"His studie was but litel on the Bible": A Natural, Textual, and Spiritual Analysis of Signs and Signifiers in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Physician's Tale*

In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Departmental Honors in English
THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

Submitted and Pledged:

W. H. Merriman

Approved by:

Dr. Stephanie L. Batkie

Accepted for Departmental Honors in English

Jennifer Michael, Chair
Easter Term, 2019

Thomas Aquinas, one of the most influential Christian philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages, concludes his commentary on Second Corinthians with a systematic sequence of how one can come to discern God's truth:

> Therefore he says, into his likeness, that is, as we see, we are transformed, I say, from one degree of glory to another. In this he distinguishes a triple degree of knowledge in Christ's disciples. The first is from the clarity of natural knowledge to the clarity of the knowledge of faith. The second is from the clarity of the knowledge of the Old Testament to the clarity of the knowledge of the grace of the New Testament. The third is from the clarity of natural knowledge and of the Old and New Testaments to the clarity of eternal vision: "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day" (2 Cor. 4:16). But how does this come about? Not by the letter of the law, but from the Lord who is the Spirit: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14); "Let your good Spirit lead me on a level path" (Ps. 143:10).[1]
>
> (C.3, L.3, 115)

The "triple degree of knowledge" passes from clarity of natural knowledge or natural signs to faith, from the Old to the New Testament, and lastly from an amalgamation of natural knowledge and scriptural knowledge to the spiritual understanding of Christ's transformative renewal of the soul.

Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* has long been regarded as one of his most enigmatic and perplexing tales not only because its narrative brevity but also because of its bewildering moral and atrocious conclusion—the unjust death of Virginia, the paradigm of righteousness.[2] However, Aquinas' sequential theory of knowledge from nature to scripture and then to the soul serves as a heuristic through which the ambiguous signs of Chaucer's words can be reconciled to his signified intent. Virginia stands as both a natural sign of God's truth and as a scripture-like text, but the pagan, pre-Christian setting of the story condemns the men of the tale to a fatal misreading of her. They lack the interpretive insight (afforded by spirit of the law that comes

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[1] Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*. Translated by Fabian Larcher. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2012. https://dhspriory.org/thomas/english/SS2Cor.htm.

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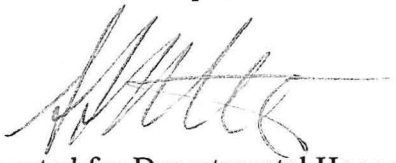

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through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ) to read her correctly. While Apius misjudges the natural law of Virginia, Virginius misreads Virginia through an Old Testament, Judaic valence that condemns Virginia to death according the letter of the law. The tale ends abruptly, devoid of grace and lacking a glimpse of Aquinas' "eternal vision" (C.3, L.3, 115), but the Physician's poignant, pathetic appeal—exponentially augmented through the shocking, unredeemed conclusion—serves to push the pilgrims onward to the renewal of both their spirits and also their interpretive capacities to behold truth through the "level path" of the pilgrimage.[3] Ultimately then, Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* portrays the dangers and consequences of misreading both natural and scriptural signs, and acts as a spiritual remedy for sanctification and intellectual growth.

By looking to Aquinas' commentary on the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law, Augustine's theory of how to interpret scriptural signs and reconcile them to the proper signifier, Carolyn Dinshaw's *Sexual Poetics*,[4] and Samantha Katz Seal's insights on how Virginius reads in an Hebraic manner,[5] the true intent of Chaucer's tale can be read more clearly and the interpretive veil, separating signs from signifiers, can be lifted. Reading and the consequences of misinterpretation, therefore, are at the heart of the *Physician's Tale.* Virginia receives death, the terminal symptom of the carnal letter, and is denied grace and life, the balms of the spirit. The Physician depicts Virginia as a pre-Christian martyr whose death redeems the Roman people not through the explicit outpouring of the Spirit but through the natural transformation and renewing of their minds. However, the *Physician's Tale* and its fire and brimstone moral leave the pilgrims bilious and mortified. The Physician does not furnish his tale with a restorative miracle or divine

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[3] Aquinas. *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians.*
[4] Dinshaw, Carolyn, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*. (Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 3-17.
[5] Seal, Samantha Katz, "Reading Like a Jew: Chaucer's Physician's Tale and the Letter of the Law," *The Chaucer Review* 52, no. 3 (2017): 298-317.

intervention. He confines the tale completely within the realm of the natural, of the human, and of mortality. He intentionally withholds a narrative consolation and an emotional cure so that the healing and the rehabilitation can take place not within the tale but outside the tale, in the hearts and minds of the pilgrims. He, through engendering contrition and pity, seeks to cut, surgically, into the hearts of the pilgrims with the purpose of healing them, unblocking their carnal blood clots, and allowing the grace of Christ's blood to flow freely. His tale prompts the renewal of their minds so that they may recognize their own carnality, repent by reading according to the Spirit, and abound in the grace denied to Virginia but readily available in their contemporary Christian context. Chaucer, through his *Physician's Tale,* replicates the Physician's endeavor. He implores his readers to take up a proper interpretation of Scripture for themselves, confront their own iniquities, and sojourn in the corporeal world as pilgrims who see beyond mortal signs and objects and strive toward a heavenly destination.

1. Kind Virginia: The Natural Sign

> ...ours to hold,
> *Virginia*,
> Earth's onely Paradise.
> .....
> To whose, the golden Age
> Still Natures lawes doth give,
> — Michael Drayton, "To the Virginian Voyage"[6]

In order to understand how Virginia acts as a natural sign of God's truth, one must first turn to Paul's assessment of nature in Romans. The Apostle Paul makes a profound claim that humanity's wickedness both instigates God's wrath and rightfully deserves to be met with that wrath; however, Paul makes an additional claim that humanity possesses the ability to

[6] Drayton, Michael, "To the Virginian Voyage," in *Poets of the English Language*. (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 113-4.

comprehend both God and its own sin from nature and from God's evident influence on and through nature:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice of those men that detain the truth of God in injustice: because that which is known of God is manifest in them. For God hath manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made; his eternal power also, and divinity: so that they are inexcusable.
>
> (Rom 1:18-20)[7]

Paul stresses this same point, more specifically with regard to mankind's consciousness of its depravity, when he claims that the human conscience is natural proof of and bears testimony to God's law that wrathfully condemns sin:

> For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature those things that are of the law; these having not the law are a law to themselves: who shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness to them, and their thoughts between themselves accusing, or also defending one another, in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.
>
> (Rom 2:14-16)

In short, Paul asserts that humans retain the remarkable capacity to glimpse the power and influence of God through manifestations of nature. Furthermore, all people, by means of their conscience, can come to the realization that they cannot live up to the perfect standard of God's law and are thus deserving of wrath.

In Chaucer's *Physician's Tale,* the Physician, a learned man of science, makes a similar natural and moral argument for God's authority over nature and for humanity's depravity through Virginia, an exemplar or sign of virtue and moral perfection, who is abused and cruelly murdered by a perverted patriarchal society. Unlike some of the other religiously trained pilgrims, the Physician does not employ explicitly theological arguments from scripture in his tale or prologue as, for example, the Wife of Bath does. Rather, he makes logical arguments that

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[7] All biblical quotations taken from the Douay-Rheims edition.

teach Christian truths on the basis of nature and of the human conscience. Guided by his professional training, the Physician views the world through the lens of cause and effect, and he responds to ills and ailments with natural solutions: "The cause yknowe and of his harm the roote, / Anon he yaf the sike man his boote" (VI. 423-4). Just as he, vocationally, desires to understand the hidden causes of physical maladies, his tale seeks to reconcile the misreading of signs, both in nature and in scripture, with their proper signifiers. He is concerned with the cause and effect of laws and language.

Because the Physician's "studie was but litel on the Bible" (VI. 438), he does not apply scriptural and theological arguments to explain metaphysical and existential ailments.[8] Rather, the Physician employs objective, natural explanations of God, his presence, and his will. Evidence of this dynamic arises when he describes the deference that the personified Nature[9] shows to God, for she designs Virginia in response to and in honor of God's original act of creation:

> For He that is the formere principal
> Hath maked me his vicaire general,
> To forme and peynten erthely creaturis
> Right as me list, and ech thyng in my cure is
> Under the moone, that may wane and waxe,
> And for my werk right no thyng wol I axe;
> My lord and I been ful of oon accord.
> I made hire to the worshipe of my lord.
> (VI.19-26)

[8] An in-depth discussion of the Physician's portrait will follow in section five of this paper.

[9] For further reading on a discussion of Lady Nature, see Robertson, Kellie. *Nature Speaks: Medieval Literature and Aristotelian Philosophy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). Robertson provides a detailed, insightful analysis of how a prominent group of writers in late medieval Europe turned to "natural philosophy and the academic controversies" as "the most obvious place to look when trying, as writers must, to transform the world into words" (1). She claims that, "'physics'—was primarily a textual endeavor; like medieval poetry, it was a set of interpretive practices that sought to divide up the material world, making it more amenable to human view" (1). She focalizes much of her discussion on the textual iterations of the personified Lady Nature, including Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la Rose,* Allen de Lille's *De Planctu Natura,* and Chaucer's *Physician's Tale.*

Paul explains in Romans that man can perceive God's presence and power via his creation. For the Physician, the personified Nature acts as an intermediary between man and God, and she retains the free will to create new works, including Virginia, that possess hints and glories of God. These works of nature are tangible realities that all mankind can bear witness to. However, the men of the tale disregard Nature's signs and abuse Virginia both privately and publicly.

Aquinas's commentary elucidates the underlying dynamic of the Physician's depiction of Virginia as a natural sign. Aquinas asserts that God manifests his truth through two avenues:

> first, by endowing him with an inner light through which he knows: "Send out your light and you truth" (Ps 43:3); secondly, by proposing external signs of his wisdom, namely, sensible creatures: "He poured her out," namely, wisdom, "over all his works" (Sir 1:9). Thus God manifested it to them either from within by endowing them with a light or from without by presenting visible creatures, in which, as in a book, the knowledge of God may be read.[10]
>
> (C.1, L.6, 116)

Because the tale takes place in a pagan, pre-Christian setting, the option of inspiration from the divine light of the Spirit is negated, making the avenue of natural creatures, read as a book of God's knowledge, legitimate and proper. Virginia is described by the Physician as a Thomistic natural creature from which divine truth can be made known, for her beauty is described in overtly natural tones:

> Thus semeth me that Nature wolde seye.
> This mayde of age twelve yeer was and tweye,
> In which that Nature hadde swuch delit.
> For right as she kan peynte a lilie whit
> And reed a rose, right with such peynture
> She peynted hath this noble creature.
> (VI.29-34)

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[10] Aquinas, Thomas. *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans.* Translated by Fabian Larcher. Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2012. https://aquinas.cc/196/198/~1.

Secondly, the Physician explains that she constitutes the perfect book or sublime word inasmuch as her outside appearance, her body or her sign, perfectly captures her inner signifier, her virtue of spirit: "As wel in goost as body chast was she" (VI. 43).[11] The chiasmus present in the line "Shamefast she was in maydens shamefastnesse" (VI.55) attests to the reality that her outside signs faithfully match her inner signifiers. The chiasmus linguistically collapses the division between inner and outer signs. The external modesty of her body, signified in the book ends of "shamefast," contain and point to the inner condition of Virginia's chaste, "maydens" soul.[12] Thus, Virginia is not only shameless in her external virginity but also chaste of heart and soul. Even explicitly, the Physician claims that the moral fabric of Virginia's onlookers can be elevated through reading her example and ascertaining inner truth: "For in hir lyvyng maydens mygthen rede / As in a book every good word or dede" (VI.107-8). Thus, the Physician describes Virginia, who "hadde" no "conterefeted terms" (VI.51), as a perfect example of a body that resonates concordantly with the soul or spirit. She is a beautifully adorned outward sign of an equally beautiful inward, natural reality.

2. Apius: Raper of Texts, Misreader of Natural Law, Corrupter of Secular Law

> So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
> It to correcte and eek to rubbe and scrape;
> And al is thurgh thy negligence and rape

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[11] Chaucer's description of Virginia, where inner virtue is perfectly translated externally, echoes throughout his other hagiographies. Some examples include Custance in the *Man of Law's Tale* who is the "mirour of alle curteisye" (II.166) or the proto-saint Lucrece in Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* who "eek hir teres ful of honestee / Embellished hir wyfly chastitee; / hir countenance is to hir herte digne, / For they acorde bothe in dede and signe" (1736-9). The lady Blanche in Chaucer's dream vision and elegy *The Book of the Duchess* is described in a parallel manner to Virginia as well. Also created by "the goddesse, dame Nature" (870), Blanche is depicted as a sign that possess an external beauty that resonates harmoniously with her integrity: "Ne sholde have founde to descryve / In al hir face a wikked signe, / For it was sad [steadfast], simple [innocent], and benigne" (916-8).

[12] Chaucer's fabliaux, like the *Miller's Tale* or *Merchant's Tale,* would often present the female characters' external beauty as being incongruous with her integrity. Because the fabliaux are subversive in nature, the inherent discrepancy between a pure appearance and an internal dishonest mischievousness complements the seditious, parodic nature of the fabliaux.

— Chaucer's Words to Adam, His Own scribe[13]

In the beginning, touch; at the origin, the medium.
— Michael Serres, *The Five Senses*[14]

Carolyn Dinshaw's *Sexual Poetics* unearths the relationship of the sign and signifier by superimposing linguistic theory onto a discussion of gender. Her discussion of the inability of the male gaze to comprehend the inherent truth or signification of the female body serves as an interpretive lens to view Apius' corrupt desire for Virginia. Dinshaw—analyzing the compact, yet sardonic poem "Chaucer's Words to Adam, His Own Scribe," wherein Chaucer laments the corruption of his authorial intent by his scribe's "negligence and rape"[15] of the physical words—asserts that by nature of the "poem's last word… literary activity has a gendered structure":

> a structure that associates acts of writing and related acts of signifying—allegorizing, interpreting, glossing, translating—with the masculine and that identifies the surfaces on which these acts are performed, or from which these acts depart, or which these acts reveal—the page, the text, the literal sense, or even the hidden meaning—with the feminine.[16]

The same dynamics, as Dinshaw argues, are applicable across Chaucer's works, including *The Physician's Tale*:

> The representation of the allegorical text as a veiled or clothed woman and the concomitant representation of various literary acts—reading, translating, glossing, creating a literary tradition—as masculine acts performed on this feminine body recur across narratives as various in thematics and structure.[17]

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[13] Chaucer, Geoffrey, "Chaucer's Words to Adam, His Own Scribe." In *Dream Visions and Other Poems : Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism.* Edited by Kathryn L. Lynch, 216-217. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2007.
[14] Serres, Michel. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies.* Translated by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.
[15] Dinshaw draws from line 1422 of Chaucer's *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, "Ye shul no thing wynne on that chaffare, But wasten al that ye may rape [variant: rappe] and renne," in order to argue that the word "rape," as it appears in "Adam Sciveyn," denotes "[h]aste" in its primary meaning but also "sexual violation" as a secondary meaning (*Sexual Poetics*, 8).
[16] Ibid, 9.
[17] Ibid, 17.

