

Chaucer's Missing Children

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The difficulty with an exploration of the role of children in Chaucer's fiction is that, with the notable exception of the little clergeon of *The Prioress's Tale*, scarcely any children make an appearance or figure centrally in the tales. Chaucer provides only a few brief and random glimpses of what the actual lives of children in medieval families might have looked like, the Squire serving before his father at the table in the *General Prologue* and the sleeping arrangements of the miller's baby and grown daughter in *The Reeve's Tale*, for example. And, despite Chaucer's focused investigation of the theme of marriage, children are, curiously, missing from the lives of most of his married characters. More curious still is the startling fact that when children do appear prominently in *The Canterbury Tales*, they are presented as objects of violence. They have their throats cut, they are decapitated, they are kidnapped by their father and apparently murdered, they are abandoned at sea, they are wounded by their father's enemies, they are imprisoned with their father and must offer him their own flesh as food. These are the children of Chaucer's tales of morality and religion. They appear within family settings and are most important in their absence as something lost, something injured, or something sacrificed. They are largely symbolic figures manipulated for their qualities of weakness and innocence and important in their absence or in their suffering. Similarly, the predominant representation of the relationship between parent and child focuses on pain and loss in an analogy, sometimes implied, sometimes overt, to the sufferings of Mary as she beholds her child on the Cross. This paper contends that for Chaucer, the most potent literary representation of the parent-child relationship mirrors the relationship between Mary and Christ.

Before investigating the depiction of children in Chaucer's moral and religious tales, which is the main focus of this paper, I would like to address briefly the question of children in the romances and fabliaux. The striking absence of children from the majority of these tales raises questions about what Chaucer and his medieval audience understood the role or status of children to be, especially in literary texts. Given the lack of contraception and the consequently high birth rate, one might expect to find children depicted frequently in the tales, at least as a part of the general background of medieval life; however, such references to children are scanty. We do know that the widow who owns the small farm in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* has two daughters, that the wife in *The Shipman's Tale* brings a child of twelve with her to her tryst with the monk in her garden, that the miller in *The Reeve's Tale* has an infant of six months whose cradle, rather than the baby itself, figures pivotally in the plot, that the Franklin has a recalcitrant son who gambles and will not "lerne gentillesse aright" (V.694).¹ In *The Summoner's Tale*, we are given a slightly more extended episode concerning a child who, keeping to the pattern of absent children, has just died within the past two weeks. His death, however, is not the focus of the narrative, but a device by which the friar, who claims to have seen in a revelation the child ascending to heaven, argues for the superior effectiveness of the prayers of friars. One might even stretch a point and include the miller's daughter in *The Reeve's Tale*, though she is a woman of twenty. Here again, though, she is seduced and ruined in a revenge plot against her father. The majority of these references are brief, superficial and passing; the two slightly extended examples involve children, again, as objects of violence and loss, however humorous the content of the tale.²

Most notable, however, is the absence of reference to children in the lives of most of Chaucer's married characters in the romances and fabliaux. Dorigen and Arveragus in *The Franklin's Tale*, those models of marital felicity, have no children, though three or more years pass during the tale. The Wife of Bath, despite her five husbands and much discourse about the purpose of humankind's "membres" of "generacion" (III.116), does not seem to have fulfilled God's injunction to "wexe and multiplie" (III.28). The characters in her tale live "unto hir lyves ende/ In parfit joye" (III.1257-8), though childless, as far as we know. Similarly, Palamon and Emelye in *The Knight's Tale* live "in blisse, in richesse, and in heele" (I.3102), but without heirs. In the fabliaux, Alisoun and carpenter John in *The Miller's Tale*

have no children, nor do their counterparts, May and January, in *The Merchant's Tale*, although there has been some "irresolvable" speculation that May might have conceived by Damian.³ Again, Phebus, in *The Manciple's Tale*, has a wife "Which that he lovede more than his lyf" (IX.140), but no children.⁴

That Chaucer, and not just his modern readers, might have seen this absence as a presence, an area of potential meaning, is suggested by a reference in *Troilus and Criseyde*. There, when discussing Criseyde's background the narrator says:

But whether that she children hadde or noon,

I rede it naught, therefore I late it goon. (I.132-3)⁵

With this sly insinuation Chaucer raises (but does not answer) in the reader's mind a question which might be critical to the interpretation of Criseyde's character and actions. Would it or would it not be important if she had or had not had children? Chaucer, after all, need not have raised the issue. But the pointed absence from the text of these either existent or non-existent children creates a blank, unresolved space.

