

The 'Mayde Child' in *The Shipman's Tale*

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Chaucer allocates only three lines to the little girl who makes a brief appearance in *The Shipman's Tale* and then is heard of no more. When the Merchant's wife goes into the garden to arrange a liaison with the Monk during her husband's absence,

A mayde child cam in hire compaignye,
Which as hir list she may governe and gye,
For yet under the yerde was the mayde.

(*Riverside Chaucer* VII, 95–97)

Since the child plays no active part in the Tale, we may well wonder why she is there at all. One might suspect that Chaucer had originally intended the Merchant to learn of his wife's duplicity from her, but I prefer not to take seriously the possibility that so consummate an artist changed his mind but forgot to revise her out of the Tale.

The older view was that Chaucer should have done more work on it. For Craik (48–70), its chief interest lay in seeing what Chaucer was able to do with 'somewhat elementary and intractable material'—and according to Craik he failed to 'impress his own artistic personality' upon it to the extent that he did in his other comic tales. Since it is about a merchant tricked into paying his wife to cuckold him, it is often assumed that the Tale was originally intended for the Wife of Bath (cf. Cooper 278). The implication is that the rather bare fabliau was set aside to pursue a better idea. Although the end-link confirms that it is the Shipman who tells the Tale, there is no obvious reason why he should be the narrator, unless his occupation of shipping merchandise to foreign ports makes a tale about a merchant who goes away on business appropriate for him. It seems to contain unrevised inconsistencies, of which the maid child's existence and the feminine pronouns in lines 11–19 are the most glaring examples.

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These pronouns need not, however, indicate that this passage is an unrevised relic of a time when *The Shipman's Tale* may have been intended for the Wife of Bath; it is not hard to imagine the Shipman's voice rising sarcastically into an imitative falsetto in order to mimic a dramatic interruption from the frolicsome wife whose husband has to pay for her extravagances. And the woman's voice is heard again, to decisive effect, at the end of the Tale when the Merchant's objections to his Wife's lack of frugality are summarily brushed aside. As usual when Chaucer's work is examined closely, there are signs that he took more care over the Tale than may at first sight appear. For instance, the Merchant's delighted response to the Monk's overtures of friendship is finely observed:

The monk hym claymeth as for cosynage,
And he agayn; he seith nat ones nay,
But was as glad therof as fowel of day,
For to his herte it was a greet plesaunce. (36–39)

He is as chirpingly happy as a bird at dawn, and perhaps as feckless. David Abraham detects a pun on 'cosynage', although there is some doubt whether 'cozen' in the sense of 'trick' was already current in Chaucer's day—cf. Cooper, who nevertheless acknowledges how well such a reading fits in with the Tale's theme of duplicity (285). Comparison with the Tale's closest analogue, a much cruder story in Boccaccio's *Decameron* (8: 1, trans. Rigg, II, 149–51) shows that it is easy to exaggerate the sparsely anecdotal quality of *The Shipman's Tale*. In the *Decameron* the Wife meets her lover's amatory advances by quite blatantly demanding money for sex. Her avarice so disgusts him that, having taken his pleasure, with a mind-boggling disregard for his own culpability he determines to trick her out of her payment by telling the Merchant he has repaid the loan to her. She is then forced to give up her ill-gotten gain. Chaucer revises this clumsily anti-feminist ending, and takes much greater care of details. The scene in the garden is more subtly and dramatically presented than the comparable arrangements that are summarized in Boccaccio. Chaucer includes the maid child, to overhear and be ignored. Next Sunday the Monk returns, all freshly shaved and tonsured (309)—as he would be, for this time it is not the Merchant he is going to see. The Monk's welcome provides a glimpse of a busy household, for such is his popularity that even the littlest knave is glad to see him, and no one, including presumably the little maid child, has the slightest suspicion that he spends the night with the Wife in return for the hundred franks he has borrowed

