

Language and Perspective in the *Physician's Tale*

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Two recent reviews of criticism of the *Physician's Tale* suggest that a continuing unease exists amongst readers as to how the tale should be apprehended. In the *Variorum* edition of the *Physician's Tale* Helen Corsa reports a 'general indifference to, or devaluation of, the tale'.¹ Then, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, C. David Benson reports that the majority of critics have found the tale 'poorly written and motivated', while some have actually gone on to apologize for its failures as intentional on the part of the poet, functioning to cast an ironic light either on the Physician or on the literary premises of the tale.²

Briefly, the tale concerns a worthy knight called Virginius and his beautiful but chaste daughter, Virginia. A judge called Appius conspires with a fellow called Claudius to have her made a ward of court so that he can possess her, but Virginius, after explaining matters to his daughter, with her willing participation beheads her instead of handing her over. The people rise against Appius, he is imprisoned and commits suicide, and Claudius is exiled. The Physician draws the lesson that whoever sins will be punished, and he urges the audience to forsake sin. In the following link passage the Host observes that the girl's beauty was the cause of her death.

One area of difficulty which has been perceived concerns the appropriateness of this moral tale to the less than moral Physician of the *General Prologue* (ll. 411–44). Without a preceding link passage, there is no immediate context to help explain this choice of tale for the Physician, or the attribution of this tale to the Physician, although various ingenious solutions have been made. A 'dramatic' approach, however, is unsuited to a textual study such as this is,³ and the Physician will be regarded here simply as the narrator. Other areas of difficulty are for the most part associated with some of Chaucer's departures from his evident source materials.

¹A *Variorum Edition of The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, II: *The Canterbury Tales*, Pt 17: *The Physician's Tale*, edited by Helen Storm Corsa (Norman, Oklahoma, 1987), p. 28.

²Edited by Larry D. Benson, third edition (Oxford and New York, 1988), p. 902. All references to Chaucer's works are to this edition.

³The limitations of the dramatic approach to the tales have been discussed recently by C. David Benson, in *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill and London, 1986), especially pp. 3–19.

Notably, a sequence of digressions on the work of Nature and the proper conduct of governesses and parents with those in their charge interrupts the description of Virginia soon after the narrative begins; the relevance of these discourses to the narrative is on the face of it slight, and yet they occupy almost a quarter of the tale. Again, the usual politico-legal context of the action is played down in the narrative, while the effect of events on both Virginius and Virginia is brought to the fore, so that the Physician's final observations on the meaning of his tale, being focused on the figure of politico-legal authority, seem less than adequate.

The present reading of the tale attempts to shed some new light on these problems, and others which have received less attention, through a close study of the language of the text, supported by further consideration of background materials.⁴

The first line of the tale attributes it to Titus Livius. This reference, of course, provides information about Chaucer's sources. It is generally agreed that his account is based primarily on that in Jean de Meun's part of *Le Roman de la rose* (ll. 5589–5685),⁵ which likewise begins with an attribution to Titus Livius (l. 5594), although occasional details suggest a possible acquaintance also with the more extensive Livian material, whether in the original *Ab urbe condita* (3. 44. 1–3. 58. 6) or in a later version of it.⁶ Beyond this, however, the mention of Livy functions within the tale itself. Most obviously, it is the conventional reference to ancient authority which guarantees the worth of what follows; but because Livy was, and is, well known as the author of an important history of Rome, the reference further insists on the historicity of the events related. This particular point is taken up later and will be seen to be one element in the tale's exploration of changing perspectives in narrative. It also, incidentally, provides an implicit identification of the setting, as pre-Christian Rome, which is otherwise left unspecified.

Apart from citing Livy as authority, the first lines of the tale are devoted to introducing Virginius by name and establishing him as an eminent and respected man in the community:

⁴Surveys of the scholarship and criticism are provided by Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 901–02, and, more extensively, by Corsa, *The Physician's Tale*, pp. 3–41.

⁵Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, 5 vols, edited by Ernest Langlois, Société des anciens textes français (Paris, 1914–24).

⁶*Titi Livi ab urbe condita*, I: *Libri I–V*, edited by Robert Maxwell Ogilvie (Oxford, 1974). There is some doubt, however, whether Chaucer would have been likely to have used the original; he might, rather, have had recourse to the mid-fourteenth-century French translation of Pierre Bersuire, or perhaps some other version of Livy's account. For a summary of the debate see Corsa, *The Physician's Tale*, pp. 4–5.

Ther was, as telleth Titus Livius,
A knyght that called was Virginius,
Fulfuld of honour and of worthynesse,
And strong of freendes, and of greet richesse. (ll. 1–4)

The next line goes on to introduce his daughter, left unnamed at this stage, and his wife, who remains unnamed throughout: 'This knyght a doghter hadde by his wyf (l. 5). The *doghter* is the direct object of the transitive verb *hadde*, an indispensable part of the clause, but carrying meaning only in the role of a possession of the *knyght*. The *wyf* is referred to in an adjunct, where her role is that of a mere instrument. The arrangement of these first few lines foregrounds Virginius as the figure whose story may be expected to be the primary focus of the tale and to consist of a testing of the qualities attributed to him initially (ll. 3–4). His daughter, the syntax suggests, may also have a story of her own, but it would be one controlled and contained by his story. And his wife, it appears, will have no story of her own, but will be featured incidentally if at all. The syntax raises expectations about the structure of the following narrative, and part of an audience's interest will lie in discovering whether those expectations are to be met or foiled.