Rather like the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*, we "rede it naught" whether the characters in his romances and fabliaux had children. I would like to suggest here that the reason we do not and, indeed, cannot know has to do with the inappropriateness of children to certain literary genres. Chaucer suggests this in his reference to Criseyde and briefly in *The Canterbury Tales* with his use of the child in *The Shipman's Tale*. There the merchant's wife goes early to her garden to arrange an assignation with a visiting monk, a friend of her husband, and she takes with her a child:

This goode wyf cam walkynge pryvely
 Into the gardyn, there he walketh softe,
 And hym saleweth, as she hath doon ofte.
 A mayde child cam in hire compaignye,
 Which as her list she may governe and gye,
 For yet under the yerde was the mayde. (VII.92-97)

As Derek Pearsall notes, the child is present "inhibiting any too free intimacies and encouraging euphemism."⁶ In one way her presence focuses the humor of the tale, but it is the inhibiting character of the child's presence that is significant for our purposes. Children are inhibiting to sexual intrigue and romance and to their narration. In his aside in *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer makes us aware that in reality married women might reasonably be expected to have children, but he drops the subject because such children would, in the fictional world of courtly romance, be a complicating and inhibiting factor. Of course, being Chaucer, he lets the ambiguity hang. In his other romances, married characters are without children and their stories culminate in the "happily-ever-after" world of the fairy tale ending because the presence of children would force the reader to consider the characters as adults with responsibilities to more than their own desires (which are, after all, the subject of romance) or as persons of age and worldly experience (while romance demands youth and emotional innocence and immediacy). In the fabliaux, in which sexual intrigue is the focus, children are absent because their presence would inject a moral note into tales which are essentially amoral.⁷ Children, then, are superfluous or a hindrance to stories of romance and sexual intrigue. 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.⁸

By contrast, children, or their loss, figure prominently in Chaucer's tales of morality and religion. There we see both fathers and mothers suffering from injury to or loss of children. Interestingly, fathers do not appear as sufferers in the overtly religious tales but rather in moral tales or in tragic tales, which might be classified as a kind of sub-group to the moral tales. In these narratives, fathers are not entirely sympathetic characters because their children's sufferings are largely linked to the fathers' own actions in the political world of men or to questionably strict moral or revenge

codes. And some fathers appear at first more upset by the injury they themselves have received through their children than by the sufferings of the children themselves. Nevertheless, Chaucer does accentuate the pathos of suffering fathers, and points to the Christian solution in which suffering, particularly of children, might be understood.

In *The Monk's Tale*, Hugolino Comite de Pize is imprisoned with his children and left to starve as a result of a political intrigue. Chaucer softens Hugolino's guilt by claiming the uprising against him was the result of "a fals suggestioun" (VII.2417), but it is clear his children die because of him. As Robert Worth Frank claims about *The Monk's Tale* in general: "The leading figure in these narratives is neither helpless nor innocent and so hardly qualifies as an ideal subject for pathos."⁹ However, Chaucer does emphasize the pathos of the family's sufferings by pointing out the extreme youth of the children: "And with hym been his litel children three;/The eldest scarsly fyf yeer was of age" (VII.2411-12). Hugolino's "yonge sone" (VII.2431) dies of starvation in his father's arms in a vague echo of the pieta (VII.2439-42). Hugolino is so distraught that he bites on his son's arms, and his remaining children, mistaking his woe for hunger, offer their own bodies to their father "...ete the flessch upon us two./Oure flessch thou yaf us, take oure flessch us fro" (VII.2450-51). Here Chaucer omits what in Dante is Hugolino's cannibalism but leaves a eucharistic suggestion. In the tale both Hugolino and the narrator explain Hugolino's sufferings as the result of Fortune's "false wheel" (VII.2446), but the vague allusions to Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and in the Mass suggest an explanation beyond the ken of the worldly Hugolino.