Just as Adam, the scribe, corrupts Chaucer's true poetic intent by figuratively raping the female body or the letters of the poem, Apius, by misreading Virginia as a consumable object for his lustful appetite, corrupts the true meaning of her physical beauty, which should be a sign that points to "the worshipe of my lord" God (VI.26). Dinshaw hearkens back to Boccaccio in order to explicate the medieval attribution of the pure female body, such as Virginia's, to the truth: "Boccaccio suggests an association of the female with the truth contained within books when, in his *Genealogia deorum gentilium,* he declares that the truth must be protected from the 'gaze of the irreverent,' so that 'they cheapen not by too common familiarity.'"[18] Virginia's body, the natural sign of God's truth, is exposed to the irreverent gaze of Apius when "this juge hise eyen caste, / Upon this mayde, avysynge him ful faste" (VI.123-4). Dinshaw explains that "according to Richard of Bury (and Augustine before him), the reader must pass beyond the pleasurable surface, the signifier, to the hidden truth beneath, the signified. To stop at the image of pleasure is to succumb to the seductions directed at the reader's 'wantonness.'"[19] The Physician presents Apius as a fallacious reader of natural truth, for he dallies on the external sign of Virginia's beauty and twists the sign to fit his will and "hasten his delit" (VI.159) rather than attending to the underlying signifier.

Apius, thus, lingers and languishes on the letter of the natural law of Virginia's body rather than ascertaining the spirit of God's truth embodied within her, and his inability to read aright destines him to a death of not only his body but also his soul. Like Scripture, Virginia's chaste body and pure soul serve as exemplars that, when read properly, empower her onlookers to attain virtue. Augustine's description of the intent of Scripture parallels Virginia's disposition as a purveyor of virtue:

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[18] ibid, 20.
[19] ibid, 21.

> But Scripture teaches nothing but charity, nor condemns nothing except cupidity, and in this way shapes the minds of men…I call charity that motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor for the sake God.[20]
>
> (3.10. 14-6)

The fulfillment and end of all Scripture is the love of God for his own sake and the love of one's neighbor for God's sake. Apius' lust, on the other hand, "a motion of the soul toward the enjoyment of one's self, one's neighbor, or any corporeal thing for the sake of something other than God" (3.10. 16), serves as the stumbling block which impedes him from being in right relationship with Virginia and from attaining charity. Rather, his misguided ardor damns him to both personal vice and social crime:

> That which uncontrolled cupidity does to corrupt the soul and its body is called a "vice"; what it does in such a way that someone else is harmed is called a "crime." And these are the two classes of all sins, but vices occur first. When vices have emptied the soul and led it to a kind of extreme hunger, it leaps into crimes.
>
> (3.10. 16)

The polyvalence inherent within the Physician's description of Apius as a "false juge" (VI.154) both reveals his criminal corruption of the judicial system and also his erroneous discernment of Virginia's body. "[C]arnal slavery" occurs when one "adheres to a usefully instituted sign instead of to the thing it was designed to signify" (3.7. 11). Apius' lust confines him to a purely carnal reading of Virginia's body, for he was "caught with beautee of this mayde" (VI.127). His personal vice then, as Augustine maintains, leads to the corrosion of his soul, and the Physician frames and signifies his moral decadence in terms of demonic possession: "Anon the feend into his herte ran / And taughte hym sodeynly that he by slyghte / The mayden to his purpos wynne

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[20] All quotations from *On Christian Doctrine* are from Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, translated by D. W. Robertson (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958).

myghte" (VI.130-2). The Physician models Apius' vulnerability to demonic corruption on Augustine's description of the consequences of evil desires:

> For it is brought about as if by a certain secret judgement of God that men who desire evil things are subjected to illusion and deception as a reward for their desires, being mocked and deceived by those lying angels to whom, according to the most beautiful ordering of things, the lowest part of this world is subject by the law of Divine Providence.
>
> (2.23. 35)

Thus, his skin-deep reading of Virginia confirms that the letter of the law does in fact kill, for Virginia physically perishes while Apius' spirit slips into depravity in an echo of Augustine's synopsis of reading figurative signs literally:

> What the Apostle says pertains to this problem: "For the letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth." That is, when that which is said figuratively is taken as though it were literal, it is understood carnally. Nor can anything more appropriately be called the death of the soul than that condition in which the thing which distinguishes us from beasts, which is the understanding, is subjected to the flesh in the pursuit of the letter. He who follows the letter takes figurative expressions as though they were literal and does not refer the things signified to anything else.
>
> (3.5. 9)

Apius, through lust and his fixation on the letter of Virginia's body, bends both the legal system and Virginia's body to his criminal will. The Physician's depiction of Claudius's consent to Apius' "cursed reed" (VI.166) further suggests that Apius' critical flaw is literary in nature. His downfall is one of misinterpretation and of blindness to underlying truth on account of external beauty. Apius' exchange of the innocent truth of Virginia for the facade of her creaturely body ensures that he suffers the same fate as the Romans:

> [They] became vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened. For professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man, and of birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of creeping things. Wherefore God gave them up to the desires of their heart, unto uncleanness, to dishonour their own bodies among themselves. Who changed the truth of God into a lie; and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.
>
> (Rom. 1:21-5)

Virginia is a natural creature in Aquinas' terminology who points to the truths of Nature and of God, but Apius trades that truth for a lust-ridden lie and suffers the damnation of first his heart and then his soul. Just as the Romans "knew God," Apius knows that Viginia is a holy vessel, a conveyor of virtue, for he himself admits that, "That wel he wiste he myghte hire nevere wynne / As for to maken hire with hir body synne" (VI.137-8). Virginia's body is presented as being essentially adverse and opposed to sin, and, while Apius recognizes this fact, he rejects the truth and instead turns to lustful cravings for Virginia's body itself in an echo of the dark-hearted Romans.

Thus, Apius erroneously conceptualizes Virginia as an Augustinian "thing" rather than as a sign. A "thing," as Augustine exhorts, is "that which is not used to signify something else" (1.2. 2). For Augustine, "things" include mundane objects that point to no greater truth like "wood, stone, cattle." However, when those "things" imply spiritual truths, they also take on an identity as a sign such as the "wood concerning which we read that Moses cast into the bitter waters that their bitterness might be dispelled" or the "stone which Jacob placed at his head" or "that beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son" (1.2. 2). Importantly, Augustine purports that there are three classes of "things": those which "are to be enjoyed, others to be used, and there are others which are to be enjoyed and used" (1.3. 3). The end of "things" is personal happiness, but Augustine warns that,

> If we who enjoy and use things, being placed in the midst of things of both kinds, wish to enjoy those things which should be used, our course will be impeded and sometimes deflected, so that we are retarded in obtaining those things which are to be enjoyed, or even prevented altogether, shackled by and inferior love. To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love provided that it is worthy of love. For an illicit use should be called rather a waste or an abuse.
>
> (1.3. 3)

The example that Augustine gives is that of a wanderer, who, when seeking to return home is mesmerized and captivated by the pleasure of "motion" that "delighted us" and leads to an unwillingness "to end of our journey quickly, and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed" (1.4. 4). Every sign for Augustine is a "thing," but not every "thing" is a sign. Thus, Virginia is both a thing and a sign, and Apius' first error is that he only views Virginia as the former rather than the latter. His fatal flaw, however, rests in his abuse of her as a "thing." In one sense, Virginia is to be enjoyed for her own sake like a piece of art, "peynte[d]" (VI.12) by the personified Nature. As for use, she serves as a vessel for attaining virtue. Apius certainly does not enjoy her for her own sake, and his use of her does not find its end in his own virtuous happiness. Rather, he abuses her based on the contorted will of his degraded heart and on his unlawful use of his position as judge. The result is that he becomes entangled in "mortal joy in transitory things" (2.7. 10) of the flesh rather than glimpsing any true notion of what Virginia points to: the glories of God. Augustine concludes his discussion on "things" by stating mankind's current state and by explaining what a fallen mankind should, therefore, do:

> Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the "invisible things" of God "being understood by the things that are made" may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual.
>
> (1.4. 4)

Apius represents one who is rapt in the "things" of mortality, who abuses the "things" given by God for the purpose of restoration and recovery, and who worships creaturely things rather than the creator, reminiscent of idolatry.

Thus, the law, both in its proper socio-legal sense and in the sense of natural law, inherent within Virginia's body, is a source that encapsulates and degrades Apius' soul on

account of his fixation on the letter rather than the sprit. Aquinas' theory of the letter of the law directly applies to Apius' condition:

> For the Law, although sin is known by it, does not repress concupiscence, but is the occasion of increasing it, inasmuch as concupiscence is enkindled the more by something forbidden. Hence such knowledge kills, when the cause of concupiscence has not yet been destroyed. As a result it adds to the sin. For it is more grievous to sin against the written and natural law than against the natural law only: "But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of concupiscence" (Rom. 7:8). But although it is the occasion of killing inasmuch as it increases concupiscence and increases the sin, the Law is not evil, because at least it forbids evil; nevertheless, it is imperfect, inasmuch as it does not remove the cause. Therefore, the Law without the Spirit inwardly impressing the Law on the heart is the occasion of death.[21]
>
> (C. 3, L.2, 91)

Apius' agency as a judge and his knowledge of the secular law become avenues through which his concupiscence proliferates and festers. Paul claims that the Romans, like Apius, both distort justice and provide agency for further injustice, for they "having known the justice of God, did not understand that they who do such things, are worthy of death; and not only they that do them, but they also that consent to them that do them" (Rom. 1:32). The sentence of his lust-driven law leads to death: first Virginia's and then his own. Just as Virginia's living body is a sign of truth, her dead body retains the innate capacity to dispel truth, for her decapitated head becomes a sign that uncovers the signifier of Apius' hidden depravity and dooms him to death.[22] In a complete reversal and subversion of Apius' former role as a judge that "yaf his doomes upon sundry cas" (VI.163) on account of the letter of the law, Virginia's decapitated head serves as a letter sanctioning Apius to social condemnation by the people and eventual death by suicide.

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[21] Aquinas. *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians.*

[22] Virginia's body serving as a sign that then engenders order resonates with Lucrece in Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women.* Lucrese willingly sacrifices herself after being raped by King Tarquin, a tyrant both politically and personally, and as she is in the act of dying, she intentionally ensures that her body may be preserved as a sign of feminine virtue, purity, and truth: "And as she fel adoun, she caste hir look, / And of hir clothes yet she heed took; For in hir falling yet she had care / Lest that hir feet or swiche thing lay bare, / So wel she loved clennesse and eek trouthe" (1856-60). The power of her body, serving now as a sign, instigates a political revolution that replaces the monarchy with the order of the Roman Republic.

Therefore, Apius, raper of the law, becomes condemned through the very signs that he attempts to manipulate. The letter of the law kills, and his depraved soul negates his access to the spirit of the law that gives life.

Apius' suicide (rather than execution) reinforces Dinshaw's gendered sexual poetics and arises as a consequence of the literary nature of social relationships in Chaucer's text. Virginia's death at the hands of her father undermines Apius' masculine role as the reader of female texts. Kellie Robertson argues that "Virginia is a copy of Virginius, virgin daughter seemingly abiogenetically sprung from virgin father,"[23] and this biological association carries literary weight according to Dinshaw's gendered dynamics of poetry, which Robertson confirms when she elaborates that "both fine art and sexual generation are about creating copies."[24] Dinshaw claims that "[t]he basic constituent of all social relations" is "the human body" and that "literary production takes place on bodies,"[25] and Robertson reinforces this notion by claiming that Virginius' relationship to Virginia operates solely in the literary realm of the social rather than that of natural biology:

> Virginia, as a little Virginius, should induce in her original a natural desire to protect her. This duplication should elicit a corresponding empathy, as it does in the rest of the world governed by the norms of Aristotelian natural philosophy, since the "doctrine of sympathy" in medieval physics and medicine asserts the mutual predisposition of similar things. Much like the antipathetic narrator of the Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer's Virginius is out of step with this natural inclination, both innate fatherly love and the sympathetic doctrine that rules the rest of the material world. Like the Physician's earlier speech on parenting, Virginius frames parental love as a social rather than a natural obligation, one driven by moral imperatives (shame and honor) rather than biological ones (care and feeding).[26]

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[23] Robertson, *Nature Speaks*, 264.
[24] ibid, 266.
[25] Dinshaw. *Sexual Poetics,* 5.
[26] Robertson, *Nature Speaks,* 264.