The daughter's beauty provides the way into her own story, where she takes on the role of subject rather than object (l. 7), but immediately the narrator pauses to imagine how the goddess Nature would boast of her achievement in creating this beautiful girl:

Fair was this mayde in excellent beautee
Aboven every wight that man may see;
For Nature hath with sovereyn diligence
Yformed hire in so greet excellence,
As though she wolde seyn, 'Lo! I, Nature,
Thus kan I forme and peynte a creature'. (ll. 7–12)

Within the digression Virginia is again the object, and in collocation with the concept Nature is referred to only as a *creature* (ll. 12, 34) among *creatures* (ll. 21, 27).

The allegorical action does not have the actuality of the literal action; it takes place in the speaker's imagination ('as though'), and thus enjoys a status like that of a dream. The digression runs to thirty lines (ll. 9–38), most of them in the direct speech of Nature, with a rhetorically elevated style, so that Nature's role becomes prominent; yet the passage begins only as a subordinate clause introduced by the subordinating conjunction *for*, a mere adjunct to the principal clause which precedes

it. A tension is thus created as the subordinate consideration acquires end-focus and comes to dominate the main consideration; the Host, indeed, retains a strong impression of the importance of this passage in unlocking the meaning of the tale (ll. 294–96). But the fact remains that the syntactic hierarchy again encodes the basic narrative hierarchy. The principal clause contains information (about the girl's beauty) which will prove essential to the stories of father, daughter, and judge, whereas the information contained in the subordinate clause and its subsequent attachments does not affect the progress of those stories.⁷ The transition into allegorical action to comment on a facet of the literal action opens up *possibilities* for speculation about the meaning of the literal action; but because the allegorical action does not intersect with the literal action, there is no *necessity* for the literal sequence of events to be interpreted in the light of such speculation. That the ideas expressed in allegorical form have potential rather than essential implications for the literal narrative is confirmed as the narrator interrupts the allegorical action to indicate again that it exists only in the realms of the hypothetical: 'Thus semeth me that Nature wolde seye' (l. 29). The allegorical account is then resumed and sustained for eight lines (ll. 31–38) after a brief statement in literal narrative that the girl was fourteen years old (l. 30).

From the account of her outer beauty the narrative moves to an account of her inner virtue: 'And if that excellent was hire beautee, / A thousand foold moore vertuous was she' (ll. 39–40). The two topics are juxtaposed in balanced lines, but virtue is given the more important place, and not merely in that its degree is 'a thousand foold moore'. The girl's beauty is now referred to only in a subordinate clause, but her virtue is referred to in a principal clause, which follows and brings the short sentence to a head. The subjects of the two clauses are counterpointed by the double inversion and the shared rhyme. In the first clause, *hire beautee* is *excellent*; in the second, *she* is *vertuous*. It has been established in the preceding passage that her *excellent beautee* (l. 7) is the achievement of a force outside herself, not at all the result of her own endeavour; whereas in the following passage it will be made clear that her *vertu* (ll. 54, 61) is the result of her own endeavour, that it is *she* and not some external force who is responsible for it. The principal manifestation of her virtue is her chastity, and 'As wel in goost as body chast was

⁷A reading that is thematic rather than structural could, of course, find the digression on Nature to have as much significance as any other part of the tale; indeed, the paradox of an important statement being located in an apparent afterthought might be seen as directing all the more attention to it. In Jerome Mandel's reading, for instance, this passage has a key role in establishing the images (art and fraud) in terms of which the central theme of governance will be explored: 'Governance in the *Physician's Tale*', *Chaucer Review*, 10 (1976), 316–25.

she' (l. 43). In its immediate context this line functions to emphasize the perfection of her chastity, but it is also a statement that there are two kinds of chastity; and whether or not bodily chastity should be identified with spiritual chastity emerges as an issue of some importance as the tale unfolds.

At one further point the narrator returns briefly to the allegorical mode, noting that Bacchus has no power to incite Venus in the girl's life (ll. 58–60). In the matter of virtue, she makes her own choices, and these supernatural beings, represented linguistically at the allegorical level, have no power to act without her consent.

The entire account of Virginia appears to have been Chaucer's own invention. Jean de Meun makes no explicit mention of her beauty or her virtue, and Livy refers to them only fleetingly (3. 44. 4): Appius finds her excelling in beauty (*forma excellentem*) and everything she does controlled by modesty (*pudore saeptā*).

From the lengthy account of Virginia the narrator proceeds to a digression on governesses and parents, in which he addresses these two groups and urges them to take good care of those in their charge (ll. 72–92, 93–104). The former passage may seem difficult in view of the narrator's subsequent observation that the girl of whom he has been speaking needed no governess because she took good care of her own morality (ll. 105–06). As the passage proceeds, however, the gender of the guardians changes as the narrator points out that in some cases a guardian may act like a *thief* (l. 83) with *his* lecherousness (ll. 83–84), or like a *traitour* (l. 89: conventionally masculine), with *traitour* amplified by *adnominatio* on *tresons* and *bitrayseth* in the concluding remark: 'Of alle tresons sovereyn pestilence / Is whan a wight bitrayseth innocence' (ll. 91–92). A point of reference is thus established for judging the conduct of the would-be guardian Appius. The latter passage in the digression addresses *fadres* and *moodres* (l. 93) and establishes a similar point of reference with regard to Virginius. The narrator then goes on to make the point that, 'Under a shepherde softe and necligent / The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb torent' (ll. 101–02). The wolf as the man who preys on innocent women has been a standard image from the Classical past to the present day. Ovid, for instance, uses it of Tereus as he rapes Philomela, in *Metamorphoses* (IV. 527–28),⁸ and of the young Tarquinius as he rapes Lucretia, in *Fasti* (2. 799–800).⁹ Chaucer reproduces Ovid's images in *The Legend of Philomela* (l. 2318) and *The Legend of Lucrece*

⁸P. Ovidii Nasonis *Metamorphoses*, edited by W. S. Anderson (Leipzig, 1977).

