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ALIENATED CHILDREN IN THE LITERARY NARRATIVES OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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Abstract

Few literary and psychiatric accounts from various cultures and eras provide insight into the psychopathology of Parental Alienation Syndrome and the familial relationships, particularly between parents and children. Parental issues often arise from a parent's lack of emotional stability or mental health challenges, leading to harmful intentions towards their children, such as infanticide or filicide. This paper aims to move beyond the idealized image of a happy family to explore the complexities of parent-child relationships. This paper examines how Parental Alienation Syndrome can adversely affect a child who experiences instances of infanticide and filicide in medieval England. Ultimately, this paper focuses on the interaction between literature and child psychiatry during this period and how they reflect the current events of the time.

Keywords: Medieval England, Infanticide, Filicide, Parental Alienation Syndrome, Literature.

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Introduction

Why did medieval parents resort to infanticide, filicide, or familicide? Did they commit these acts due to being non-compos mentis? What are the painful consequences for a child's future in medieval England if they survive an attempted murder by a parent? In this context, it can be challenging to differentiate between parental alienation syndrome and acts of infanticide, filicide, or familicide in medieval England. The word infanticide is first used in English in the seventeenth century, and it is difficult to figure out the medieval synonym. While Latin documents provide information regarding homicide, some Old-English records use *formyrthrian*, *bearnmyrdhran*, or *overlaying* (Graham, 1998, 275). In medieval England, parents committed crimes for various reasons, with a specific focus on infanticide/filicide records. These records inform that infanticide/filicide is a common act of misdemeanors due to *non-compos mentis* of a parent. (Hurnard 1969, Kellum 1973, Helmholz 1974, Hanawalt 1976, Butler 2007). Hanawalt suggests that Margery kills her baby daughter and forces her young son to sit in hot coals (1976, 131), and another woman beats and kills her ten-year-old son (131). Hurnard points out that the court judges a woman killing her daughter and son with an axe to be supervised by her kin (1969, 162). Butler focuses on Anabilla, wife of William Carter of Bulcote who kills her son and two daughters; Alice, wife of Reginald of Tibthorpe strangles her daughter Agnes; and Maud who kills her children (two sons and one daughter) in 1329 and Goda, wife of John Attebek who slays her son John and daughter Beatrice (2007, 73). Boswell provides information about a woman who kills her husband with the help of a lover because an insane murder is easier than a divorce, and Juliana Matte of Killingbury who drowns her one-year-old son in a well (1984, 10). *Non-compos mentis* is considered an excuse for the penance of a parent. Also, Mull notes that a wife resorts to infanticide after being rejected by the husband (1987, 119). Parental Alienation Syndrome happens when one parent tries to sabotage the child's relationships with other family members after a separation or divorce, even if infanticide, filicide, or familicide may occur due to non-compos mentis. Children who are manipulated by one parent to alienate them from the other parent may display signs associated with Parental Alienation Syndrome. These signs can include extreme, unjustified fear, disdain, or hostility toward the targeted parent. This behavior can be observed in certain families involved in child custody disputes and may be diagnosed based on a specific set of indicators. Child custody issues often lead to parental alienation syndrome, which can arise between parents as well as involving stepparents, grandparents, or other relatives. This syndrome occurs when a child unjustly targets a loving parent, typically due to indoctrination from the other parent (Gardner et al., 2006, 5). It's important to note that a child's hostility may be justified in cases of real parental abuse or neglect. Parental alienation can severely damage or destroy a child's bond with a loving parent, constituting a form of emotional abuse.

Although medieval historical records provide a foundation for understanding the complexities of infanticide and filicide, the concept of non-compos mentis is not applicable in this context. Instead, it somewhat parallels the notion of Parental Alienation Syndrome found in the Old French narrative *Le Fresne* and in the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone* from medieval England. This paper explores how and why parental alienation syndrome can harm a child's soul by looking at incidents of infanticide, filicide, familicide, and parental alienation syndrome in medieval England. In other words, this paper examines how literature and child psychiatry experiences in medieval England reflect the current events of that time.

The child in *Le Fresne*: A Case for Infanticide?

