in following through with God's command to sacrifice Isaac. As this study has demonstrated, medieval culture in particular struggled with just how to view this very short but complicated biblical passage, as the scores of plays, artwork, and commentary reveal. While the passage creates a sometimes callous view of God, or at the very least a denial of the believability of the principal characters, these and other medieval (and modern) reactions indicate that people indeed did (and do) care about it. Abraham's and Isaac's stories are difficult to let go of, and others no doubt in the future will continue to tackle this perplexing passage in an attempt to understand it in a way that is informative and satisfying. And while sacrifice may not be the most popular method of proving faith and devotion, the payoff is undeniable, particularly in the case of Isaac. Abraham's son, after marrying Rebekah, becomes the father of twins, and from them, descends the lineage of Christ.¹

Chaucer's tales of religion and morality prove equally perplexing to those who look for understanding or clarification in the behavior of the principal characters, and it is not surprising given that these tales are all variations of the Abraham and Isaac theme.

¹ See Matthew 1:1-17. Of course, while most generally agree about Christ being a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, not everyone agrees as to who is in the family line. For more, see Augustine, *De Consensu Evangelistarum Liber 4. Volume 43 of Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum Series*. Ed. F. Wehrich. Bel Air, CA: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1987; Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church*. London: T & T Clark International, 2004. 315-373, and "Tamar's Ancestry and Rahab's Marriage: Two Problems in the Matthean Genealogy." *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1995): 313-329; Harold A. Blair, "Matthew 1, 16 and the Matthean Genealogy." *Studia Evangelica* 2 (1964): 149-154; Barbara Sivertsen, "New Testament Genealogies and the Families of Mary and Joseph." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 43-50.

Yet, like Isaac, the sacrificial victims demonstrate that their death or suffering was not in vain. The Hugelyn episode in the *Monk's Tale* proves the most troubling in terms of seeing a payoff for sacrifice. Hugelyn and his children slowly starve to death while they sit in a prison cell. His suffering, coupled with the knowledge that his actions resulted in the imprisonment of his children, should create a reaction more in line with how Dante presents Ugolino in *Inferno* 32 and 33, angry and defiant. Chaucer's character, however, is much more passive and strangely quiet. Yet if viewed in the light of Abraham and Isaac, the sacrifice of Hugelyn's children is easier to understand. Dante demonstrates that there is a beyond following death. Ugolino spends eternity in Hell, exacting his revenge upon Ruggierri, the man he holds responsible for his suffering. Since Chaucer's version comes primarily from his Dantean template, it is important to remember that his characters, too, have a beyond to which they will travel. Many tend to see Hugelyn's situation as final – that his story ends in the cell in which he is imprisoned. Kierkegaardian theory demonstrates that, at least for the children, their beyond will be in paradise, since they are very young versions of Isaac as he is presented in medieval drama. They are innocent and caught in the snares of hunger and imprisonment that they cannot control. Yet within those entrapments, they offer themselves as sacrifice to their father. The success of their afterlife, however, existence depends on Hugelyn. Like the biblical Abraham, he must demonstrate total obedience to the principles outlined in Kierkegaard's theory – namely adherence to the absurd – or the reward for his children, regardless of whether he realizes it, vanishes. Because he does remain in the absurd, his children win and their sacrifice has meaning. Additionally, since the Eucharistic

implications are clearly demonstrated by the children, Hugelyn wins too, since Chaucer obviously wants him to be viewed from a Christian perspective.

In the *Prioress' Tale*, the ending demonstrates clearly that God rewards those who remain steadfast in their faith. But the application of Derridean theory to explain the little clergeon's journey toward salvation creates an interesting question in terms of the Abraham and Isaac theme. Girard states that the sacrificial figure must be pure if the sacrifice is to have meaning. Nothing, either biblically or dramatically, suggests that Isaac is not pure. Yet Derrida's theory demonstrates that the little clergeon begins his journey to salvation at the point of responsibility, ahead of the demonic that most others have trouble jettisoning. Quite simply, the little clergeon has no secret demonic he must exculpate in order to achieve responsibility and salvation. He therefore becomes the gift that others such as the Abbot need in order for salvation to be achieved through the *mysterium tremendum*. Church theology, however, teaches that all are born with original sin,¹ and that of course would include the little clergeon. Presumably, though, the little clergeon, as fervent as he is in pleasing Mary, would have been baptized thus washing him clean of that taint. Even when the little clergeon says, "Though that I for my prymer shal be shent / And shal be beten thries in an houre" (541-542), his purity remains intact despite deliberately shirking his duties at school. Here is the point he is most Isaac-like in his willingness to accept punishment for a greater whole. While the implied beatings indicate that others would consider his lack of responsibility as sinful, his actions do not result in the demise of others, only himself. And as is most commonly perceived,

¹ See in Romans 5:12-21, 1 Corinthians 15:22, and Psalm 51:5. See also A. J. Wallace and R. D. Rusk, *Moral Transformation: The Original Christian Paradigm of Salvation*. New Zealand: Bridgehead, 2011.

sacrificial figures accept their martyrdom for what they believe. The little clergeon certainly does. He shows no regret for what happens to him, despite its brutality. Unlike most sinners, the little clergeon does not knowingly sin and he deceives no one. He therefore serves as the perfect figure to demonstrate the applicability of Derrida's theory. The result is his "deification" and the salvation of those present at the *mysterium tremendum*.

