

**Textuality, Subjectivity, and Violence:**  
Theorizing the Figure of the Child in Middle English Literature

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The Corporation of London's *Letter Book G* (fol. ccxcix) records the following event: on Monday, 21 March 1373, a certain Alice de Salesbury was convicted of kidnapping a minor child, Margaret, the daughter of London grocer and citizen, John Oxwyke, in the Ropery. After stealing the child, de Salesbury reportedly stripped the child "that she might not be recognized by her family" and carried her away. The record calls Alice a beggar, and she kidnapped and disguised Margaret Oxwyke so the child "might go begging with the same Alice, and gain might be made thereby." For this crime, the mayor and aldermen sentenced de Salesbury to stand at the thewe, the London pillory for women, for one hour.<sup>1</sup>

This briefly noted incident marks the intersection of several of late-medieval London's socio-political hierarchies, particularly those preoccupied with issues of gender and class--and I would add to that list age and family. These hierarchies operate across several registers. First, economic concerns, defined both by wealth and by the classical "oikonomia" or "rule of the household," are engaged here, for the Oxwyke child is transmuted through dress and disguise from her position in a wealthy family into a new relationship with a false mother, for whose profit she will beg. Second, discipline and social control become evident in that the child, though kidnapped, is successfully returned to her parents, and the captured kidnapper is forced to submit silently to public humiliation and punishment at the thewe, thereby reestablishing the conventional social and familial order. Third, because an official interpretation of the event is transcribed into the legal discourse of the city archives of London, the account is prey to the slippery operations of textuality. Seen as a whole, these three registers--the economic, the legal, and the textual--form the coordinates within which questions of personal identity and individual subjectivity arise, for the child's previous identity as a grocer's daughter, momentarily threatened and transformed into that of a common beggar-child, dissipates in the wake of the kidnapping, prior to her successful return to her original status in the Oxwyke family. The cultural order of late medieval London is thereby sustained by a narrative that shows the identity of Margaret Oxwyke to be malleable for a variety of purposes, both legitimate and illicit. At the same time, the *Letter Book G* account constitutes Alice de Salesbury as an undesirable underclass beggar-woman in need of control and reinforces the socially sanctioned position of the London grocer, John Oxwyke.<sup>2</sup>

As presented in the *Letter Book G* account, Margaret Oxwyke is a child under threat and subject to a variety of violent forces, and I'd like to begin this paper with an analogous observation: when children are featured in Middle English literature, they are often abused in some way--regularly threatened, violated, killed, or already dead. The dream-vision Pearl is structured around a grieving father's dialogue with his deceased daughter. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Virginia is sacrificed in the *Physician's Tale*, and the young martyr of the *Prioress's Tale* has his throat cut. The children of the mystery plays--in the *Massacre of the Innocents* plays, for example--are likewise sacrificed or, as in the *Abraham and Isaac* plays, put under the threat of death. We could add many other texts to this list: the *Clerk's*, *Man of Law's*, and *Monk's Tales*; hagiographies; romances; and numerous individual episodes in story collections like the *Gesta Romanorum* and *An Alphabet of Tales*.

The relentlessly violent representation of children in Middle English texts presents a theoretical challenge and raises a series of questions: Why are children represented as the subject (and object) of such violence, and what social, ideological, or textual purpose does the violated child serve? Put more precisely, if children are so incessantly associated with violence, what role does violence play in the constitution of child as subject, what conditions give rise to this violence, and what are its ultimate effects? What, then, is the function in Middle English literature of the

violated child, both as a social phenomenon and as a theoretical problem for readers of Middle English literature? Let me venture an initial answer. In these accounts of violence against children, whether literary or historical, the child as subject is effectively erased; that is, the child's subjectivity is voided by powerful socio-political forces, often embodied in specific adults, parents, or parent-surrogates, who usurp the child's subjectivity for their own purposes. I will argue that this usurpation of the child's subjectivity is essentially a form of violence sited at the intersection of physical or social violence, on one hand, and textualized or discursive violence, on the other. Furthermore, the tools of contemporary literary criticism--namely historicism, psychoanalysis, and to a lesser degree deconstruction--likewise are characterized by profound ambivalence toward the figure of the child. A more fully-fledged response to this problem of textuality, subjectivity, and the violent representation of children in Middle English literature begins, first, by articulating the hermeneutic of violence that structures these violent representations and, second, by deconstructing the culturally opaque dualism of youth versus age and its more specific manifestation in the seemingly natural relationship of parent to child. These analyses will open to a discussion of resistance within the ideology of violence in Middle English representations of children and will suggest the possibility for "childishness" as a mode of resistance.