While there is uncertainty surrounding the identity of Marie de France, the author of *Le Fresne*, Mari likely authored the twelve short narrative poems, along with a General Prologue, found in Harley 978. These poems, known as *the Lais of Marie de France*, were likely composed during the late twelfth century and were possibly created for the court of Henry II Plantagenet and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. While Marie, a medieval writer, reworked traditional tales to include more positive representations of women, some of the *lais* do not suggest this. Marie de France's *Le Fresne* starts with two knights who are neighbors in Brittany. They are both strong. One of them has twin boys while the other has a wife but no children. The father of the twins decides to give one of his sons to his friend. This way, each man will have a wife and a son, and the symmetry will be restored. The knight is happy for his friend, but his wife is confused and wonders why her neighbor would give away one of his sons. She says that the birth of twins means the mother is unfaithful because two children must have two fathers:

Nus savum bien qu'il i afiert:
Unques ne fu ne ja nen iert
Ne n'avendrat cele aventure
Qu'a une suie porteüre
Une femme deus enfanz eit,
Si dui humme ne li unt feit
(Ewert, 1980, ll.37-42) ²

The legal system of the story allows the mother to avoid shame by spreading false information to her neighbors, and only the women who attended her know the truth. The poem's opening scene introduces a woman with two husbands and a supposed lover:

Verité est que ceste dame
Ad mut esté de bone fame.'
La gent qué en la meisun erent
Cele parole recorderent.
Asez fu dite e coneïie,
Par tute Bretaine seiïe:
Mut en fu la dame haïe,
Pois en dut estre maubailie;
Tutes les femmes ki l'oïrent,
Povres e riches, l'en haïrent (Ewert, ll. 57-56).³

² Both he and she are disgraced by this;
we know the truth of the matter all too well:
it never was and never will be
possible for such a thing to happen'
that a woman could have
two sons in one birth
unless two men had lain with her (Hanning and Ferrante, ll. 37-42).

³ The fact is that she's a woman
who's always had a good reputation.
But the people in the household

Making comments that question the reputation and lineage of a knight can have serious negative consequences for the speaker. These comments can cause her to be looked down upon by all women who hear her words. It is important to be mindful of the impact of the words and avoid making such statements that harm others. The envious lady had previously spread a false rumor becomes pregnant this time and is punished for her jealousy:

La dame que si mesparla
 En l'an meismes enceinta,
 De deus enfanz est enceintie;
 Ore est sa veisine vengie.
 Desque a sun terme les porta
 Deus filles ot, mut lipesa
 Mut durement en est dolente
 (Ewert, 1980, ll. 65-21).⁴

The *lais* is driven by envy. The lady sees her neighbor's sons as a reflection of her inadequacy. She falsely accuses her neighbor of wrongdoing to ruin her good fortune, and by doing so, she makes both appear illegitimate. Moreover, she suggests that even though she hasn't yet given birth to a male heir, she is still a loyal wife who will not produce illegitimate offspring. However, this time the gossipmaker will be pregnant, she will be put down into the unfair position. This is the reason why; she gets rid of one of her twin daughters and commits infanticide with the help of her servant:

L'un des enfanz me baillez ça
 Jeo vus en deliverai ja,
 Si que hunie ne serez
 Ne ke jamés ne la verrez:

repeated the wife's words;
 the matter was widely spoken of
 and became known throughout Brittany.
 The slanderous wife was hated for it,
 and later made to suffer for it.
 Every woman who heard about it,
 rich or poor, hated her
 (Hanning and Ferrante, ll. 47-56)

⁴ The wife who had spoken so evilly
 became pregnant herself that same year,
 and was carrying twins
 now her neighbor has her vengeance.
 She carried them until her time came;
 then she gave birth to two daughters;
 she was extremely upset
 and terribly sad about the situation.
 (Hanning and Ferrante, ll. 65-71)

A un mustier lageterai,
Tut sein e sauf le porterai (ll.109-114).⁵

The mother's extreme harshness towards her child is emphasized. She was willing to kill her daughter rather than admit to society that she had given birth to twin daughters. The lady protects her reputation and honor by murdering one of her children, Le Fresne and compounds her sin with the crime of infanticide. Hence, the lady is not in the status of non-compos mentis but a deliberate act. Luckily Le Fresne was raised by a group of nuns, and the abbess showed her great kindness. The nuns adopted, baptized, named, and raised Le Fresne as their daughter, providing her with a caring family-like environment. However, to prevent Parental Alienation Syndrome, Le Fresne's personal history should be removed from the context of the private lives of women. This will make it possible for Le Fresne's true royal identity to become public, legitimate, and complete. Regarding Parental Alienation Syndrome, a mother may cause her daughter to reject her father and other family members, leading to the daughter feeling alienated from her family. This can ultimately result in the daughter feeling abandoned, even though she is still alive and growing up. As time passes, the daughter's identity is revealed, leading to a family reunion and reconciliation:

“De ceo sui liez;
Unques mes ne ful[i] si haitiez;
Quant nostre fille avum trovee,
Grant joie nus ad Deu donee,
Ainz que lipechez fust dublez (ll. 485-489).⁶

When a mother causes her daughter to reject her father and other family members, it can result in parental alienation syndrome, which makes the daughter feel cut off from her family. Even if the daughter is still alive and developing, this may eventually cause her to feel abandoned. A family reunion and reconciliation result from the daughter's identity being revealed over time. The Old French *Amie and Amile* details a case of filicide committed by the father, rather than the mother, akin to the infanticide mentioned in *Le Fresne*:

Biax tres douz peres, dist l'anfes erramment,
Quant vos compains avra garissement
Se de nos sans a sor soi lavement,
Noz sommez vostre, de vostre engenrement,
Faire en poéz del tout a vo talent' (Dembowski, 3000–3004).⁷

⁵ Give me one of the babies;
I'll take care of her for you,
so that you won't be disgraced;
you'll never see the child again.
I'll abandon her at a convent,
to which I'll carry her safe and sound (ll.109-114).

⁶ Her husband said, I'm delighted by this news; I was never so pleased. Since we've found our daughter, God has given us great joy, instead of doubling the sin (ll. 485-489) Li sires dit:

While the child is aware of the filicide, he accepts whatever his father offers to heal the leprosy of his father's best friend, Amis. As soon as the blood touches Amis, he is cured of his ailment. The mother becomes despondent and rushes to the room where her dead children lie. However, to her surprise, she finds them alive and perfectly healthy. This is because a miracle has taken place to reward the loyalty of the friends, who have been purified of their sin through their suffering, therefore there is no parental alienation syndrome. Amile's filicide is not a matter of non compos mentis but a deliberate act like Le Fresne, but this Old French hagiographical-like narrative provides a miraculous act.

The Child in *Boeve de Haumtone*: A Case for Familicide and Parental Alienation Syndrome

In the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*, an elderly count of Southampton named Gui marries a young Scottish princess enamored with the Emperor of Germany. Boeve, son of Gui, narrates the story of the mother of Boeve plotting familicide. She sends a messenger to Germany to inform the emperor to kill her husband, Gui:

Messenger, dist ele, en Alemaïne ore tost alez!

En Alemaïne ja ne demorrez,

a le riche emperur de la meii part dirrez,

ke jeo lui envoie saluz e amistez;

e dites lui, ke il ne lese pur homme ke seit nez

ke le primer jur de may ne seit apresez (Stimming, ll. 51-56).⁸

The wife is conspiring to slay her husband, and her husband, Gui, is unaware. The wife's malicious intentions stem from her negative feelings towards her elderly husband. She pretends to be sick and asks Gui to hunt for fresh boar meat to help her recover. Gui, who loves his wife, goes hunting. However, despite his love and loyalty, Gui's trust and lack of suspicion towards his wife puts him in a powerless position. As a result, his hunting trip ends in tragedy and leads to his death. Gui becomes a victim of a perfidious consensus between the emperor of Germany and his wife, which ultimately leads to his downfall. Despite this, Gui remains loyal to his wife and son and is willing to protect and save them. Gui's love for his family is evident when he refuses to kill the count, pleads for mercy, and offers everything except his son and wife. The Lady of Hampton orders the Emperor of Germany to execute Count Gui by beheading him with his gilded sword, so her deliberate familicidal act takes place:

⁷ Dear sweet father,' the child answers immediately, 'Since your friend will be cured if he is bathed in our blood, you can do as you wish, for we are yours, from your engendering

⁸ Messenger, she said, now go swiftly to Germany. Don't linger there, but say to the noble emperor on my behalf that I send him friendly greetings. And tell him no one alive should prevent him from being ready on the first day of May (Weiss, 9)

Lui glut sache le branc, dount le point fu deoré,
 e feert lui quens Guioun, la teste lui ad coupé
 un messenger apele e lui dist ses voluntez:
 “Frere”, dist il, “a la dame de Haumtone tost irez,
 de la mei part saluz lui dirrez
 e ceste teste ov vus lui porterez” (189-94)⁹

Upon receiving Gui's decapitated head, she becomes a widow with a son from her previous marriage. She fulfills her promise and marries the king of Germany. At their wedding ceremony, Boeve appears and recognizes the mother's familicidal wishes. According to Gardner, rage is a type of anger that is so intense that it can lead to irrational behavior (2006, 34). Similarly, Kohut argues that rage can arise from a desire for revenge or justice after experiencing harm or wrongdoing (1972, 360). The romance suggests an example of the lady's revenge-driven rage. The lady is forced to marry Gui instead of the Emperor of Germany, whom she loves. In response, she seeks revenge by punishing Gui for his lack of understanding about her relationship with the emperor. She also gives birth to a son, Boeve, but this does not diminish her desire for revenge. Her rage and desire for revenge are deliberate and purposeful rather than the result of mental instability.