In the narrative of the tale, Apius, with the power of the law behind him, becomes the social owner of Virginia, and Apius demonstrates his role as a masculine reader and master of the female text, for he demands the text of Virginia's body to bend to the interpretation of his lustful will. However, the problem for Apius arises because the "'maker' is unavoidably dependent on the copyist for the accurate transmission and, indeed, the very intelligibility of his works."[27] Virginius' apathetic destruction of his copy, Virginia, destabilizes Apius' role as the masculine owner and interpreter of the text. Without a female text, Apius has no object on which he can superimpose his will. Devoid of agency, his social position in the patriarchy of the Roman setting is destabilized. Apius is rendered impotent, for he no longer retains power over the law since his commandment "to take" Virginius "and anhange hym faste" (VI.259) sparks a social revolution that conversely results in his incarceration. The demise of Apius' social control mirrors Dinshaw's argument, especially when she points to Richard of Bury, who "openly identifies the care and preservation of books with the care and preservation of the patriarchy" since in "the act of preserving books, Richard argues, one protects against violations of property, territory, lineage, and family—against violations of the patriarchy."[28] Without a text to read, interpret, correct, "and, finally, 'rape,'" Apius loses his hierarchical authority and resorts to a masturbatory act of self-inflicted mutilation.[29]

In addition to Apius' suicide arising on account of the literary relationships in the tale, the act of self-destruction represents the victory of the flesh and the letter of the law over the spirit. When Augustine describes the kinds of "things" that are to be loved in *On Christian Doctrine*, he lists "first, the kind which is above us; second, kind which constitutes ourselves; third, that which

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[27] Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics,* 3.
[28] ibid, 18.
[29] ibid, 6.

is equal with us; and fourth, that kind which is below us" (1.23. 22). Mankind, according to Augustine, possesses a natural proclivity to love himself and his own body, regardless of his relationship with God:

> However much a man departs from the truth, there remains in him the love of himself and of his body. For the spirit, having fled the immutable light which reigns over all, acts so that it may rule itself and its own body, and thus cannot do otherwise than love itself and its own body.
>
> (1.23. 22)

Apius certainly possesses this kind of sinful soul that cannot help but love itself as demonstrated in his pride, but his suicide appears to obscure Augustine's claim that everyone necessarily loves their own body. However, Augustine continues by adding that a sinful soul "thinks it has gained much when it can also rule over its associates, who are other men. For it is the nature of the vicious spirit to desire greatly and to claim as its desert that which is properly due only to God" (1.23. 23). Apius, whose soul has been darkened, operates solely on the basis of desire that seeks to claim Virginia, who has been hand-crafted by Nature to pay homage and glory to God. Augustine's claim that "such self-love is better called hate" directly applies to Apius, for "it is iniquitous for the spirit to wish those below it to serve it and to refuse at the same time to serve a superior" (1.23. 23). Apius rebels against all forms of superior authority—both God and the law.

Apius' suicide, therefore, takes place because of the inherent disparity between the soul and the flesh. Augustine details the struggle between the decrepit soul and the body:

> it is said most justly, "He who loveth iniquity hateth his own soul." And in this way the soul is made weak and tortured by the mortal body. It is forced to love the body and is weighed down by its corruption. For immortality and purity of the body arise from the health of the spirit, and the health of the spirit arises from a firm adherence to something more powerful, that is to immutable God. When it endeavors to dominate those who are naturally its peers, other men, its pride is altogether intolerable.
>
> (1.23. 23)

Augustine claims that the spirit seeks "not that the body should be destroyed, but that its concupiscence, which is its evil habit, should be completely conquered so that it is rendered subject to the spirit as the natural order demands" (1.24. 25). With regards to the *Physician's Tale,* nature certainly demands that carnal "fetters of habits" (1.24. 25) be rooted out, as seen in the revolution, sparked by the people's natural sense of right and wrong, that overthrows Apius. As a result, he, in turn, destroys his own body rather than face the penalty of either physical or spiritual penance. Rather than being subject to execution at the hands of others, his self-love necessitates that he murder himself.

Lastly, Chaucer's authorial wit and dark humor, which testify to Apius' fixation on the letter of the law, arise in Apius' suicide. If the law can be summed up by the golden rule, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Lev. 19:18), Apius literalizes the maxim.[31] His love for Virginia deteriorates into ravenous desire, and, thus, his violent love for himself reaches a climax of suicide, a distorted form of masturbatory self-rape. Furthermore, Christ's words that "He who loveth his life shall lose it" (Jn. 12:25) find an absolutely literal interpretation in Apius and his suicide, which takes place on account of self-love. Augustine elucidates the figurative essence of this verse: "'he shall lose his life' is spoken figuratively. That is, let him cut off and put away the use of it which he now as, the perverse and unnatural use of life by which he is moved toward temporal things so that he does not seek the eternal" (3.16. 24). Apius—enrapt by the perversion of his soul and his desire for temporal, fleshly pleasure—fails to live out Christ's exhortation in its proper metaphorical sense; rather, he literalizes the verses and loses his life through suicide, the ultimate perversion of holy love for one's self.

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[31] As quoted in *On Christian Doctrine* (1.22. 21).

3. Jewish Virginius: Misreader of the Letter of the Law

> And immediately there fell from his eyes
> as *it had been* scales, and suddenly he received
> sight, and arose, and was baptized.
> — Acts 9:18

Apius is unable to rise above the first step of Thomas Aquinas' threefold ladder of clarity, for his distorted, carnal perception of the natural law, inherent within Virginia, leads to his corruption of the legal system and to his subsequent death. Moving from Aquinas' first step of the "triple degree of knowledge" to the second, the Physician presents Virginius as a Judaic reader paralyzed between the interpretative veil of the Old and the New Testaments, between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Augustine marks this shift when he says, "But just as it is a servile infirmity to follow the letter and to take signs for the things that they signify, in the same way it is an evil of wandering error to interpret signs in a useless way" (3.9. 13). While *The Physician's Tale* certainly centers around the misreading of natural law, Samantha Katz Seal, in her article "Reading Like a Jew: Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and the Letter of the Law," asserts that the tale is "just as much a critique of a father who reads the letter rather than the spirit of his situation, who adds up all the facts he sees and comes up with the 'solution' of killing his own daughter rather than turning his violence against those who attacked his family."[32] Augustine claims that the Jews of Jesus' time were inept at transitioning from a literal, authoritarian interpretation of the law to a spiritual understanding that culminates in Christ's life and example:

> And although they took signs of spiritual things for the things themselves, not knowing what they referred to, yet they acted as a matter of course that through this servitude they were pleasing the One God of all who they did not see…In this way those who stubbornly adhered to such signs as things could hardly bear it when the time for them to be revealed had come and the Lord condemned them. And hence their leaders stirred up accusations that He wrought cures on the Sabbath, and the people, taking these signs as

[32] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 299.

> things, did not believe him to be God or to have come from God, since He did not treat the signs in accordance with the Jewish observance.
>
> (3.6. 10)

This conception of Jews being misinterpreters of signs extends from Augustine's time to Chaucer's, for "When medieval Christians thought of Jews, first and foremost they imagined them as flawed readers."[33] Jeremy Cohen, a scholar of Jewish history and theology, historically contextualizes medieval conceptions of Jewish interpretation in his work *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity*. Specifically, he analyzes how Augustine's understanding of Hebraic misinterpretation plays a seminal role in shaping medieval attitudes.[34] Cohen states that "modern students of Jewish Christian relations typically attribute the theological foundations of the medieval church's Jewish policy to Augustine, referring as a matter of course to the legacies and principles of Augustinian anti-Judaism."[35] Cohen concisely summarizes Augustine's ideas of Judaic interpretation, which in turn shaped medieval thought:

> The link between Judaism and the literal interpretation of Scripture hardly requires additional demonstration. Augustine explained, repeatedly and pointedly: The Jews preserve the literal sense, they represent it, and they actually embody it—as book bearers, librarians, living signposts, and desks, who validate a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament. Unlike the "true bride of Christ," the Jew knows not the difference between letter and spirit.[36]

Augustine's sentiment, which serves as the basis for medieval attitudes towards the Jewish people and their exegetical capacities, influences the Physician's presentation of Virginius.

The Physician encourages his audience to regard Virginius as Jewish not in respect to his race but in regards to his proclivity for misinterpretation. The Physician typologically

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[33] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 301.
[34] "Augustine of Hippo bequeathed so much to Western civilization that one need hardly wonder if this bequest included his ideas on Jews and Judaism." Cohen, Jeremy. *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 19.
[35] ibid, 19.
[36] ibid, 59.

superimposes the Biblical figure of Jephthah onto Virginius on account of the explicit connection between Jephthah's daughter and Virginia, who both die at their fathers' hands because of a misapprehension of the letter of the law. Seal claims that "medieval Christian commentaries found Jephte to embody many of the deepest flaws in Jewish reading and judgment" because "he represented yet another Jew choosing the cruel enforcement of the law over the preservation of human life."[37] Augustine diagnoses the symptoms of a person who, "if he hears of Sacrifice," adheres to solely the literal letter of the law: "his thoughts do not go beyond the customary victims of the flock and fruits of the earth" (3.5. 9). Both Jephthah and Virginius possess this fixed understanding of the law. Jephthah swears a rash vow to God that he will sacrifice the first living creature that he beholds after his return from a victorious battle, and after he lays eyes on his daughter, he follows through with his promise and kills her. By honoring his impetuous vow, Jephthah does legalistically abide by the letter of Deuteronomy, which demands that:

> When thou hast made a vow to the Lord thy God, thou shalt not delay to pay it: because the Lord thy God will require it. And if thou delay, it shall be imputed to thee for a sin. If thou wilt not promise, thou shalt be without sin. But that which is once gone out of thy lips, thou shalt observe, and shalt do as thou hast promised to the Lord thy God, and hast spoken with thy own will and with thy own mouth.
>
> (Deut. 23:21-23)

Virginius' legalistic obedience dooms his daughter to death, and Seal notes that to medieval readers "Jephte represented carnality, literalism, and the violent sacrifices demanded by the Old Law."[39] As for the literalism, "Virginius takes the 'sentence of this justice Apius'" (VI.204) as if it were impossible to challenge: "He is so wedded to the law that he will sacrifice his daughter to see the fulfillment of its letter rather than the preservation of her life."[40] Even if Jephthah's

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[37] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 304.
[39] ibid, 305.
[40] ibid, 308.

action of upholding his vow were virtuous, Virginius's application of Jephthah's sacrificial methodology is fallacious. As Augustine writes,

> Therefore, although all, or almost all, the deeds which are contained in the Old Testament are to be taken figuratively as well as literally, nevertheless the reader may take as literal those performed by people who are praised, even though they would be abhorrent to the custom of the good who follow divine precepts after the advent of the Lord. He should refer the figure to the understanding, but should not transfer the deed itself to his own mores. Many things were done in the course of duty in those times which now cannot be done without libidinousness.
>
> (3.22. 32)

Jephthah's character is not set forth in scripture for emulation on account of his dutiful virtue but rather is a cautionary example of the dangers of hasty vows. Virginius, therefore, not only misreads the scripture by taking it literally, but also misreads his present situation, a misreading which Augustine attributes to lust:

> Again caution must be exercised lest anyone think that those things in the Scriptures which are neither vices nor crimes among the ancients because of the condition of their crimes, even when such things are taken literally rather than figuratively, may be transferred to our own times and put in practice. Unless he is dominated by cupidity and seeks protection for it in the very Scriptures by means of which it is to be overthrown, no one will do this. The wretched man does not realize that these things are so arranged for this purpose: that men of good hope may profitably see both that the customs which they disdain may profitably see both that the customs which they disdain may have a good use and that the customs which they themselves embrace may be damnable, if charity moves the first and cupidity accompanies the second.
>
> (3.18. 26)

Like Jephthah's carnality and also like Apius' fixation on beauty, Virginus, entrapped in a lust for the letter of the law, is unable to see beyond the sign of Virginia's external body and comprehend her spirit.[43] Thus Virginius, concerning himself with that which is carnal and

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[43] "Medieval Christianity had long established a distinction between literal and spiritual virginity in order to enable chaste women who had suffered rape (especially nuns) to remain untouched by a carnal sin to which they had not consented. Virginius, however, reasons like a Jew. Obsessed with the problem of his daughter's literal, physical virginity, he fails to value correctly the virginity of mind and spirit that the Physician has detailed so extensively in his earlier description of Virginia. "As wel in goost as body chast was she" (VI 43), the reader is told of Virginia, but Virginius is incapable of perceiving that duality. He can see only his daughter's body and is blind to the spiritual condition made manifest by the flesh." Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 309.

misreading the situation, restricts his range of choices to a false binary of "outher deeth or shame" (VI.214), and his strict adherence to the letter of the law and his fixation on the Virginia's body leads to the bloody climax of the tale in which "Hir fader with ful sorweful herte and wil / Hir heed of smoot and by the tope it hente, / And to the juge he gan it to presente" (VI.255-7). Virginius explicitly embodies the flaw of focusing on the letter rather than the spirit, for he "carries out Apius's literal sentence" of the false judgement by actually surrendering to Apius the sacrificed head of Virginia that is entirely flesh and devoid of soul.[44]

The reality of Virginius' conflicted heart and stricken conscience attests to his failure not only as a father but also as a reader of signs. Seal argues that:

> It is *despite* the "fadres pitee stikynge thurgh his herte" (VI 211) that Virginius resolves to carry out the execution of his innocent daughter. The monstrosity of adhering to a literalist reading is only magnified by the affective humanity of Virginius and his love for his daughter. Virginius's own body knows that killing his daughter is fundamentally wrong, but his blind obedience to the law prevents him from acknowledging that knowledge.[45]

Virginius' empathetic pain and bleeding conscience are palpable, for he in Job-like fashion laments his own existence when he exclaims "allas that I was bore" (VI.216) and vicariously equates his daughter, condemned to die, with the "endere of my life" (VI.218). The reality of his wavering conscience and emotional dissonance serves as proof that he is enslaved to misinterpretations as he neglects the passion of his heart for the sentence of the law. Augustine comments that when Christians come across a passage that retains an inconclusive meaning that could require a literal reading or a figurative one, they should use purity of life and sound doctrines as the interpretative metrics for their deciphering of the text.[46] Augustine qualifies his

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[44] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 308.
[45] ibid, 315.
[46] "whatever appears in the divine Word that does not literally pertain to virtuous behavior or to the truth of faith you must take to be figurative. Virtuous behavior pertains to the love of God and of one's neighbor; the truth of faith pertains to a knowledge of God and of one's neighbor" (3.10. 14).

exhortation by adding that, "For the hope of everyone lies in his own conscience in so far as he knows himself to be becoming more proficient in the love of God and of his neighbor" (3.10. 14). Virginius' conscience serves as a psychological mooring post that guides him toward the direction of proper interpretation; however, his "Hebraic literalism" suffocates the truths of his pulsing, fleshly heart in favor of the legalism of stone-written laws,[48] for he "wolde…from his purpos nat converte" (VI.212), which also evokes images of the first century Jews who would not convert to a belief in Christ.