Although not immediately and markedly a representation of physical violence, the account of the Oxwyke kidnapping reveals an underlying structure or hermeneutic of violence. As the codified transcription of an official legal source, the anecdote of the kidnapping creates and maintains a symbolic order, for social practices that reveal a potential for danger to the social order are codified in proportion to their possible threat, according to Bourdieu, who argues that such codification likewise manifests symbolic violence.<sup>3</sup> Within this framework of codification and symbolic violence, the figure of Margaret Oxwyke can be seen as a signifier in a "scriptural economy," to use de Certeau's phrase, wherein, on the one hand, "living beings are 'packed into a text' (in the sense that products are canned or packed), transformed into signifiers of rules (a sort of 'intextuation') and, on the other hand, the reason or *Logos* of society becomes flesh (an incarnation)."<sup>4</sup> In a legal narrative such as the account of Margaret Oxwyke's kidnapping, persons are transformed into textual functions and, at the same time, embody the symbolic regimes of that culture. The functions of "intextuation" and "incarnation," through which subjects are abstracted from the material conditions of existence and transformed into signifiers, illustrate that in a hermeneutic or "rhetoric of violence" the "(semiotic) relation of the social to the discursive"<sup>5</sup> is ultimately a two-way street in which violence can be represented through symbolic practices and forms of representation themselves can be seen as orders of violence.<sup>6</sup> Through her simultaneous "intextuation" in legal discourse and "incarnation" of the law, Margaret Oxwyke is violently rendered into a signifier in the "scriptural economy" of late medieval London, and the economic, disciplinary, and discursive subtexts of that symbolic economy intersect to condition the subjectivity of the disguised child, Margaret Oxwyke.

In the first place, the kidnapping account shows the Oxwyke child to be a commodity whose currency the kidnapping exploits, and her seizure may be seen as a struggle between competing economic agencies, for Margaret functions as a profit-earning commodity both in the London power structure and for the kidnapper de Salesbury. Children could inherit property and wealth in late-medieval London, usually through the custom of legitim, whereby a testator divided his or her wealth into thirds (usually one third for the spouse, one third for the children, and one third for pious causes and the good of the testator's soul).<sup>7</sup> Until a young girl married, at which time control of any land or wealth would pass to her husband, she could gather a substantial economic base, but abduction of a ward, usually termed "raptus" or "rapuit et abduxit" in the legal records, was a common abuse, for a guardian could legally profit from the sale of the wardship, from the revenue derived from the ward's lands, and from the arrangement of the ward's marriage.<sup>8</sup> Although the London Court of Orphans sought to discourage the economic exploitation of orphans and wards of both sexes, such abuse did occur,<sup>9</sup> but even with such protections, "the medieval child, whether orphaned or not, was a commodity, an item of present value and potentially increased future value whose own particular desires were subordinated to the interests of his overlords," according to Jerome Kroll. The child carried the wealth as an heir but was largely "powerless to enter into the negotiations."<sup>10</sup> For her family, Margaret is the bearer of wealth and a potential legitimate heir. For de Salesbury, the kidnapping is a form of illicit economic reproduction and an attempt to "apprentice" Margaret as a beggar or secure her as a ward. In either case, for Margaret Oxwyke, "being" is measured by being acted upon, by being cut loose from relations of economic and political power to be their currency.

Second, the threatened loss of the child creates the potential for social and familial disruption, but at the same time that Margaret Oxwyke becomes a kind of convertible currency, her kidnapping allows the law to carry out its stabilizing function and enables various social hierarchies to perpetuate themselves. The kidnapping account is very specific in its description of her kidnapping: de Salesbury "had carried her away, and stripped her of her clothes, that

