



MEDIEVAL FEMALE BODY POLITICS IN CHAUCERIAN HAGIOGRAPHY: A CASE STUDY OF THE *PHYSICIAN'S TALE*

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The main motivation for suffering in a hagiography is to defend the faith. Bodily sufferings which recall the sufferings of the saints and the Passion of Christ are commonplace in hagiography. Hagiography represents the faith and divine teaching. Traditional hagiographical motifs and endings are false accusations, physical and emotional sufferings and rewards at the end of the patient sufferings. The sufferers in hagiographies strive to be spiritually perfect, in order to be rewarded with heaven after death through suffering on earth. In other words, the sufferers experience ordeals testing them as good human beings and good Christians. In the Middle Ages, hagiography and *exempla* were popularized by the Church to give religious instruction and they describe miraculous divine intervention to chastise mankind, or they portray innocent people who endure great hardships and persecution but withstand all ordeals by their exemplary patience and piety. The aim of this article is to discuss Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Physician's Tale* in accordance with the hagiographical representations and medieval body politics. It questions how the tale deals with the Christian idea of virginity, revealing the virgin's place in medieval patriarchal society and culture; and it examines Virginia's potential role as a victim. Moreover, father and daughter relationship, filicide and sexual violation are included into the discussion to expand the argument.

Keywords: Hagiography, The middle ages, Female body, Geoffrey Chaucer, *The physician's tale*.

Geoffrey Chaucer produced *The Canterbury Tales* during a period dominated by the Christian doctrines. Therefore, the idea of the necessity of suffering for the salvation of the soul generated by the Passions of Christ during the Middle Ages constituted the base for his employing hagiography in order to stress upon the moralities of the fourteenth century England. Chaucer reworks several genres such as romance and fabliau apart from hagiography in *The Canterbury Tales*, manipulating these genres in order to add his own mastery. The aim of this article is to discuss Chaucer's reworking of the generic boundaries of hagiography in *The Physician's Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales* by basing on the female body politics in the Middle Ages, in addition to identify the interplay between hagiography that presents 'saints' and Chaucer's tale that exemplifies a 'saint-like' female.

Hagiography is among the earliest forms of English literature and it can be simply described as a form of morally edifying 'exemplary biography' which is integrated instruction without entertainment.¹ Hagiography involves descriptions of the victims of persecution, crucifixion, burning or beheading because of denying the non-Christian beliefs; and it is a biography of a saint, a martyr or a virgin martyr

¹Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Bet... to... rede on holy seyntes lyves...: Romance and Hagiography Again', in *Readings in Medieval English Romance*, ed. by Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 83-97 (pp. 84-5).

who is 'an example of both religious and personal excellence for having lived a life in "imitation of Christ"'.² Hagiographic convention was highly regarded in medieval literature and it was adapted to other medieval genres, particularly to romance which has flexible generic boundaries. As a genre, hagiography was mainly intended for monastic reading;³ however, the Church was very influential in popularizing texts in the Middle Ages. Although the saints' legends and *exempla* were popularized by the Church to give religious instruction, romances were regarded with suspicion - except for the Charlemagne romances which served the Church's purpose.⁴ Hence, the religious context of hagiography is re-contextualized in several romances within a secular perspective, broadening the representation of the hagiographical issues to a wider literary production and secular audience.

Commonly, in hagiography and in romance, the heroes or the heroines undergo many dreadful experiences such as being buried alive, shipwrecks, being captured by pirates or purchased as slaves; however, they 'emerge unscathed, unchanged, ready to reenter their society once again just as if nothing has happened to them. The implicit message of romance is clear, [...] pain and hardship did not matter';⁵ instead, they immunize to the effects of pain and suffering. However, different from romance, the main motivation for suffering in a hagiography is to defend the faith. In other words, 'a saint suffers martyrdom and is rewarded in heaven, while his knightly counterpart retrieves his fortunes and enjoys the remainder of his life in comfort and security.'⁶ Moreover, 'hagiography constructs a human community focused on suffering and made up of sufferers',⁷ exposing the fact that representations of pain and suffering are apparent in both secular and religious writings of medieval period, and the conventional descriptions in romances are secular 'alternatives' to those in hagiography.

