



Speaking Survival: Chaucer Studies and the Discourses of Sexual Assault

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ABSTRACT: This article addresses the discursive perspectives of survivor speech as they inform discussions of Chaucer's rape narratives. Responding to Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobocki's discoveries that the Chaumpaigne release did not address an accusation of rape, I argue that they offer Chaucer scholars a chance to transform our approaches to the poet and the subject of sexual violence. No longer burdened with assessing Chaucer's guilt or Chaumpaigne's victimization, we may adopt, instead, a structural approach, examining how Chaucer's rape narratives reproduce harmful myths about women, sex, and consent that perpetuate assault. The article explores the *Reeve's Tale* as an example of this approach.

KEYWORDS: Cecily Chaumpaigne, feminist studies, *Reeve's Tale*, sexual assault, survivor speech

It seems like convention to remark on the abruptness of change. To those of us on the outside, the months and years of painstakingly combing through archives remain invisible. With the arrival of an email, a call, this issue of *The Chaucer Review*, the (scholarly) world we knew abruptly shifts. It is worth taking a moment, I think, to reflect on how such a discovery *feels*, because these responses will fundamentally shape reception of the field-changing discoveries Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobocki set forth in this issue. This is particularly true when we speak of Cecily Chaumpaigne, whose name has long

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invoked emotionally-driven—and for some Chaucerians, deeply personal—responses from Chaucer scholars. Tison Pugh handily illustrates the affective lines of this response, opening his exploration of the friction between textual or artistic pleasure and an author or artist's misconduct: in the case of Chaucer and Chaumpaigne, ambiguity has allowed Chaucerians seeking uncomplicated appreciation of the poet to “hope for the best.”¹ Scholarly assessment of the Chaumpaigne release and its likely implications have long been expressed in emotional—specifically, desiring—terms. “I wish,” proclaims Frederick J. Furnivall in the first lengthy discussion of the release, that “this record about Cecilia Chaumpaigne had not been on the Close Roll.”² Derek Brewer signals discomfort when he terms the release's implications an “awkward problem.”³ Derek Pearsall admits to a temptation “too strong to resist” to offer some further explanation.⁴ Even public sentiment appears to reproduce this desire: when Sobecki published a set of documents witnessing the tenure of Chaucer's wardship of Edmund Staplegate until at least 1382, scholarly and public-facing discussion of the discovery jubilantly celebrated the exoneration of the poet from suspicion of rape.⁵

It seems likely, then, that the new documents concerning the Chaumpaigne release represent “the best” for which ambiguity and the passage of time have allowed Chaucerians to hope. Though Roger and Sobecki frame their discovery cautiously, noting that “it is, of course, impossible to rule out an act of physical or sexual violence in the events that took place around Chaumpaigne's move from Staundon's service to Chaucer's, or the possibility that she was coerced into agreeing to a release against her will,” the new documents linking the two appear to herald liberation from negotiating the figure of Chaucer the rapist. They offer, in particular, renewed access, untinged by irony or scandal, to a favorite trope of Chaucer

1. Tison Pugh, “Chaucer's Rape, Southern Racism, and the Pedagogical Ethics of Authorial Malfeasance,” *College English* 67 (2005): 569–86, at 570.

2. Frederick J. Furnivall, *Trial Forewords to My “Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems” for the Chaucer Society* (London, 1871–73), 143 (emphasis mine).

3. Derek Brewer, *Chaucer*, 3rd edn. (London, 1973), 22.

4. Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), 137.

5. Alison Flood, “Document Casts New Light on Chaucer ‘Rape’ Case,” *The Guardian* (June 7, 2019), online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/07/document-casts-new-light-on-chaucer-rape-case>; and Jennifer Wollock, “Calls to cancel Chaucer ignore his defense of women and the innocent—and assume all his characters' opinions are his,” *The Conversation* (July 19, 2021), online at: <https://theconversation.com/calls-to-cancel-chaucer-ignore-his-defense-of-women-and-the-innocent-and-assume-all-his-characters-opinions-are-his-152312>. For the discovery to which these respond, see Sebastian Sobecki, “Wards and Widows: *Troilus and Criseyde* and New Documents on Chaucer's Life,” *ELH* 86 (2019): 413–40.