There are similarities in this pattern of paternal suffering in *The Tale of Melibee*. Melibee's daughter, Sophie, is wounded "with fyve mortal woundes in fyve sondry places" (VII.971) by three of Melibee's old foes so that, like Hugolino's children, Sophie suffers, on the literal level of the tale, because of her father's political machinations. Like Hugolino, Melibee is distraught with woe; he, "lyk a mad man rentynge his clothes, gan to wepe and crie" (VII.973). Because the *Melibee* is a dialogue between Melibee and his wife, Prudence, rather than a narrative, Chaucer does not emphasize the element of pathos; in fact, we never see Sophie, who quickly drops out of the picture. However, Prudence, remembering Ovid, likens Melibee's sufferings to those of a woman who weeps inconsolably at the death of her child (VII.976), and later, in an argument for moderate grief, to Job, who accepted the loss of his children as God's will (VII.999). Similarly, Melibee likens himself to Christ who wept at the death of his friend, Lazarus (VII.987). In various ways, all these examples legitimate a father's grief. However, it quickly becomes clear that Melibee's concern is for his own injury, that his ruling emotion is anger, and that his answer to suffering is vengeance and war (VII.1009). The aim of the ensuing dialogue between husband and wife is to teach Melibee the Christian concepts of mercy and forgiveness. The sufferings of Melibee and his daughter, then, are removed from the interpretive context of the political revenge feud and placed in the Christian context of redemptive suffering and sacrifice.

Again, in *The Physician's Tale*, Virginius's daughter, Virginia, a girl of fourteen years, figures as a kind of pawn in dispute between an unscrupulous judge who wants to seduce her ("This mayde shal be myn, for any man" [VI.129]) and her father who wants to preserve her virginity. This is a battle of possession between men, and there is offered to Virginia no alternative (such as marriage or flight) but death. The tale unfolds in a patriarchal world where Virginia must obey and where her mother disappears after having been mentioned once at the beginning of the poem. Virginia's own analogy between herself and the daughter of the Old Testament figure Jephtha reinforces the impression that this is a world of justice rather than of mercy, which is what Virginia pleads for but is denied ("O mercy, deere fader!" quod this mayde" [VI.231]). Virginius is the direct cause of his daughter's suffering, for it is he who beheads her,¹⁰ and he takes revenge on the judge by presenting him with the severed head, an action which precipitates a citizens' uprising and the judge's death.¹¹ Against this masculine world of vengeance and intrigue are set the pathetic sufferings of Virginius, who laments, "O doghter, which that art my laste wo/And in my lyf my laste joye also" (VI.221-22), and the character of Virginia, whose virtues of virginity, humility, and modesty suggest she is a prototype of the Christian martyr. Thus, Virginia's death and her father's sufferings are presented against alternative backdrops: her father's unyielding world of vengeance and justice and the world of Christian sacrifice which she herself represents.

These tales of the griefs of fathers and their children suggest, then, that to be understood such sacrifices must be extracted from the political, patriarchal worlds which produce them and set against the Christian and more feminine world of mercy and redemptive sacrifice. Jill Mann, in "Parents and Children in the *Canterbury Tales*," takes a somewhat different point of view of the fathers in these tales, however.¹² While her argument does take into account the mirroring of the mother/child relationship in that of Mary and Christ, which I will discuss shortly, she focuses largely on the role of cruel, or apparently cruel, fathers and on the sufferings which result from the subordination of

children to parents. She argues that Chaucer uses this parent/child relationship to explore the connection between power and love and to express humankind's relationship to an omnipotent and sometimes incomprehensible God. She describes a circular chain, discernible in *The Monk's Tale*, *The Physician's Tale*, *The Prioress's Tale*, and *The Clerk's Tale*, in which children are in thrall to the governance of their fathers, humankind to God, and, in turn, God, through the Crucifixion, to his creatures. While I argue here that suffering fathers fall short of expressing the central Christian theme of redemptive sacrifice, Mann sees their relationship to their children as emblematic of God's relationship to His "children."