When Boeve is ten years old, he witnesses the deteriorating condition of his deceased father and also his mother's desire to harm both his father and himself. Due to her anger towards Gui, his mother expressed hatred towards Boeve and threatened to take away his inheritance. She reveals her past and begins a new life with a new husband. Boeve responds by insulting his mother and calling her a prostitute. He loses his father, and his mother acts like an enemy toward him. This inadequate parenting leads to his alienation, and he insults the targeted parent due to his psychopathological vulnerability.

While a child's reactions can be important, a mother's actions speak louder than words. During her wedding ceremony, she wishes harm upon her son and orders her tutor, Saboath, to kill him. Her desire to harm him stems from the fact that he is a reminder of her deceased husband. Though unable to carry out her wish, Saboath collects an animal's blood and covers the child's clothes with it to make it seem as if he is dead, before hiding him away for safety. Boeve, the child, becomes a shepherd and eventually claims his father's lands. He faces opposition from the porter, who accuses him of being born out of wedlock. Though Boeve does not confirm the accusations against him and his mother, he refuses to accept the label. Boeve's feelings of anger and hatred towards his mother resurface.

⁹ ‘Brother’, The villain drew his sword, with its gilded tip, struck count Gui, and cut off his head. He called a messenger and told him his wishes. “Brother”, he said, go quickly to the lady of Hampton, greet her from me, and take this head to her (30).

Boeve kills a porter who mistreats him. He then goes to the palace to talk to his stepfather and claim his lands. However, his stepfather behaves inadequately and alienates Boeve. As a result of feeling alienated, Boeve strikes his stepfather and wounds him. This angers his wicked mother:

La dame prent son fiz, que mult out feloun quer,
 deus chevalers apele si lor va demaunder
 que il preissent l'enfaunt si l'alassent mener,
 taunt que il venissent a port de la mer,
 e si il trovent marchaunz que li volent achater,
 que il le vendent saunz point delaier,
 ou si nul ne trovent, que il le facent neer (346-52).¹⁰

Boeve's mother changes her mind regarding how to punish him. Instead of hanging or flaying him, she decides to banish him from his father's land and abandon him, with the intent of familicide. After her trade, the merchants sail to Egypt. Boswell explains that in medieval records, it was a common act of abandonment among Englishmen to sell or donate their children (1988, 281). This abandonment can be referred to as murdering babies and children, and it can be asserted with the terms of oblatio (donation of a child to a monastery) and exposition (1984, 18; 1988, 228). Boswell also provides an example from the Archbishop of Canterbury, who buys a five-year-old boy for a small amount and finds another boy at Caen, and these children grow up in the church (1988, 282). It is common to sell and buy children in medieval England, and Boeve reflects this. The mother sells her son Boeve to the Saracen merchants. Boeve's sale is not an oblatio but an expositio, leading to familicide after his father's death.

In the Old French *Le Fresne* and *Amie et Amile*, there is an attempt to murder infants or children by their family members. These children are abandoned by their family members, but the concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome is not as evident in Boeve's condition in the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*. Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) refers to a situation where a parent intentionally causes the child to feel alienated. This can ultimately lead to the child being abandoned, which is a form of infanticide/filicide. Gardner believes that prolonged conflicts between parents can lead to psychiatric disturbances (1985; 1999, 195). According to Johnston, an alienated child doesn't have positive feelings or beliefs towards their family due to negative experiences (2004, 762). In Boeve's case, the loss of his father makes him upset and angry. His mother then quickly marries the emperor of Germany after his father's death, which makes him hate her and reject motherhood. Boeve is filled with anger, fear, and a sense of alienation when he is sold to merchants and taken to Egypt. On his way, he weeps and remembers his deceased father. His mother commits filicide, and her actions cause parental alienation, which poisons his soul. Gardner (1999), Gordon (1998), Baker (2007), and Lowenstein (2006) argue that this type of psychological injury sets up difficulties for the child in their adolescent and adult life, including anger, lack of self-confidence, loss of self-esteem, and depression. When parents act destructively, the