scholarship: the oft-repeated assertion, via Gavin Douglas, that the poet was “evir, God wait, all womanis frend.”⁶ Indeed, Chaucer’s biographers—the same authors responsible for framing and disseminating knowledge of the release to the (academic) public—trumpet his sensitive knowledge of and love for women. Brewer imagines Chaucer as a real-life Troilus, passionate and heart-broken.⁷ John Gardner imagines the poet as a man fixated on understanding “the nature and spiritual effect of love” and dedicated to buttressing, however subtly, the rights of women.⁸ Donald Howard’s take most explicitly embraces the idea of the poet as lover and *auctor* of womankind, observing, “Chaucer liked women. He had what was for his day an unusual kind of interest in women, and he had unusual insight into a woman’s mind . . . he was the first male writer since the ancient world who was successfully to portray a woman’s thoughts and feelings.”⁹ Scholars who wrote Chaucer, (re)creating the man through his biography, converted Douglas’s allusion into fact, a poet possessed of a particular ethical orientation to women. For these accounts, the Chaumpaigne release posed a visible obstacle, or at least a counterpoint to be integrated into—or gainsaid by—their Chaucers, defined by his native philogyny. Thus Brewer avers that it is “far better . . . in view of the awkward problem of his ‘rape’ of Cecily Chaumpaigne,” to romanticize the poet, imagining him as vulnerable, emotional, a “Romeo,” and Howard suggests that Chaucer’s passions might proffer “mitigating circumstances” to justify the possibility that he raped Chaumpaigne.¹⁰ In a section titled “Chaucer and Women,” Pearsall’s seminal biography offers Douglas himself as a gloss on the release, sifting through its likely implications—which Pearsall acknowledges appear to indicate a case of sexual assault—and admitting their challenges to an uncomplicated rendering of Chaucer’s attitudes towards women, only to mollify readers with Douglas’s assessment.¹¹ If, as Roger and Sobeci show us, the Chaumpaigne release concerns a labor dispute rather than a case of sexual assault, Chaucer the philogynist now appears liberated from the restraints of this accusation.

6. Gavin Douglas, *Eneados* (1513), cited in Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1337–1900*, 3 vols. (Cambridge UK, 1925), 1:72.

7. Derek Brewer, *Chaucer and His World* (Cambridge UK, 1978), 51–52.

8. John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York, 1977), 10, 53.

9. Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York, 1987), 96 (his emphasis). Howard reiterates the assertion on the next page, averring that the poet could not have written his female characters had he not had the ability to be women’s friend.

10. Brewer, *Chaucer*, 22; and Howard, *Chaucer*, 319.

11. Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 137–38.

Chaucer and Rape, Revisited: Certainty's Uncertainties

The documents in Kew, The National Archives (TNA), KB 145/3/3/2 and KB 136/5/3/1/2 appear freeing indeed. The necessary questions for Chaucer studies should now remain: What, precisely, do these documents free us *from*? And to what purpose? Roger and Sobecki present a compelling case for situating the release in TNA, C 54/219 m. 9d, and its controversially ambiguous allusion to the “raptus meo,” within the larger legal sphere of post-plague adjudications of the rights of—and restrictions on—laborers. Thus it radically reshapes the Close Roll document, indicating that its proper function fits into an ongoing labor dispute, following Chaumpaigne’s attempt to change employment situations without the permission of her former employer, Thomas Staundon. It suggests that Chaumpaigne had not intended to pursue a course of legal action against the poet for sexual assault, but rather to disavow his liability for her departure from Staundon’s service and to legally signal her consent to the new position—that is, that she was not abducted from Staundon’s estate but rather left it willingly. Roger and Sobecki thus increase those things that it is possible for us to say with confidence about the release: we can now state with some certainty that the nature of Chaucer and Chaumpaigne’s association was professional, that the instance of “raptus” in the Close Roll indexes its use to designate procurement of labor, and that no extant documents indicate that the release referenced any additional accusation. That is, it seems likely the Chaumpaigne release does *not* refer to an action of rape. Equally important, though, are the things such recontextualization cannot tell us. Roger and Sobecki rightly caution against assuming that because the release appears to govern the terms of Chaumpaigne’s change of employment, this does not mean that no act of sexual violence was involved—their caution might be extended to observing that the release also does not indicate that Chaucer never committed any act of sexual violence. In the Middle Ages, as now, rape likely remained underreported for a variety of reasons, and scholars should not assume that lack of definitive legal evidence of conviction equates to innocence. As Christopher Cannon has observed, the presence of a claim—a quitclaim, a trial record, a conviction, or a settlement—cannot tell us definitively what events transpired or how either party understood them.¹² It can

