

CHAUCER'S *PHYSICIAN'S TALE*: AUTHORITY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND POWER

Abstract

The Physician's story in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and its connections with the story-teller has always been a puzzle for literary critics. The purpose of this paper is to articulate a possible explanation of the plot and its connection with the teller by analysing the physician-narrator's discourse together with Chaucer's additions to the original narrative, and the author's treatment of the concepts of authority, sovereignty and power in relation to the story-teller and the characters depicted in the story. **Keywords:** Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, Physician's Tale, rhetoric, power struggle, marriage, sacrifice.

Resumen

El cuento del Doctor en Medicina en la colección de los *Canterbury Tales*, y su relación con el personaje que relata esta historia ha sido siempre una incógnita para los críticos literarios. El objetivo de este artículo es poner en pie una posible explicación del argumento y de las conexiones de éste con el narrador de la historia. Esto se lleva a cabo por medio del análisis del discurso del médico, así como de los elementos adicionales incorporados por Chaucer a la narración y del tratamiento que hace el autor de los conceptos de autoridad, soberanía y poder con relación al narrador-médico y a los personajes caracterizados en la historia. **Palabras clave:** Geoffrey Chaucer, *Cuentos de Canterbury*, Cuento del Doctor en Medicina, retórica, lucha de poder, matrimonio, sacrificio.

I INTRODUCTION

VIRGINIA'S DEATH AT HER FATHER'S HANDS IN CHAUCER'S *Physician's Tale* has become difficult to explain for both critics and modern readers of the *Canterbury Tales*. The tale itself and its connection with the teller are problematical, and although a few efforts have been made to articulate a coherent explanation alongside the rest of the tales of the collection, there are no straightforward conclusions to be drawn. The tale was regarded in the past as a 'bad tale' inappropriate for Chaucer's mastery, but this story, as many others in the collection, is not Chaucer's original. It was reworked, supposedly, with the same purpose as the arrangements made for the rest of the stories: to make a further characterization of the pilgrims going to Canterbury. In this paper, I try to articulate an explanation of the plot of the tale and its connections with the teller. Several elements essential to the tale, such as the notions of authority, sovereignty and power, link the story of Virginia and Virginius with the story teller.

2 FORMS OF AUTHORITY: THE TALE AND THE TELLER

A keyword in the story is the term authority with some of its possible meanings and senses.¹ Neither in Chaucer's portrait of the physician in the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales*, nor in the Physician's Tale itself is the word *auctoritee* mentioned, although in its multiple senses, it is relevant in both sections of this work and it links several elements that could seem disconnected at first sight. The characters in *The Physician's Tale* are depicted according to their "power to enforce obedience." Apisus embodies legal authority, Virginius, on the other hand, represents parental authority, but in addition, for this character the meaning of this word is expanded to its sense of "expert in a subject" since fathers eventually should become experts in the care and governance of their own children. The physician's digression on the parental responsibility in the care of children (VI. 72–104) is one of the puzzling additions made by Chaucer to the original story of Virginia and has been discussed by a number of critics.² The topic of parental responsibility is clearly connected with the theme of authority and it is as significant to the general purpose of the work as are some other Chaucer's additions in this section. The connotations of this digression (discussed below) are far more important for the narrator of the tale, who is eventually the one responsible for telling the story in this particular way, than for the story of Virginia. As some scholars have pointed out, the discussion on the parental responsibility certainly seems to be disconnected with, or seems to be inappropriate for the events narrated thereafter. Nevertheless, in these lines of the narration, we listen

¹ According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*), the word authority can be understood, among other senses, as: a) power or right to enforce obedience, b) expert in a subject, c) those in authority; the body or persons exercising power or command, d) evidence that may be cited in support of a statement, and e) book, quotation, author considered to settle a question. *The Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*) glosses the term *auctorite* as having the following meanings: a) The right to rule or command, legal power, b) power to inspire or convince, c) recognized worth, value, efficacy, quality of being approved, good reputation, d) an authoritative passage or statement or an authoritative work.