from her husband (310–22). In due course the Merchant comes home well pleased with his business dealings, which have won him ten times what he lent the Monk. His wife repays him in the manner she knows best, and he rebukes her only for causing him embarrassment by not telling him she had the money from the Monk. Afterwards the Host, typically short-sighted, awards the Monk the palm for tricking both Merchant and Wife (438–42), but he seems to have been listening to Boccaccio rather than Chaucer, for the Wife has her answer ready, and the profit from the transaction: she claims, persuasively, that she took the franks as a gift from her husband, knowing it to be as much for his honour as for her own pride and pleasure that she should appear finely dressed in company. The unwitting Merchant has been tricked, but never realizes how much, and no one is physically the worse off.

The Tale, then, is more carefully crafted than is sometimes thought—Pearsall justifiably calls it a ‘minor masterpiece’ (211)—and this should be borne in mind when considering what the ‘mayde child’ who makes so fleeting an appearance is doing there. One could argue, of course, that her appearance is much less fleeting than the three lines allocated to her may suggest, for she is presumably ‘there’, though evidently forgotten or completely ignored by the Wife and Monk, throughout the hundred and eleven lines (98–208) describing their interview in the garden. But what happens to her after that is a mystery. Forth goes the unscrupulous Wife, ‘as jolif as a pye’ (209), first to the cooks, and then to her husband’s counting-house, but somewhere along the way she presumably loses the little maid—or at least, we do.

Since I wish to argue that the overlooking of this little maid has thematic significance in the Tale, a pictorial reminder of her easily forgotten presence may be in order. Illustrated editions of Chaucer, of which there are a great many, generally either omit *The Shipman's Tale* or choose not to illustrate it. However, the elephant-folio limited edition produced for John Deuss by the Westerham Press in 1983 contains the accompanying rather intriguing picture by Charles Mozley. I am indebted to Robert Simola of California, who has a large collection of editions of Chaucer, for providing me with a copy of Mozley’s illustration.



Lithograph of Charles Mozley, Copyright John Deuss 1983.
*The Merchant's Tale and The Shipman's Tale from Geoffrey Chaucer's
Canterbury Tales.*

The Wife and Monk are clearly too deep in conversation to notice the little maid, while the child's expression, with its Mona Lisa-like smile and eyes directed perhaps at birds in the bushes, makes it as uncertain as in Chaucer whether she's listening roguishly or awaiting permission to run off and play elsewhere.

If, as I do, one rejects the aspersions sometimes cast on the Tale, one needs to account for the child's presence in the Merchant's family, and more specifically for her function at this point in the narrative. I think we may dismiss at once the idea that she is a daughter of the Merchant's wife, either by a previous marriage, of which there is no suggestion in the text, or by the Merchant, whose neglect of her is the reason for her liaison with the Monk, or by the Monk, since such a business as the tale recounts would hardly have been necessary if their cohabiting had been of so long standing. But in any case the three lines that refer to the child not only give no indication of consanguinity, but suggest that the relation between Wife and child is purely one of teacher and pupil.

A note to lines 95–97 in *The Riverside Chaucer* (911) suggests that the maid was a servant, quoting evidence that merchants' wives, like other gentlewomen, often had a little maid to wait on them when they went out. Thus Arveragus orders a squire and a maid to accompany Dorigen on her way to the garden where she is to meet Aurelius (V 1487); they have no other function in *The Franklin's Tale*. If this is so she is merely a status symbol, to be mentioned and then ignored, for she renders no service to her mistress in the garden. 'Governe' would suit such an interpretation, but together with 'gye' and 'yerde' it seems to imply something more: that she is a ward whom the Wife is bringing up.

It was customary for children in the Middle Ages to be boarded with other families than their own as part of or to complete their education. In 1470 Anne Paston, aged about fifteen, overstayed her welcome in the home of William Calthorpe. He complained that 'she waxeth hygh, and it were tyme to purvey her a mariage'. Her mother concluded that 'owthere she hath displeased hym or ell he hath takyn her with summe diffought'. She was unwilling to believe Calthorpe's excuse that he wanted her off his hands because he needed to trim his household expenses. Convinced she could not cope with the return of another intransigent daughter, Margaret begged her son John, then head of the family, to 'comune wyth my cosyn Clere at London, and wete how he is disposyd to her ward' (Davis 206: I, 348).