4. Logocentric Virginia: Proto-martyr

> And that Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,
> (and we saw the glory thereof, as the glory of the only
> begotten *Son* of the Father) full of grace and truth.
> — John 1:14

Throughout the entire *Physician's Tale*, the male characters, both Apius and Virginius, are blinded by an interpretative veil that stunts their ability to perceive concealed truth and that leads to Virginia's death, just as the Jews were unable to see the spiritual truth of Christ:

> When medieval Christians imagined the Passion, for example, they emphasized the repeated opportunities that the Jews had been given to interpret Christ as spiritual text, and the Jews' mistaken assumption that they might destroy his Gospel with the destruction of his material body.[49]

However, Christ's death removes the interpretive impediments for Christians, including Chaucer's pilgrims and readers, and Virginia's death operates in a similar, Christological manner.

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[48] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 299.
[49] ibid, 301.

Virginia's sacrifice resembles Christ's on account of its clarifying, salvific qualities. In Second Corinthians, Paul discusses the Old Testament scene in which Moses, after beholding a glimpse of the truthful glory of God, has to cover his face with a veil to shield the Israelites from God's reflected glory, which induces awful terror. Aquinas' interpretation is that the veil represents a sign, misread by the Jews, that points to the signifier of God's truth and that the life and death of Christ serve to lift the veil of interpretation and provide full access to God's unfiltered truth:

> He says, therefore, that Moses put a veil, namely, of the figure, over his face; this veil is made void, i.e., is taken away by Christ, namely, by fulfilling in truth what Moses delivered in figure, because all things happened to them in a figure. For thus Christ by his death removed the veil of the killing of the paschal lamb. Therefore, as soon as he gave up his spirit, the veil of the Temple was rent. Likewise by sending the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers so that they might understand spiritually what the Jews understood carnally. He removed the veil, when he opened their mind to understand the Scriptures (Lk. 24:45).[50]
>
> (C.3, L.3, 105)

After Christ's death, the truth of God becomes accessible to the Jewish people, signified in the sundering of the temple veil that formerly separated the holiest room of the temple, where God's spirit dwells, from the rest of the mankind. However, after Christ's death, nature also attests to the truth of his divinity and his sacrifice, for "there was darkness over the whole earth" (Matt. 27:45) and "the earth quaked, and the rocks were rent" (Matt. 27:51) in an echo of the temple veil. These natural signs serve as witnesses for not only the Jews but also the Gentiles to ascertain God's truth, for a "centurion and they that were with him watching Jesus, having seen the earthquake, and the things that were done, were sore afraid, saying: Indeed this was the Son of God" (Matt. 27:54). Thus, just as Christ's death demystifies the Scriptural signs of the Old Testament and the natural signs of creation, the Physician's depiction of Virginia's death sheds

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[50] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians.*

light on her status and function as a natural sign with regards to Apius and as a Christological sign to Virginius.

Rather than the Holy Spirit acting as the reorienting force that heals the Jews of their analytic blindness, the Physician substitutes the human conscience for the Spirit, inasmuch as the tale's pagan setting precedes the advent of Christ. Virginia asks for the Christian concepts of "grace" and "remedye" (VI.236), but the Roman setting denies her that option:

> Virginia asks for mercy, for the remedy of Christ the Physician, but it is unavailable to her due to the historical circumstances in which her story is set. Without the grace of salvation, for which she also asks in vain, she can receive only the cruel sentence of the law. She will be sacrificed because, like Jephte's daughter, she lives in a time without access to Christian mercy, with a father who values justice like a Jew.[51]

Thus, contrary to the full arc of Christ's passage from death to resurrection that then makes way for the coming of the Spirit, Virginia only receives death and condemnation. Virginia is not a Christ figure herself but can only act as a Christological martyr.

As discussed earlier, the Physician presents Virginia as the perfect sign, like Christ, which illuminates her inner truth as Nature's homage to God. However, just as Christ's body is beaten and mutilated on account of misinterpretation by the Gentiles and Jews alike, Virginia's body is lacerated to a similar degree; however, grace abounds in and through both sacrificial deaths, as does the ability to read properly.[52] Whereas Christ experiences the resurrection, Virginia does not; therefore, the Physician presents Virginia not as a pre-Christian Jesus but as a proto-Christian martyr who undergoes a Christological sacrifice. Thus, Virginia's death, which reflects the medieval trend of the suppression of the female voice, is a typological shadow or

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[51] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 313.

[52] Cecilia's female martyrdom in the *Second Nun's Tale* operates in a parallel manner with equally comparable effects, for her words expose the impotence of Almachius' authority: "For thy power is ful naked" (VIII.486). Her powerful use of language also emasculates Almachius in an echo of Apius' reversal: "That ilke stoon a god thow wolt it calle. / I rede thee, lat thyn hand upon it falle / And taste it wel, and stoon thou shalt it fynde, / Syn that thou seest nat with thyne eyen blynde" (VIII.501-4). The testicular pun on "stoons" of the pagan statue emasculates Almachius, and his inability to read properly is additionally highlighted.

prefiguration of Christ's death. As illustrated in Revelation, Christ both is the Word and also wields words with authority in order to judge:

> And I saw heaven open, and behold a white horse, and he that sat upon him was called faithful and true, and he judgeth and fighteth righteously. …And he was clothed with a garment dipped in blood, and his name is called, THE WORD OF GOD… And out of his mouth went out a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the heathen: for he shall rule them with a rod of iron, for he it is that treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God.
>
> (Rev. 19:11-15)

Virginia's death by the sword arises only when her decisive words consent to the will of her father in a direct echo of Christ's prayer in Gethsemane of "not my will, but thine be done" (Luke 22:42): "Blissed be God that I shal dye a mayde! / Yif me my deeth er that I have a shame. / Dooth with your child youre wyl, a Goddes name" (VI.248-50). However, her dying words lose the sharpness of Christ's words that are "living and effectual, and more piercing than any two edged sword; and reaching unto the division of the soul and the spirit, of the joints also and the marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). The Physician describes Virginia's death as a gradual reduction, dulling, or veiling of her voice to the point of silence:

> And with that word she preyed hym ful ofte
> That with his sword he wolde smyte softe.
> And with that word aswowne doun she fil
> Her fader with ful sorweful hearte and wil
> Hir heed of smoot and by the tope it hente,
> And to the juge he gan it to presente
> As he sat yet in doom in consistorie.
>
> (VI.252-58)

Virginia's "word" structurally enwraps Virginius' "sword" on account of the repetition in lines 252 and 254, signifying that her words possess the form of a double-edged sword since her "word" poetically engulfs both edges of her father's "sword." However, the Physician simply

gives his audience the form of her word without the substance. Virginia's word, therefore, acts a kind of passive, receptive sheath that possesses the shape and form of the masculine, active sword but that lacks the agency.

What we hear from the Physician is a detached commentary without Virginia's actual words. This kind of systematic silencing resonates with the medieval mode of patriarchal interpretation, where the "signification" is "dependent upon the passivity, blankness, or absence of women."[53] Dinshaw's claim that "Medieval limitations of women's expression seem, in the final analysis, inseparable from the regulation of woman's body" applies perfectly to Virginia's death.[54] The "correlation between the masculine silencing of women's writing (and appropriation of women's voices) and the masculine control of their bodies" manifests explicitly in the incremental quieting of Virginia's voice that coincides with the mutilation of her body.[55] Rather than consciously and triumphantly declaring victory over death, like Christ who declares, "It is consummated" before "bowing his head" and surrendering his "ghost" (John 19:30), Virginia falls unconsciously "aswowne" (VI.254) before her head is rent from her defenseless body. Her passive and submissive death echoes Christ's emptying of himself described in Philippians 2:6-11:

> [Christ] Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross. For which cause God also hath exalted him, and hath given him a name which is above all names: That in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those that are in heaven, on earth, and under the earth: And that every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father.

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[53] Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics,* 16.
[54] ibid, 19.
[55] ibid 20.

The Physician describes her death as passive and receptive, but the effects of her death and of the agency gained by her body engender powerful, transformative outcomes. Thus, Virginia's death is "a shadow of things to come" anticipating "the body…of Christ" (Col 2:17) but not quite fulfilling the same role.

However, as demonstrated earlier in Apius' masturbatory death, Virginia's demise actually undermines the Virginius' male patriarchy of literary interpretation. Dinshaw argues that, "Chaucer's works point to a critique of patriarchal conceptions of language and literary activity."[56] Her body itself takes on the qualities of Christ's discerning words of judgement, for it becomes a sign of Apius' crimes and exposes the "intents" (Heb. 4:12) of his corruption. Furthermore, the Physician specifically adopts the illuminating transformation of scriptural interpretation that occurs though Christ's death, resurrection, and consummate coming of the Spirit. The death of his daughter's body enables Virginius to ascertain the spirit of the law, thereby destroying the literalistic male patriarchy and resurrecting it to one of grace. Dinshaw explains that

> A defining characteristic of the female, in both classical and Christian exegetical traditions is her corporality, her association with matter and the physical body as opposed to the male's association with form and soul. Aristotle's political analysis of woman…is clearly related to his theory of the metaphysical female principle as *steresis*, the totally passive privation of her physical being with matter (as opposed to the male being, which is characterized by form, animation, and generation).[57]

The Physician subverts Aristotle's binary notion because the slaughtering of Virginia's unconscious, passive body is the very force that instigates Virginius' ascertainment of the spirit. Virginius would not be able to understand matters of the spirit, of grace, without the death of Virginia's body. Her death, therefore, mirrors the death of Christ's body, the Word made flesh.

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[56] ibid, 16.
[57] ibid, 19.

Christ's death redeems humanity's ability to perceive the Word properly on account of the Old Testament's pervasive idea of the Messiah, prophesied throughout scripture, being made manifest in the body of Christ and made accessible through the transformative powers of his spirit:

> Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and diligently searched, who prophesied of the grace to come in you. Searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ in them did signify: when it foretold those sufferings that are in Christ, and the glories that should follow: To whom it was revealed, that not to themselves, but to you they ministered those things which are now declared to you by them that have preached the gospel to you, the Holy Ghost being sent down from heaven, on whom the angels desire to look.
>
> (1 Pet. 1:10-12)

The Physician shadows Virginia's death with this messianic idea from Peter that Christ's body is the ultimate sign that points to the signified truths of God; however, with the removal of her voice and the absence of a resurrection, she is nothing more than a martyr, a sacrifice.

If Virginia is a proto-martyr, the Roman people, including Virgnius, are proto-Christian converts and, collectively, a proto-church. The atrocity of Virginia's death precipitates a restoration of order—sparked by an innate, natural desire for justice—from the unified body of the Roman citizens.[58] Within the narrative framework of the tale, injustice reigns supreme, as the morally pristine Virginia is condemned and exploited legally and domestically; however, the grossly palpable weight of iniquity triggers a keen response by the people that restores order:

> But right anon a thousand peple in thraste,
> To save the knyght for routhe and for pitee,
> For knowen was the false iniquitee.
> The peple anon hath suspect of this thyng,
> By manere of the cherles chalangyng.

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[58] This restoration of order mirrors the conclusion of *The Legend of Lucrece*. Lucrece' body becomes a sign of both feminine virtue and masculine injustice that fills "al the toun of Rome" with "routhe." This pity leads to the open revelation of Tarquin's hidden atrocities, "the horrible deed of hir oppressioun" (1868), and to the creation of the ordered Roman Republic. Furthermore, *The Legend of Lucrece,* which takes place in a pre-Christian Roman setting, blends the Christian and pagan traditions, much as the *Physician's Tale* does, for Lucrece is thereafter "holden" as a "seynt" (1870-1).

(VI.260-4)

Her wrongful execution is the climactic force that reorients the people's vision in a secularized instance of proto-salvation. Her death exponentially augments the sense of injustice, which reciprocally provokes an innate desire for justice within the people, regardless of their broken and fallen condition.

The Physician reveals, through the monstrous atrocity of Virginia's death and the people's subsequent response, that human beings do possess an inherent sense of right and wrong that stems from the human conscience. In the second chapter of Romans, Paul asserts that Gentiles have the capacity to ascertain the natural law of God's truth through their consciences. Before Virginia's death, the people lack the ability to see through natural signs to glimpse God's underlying truth. Apius cannot see this truth because his wicked concupiscence drowns out his moral conscience, and Virginius, likewise, spurns and stifles his conscience due to his fixation on the letter of the law. However, the divergence of Apius' and Virginius' respective outcomes attests to the reality that Virgnia's death restores and redeems the human conscience; it can in fact discern right from wrong and glimpse the truthful meaning within the natural law. Aquinas says that, "With the removal of the veil the truth is manifested very clearly to all who open the eyes of their mind through faith" (C.3, L.3, 107).[59] The injustice of Virginia's death clarifies the people's clouded misperceptions, opens their eyes on account of their transformed consciences, and leads to their revolt. This shift in the social order precipitates Virginius' commensurate transformation:

> When Virginius's Judaizing interpretation of how to understand the law has been overthrown by the populace to save his life, Virginius chooses to understand the signs

[59] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians.*

> that have been placed before him. He converts to Virginia's way of reading, accepting the rule of mercy for himself that he denied to his daughter.[60]

Even though Virginius formerly neglected his conscience to follow to the letter of the law, the conflict between his internal conscience and his external action does not condemn him; rather, his conscience steers him to the truth and allows him to be converted to right seeing. Aquinas maintains that "if conscience bears witness about good or evil, this is a clear sign that the work of the Law has been written in the man's heart" (C.2, L.115, 216).[61] The animated conscience, marked by sorrow and pity that is present in Virginius but deadened in Apius, serves as a foothold for restoration.[62]

The Physician discourages his audience from taking the sign of Virginia's death and reading it as an Old Testament sacrifice; rather, he presents her death as a type that prefigures and anticipates Christ. He encourages his audience to read Christologically. Virginius, because of his kindled conscience, possesses the capacity for conversion to a proto-Christian way of seeing, and Virginia's Christological martyrdom engenders his adaptation from a purely Jewish mentality to a more broadened Christian one. This shift is evident in Virginius' plea that Claudius receive mercy even when the letter of the law demands his condemnation and death:

> …And Claudius,
> That servant was unto this Apius,
> And demed for to hange upon a tree,
> But that Virginius of his pitee

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[60] Seal, "Reading like a Jew," 315.