Romance is merely one of the genres in which religious didacticism is intermingled with secular issues. Apart from it, Chaucer experiments with the borders of hagiographical representations in *The Physician's Tale* and produces a secular alternative to the hagiographical narratives by blending the suffering of a female victim of slander with the Christian idea of virginity by revealing the virgin's place in the patriarchal culture and her potential role as a victim. Accordingly, Chaucer focuses on the idea of suffering, which is also the core of hagiographical writing, and enhances it with the discussion of female virginity. Hence, Chaucer intertwines the religious and secular aspects and utilizes hagiography in order to discuss the medieval perception of femininity, and hence provides the understanding and guidance that his audience needs.

As Paul Murray points out, suffering initiates 'an awareness of reality',⁸ highlights the reliability of the fictional events and increases the audience's emotional involvement. This cathartic experience leads to self-realization and provides them with an understanding of the divine, the realization of their own susceptibility to temptation or trial, and the general insufficiency of being a human being. In Lynda L. Coon's words, 'the hagiography of female saints replicates the process of redemption. By transforming profane female flesh into a vehicle of grace, women's conversion extends the hope of universal salvation to sinful humanity.'⁹ Chaucer lived in an age during which Christian dogmas determined the lives of

² Greg Buzwell, *Saints in Medieval Manuscripts* (Hong Kong: South Sea International Press, 2005), p. 8.

³ M. R. Godden, 'Experiments in Genre: The Saints Life in Ælfric's *Catholic Homilies*', in *Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints' Lives*, ed. by Paul E. Szarmach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 261-88 (pp. 263).

⁴ Harriet E. Hudson, 'Toward a Theory of Popular Literature: The Case of the Middle English Romances', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 23.3 (1989), 31-50 (pp. 38-9).

⁵ Judith Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 90.

⁶ Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 77-8.

⁷ Perkins, *The Suffering Self*, p. 208.

⁸ Paul Murray, 'The Task of Happiness: A Reflection on Human Suffering and Christian Joy', *Logos*, 4.4 (2001), 11-32 (p. 21).

⁹ Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. xvii.

people and the salvation of the soul was given utmost importance. In *The Canterbury Tales*, he presents his observations on the realities of his age and indirectly criticizes the people as well as the conditions that are shaped through religious impositions, and mostly depicts the corruption in the religious institutions. Hence, he makes use of various genres and within the variety of his subject matters, Chaucer's interest in the female issue is noteworthy, as during the Middle Ages, women were denied access to the routes by which men of even the lower class could rise such as receiving education and having an official duty in the Church.¹⁰

Different from the common perception of his age, Chaucer in his work gives voice to women characters both in *The General Prologue* and the tales narrated by both the male and the female characters. In order to impose an awareness of reality and emotional involvement of his audience, he portrays a variety of women ranging from virgins, good wives, mothers, patient sufferers to adulteresses. Among the tales framed in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale* and particularly *The Second Nun's Tale* depict the idealized lives of the suffering females and their subordination to divine providence, which makes them 'holy females'.¹¹ Depictions of both clerical and secular female characters such as Constance, Griselda and Cecilia allow Chaucer to discuss the patriarchal feudal order of the society and the misogynist outlook that was reinforced by Christianity.

The misogynist outlook is blended into the tales adapted to hagiography since the female characters in the above mentioned tales are vulnerable, desperate, dependant on a male figure –either a father or a husband- and submissive. However, their virginity is reinforced as their 'treasure' which they shall preserve. In the hagiographies of the virgin martyrs, who are the counterparts of the martyrs, virginity is highly regarded as well. Women suffer, are tortured or executed because of their resistance to or refusal of the sexual advances, temptations or marriage proposals from emperors or lords.¹² Hereby, hagiography enables Chaucer an alternative means of expression in order to discuss the female issues, due to the fact that hagiographies dedicate to the description of sacrifice, suffering, and 'provide believers with models of a Christian life and death meant to inspire them to a life of piety in imitation of the saints.'¹³ Hence, in *The Physician's Tale*, the issues of sacrifice, suffering and piety can be discussed thoroughly within a hagiographical context, broadened by the ideas of female virginity and chastity.