⁹P. Ovidi Nasonis *Fastorum libri sex*, edited by E. H. Alton, D. E. W. Wormell, and E. Courtney (Leipzig, 1978).

(l. 1798), respectively; and Gower does the same in *Confessio Amantis*,¹⁰ in his *Tale of Tereus* (v. 5633) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (VII. 4983–84), respectively. In the *Physician's Tale* the image warns that a particular kind of danger may lie ahead for Virginia and foreshadows the action of Appius.

As the narrative is resumed, the girl's beauty and goodness are said to have become widely known through *fame* (l. 111) and praised by all but *Envye* (l. 114) 'That sory is of oother mennes wele, / And glad is of his sorwe and his unheele' (ll. 115–16). This momentary switch to the allegorical mode introduces another force which, like Bacchus and Venus, might threaten a happy state of affairs. Envy is not subsequently said to be a motive for Appius or Claudius, and the remark about Envy may merely evoke a general foreboding of strife. But if an echo from a certain literary episode is recognized here, these lines may carry a more specific foreboding.

Envy comes into play through the work of *fame*. At a climactic moment in the Dido episode in Virgil's *Aeneid*, after the storm-and-cave incident and just before Dido is deserted by Aeneas, Fame (*Fama*, IV. 173) is said to have broadcast the affair across Africa, making known Dido's guilt.¹¹ Chaucer himself has recourse to this passage in *The House of Fame*, where his Dido laments in her own voice that *wikke Fame* (l. 349) has reported their affair throughout the land and caused her to be *yshamed* (l. 356). The account of Dido in this dream vision constitutes the conventional literary example of the main idea of the poem, fame, and this particular passage within it provides the central focus for that idea — clearly, a passage of central importance to *The House of Fame*. As the work of fame leads to death for Dido, so, the inference may be drawn, it will do for Virginia. For Dido, Fame works unfavourably, reporting her bad behaviour and thereby initiating disruption; for Virginia, by contrast, it works favourably, reporting her reputation for virtue. But some other factor must then be adduced to function as the source of disruption, and this role is fulfilled by Envy. Envy could, in context, refer to feelings directed against Virginia personally, but the use of masculine terms in lines 115–16, although ostensibly generalized, raises the possibility that Virginius might be the target, as one enjoying *wel*e on account of his daughter's reputation. That it is Envy

¹⁰In *The English Works of John Gower*, edited by G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols, EETS, e.s. 81, 82 (1900, 1901). The frequent references to Gower in this paper are intended to provide comparative evidence from another respected writer of the same time and place, with a very similar cultural background, whom Chaucer knew well. For a detailed discussion of their literary relationship see John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York, 1964), pp. 204–302; the stories of Lucretia, Philomela, and Virginia are mentioned briefly on p. 285.

¹¹In *P. Vergili Maronis opera*, edited by R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969).

which is the potential source of disruption in their world may be due to a further literary reference. The behaviour of Envy as defined in lines 115–16 is a commonplace,¹² but it is worth noting, in a work so indebted to *Le Roman de la rose*, that the figure of *Envie* created by Guillaume de Lorris, as well as embodying the commonplace definition, specifically desires to bring shame on those of high lineage and spoil the reputation of the most worthy people (ll. 235–90; similarly in *The Romaunt of the Rose*, ll. 247–300).

The particular action of the tale begins at the literal level with the statement: 'This mayde upon a day wente in the toun / Toward a temple, with hire mooder deere' (ll. 118–19). The mother is referred to only in an adjunct, just as she was earlier in her role of wife; as these prove to be the only two references to her in the tale, she can be seen to have no story of her own. It is the girl who is here the subject of the action. But attention promptly shifts to another area, beyond the family, as Appius is referred to for the first time, nearly half-way through the tale:

Now was ther thanne a justice in that toun,
That governour was of that regioun.
And so bifel this juge his eyen caste
Upon this mayde. (ll. 121–24)

As the story of Appius begins, he takes over as subject of the action, and the girl is once more the object. Her beauty becomes the occasion for him to drive himself out of his right mind:

Anon his herte chaunged and his mood,
So was he caught with beautee of this mayde,
And to hymself ful pryvely he sayde,
'This mayde shal be myn, for any man!' (ll. 126–29)

His reaction to the sight of the girl is plainly sinful: it is instantaneous and unreasoned, it explicitly affects his state of mind, and his thoughts are expressed as a desire to possess, whatever the cost to anyone else. In relation to Virginius, the girl is a possession in the natural scheme of things (l. 5); by contrast, she is not naturally Appius' possession but is to be put into that position by force (*shal*).

The text does not make it clear whether this incident occurs in or near the temple, but either way the association is made.¹³ For Virginia, the locale implies a

¹²See Corsa, *The Physician's Tale*, pp. 114–15.