At the Leeds medieval congress in 2005 I suggested that the tales in Fragment VI and at the beginning of Fragment VII contain a sequence of animadversions

on the subject of the education of the young. The little maid in *The Shipman's Tale* forms part of the series that includes Virginia, the young revellers in *The Pardoner's Tale*, and the Prioress's little clergeon—perhaps, if Thopas in Chaucer's own tale is regarded as a child playing at knight errantry, him as well (cf. Truscott).

In *The Physician's Tale* Chaucer's stark confrontation of the dilemma that forced a loving father to prefer his daughter's chastity to her life has obscured for most readers the relatively minor question of her education, and made the earlier part of the tale concerning governesses and the school Virginia was attending seem simply irrelevant. Critics (e.g. Whittock) have in particular denounced the injunction to governesses to take care of the moral education of their charges, whatever their own behaviour in youth may have been, since Virginia's fate in no way depends on the negligence or incompetence of a governess. After the Physician has cast doubt on the moral credentials of some (perhaps most) governesses, one would expect a governess to appear in the story, but none does. Perhaps the very absence of a protector is part of the point of the tragedy.

But if in the wider context of Fragment VI and the beginning of VII Chaucer is concerned with the upbringing of children, it makes sense for him to allude in *The Physician's Tale* to two types of education: that enjoyed by aristocrats' children at home, and that acquired at school by well enough connected members of the middle or upper middle classes. The tirade against governesses of 'lordes doghtres' (VI, 73) envisages the former group, while Virginia, like the child in *The Prioress's Tale* later on, attends a school. The girl in *The Shipman's Tale* belongs in a third category, as the ward of a middle class businessman. In this capacity her future rather than her present usefulness would be of most interest to guardians who hoped to benefit financially from their wardship of her.

An example of the schooling of a male ward in the time of Chaucer is provided by Gilbert Maghfeld, a London merchant and money-lender of some standing: he had six servants, two of them women, and Chaucer himself had secured a loan from him. Chaucer's portrait of the Merchant in *The General Prologue*, and perhaps of the Merchant in *The Shipman's Tale*, may owe something to his acquaintance with this Maghfeld. Maghfeld had secured the profitable wardship of John Frogenhale, and paid for his schooling in Croydon. With the wardship he obtained the subsequent marriage of the boy (Rickert 112–13).

One of the inspirations of the present essay was a paper presented by Eugenie Freed to the Medieval Society of Southern Africa in 1984, in which she examined

the economic basis of bourgeois marriages, with illustrations from the Paston letters and Lydgate's *Temple of Glas*. She pointed out that Stephen Scrope, a stepson of Sir John Fastolfe, had been forced by his stepfather's lack of generosity to sell a little daughter of his for much less than she was worth. What was sold was the wardship of the child, whose new guardian thereby acquired the right to arrange her marriage, probably to a relative or dependant, thus obtaining for himself or his family whatever inheritance might be hers. A problem arose later on for the Pastons when negotiating with the widower Scrope to marry their sister Elizabeth to him; he was by then about fifty, she twenty or so: would he leave his possessions to this daughter he once sold, who was now married to a knight, or to Elizabeth and any children they might have if he married her? In the event the negotiations, for whatever reasons—one can imagine several—fell through.