she might not be recognized by her family." <sup>11</sup> The emphasis on clothing and disguise is noteworthy, for clothing created an important indicator of social distinction, separating common from respectable men and women in late-medieval London. Elaborate adornment was reserved for women of high status, while the social status of common women was to be reflected in their plain clothing. <sup>12</sup> By disguising the wealthy merchant's daughter as an anonymous young beggar, de Salesbury positions herself as a false mother to Margaret Oxwyke. So, the kidnapping threatens the social and familial order in a variety of ways: it deprives Margaret Oxwyke of her socially sanctioned subjectivity; it strips the Oxwyke family of their daughter; and it displaces the well-born child into the realm of the common folk. Therefore, stripping and disguising the child confounds the readily recognizable sumptuary demarcations that identify social standing in London. Furthermore, the account of the kidnapping also notes Alice de Salesbury's improper use of dress in order to reveal its subversive potential and to counteract it, thereby reasserting the conventional social hierarchy and reinscribing the Oxwyke father-daughter relationship. Thus, because Margaret embodies de Certeau's "logos of society" as the child of a wealthy citizen, the threat of violence against her mobilizes and reproduces the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal relationships of male over female, upper over lower class, and age over youth. In the account from *Letter Book G*, only the identity of John Oxwyke, wealthy member of London's elite, remains stable and acts as the criterion against which the others are fixed. Finally, the kidnapping yields not only economic and disciplinary results, it also initiates textual and discursive production in a gendered literary activity. According to de Certeau, social strategies, such as we see exercised in this legal narrative, assert the priority of place over time, and these customs attempt to master time and render it neutral by observation, description, and by the delineation of a specific, identifiable place. <sup>13</sup> In the legal account, the place of the crime--the Ropery--is a vaguely identified street or district, and the brief duration of the punishment, only one hour, is downplayed, but Alice de Salesbury's discipline is clearly tied to a specific site, the thewe. Thus, circumscribing the place of punishment likewise delimits the subjectivity of the accused and reduces her identity to that of only a criminal. The law, in effect, inscribes itself onto the body of Alice de Salesbury through public discipline and the open proclamation and posting of the offense at the site of punishment, which is both her body and London's thewe. <sup>14</sup> Though the etymology of the word is obscure, "thewe" initially denoted a "custom, usage, [or] general practice," or more specifically "a good quality or habit; a virtue; [and] courteous and gracious action," but the term also quickly became applied specifically to the apparatus of punishment for women. <sup>15</sup> "Thewe," therefore, marks both the place of punishment, the practice of discipline, and the fantasy of reform through violence: punishment at the thewe results in "thewe," or proper behavior. <sup>16</sup> Furthermore, correction at the thewe entailed posting an account of the offense above the condemned, who was to remain silent during the ordeal. As a result, de Salesbury "incarnated" through the law is mutely subjected to public spectacle and is herself inscribed as a juridical text; her identity is reduced to her offense. In this *Letter Book G* account, discursive production, whether spoken or written, is reserved only for the (masculine) law, in which bodily punishment, subjective co-optation, and textual production are equated. By being openly punished at the thewe, de Salesbury is transformed into a legal document whose text can be read by all of London, and as a juridical text, she functions both as a warning against transgressing the law and as a testimony to the law's ability to enforce social norms. These cultural operations, whereby bodies are translated into texts and texts are embodied, are structured by the violence of rhetoric which so marks Middle English representations of children and conditions their subjectivity. Accordingly, if we follow de Certeau in saying that "the blank page," in this case the legal record, delimits "a place of production for the subject," <sup>17</sup> we can see the account of the Oxwyke kidnapping as a chronicle of struggle between competing socio-political and discursive agencies whose conflict engenders Margaret Oxwyke's subjectivity. On one hand, Alice de Salesbury fabricates a new subjectivity for the girl, that of a beggar child. On the other, by recording the incident into the legal record, the girl's identity is (re)confirmed: she is Margaret, the daughter of John Oxwyke, and not an anonymous beggar-child. Yet the two operations are intimately linked. Margaret Oxwyke is simultaneously discursively "intextuated" at the moment she is inscribed into the record of law and is subjectively "incarnated" as a result of an action that seeks to erase and then co-opt her identity. Put more directly, the Oxwyke child's identity can be stabilized and reasserted only because it has been put under threat. The ideological efficacy of representations of violence lies in such rhetorization. In a sense, textualizing violence sustains it as a threat, continually repeating it, without ever having to actualize it, and this repetition articulates an essential effect of discursive violence and its relation to social structures: violence sustains hierarchy as it threatens to negate it; it reproduces social structures as it threatens them; and as discourse, it is endlessly supplementing and supplementable.

At this point, it is tempting to ascribe to the kidnapping a monolithic Althusserian reading wherein Margaret Oxwyke is irresistibly "interpellated" or "hailed" by overwhelming ideological forces. In such a reading, the subject is relentlessly shaped by social, economic, political, educational, religious, and other ideological forces, leaving little

room for resistance.<sup>18</sup> Yet precisely because the "subject" is not coterminous with the "person," "individual," or "agent," the interpellated subject may be "dis-cerned," according to Paul Smith in *Discerning the Subject*.<sup>19</sup> Drawing from two obscure English verbs--"to cern" ('to accept an inheritance or a patrimony') and "to cerne" ('to encircle or to enclose')--Smith notes the tendency of academic discourse to rigidly circumscribe or "to cern" the subject, which he describes as the simultaneous tendency of theoretical inquiry to abstract the "subject/individual" from "the real conditions of its existence" and to severely restrict "the definition of the human agent" to that of the "subject" alone (xxx). Against such a limited and limiting view of subjectivity, Smith's project is "an attempt to dis-cern the 'subject,' and to argue that the human agent exceeds the 'subject'" as theorized by current analyses (xxx, emphasis Smith's). Because notions of subjectivity have been limited by the theoretical questions that inform their analyses, Smith writes that "resistance to ideology can be glimpsed as soon as the 'subject' is no longer theorized as an abstract or cerned entity," and therefore, resistance is no longer outside of ideology but is actually "a veritable product of ideological interpellation" (xxx). Smith elaborates that a locus of resistance is possible within ideology because the "subject/individual" is always situated at the shifting intersection of rival social and discursive formations, and as a result of occupying multiple "subject-positions" simultaneously rather than a single position exclusively, "a person is not simply determined and dominated by the ideological pressures of any overarching discourse or ideology but is also the agent of discernment" who chooses to engage or not to engage the ideological scripts available (xxxiv-xxxv, emphasis Smith's). The Pearl-child of the famous elegiac dream-vision offers this kind of resistance against the insistent, fetishistic interpellation ventured by her father, who attempts to fix her subjectivity through theological and courtly discourse. By maintaining her contention that she is actually a child "who knew neither Pater nor Creed" and not a courtly paramour or theological abstraction, she effectively maintains her childish subjectivity within her father's discourse and "dis-cerns" herself from within it, leading the dreamer into a renewed understanding of their father-daughter relationship and, as a result, a full awareness of his loss.<sup>20</sup>

However, the tools offered by contemporary literary-critical theory, rather than facilitating such discernment and ideological resistance, have in fact often themselves served to "cern" or rigidly enclose and evacuate the child of subjectivity and to reproduce the marginalized status of children. Children, in short, have rarely been the subject of study in Middle English literature, although they appear prominently in many significant texts. When we look for a studied consideration of the child in Middle English literature either in theoretical or literary terms, we are instead faced with a series of evacuations. I'd like here to suggest briefly--and far too schematically--an outline of those literary-critical erasures.