The ideas of virginity and chastity emphasized in *The Physician's Tale* are believed to lead women to religious salvation. They are also identified with Virgin Mary whose submission to divine will and patient suffering are expected to be example to all women in their relationships with their fathers and husbands, and whose motherhood is expected to be a model for women. On the contrary, the misogynistic attitudes of men of religion and men of law lead to misrepresentation of women as the initiators of evil because of misogynist interpretations of the Biblical texts (such as Corinthians 11:2-9, Genesis I: 25-27, Ecclesiasticus 25: 22-31, Ecclesiasticus 42: 11-13)¹⁴ that confirm the superiority of men over women. Although Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, is put on a pedestal and becomes a cult figure, Eve is blamed as the incarnation of the Devil.

In Christian belief, Adam and Eve are depicted as the primal couple who demonstrate their independence from God by eating the apple from the tree that has been forbidden to them. Eve becomes the central figure in this primary act of disobedience against God, and she turns into the figure responsible for the Fall and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In time, Eve becomes the representative of womankind and all women are punished for Eve's disobedience which makes all of them subservient to men.¹⁵ As Debroah F. Sawyer points out, this interpretation of the Fall forms the basis of the negative

¹⁰ Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. by Chaya Galai (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 4-5.

¹¹ See also *The Prioress' Tale* in *The Canterbury Tales* for a hagiographic narrative with a male child as its protagonist.

¹² Buzwell, *Saints*, pp. 12-3.

¹³ Matthias Galler, 'Attitudes Towards Death in Middle English Lyrics and Hagiography', *Connotations*, 16.1-3. (2006/2007), 137-157 (p. 138).

¹⁴ *Holy Bible*. King James Version (New York: American Bible Society, 1999).

¹⁵ Debroah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 148-51.

religious outlook on women, which depicts them as disobedient and rebellious to the figures of authority. Eve's disobedience to God is associated with all women's presumed disobedience to their husbands who are the figures of authority.¹⁶ Women are not believed to be created in God's image but only in his likeness, as God created Adam first and Eve was created from Adam's rib. This idea supports her weakness and propensity to sin as she is not provided with godly attributions; therefore, women are forced to submit to their husbands.¹⁷

Woman's lacking individuality because of her inferior position to man in many respects, her determination to preserve her chastity and virginity, her submission into her father's decision, the sacrifice she is expected to make and her desperateness on the face of death are skilfully presented by Chaucer in *The Physician's Tale* enhanced by hagiographic implications. Hagiography follows a set pattern of events such as 'the confrontation with figures of state authority, trial, sentencing, torture, execution, burial and posthumous miracles.'¹⁸ Moreover, '[h]agiographical stories affirm both a religious and worldly identity for their female subjects. The saint is named, labelled, her lineage delineated. Theologically and socially, she is inscribed by a text locating her in patriarchal space and confirming her otherness.'¹⁹ However, Chaucer subverts all these hagiographical patterns and reworks his own hagiographical style. *The Physician's Tale* is introduced with a confrontation with a figure of authority; nevertheless, it lacks the following trial, sentence, burial and posthumous miracles of a hagiographical text. Rather, it includes a psychological torture ending with a filicide and the execution of the villainous figure of authority represented by Appius. The inevitable scene of torture, which mostly takes place with the female martyr's being stripped, bathed in her own blood or surrounded by fire in which she remains unharmed and free from pain,²⁰ is recontextualized by Chaucer in order to pay attention to Virginia's execution by her father. Lacking a miraculous survival of the beheaded female victim, *The Physician's Tale* stresses the insecurity and vulnerability of a woman in real life, even at home. Meanwhile, Chaucer puts great emphasis on the issues of female chastity, virginity, piety, honourable lineage and dependence on paternal authority.