Chaucer's own son Thomas, and Thomas's patron Henry Beaufort, Bishop of Winchester, who was himself the son of Chaucer's sister-in-law Katherine and John of Gaunt, were also involved in the lucrative trade of custodianship. Thus, 'On 26 February 1426, three weeks before Beaufort's removal from the chancery, Thomas Chaucer, his kinsman and servant, secured custody of Joan, daughter and heiress of Sir John Drayton, for 100 marks. Beaufort's decided inclination to reserve at least the marriages of widows for selected individuals may not have escaped the commons' attention, for at Leicester early in 1426 they complained that as chancellor he had been refusing to license widows' remarriage in return for the usual fine.' (Griffiths 86)

James Gairdner, the nineteenth-century editor of the Paston letters, was indignant at this 'evil system of bargaining in flesh and blood' (clxxvi), but in practice it was only as good or as bad as any system of securing a 'good' marriage for one's children is likely to be. Fastolfe, indeed, had 'sold' Scrope himself when a child, and subsequently bought him back when a marriage that would 'disparage' him was mooted by his new guardian (Gairdner, epistle 72: I, 91–94). In an age that set so great store by rank, an economically disadvantageous marriage was a 'disparagement'—in fact, the word 'disparage' meant to degrade by an unequal marriage, with consequences for one's well-being as well as one's reputation. Hence the knight in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is quite as upset by his bride's poverty, which he equates with the fact that she is 'comen of so lough a kynde' (III, 1101, cf. 1063), as he is by her age and ugliness: 'Allas,' he cries, 'that any of my nacioun / Sholde evere so foule disparaged be!' (III, 1068–69). More revealingly, Symkyn, the miller in *The Reeve's Tale*, is incensed when he

learns of the poor, and therefore unsuitable, student Aleyn's treatment of his daughter (willingly accepted though it was!), since this is likely to damage her prospects of inheriting her parson grandfather's 'catel and his mesuage' when she marries (I, 3979–80). The swyving of his wife, if he ever learns of it, he could perhaps more easily endure, since he has her dowry (3944). Seizing Aleyn by the 'throebolle' he cries 'Who dorste be so boold to disparage / My doghter, that is come of swich lynage?' (I, 4271–73) Of course, her 'lynage' is by no means so exalted as Symkyn likes to imagine. Nevertheless, like the Paston family, Symkyn's was upwardly mobile: his own marriage cost his father-in-law a substantial dowry, and he was determined neither to marry beneath him nor anyone who was not a virgin, 'To saven his estaat of yomanrye' (I, 3949). It is more than 'the gryndynge of the whete' (4314) that Symkyn loses as a result of his attempt to get the better of the two 'povre scolers' (4002)—disparagingly poor, when they destroy his social aspirations.

On the evidence of the Paston letters, Gairdner accuses the fifteenth century of a want of domestic feeling: 'Children, and especially daughters, were a mere burden to their parents. They must be sent away from home to learn manners, and to be out of the way. As soon as they grew up, efforts must be made to marry them, and get them off their parents' hands for good.' (ccclxx) Gairdner is here anticipating the now largely discredited work of scholars like Philippe Ariès, who concluded that there was very little parental affection for or understanding of children in the Middle Ages. Since Ariès wrote, plenty of evidence has come to light of care for the nurture and wellbeing of children (cf. Hanawalt, Kline, Lee, Pollock, Truscott).

It is perhaps to be expected that it is easier to find examples of hardship than of happiness among children in literature, since writers are more likely to draw attention to what needs remedying than to what does not (see further, Coveney, Pattison). From this perspective the phrase 'yet under the yerde' may have sinister connotations. In itself it could of course simply mean that the child the Merchant's wife was looking after was of an age to be taught. But in a tale of such physicality as the Shipman's its stark literalism implies a discipline that could be brutal. The Wife has absolute power over the child, to govern and guide her 'as hir list'. One recalls the temper of Agnes Paston when her own daughter got on her nerves: hurry up and get your sister married, Elizabeth Clere writes to John Paston in 1449, 'for sche was neuer in so gret sorow as sche is now-a-dayes ...sche hath son Esterne þe most part be betyn onys in þe weke or twyes and som tyme twyes on o day, and hir hed broken in to or thre places' (Davis 446: II, 32).