First, until the relatively recent work of historians like Barbara Hanawalt and legal scholars like Sue Sheridan Walker, Elaine Clark, and Richard Helmholz, Philippe Ariès's thesis has dominated critical thinking about children in the Middle Ages.<sup>21</sup> Ariès argues that "[i]n medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist" (p. 129) and although he demurs that "this is not to suggest that children were neglected, forsaken or despised" (p. 129), he likewise insists that the Middle Ages had no idea of childhood per se because "[t]oo many of them died" (p. 39). As a result of this "demographic wastage" (p. 40), the Middle Ages were indifferent to childhood as concept and a distinct phase of life. In short, because children were in some sense expendable, they were not important ultimately to their families or to their culture. I would argue that Ariès's thesis remains the common assumption among many readers of Middle English literature, and though Ariès effectively has been put to rest by recent historical scholarship, literary critics have served unconsciously to advance Ariès by their inattention to the rather prominent status of children in many of these texts.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theorizing can also be seen in terms of their effacement of the child's subjectivity. When Freud abandoned the seduction theory, which held that the neuroses of adulthood stem from actual physical abuse suffered in childhood, he formulated the problematic Oedipal complex, which found that the (male) child harbors violent fantasies to displace the (male) parent in a bid for the affections of the mother.<sup>23</sup> In this crucial theoretical move away from the seduction theory and the violence against children it suggested, Freud dismissed reports of abuse against the child and instead found that the child is the perpetrator of violence, either in fantasy or in action, against the parent.<sup>24</sup> So for Freud, childhood violence recalled by the adult actually was a symptom of the child's own violent desire. In short, the report of violence against the child is dismissed and is theoretically transformed in the Oedipal complex into an over-arching narrative of childhood development and a widespread cultural signifier.<sup>25</sup> In Lacan's well-known narrative of the mirror stage, the infant, who is no more than an uncoordinated mass of drives and limbs, sees in the mirror the unified image of a coordinated whole. So, the child's first vision of self is actually a misrecognition, opening the "split-subject" whose breach is sutured through the process



of signification.<sup>26</sup> The rhetorical violence of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory therefore operates at the metacritical level, for both theorists expropriate the position of the child and "cern" its subjectivity, definitively interpret the child's internal operations from a position of magisterial superiority, and then use this usurped position as a basis for their own theorizing.

From a different perspective, such theorizing that abstracts or "cerns" the child in a sense also "colonizes" the position of the child. In this regard, the child might therefore be seen as an internal Other, a silent interior colony within medieval culture, which is constructed and deployed for a variety of ideological purposes.<sup>27</sup> The simultaneously essential yet expendable nature of this childish Other, against whom dominant cultural groups articulate and reproduce themselves, is particularly evident in family narratives, which themselves engage issues of parenting, lineage, and inheritance. The Northampton and the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* plays provide a prime example of the latent violence in "colonizing" the position of the child and the ideological utility of such an appropriation. The Northampton Abraham declares that Isaac must be sacrificed "In counfor [remedy] of al my mys [error]" (line 247) and the Brome Abraham tells Isaac that God has commanded him "To make my sacryfyce wyth thy blood" (line 186).<sup>28</sup> In both cases, the son is threatened for the father's sake, and furthermore, Isaac manifests symptoms characteristic of child abuse by internalizing Abraham's violence as his own fault and by acquiescing dutifully to his father's threat of murder. Both the manifestly violent patriarchal family structure and the supporting theological violence that presents a father ready to murder his son is rationalized as a prefiguration of the eventual salvific death of Jesus on the cross (as the Chester Expositor makes clear in the Chester *Abraham, Melchizedek, and Isaac* play).<sup>29</sup> Because it is necessary for familial, cultural, and theological coherence, violence against the child is accepted when the social end is ideologically justifiable.

Finally, though Paul Smith criticizes Derrida's unwillingness to account for subjectivity, I think deconstruction affords the tools to begin the analysis of the discursive violence proffered in Middle English representations of children. In a provocative passage from *Of Grammatology*, Derrida speculates on the originary relation of language to violence and posits an elliptical three-stage metamorphosis of violence from the textual domain to the physical.<sup>30</sup> First, he asserts that violence begins in language, in the very act of naming, for "the originary violence of language . . . consists of inscribing within difference" (p. 112). Second, the initial violence of naming leads to logocentrism and the "reparatory" violence of the supplement, for the metaphysics of presence continue to mask the underlying violence of naming. Third, violence continues from its first moment in "the violence of the arche-writing, the violence of difference, of classification, and of the system of appellations" (p. 110) ultimately toward the possibility of actual physical violence or, in Derrida's words, "what is called evil, war, indiscretion, rape" (p. 112). Finally, approaching Smith's critique of the "cerned" or ideologically and theoretically limited subject, Derrida goes on to suggest a fourth dimension of violence, a "violence of reflection" that locates "identity as the abstract moment of the concept" (p. 112). In effect, Derrida describes a circuit of violence that begins in language and ends in the theoretical "cerning" or "abstract moment" of the subject. The conditions for violence are thereby established in language, in the act of naming and categorizing, and are sustained by the hierarchical binaries (male/female, culture/nature, citizen/foreigner, self/other) that characterize the logocentrism of western culture.