[61] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans.*

[62] The theme of pity, which Chaucer equates with nobility, is a major theme that arises throughout Chaucer's greater body of work. Ananalese Duprey provides the locations of the various iterations of "Pite renneth soon in gentil herte": "Merchant's Tale, 4, line 1986, "Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!"; Squire's Tale, 5, line 479, "That pitee renneth soone in gentil herte"; Legend of Good Women, F Prol., line 503, "But pite renneth soone in gentil herte"; Knight's Tale, 1, line 920, "Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentillesse"; Man of Law's Tale, 2, line 660, "A gentil herte is fulfild of pitee"; Merchant's Tale, 4, line 1995, "This gentil May, fulfilled of pitee"; Legend of Good Women, F. Prol., line 161, "Yet Pitee, thurgh his stronge gentil myght"; Troilus and Criseyde, 3, lines 4–5: "O goodly demonaire, / In gentil hertes ay redy to repaire!" This quotation is found in the first note of Duprey, Annalese. "Chapter 4 'Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte': Pity as Moral and Sexual Persuasion in Chaucer," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 30 (2014): 55-66. https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed April 16, 2019).

So pryede for hym that he was exiled.
(VI.269-73)

The Physician, therefore, intimates that Virginia's death acts as a Christ-like atonement for the people through an allusion to the cross. Christ's death on the cross is the culmination of his bearing the transgressions of mankind onto his body, which is most clearly stated by the apostle Peter. He expresses that Christ, "bore our sins in his body upon the tree: that we, being dead to sins, should live to justice: by whose stripes you were healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). Claudius's justified punishment for his collusion in the false trial and subsequent death of Virginia is not only his death but, specifically, death on a cross, for he is "demed for to hange upon a tree" (VI.271). Importantly, however, Virginia's sacrifice, atoning for Claudius' deserved death, converts Virginius from exacting a law of condemnation to offering grace and forgiveness. Peter claims that "Because Christ also died once for our sins, the just for the unjust…he might offer us to God, being put to death indeed in the flesh, but enlivened in the spirit" (1 Pet. 3.18). Virginia submits to the death of her flesh, but the result is the illumination of Virginius' understanding of the Spirit. Virginius, therefore, mirrors the Gentile Christians who in 1 Peter are "called…out of darkness into his [Christ's] marvellous light: Who in time past were not a people: but are now the people of God. Who had not obtained mercy; but now have obtained mercy" (1 Pet. 2:10). At the close of the *Physician's Tale*, Virginius reads the law through the light of the Spirit, which comes through Virginia's merciless death, and Claudius receives the grace which he did not deserve.

Lastly, Aquinas—when commenting on Paul's statement in Romans that the Gentiles "*do by nature what the law requires* i.e., the moral precepts, which flow from a dictate of natural

reason"—asserts that "*by nature* should mean nature reformed by grace" (C.2, L.113, 216).[63] Virginius' adoption of grace proves that he now sees the spirit of natural law properly. The mercy marks the shift from fleshly misinterpretation to right seeing, focalized around Augustine's view of charity: "The more the reign of cupidity is destroyed, the more charity is increased" (3.10. 16). Virginius' conscience makes way for the transformation of his heart and for his ability to see beyond the letter of the law. He becomes a proto-convert, but Apius' absence of conscience condemns him to the precepts of the law.[65] His suicide stands as the ultimate sign of the death through the sole fixation on the letter of the law. Rather than having the veil lifted from his vision like Virginius, Apius becomes suffocated within it.

5. The Physician: The Portrait of the Doctor as an Experienced Man

> I swear by Apollo Physician and Asclepius
> and Hygieia and Panaceia and all the gods
> and goddesses, making them my witnesses,
> that I will fulfil according to my ability and

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[63] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*.

[65]Saint Augustine. "Exposition on Psalm 105." Translated by J.E. Tweed. From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 8. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801105.htm; The Physician, when speaking of Virginia, expresses that,

> Both of her beautee and hir bountee wyde,
> that thurgh that land they preised hire echone
> That loved vertu, save Envye alone,
> That sory is of oother mennes wele
> And glad is of his sorwer and his unheele.
> (VI. 112-5)

He quotes Augustine's commentary on Psalm 104:25, which reads "And He turned their heart so, that they hated His people, and dealt untruly with His servants." Augustine explains that,

> Is it to be in any wise understood or believed, that God turns man's heart to do sin?...For they were not good before they hated His people; but being malignant and ungodly, they were such as would readily envy their prosperous sojourners. And so, in that He multiplied His own people, this bountiful act turned the wicked to envy. For envy is the hatred of another's prosperity. In this sense, therefore, He turned their heart, so that through envy they hated His people, and dealt untruly with His servants. It was not then by making their hearts evil, but by doing good to His people, that He turned their hearts, that were evil of their own accord, to hatred. For He did not pervert a righteous heart, but turned one perverted of its own accord to the hatred of His people, while He was to make a good use of that evil; not by making them evil, but by lavishing blessings upon those, which the wicked might most readily envy.

Within the context of the Physician's tale, Nature lavishes Virginia with goodness and beauty, but it is not those gifts that lead Apius to sin as Harry Bailey later claims (VI.293-6); it is the pre-existing evil within Apius' soul.

judgment this oath and this covenant
— Hippocratic Oath

It is no coincidence that Chaucer uses the figure of a physician as the story-teller of this disturbing tale wherein repentance and spiritual rehabilitation are the intended effects. The Physician himself, like Apius and Virginius, is a reader of texts, but rather than consuming the texts for himself and fixating on the texts' pleasurable surface, he opts to go beyond the Latin signs of "Titus Livius['s]" (VI.1) tale and translate those signs into a readily accessible English medium for the sake of his audience.[66] Furthermore, the *Physician's Tale*, as we have seen, draws heavily from Augustine's discussion of signs and signifiers. Augustine himself employs the metaphor of a surgical physician to describe how the wisdom of God heals mankind:

> Just as a cure is the way to health, so also this Cure received sinners to heal and strengthen them. And just as physicians when they bind up wounds do not do so haphazardly but neatly so that a certain beauty accompanies the utility of the bandages. (1.14. 13)

When the body is broken and dying, surgery is a brutal necessity. Physicians must first find the root of the problem and then cut, painfully deep, into the very spot of affliction in order to make the body well. As a storyteller, the Physician does exactly what he would do in a surgery. The cruel, unjust, and merciless death of Virginia penetrates the consciences and very souls of the pilgrims. He arrests fleshly hearts to the point of contrition with a tale of fleshly terror that finds its climax in the slaughter of Virginia's body. In the same manner, the wisdom of God, contained in the body of Christ, saves mankind. To return to Augustine:

> the medicine of Wisdom by taking on humanity is accommodated to our wounds, healing some by contraries and some by similar things. He who tends to the wounds of the body sometimes applies contraries, such as cold to hot, moist to dry, and so on; at other times he applies similar things, like a round bandage for an oblong wound, not using the same bandage for all members but fitting similar things to similar. Thus the Wisdom of God, setting out to cure men, applied Himself to cure them, being at once the Physician and the

[66] "Chaucer probably got the tale not directly from Livy, but from the French allegorical dream vision *The Romance of the Rose,* part of which he translated into English" (Boeing 261).

> Medicine. Because man fell through pride, He applied humility as a cure. We were trapped by the wisdom of the serpent; we are freed by the foolishness of God. Just as that which was called wisdom was foolishness is wisdom on those who conquer the Devil. We ill used our immortality, so that we deserved to die; Christ used his mortality well to restore us.
>
> (1.14. 13)

The spiritual disease, as Augustine claims, "arose through the corrupted spirit of a woman." However, "from the incorrupted flesh of a woman proceeded our salvation" (1.14. 13), in reference to Christ's virgin birth. Chaucer, showing off his wit, not only uses a physician to act as Augustinian teacher of proper interpretation or to serve as an administrator of the harsh truth of sin and the need for repentance, but also makes the "woman's virgin body" of Virginia the very vessel through which salvation comes to the characters of the *Physician's Tale.* Ultimately then Chaucer, through the Physician, employs the "Christian medicine" (1.14. 13), a painful yet effective remedy.

This favorable reading of the Physician and his tale falls on the positive side of a divided scholarly debate over his integrity and intent on account of the inherent ambiguity which resides in the Physician's portrait, particularly with regards to avarice and religious skepticism. Carole Rawcliffe, in her essay "The Doctor of Physic," provides a thorough commentary of the Physician's portrait in the General Prologue that draws from medieval historical sources, furnishes modern readers with vital contextual information to help mediate the ambiguity, and uncovers the biases and attitudes that medieval readers would have harbored either for or against the medical profession. Ultimately, Rawcliffe's discussion concludes that "the Doctor remains an ambiguous character, one whose curious compound of contradictory elements defies easy categorization."[71] There even exists "such a lively debate among critics"[72] regarding his

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[71] Rawcliffe, Carole. "The Doctor of Physic," in *Historians on Chaucer: The 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales*, edited by Stephen Rigg. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 318.
[72] ibid, 298.

character and morality: "Some regard him as an impressive, even idealized, ornament to his profession, while others see only a grasping and unscrupulous charlatan. A third group of scholars, including Walter Curry and Jill Mann, are struck by the ambivalence of a character of whom nothing is 'absolutely sure.'"[73] However, by attuning to Augustine's attitude toward the medical practice and to the Physician's concern for linguistic and literary causes and effects, the equivocality of the Physician's character can be read in a positive light. The allegations of avarice and atheism, which arise from the ambiguity of the portrait, reflect genuine historical stereotypes but do not define the Physician's motivations and convictions which manifest in his tale.

The first ambiguous character trait of the Physician is his apparent lack of faith based on his scant "studie" of the Bible (I.438). The obscurity of the Physician's faith arises from the contemporary historical debates, which "Chaucer was clearly aware of," centering around the place of genuine faith in a rational scientific field of study: "[b]y the early fourteenth century, some clergy had come to admire the rigour and dedication of this new breed of academically trained *medicus*, while none the less recognizing that such men were sometimes 'prone to laxity in faith.'"[74] Rawcliffe provides a brief summary of religious suspicions revolving around the Physician's character:

> The Doctor's preference for the work of pagan authorities (most notably Averroes) and apparent neglect of Holy Scripture subtly evoke the more extreme allegations of godlessness and lack of compassion made by critics of medical materialism.[75]

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[73] ibid, 298; Walter C. Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (revised edition, London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), 36; Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 98.
[74] ibid, 313.
[75] ibid, 318.

On one hand, the extensive list of pagan, medical authorities serves to highlight the Physician's depth and breadth of learning: "In this respect, Chaucer's catalogue of medical authorities might be compared with the Knight's numerous battle honours (I: 51-66), since it, too, reflects a striking level of expertise and distinction."[76] However, this impressive genealogy of predominantly pagan sources from classical Greek and middle-eastern authors induces skepticism about the sanctity of his faith. Rawcliffe comments that "[s]uch achievements were, nonetheless, likely to prompt censure…where academic medicine inspired considerable unease,"[77] and she adds that, "his neglect of the Scriptures (I: 438) seems all the more striking in view of his easy familiarity with so many 'heathen' experts on medicine and pharmacy."[78]

However, by viewing the Physician not only as an expert on medicine and surgery but also a teacher of signs and signifiers, we see that his proficient comprehension of pagan sources, in fact, supports his role as an Augustinian mentor to the pilgrims. Augustine, from his personal experience as a convert, claims that heathen knowledge serves a useful purpose for Christians in their duty to read scripture properly and for the Christian mission of glorifying God. Firstly, Augustine claims that, when interpreting figurative expressions, the knowledge of things is as imperative as knowledge of the words themselves. Augustine puts forth the maxim that all truth is God's truth, even if it derives from heathen sources, which can be used to better understand signs and remove any lack of knowledge regarding those signs. He declares "every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's" (2.18. 28), just before warning his readers to guard their hearts from the temptation of worshipping images like Apius does:

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[76] ibid, 311.
[77] ibid, 312.
[78] ibid, 310.

> Confessing and acknowledging this truth also in the sacred writings [of the pagan], he [the Christian] will repudiate superstitious imaginings and will deplore and guard against men who ""when they knew God…have not glorified him as God, or given thanks; but became vain in their thoughts, and their foolish heart was darkened. For professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. And they changed the glory of the incorruptible God into the likeness of the image of a corruptible man, and of birds, and of four-footed beasts, and of creeping things.
>
> (2.18. 28)

The end, therefore, of using the pagan knowledge is for the understanding of scriptural interpretation and, subsequently, the communication of the Gospel message. The means rely entirely on the sanctity of spirit:

> As for they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them [reference to Islamic sources]...These, therefore, the Christian, when he separates himself in spirit from the miserable fellowship of these men, ought to take away from them, and to devote to their proper use in preaching the gospel.
>
> (2.40. 60)

Further justification of the Physician's expertise on pagan sources arises out of Augustine's opinion that the only beneficial pieces of knowledge from heathen sources are specifically those of physiology, which the Physician focuses on:

> Among other teachings to be found among the pagans, aside from the history of things both past and present, teachings which concern the corporeal senses, including the experience and theory of the mechanical arts…I consider nothing to be useful.
>
> (2.39. 58)

Thus, the Physician's comprehensive expertise of medical knowledge derived from pagan origins stands not as a strike against the legitimacy of his faith but as a defense of his role as a teacher of the interpretation of signs.

Augustine's exhortations, along with a proper historical contextualization, broadens the possibilities of meaning regarding the Physician's apparent limited study of the Bible. Firstly, Augustine claims that scripture itself serves as a tool to inculcate divine love of self, others, and

God. Thus, if one already possessed this degree of love, Augustine suggests that scripture's only use for that one would be for instruction: "Thus a man supported by faith, hope and charity, with an unshaken hold upon them, does not need the Scriptures except for the instruction of others. And many live by these three things in solitude without books" (1.39. 43). The absence of studying scripture, according to Augustine, does not discount the presence of Christian love, nor the ability to teach and instruct others. Thus, the Physician's supposedly minimal study of the Bible does not negate his ability to instruct others, leading them to proper interpretation and then, ultimately, love.