There was certainly no lack of violence in the upbringing of children in the Middle Ages, but serious cases might be brought to court. *How the Good Wife Taught Her Daughter* contains a stanza thus modernized by Edith Rickert (Rickert 103–04):

And if thy children be rebel and will not bow them low,
If any of them misdo, neither curse them nor blow [scold];
But take a smart rod and beat them in a row,
Till they cry mercy and their guilt well know.

However, a father whose daughter had been apprenticed to an embroiderer for five years, who beat and ill-treated her, brought a successful action against him, for which he was fined and forced to release the girl from her apprenticeship (Rickert 108).

This unlimited power which the Wife seems to have over the child suggests that the latter is more than just a casual visitor, that, in fact, the Merchant has paid good money to secure her wardship. He would only do that if she was an heiress of some standing, and he was likely to make a packet out of her marriage, or the re-sale of her wardship, in due course. This prospect would be in keeping with the mercenary theme of the tale, where what Gairdner thinks of as a trading in flesh and blood is thematically linked to the main one of carnality, of sex for money (cf. Silverman, Fulton). As Pearsall comments, 'The delicious rhyme on franks/flankes [201–2] epitomizes the theme of convertibility.' (213)

If violence rather than affection formed a great part of the way the Merchant's wife was likely to 'governe' her ward, her guidance was even more suspect, for in this case we have knowledge of the kind of woman she was to enable us to assess her suitability as a guardian of the child. The only glimpse we have of her conduct towards her shows the Wife busy arranging in her presence a meeting with her hypocritical lover. Chaucer has left it to our imagination to wonder how far the child is aware of what is going on. The enigmatic smile on the face of the apparently innocent child in the Mozley picture may suggest she is drinking in the whole of the adult conversation, or that her thoughts are entirely elsewhere. But surely much of the Wife's 'compaignye' must sooner or later influence her for evil.

What then is the 'mayde child' doing in *The Shipman's Tale*, and why specifically does she appear at this point? Both Craik and Pearsall use the word

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‘chaperone’, but without granting it much force. Craik, indeed, considers her superfluous:

The ‘mayde child’, who comes with the wife, is used by her as a sort of innocent chaperone, adding piquancy to a situation which she is too young to understand, and which in any case the wife can forbid her to reveal. Nevertheless, she seems superfluous, for the mood of the meeting is clear enough without her, and at its end she has simply vanished. (56)

Pearsall suggests that while the Monk has no ulterior motive for being in the garden (which seems doubtful!), having come simply to say his (hypocritical?) devotions,

[T]he Wife is there by premeditation: she arrives ‘pryvely’, bringing with her, for form’s sake, the ‘mayde child’ that she has under governance, that is, someone else’s daughter that she is bringing up. This girl is ‘yet under the yerde’ and probably therefore about twelve years old. [If so, she is ready to be married off advantageously, as the Wife of Bath was at that age (III, 4–6), but there is no hint of this in this tale.] She is present throughout the following scene, and acts as a kind of chaperone, inhibiting any too free intimacies and encouraging euphemism. Chaucer’s care with small but significant dramatic details is thereby well illustrated. (211)

One may certainly agree with this last sentence, while wishing to take issue with the preceding one. As a chaperone, the child can safely be ignored. Indeed, her presence is so easily forgotten that it seems to be elided completely from the adults’ attention, as they promise to betray each other’s confidences to no one—ironically, if the child may be listening! The intimacies that conclude the scene, ‘And with that word he caughte hire by the flankes’ (202), are only slightly less gross than Nicholas’s seizure of Alison’s ‘haunchebones’ at the beginning of *The Miller’s Tale*, and are scarcely inhibited by the child’s presence. By that time even the reader may have forgotten her.