Although it is clear that the account of Margaret Oxwyke's kidnapping narrativizes the conflict of economic, legal, and textual agencies, these cultural registers are bolstered by a further unstated opposition, one that has generally been ignored: the underlying dynamic of age and youth, particularly in one of its most common forms, the seemingly natural relation of parent/adult and child. The cultural constructs of age/youth and parent/child need to be examined in their own right, apart, for example, from the overlapping category of male/female. In that conventional hierarchy, maleness conveys power and production in the sphere of labor while femaleness conveys passivity and reproduction in the domain of the household. The child, however, sits at the crossroads of these conceptions as the carrier of (largely) male wealth and economic power and as the domestic product of (largely) female reproductive labor. The naturalized assumption that family position is determinative for identity is questioned in the account of the Oxwyke kidnapping, making that seemingly fixed and natural relationship appear to be rhetorical and contingent. This rhetorical and social slippage is immanent in the semantic field of the term "child," which denotes both fixity and fluidity. First, to be a "child" denotes a relatively fixed structure of relation, as in parent or parent-surrogate to child, or metaphorically as a child of God or the state. In this sense the adult dominates the child. Second, to be a "child" is to be childish, transgressive, and capricious, and by testing boundaries, the "childish" defy accepted social and behavioral standards. In this sense the childish test the culture. Margery Kempe's strategy of resistance, viewed by many of her

contemporaries as bizarre, might be called "childish" in its extreme behavior, particularly in her crying, her trembling, and her inability to speak during the depth of her ecstatic experiences, and her self-proclaimed status as a child--or more precisely a "daughter"--of God enables her to withstand repeated persecution and provides her a framework for understanding and articulating her own experience. "Child," then, denotes a semantic field of both fixity and subordination, on one hand, and transgressivity and agency, on the other, and a childish opposition to ideological domination and a playful disregard for hierarchy may offer a conceptual framework for establishing a mode of resistance within contesting ideological formations.

Extending this analysis of "childishness" suggests that the seemingly natural conception of age, particularly its specific articulations of "age" and "youth" or determining what is "old" or "young," is likewise socially constructed and historically determined.<sup>31</sup> In trying to account for the cultural influence of the story of Oedipus, Teresa de Lauretis wonders if Sophocles' artistry or Freud's paradigm is the more important and muses whether it is because ". . . that, like the best of stories and better than most, the story of Oedipus weaves the inscription of violence (and family violence, at that) into the representation of gender."<sup>32</sup> I would argue that the ancient narrative of Oedipus also inscribes the representation of age into a story of gender, sexuality, and family violence, for the Sphinx's seemingly insoluble riddle primarily concerns the paradox of aging and of retaining identity or sameness within temporal difference. So, this unfixed dimension of age is also at the core of the Sphinx's riddle to Oedipus, and age, like language, both differs and defers. "Age," the subject and like language, has been theoretically "cerned," yet it instances the operation of *différance*. In other words, age, like discourse, is imbued with what Paul de Man would call "a rhetoric of temporality" wherein the relationship of subject and object is located in a "conflict between a conception of the self seen in its authentically temporal predicament and a defensive strategy that tries to hide from this negative self-knowledge."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, fixing age or defining what is young or old, like essentializing language or "cerning" the subject, requires a particular interpretive, and therefore political, commitment which has traditionally favored age over youth and parent over child.

If we grant that age, like language, is fluid and unfixed per se, then theoretically "cerning" the child, that is, fastening the child into a particular subject position, is analogous to fixing the motility of the sign in the play of discourse. The *Physician's Tale* instances this intersection of textuality and temporality with the operation of violence in subjectivity, for the difference in age between an adult (Virginius) and a child (Virginia) also indicates a dissymmetry of power. Simultaneously, Virginia is situated at the crossroads of a variety of contending discourses that emerge and interact as the tale progresses.<sup>34</sup> In the first discourse, Nature has imprinted her with "excellent beauty" (VI.7) which cannot be counterfeit, and in a second, the Physician's advice to governesses attempts to "cern" or discipline the natural proclivities of the young. In a third, because of Apius's counterfeit juridical claim of paternity, Virginius likewise faces a textual dilemma that challenges his natural relationship to Virginia through the courts. In a fourth, Virginia invokes the biblical narrative of Jephthah's daughter as both a criticism and rationalization of her father's actions. At this uneasy discursive juncture of nature and nurture, law and theology, Virginia is killed by her own father, who turns against parental and natural affection and instead privileges his commitment to a patriarchal, honor-based culture. Thus, the claims of Apius's counterfeit "bille" (VI.166) efface the natural prerogatives of paternity, and youthful Virginia, who reads like Nature's own courtesy book, is subjugated at the hands of her father. The rootlessness of the sign and its analog in the transgressivity of the child is also an overriding concern in the *Prioress's Tale*. The tale begins with the Prioress's nostalgia for a preverbal unity with Mary and ends--or actually has trouble ending--because the "litel clergeon" continues singing even after his death. In the same way the child in the *Prioress's Tale* traverses clearly established social boundaries by walking through the town's Jewish quarter, so his language persists even after his murder. Violence is the ultimate "fix" to such discursive transgression and offers a solution to the intrinsically unfixed dimension of the child's subjectivity. Violence infuses both social and symbolic practices, and these tales demonstrate that the relation of rhetorical to physical violence is again a two-way street. At the same time the figure of the child may be seen as a transgressive supplement in the chain of signification, the enunciation of violence against children, whether in language or in practice, whether in the *Canterbury Tales* or in *Letter Book G*, provides a closure to this play of *différance* and stabilizes the cultural hierarchies of age, gender, class, and cultural identity.