The historical context of a doctor of physic's education challenges the notion that the Physician himself is ignorant of Scripture. Rawcliffe explains that "the recipient of a doctorate in medicine, or of any other degree, from Oxford or Cambridge must have taken minor clerical orders," so the Physician, by nature of his vocation, received religious instruction and training.[84] Furthermore, Rawcliffe adeptly points out the truth of Harry Bailey's sarcastic comment that the Doctor is "lyke a prelate" (VI.310), for she explains that "Bailly's observation…should be taken at face value, since he possesses all the *gravitas* and learning of a senior ecclesiastic, without ever having been fully ordained."[85] Perhaps, then, Chaucer's description that his "studie was but litel on the Bible" (VI.438) is an understatement of comparison, making his study of scripture seem relatively deficient in comparison to his thorough medical education. This theory holds weight when considering that a doctor of physic would have "devoted the best part of two decades to their studies" of medicine and science.[86]

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[84] Rawcliffe, "The Doctor of Physic," 301.
[85] ibid, 303.
[86] ibid, 302.

The Pardoner, the natural foil of the Physician and the speaker of the tale which immediately follows the Physician's, serves as a negative exemplum which affirms the Physician's methodology of teaching the precepts of scripture without the use of scripture itself. The Pardoner begins his prologue by admitting that his public sermons and "hauteyn" (VI.330) speeches are rooted not in the heart or in love but in "rote" (VI.332) memory, and he follows with a recitation of polished scripture: "My theme is alwey oon and evere was: / *Radix malorum est cupiditas*" (VI.333-4). The Physician chooses not to use scripture, given that his primary aim is teaching others to understand signs and signifiers in order that they may grasp the signified truth of the Spirit. The Pardoner, conversely, gives his audience the sign of the scripture, emphasized by his use of the Latin text which his English audience does not comprehend. Conversely, he purposely masks the signified, the translation of which is "the root of evil is cupidity" (VI.267). His focus on the sign superficially inflates his own status, making him seem learned and holy. Thus, when he "spitte[s]…out" his "venym under hew / Of hoolynesse, to semen hooly and trewe" (VI.421-2), he himself becomes an empty sign with no real signified depth. Moreover, the Pardoner subsumes his audience's free will as they, devoid of comprehending the signified meaning of his signs, become reliant on him and fall into his self-serving, materialistic schemes. The Pardoner deliberately casts a veil over the text. Unlike the Pardoner, the Physician, who knows Latin yet chooses not to employ it, seeks to make the role of the scriptural intermediary obsolete in Augustinian fashion: "Just as a man who knows how to read will not need another reader from whom he may hear what is written when he finds a book, he who receives the precepts we wish to teach will not need another to reveal those things which need explaining" (Prologue 9).[87] The Pardoner, however, offers the forgiveness of Christ only by

[87] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine.*

the means of his exclusive intercession: "And Jesu Crist that is our soules leche [soul's physician] / So graunte yow his paroun to receyve" (VI.917-8). Furthermore, the signified meaning of the Pardoner's scripture ironically highlights the Pardoner's defining character trait, greed: "Of avarice and of swich cursednesse / Ys al my preaching for to make hem free / To yeven hir pens—and namely unto me" (VI.400-3). The Pardoner inadvertently confesses that he himself denies the signified truth of God in favor of a lie like the Romans and instead serves created things.

There are potentially justifiable ends for the Pardoner's actions. However, those ends come at the expense of his own salvation, and those people who repent have no personal agency to work out their faith but rather become reliant on another for correction. While his ecclesiastical services "kan…maken oother folk to twynne / From avarice and soore to repente," that is "nat" his "principal entente" (VI.430-2). Augustine details a similar dilemma:

> But anyone who understands in the Scriptures something other than that intended by them is deceived, although they do not lie. However, as I began to explain, if he is deceived in an interpretation which builds up charity, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passed through a field to the same place towards which the road itself leads. But he is to be corrected and shown that it is more useful not to leave the road, lest the habit of deviating force him to take a crossroad or a perverse way.
>
> (1.36. 41)

Thus, the Pardoner acts as one of the "false prophets, who come to you in the clothing of sheep, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 7:15), and the people are "lying like sheep that have no shepherd" (Matt. 9:36)—a situation that the Physician directly warns against when he entreats that, "Under a sheperde softe and necligent / the wolf hath many sheepe and lamb torent" (VI.101-2). Wolfishness defines both his materialism and his identity as a spiritual mercenary who preys on the innocent instead of praying with them, over them, and for them.

Lastly, another contentious, ambiguous detail in the Physician's portrait, which aligns with the Pardoner's character, is his suspected avarice. The satirical line that "For gold in phisik is a cordial. / Therefore he lovede gold in special" (VI.443-4) arises on account of a medieval social stereotype of doctors of physics that is best captured in the *Romaunt of the Rose*:

> Phisiciens and advocates
> Gon right by the same yates;
> They selle her science for wynnyng,
> And haunte her craft for gret getyng.
> Her wynnyng is of such swetnesse,
> They are full glad for her encres;
> For by her wille, withoute lees,
> Everich man shulde be sek,
> And though they die, they sette not a lek.
> After, whanne they gold have take,
> Ful litel care for hem they make.
> (5721-32)[90]

Historically, this stereotype derives from the '"no win" situation of a physician's role during times of plague: "had they fled the plague they would have been deemed negligent, but by remaining behind they appeared mercenary and exploitative."[91] Rawcliffe addresses this stereotype and takes a more favorable stance on the Physician's disposition: "literary critics who focus upon the alleged detachment of the medical profession overlook the fact that, greatly to his credit, the Doctor continues to maintain successful practice during epidemics (I: 442) rather than taking to the heels, which was an option favored by many."[92] Rawcliffe additionally uncovers some of the biases attributed to the Physician by explaining that medieval doctors of physic, because of their commitment to erudition, rejected more accessible, profitable, and expedient ends:

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[90] Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer.* Edited by Larry Dean Benson. 3rd ed. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987.
[91] Rawcliffe, "The Doctor of Physic," 316.
[92] ibid, 316.

> Surprisingly, in view of his notorious love of gold (I: 444), the Doctor's early career, at least seems to have been marked by a preference for scholarship rather than the bustle of a rapidly expanding highly lucrative medical marketplace. Since no formal qualifications were then required for the practice of physic, the great majority of English medical students (who were already Bachelors or Masters of Arts) left university *before* graduation in search of patronage, while a mere handful stayed on to pursue their studies.[93]

As discussed earlier, the Physician's education would have spanned at least two decades, which means that he values the underlying principles of science and medicine over the monetary fruits which the application of his knowledge produces, just as he concerns himself with the fundamental meaning of signs rather than settling for the signs themselves (as the Pardoner ostentatiously does). Thus, while both the Physician and the Pardoner are ambiguous signs who could be easily compared and conflated, their signified intent and underlying degrees of knowledge greatly differ as a meta-example of the dangers of misinterpretation based on a shallow reading of signs. Thus, Chaucer positions the rapacious Pardoner immediately after the Physician not in order to reveal their equivalent degrees of greed but to illuminate the inherent differences between their respective intentions. Whereas the Pardoner seeks to serve himself, the Physician serves others. With regards to historical context, physicians risk their well-being to heal others by venturing into plague-infested populations, and they incur a social stereotype as medicinal mercenaries as an unavoidable cost. With regards to the context of the *Canterbury Tales,* the Physician risks his own reputation and his chances of winning the tale-telling competition by relating a harrowing story that excises all "solaas" or enjoyment in order to heal the pilgrims spiritually by exposing them to the "sentence" (I.798) of God and themselves, regarding both the hidden meaning of God through signs and the literal sentence of sin that condemns and "forsake[s]" (VI.286) them.

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[93] ibid, 302.

In this way, Chaucer's presentation of the Physician as an initially ambiguous sign perfectly conforms to the Physician's own intention of guiding others to proper interpretation. The ambivalent sign of the Physician is a catalyst for Chaucer's readers to engage, actively, in the action of interpreting his character by means of their own personal reading, of his portrait, his sequential tale, and his positioning next to the Pardoner.

6. The Moral: Forsaketh synne er synne yow forsake

> The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.
>
> — Frederick Buechner[94]

The Physician does not apply a Biblical lexicon to frame sin, the recognition of sin, and repentance of sin that is elucidated through the traditional Judeo-Christian law; rather, he, like Paul, stresses that sin and that the necessity of repentance are known through one's natural conscience. The evident corruption and obstruction of justice and the exploitation of innocence are met with an eventual restoration of order in the tale with the Roman people's response, Apius' condemnation and suicide, and Claudius' exile. Thus, the morals of "Heere may men seen how sÿnne hath his merite. / Beth war, for no man woot whom God wol smyte / In no degree ne in which manere wyse" (VI.277-9) and of "Forsaketh synne er synne yow forsake" (VI.286) apply to the primary sinners of the tale, Apius and Claudius. Their sins brought about the justice that condemns them. The moral does not apply to Virginia, for her death, like Christ's, is brought about by a corrupted legal system in the hands of an even more corrupt male hierarchy. Furthermore, her death, like Christ's, restores the injustice of sin through sacrifice.

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[94] Buechner, Frederick. *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), 7.

By drawing the moral from Claudius and Apius, the Physician forces the pilgrims to identify with Claudius' and Apius' morally bankrupt and damned condition rather than Virginia's exemplarity. Augustine explains that the reason Scripture records the sins of men, such as Jephthah, is

> The sins of these men have been recorded for a reason, and that is that the lesson of the Apostle may be everywhere momentous, where he says, "He that thinketh himself to stand, let him take heed lest he fall." There is hardly a page in the holy books in which it is not shown that God resists the proud but to the humble offers grace.
>
> (3.23. 33)

The Physician's moral reveals to the pilgrims God's concern for justice, pushes them towards humility and repentance, and reveals that their own deviation from God's standard of right and wrong is made known through their natural consciences: "The worm of conscience may agryse / Of wikked lyf, though it so pryvee be / That no man woot therof but God and he" (VI.280-2). The Physician even universalizes humanity's natural ability to know God's standard of righteousness and God's detestation of sin when he adds that both the "lewed man, or ellis lered" (VI.283) are deserving subjects of God's wrath. Daniel Pigg, in his work "Does the Punishment Fit the Crime?: Chaucer's *Physician's Tale* and the Worlds of Judgement," asserts that "the judgement of the gods or the Christian God remains outside the frame of the narrative."[95] The Physician deliberately makes no explicit expression of God's judgement within the tale in order to emphasize that God's sense of justice is woven within the natural fabric of human consciousness through the intense feelings of guilt and aversion that arise in the human conscience in response to injustice.

Pigg, Daniel F. "Does the Punishment Fit the Crime?: Chaucer's 'Physician's Tale' and the Worlds of Judgement," in *Crime and Punishment in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Mental-historical Investigations of Basic Human Problems and Social Responses.* Ed. by Albrecht Classen and Connie Scarborough, 347-58. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2012, 358.

In his proto-hagiography, the Physician omits a redeeming scene of divine intervention. This excision of the *deus ex machina* trope—which Chaucer employs in his other hagiographies, the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Prioress' Tale*—is a deliberate choice of authorial intent which casts the narrative of the Physician's tale entirely within the natural realm. The Physician chooses not to focus on God's explicit displays of glory; rather, he shifts the scope to both the internal workings of the heart and the conscience and also the actions of God as revealed through the intermediation of signs. In the *Man of Law's Tale,* Custance, a righteous young woman who is the "mirour of alle curteisye" (II.166), cries out for "Mercy!" (II.516), like Virginia, after washing ashore the beaches of King Alla's Northumberland. In the place of mercy, she becomes the subject of male desire and, subsequent, legal abuse, when a "false knyght" (II.619), who is "hoote of foul affeccion" (II.589), frames her for an egregious murder, committed by his own hands. Unlike Virginia, whose supplications are repaid with death, Custance receives mercy not from human agency but from divine intervention. After the knight falsely swears by the Bible, condemning Custance to an underserved death, the physical hand of God intervenes to reconcile and illuminate the corrupt proceedings and also enforce righteous judgement:

> An hand hym smoot upon the nekke boon,
> That doun he fil atones as a stoon,
> And bothe hise eyen broste out of his face
> In sighte of everybody in that place.
> (II.669-72)

The Man of Law, unlike the Physician, unequivocally explains that God acts directly and physically. Even moving beyond the miraculous act of God's own hand acting as an arbiter of justice, God's words—not written in a Bible but articulated by his own voice—eradicate any ambiguity and declare the truth:

> A VOYS was herd in general audience,
> And seyde, 'Thou has desclaundred giltless

> The doghter of Hooly Chirche in heigh presence.
> Thus hastou doon, and yet holde I my pees.
> (II.673-6)

The Man of Law establishes the word of God, "A BRITOUN book, written with evangiles" (II.666), as a standard through which justice may be sworn by and upheld. But moving beyond the revelation of God's truth through signs, the Man of Law makes God's will, presence, and action immediate and extant. The Physician rejects this use of the *deus ex machina* trope because he desires to demonstrate mankind's inherent ability to ascertain God's truth through first natural signs and secondly scriptural signs.

The Prioress' hagiographic and anti-Semitic tale of an innocent Christian boy, murdered by a group of resentful Jews, acts as a foil that illuminates the Physician's intentions and explains the methodologies of his story-telling practice. Just as Virginia's body, a natural sign, is the conduit through which Apius succumbs to lust and the object that he aspires to abuse, the young boy's song, the *Alma redemptoris,* is a literal, linguistic sign that provokes the Jews to murder him. Furthermore, a pun on "Juerie" (VII.55), the neighborhood where the murder occurs, and "jury" links the two tales together via the corrupt proceedings which occur in both respective settings. The Jews, like Apius and Virginius, misinterpret the signs of the *Alma redemptoris* as a slight against their "lawes reverence" (VII.364), and their misreading of the boy's morally blameless intentions leads to the physical mutilation of the boy's body, in a parallel to Virginia's death. Despite the similarities, however, the tales diverge after the climactic death, for the Prioress weaves a miracle into her tale whereas the Physician does not. Rather than the people's consciences, transformed and penetrated by Virginia's unjust death, sparking a desire for justice, a miracle restores the balance of justice, where "Yvele shal he have that yvele wol deserve"(VII.632). In addition to righteous justice, her tale concludes with a "welle of

mercy" (VII.656). Unlike the Physician, who concerns himself with linguistic signs and natural signs in order to teach the pilgrims how to experience God through interpreting nature and scripture properly, the Prioress disregards the reading of both nature and scripture by furnishing her tale with a redemptive miracle. By "wey of kynde" or according to the precepts of nature, the boy "sholde have dyed" (VII.650-1). However, he experiences mercy through the intermediation of "Cristes mooder sweete" because "Jhesu Christ, as ye in books fynde, / Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde" (VII.653-4). Thus, the Prioress bypasses both natural signs and the linguistic signs of scripture through this explicit revelation of divine, supernatural grace.