In the *Physician's Tale*, Virginius and his daughter take on the characteristics of Abraham and Isaac as presented in medieval drama despite the tale's pagan backdrop. Clearly Chaucer intends the tale to be viewed with a Christian lens since Virginia herself invokes the story of Jephthah's daughter. What makes the tale work is the emotion that surrounds the central characters, the denial of Virginius' *jouissance*. Fradenburg notes the paradox of *jouissance*: "*Jouissance* is the point at which pleasure and pain crisscross, when there are no more objects, and the only thing left for desire to desire is the unknowable beyond insentience" (18). Virginius is a child of a Golden Age environment that is disrupted with Apius' pursuit of Virginia. As Girard notes, only sacrifice can restore harmony to a society that has had its harmony destroyed. In essence, violence is used to prevent violence or the society degenerates into pure chaos. To regain his *jouissance* – that perfect harmony of the Golden Age – Virginius must kill his daughter. When she hears her father's edict, Virginia reacts much like the dramatic Isaac, lamenting and fearing. Ultimately, however, she accepts her fate because like Isaac, she recognizes the better good that will result. Indeed, after Virginia's death, societal balance is restored and *jouissance* is regained. While Virginius struggles with what he must do, like the dramatic Abraham, he follows through and his society reaps the rewards.

The story of Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale* is perhaps the one instance where Chaucer's personal inklings intersect with the Abraham and Isaac theme. Custance, at the beginning of the tale, is a version of the dramatic Isaac, aware of her dilemma but reacting initially with reticence before finally accepting the will of her father. Once she becomes a mother, her personality mirrors the biblical Abraham. While Custance is initially sent to Syria to be the bride of the Sultan, his murder results in her exile at sea. Finally, she lands in Northumberland where customs and language differ significantly from her Roman upbringing or what she may have experienced while in Syria. The xenoglossic ambiguity surrounding her encounter with the Constable and his wife indicates that, as in the case of Isaac, God has chosen her for a special purpose. Indeed, it is through the intervention of the Divine that Custance is spared, once she is put on trial for the murder of Hermengyld. When she becomes a mother, and is again exiled thanks to Donegild's lies, her comportment significantly changes. She now behaves like the biblical Abraham – purposeful, without emotion. God makes sure that Custance return to where her journey began so many years before, Rome. And the tale ends with her empowerment over the males in her life who previously dictated their wishes to her. Custance's "crowning achievement" occurs with the installation of her son, Maurice, as the new Emperor. One could argue that Chaucer uses Custance as a metaphor for the glory of England. Indeed, Abraham and Isaac, because they remain steadfast to God, give birth to the glorious nation of God's chosen. In any other context, it would seem inconceivable that a Britain would assume the mantle of Rome's most powerful citizen. Yet the tale does end with Maurice firmly in control. It seems, then, that Chaucer is suggesting that the England of his day is analogous to the Rome in which the story is set

– a great empire made even greater by the blessings of God. Because Custance sacrifices her will to that of her male counterparts, she, her son, and an entire empire are rewarded.

With Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale*, sacrifice is presented from the perspective of the biblical Abraham. For that reason, her behavior, more so than that of any other Chaucerian character, is highly scrutinized. Even the Clerk seems to doubt such behavior is possible, as the ending of the tale and the *Envoy* suggest. But if Chaucer is following the pattern of Abraham and Isaac as it was understood in his time, then it should not be so surprising that Griselda can remain so steadfast, even in light of her children's apparent deaths. After all, God, when wanting to prove a point, chooses *extraordinary* individuals through which to act. Abraham and Isaac are remembered because of their extraordinary behavior in seemingly impossible circumstance. Perhaps that is the point. Each of the sacrificial figures in these tales is different from what is considered the ordinary. They are Christ-like, and no more extraordinary figure ever walked the earth. If that is the case, then perhaps these figures should be given a bit of leeway, no matter how ridiculous or illogical their behavior may seem. After all, it is through these types that God imparts His wisdom to His followers. It may not always make sense, but in the end, faith makes it acceptable, and each of these characters has abundance in supply. No wonder they win in the end.

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Biographical Information

In 1985, Gary Montaña received his Bachelor of Science degree in English from New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico. After teaching in public education for a decade, he enrolled in Middlebury College at the Bread Loaf School of English in Middlebury, Vermont, where he received his Master of Arts degree in English in 1998. Having enjoyed the experience, Gary enrolled in Middlebury's Master of Letters program and completed that degree in August of 2004. In the fall of 2000, he enrolled in the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Arlington. After completing his course work, Gary passed his Comprehensive Examinations in January 2007 and successfully defended his dissertation in the spring of 2011, all while continuing to teach full time and raise his children. In 2000, Gary's teaching methodology was the subject of research documented in the Harvard dissertation of Dr. Douglas E. Wood, *Teaching as Learning: From Content Knowledge to Pedagogical Practice*. Gary's work on language as power was documented in 2003 in the article "Teacher Inquiry into Literacy, Social Justice, and Power" by Bob Fecho and JoBeth Allen, published in the *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, edited by James Flood *et al.* Gary's future endeavors include writing a play on the French Impressionist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, an artist, Gary says, "Whose life needs to be rediscovered."