I have been using this account of the kidnapping of Margaret Oxwyke by Alice de Salesbury as the basis for theorizing the conflicted nature of the figure of the child in Middle English literature and culture, and by doing so I am implicating myself in the very hermeneutic of violence I have sought to describe. As Armstrong and Tennenhouse

intimate, the "idea of violence as representation. . . . implies that whenever we speak for someone else" we also impose our own idea of order.<sup>35</sup> Such theorizing abstracts a child like Margaret Oxwyke out of her historical and material circumstances and again renders the subjectivity of the child malleable for purposes that serve the needs of the adult. However, rather than renouncing theoretical investigations such as these, I hope that articulating the dynamics of textuality, subjectivity, and violence is a step in more becoming conscious of this cultural structure of violence. The historical record shows us that children in the Middle English period were subjected to every form of violence we now recognize; similarly, we know that these children were likewise nurtured and loved. Thus, at the same time the account of the kidnapping narrativizes a complex network of social and discursive violence, it also stands as an exception of sorts to this hermeneutic of violence, for it gives Margaret a name, shows she was counted important to her family, and demonstrates that she was protected. Children have silently carried untold ideological and theoretical freight, so consequently foregrounding the figure of the child will allow, I hope, a kind of resistant reading which both opens fissures in the textual fabric of these Middle English narratives to critical examination and identifies the multiply embedded subject-positions of the child in the ideological system of the text, ultimately to read against that ideological deployment.

## Notes

1. This account is found in *Letter Book G*, circa A.D. 1352-1374, 7: 306 of the *Calendar of the Letter Books of the City of London, A-L (1275-1497)*, 11 vols., ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1899-1912), hereafter cited as *Letter Book*. The incident is also cited in *Memorials of London and London Life, A.D. 1276-1419*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1898), p. 368; hereafter *Riley's Memorials*.
2. Oxwyke variously is called a grocer (as in the account of the kidnapping), a spicer (*Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1327-99* [London, 1891-1916], hereafter *CPR*), and *CPR, 1391-96*, p. 267), and a citizen and apothecary (*CPR, 1388-92*, p. 65). Although Oxwyke is identified by different trade associations in the records, there is no real confusion. Apothecaries sold medicines as well as herbs and spices, and the apothecaries and spicers joined the pepperers in the early fourteenth century to begin the Grocers Company (John Benjamin Heath, *Some Account of the Worshipful Company of Grocers* (London, 1854), pp. 40-41). Oxwyke also was a collector in Dowgate Ward for the office of petty customs beginning in 1369 (Martin M. Crow and Clair Olsen, eds. *Chaucer Life Records* (London, 1966), p. 173; *Letter Book G*, p. 252), and in June 1377 he was appointed to the office of controller of the petty customs for the port of London, an office that provided him with a handsome income (*CPR, 1377-81*, p. 5). He is also listed as a member of the Common Council from Cripplegate during the 1380's factionalism between Brembre and Northampton (*Letter Book H*, pp. 281 and 333). Not only was Oxwyke connected to a wealthy trade guild and to prestigious positions within the city, the records also suggest contact with Chaucer, for they were both controllers in the port of London during overlapping tenures. When Chaucer was controller of the wool custom in the port of London beginning in 1374, Oxwyke was a controller in the office of petty customs from November 1375 (*Chaucer Life Records*, pp. 153-54). The city records are largely silent about Oxwyke until the end of his life, when he was murdered "in his mansion-house at Westchepe" by John de Thorp of York, who was pardoned by the king on May 10, 1393 (*CPR, 1391-96*, p. 267). After Oxwyke's death the guardianship of his son Thomas and the money due to his daughter Petronilla (who was fifteen years old) was entrusted by Mayor John Shadworth to Richard Donyngton, a draper and their stepfather (*Letter Book H*, p. 405-06). Although Margaret Oxwyke is not mentioned again directly in the city records, we find in this same account that Petronilla was "apprenticed to Thomas Lucas, mercer, and Margery his wife." Given that city orphans were often entrusted to relatives, it is possible that Margery Lucas is the Margaret Oxwyke of the 1373 kidnapping.
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Toward A Reflective Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford, 1990), p. 78.
4. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), p. 140.
5. The phrase is from Teresa de Lauretis, "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender," in *Violence and Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse (London, 1989), p. 240.
6. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, "Introduction: Representing Violence, or 'How the West Was Won,'" in *Violence and Representation*, p. 2.
7. For examples of *legitim*, see the *Calendar of Wills Proved and Enrolled in the Court of Husting, London, A.D. 1258-A.D. 1688*, 2 vols., ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London, 1890).
8. See Sue Sheridan Walker, "Common Law Juries and Feudal Marriage Customs in Medieval England: The Pleas of Ravishment," *University of Illinois Law Review* (1984), 705-18.
9. For the Court of Orphans, see Charles Carlton, *The Court of Orphans* (Leicester, 1974). Wardships and orphans were usually entrusted to family members in socage wardships (that is, non-feudal wardships). In the event that such wardships were abused, the mayor and aldermen could transfer the wardship to a respected London citizen. Elaine Clark's two recent articles, "City Orphans and Custody Laws in Medieval England," *American Journal of Legal History* 34 (1990), 168-87, and "The Custody of Children in English Manor Courts," *Law and History Review* 3 (1985), 333-48, detail the quite considerable arrangements made for (usually wealthy) children in the city and in the rural manor.
10. Jerome Kroll, "The Concept of Childhood in the Middle Ages," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 13 (1977), p. 387. There were some protections for wards. Canon law, for example, did not recognize coerced marriages, and wards who married against their guardians' wishes often could pay a fine to avoid further prosecution. For a survey of such issues, see Sue Sheridan Walker, "Wrongdoing and Compensation: The Pleas of Wardship in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century England," *American Journal of Legal History* 9 (1988), 267-307.
11. *Riley's Memorials*, p. 368.
12. The regulation of dress formed a primary means by which the law of late fourteenth century London operated upon bodies to create class and social distinction. A 1351 proclamation of Edward III in *Letter Book F* (fol. ccviii) prohibited "common lewd women" from assuming "the fashion of being clad and attired in the manner and dress of good and noble dames and damsels of the realm," instead requiring them to "go openly with a hood of cloth of ray, single, and with vestments neither trimmed with fur nor yet lined with lining, and without any manner of relief" (*Riley's Memorials*, p. 267). A 1393 proclamation that equated hucksters (women street vendors) and prostitutes likewise stipulates that "any such [common] women" be confined to the Southwerk stews or Cock Lane, London. If found outside those precincts, she risked the "pain of losing and forfeiting the upper garment that she shall be wearing, together with her hood" to the officer or sergeant who found her (*Riley's Memorials*, p. 534). The regulation of dress formed a discernible means both for identifying and controlling "common women," who, although they may have been legitimate vendors, were often identified with prostitutes. Although there is no indication of Alice de Salesbury's marital status, her identification as a street beggar or perhaps even huckster places her in the category of "common women" whose actions were closely watched and carefully regulated in London. A standard treatment of these and related concerns is Frances Elizabeth Baldwin, *Sumptuary Legislation and*