According to the General Prologue, the Prioress herself mishandles signs, neglecting the relationship between the sign and the signified, as demonstrated in her flaunting of the "Amor vincit omnia" necklace (I.162). The ambiguity of the Latin might well attest to a reverence for carnal love rather than the love of charity. She even makes her incompetence with words clear by equating her "konnyng" (VII.481) to a "child of twelf monthe oold or lesse / that kan unnethe any word expresse" (VII.484-5). In an act of self-negation, she inversely points to the intermediary power of Mary. Her tale itself perfectly mirrors the Prioress' misuse of signs. The young boy sings the *Alma redemptoris* out of genuine faith and love while being ignorant of the words themselves, and the Jews subsequently misread his intentions. However, just as the Prioress pleads for Mary to intercede as a Christianized muse at the conclusion of her prologue, Mary intercedes within the tale to redeem the boy's death and restore justice. The Prioress seeks not to teach the pilgrims how to read or interpret signs, but, rather, she hopes to honor and glorify Mary. Thus, she tells an appropriate tale that accomplishes her objective. Rather than trying to teach the pilgrims how to read and interpret signs themselves, the Prioress shows them

the immediate, immaculate grace of God, which transcends Nature and exists outside of scripture, through the mediation of the Virgin.

Contrary to the full narrative of Christ's passage from death to resurrection and life, the Physician does not furnish his tale with a miraculous ending of resurrection. Rather, he leaves the audience in the pain of grief and pity. The emotional impact of the abrupt conclusion on the audience, caused by the shock of the tale's injustice, engenders real, positive effects that elevate the audience's virtue through pity and contrition. Pigg rightfully claims that the *Physician's Tale* has "no emotional release," for the Physician intentionally prevents an emotional release within the narrative so that the pilgrims may experience their own transformation (like Virginius') through the workings of their consciences.[96] The transformation must happen outside of the tale, not within as it does in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Prioress' Tale.* In the former, King Alla experiences a sharp tinge of emotion at the prospect of Custance's death where his "gentil herte is fulfild of pitee / That from hise eyen ran the water doun" (II.659-61). However, the miracle redeems the situation from emotions of pity to those of joy and love, as demonstrated in the resulting marriage that "ymaad Custance a queene" (II.693). Furthermore, the Man of Law provides an emotional release within the tale that successfully reconciles the people's horror at God's judgement with their subsequent conversion:

> Of thiss mervaille agast was al the prees.
> As mazed folk they stoden everichone,
> For drede of wreche, save Custance alone.
> Greet was the drede and eek the repentence
> Of hem that hadden wrong suspecioun
> .....
> the kyng and many another in that place
> Converted was, thanked be Cristes grace!
> (VII.677-86)

[96] Pigg, "Does the Crime Fit the Punishment," 347.

The people within the Man of Law's tale witness God's judgement, experience emotional contrition, and turn to accept God's grace.

The Prioress' tale, likewise, alleviates any emotional disruption within the frame of the narrative. The Prioress possesses an inherent proclivity towards sentimentality and pity, as described in the General Prologue: "She was so charitable and so piteous, / She wolde wepe if that she saugh a mous" (I.143-5). This excessive tenderness bleeds into her tale on account of the miracle-trope that successfully assuages any emotional anguish regarding the boy's death and which inversely furnishes the tale with an emotionally joyful conclusion. The Virgin Mary herself consoles and comforts the boy in an act of maternal kindness, when she says "My litel child, now wol I fecche thee" (VII.667) before soothing his fear: "Be nat agast. I wol thee nat forsake" (VII.669). Thus, the Prioress successfully resolves the emotional imbalance within the narrative, leading to acts of penitence by characters within the tale:

> And whan this abbot hadde this winder seyn,
> Hise salte teeris trickled doun as reyn,
> And gruf he fil al plat upon the grounde,
> And stille he lat as he had leyn ybounde.
> (VII.673-6)

The Prioress, like the Man of Law, provides for a successful emotional release and reconciliation.

The *Man of Law's Tale* and *the Prioress' Tale* certainly serve as useful foils for better understanding the Physician and the aims of his tale. However, by turning to a story outside of the frame of *The Canterbury Tales,* an even clearer conceptualization of the Physician and his tale can be gleaned. The *Legend of Lucrece,* one of the poems recorded in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, details the Christianized martyrdom of Lucrece, a canonized pagan, and while the *Legend* and the *Physician's Tale* bear many parallels, the differences, centering mainly on the

consolation and emotional release of the former's benediction and the absence of solace in the latter's conclusion, serve as even more effective foils that elucidate the Physician's intent and the emotional power of his tale. As mentioned previously in an earlier footnote, Lucrece and Virginia both have inner virtue that translates verbatim to their external appearance, both are abused by a Roman tyrant, both use their bodies as signs that restore order, and both are presented as pre-Christian martyrs. Both tales also reveal the powerful influence that pity retains for instigating personal and social change. Lucrece's abuse engenders pity within the Roman people:

> This reful cas and al the thing horrible.
> The wo to tellen it were impossible,
> That she and alle hir frendes made atones.
> Al hadde folks hertes been of stones,
> It mighte have maked hem upon hir rewe.
> (1838-42)

That pity, which then spreads to "al the toun of Rome" (1861) after Lucrece's death, leads to a political revolution that mirrors the revolt of the Roman people in the *Physician's Tale.* However, the difference between the two stories resides in the emotional resolution which is present in the *Legend of Lucrece* yet lacking in the *Physician's Tale.* The final benediction of the *Legend of Lucrece* acts as a consolation that brings the story to a pleasant resolution with a tone of optimism and hope:

> For wel I wot that Crist himselve telleth
> That in Israel, as wyd as in the lond,
> That so greet faith in al that he ne fond
> As in a woman, and this is no lye.
> (1879-82)

Invoking Christ himself as the messenger of Lucrece's faith serves to lighten the emotional imbalance and sadness of her death and to assure the audience that she has received a specifically Christian grace in the afterlife. In stark contrast, the Physician omits any mention of grace or

honor imparted to Virginia. He presents her as a proto-martyr within his tale, but he never explicitly announces her role as such. The Physician does not lessen the tragedy of Virginia's death by anachronistically Christianizing or canonizing her as Chaucer does with Lucrece. He refuses to whitewash and diminish the horror of Virginia's death. While Virginia can be read as a saint-like martyr, the Physician presents her as nothing more than a victim. He utterly deprives the tale of an emotional release, and he augments the tale's emotional effects—the inculcation of grief, contrition, and pity—by focusing his moral on the arresting details of sin and justice.

The Physician, therefore, uses Virginia not in a manner like Apius who abuses her to satisfy his own ends or like Virginius who misinterprets her, but in an Augustinian manner to bring others to a place of pity. According to Dinshaw's argument, Chaucer presents "literary representation" in "terms of the body—the body as it enters into social interactions, as it functions in social organization, as it is assigned gender value in the transactions that constitute social structure."[98] The Physician, in his translation of Titus Livius' first-century tale, uses the story and literary character of Virginia to teach a Christian truth about the proper interpretation of signs. Thus, there exists an unsettling echo between the Physician's use of Virginia and the patriarchal figures within the tale that abuse her. However, the difference between the Physician and the tale's male figures resides in the Physician's respect for Virginia's dignity. If Chaucer intends her to be read as a text, as Dinshaw explains is the heuristic model for Chaucer's corpus of work, then the Physician's tale equates the misinterpretation of spiritual signs, specifically scripture, with the heinous slaughter of an innocent virgin. In doing so, he actually subverts the particularly male, authorial tradition of reading beyond the carnal pleasures of a pagan story. The church father St. Jerome "defends his reading of the pagan text on the basis of its carnal

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[98] Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 15.

attractiveness, the elegance of classical style."[100] Dinshaw explicates the process of the Christianization of the pagan text: "The reader is drawn to the text by its attractive appearance; the text is then interpreted—stripped of its stylistic and fictional blandishments, revealing and preparing its wisdom for Christian use."[101] St Jerome even "stresses the harsh necessity of taking a sharp razor to the woman, of making her bald, of scrubbing her with niter, of getting rid of all her carnal attractions."[102] Augustine attests to the subsequent pleasurable interpretation of particularly difficult readings: "For the present, however, no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure" (2.6. 8). However, the Physician, in his retelling of the pagan tale, demystifies and literalizes this process of translation and interpretation. While the Christian interpretation of the tale may be pleasurable in an Augustinian sense, the Physician makes sure that the reading of his tale will be anything but pleasurable. The reading is dreadful.

His preservation of the tale's cruel, bloody nature serves two purposes. First, the Physician respects the dignity of Virginia by presenting her as nothing more than a victim, as already mentioned, rather than as a saint. Second, because Chaucer "attempts to discern the consequences for literature and literary tradition, and the effects on lived lives, of understanding literary endeavor as masculine acts performed on feminine bodies," the Physician prophesies the consequences of misreading and misusing the signs of God, represented in Virginia's body:[104] "literary activity has actual social consequences: it has real, and negative, effects on lived lives."[105] The Physician reveals, through Virginia's death, that the abuse of nature and of

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[100] Dinshaw, *Sexual Poetics*, 23
[101] ibid, 24.
[102] ibid, 24
[104] Ibid, 25.
[105] ibid, 12.

scripture for self-centered purposes leads to violence in both the tale and in the real world. The implicit Christian consolation of Virginius' conversion and the immediate access of tangible mercy attests to the Augustinian notion of an eventual pleasurable interpretation, but the Physician makes sure that the initial reading of the tale evokes disgust and horror, pictured within the frame of the *Canterbury Tales* in Harry Bailly's reaction, in order to show the fearful power of the Word of God while also preserving the dignity of the female individual who metaphorically represents the signs of scripture.

Therefore, the Physician, while respecting Virginia's death, implicitly emphasizes her role as a sign of God's truth by the fact that God's meaning still prevails in the tale regardless of human sin and misinterpretation. The same dynamic underlies Chaucer's "language of presence" which he stresses in his "invocation of the incarnate Word" in his *Retractions*.[107] Chaucer claims that the entire "entente" (*Retraction* 6) of "our book" (*Retraction* 5) is the same as Paul's epistolary ministry: "Al that is written is written for oure doctrine" (1 Tim 3:16). The misinterpretations on the readers' part and Chaucer's "unkonnynge" (*Retraction* 4) as a poet are both redeemed by the physical and textual Christ, who "bought us with the precious blood of his herte" and "who was sent down to earth in human form in a divine commercial transaction, a holy trade."[109] Just as Chaucer begs "Crist for his grete mercy" so that he may "foryeve me the synne" (*Retraction* 14), the Physician stresses the renunciation of sin to the pilgrims—who, living after Christ's death, have access to Christ's mercy.[110]

Thus, in the Physician's tale, Virginia is used by the Physician not in a Jerome-like or Apius-like sense that focuses on carnal pleasure first, but in an Augustinian sense to push his

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[107] ibid, 27.
[109] ibid, 15.

listeners to the unfiltered enjoyment of God. However, the Physician accomplishes this end not through the medium of pleasure but pity, a more powerful emotion that successfully eulogizes Virginia and also, as Augustine stresses, brings people to a greater understanding of love and a purer enjoyment of God himself. The Physician's tale and his outwardly directed moral leave the audience devoid of grace both inside the story for Virginia's sake and outside of the story for the pilgrims' own condition of sin, for the Physician intentionally leaves the idea of grace, which resolves emotional imbalance, outside of his moral to induce an external response from the pilgrims by means of pity and the emotional pangs of their consciences. Augustine— when advising on how to best "sustain our pilgrimage" of life that is seen "'as through a glass' or 'in a dark manner'" (1.30. 31) which leads to misinterpretation—claims that God "shows us mercy in accordance with His own goodness, while we show mercy for the sake of His goodness rather than for our own; that is, He has mercy on us that we may enjoy Him, and we have mercy on our neighbor so that we may enjoy Him (1.30. 33). Augustine gives a central and critical role to mercy, arising from pity, as the emotional catalyst that allows people to love their neighbors as themselves. The beginning and end of pity are the eternal enjoyment not of the "things" of the world, which entrap mankind like Apius in mortality, but the enjoyment of God himself. Augustinian enjoyment pertains to "that thing which we love for its own sake" and "that we should enjoy anything only in so far as it makes us blessed...For every good of ours either is God or comes from God" (1.30. 31). Thus, pity, first shown by God and then by man, enables a pure, humble loving of God that seeks no kind of ulterior, selfish end. The efficacy of the Physician's tale and of his moral manifests in his isolation of the pilgrim's emotions, especially regarding pity for the unjustly murdered Virginia. Evidence for the emotional impact arises in the pilgrims' desire to abide in their grief and to be filled up with moral learning rather than drown their

sadness and guilt in transient distractions such as drinking and misguided mirth. When Harry Bailey requests that the Pardoner "Telle us som myrthe or japes right anon" (VI.319) as a way to mitigate, minimize, and parry the pain of the tale and the desperate sin condition of himself and the other pilgrims, the effect of the tale stands firm:

> AND right anon the gentils gonne to crye,
> 'Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
> Telle us som moral thyng that we may leere
> Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly here.
> (VI.323-6)

The tale's moral penetrates the natural consciences of the pilgrims, engenders lasting effects, and enlarges their moral capacities. The Physician, through isolating the consciences of the pilgrims by omitting an emotional outlet, generates the same effect as Biblical wisdom literature without actually utilizing the scripture itself. This indirect transference of scripture's intent without the words coherently resonates with his introduction in the General Prologue that his "studie was but litel on the Bible" (VI.438). He transports the signifier without the sign.[113] The Physician forces the pilgrims to beg the same question as Virginia: "Is ther no grace? Is ther no remedye?" (VI.236), leaving them in a state of sober grief, much like the characters within the *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Prioress' Tale,* and the *Legend of Lucrece*. The pilgrims are compelled, through the workings of their consciences, to acknowledge God's righteous justice outside of the tale in the framework of their own lives.