² Kittredge and Tatlock suggested that the contents of this digression were connected to various historical references of Chaucer's time. See Kittredge (1903: 1–18) and Tatlock (1907). Other scholars have pointed out that the digression is important in the way that it is inappropriate to Virginia's story. See Middleton (1973: 9–32, 19–20).

to the physician's voice, and this addition to the original story, as the rest of Chaucer's additions, is tied to the physician's purpose when telling this tale.

The depiction of the physician in the General Prologue is the only information about this pilgrim provided by Chaucer. There is no prologue or link preceding his tale which could complement or contradict the description made in those first stanzas of the poem, and the physician does not perform or is mentioned anywhere else in the work. His depiction involves a different sense of the word authority, that of "book, quotation, author considered to settle a question. Six lines (I.429-434) are devoted to list the medical *auctoritas* which were the entire physician's lore of science. The physician pilgrim was portrayed by linking his personality to this other meaning of the word authority. His acquaintance with the medical authorities is what makes him a good physician, and allows him, at the same time, to become an authority himself. His portrait is that of someone who is an expert in his professional activities; someone for whom his level of expertise means to act with authority, that is, to have the power to enforce obedience over those who lack his proficiency. It is a requirement for the restoration of health to be aware of the causes of diseases and the cures for them, and this knowledge belongs to physicians. Their knowledge becomes their power to gain sovereignty over their patients. The power to decide what the patients should do to see their health restored is theirs, and if the patients do not act with blind obedience following the physicians' advice, the success cannot be guaranteed.³

3 AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY: PATERNALISM

Physicians become responsible for the health of their patients only when they can act with the authority that implies the power to enforce

³ Bullough (1966: 97) states that "It is important that the physician emphasized his skill to his patient, and made absolutely certain that the patient understand the necessity for following his orders. To do this the physician should exaggerate the dangers of disobedience." and he quotes from the writing of the fourteenth century French Surgeon, Henri de Mondeville who declared that "The surgeon should also promise that if the patient can endure his illness and will obey... he will soon be cured and will escape of all the dangers which have been pointed out to him; thus the cure can be brought about more easily and more quickly." (Quoted from Nicaise (1893: 104)).

obedience. The theme of responsibility is clearly connected with the theme of authority. One is responsible when occupying an authoritative position. The degree of responsibility is proportional to the capacity for decision or the degree of authority over a matter.⁴ The personalities of the physician and Virginius are linked in this respect, in the sense that both are authorities, both have authority, and both are responsible for the care and protection of other people, either patients or offspring. A physician must act with his patients as a father would do with his sons and daughters. Aristotle in his *Politics*, making a parallelism with the practice of medicine,⁵ states that this must be as if they were passive beings for whom the father must provide good. Medical paternalism has been a requirement in the practice of medicine throughout history. Medical relationships have imitated the model in which the father, as governor, monopolises the power and the rest of the family members act in an obedient and submissive way.⁶

Medical paternalism is based essentially on relationships supported by domination or by authoritative power. According to Max Weber (1968: 941–942), “domination in the most general sense is one of the most important elements of social action.” Domination means “the possibility of imposing one’s own will upon the behaviour of other persons.”

⁴ Agamben (1999: 21–22) states that “the Latin verb *spondere*, which is the origin of our term ‘responsibility’” means “to become the guarantor of something for someone (or for oneself) with respect to someone.” And that “in archaic Roman law, in fact, the custom was that a free man could consign himself as a hostage ... to guarantee the compensation of a wrong or the fulfilment of an obligation.... The gesture of assuming responsibility is therefore genuinely juridical and not ethical”.

⁵ He states that “Rule over children and wife and the whole household, which we call household management, is for the sake of those ruled or of something common on both sides. Essentially it is for the sake of the ruled, as we can see the other arts to be, such as medicine and athletic coaching; but accidentally it can also benefit the rulers, since there is nothing to prevent the coach from being sometimes himself one of the athletes, just as the navigator is always one of the sailors. The coach or navigator seeks the good of those he directs.” Aristotle, *Politics III* 6:1278b 37 1279a 2. Translation by Robinson (1962).