In medieval mind, 'a virgin is a woman who has never been seen and who has never entered the thought of a man.'²¹ In relation to this, virgins are expected to be withdrawn from society and to be seen only at worship to God. Chaucer's story is about Virginia who is brought up as the single child of Virginius, a worthy knight, in accordance with the proper conduct attributed to the females by the society. Virginia's beauty is noticed by lecherous Appius who abuses his judicial power in order to seize her. Virginius, rather than giving his daughter to Appius, cuts her head off without waiting for the revelation of the truth about the false judgment. In the tale, Virginia is neither raped nor given to Appius by force; however, the threat of losing her virginity and bringing dishonour to her family name put her under the risk of death. Although Virginia has no intention of tempting Appius on their first encounter, she is exposed to his erotic fantasy. After catching sight of her on her way to the church, he tries to seize her with a false charge. When the case is carried to court, her virginity becomes a public concern rather than a private matter.²² The public concern for virginity is of utmost importance for the feudal society in which inheritance is based on blood descent. As Margaret Hallisy states, the bloodline must be pure and the bride must be chaste to produce offsprings for her husband to preserve the blood inheritance and the

¹⁶ Sawyer, *Women and Religion*, p. 149.

¹⁷ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle-Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 141.

¹⁸ Buzwell, *Saints*, p. 15.

¹⁹ Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 74.

²⁰ Ashton, *The Generation of Identity*, p. 146.

²¹ Howard R. Bloch, 'Chaucer's Maiden's Head *The Physician's Tale* and the Poetics of Virginity', in *Chaucer: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Valerie Allen and Ares Axiotis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 145-56 (p. 148).

²² Michael Uebel, 'Public Fantasy and the Logic of Sacrifice in *The Physician's Tale*', *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews*, 15. 3 (2002), 30-3 (p. 31).

reputation of the family.²³ Moreover, it is accepted as a fatherly duty to protect the virginity of his daughter before her marriage.²⁴ Virginia is Virginius' only child, in other words, his only heir for the continuation of his lineage. Hence, her death is at the same time his death.²⁵ Before cutting her head off, Virginius laments:

“Doghter,”quod he, “Virginia, by thy name,
 Ther been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame,
 That thou most suffre; alas, that I was bore!
 For nevere thou deservedest wherfore
 To dyen with a swerd or with a knyf.
 O deere doghter, endere of my lyf,
 Which I have fostred up with swich pleasaunce
 That thou were nevere out of my remembraunce!
 O doghter, which that art my laste wo,
 And in my lyf my laste joye also,
 O gemme of chastitee, in pacience
 Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence.
 For love, and nat for hate, thou most be deed;²⁶

Considering the fact that handing Virginia over to Appius is going to bring shame on his honour, without any internal debate, Virginius tells Virginia that there are only two alternatives –death or shame– and ‘For love, and not for hate, thou must be deed.’²⁷ Virginius prefers the death of his daughter rather than her suffering from the shame of her sequestration in Appius’ house.²⁸ He feels obliged to kill Virginia to save her from becoming the sexual prey of Appius; nevertheless, he acts rashly because he values his daughter’s virginity above her life. Appius, by his false charge, challenges Virginius’ paternal control and becomes a threat even to his patrimony. Preceding the violent death of Virginia by the hand of her father, she has two more sentences passed upon her by Claudius and Appius. First of all, Claudius’ bill aims to make her his slave, and secondly Appius’ demand transforms her to a sexual servant. Appius’ appropriation of Virginia would be easier during the absence of Virginius; however, he refuses to proceed without Virginius. Even when Virginius arrives in court, Appius prevents his speech, making Virginius admit both Appius’ governance over his daughter and the court’s right to govern him. In response to Appius’ challenge, Virginius is determined to prove his knighthood to demonstrate his class-based superiority. Their mutual conducts are based on the patriarchal power politics, and the relations between them determine Virginia’s fate. Consequently, rather than allowing Appius to take the maidenhood of Virginia, Virginius himself takes her ‘maidenhead’.²⁹ Hence, the virgin’s body is centralized for the masculine control of both her father and her seducer, transcendences its physical existence and finally transforms into a moral entity.