Such a view, I would suggest, puts too heavy a philosophical burden on the images of suffering fathers in these tales. Unlike the actions of God, the Father who may allow suffering for his own good, though shadowy purposes, the actions of these earthly fathers are left morally ambiguous (*The Monk's Tale*, *The Physician's Tale*) or are presented as morally inadequate (the *Melibee*). Mann does not include the *Melibee* in her discussion, an important omission since *Melibee* is presented as in need of moral edification. Moreover, Mann does not distinguish between suffering fathers like Virginius and Hugolino and fathers who, in god-like fashion, manipulate the lives of their children but do not themselves suffer for it, like Walter in *The Clerk's Tale*. What Chaucer seems to be concerned with is not so much the development of a consistent philosophical scheme, or even, as Mann suggests, an "extended and extendable meditation on different manifestations of a mystery--the mystery of the relation between power and love,"¹³ but, more locally in each tale and for different purposes, the affective power of the image of the suffering parent. In three tales (*The Clerk's Tale*, *The Man of Law's Tale*, and *The Prioress's Tale*) in which mothers suffer with and for their children, Chaucer directly exploits this image by explicit analogy between the sufferings of mothers and their children and those of Mary and Christ.

Several scholars have pointed out the marian imagery that permeates the story of the long suffering Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale*. Francis Lee Utley has interpreted Walter's proposal to Griselda as an Annunciation scene because, according to the apocryphal *Protevangelium*, the angel appears when Mary has returned from fetching water just as Griselda does here (IV.276).¹⁴ Others have pointed to the ox's stall associated with Christ's birthplace and Griselda's home: "But hye God somtyme senden kan/His grace into a litel oxes stalle" (IV.206-7).¹⁵ And James I. Wimsatt argues that Griselda's wedding to Walter parallels the Coronation of Mary, which was seen as integral to the Annunciation.¹⁶ We might also point to the humility with which Griselda accepts the will of her lord and to her role as intercessor with his people:

So wise and rype wordes hadde she,
 And juggementz of so greet equitee,
 That she from hevene sent was, as men wende,
 Peple to save and every wrong t'amende.
 (IV.438-41)

Griselda's great suffering in the tale, of course, is the loss of her young children, though she suffers that loss steadfastly and uncomplainingly. Nevertheless, Chaucer suggests a parallel between Griselda's loss and Mary's in Griselda's farewell to her daughter:

Fareweel my child! I shall thee nevere see.
 But sith I thee have marked with the croys
 Of thilke Fader--blessed moote he be!--
 That for us dyde upon a croys of tree,
 Thy soule, litel child, I hym betake,
 For this nyght shaltow dyen for my sake.
 (IV.555-60)

The identification of Griselda with Mary is completed as her child is associated with Christ, and this identification both heightens the tale's allegorical meaning and, conversely, intensifies the picture of the suffering of earthly mothers.

Custance, in *The Man of Law's Tale*, shares with Griselda her innocence, humility, and passivity. Although she is actively instrumental in several conversions in the tale, she is contrasted in her passive suffering to her two evil mothers-in-law, who entangle themselves in political intrigues against her. Custance, of course, has the characteristics of the Christian saint particularly because of her powers to convert the heathen, but also because she is miraculously

preserved by God when she is at sea in her rudderless boat. When she is exiled with her infant son to her second voyage, she makes a prayer to Mary which draws overtly the parallel (in kind though not in intensity) between the sufferings of earthly mothers and the sufferings of Mary which are suggested in *The Clerk's Tale*. As she comforts her own child she appeals to Mary:

"Mooder," quod she, "and mayde bright, Marie
Sooth is that thurgh wommanes eggement
Mankynde was lorn, and damned ay to dye,
For which thy child was on a croys yrent.
Thy blisful eyen sawe al his torment;
Thanne is ther no comparison bitewne

Thy wo and any woman may sustene.
"Thow sawe thy child yslayn bifore thyn yen,
And yet now lyveth my litel child, parfay!
* * *

Rewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse
Rewest on every reweful in distresse."
(II.841-54)

Beyond drawing this comparison between Mary's suffering and her own, Custance identifies her own child with Christ when she exclaims:
"O litel child, allas! What is thy gilt,
That nevere wroghtest synne as yet, pardee?"
(II.855-56)

Thus, Custance and Griselda in their passive humility, their children in their guiltless sufferings illuminate the central image of Christian sacrifice; likewise, the grief of Mary as she beholds Christ on the Cross gives meaning to the suffering of earthly mothers.

