



## The Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne: New Evidence

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This special issue of *The Chaucer Review* announces the momentous discovery by Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobceki of new documents from the Court of King's Bench that establish the nature of the Chaucer–Chaumpaigne court case. As editors, we are pleased that *The Chaucer Review* is the venue for making public newly uncovered documents housed at The National Archives in Kew. In addition, three appendices supplied by Roger and Sobceki provide important updates to Chaucer's extant life-records: (1) a full chronology of the known Chaucer–Chaumpaigne record; (2) transcriptions and translations of all the pertinent documents; and (3) a calendar of the nine Chaucer life-records discovered since the publication of Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olsen's *Chaucer Life-Records* (Oxford, 1966). This historic issue also holds a first-ever survey of the life-records of Cecily Chaumpaigne, compiled and assessed by Andrew Prescott, as well as three critical responses, authored by Sarah Baechle, Carissa M. Harris, and Samantha Katz Seal, which consider scholarly perspectives that may arise in light of these new facts and findings. An afterword composed by Roger and Prescott delineates the strong potential for finding yet more life-records on major medieval authors—records likely to still lie dormant in the archives. With this issue, *The Chaucer Review* hews close to its tradition as a forum for both new evidence and courageous opinion on the life and writings of Geoffrey Chaucer.

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The court case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne has discomfited modern readers of Chaucer ever since Frederick J. Furnivall and William Floyd unearthed Chaumpaigne's quitclaim of May 4, 1380, wherein she releases Chaucer of "omnimodas acciones tam de raptu meo" (all manner of actions related to my *raptus*). The phrase *de raptu meo* has seemed to incriminate the poet as the offending actor in a sexual crime, even if the document did release him from the charge. From the moment of its discovery, biographers and scholars have striven to provide rationales for the apparent accusation. For more than a century, responses to the court case sought to keep intact Chaucer's reputation as a moral poet worthy of his place as the stalwart early progenitor of a line of later English poets. Many reconstructions of events tried to excuse, sometimes even laud, Chaucer for having had such a virile "escapade," creating scenarios in which the seductive "Cecily" was a spurned lover, or a conniving gold digger, or some other kind of female stereotype concocted out of sexism. In recent decades, feminist scholars have rightly called out such constructions for the all-male clubbishness of their assumptions. Meanwhile, the legal meaning of the word *raptus* has been much debated, with scholars ultimately agreeing that it had to denote some form of coercive act: either a sexual rape or, at the least, a physical abduction on behalf of another man. Our thinking on the phrase could not, it seems, proceed in any other direction. Even for those who used this particular charge to extol Chaucer's manhood, the word indicated a conflict based in gender difference, meant that a forced physical encounter had taken place, and that Chaumpaigne's will and autonomy had been transgressed.

The findings reported here—by Roger and Sobecki on the court case and by Prescott on Chaumpaigne's biography—show us how wrong we have been. It turns out that the valence of a term like *raptus* is considerably more circumscribed for us than it was in the vocabulary of fourteenth-century medieval law and for certain lived realities the word was called upon to address. We are also hampered by modern bias when we fail to think through a range of social and entrepreneurial opportunities available to medieval urban women, and their familial successors, in the labor market of the times, as is tantalizingly disclosed in the bits of real biography that we have for Chaumpaigne and her mother. The abundance of Geoffrey Chaucer's life-records—so much larger than those for William Shakespeare, for example—has led us to imagine that we can reach into the poet's personal life (about which they give little factual information) and even into

his psyche. Instead, as these new discoveries show, it is worth reanimating in ourselves a sense of how *unfamiliar* from ourselves are Chaucer and his world. We do not—ultimately, cannot—come to “know” Chaucer, although we can strive collectively to apprehend more of the many points of difference, as well as the likenesses, between ourselves and him. If we insist on approaching Chaucer solely through modern ideologies of sexuality, gender, privilege, work, religion, etiquette, emotion, othering, and so on, we may well risk making radical distortions of his actual substance and import.

As Roger and Sobecki point out, Chaucer’s biography “matters for the reception of his poetry” because “it reflects and refracts his biological self.” Noting that the “new evidence [published here] does not remove the validity of arguments grounded in reader-response positions,” they nonetheless warn against “succumbing to the fallacy of the intentional fallacy,” because “it is the constant negotiation between authorial objectives and autonomous critical interpretations that generates the semantic energy behind so much creative literature” (p. 436). Chaucer’s real self exists in the poetry he created, reflected and refracted there, and another kind of real existence is embodied in the wonderfully intelligent and sophisticated critical edifices we have constructed and continuously refashion, or update, or rehistoricize. These new archival records matter because they give us more facts to work with, telling us about an actual business dispute that ended up in court, and about the kinds of workers Chaucer sought to employ—a class of associates that we have little considered aside from the controversial scribe Adam. Prescott’s findings on Chaumpaigne’s life give us more new avenues to consider, as he provides intriguing details about her family, including a brother professionally associated with Chaucer. These records, taken together, hint at various transactions between men, with women on the sidelines and sometimes at the center. They hint at systems of legal protections and inequities, at balances and imbalances of power, at matters of consent or nonconsent (gendered and/or servient), and at lived intersections of work and home-life. About the story told by the new facts, we can speculate and attempt to fill in details, and yet, as we do so, we should recall Christopher Cannon’s adage that “uncertainty is itself something we may be certain about.”

Along with guest editors Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobecki, we wish to express our gratitude to The National Archives for its extraordinary support in facilitating free online access to the articles by Roger and Sobecki and by Roger and Prescott, which includes color reproductions of relevant

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