The death of Virginia prevents her violation by Appius, and Virginius feels pity while cutting Virginia’s head off although he tells her that he kills her because of his love for her, and it is the father’s feeling of pity that dispels the violence of his act. Despite her tears and swooning in addition to her request that her father should ‘smyte softe’,³⁰ she cannot escape being the sacrificial victim. She chooses

²³ Margaret Hallissy, *Clean Maids, True Wives, Steadfast Widows: Chaucer's Women and Medieval Codes of Conduct* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1993), p. 46.

²⁴ Hallissy, *Clean Maids*, p. 44.

²⁵ Linda Lomperis, ‘Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices: Chaucer’s Physician’s Tale as Socially Symbolic Act’, in *Feminist Approach to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. by Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 21-37 (p. 32).

²⁶ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 192, lines 213-25. All references from *The Physician’s Tale* are taken from this edition, cited by Benson’s page and line number.

²⁷ *The Physician’s Tale*, ed. by Benson, 192. 225.

²⁸ Bloch, ‘Chaucer’s Maiden’s Head’, p.145.

²⁹ Lomperis, ‘Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices’, pp. 29-30.

³⁰ *The Physician’s Tale*, ed. by Benson, 193. 252.

to die as a virgin rather than to live as a thrall, in other words, she chooses death rather than shame.³¹ The Physician narrates her mourning for her fate and her acceptance of death rather than bringing dishonour on the following lines:

“O mercy, deere fader!” quod this mayde,
And with that word she bothe hir armes layde
Aboute his nekke, as she was wont to do.
The teeris bruste out of hir eyen two,
And seyde, “Goode fader, shal I dye?
Is ther no grace, is ther no remedye?”³²

“Blissed be God that I shal dye a mayde!
Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame;
Dooth with youre child youre wyl, a Goddes name!”³³

As a virgin, Virginia must be killed to become privileged in the society and to dispel the shame on her and her family name; in other words, she is to be sacrificed for the honour of her family. In this sense, her virginity necessitates the transmutation of her body –her head’s being cut off. As Michael Uebel suggests:

the Chaucerian understanding of the struggle to become virgin frames virginity within an economy of sacrifice. In *The Physician’s Tale*, the unrepeatable singularity of Virginia’s maidenhood, expressed in Nature’s imagined boast that the young girl cannot be made “countrefete” (VI. 13; 18) necessarily renders it to catastrophic change: what Nature had laboured over, and familial and religious law had policed, finds the ultimate refuge in violent death. Virginius’s beheading of his daughter can only be understood as a social act, a sacrificial process.³⁴

The sacrificial death of Virginia becomes a public act while the symbolic significance of her sexual purity –also implied by her name–, transcends the moment of her death. Unless there is no social concern for the concept of virginity, it would be devoid of meaning and importance, and accordingly, her Christ-like death undertaken by her father³⁵ would not be indispensable. Her virginity, which is expected to protect her from sexual violation, paradoxically causes her violation. Virginia who is described as the ‘gemme of chastitee’³⁶ is just an object to be possessed by her father, and an object to be violated by her seducer. In both cases, she is a vehicle for male self-assertions³⁷ and she is not safe anywhere, either on the way to the church or even at home.

The emphasis on the insecurity of home is Chaucer’s contribution to the tale. Only in Chaucer’s version of the tale does Virginius go home to kill Virginia.³⁸ In respect of the analogues of the tale, there are more apparent discrepancies with the purpose of drawing attention to the female body politics and the idea of virginity. Chaucer makes several contextual amendments to focus his discussion on the female issues. For instance, in *The Romance of the Rose*, Virginia’s story is narrated in fifty short lines.³⁹ This stems from the fact that, Jean de Meun introduces the story to discuss the corrupt judges. However,

³¹ Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 144-5.

³² *The Physician’s Tale*, ed. by Benson, 192. 231-6.