Holly Crocker analyses the scene in the garden without mentioning the child at all. Crocker argues that the masculine identities of the men depend on their

ability to satisfy the Wife either with sex or money, and describes how she manipulates the Monk into ensuring that his 'cousin' the Merchant will in effect pay for his own cuckolding. Cuckolds in Chaucer generally have to live with the deception practised on them as best they can: old John in *The Miller's Tale* is adjudged to be mad by the neighbours who see him wallowing on the floor beneath the kneading tub he has hung in the rafters, in *The Reeve's Tale* Symkyn suffers a number of inconveniences, including being beaten by his own wife, and Januarie in *The Merchant's Tale* is willing to be persuaded that his eyes rather than his wife and squire have deceived him. But the Merchant is embarrassed only by having to ask for money which he discovers has already been repaid. For the little girl to reveal, either deliberately or inadvertently, what the Wife and Monk have really been up to would, in obliging the Merchant to react, have extended the tale beyond its anecdotal limits, shifting its focus from the Wife's cleverness to the Merchant's double discomfiture. But it is typical of their apparent unawareness of wrongdoing that no one in *The Shipman's Tale* suffers any serious discomfiture. The maid child is not to be an instrument of retribution, except as a potential sign that it is owing. It is her symbolic rather than narrative significance that is important.

In fact she signifies as no direct statement would the callous immorality of the corrupt woman who was in duty bound to set a good moral example to her charge. The governesses in *The Physician's Tale* who were given charge of lords' children were reminded that they were chosen either for their honesty or else because they had thoroughly repented of former frailty. The Merchant's Wife fails on both counts.

So in his way does the Merchant, who treats his household, including his wife and implicitly his ward, as tradable possessions. 'Goldlees for to be, it is no game' (290), he tells his perfidious 'cosyn' the Monk, summing up his worldly philosophy. Helen Fulton points out that Chaucer was well aware of the rising merchant class's struggle to maintain status and affluence; perhaps that is why he is more leniently disposed towards the deceived Merchant at the end than he might otherwise have been. However, because the Merchant makes all his business arrangements, and especially his financial bargain with the Monk, without reference to his wife, 'refus[ing] to see his wife as a partner with equal influence over the goings-on in the household, she directs her energies to other activities' (Crocker 67). On leaving for Flanders he instructs his wife to take care 'to kepe oure good' (243), and 'honestly governe wel oure hous' (244) assuring her she

has all she needs in the way of clothing, food and money. All she needs is by no means all she wants, and his niggardliness in not supplying it encourages her to be anything but honest in the way she governs his household.

Chaucer was aware, too, that 'chaffare' and charity do not readily go together. Robert Adams views the Merchant's stock-taking prior to his trading venture as a parody of extra-sacramental penance, private devotions concerned not with his sins but his hopes of monetary gain. Analyzing the garden scene, also without mentioning the maid child, Adams indicates its parallels with the confessional, in which the Wife confesses not her own sins but her husband's shortcomings. Confession in the Middle Ages was public rather than private; perhaps there is an ironic appropriateness in the little maid's being there to overhear the Wife's complaint and the Monk's opportunistic response. But they ignore her, as they do the Church's injunction to 'redde quod debes', to pay the debt of contrition and penance that sinners owe to God. 'The central irony at the end of *The Shipman's Tale*', Adams says (98), 'is not simply that marriage has been commercialized; rather, it is that both the merchant and his wife imagine themselves to be free of debt when, in fact, their successfully concealed violations of accepted moral principles in trade and marriage have rendered them insolvent in the only "taillynge" that finally matters, the "Taillynge . . . unto oure lyves ende".'

The ignored child stands for the neglect of their moral duty that vitiates the adult characters. Her absence in presence mirrors the adult characters' blindness to their own immorality. The Merchant has no interest in her except as a commodity. The Monk sees no impropriety in allowing her to witness his devotions degenerating into dalliance, and that with his trusting friend's own wife, her guardian. Whether the child overhears and understands the Wife's conversation with the Monk, or trips guilelessly along beside them unaware of what is in the wind, it is clear that the Wife has betrayed the ill-advised trust of whoever put her in her care. A comical fabliau setting masks the seriousness of the adulterers' immorality, but a three-line glimpse of potentially corrupted innocence unveils the heart of darkness beneath the comedy.

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