⁶ Gracia (1989: 25) argues that “cuando el médico actúa del modo más excelso y divino posible, como monarca paternal, tratará a sus súbditos, los enfermos, como seres pasivos a los que se procura el bien como a los niños: tal es la esencia del paternalismo, una constante a lo largo de toda la historia de la medicina”.

Justification of any kind of domination requires legitimization, which according to him, could be accomplished in three ways: "rational grounds, traditional grounds and charismatic grounds." (215). The first one rests on rules (legal authority), the second one rests on personal authority and tradition (traditional authority), and the last one on the belief in the existence of exceptional heroism or charisma (charismatic authority). The authority that physicians could claim for themselves would be of the type of the latter, that is to say, an authority based on their position above the rest of the human beings because of their knowledge. This knowledge places them somewhere in the same sphere as prophets or heroes, being able to work on issues of life and death as they embody the idea of 'safeguarding life'. In the story told by the physician Virginius represents the second type (traditional authority) and Apius the first one (legal authority). Virginia does not epitomize the victim of the execution of a sentence, she stands for those who lack autonomy, cannot articulate a moral decision, and whose only obligation is to obey. Thus, she is like the physician's patients in Chaucer's society and in such a role she asks for a "remedy" (VI. 236) that could prevent her from dying.

4 AUTHORITY AND RHETORIC: PERSUASION

Being an authority implies the possibility of setting examples as a model of behaviour. The story of Virginia as told by Chaucer's physician could in fact be considered an *exemplum*. As a rhetorical device the finality of the *exemplum* is to convince or to persuade the audience, and to demonstrate something proving it by analogy with something else.⁷ In the physician's narration the analogy is carried out by means of a "historial thyng notable."

⁷ University-trained physicians should be versed in the art of rhetoric as part of the *Trivium*, a requirement to obtain a degree in medicine. Jan Yperman, a fourteenth century Flemish physician and surgeon, declared that the physician and surgeon: "must not only have knowledge of medicine, but he must also know the books of nature, which is called philosophy. Grammar, logic and rhetoric and ethics are the four sciences which are necessary to examine things judiciously." See van Leersum (1912: Book I chapter iv). Furthermore, in the practice of their profession the knowledge of the liberal arts was also essential as Guy de Chauliac pointed out: "If the doctors have not learned geometry, astronomy, dialectics, nor any other good discipline, soon the leather workers, carpenters, and furriers will quit their occupations and become doctors" Nicaise (1890 : 18). (As quoted by Bullough (1966: 95).

(VI. 156) The physician, who was able “to speke of phisyk and of surgerye” (GP. 413) because he knew all the authorities and could cite them, did not surprise his audience by using an *exemplum*, and consequently citing its source, “Titus Livius” (VI. 1).⁸ The use of rhetorical devices in this part of the narration is not restricted to the use of an *exemplum*. The *digressio* is likewise a common rhetorical element in medieval poetry. In addition to those, the pathetic style which is the result of “piling up horrors” can be reinforced by rhetoric, as pointed out by Curtius (1953: 66), in order to give “the utmost effects to tragic material.” Lastly, the *conclusio*, in order to have a successful rhetorical effect, must “make an appeal to the emotions of the hearer, that is, stir him to enthusiasm or to sympathy.” (Curtius 1953: 89).

The physician narrator makes use of these rhetorical devices perfectly so that through his speech he seems to be trying to convince his audience of something. Nevertheless, his audience could be misled by the story he chose to tell. The tale, out of the context of *The Canterbury Tales*, could be taken as an *exemplum* of virginity, but within the frame of this work it is doubtful that, by assigning this tale to the physician, Chaucer’s intention was for this pilgrim to persuade the audience of the moral virtues that virginity portrays. As a rhetorical device this *exemplum* must serve the function of convincing the rest of the pilgrims of something; the last words in the Physician’s narration, which happen to be his moral conclusion, “Forsaketh synne, er synne yow forsake” (VI. 286) are a clear indication that the narrator did not choose this story as an *exemplum* of virginity. His conclusion has nothing to do with Virginia’s unfortunate fate or the relation of her fate to virginity; neither can we see any kind of reward as a consequence of the preservation of her virtue. The physician’s moral conclusion seems to move in a completely different direction. His words reveal that he is mostly concerned with the punishment received by those that were the initiators of the tragedy. He puts the blame of the deed on them, not considering Virginius’ crucial role in that tragedy, and forgetting Virginia completely.