³³ *The Physician’s Tale*, ed. by Benson, 193. 248-50.

³⁴ Uebel, ‘Public Fantasy’, p. 31.

³⁵ Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 144.

³⁶ *The Physician’s Tale*, ed. by Benson, 192. 223.

³⁷ Winthrop Wetherbee, *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 96.

³⁸ Lomperis, ‘Unruly Bodies and Ruling Practices’, p. 30.

³⁹ G. Lorriss and J. Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. by Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 114.

Chaucer inserts lines to describe Virginia's goodness,⁴⁰ shifting the interest of the story from Appius to Virginia. Furthermore, different from Boccaccio's version of the story in *De Mulieribus Claris*, Chaucer mentions Virginius' wife, although there is only one reference to her, in addition to his emphasis on Virginia's being Virginius' only daughter.⁴¹

First of all, Chaucer's emphasis on Virginia's being the only child of Virginius is significant, since it highlights the fact that an honourable name is more important for medieval man than an heir with a potential for seduction. Her being the only means for the father's name to live on does not prevent her from being violated, because the public concern overcomes his parental role to save her from violation. Secondly, the mentioning of Virginius' wife -though referred only once accompanying Virginia on the way to church- is also significant. The nameless wife is the only female figure in the tale except for Virginia, and her voice is unheard throughout the tale. She does not even mourn for her daughter's death; she is silenced and inactivated. She is only the witness of the filicide without any attempt to prevent and even to criticize its brutality. Her silent existence stressing women's being voiceless, being submissive and helpless in the presence of male decisions ironically correspond to Virginia's in vain beseeching to Virginius to spare her life, because both silence and resistance end up with Virginia's being beheaded by her father.

Furthermore, Chaucer eliminates some details from *The Physician's Tale* that are present in the analogues, in order to make the tale comply with his intention to discuss the issue of female virginity. For instance, different from Livy's *History*, he excludes the parts narrating the corruption of law and the demonstration of the people⁴² which are irrelevant to his discussion. More importantly, he does not mention Virginia's fiancé. Chaucer's omission of Virginia's fiancé may stem from the fact that in medieval society rape of a virgin was accepted to be a more serious crime than the rape of a married woman.⁴³ If he had mentioned her fiancé, she would have been half-married because of her engagement, and the severity of Appius' claim on her would have been diminished as a crime. Moreover, by focusing on the relationship only between Virginia and her father, Chaucer has the opportunity to put Virginius in a moral dilemma of losing his daughter or his family honour, which prepares for Virginia's death.⁴⁴

Similar to Virginius' dilemma, Virginia is torn between her life and her sacrifice, and she finally submits to death to save her family honour. By presenting Virginia's death in the light of *sacrifice*, Chaucer associates Virginia with Christ whose sacrifice ended up with his death. However, different from Christ, Virginia neither rises to heaven nor attains a holy position. On the contrary, her sacrifice has realistic outcomes. She turns into a pitiful victim who is torn between disgrace and death. Her death is polished up to advertise the necessity of preserving virginity of a female. Furthermore, Virginia's exemplary submission into death in order to keep chaste and virgin coincides with one of the major aims of hagiography which is 'to function as a model for imitation.'⁴⁵ Towards the end of the tale, the Physician stresses the significance of the preservation of virginity with the following lines:

Ye fadres and ye moodres eek also,
Though ye han children, be it oon or mo,
Youre is the charge of al hir surveiaunce,
Whil that they been under youre governaunce.
Beth war, if by ensample of youre lyvyng,
Or by youre negligence in chastisyng,

⁴⁰ Wetherbee, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, p. 96.

⁴¹ Edgar F. Shannon, 'The Physician's Tale', in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, ed. by Bryan W. F. and Germaine Dempster (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), pp. 398-408 (p. 398).

⁴² Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 278.

⁴³ Helen Phillips, *An Introduction to The Canterbury Tales: Reading, Fiction, Context* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), p. 146.

⁴⁴ Hallissy, *Clean Maids*, pp. 49-51.