¹⁰ The evil-hearted lady took her son, called two knights, and asked them to seize him and take him into the harbor. If they found any merchant who wanted to buy him, they were to sell him without delay, and if not, they were to drown him (55)

child suffers, and as they grow up, they may also act destructively towards their spouse and children. Such psychological effects of the PAS work well with Boeve. He is now in Egypt with the merchants. He introduces himself to the court of king Hermine. While providing information about himself and his lineage, his rage towards his mother and step-father continues:

Dount dist li emfes: “En Engleterre fu ne,
fiz au counte Guioun de Haumtone la cite;
ma mere le fist tuer a doel e a vilté,
un emperur l’ad pris estre ma volunté.
Mes si puse taunt vivre, si me eid la mere de!
ke puse porter armes, mult eher serra compré.”
Lui rois le oi si en prist graunt pité (ll. 386-92).¹¹

Boeve abandoned by his father and stripped of his lands, now lives far away from Southampton. Both physically and spiritually harmed, and his soul suffers due to parental alienation. Later, Boeve approaches the king with honesty and earns his pity. The king of Egypt likes Boeve and becomes his fostering father, teaching him everything he needs to know to become a knight. During his time in Egypt, the king's daughter, Josiane falls in love with the Boeve. However, his damaged soul by parental alienation pushes him to reject Josiane's hand:

il n'i ad roi, ceo crei, en tretut le mound
ne prince ne admiré ne counte ne baroun,
que il ne vus desirrunt, si il veient vostre fasoun (683-85)¹²

Boeve lacks self-confidence as he does not value himself as much as the other princes or counts, despite being the son of a count. He neither owns any lands nor trusts women, and he has no intention of getting married. According to Gordon, PAS passes from one generation to the next, and an alienated child may act negatively towards a spouse and children (1998). Similarly, Baker focuses on the transmission of narcissism, suggesting that a narcissistic child becomes a narcissistic partner, leading to alienation from childhood to maturity (2007). Boeve's relationship with Josiane exposes his awkward attitude stemming from his vicious mother. Despite Josiane's persistent efforts, Boeve refuses to have intimacy with her. However, Josiane offers to convert to Christianity: pur la vostre

¹¹ Then the child said: I was born in England, son of Count Gui of the city of Hampton. My mother had him killed in pain and ignominy, an emperor took her against my wishes. But so help me, mother of God, if I can live to bear arms, he will pay for it dearly'. The king heard him and had great pity (2008, 62).

¹² There is no king I believe in the whole world, no prince, emir, count, or baron who would not desire you if they saw your face (83).

amour prendrai cristienté (l.769).¹³

After a series of events, Boeve and Josiane get married. However, Boeve proves to be an unworthy husband, unable to take good care of his wife. Even though they have a usual husband-wife relationship, Boeve fails to be a supportive partner. For instance, when Josiane gives birth to twin boys in the woods, Boeve and Terri return to the shelter to find only the newborn twins, unable to locate Josiane. They search for her in far-off realms but eventually give up. They find foster families for the twins, and Boeve technically marries the princess of Civile for seven years instead of lamenting or searching for Josiane. After seven years, Josiane finds Boeve in Civile, and they reunite, take back their children from their foster parents, and live together again. Towards the end of the story, the affectionless mother-son relationship reappears. Boeve's mother dies, but Boeve remains idle and indifferent, showing no emotion towards her death. As a mature man, Boeve returns to Southampton to claim his father's lands. After his mother commits suicide by throwing herself from the top of the tower, Boeve looks unconcerned by her death and does not weep.

Literature within psychiatry produces writings about psychopathology and Parental Alienation Syndrome, with a particular focus on the Old French *Le Fresne* and the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*. Misdemeanors committed by parents can be attributed to their non-compos mentis, whereas psychopathology, as a psychiatric disturbance, refers to mental cases where parents have infanticidal, filicidal, or familicidal wishes. This paper explored how the relationship between parents and children is much more complex than traditional family structures suggest. In medieval England, infanticide, filicide, and familicide took place, which led to the damaged soul of the child through Parental Alienation Syndrome. Medieval historical and literary records provide an outline of the central elements of psychopathology in the literary narratives of medieval England. Psychopathology intersects with psychiatric disturbance, known as Parental Alienation Syndrome. Unlike *Le Fresne*, Boeve suffers from soul damage due to familial and spousal alienation from childhood to adulthood, culminating in a familicide, therefore to his parental alienation syndrome.¹⁴

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¹³ 'I'll be a Christian for love of you' (86).

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