⁸ Ussery (1971: 22) argued that this reference serves to underscore the Physician’s suitability to the tale; such a reference should be appropriate only to a man of learning, and physicians in the Middle Ages could be expected to have earned at least a master of arts degree.

With his digression on parental responsibility on the governance of children, the Physician establishes the basic points he wants to deal with, points that are going to be supported by his *exemplum*. His digression represents the theoretical discourse that has to be proven by means of his tale. Thus, this part of the physician's narration becomes essential for the understanding of the story as a whole, since it is going to become the link between the teller and the tale, or between the physician's mind and the physician's words. The *doctour of phisik* expresses his own feelings, doubts and fears by transferring them to the plot and characters of his tale. From his digression we infer that he is concerned with the responsibility of the people in charge, that is, of those who are in a position of authority. With his *exemplum* he wants to convince the audience that the application of the principle of authority is the natural consequence of responsibility, and that responsibility is applicable only when one is in a position of authority. As I have argued above, the physician himself, in the practice of medicine has to apply the same principle of authority over his patients, who owe him obedience if they want to get their health restored. Therefore, Physicians are only partially responsible for the cure of their patients.

5 AUTHORITY AND LAW: HIERARCHY

In the physician's exemplum the concepts of authority, sovereignty, power, and submission are depicted in the shape of law which takes different forms in the tale. In the first place, there is a form of natural or divine law so far as interpretations of the story, either in Christian or in pagan terms, are possible.⁹ Both systems are intermingled and not clearly distinguishable, as the work of several scholars has demonstrated.¹⁰ Secondly, there is also a form of human law or man-made regulations.¹¹ Lastly, there is a third type which constitutes a form outside the law, applicable in a state of exception. The application of each of form of law implies in the story the transgression of the others. Critics such as

⁹ The powers of the goddess Natura and its function within the story of Virginia are explained in Bartholomew (1966: 46–57).

¹⁰ See for example Prior (1999: 165–180).

¹¹ The application of this form of law and its connections to Chaucer's historical time has been analysed in Mandel (1976: 316–325).

McCall (1979: 105) have pointed out that “the physician presents an ideal picture of a chain of command—God’s lordly governance of Nature, Nature’s “sovereign” rule over creation, and finally Virginia’s, the best of creatures, rule of herself” and that “the physician knows very well that Nature proposes, man disposes.” There is in fact a chain or a hierarchy in the order of application of the law: God → Nature → Governors → Parents → Individual.

Chaucer chose a tale which originally dealt with corruption and justice, but he shifted the emphasis towards other aspects which are also implicit in the application of the law. By doing this, he expanded its scope if compared to that in the original narrative. The law in itself is devoid of value since it can be transgressed easily as the story demonstrates, but the forces behind the law, the concepts of authority, sovereignty and submission acquire significance and relate the story of Virginia to the story teller. What is at issue in the story can be summarized in the idea of sovereignty. According to Giorgio Agamben (1998: 15) there is paradox of sovereignty in the sense that “the sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law” and he quotes Carl Schmitt to express the idea that “sovereign is who decides on the state of exception.” (Agamben 1998: 11). In the physician’s story sovereign is Nature, having the power to decide the shape of human beings: “For Nature hath with *sovereyn* diligence / Yformed hire in greet excellence.” (VI. 9–10, emphasis added)¹² The sense of the word ‘sovereyn’ in these lines would be that given in the *MED* as “with the diligence of one who has superior or supreme power or rank,” or the one found in the *OED* “with authority over others.” Nature gets her power directly from God who is in fact “the formere principal.” (VI. 19) Nature, or a state in which nature governs is according to Agamben (1998: 35–36) “the being-in-potentiality of the law, the law’s self presupposition as ‘natural law’.” God and its agent *Natura* represent in the tale this ‘natural law’ to which the power of creation is given. Nature is essentially agreeable, as the depiction of Virginia shows, since she can in fact “peynten” (VI. 21) Virginia as a perfect human being.