*Personal Regulation in England* (Baltimore, 1926).

13. Bourdieu, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 36.

14. The *Liber Albus*, trans. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1861) specifies punishment at the thewe for being "a common courtesan," a "common receiver of courtesans or bawd," or "a brawler or scold" (pp. 395-96). See Riley's *Memorials*, pp. 319, 367, and 486 for additional accounts of punishment at the thewe.

15. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Thewe," sb.1, 1. and 2.b and "Thewe," sb.2.

16. In discussing the seven virtues, *The Lay Folks Catechism*, ed. Thomas Frederick Simmons and Henry Edward Nolloth, EETS OS 118 (London, 1901), describes "the thre first [virtues], that er heued thewes," which are the heavenly or "cardinal or theological virtues" directed toward God (p. 78, line 382); "The tothir gode thewe and vertue is hope" (p. 78, line 394); and "The third vertue or thew is charite" (p. 80, line 406).

17. Bourdieu, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 134.

18. Louis Althusser's classic essay is "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin, Philosophy, and Other Essays* (London, 1971).

19. See Smith's "Notes on Terminology," in *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1990), xxxiii-xxxv for a discussion of his very detailed and crucially precise definitions of "subject," "individual," "agent," "subject-position," and other key terms. I will indicate the page numbers from Smith parenthetically in the text.

20. My translation of *Pearl*, line 485 from *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*, ed. Andrew Malcom and Ronald Waldron, York Medieval Series, 2nd ser. (Berkeley, 1978).

21. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, 1962); page numbers from Ariès are indicated parenthetically. Ariès's thesis has been challenged most effectively by Barbara Hanawalt in a series of articles and, most notably, in two books, *The Ties That Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (London, 1986) and *Growing Up in Medieval London: The Experience of Childhood in History* (London, 1993). Legal historians Sue Sheridan Walker, Elaine Clark, and Richard Helmholz have also investigated the many protections offered children in late medieval England. In addition to Elaine Clark's and Sue Sheridan Walker's previously cited articles, see Walker's "The Feudal Family and the Common Law Courts: The Pleas Protecting Rights of Wardship and Marriage, c. 1225-1375," *Journal of Medieval History* 14 (1988), 13-31; "Free Consent and Marriage of Feudal Wards in Medieval England," *Journal of Medieval History* 8 (1982), 123-34; "Violence and the Exercise of Feudal Guardianship: The Action of 'Ejectio Custodia'," *American Journal of Legal History* 16 (1972), 320-33; and "Widow and Ward: The Feudal Law of Child Custody in Medieval England," in *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia, 1976), 159-72. A collection of Richard Helmholz's most important articles have been compiled in *Canon Law and the Law of England* (London, 1987).