¹³No locale is mentioned in *Le Roman de la rose*, and Livy places the incident simply in the *forum*. Chaucer may have misunderstood Livy's reference to the *tabernaculis* in the forum as a 'place of worship', rather than as 'booths'; or he may have been influenced by a scene in some other

piety which reinforces the picture of her already given; for Appius, it implies the reverse. Gower touches on the same matter in his *Confessio Amantis*. In his *Tale of Paris and Helen* Paris first sees Helen in the temple and carries her off from there by force (v. 7505–54), this crime sparking off the Trojan War. The Lover is told in conclusion:

Now se, mi Sone, which a sinne
Is Sacrilege in holy stede:
Be war therfore and bidd thi bede,
And do nothing in holy cherche,
Bot that thou miht be reson werche. (v. 7586–90)

This argument is further supported by brief reference to the strife that ensued when Achilles fell in love with Polixena in the 'holy temple of Appollo' (v. 7594) and when Troilus fell in love with Criseide in 'holi place' (v. 7599).¹⁴ The pagan temples featured in these three celebrated events are easily allowed to stand for Christian churches. That Appius conceives his sinful passion in or near Chaucer's temple might similarly be understood to represent a direct offence against the Christian God, and this is made more likely by an immediate reference to Christian teaching in mention of the Devil.

The evil of Appius' response is made explicit as the *feend* comes to tell him how to get what he wants: 'Anon the feend into his herte ran, / And taughte hym sodeynly that he by slyghte / The mayden to his purpos wyne myghte' (ll. 130–32). Despite the lack of a capital letter in editions of Chaucer, the *feend* functions on the allegorical level. Here the topic is not physical appearance, determined by supernatural figures without reference to the desires of the person concerned, but morality, determined by human choice in conjunction with a supernatural figure. Earlier, Virginia's chosen attitude prevented Bacchus from interfering in her life; here, it is after Appius has personally determined on a wrong course of action that the *feend* is said to function.

Reference to the Devil here may have further, retrospective implications for an understanding of Envy at line 114. Although the primary sin of the Devil, and hence the source of all evil, was generally said to be pride, as in the *Parson's Tale* (l. 387), it was sometimes said to be envy, the sin which is commonly placed next

work in which a young girl goes to worship with her mother. See Corsa's note to this line, *The Physician's Tale*, p. 115.

¹⁴In *Troilus and Criseyde*, a 'temple' (l. 267), but without any clear implication of sacrilege being involved.

to pride in arrangements of the Seven Deadly Sins, again, as in the *Parson's Tale* (ll. 483–531), and also in *Confessio Amantis* (II).¹⁵ If this association is adduced, the figure of Envy in the *Physician's Tale* would connote evil all the more powerfully, and might even be taken to refer to Appius himself as informed by the Devil.

The narrative of the conspiracy and court case is relatively brief. The explicit aim of the conspiracy is to place Virginia in Appius' hands, but there are also suggestions in the lexis and the syntax that the conspiracy, if successful, would make a mockery of Virginius' standing in the community and upset accepted ideas of social order. Virginius is set in opposition to Claudius, and Claudius is repeatedly referred to as a *cherl* (ll. 140, 142, 153, 164, 191, 199, 202). This *cherl* makes demands of him as a *worthy knyght* (l. 203), claiming that the knight's daughter is his own *servant* and *thral* (ll. 183, 189). He also assumes the role of subject in his utterance and assigns the role of object to Virginius, as he says, 'I pleyne upon Virginius' (l. 167). The truth would have emerged because Virginius 'wolde have preeved it as sholde a knyght' (l. 193) — that is, maintaining his own proper (*sholde*) social dignity ('knyght'); but Appius abuses his office and rules: 'I deeme anon this cherl his servant have; / . . . / The cherl shal have his thral, this I awarde' (ll. 199–202) — that is, the judge approves the *cherl's* role as possessor and the girl's role as possession, necessitating a change of social designation for her. At the end of the tale, once the attempted upsetting of the social order has been foiled, syntactic relationships return to normal, as Virginius takes charge and shows the mercy proper in some circumstances to the ruling class by arranging for the churl's death sentence to be converted to exile: 'Virginius, of his pitee / So preyde for hym that he was exiled' (ll. 272–73)

¹⁵In his *De civitate dei* Augustine says of the evil angels that they turned away from God toward themselves: 'What other name is there for this fault than pride? "The beginning of all sin is pride."' (XII. vi: 'et hoc uitium quid aliud quam superbia nuncupetur? *Initium quippe omnis peccati superbia*') Then further on he refers to the Devil as 'the arrogant angel ... envious because of that pride of his'. (XIV. xi: 'superbus ille angelus ... inuidus per eandem superbiam') In his *Divinarum institutionum libri septem* Lactantius says that the Devil 'was infected as though by poison with envy ... Whence it is clear that ill will (or envy) is the source of all evils. There was in that one envy of his predecessor [i.e. the Son].' (II. ix: 'invidia tamquam veneno infectus est ... Unde apparet cunctorum malorum fontem esse livorem. Invidit enim illi antecessori suo.') For Augustine see *Sancti Aurelii Augustini de civitate dei*, edited by Bernard Dombart and Alphonse Kalb, Corpus Christianorum series latina 47, 48 (Turnhout, 1955); and *Augustine: City of God*, edited by David Knowles, translated by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth, 1972). For Lactantius see *Lactantii divinarum institutionum libri septem*, in *Lucii Cæcilii Firmiani Lactantii opera omnia*, edited by J. B. LeBrun and N. Lenglet-Dufresnoy (Paris, 1748), reprinted by J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 6 (Paris, 1844); and *Lactantius: The Divine Institutes Books I–VII*, translated by Mary Francis McDonald, The Fathers of the Church 49 (Washington, 1964).