These associations of the sufferings of earthly mothers and children with the paradigmatic example of Mary and Christ are given their richest expression in *The Prioress's Tale*, the only tale in which a child figures as a protagonist, the only tale in which fathers are absent.¹⁸ These associations have been thoroughly documented by previous scholars.¹⁸ Briefly, however, the prologue to the tale is a hymn to the Virgin and draws in places on services which commemorate the Massacre of the Innocents. In it the Prioress likens herself to an infant incapable of expressing itself without Mary's aid. The little clergeon is devoted to the Virgin, and, like Christ, is sacrificed by the Jews. The miraculous resurrection he undergoes is performed by Mary, who refers to him as "My litel child" (VII.667).

The little clergeon does not, of course, present us with a realistic representation of medieval childhood. He is an image of innocence manipulated to produce the pathos necessary to the affective piety of the tale. As many scholars have pointed out, this effect is accomplished by the repetition of the word "litel" in regard to the clergeon and his surroundings.¹⁹ It is his very childishness which makes him the perfect emblem for a tale of naive faith, innocent suffering, and final redemption.

The little clergeon's mother, however, is presented realistically in her frantic search for her missing child:²⁰
With moodres pitee in her brest enclosed,
She gooth, as she were half out of hir mynde,
To every place where she hath supposed
By liklihede her litel child to fynde.
(VII.593-96)

Like Custance, she asks Mary for aid and, indeed, is supplanted in her role as earthly mother by Mary as the child's spiritual mother. Though the Prioress refers to the clergeon's mother as a new Rachel (VII.627), his mother is nowhere presented as an allegorical figure as are Griselda and Custance, so that the suggestion that actual mothers suffer for their children as Mary did for Christ ("His mooder swownyng by his beere lay" [VII.625]) is, perhaps paradoxically,

heightened here.

The mother/child relationship which Chaucer elaborates in *The Canterbury Tales* and which this paper investigates is a limited but powerful one; it is the image of sacrificial suffering which is part of the medieval tradition of affective piety. This is not to say that medieval people were uninterested in other aspects of the mother/child relationship. The persistence of interest throughout the Middle Ages in the apocryphal infancy gospels, for example, attests to an intense curiosity about how human familial relationships might be played out in the Holy Family.²¹ Such curiosity was left largely unsatisfied by the canonical gospel accounts. Only Matthew and Luke treat Christ's birth, and Christ appears as a child in the gospels only once: at the age of twelve, when, after a trip to Jerusalem with His family, He remains in the temple so that His anxious parents must come searching for Him (a foreshadowing of the suffering Christ's special role will occasion his parents) (Luke 2:41-52). That early and medieval Christians elaborated legends to account for the silence of the canonical gospels about Mary's history and Christ's early childhood indicates, among other things, the psychological importance motherhood and childhood held for people of these eras.

The apocryphal accounts of Christ's childhood are not directly relevant to the sacrificial character of the relationship on which Chaucer draws in *The Canterbury Tales*, however.²² Although the mother/child relationships in *The Canterbury Tales* involve small children, as do the infancy gospels, Chaucer's children, as we have seen, are largely inactive or important in their absence. More illuminating for our discussion of children as they appear in Chaucer's work is the emphasis on the suffering of mothers and their children in late Middle English literature such as the lyrics and the mystery plays. The gospels are also silent about the sufferings of Mary at the Crucifixion. Only in John is Mary present (John 19:26-27). Christ speaks to her assigning John as her new son and making Mary John's mother, but there is no hint of the anguish which the medieval tradition of affective piety promoted and which is reflected in the lyrics and the drama.