¹² Unless otherwise indicated quotations from Chaucer’s *Physician’s Tale* are from Benson (1987).

The status of Nature or the natural law can be challenged by men through human rules. The setting of the story places us under the regulations of Roman law and in the plot two powers are confronted: that of the governor and that of the father. In different environments both enjoyed the privilege of having the right over life and death. The governor's scope is in the realm of the public sphere while the father's lies in the realm of private life. Agamben (1998: 87) states that "The first time we encounter the expression "right over life and death" in the history of law is in the formula *vitae nequisque potestas*, which designates not sovereign power but rather the unconditional authority [*potestà*] of the *pater* over his sons" and "this power is absolute and is understood to be neither the sanction of a crime nor the expression of a more general power that lies within the competence of the *pater* insofar as he is the head of the *domus*." Nevertheless, this authority was felt as the sovereign power of the magistrate's *imperium* applied in the private sphere, and the magistrate's *imperium* was "nothing but the father's *vitae nequisque potestas* extended to all citizens." (Agamben 1998: 89). Apius and Virginius are then struggling at the same level in order to impose their authority or sovereignty, which eventually become the same thing. In both cases the issue is an exercise of authority to manifest their respective power, a simple battle for their spaces which are in conflict, since Virginius' private space is in the scope of Apius' territory.

The sovereignty over one's own life, the last element in the hierarchy, is suggested in the story with allusions to the independent character of Virginia. Chaucer seems to have made an effort to make it patent that the individual has also a role to play in the decisions over his or her own life, as he gives Virginia a voice, a feature she lacked in other versions of the tale. Virginius offers her to choose when he says: "There been two weyes, outhere deeth or shame, / that thou must suffre..." (VI. 21-215). Nevertheless, even if she has the opportunity to speak out her thoughts, she cannot really make a decision about her own fate. The verdict is made by the authoritative father who sees her as his property more than anything else.

6 AUTHORITY AND POSSESSIONS: POWER

In spite of the role assigned to the individual, there is not a real choice for Virginia in the tale. Her father laments his daughter's fortune only through his own perspective. Virginia is part of the property of his household and this fact is emphasized in his discourse: "o deere doghter, endere of *my* lyf, / which *I* have fostred up with swich plesauce / that thou were nevere out of *my* remembrance! / o doghter, which that art *my* last wo, / and in *my* lyf *my* last joye also" (VI. 218–222, emphasis added). This emphasis on the possessive pronoun 'my' serves a twofold purpose here. On the one hand, it corroborates the idea of Virginia being just part of her father's household, and on the other hand, it forces in the audience a sentiment of pity towards a father who is about to 'sacrifice' his most precious possession. Virginius' lamentation leads directly to his speaking out about his decision without waiting for Virginia's response: "Take thou thy deeth, for this is my sentence" (VI. 224). Virginia is still given a voice after that sentence and she asks for a "remedye" (VI. 236) that could save her life, but she eventually accepts her father's authority without questioning it. She seems to accept that the reasons for her death sentence are justified as far as her father has decreed so, and so she pleads for her death: "Blissed be God that I shal dye a mayde! / Yif me my deeth, er that I have a shame." (VI. 248–249)

Virginia's interpretation of her own death is very complex and her words connecting her fate with that of Jephtha's daughter have been discussed by several scholars.¹³ The parallelism seems to be in fact not very apt since Jephtha's daughter cried because she was to die a virgin while Virginia blesses God for dying a maid and cries for her death alone. Nevertheless, Virginia emphasizes another aspect of that story: Jephtha's daughter's trespass which was in fact nothing but "for she ran hir father for to see, / To welcome hym with greet solempnytee" (VI. 243–244). Her own trespass is equally interpreted: she had done nothing to deserve the death that her father, in the possession of the *vitae nequisque potestas* could impose on her. There is no rational explanation for that sentence, unless the victim of the sentence understands it in terms of the illogical

¹³ See for example, Hoffman (1967: 20–31), Lancashire (1975: 320–26), Prior (1999: 165–180).

rationality of the 'sacrifice' and this is precisely what makes both stories parallel.