The Physician's tale is a reminder to the pilgrims of the gruesomeness of Christ's real death and of Thomas Becket's unjust death. Pigg expresses that, '"No grace' and 'no remedy' are seen indeed," and that "humans must continue their quest for true grace and remedy that only

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[113] The speaker of Ecclesiastes states that, "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning: but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth. Better it is to hear the rebuke of a wise man, than that a man should hear the song of fools (Eccles. 7:4-6).

a religious pilgrimage will provide."[114] The sober recognition and affirmation of death and of God's wrath make way for a more perfect understanding of penance, restoration, and resurrection. Hearkening back to Aquinas' threefold path to knowledge, one can discern that Apius represents the hindrance at the first step of natural knowledge to Scripture and that Virginius represents the impediment at the second step of the knowledge of the Old Testament to the New. The Physician gives the pilgrims the opportunity to surpass not only both of those steps but also attain the third of "clarity of eternal vision" (C.3, L.3, 115).[115] Aquinas states that this clarity only arises by overcoming the letter of the law and by being led by the Spirit of God on "a level path." For the pilgrims this path is salient. It is the pilgrimage to the altar of Canterbury Cathedral where they have the opportunity to make sacrifices of their spirits and of their hearts. As Augustine makes clear, however, the physical pilgrimage means nothing without a spiritual pilgrimage and without the transformation of the heart and the purification of the soul:

> Therefore, since that truth is to be enjoyed which lives immutable, and since God the Trinity, the Author and Founder of the universe, cares for His creatures through that truth, the mind should be cleansed so that it is able to see that light and to cling to it once it is seen. Let us consider this cleansing to be as a journey or voyage home. But we do not come to Him who everywhere present by moving from place to place but by good endeavor and good habits.
>
> (1.10. 10)

The Physician, by virtue of emotional penetration and activation of the pilgrim's God-given, natural consciences, breaks their hearts and leaves them mournful, hungry for wisdom and righteousness, and poor in spirit, which Christ promises will be met respectively with comfort, fulfillment, and entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

7. Chaucer's Unveiled Truth

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[114] Pigg, "Does the Punishment Fit the Crime," 358.
[115] Aquinas, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*.

HEERE IS ENDED THE BOOK OF THE TALES OF CAUNTERBURY
COMPILED BY GEFFREY CHAUCER,
OF WHOS SOULE JHESU CRIST HAVE MERCY,
AMEN.
—Epilogue of *The Canterbury Tales*

While the Physician's moral primarily relates to Apius and Claudius, it can also be applied to Virginius, who as Seal remarks, is "a model of sinful error, saved at the last moment by grace." The Physician's exhortation of "I rede yow this conseil take" (VI.285) expands the moral from ascertaining personal sin to considering interpretation, for he pleads that the pilgrims learn to read rightly by seeing beyond the external signs to understand underlying signifiers. Virginius is trapped within the misperceptions of the letter of the law, but Virginia's death shifts the pagan setting to a proto-Christian one where grace and mercy are available. Thus, the Physician is not only forcing the pilgrims to confront their own sin condition, made evident in their consciences, but also urging them to take up a proper interpretation of Scripture and the Gospel: The Physician "gives his listeners the example of a pagan who reads like a Jew, to demonstrate how each pilgrim may instead choose to read like a Christian, like a virgin martyr."[116]

Ultimately, then, the Physician presents the pilgrims with two models of interpretation, one that cannot see beyond the carnal letter and one that grasps the spirit of readily available grace, but his hermeneutic tactic rightfully leaves room for personal choice and for individual misreadings. Force and deceit, which bypass freewill, nullify the most crucial aspects of repentance, the free response of contrition that is met with grace. Chaucer employs the same authorial stratagem throughout his entire corpus of work, which he makes evident in his

[116] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 317.

Retraction. Though his vocalized "entente" is to augment "oure doctrine" (*Retraction* 6), he relinquishes all interprative authority to his audience:

> if ther be anything in it that liketh hem, that thereof they thanken oure Lord Jhesu Crist, of whom procedeth al wit and al goodnesse. And if ther be anything that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrete it to the defaute of myn unkonnynge and nat to my wyl. (*Retraction* 1-4).

Though Chaucer "revoke[s]" his "enditynges of wordly vanitees" (*Retraction* 9), his audience retains the capacity to read his translations and interpret them by their own volition. This spectrum of choice is likewise captured within the *Physician's Tale,* for Harry Bailey's willful misreading of the Physician's tale contrasts with the majority of the pilgrims' response to the tale. Their divergent reactions attest to the reality of the indiviudal choice inherently provided for within the Physician's model. Moving outside of the frame of the tale, the choice that the pilgrims must personally make regarding reading and interpretation is the same choice which Chaucer poses to his own readers. Chaucer challenges his audience to make the same appeal and confession as he himself does in his *Retraction*:

> oure Lord Jhesu Crist …sende me grace to biwayle my giltes and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule and graunte me grace of verray penitence, confessioun, and satisfaccioun to doon in this present lyf thurgh the benigne grace of hym that is Kyng of kyngs and preest over all prestes, that boghte us with the precious blood of his herte, so that I may been oon of hem at the Day of Doom that shulle be saved. (*Retraction* 16-22)

Through the *Physician's Tale,* he invites his readership to confront their own sin condition which deserves rightous judgement, learn to read Scripture rightly, and be filled with the illumiating and empowering grace and wisdom of the Spirit.

Chaucer links the Physician's morals of confronting one's own sin and of properly interpreting Scripture to his immediate medieval context and to his contemporary English, Catholic readers. Harry Bailey represents the medieval Christian who focuses solely on physical

signs and neglects the reverberations of his or her conscience. Upon hearing the tale, he spouts out a series of curses that uncover his innate aversion to the overwhelming horror of the story: "Oure Hoost gan to swere as he were wood. / 'Harrow!' quod he. 'By nayles and by blood! / This was a fals cherl and a fals justice" (VI.287-9). However, his irreverent invocation of Christ's body intimates that he, like the corrupt Apius and the untransformed Virginius, attunes only to the body without regards to the truth of the spirit. Chaucer further cements this association, for Harry Bailey creates his own subjective moral for the tale that revolves around Virginia's literal physicality rather than the imbedded spiritual truth:

> Allas! To deere boughte she beautee!
> Wherefore I seye al day as men ay see,
> That yiftes of Fortune and of nature
> Been cause of deeth to many a creature.
> (VI.293-6)

Rather than internalizing the "piteous tale" (VI.302), looking at his own life with scrutiny, and striving for spiritual reconciliation to hidden truth, Harry Bailey "passe[s] over" (VI.303) the matter and turns his attention to the expedient, carnal physical signs before him such as the Physician's "gentil cors / And eek thyne urynals and thy jurdones" (VI.304-5). Furthermore, because the Physician's objective is to pierce the hearts of his audience and engender pity that then leads to right interpretation, Harry Bailey's satirical profession that he "almoost have caught a cardynacle" (VI.316) reveals that he has disregarded the metaphysical gravity and true intent of the Physician's tale and instead has condemned himself to the literal understanding, leaving not only his fleshly heart vulnerable but also his soul. Thus, Harry Bailey, like Apius, is blinded by misperceptions of the body, and Seal makes Chaucer's intentions of portraying Harry Bailey as a negative exemplar of a deficient reader explicit by linking him to Virginius:

> The tale of Virginius and Virginia is the very *definition* of a "fors," offering a vision of salvation to those who choose to understand. The Host considers the virtuous choice,

> before deciding that he would prefer to buy the worldly medicines of the Physician. In thanks, he will also "pray to God to save thy [the Physician's] gentil *cors*" (VI 304), a word that Chaucer usually reserves for dead or unconscious bodies...It is the dead things of the world that the Host will choose, a choice as wrong and materialist as any made by Virginius.[117]

Rather than comprehending the spirit of the Physician's tale and offering his body as "a living sacrifice" (Rom. 12:1), Harry Bailey is caught within the veil of mortal bodies and corporal signs. Also, he, like Virginius, neglects the signals of his conscience; the result is that, just as Virginius becomes fixated on Virginia's body and spurns his conscience, Harry Bailey turns to literal drink to drown out his pitiful emotions, which is most evident in his sarcastic final words of "But I moot thynke / Upon som honeste thynge whil that I drynke" (VI.327-8).

Moreover, Harry Bailey passes over the Physician's hard truths for the Pardoner, the pilgrim who epitomizes materialism and a narrow focus on signs, to reinvigorate his emotions with "som myrthe or japes" (VI.319). The Pardoner himself admits his own materialism and disregard for the spirit when he confesses:

> myn entente is nat but for to wynne
> And nothyng for the correction of synne.
> I rekke nevere whan they been beryed,
> Though that hir soules goon a blakeberyed!
> (VI.403-6)

The Pardoner signifies, for Chaucer, living according to the letter of the law rather than spirit. Therefore, Chaucer's readers, like the pilgrims, can choose to follow the precepts of the Physician that urge an understanding of the spiritual, transformative freedom of Christ, the Great Physician, or the shallow, corporeal offerings of the Pardoner.

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[117] ibid, 317.

The Physician, the narrator within the tale, and Chaucer, the author, both take up the role of Augustine, as a teacher of interpreting signs. Augustine spells out his purpose as one who "teaches reading so that others may also read" (Prologue 9):[118]

> he who teaches how the Scriptures are to be understood is like a teacher who advises how the words are to be read. Just as a man who knows how to read will not need another reader from whom he may hear what is written when he finds a book, he who receives the precepts we wish to teach will not need another reader, from whom he may hear what is written when he finds a book, he who receives the precepts we wish to teach will not need another to reveal those things which need explaining when he finds any obscurity in books, since he has certain rules like those used in reading in his understanding. But by following certain traces he may come to the hidden sense without any error, or at least he will not fall into the gross absurdity of wicked meanings.
>
> (Prologue 9)[119]

Seal suggests that Chaucer pessimistically knows that his audience will choose the Pardoner's latter option of gross absurdities rather than the transformative ladder of Aquinas:

> They have the chance to embrace "pitee" rather than a "cors," to convert from cruelty to mercy, and to put their study firmly on the Bible. But Chaucer knows that they will not. His England is not Virginius's Rome, to turn against evil after witnessing a moral drama. There are too many Christians who choose to read like Jews, lining up to buy the inadequate remedies of the world.[120]

However, the pilgrims' cry to be filled with "som moral thyng" so that they "may leere" (VI.323) suggests that Chaucer may still have hope in audience's desire and ability to read rightly. The pilgrims long for morals and truths so that they may learn. They are asking, and Christ promises that "Ask, and it shall be given you: seek, and ye shall find: knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For whosoever asketh, receiveth: and he that seeketh, findeth: and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened" (Matt. 7:7-8).

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[118] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine.*
[119] ibid.
[120] Seal, "Reading Like a Jew," 317.

The pilgrims' plea for knowledge stems from the Physician's effective appeals to pathos that instill within them the fear of God and the pity for Virginia, which are the emotions that inaugurate Augustine's seven-fold steps to wisdom. He asserts that the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God and that, from this fear, one embarks on a spiritual pilgrimage of growth and sanctification that ends not at a physical location like Canterbury but at spiritual one of wisdom and proper interpretation:

> Then it follows that the student will first discover in the Scriptures that he has been enmeshed in the love of this world, or of temporal things, a love far remote from the kind of love of God and of our neighbor which Scripture itself prescribes. Then, indeed, that fear which arises from the thought of God's judgement, and that piety which can do nothing except believe in and accede to the authority of the sacred books, will force him to lament his own situation. For this knowledge of a good hope thrusts a man not into boasting but into lamentation. This attitude causes him to ask with constant prayers for the consolation of divine assistance lest he fall into despair, and he thus enters the fourth step of fortitude, in which he hungers and thirsts for justice. And by means of this affection of the spirit he will extract himself from all mortal joy in transitory things, and as he turns aside from this joy, he will turn toward the love of eternal things, specifically toward that immutable unity which is the Trinity.
>
> (2.7. 10)

While Harry Bailey and the Pardoner are condemned to the "fatal joy in transitory things" (2.7. 10) and the "gross absurdit[ies]" (Prologue 9) of misinterpretation, the rest of Chaucer's pilgrims retain the capacity, like Virginius, to learn to read rightly. The pilgrims reside at the fourth step of Augustine's path to wisdom on account of the effect of the tale, and Chaucer is inviting his audience to join them and even surpass them in achieving Augustine's latter steps of compassion, purification of heart, peace, and finally wisdom. Just as the Physician gives his audience a choice to confront their own sins and attend to hidden truths, Chaucer, by placing the *Physician's Tale* directly before the *Pardoner's Tale,* gives his audience a chance either to take up their faiths for their own, adhere to the spirit of Christ's freedom, and learn to read rightly or

to take the "broad way" of the Pardoner, of Harry Bailey, and of Apius that languishes on the letter of the law and "that leadeth to destruction" (Matt 7:13).

The Great Physician God "provide[s] a medicinal exercise" in Scripture that "secretly moves" from the "carnal" to the "spiritual" (3.34. 49) so that Christians may view the world and scripture not through the letter of the law but through the spirit. The Physician cuts deep into the hearts of the pilgrims to bring them to a place of humility so that the grace of God may be written on their broken and contrite hearts and sealed in their consciences as prophesied by Ezekiel:

> And I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in the midst of you: and I will cause you to walk in my commandments, and to keep my judgments, and do them. And you shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.
>
> (Ezek. 36:26-28)

The prophet Ezekiel, when referring to the land, not only speaks of "carnal Israel" but looks forward to "spiritual Israel" (3.34. 49). In "high prophetic style," he anticipates the fully healed, cured, and redeemed Church, "not having spot or wrinkle" (3.34. 49). Like Ezekiel, Paul, when speaking to Timothy, declares that the grace "which was given us in Jesus Christ before the times of the world…was given when there were not yet those to whom it could have been given" (3.34. 49).[121] Chaucer uses his Physician to tell a tale that has no grace for the martyred, text-like Virginia but that points forward to the very real grace, "made manifest by the illumination of our Savior Jesus Christ" (3.34. 49), available to the pilgrims and also to Chaucer's own readers, should they humble themselves and allow the spirit to help them read the Lord's text rightly.

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[121] Augustine quotes from 2 Timothy 1:9-10

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