A further point of interest in this episode is the reference to authority which takes up some implications of the earlier attribution to Livy. When the judge's name, Appius, is given, the narrator insists: 'So was his name, for this is no fable, / But knowen for historial thyng notable; / The sentence of it sooth is, out of doute' (ll. 155–57). The importance of this information is emphasized by the reminder a few lines later of its basis in the *storie* (l. 161). The earliest record of the word *historial* in English, according to the *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), is in this line.¹⁶ It is an elevated word and reinforces the authority of the stated source. The *MED* locates its specific meaning under (a), 'belonging to history, authentic, true', and this is clearly an accurate reading in view of the verbal context: the surrounding expressions define the term as indicating a narrative which is 'no fable' and which has *sentence* that is *sooth*. The reference to fable, made by the deliberate means of a *contrarium*, in turn invokes the controversial topic of the validity of fiction as a medium for transmitting truth. Boccaccio discusses fable at some length in his *Genealogiae* (XIV. ix), defending some kinds of fable as conveyers of truth while dismissing others as useless.¹⁷ Chaucer himself makes explicit reference to the topic in the *Parson's Prologue*, where the Parson refuses to recount 'fables and swich wrecchednesse' (l. 34) and then proceeds to give the company a straight message without the fictional dressing; he also explores the topic by implication in the more complex of his two animal fables, the *Nun's Priest's Tale*.¹⁸ If only in passing, a question has been raised about the relationship between narrative mode and effective communication. The word occurs twice more in Chaucer's works. In the Petworth manuscript of the *Miller's Tale* it replaces *storial* at line 3179, again with the meaning 'true'; and in the G text of the prologue to *The Legend of Good Women*, line 307, it translates part of the Latin title of the best known work of Vincent of Beauvais, *Speculum historiale* ('Estoryal Myroure'), so that it bears here the *MED* meaning (c), 'dealing with history'. A further meaning of the word is given as (d), 'literal, factual', the first citation coming from a Wyclif Bible text of c. 1395, within a very short time of the Chaucerian citations, dated c. 1425 and c. 1430 (MS)/c. 1395 (composition), respectively. The context of this Wycliffite citation is an explanation of exegetical levels: 'Literal ether historial vndurstondyng

¹⁶*Middle English Dictionary*, edited by Hans Kurath, et al. (Ann Arbor, 1954–).

¹⁷Venice, 1494, edited by Stephen Orgel (New York and London, 1976).

¹⁸See especially Stephen Manning, 'The Nun's Priest's Morality and the Medieval Attitude toward Fables', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 59 (1960), 403–16; also R.T. Lenaghan, 'The Nun's Priest's Fable', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 78 (1963), 300–07, and Walter Scheps, 'Chaucer's Anti-Fable: *Reductio ad absurdum* in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 4 (1970), 1–10.

techith what thing is don; allegorik techith what we owen for to bileue.' There would seem to be a reasonable case for suggesting that *historial* in the *Physician's Tale* might have, in addition to the meaning 'true', a further, more technical meaning 'literal', since the text to this point has indeed been seen to shift continuously between the literal level, on which the main action takes place, and the allegorical level, on which the narrator's ideas are set out, in mythological terms. *Historial* is a very unusual word, the most striking lexical feature of the tale, and it could well alert some in an audience to the poet's manipulation of the two distinct levels of the narrative.

The scene between Virginius and his daughter which is the dramatic high point of the tale is, as far as we know, entirely Chaucer's own contribution. Virginius initiates their exchange and speaks in terms which present the situation from his point of view, as his story. His first exclamation laments his own fate: 'allas, that I was bore!' (l. 215), and the girl's identity is defined almost entirely in relation to him:

O deere doghter, endere of my lyf,
Which I have fostred up with swich plesaunce
That thou were nevere out of my remembraunce!
O doghter, which that art my laste wo,
And in my lyf my laste joye also. (ll. 218–22)

As his speech opens, he addresses his daughter as 'Virginia' (l. 213), the first time in the tale that her name has actually appeared. On the one hand, the fact of being named foreshadows her emergence in this scene as an independent force, enacting her own story; on the other hand, since her name is merely the feminine derivative of her father's, she is immediately classed as an extension of him.

Virginia has, of course, been identified by a translation of her Latin name from the start, in the terms *mayde* (ll. 7, 30, 105, 118, 124, 127, 129; later, ll. 231 and 248) and *mayden* (l. 132), in her association with *maydens* in general (ll. 55, 197, 109, 120), and in the prospective pun on her *virginitee* (l. 44). The names 'Virginius' and 'Virginia', it may be observed, form a word-set of two, as the masculine and feminine embodiments of an abstraction, and have a potential as allegorical names. This is not realized in allegorical action, but 'Virginia' at least functions as a quasi-metaphor, as the attention drawn to the relevance of the name suggests. From this point of view, incidentally, there is no name or metaphoric function available for the wife-mother because there is only one female 'Virginian' name.