Etymologically, the meaning of the verb 'sacrify' is to make an object sacred (*sacro+facere*), so that in every sacrifice an object passes from the common into the religious sphere. Originally, a sacrifice was "a gift made by the primitive to supernatural beings with whom he needed to integrate himself." (Hubert & Mauss 1964: 2). The nature and function of sacrifice have changed under the perspective of different cultures, but in every sacrifice there must be certain elements linking it with its religious nature, since sacrifice is essentially a religious act. There must be a sacrificer, a sacrifier, a sacred place, sacred instruments to perform it, and a victim. Virginius plays the role of both sacrificer and sacrifier and Virginia is the victim. However, there is no such thing as sacred place or sacred instrument to perform it. If this was a real religious sacrifice it would not be fulfilling most of its basic precepts. Moreover, sacrifices, in every possible context, must follow some general principles as Slavoj Žižek (2001: 69) states: "At its most elementary, sacrifice relies on the notion of exchange: I offer to the Other something precious to me in order to get back from the Other something even more vital to me." There is nothing like that in the sacrifice of Virginia. If we need to interpret this death as a sacrifice we would have to do it in terms other than religious.¹⁴ It is only Virginia that relates her death to the idea of sacrifice as long as she cannot find any other rational explanation for it.

Virginius' interpretation of Virginia's death has nothing to do with this idea of 'sacrifice'. His speech reveals that the slaughter is not associated with any religious offering connected with sacrifices. Furthermore, even if he was offering something precious to him, he does not get back something even more vital to him. His attitude and point of view are justified by his notion of necessity. Virginia's death is necessary just because it prevents a greater evil, and only Virginius, in his authoritative position as a father who 'possesses' a child, is allowed to act against natural or human laws. For Virginius death is justified when there is a supreme goodness that

¹⁴ A looser interpretation of the concept would be more appropriate here. The meaning given in *OED* of "the destruction or surrender of something valued or desired for the sake of something having, or regarded as having, a higher or a more pressing claim" seems to be closer to Virginius' interpretation of the deed.

can cancel all sorts of wickedness, and consequently violence becomes an expression of “love and nat” of “hate.” (cf. VI. 225) The irrationality of the deed is the consequence of applying a system of values in which life is above any other issue, that is, a system where life itself is the supreme goodness, and living in any possible condition should be more appreciated than suffering death. In the mixed Pagan-Christian environment of the tale, playing with a double system of values seems appropriate: one in which life is the most precious object humans may have, and which no human being is allowed to challenge, and another one in which general goodness is above the individual. Reconciling both systems is always difficult and the application of the latter is generally justified only in extreme cases or ‘states of exception’.

7 AUTHORITY AND DEATH: JUSTIFICATION

The trouble in this story is that Chaucer’s audience, as well as present-day readers, might have had a problem in identifying the situation described in the tale as an exceptional situation towards which one might act outside the law in such a way. The inevitable question either for medieval or modern audience is: to what extent can one justify the death of a child in the terms described by the physician? The virginal and childish appearance of Virginia makes the situation even more puzzling. Her age is omitted in other versions of the tale and likewise her physical depiction. Nevertheless, the physician describes her as a being shaped by Nature emphasizing mainly colours: “This mayde of age *twelve* yeer was and tweye, / in which that Nature hadde swich delit. / For *right* as she kan *peyn*te a lilie *whit*, / And *reed* a rose, *right* with such *peynture* / she *peynted* hath this noble creature, / er she were born upon hir lymes fre / where as by *right* swiche *colours* sholden be” (VI. 30–36, emphasis added). The description is made up by means of colours themselves and by making use of verbs like “peyn^ten” and nouns like “painture” in the *OED* sense of “action or art of painting or depicting objects in colours.” Besides, there is also an emphasis on the word ‘right’ as an adverb with the meaning ‘just ... so’ or ‘correctly’ in the first two instances, and as a noun in the

third occurrence¹⁵. Thus, these are the right colours she should have, and she has got them by right, as opposed to having them by accident or temporally since they were part of her nature even before she was born.