Medieval lyrics of this period, particularly those which feature a dialogue between Mary and Christ during the Crucifixion, seek to inform the reader's meditation on the meaning of Christ's sacrifice by intensifying the pathos of Mary's grief at the sight of her son's wounds. In a late thirteenth century/early fourteenth century lyric, "The Mother and her Son on The Cross," Christ instructs Mary on the necessity of his sacrifice, but Mary repeatedly answers with a refrain detailing her pain:

Sone, how may I teres werne?
I se the bloody stremeserne
From thine herte to my fet.
(16-18)²³

In another, "Mary suffers with her son," she wishes to die with her child: "Als love me bindet to my sone,/So lat us deiyen bothen isame" (6-7).²⁴ Moreover, Mary's maternal feelings are directly tied to the experience of ordinary mothers in the first lyric: "Moder, now thou might well leren/What sorewe haveth that children beren" (37-38).²⁵ And if Mary learns about ordinary mothers, the lyric "Mary complains to other mothers" indicates that those mothers can approach Mary's experience by meditating on their own children:

Therefore, wemen, by town and strete,
Youre childer handes when ye beholde,
Ther breste, ther body, and ther fete,
God were on my sone to thinke, and ye wolde,
How care hath made my hert full colde,
To see my sone with naile and spere,
With scourge and thornes manifolde,
Wounded and dedd my dere sone, dere.
(49-56)²⁶

Very similar language is used in the mystery plays to express maternal suffering.²⁷ The Massacre of the Innocents, alluded to twice in *The Prioress's Tale*, is presented in the Wakefield Master's *Herod the Great*. There the victimized mothers, whose sons die in place of Christ, though they cry for vengeance, bemoan their losses in language that prefigures Mary's. For example:

1 Mulier. Outt, alas, my childys bloode!

Outt, for reprefe!

Alas for shame and sin! Alas that I was borne!
Of weping who may blin to se hir childe forlorne?
My domforth and my kin, my son thus al to-torne!
(341-45)

or:

3 Mulier. God forbede!
Thefe, thou shedys my childys blood!
Out, I cry! I go nere wood!
Alas, my hart is all on flood
To se my child thus blede!
(374-78)[28](#)

In these examples ordinary mothers suffer as Mary herself will at the sight of their sacrificed children.

The unbearable sorrow of having to witness the suffering of a son, the blood and disfigurement of the body, is carried through in various passion plays. In the York play, *Christ's Death and Burial*, Mary laments:

"Allas!" for my swete sonne I saye,
That doulfully to dede thus is dig[h]t!
Allas! for full lovely thou laye
In my wombe, this worthely witht.
Allas, that I schulde see this sight
Of my sone so semely to see!
Allas, that this blossome so bright
Untrewly is tugged to this tree!
(131-38)[29](#)

In the N-town *Passion Play I*, Mary makes a similar complaint:

For, these langowrys may I [not] susteyn,
The swerde of sorwe hath so thirlyd my mende.
Alas, what may I do? Alas, what may I seyn?
These prongys min[e] herte asondyr they do rende.
(1065-68)

And, as does Custance in *The Man of Law's Tale*, Mary points out Christ's guiltless state (1059).[30](#)

In *The Scourging* by the Wakefield Master, Mary and Jesus have an exchange similar to their conversation in the lyric "The Mother and her Son on the Cross." Mary expresses her pain and Jesus instructs her on the necessity of his death:

Maria. Alas, for my son dere, that me to moder chese!

...

Alas, dere son, for care I se thy body blede!

...

Jhesus. Forsothe, moder, this is no nay: on cros I must dede dre,
And from deth rise on the thrid day--thus prophecy
says by me.
(315-27)[31](#)

What these examples seem to indicate is that Chaucer was working within and drawing from a tradition which elaborated the sufferings of mothers and children. The laments of mothers/Mary focus on the nearly unbearable experience of having to watch the physical, usually bloody, sufferings of children/Christ. They question the reason for the sacrifice of the guiltless and suggest that human suffering has redemptive value. The tradition both humanizes Mary and exalts ordinary mothers in the common experience of the loss of a child. All of these concerns, in one way or another, inform Chaucer's moral and religious tales.