Virginius announces to his daughter: 'Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame, / That thou most suffre' (ll. 214–15), but almost immediately he concentrates on one way alone: 'nevere thou deservedest wherfore / To dyen with a swerd or with a knyfe' (ll. 216–17), and he concludes in the imperative: 'Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence' (l. 224).

Shame has never been contemplated after the first mention of it. Virginia has earlier been described as *shamefast* (l. 55), so that shame now would be a specific defeat for her. But shame would also be a defeat for Virginius. It is essentially a public notion, referring to the way one is perceived by others, as is its antithesis, honour. The first thing said about the knight Virginius is that he is 'fulfild of honour' (l. '3). His daughter's reputation is under threat, but this cannot be separated from his own. Where Virginia does function separately from him is in the matter of private virtue. The narrator has made the point that she is chaste in both body and spirit (l. 43), but neither Virginius, nor, for that matter, Virginia herself, raises this point now. It would logically be possible for her to endure shame without losing her inner integrity, and the fact that the basis for this conclusion has been established earlier, in a line not paralleled in Jean de Meun or Livy, impels consideration of the issues in the event.

The necessity of distinguishing between bodily and spiritual chastity had been urged in an important patristic interpretation of another story not unlike Virginia's in its circumstances and implications. The story of Lucretia, who committed suicide after being raped, had also been told by Livy (*Ab urbe condita*, 1. 57. 1–1. 60. 2), then retold by Ovid (*Fasti*, 2. 721–852). Importantly, it was taken up by Augustine in *De civitate dei* (I. xix),¹⁹ as a case in point linking a discussion about the violation of chastity with a discussion about suicide (I. xvi–xxiv). He finds Lucretia's death inexcusable, precisely because it resulted from shame rather than guilt:

Quod ergo se ipsam, quoniam adulterum pertulit, etiam non adultera occidit, non est pudicitiae caritas, sed pudoris infirmitas. Puduit enim eam turpitudinis alienae in se commissae, etiamsi non secum, et Romana mulier, laudis avida nimium, uerita est ne putaretur, quod uiolenter est passa cum uiueret, libenter passa si uiueret.

Her killing of herself because, although not adulterous, she had suffered an adulterer's embraces, was due to the weakness of shame, not to the high value she set on chastity. She was ashamed of another's foul deed committed *on* her, even though not *with* her, and as a Roman woman, excessively eager for honour, she was afraid that she should be thought, if she lived, to have willingly endured what, when she lived, she had violently suffered.

¹⁹Edited by Bernard Dombart and Alphonse Kalb; translated by Henry Bettenson (see my note 15).

That Augustine's work, including this argument, was still accepted in the fourteenth century is evidenced by the attention it received from the scholars Nicholas Trivet and Thomas Waleys, both of whom wrote commentaries on it.²⁰ The story of Lucretia also appears in the main body of tales in the *Gesta Romanorum* (135), with the authority cited as *Augustinus de civitate dei*.²¹ The moralization following the narrative again focuses primarily on Lucretia. Lucretia's actions are not discussed *per se*, but they are endowed with allegorical significations which invoke the separateness of body and soul. Gower includes her story in *Confessio Amantis* (VII. 4754–5123), immediately preceding his *Tale of Virginia* (VII. 5131–5306). Lucretia's action is not questioned here, however, because the tale is an exemplum focussed on the rapist; the *Tale of Virginia* is linked to it as

... yit an other remembrance
 That rihtwisnesse and lecherie
 Acorden nocht in compaignie
 With him that hath the lawe on honde. (ll. 5124–27)

This explicit linking of the two tales in fact follows Livy, who introduces his account of Virginia with a backward reference to Lucretia, saying that those later events were no less disgraceful than the earlier ones (3. 44. 1).

In *The Legend of Lucrece* both Ovid and Livy are cited as basic authorities (l. 1683), although in fact Chaucer simply follows the account in *Fasti*. A further authority is adduced, however, as the narrator observes that, 'The grete Austyn hath gret compassioun / Of this Lucesse, that starf at Rome toun' (ll. 1690–91). This remark clearly misrepresents Augustine's attitude. It has even been suggested that Chaucer's actual source at this point was the *Gesta* account with the reference to Augustine embedded in it;²² but there is no response like compassion on the part of the *Gesta* narrator, nor does he imply such a response on the part of Augustine. Whatever its source, however, the remark made by Chaucer's narrator effects a modification towards the overall elegiac mood of the *Legends*, where the women are uniformly innocents suffering for love. It remains uncertain whether Chaucer was

²⁰Trivet's commentary can be found in *De dictis S. Augustini*, B.L. MS Harleian 4093, f.1^r – f.93^v; the story of Lucretia: f.6^v – f.7^r. Waleys' commentary can be found in *Augustinus de civitate dei cum commento* (Fribourg, 1494); the story of Lucretia: I. XIX, sig.b2^{va} margin – sig.b3^{ra} margin.

²¹Edited by Hermann Oesterley (Berlin, 1872).

²²M. C. E. Shaner and A. S. G. Edwards report the existence of differing views on this matter in *The Riverside Chaucer*, p.1070.

familiar with Augustine's actual views, but those views are merely an expression of the fundamental distinction in Christian thinking between the physical being, which was subject to onslaught and decay from external factors, and the spiritual being, which could be affected only by one's own decisions.²³ Line 43 of the *Physician's Tale* reveals Chaucer's consciousness of the issue; he may further have been influenced in presenting it here as a literary theme by his awareness of the Augustinian analysis of the Lucretia story.