The implications of such colours in Virginia's countenance, as well as the inclusion of her age, acquire some importance insofar as Chaucer added them to the original story.¹⁶ Helen S. Corsa (1987: 96–97) points out that “twelve to fifteen seems to have been the norm for marriageability” and that “why Chaucer has his narrator emphasize this point can only be conjectured.” One possible explanation for this emphasis can be developed from the implications hidden behind the elements just mentioned here, that is, age, colours, virginity and marriageability. The combination of these elements come together in what has been called the ‘disease of virgins’ better known in the Renaissance as ‘green sickness’, a disease mostly affecting young females about the age of puberty, characterized by a pale or greenish complexion. The term does not seem to have been used during the Medieval period although this disease had already been described in antiquity, and it certainly existed as such in the Middle Ages. There were other terms common in medical texts which designate the same condition, as for example when women were diagnosed as suffering from *suffocation of the womb*,¹⁷ or as Helen Kings (2004: 2) puts it, *obstruction of the spleen, excess phlegm, or love sickness*. Virginia's healthy colours are totally opposed to the colours of puberty.

The physician narrator, for some reason, emphasizes Virginia's childish condition for a ‘marriageable’ girl. If she is not yet mature, it seems even more inconvenient to put her under the obligation of undertaking the duties of a married woman. The implications of the disease of virgins were mainly concerned with the idea of women's submission to the authority of

¹⁵ Nevertheless, for the last occurrence in the quotation there are variant readings in the different manuscripts. Instead of ‘right’ some of the manuscripts read ‘bright’. See Corsa (1987).

¹⁶ There have been some previous thoughts about Chaucer's addition of Virginia's age. See for example, Waller (1976) and Owen (1981).

¹⁷ Jacquart and Thomasset (1988: 174) state that “for the medieval doctor, suffocation of the womb was without any possible doubt a disease caused by chastity.” This idea was explained in Constantine's *Viaticum* as well as in the texts belonging to the Trotula tradition and in Avicenna's *Canon Medicinæ*.

male power. The disease became a way of controlling girls' lives treating them only as objects in their fathers' household. The medical argument was that "marriage was the best remedy for chronic suffocation" (Jacquart and Thomasset 1988: 176), since girls were at that stage, as stated in the Hippocratic treatise *On the Disease of Virgins*, "ripe for marriage." (Green 2004: 42). References to ripeness are also made by the physician narrator when he mentions that Virginia did not go to "festes, revels, and at daunces" (VI. 65) for "Swich thinges maken children for to be / To soone ripe and boold ..." (VI. 67-68). Once again, there is an emphasis on her childish condition; she is not ready yet for marriage, being only a child in spite of her age. Virginia seems to have been depicted as someone who does not belong to the world of humanly affections;¹⁸ she blesses God for dying a maid because she does not need a remedy against a disease associated with her age. In this way, she together with Virginius and the physician narrator justify an absurd death.

8 CONCLUSIONS: *PROPRIETAS* IN THE PHYSICIAN'S TALE

The narrator's additions to Virginia's original story have a function in his discourse. His digression on parental responsibility and his moral conclusions, Virginia's speech and interpretation of her own death, the emphasis on the hierarchy, the role of nature, and Virginia's physical description as a childish will-less-ness object, serve to justify death despite love and care, at the hands of the fatherly figure or in spite of the fatherly character's own desires. At the same time, all these additions show that that a minority is sovereign in the hierarchy, and the vast majority must obey. God and Nature seem to be in the highest position in the hierarchy; nevertheless, the physician tells a story in which natural laws can be violated when there are exceptional causes that may justify it. With his narration he seems to be making claims for authority or sovereignty rather than appealing to the use of violence, but he uses an extreme case about the power over life and death as *exemplum*. Eventually, his discourse becomes nothing but the justification of the principle of authority he requires for himself and his profession. Finally, a story in which there is a struggle

¹⁸ Angus Fletcher (2000: 305) goes further as he states that "Virginia's virtuous behaviour places her outside of traditional power structures."

to impose authority in order to gain power in different spheres, that is, in the public and private lives, is perfectly appropriate for physicians. Their profession installs them right in this intermediate position: being professionals, they naturally belong to the public sphere, but the nature of their work and the devotion to secrecy they have to swear according to precepts of the Hippocratic Oath,¹⁹ place them within the inner walls of the patients' private lives.