In the lyrics, the drama, and in Chaucer's religious tales, then, the sufferings of mothers and children are made analogous to those of Mary and Christ. Children are appropriate, even essential, to this genre because, in their relationships to their mothers, they embody one of the central mysteries of the faith. Conversely, the relationships between fathers and suffering children, while presented as significant in the tales of tragedy and morality, hint at but cannot carry the same spiritual valence. Further, to recapitulate my introductory remarks, children are largely absent from the romances and fabliaux because they would be a hindrance to the internal necessities of those forms. Children are depicted in *The Canterbury Tales* not according to any principles of mimetic realism, but according to their appropriateness to particular literary genres.

Notes

1. All quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987).
 2. Children are briefly mentioned in *The Knight's Tale*: the woman in labor at Diana's feet, "for hir child so longe was unborn" (I.2084) and in Mars' temple, "The sowe freten the child right in the cradel" (I.2019). The Parson refers to children in his tale. Many of his references have to do with injury to children. In his discussion of penance we learn that "Thilke penance that is solempne is in two maneres; as to be put out of hooly chirche in Lente for slaughtre of children, and swich maner thyng" (X.102). Regarding the sin of Ire, we learn it is a deadly sin if "a womman by necligence overlyeth hire child in hir slepyng" (X.574); equally, it is a deadly sin if a man or woman prevents conception, causes an abortion, or commits infanticide (X.575-7). Under the sin of Lechery, we learn that some men put their own children out to prostitution (X.885). Other references can be found at X.121-22, X.220-21, and X.669-72.
 3. M. Teresa Tavormina, "Explanatory Notes to the *Merchant's Prologue and Tale*," *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 889.
 4. *The Squire's Tale* does present us with a family: King Cambuskan; his wife, Elpheta; two sons, Algarsyf and Cambalo; and his daughter, Canacee. However, the tale focuses, if it can be said to focus on anything, on Canacee as a romance heroine rather than as a daughter. The rest of the family and, indeed, the rest of the tale itself are abandoned with the Franklin's interruption.
 5. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987).
 6. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1985), p. 211.
 7. Of the children in *The Reeve's Tale* we might note that by medieval standards, the miller's daughter is not a child but a woman, who, following her seduction, connives with her seducer against her father, and that the infant is a cipher whose cradle is used only to advance the plot. However, it is true that the crudity of the tale is enhanced by the fact that the students revenge themselves on the miller through his daughter (and his wife). Paradoxically, the crudity demonstrates my point that the presence of children in fabliaux complicates the genre by injecting moral considerations.
 8. An extended discussion of literary genre might be somewhat digressive for a paper of this length. However, it is important to note that such genre distinctions were rather fluid in the Middle Ages. For some general distinctions about romance and fabliaux as they appear in *The Canterbury Tales*, we might rely on the definitions of Derek Pearsall: "The general character of the medieval romance is that it is, first, a narrative of the life of an idealized warrior aristocracy, in which prowess in feats of arms and dedication to the service of women are the principal subjects. . . . What is essential is the function of such narratives as demonstrations of an ideal code of conduct in operation. The demonstration may be in the form of a quest, a battle, a love-affair, but what it will always contain is a test and proof of the code" (*The Canterbury Tales*, p.115). The necessities of such a genre leave little room for the depiction of children, focused as the genre is on the testing and proof of the worth of individual adults. Outside *The Canterbury Tales*, children do appear in a few romances like *King Horn* or *Sir Degar*, where we see the hero develop from childhood, but, in general, children do not appear in romances as active adjuncts to the adults who must single-mindedly pursue their allotted quests.
- Pearsall defines the fabliau as "a comic tale of lower bourgeois life, involving trickery, often obscene, with a coarse sexual motive," and, more broadly, speaking of the comic tales in general, he stresses what I have called their essential amorality: "The common understanding of author and reader is that there are no values, secular or religious, more important than survival and the satisfaction of appetite" (*The Canterbury Tales*, pp. 166, 167). Moreover, the fabliaux in *The Canterbury Tales* rely on one plot: the older husband is duped by his younger or more sexual wife and her younger lover. The humor (and/or crudity) lies in how this is achieved. The injection of children as significant characters into such a plot would