In this scene the audience is offered at the outset two ways of looking at Virginius. He has approached his daughter 'With fadres pitee stikyng thurgh his herte, / Al wolde he from his purpos nat converte' (ll. 211–12), and he appears throughout the scene both pitiful father and resolute knight. There are also two ways of looking at Virginia, though these are not simultaneous but sequential. As she hears her father's words and pleads with him, she is the sacrificial victim,²⁴ and in this role the point comes where she effectively ceases to exist: 'she fil aswowne anon' (l. 245). But she then assumes another role, marked by direct verbal contrast, as 'She riseth up . . .' (l. 247). Now in charge of the situation, she proceeds to speak in the militant tones of a prospective martyr.²⁵ Taking over the imperative tone of her father, she demands of him: 'Yif me my deeth, er that I have shame; / Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!' (ll. 249–50), the imperatives paradoxically overriding the vocabulary which places her under his control. In a pagan situation it would not be decorous to give her the angelic send-off from this life or the heavenly reception that might be given to a Christian saint; but the possibility of assuming for her a Christian, or at least Old Testament pre-Christian, fate is opened up through her references to the Old Testament figures of

²³For theological discussion see, for example, Christ's own contrast between earthly and heavenly goods in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6. 19–21) and Paul's claims that enduring public humiliation in the Christian cause actually provides an opportunity for spiritual growth (2 Corinthians 4. 9–13, 12. 10). For philosophical discussion see, for example, Boethius' *De consolacione Philosophiae*, rendered by Chaucer as his *Boece* (e.g. I. Prosa 5). For Bible texts see *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, fifth edition (Madrid, 1977), and *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford, 1970).

²⁴Anne Lancashire suggests an implicit Biblical model for Virginia here in the figure of Isaac, although, as with the explicit Jephthah reference, the inappropriateness of the comparison is striking: 'Chaucer and the Sacrifice of Isaac', *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1975), 320–23. For discussion of the Jephthah reference and its resonances see Richard L. Hoffman, 'Jephthah's Daughter and Chaucer's Virginia', *Chaucer Review*, 2 (1967), 20–31.

²⁵Compare the presentation of Cecilia in the *Second Nun's Tale*, especially lines 421–511. The hagiographical aspect of the story of Virginia has been recognized by various critics. See, for example, Gerhard Joseph, 'The Gifts of Nature, Fortune and Grace in the *Physician's, Pardoner's and Parson's Tales*', *Chaucer Review*, 9 (1975), 40, and Anne Middleton, 'The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyrs: "Ensamles Mo than Ten" as a Method in the *Canterbury Tales*', *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1973), 11, 16, 17, 27.

Jephthah and his daughter (ll. 240–41) and the twofold invocation of a non-specific 'God' in her final utterance (ll. 248, 250).

Events after the beheading are again authenticated by reference to *the storie* (l. 258). The intervention of the people, potentially climactic, is given minimal attention, but their action does retrospectively pose a question about what has happened. It may be recalled that Virginius is said to have been 'strong of freendes' (l. 4), as is Virginia (l. 135). For either of them to have called on these friends for help is logically a third possibility alongside death and shame. Yet this possibility has not been verbalized in the text, so that there has been no clear need established for the friends to have been mentioned at all, and particularly not in such a deliberate way — the phrase is repeated exactly from one place to the other, in both cases functioning as a complement to fix a specific quality in the two subjects; and there is no equivalent information supplied in *Le Roman de la rose*, although in Livy's account the family implicitly enjoys strong support in the community (and Gower explicitly refers to the *freendes* of Virginia: VII. 5185). In Virginia's case, for her to have turned to friends would have spoilt the story, which turns out to be a quasi-hagiographical one recounting the triumph of a virgin martyr over forces of evil through faith alone. But in the case of Virginius, where the story is an heroic one recounting a man's preservation of honour at all costs, his means of achieving this is the sacrifice of the thing next dearest to him after honour itself, and it is not clear that his honour would have been less had he called on the human resources at his disposal. The main effect of mentioning the friends seems to have been to raise some disquiet in the audience.

As the guilty ones meet their fate reference is made to the *remenant* who had been 'consentant of this cursednesse' (ll. 275–76). These people have not actually appeared before, and their sudden appearance now might cause surprise, but their role has been implicit in the statement of the conspirator, Claudius, at two points, that he is prepared to prove his ownership of the girl by bringing forward *witnesse*, that is, the testimony of other people (ll. 169, 186). Chaucer in fact merely follows Jean de Meun here. The French account concludes, with reference to Claudius, 'E tuit cil condanné moururent / Qui tesmoing de sa cause furent' (ll. 5657–58), although these people have previously been referred to only in Claudius' stated intention of summoning 'bons tesmoinz' (l. 5614). Chaucer is at least not the only writer to see no failure of narrative here. Where there are false accusations, moreover, it is to be expected that there will be false witnesses to suggest by a weight of numbers that the accusations are actually founded on fact. The testimony of false witnesses before Caiaphas, functioning as another 'false juge', was a

feature of the passion of Christ (Matthew 26. 59–63, Mark 14. 55–61), and the sufferings of Christian martyrs, with whom Virginia is implicitly associated, emulate that passion more or less closely. False witnesses are, for instance, brought against the proto-martyr, Stephen (Acts 6. 11–14). It seems likely that false witnesses would have been taken for granted in Appius' attempt to pervert the course of justice.