⁴⁵ Sarah Salih, 'Introduction: Saints, Cults and Lives in Late Medieval England', in *A Companion to Middle English Hagiography*, ed. by Sarah Salih (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 1-23 (p. 18).

That they ne perisse; for I dar wel seye
 If that they doon, ye shul it deere abeye.
 Under a shepherde softe and necligent
 The wolf hath many a sheep and lamb torent.⁴⁶

As the preservation of virginity is an obligation for the family honour and it puts the female in a vulnerable position as an object of male sexual passion, the parental education of daughters in order to protect them from sexual abuse is significant. Virginia's sacrifice for the preservation of her virginity is put forward to function as a model for imitation, so does in a hagiography. The Physician subsequently addresses the parents and reminds them how they can protect their daughters from sexual involvement. As long as a daughter is kept under control, she is left without any self-attempt or any self-decision to take, and hence, she accepts what is assigned to her. It is due to this ongoing control that she accepts death without much resistance. The psychological pressure on her that urges her to be the perfect virtuous virgin makes her welcome any decision for the sake of her chastity, and she even concedes to death.

The sacrificial death of Virginia for the sake of preserving her virginity and her family honour arouses the pity of the Host⁴⁷ which is expressed within a sentence: 'This is a pitous tale for to heere.'⁴⁸ None of the pilgrims criticizes Virginius for his rash decision to kill Virginia nor praises Virginia's death for the preservation of her virginity. They do not applaud Virginius who *saves* his daughter as a responsible father, neither do they blame him for killing her. Chaucer, similar to his pilgrim audience, avoids making any direct comment on the importance of virginity, and by a simple reaction of the Host - just with the expression of slight pity for Virginia's fate rather than a long praise- dismisses the disputability of the concept in the text. Their unresponsiveness initiates the questioning of the importance and indispensability of virginity which makes woman vulnerable. In fact, their avoiding any comment is far more noteworthy because it arouses interest among the audience and prompts them to consider on the significance of virginity, family honour and the necessity of sacrifice. Chaucer's favouring the critical and down-to-earth thinking is also strengthened by the Physician's statement. The Physician in the beginning of the tale emphasizes that 'this is no fable, / But knowen for historial thyng notable'⁴⁹ to emphasize the truth of his tale by relating it to history.⁵⁰ By insisting on the reality of his narrative, the Physician, in one respect, tries to convince his audience that the occasions he narrates take place in everyday life. In addition to this, he depicts the facts about women by means of Virginius' story that they are the sacrificial figures exposed to victimization in the power struggles of men, and only through death are they praised and obtain the status of men and become equal with them.

In conclusion, Chaucer adds realism to the fictional narrative of hagiography by employing the genre as a means of social criticism in terms of the vulnerability of female body owing to the significance attributed to female virginity. Chaucer subverts the traditional hagiographical convention in order to discuss the idea of virginity in addition to the male control over female body. Therefore, he not only subverts the genre, as he frequently applies in *The Canterbury Tales*, but also makes use of the didactic aspect of hagiographical writings, implying that a non-hagiographical or a non-religious writing may also be didactic. Furthermore, by excluding a miraculous occasion in the tale, Chaucer draws attention to the social realism, and provides the audience's involvement into the narrative and its argument. Hence, in *The Physician's Tale*, female body transcends its physical limits and it is re-embodied as a social construct.

⁴⁶ *The Physician's Tale*, ed. by Benson, 191. 93-102.

⁴⁷ The Host is the judge of the tales narrated by the pilgrims described in *The General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales*. He is supposed to determine the winning tale.

⁴⁸ *The Introduction to the Pardoner's Tale*, ed. by Benson, 194. 302. The Host comments on *The Physician's Tale* before *The Pardoner's Prologue*, in *The Introduction to The Pardoner's Tale*.

⁴⁹ *The Physician's Tale*, ed. by Benson, 192. 155-6.

⁵⁰ Angus Fletcher, 'The Sentencing of Virginia in The Physician's Tale', *Chaucer Review*, 34.3 (2000), 300-8 (pp. 300-1).