- alter the formal structure and would complicate the amoral compact Pearsall describes as having been made between author and reader. Significantly, Chaucer seems to think children appropriate to tales which are highly moral and which investigate and affirm Christian values.
9. Robert Worth Frank, Jr., "*The Canterbury Tales* III: Pathos," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge, 1986), 143-158, at p. 149.
 10. C. David Benson's note to VI.207-53 in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. 903, points out that Chaucer changes Virginia's death from its depiction in his sources. Originally Virginia is beheaded publicly under extreme pressure, while Chaucer makes the beheading private and deliberate.
 11. As Brian S. Lee points out in "The Position and Purpose of *The Physician's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 22 (1987), 141-160, readers of *The Physician's Tale* have had difficulty with "the appalling facility with which Virginius decapitates his daughter sooner than allow her to forfeit her chastity" (p. 142), but he argues that Chaucer's intention is to make the reader face an "intellectual dilemma" (p. 157), the choice between chastity and death.
 12. Jill Mann, "Parents and Children in *The Canterbury Tales*," in *Literature in Fourteenth Century England*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Tbingen, 1983), pp. 165-83.
 13. Mann, "Parents and Children," p. 165.
 14. Francis Lee Utley, "Five Genres in *The Clerk's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 6 (1972), 198-228, at p. 224.
 15. Sister Rose Marie, "Chaucer and His Mayde Bright," *The Commonweal* 33 (1940), 225-27.
 16. James I. Wimsatt, "The Blessed Virgin and the Two Coronations of Griselda," *Mediaevalia* 6 (1980), 187-207, at p. 192.
 17. Mann, "Parents and Children," p. 177.
 18. See also Sherman Hawkins, "Chaucer's Prioress and the Sacrifice of Praise," *Journal of English and German Philology* 63 (1964), 599-624; Summer Ferris, "The Mariology of the *Prioress's Tale*," *Benedictine Review* 32 (1981), 232-254; and Beverly Boyce, "Our Lady According to Geoffrey Chaucer: Translation and Collage," *Florilegium* 9 (1987), 147-54.
 19. Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 248; Frank, "*Canterbury Tales* III," p. 154.
 20. Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales*, p. 248.
 21. Wilhelm Schneemelcher and Edgar Hennecke, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1959), pp. 404-8.
 22. According to Montagu Rhodes James, in his edition *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1969), the infancy gospel *Pseudo-Matthew* was "the principal vehicle by which . . . [the infancy stories] were known to the Middle Ages and the principle source of inspiration to the artists and poets of the centuries from the twelfth to the fifteenth" (79). Many of the stories regarding Jesus as a child have to do with miracles He performs, sometimes cruel ones, to demonstrate His power and His special status and to indicate to His parents that the usual parent/child relationship is, in their case, reversed. For example, in Chapter XVIII Joseph, Mary and Jesus come to a cave inhabited by dragons. Jesus subdues the dragons and informs His astonished parents, "Fear not, neither conceive that I am a child, for I always was and am a perfect man, and it is necessary that all the beasts of the forest should grow tame before me" (75).
 23. All quotations from the lyrics are from *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. T. Davies (Evanston, 1963). "The Mother and her Son on the Cross," p. 86.
 24. "Mary Suffers with her Son," *Medieval English Lyrics*, p.119.
 25. "The Mother and her Son on the Cross," *Medieval English Lyrics*, p. 87.
 26. "Mary Complains to Other Mothers," *Medieval English Lyrics*, p. 211.
 27. All quotations from the drama are from *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Atlanta, 1975).
 28. *Herod the Great*, in *Medieval Drama*, pp. 448, 449.
 29. *Christ's Death and Burial*, in *Medieval Drama*, p. 585.
 30. *Passion Play I*, in *Medieval Drama*, p. 519.
 31. *The Scourging*, in *Medieval Drama*, p. 564.