In conclusion the narrator observes: 'Heere may men seen how synne hath his merite' (l. 277), and he advises the audience to avoid sin. This explicit drawing out of a moral lesson, together with the application that follows it, establishes the tale retrospectively as an exemplum. For the narrator this exemplum coincides with the story of Appius, roughly as it is found in Livy and Jean de Meun, and focuses on the one relationship, that of criminal and victim. But there are two other stories to consider also.

Virginia's part in the tale is taken up by the Host in the Introduction to the *Pardoner's Tale*. He first confirms the Physician's assessment of the villains, but then makes it clear that he has noticed how prominently the girl herself has featured as well:

Allas, to deere boughte she beautee!
Wherfore 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 deeth, I dar wel sayn. (ll. 293–97)

As soon as the allegorical figures are mentioned, the girl is designated a *creature* as before and is thus situated in the same allegorical action as they. Fortune is not explicitly mentioned within the tale, but her operation is an easy inference: reference to people as prospering and then suffering fits the formula for Fortune tragedy which is spelt out in the *Monk's Tale* and can be seen there to operate with or without guilt on the part of the tragic figures themselves. In *Le Roman de la rose* the tale is related by Reason in the context of discussing the operations of Fortune, and this could well have influenced Chaucer to indicate the possibility of such a context in his own work. Jean de Meun's figure of Fortune is not explicitly associated with his figure of Nature, but the two are effectively on the same side in the psychomachia, as Fortune is ranged against Reason and Nature sides with Venus and Cupid.

As in her original creation, so in her death Virginia is seen as the object of the activity of forces beyond herself, and their story is not hers — the allegorical action is, in any case, better described as a series of anecdotes than as a connected story.

The Physician's moral lesson offers no interpretation at all of Virginia's part in the tale — this remains implicit, the part of the obligatory victim which enables Appius to be established as a criminal. The Host's remarks following the tale equally ignore her active role in events, but they do acknowledge her function as object by representing her as an individual figure of pathos and as a typical example of one of life's patterns. By far the greater part of the allegorical language within the tale has to do with Virginia, and this rhetorical elevation of her role above the roles of the two men provides a decorous accompaniment to the story, in the literal narrative, of which she is the protagonist, a story of the triumph of good over evil in the person of a secular saint. But the allegorical reading of Virginia in itself remains additional to the basic perception of her which is advanced, not through any verbal discourse, but through the narrative mode in which her story is presented. The role of hagiographical antagonist is shared by Appius, as the evil instigator of a decree she cannot obey, and her father, as the interviewer of the 'saint' and, ultimately, executioner. That Virginius functions in his daughter's story at least partly as her antagonist is one indication of the problematic nature of his own story.

The meaning of the third main story, that of Virginius, is not explicated at all by the Physician or the Host, so that no suggestions exist outside the narrative as to how it might be apprehended. Guidance rests solely in the shape of the narrative itself, supported by the linguistic choices. Virginius is the focal figure as the tale opens, and his action with regard to Claudius is almost the last action reported. Only two lines follow, noting that the rest of the conspirators were hanged (ll. 275–76), and these lines, in any case, throw into relief the extent to which Virginius has helped Claudius; at the same time, of course, they bring the narrative to an end in a summation as 'this cursednesse', effecting a transition to the lesson of the exemplum which begins in the next line.²⁶ Virginius' story thus begins and ends the narrative of the tale; Virginia and Appius are both already dead, their stories contained by his. It has been seen, moreover, that the conspiracy sequence has at least as much to do with Virginius as with his daughter and that the greater part of the climactic scene between them is presented from his point of view. The shape of the narrative, in fact, seems to make Virginius' story the dominant one of the three.

For an audience, there is a wide range of possible responses to the tale depending, for a start, on whether one or other of the three main stories occupies the attention. The audience can take the moral lesson of Appius to heart and be warned.

²⁶Interestingly, the same lexis effects a transition from the narrative of the *Pardoner's Tale* to the lesson it affords: 'O cursed synne of alle cursednesse!' (l. 895).

It can be sentimental about the pathos of Virginia's situation and then inspired by her example, or it can regret her fate philosophically. In the case of these responses the tale has indeed had an effect, but the audience is not required to continue a dialogue with the text. The story of Virginius, however, is problematic, recording, on the one hand, the success of the public man, and, on the other, the failure of the private man. His story demands a continued questioning of the text in an effort to come to terms with alternative views of him, and this intellectual exercise brings together a good part of the *sentence* and the *solaas* of the tale.²⁷

This study of the language of the *Physician's Tale*, though by no means exhaustive, has revealed intricate patterns of cohesion in the text which embrace elements that have sometimes been regarded as disparate. The significance of events is explored from different points of view which are established through the deployment of a variety of generic codes and literary allusions. The characters in the tale are endowed with certain motives and perceptions; the pilgrim narrator and one member of the pilgrim audience are made to express other kinds of perception; and the text as a whole invites the external audience's consideration of several issues, both ethical and literary. Not least amongst the latter is the potential of multiple perspective in linear narrative and the possible ways by which it might be achieved.

²⁷ Anne Middleton, in particular, has observed the 'equivocal role' of Virginius (p. 27), but she considers the role of Virginia to occupy the central focus of the tale (pp. 10–11), in 'The *Physician's Tale* and Love's Martyrs'.