The plague in the fourteenth century brought about, among many other things, a feeling of distrust towards medicine and the medical class. The physicians' authority when it came to the restoration of health was questioned.²⁰ They were discredited since their knowledge did not prevent the death of thousands of people. Those members of the medical class who were fortunate and survived had to face this state of affairs. After the plague, the medical class had to restore the confidence of the population in them. The authority with which Chaucer portrayed his physician should have run parallel to a high degree of responsibility. If the physician and Virginius are linked by their sharing of authoritative power, the simple act of absolving Virginius from condemnation—freeing him from responsibility over the death of his daughter—deprives the physician of responsibility over the death of his patients insofar as in the physician's narration Virginius becomes just a projection of the narrator's personality. Those responsible for Virginia's death are others, those with feelings of lust instead of love, and who acted not only in a sinful way but also illegally in the story. One should blame those who represent external causes which trigger processes that are not controllable by the person responsible or in an authoritative position. Chaucer's physician's intention when telling his story in this particular way might have been devised to restore the people's confidence in the medical class. It is in this light that we must read that what the Doctor of Physics is trying to say is that a physician's authority cannot be questioned, that his power when deciding about the lives of

¹⁹ At the end of the Hippocratic Oath, the physicians should swear that "Whenever I go into a house, I will go to help the sick and never with the intention of doing harm or injury..." and also that "Whatever I see or hear, professionally or privately, which ought not to be divulged, I will keep secret and tell no one." See Lloyd (1987: 67).

²⁰ For a brief discussion of this issue in relation to Chaucer's work see for example Astell (1996: 207–209).

others is essential in order to carry out his duty. Along with this, he is trying to say that death is inevitable in spite of everything, and in spite of good intentions and feelings. Virginia's death was inevitable in spite of her father's feelings for her and, as Virginius said, she died "for love, and not for hate." (VI. 225). Her death as Ann W. Astell (1996: 205) points out "represents the mystery of evil in a fallen world where all people, good and evil alike, must die, if not through human betrayal and violence, then through some other 'pestilence' (VI. 91)."

Chaucer's attitude towards his Physician has been largely discussed. Walter C. Curry (1960: 35) stated that the Doctor of Physics is "a curious compound of contradictory elements which makes his character second only to that of the Wife of Bath in complexity." The character of the Physician is not fully developed in the same way as other pilgrims to whom Chaucer gave the possibility of introducing themselves by letting them speak in their prologues. The obscurities of his personality run parallel to the obscurities traditionally associated with the medical class during the Middle Ages. Medical practitioners were not willing to let their craft be known or shared by everyone, insofar as this could constitute a threat to the practice of their profession. Chaucer was a man engaged with the scientific knowledge of his time, and there is no reason to believe that he distrusted the system in which medical knowledge was based. This would imply for him to distrust the entire scientific system. As Curry (1960: 27) pointed out Chaucer's description of the Doctor of Physics "constitutes not so much a satire upon the principles of medieval medicine as a character-sketch of contemporary physicians." From the analysis carried out in this paper we could conclude that it is likely that what the author was criticising was the abuse of power of contemporary physicians, and their claiming for lack of responsibility when they were not in an authoritative position. The consummation, up to the last consequences, of the principle of authority in the physician's *exemplum* has a satiric effect, since when physicians, without giving up their role of governors forget the most divine of paradigms, that is to say, behaving like a father

would do, they fall in the worst of all possible procedures: they become tyrants.²¹

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²¹ See Gracia (1989: 25). "Cuando el médico, sin renunciar a su papel de monarca, olvida el más divino de los paradigmas, el de padre, cae en el peor de los procederes posibles, el del tirano."

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