22. Among the more notable literary treatments of children in Middle English literature are those of F. Xavier Baron, "Children and Violence in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," *Journal of Psychohistory* 6 (1978-79), 77-103; D.S. Brewer, "Children in Chaucer," *Review of English Studies* 5.3 (1974), 52-56; Leslie A. Harris, "Instructional Poetry for Medieval Children," *English Studies* 74 (1993), 124-32; Thomas and Karen K. Jambeck, "Chaucer's Treatise on the Astrolabe: A Handbook for the Medieval Child," *Children's Literature* 3 (1974), 117-22; Charles A. Owen, Jr., "'A Certain Nombre of Conclusiouns': The Nature and Nurture of Children in Chaucer," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981), 60-75; Leah Sinangoglou, "The Christ Child as Sacrifice: A Medieval Tradition and the Corpus Christi Plays," *Speculum* 48 (1973), 491-509; and C.H. Talbot, "Children in the Middle Ages," *Children's Literature* 6 (1977), 17-33.

23. Critiques of the Oedipal complex are numerous and important, particularly those that engage Freud from a feminist perspective. Standard treatments include Jane Gallop, *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, 1982), particularly pp. 56-79 and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), particularly pp. 59-72. For a provocative article that engages feminist psychoanalytic theorizing about the Oedipal complex in relation to literary analysis, see Jerry Aline Fliieger, "Entertaining the Ménéage à Trois: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Literature," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca, 1989), pp. 185-208. For a recent reading of the Oedipal complex and its transmutation in Lacan, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, "The Oedipus Problem in Freud and Lacan," trans. Douglas Brick, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (1994), 267-82.

24. In recounting the analysis of Little Hans, or actually the analysis of Little Hans through his father, Freud summarizes the Oedipal dynamic succinctly: ". . . it became evident that he [Hans] was struggling against wishes which had as their subject the idea of his father being absent (going away on a journey, dying). He regarded his father (as he made all too clear) as a competitor for the favours for his mother, towards whom the obscure foreshadowings of his budding sexual wishes were aimed. Thus he was situated in the typical attitude of a male child towards his parents to which we have given the name of the 'Oedipus complex' and which we regard in general as the nuclear complex of the neuroses," in *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York, 1950), pp. 128-29.

25. Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory is itself the subject of considerable recent controversy. The most publicized attack on Freud's theoretical turn, itself loaded with Oedipal implications, is Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson's *The Assault on Truth: Freud's Abandonment of the Seduction Theory* (New York, 1984). For the argument that Freud actually oscillated between a belief in the actual abuse of children and a notion that narratives of abuse were the products of childhood fantasy, see Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok, "Questions to Freudian Psychoanalysis: Dream Interpretation, Reality, and Fantasy," trans. Nicholas Rand, *Critical Inquiry* 19 (1993), 567-94. Recent popular responses to the growth industry of "repressed memory syndrome" include Richard Ofshe and Ethan Watters, *Making Monsters: False Memories, Psychotherapy, and Sexual Hysteria* (New York, 1994) and Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *The Myth of Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse* (New York, 1994).

26. See especially Lacan's "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," *Écrits: A Selection* (New York, 1977), 1-8.

27. For a discussion of the violent relationship of the dominant classes to various Others, see Lucia Folena, "Figures of Violence: Philologists, Witches, and Stalinistas," in *Violence and Representation*, ed. Armstrong and Tennenhouse, pp. 219-38.

28. Emphasis mine. Citations to the Northampton and the Brome *Abraham and Isaac* plays are from *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman

Davis, EETS SS 1 (London, 1970), pp. 32-42 and 43-57 respectively.

29. Chester 4, the Barbers' *Play of Abraham, Lot, Melchisedek and Abraham and Isaac*, is an elaborate typological dramatization, and it marks the first appearance in the cycle of the Chester Expositor, who gives each of the three Old Testament episodes (Abraham, Lot, and Melchizedek; Abraham and circumcision; and Abraham and Isaac) a figural reading which foreshadows a New Testament fulfillment. The Expositor notes that Abraham's obedience in face of God's command to sacrifice Isaac is a "signification" of Jesus who "was sacrificed one [sic] the rood" (lines 460-67). See R.M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, EETS SS 3 (London, 1974).

30. Citations are from *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976); I have indicated page numbers parenthetically in the text. It is interesting to note that Derrida's brief but suggestive account of the relationship of language to violence occurs in the context of reading L.vi-Strauss's account of teaching the Nambikwara children to write.

31. Although it is beyond the scope of the present paper to examine the "ages of man" material in detail, it is sufficient to note that even these highly emblematic treatments of the life span, which generally mark age in seven year increments, note that such schematization is often only approximate and is based more on physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics than on age per se. See, for example, the description of infants and children in "Liber Sextus" of *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum, A Critical Text*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1975), 1: 291-93.

32. "The Violence of Rhetoric," p. 251. In contrast, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York, 1966), Freud writes, "The sexual interest of children begins by turning, rather, to the problem of where babies come from--the same problem which underlies the question put by the Theban Sphinx--and it is most often raised by egoistic fears on the arrival of a new baby" (p. 318).

33. "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searl (Tallahassee, 1986), p. 210.

34. Citations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston, 1987) and will be indicated in the text by fragment and line number.

35. "Introduction" to *Violence and Representation*, p. 25.