12. Christopher Cannon, “Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainty’s Certainties,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 22 (2000): 67–92 (repr. in Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose, eds., *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature* [New York, 2001], 255–79). On the under-reporting of rape, see Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500* (Cambridge UK, 2013), 2–3; and Patricia Orr, “Men’s Theory and Women’s Reality: Rape Prosecutions in the English Royal Courts of Justice, 1194–1222,” in Liam O. Purdon and Cindy L. Vitto, eds., *The Rusted Hauberck: Feudal Ideals of Order and Their Decline* (Gainesville FL, 1994), 121–59.

only signal how the weight of presented evidence appeared to the moving parts of the legal system. Nor, indeed, does this recontextualization of the Champaigne release liberate Chaucer studies to uncomplicated veneration of Chaucer the philogynist. Feminist Chaucer scholarship has long complicated its portrait even absent consideration of the Champaigne release, and their readings enjoy no less validity.¹³

But feminist approaches to reading Chaucer, his female characters, and his predilection for staging literary scenes of gendered and sexual violence have always evolved under the shadow of the Champaigne release and the possibility of a single, individual victim of an imagined single act of assault. Furnivall's publication of the document in 1873 meant that feminist Chaucer studies emerged already knowing the release's implications, and scholars who wanted to consider how Chaucer writes rape have been obligated to position their work around the question of whether the release meant Chaucer raped Champaigne. In this way, examinations of Chaucer and rape have needed to center individual discourses on violence, which are focalized around discrete accounts of violation: one specific survivor, one aggressor (or group of aggressors), one set of circumstances, one unique experience. Individual accounts of rape exercise considerable rhetorical power, particularly for the victim-survivors whose ability to speak out about their assaults represents relief from silence or shame, or whose testimony challenges or even subverts normative discourses about sexuality and violation.¹⁴ But feminist theories of sexual violence and survivor speech also stress the exploitability of survivor speech: Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray note the variety of ways in which individual accounts of rape survival are repackaged for consumption by wider audiences as entertainment or erotic titillation, and are even made to reinscribe myths about assault that are damaging to victim-survivors.¹⁵

13. Recent examples include but are certainly not limited to Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca NY, 2018); the essays in the special issue "New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer," *Chaucer Review* 54 (2019): 221–370, particularly Suzanne M. Edwards, "'Burn all he has but keep his books': Gloria Naylor and the Proper Objects of Feminist Chaucer Studies," 230–52; Chelsea Skalak, "The Unwilling Wife: Marital Rape in the *Canterbury Tales*," *Chaucer Review* 55 (2020): 119–46; and, of course, the less recent but foundational Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989).

14. Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs* 18 (1993): 260–90, at 261–62. Alcoff and Grey argue from a Foucauldian framework, but see also Audre Lorde's more personal approach, informed by Black feminist philosophy, in "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," in her *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, 1984; repr. 2007), 40–44, esp. 42, which frames speaking out as a cathartic act of self-definition and healing.

15. Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 262–63. See also Wendy S. Hesford, "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation," *College English* 62 (1999): 192–221.

By focusing on singular experiences of assault, individual rhetorics of survival have encouraged us to locate blame on individual assailants—and victims—rather than unearthing the widely held beliefs about women and sex that encourage rapists' entitlement to women's bodies regardless of their wills.

The necessary work of survivor speech involves discursive transformation: a movement from the individual to the structural level that exposes and uproots cultural scripts that foster violation, and that promotes social change rather than (re)acclimating individuals to normative cultures.¹⁶ We need not look far to see how the Chaumpaigne release, when read as an account of assault, has led Chaucer scholarship towards predictably exploitative discursive scripts: Susan S. Morrison unpacks the way Chaucer's biographers eroticize Chaumpaigne and her hypothetical relationship with the poet and turn the possibility of real assault into food for literary entertainment, even recasting narratives of rape in his poetry in the same sensationalized terms.¹⁷ Herein lies, I think, the real liberatory potential of Roger and Sobceki's discoveries: in effectively removing the question of a single man's guilt in a single moment of violence, they offer Chaucerians a moment to disengage—to remove at last the question of a specific moment of (ostensibly) true-or-false accusation from the reading of Chaucer's violated women, and instead to examine his narratives for the myths they embrace and the scripts they reproduce. In short, they free us to prioritize a *structural* approach to the sexual violence in the Chaucerian canon. No longer needing to adjudicate an individual assault, we can examine how the treatment of assault reinscribes sexual hegemony that encourages women's violation. We are freed to ask not what happened to one woman, but what discourses governed the lives of *all* women. Chaucer repeatedly worries the subjects of consent and violation by examining the workings of trauma, dissecting the impossibilities of truly knowing consent, exposing a victim's (non)consent as irrelevant, and proposing possibilities for alternative modes of justice and restitution. What might we now say not about the old questions of how Chaucer's oeuvre adjudicates the Chaumpaigne release, but rather about how his oeuvre participates in discursive scripts that enable assault?

16. Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 279–88; and Hesford, "Reading Rape Stories," 193–97.

17. Susan S. Morrison, "The Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne," *Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 69–86.

Speaking Structurally about Rape: The Reeve's Tale

I will consider one example to illustrate what a *structurally oriented approach* to sexual violence in Chaucer's work offers. Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* revolves around the increasingly violent competition between its male characters, eventually spilling into its acts of aggression against the women in Symkyn the miller's household. Chaucer's version of the story frames this act as assault: it notes Malyne's unconsciousness and observes that Aleyn leaps on her so quickly, "er she myghte espie, / That it had been to late for to crie" (I 4195–96), apophatically admitting her likely resistance and alluding to the hue and cry that would initiate the report of a crime.¹⁸ Chaucer's version also establishes the intoxication of each member of the household, affirming in multiple narrative strata the scene's violence.¹⁹ At its simplest, reading the *Reeve's Tale* through a traditional, individually oriented lens invites adjudicatory exploration of the text and—as so many discussions of the tale have been obliged to remind us—of Chaucer's life, as well.²⁰ This approach has promoted instructive examinations of Malyne's potential consent, but it has also spurred sensationalism and the commodification of assault.²¹ The assault on Malyne and her mother have been described as "fun mixed awesomely with aggression and revenge" and as "that glorious moment . . . when the clerk plays his trick on the Miller's wife," for which Malyne (given her unattractive peasant physiognomy) must surely be grateful, and it has been asserted that, whatever the initiating violence, the night concludes with Malyne's sexual satisfaction.²² These accounts imagine, with voyeuristic enthusiasm, Malyne's

18. All quotations of Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

19. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 56–58; and Nicole Nolan Sidhu, "'To Late for to Crie': Female Desire, Fabliau Politics, and Classical Legend in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 21 (2009): 3–23.

20. Aside from the biographers discussed above, see, for example, Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 51–52; Heidi Breuer, "Being Intolerant: Rape Is Not Seduction (in 'The Reeve's Tale' or Anywhere Else)," in Kathleen A. Bishop, ed., *The Canterbury Tales Revisited: 21st Century Interpretations* (Newcastle UK, 2008), 1–15, at 3–4; Christine M. Rose, "Reading Chaucer Reading Rape," in Robertson and Rose, eds., *Representing Rape*, 21–60, at 26; Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge UK, 2001), 72, 266; Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 10–12; and Geoffrey W. Gust, *Chaucerotics: Unclouing the Language of Sex in The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde* (Cham, Switzerland, 2018), 126.

21. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 46–55; and Mary C. Flannery, "Good Fun: Cecily Champaigne and the Ethics of Chaucerian Obscenity," *Chaucer Review* 56 (2021): 360–77.

22. Howard, *Chaucer*, 100; Gardner, *The Life and Times*, 119; R. E. Kaskie, "An Aube in the Reeve's Tale," *ELH* 26 (1959): 295–310; and Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics, and Gender* (Oxford, 2006), 101. Such assessments of *RvT* often happen ephemerally; for a discussion of one such instance, see Breuer, "Being Intolerant." On how *RvT* engages readers' sexual voyeurism, see Gust, *Chaucerotics*, 119–21.

violated body in states of erotic pleasure, and thus deny the violence of sexual assault in order to enjoy its sex. Their authors join the clerks of Soler Hall as gleeful consumers of violation through its retelling: the narration of rape becomes a spectacle in its own right.

In contrast, a structurally oriented reading might address not whether Malyne experiences sexual violation, but rather what beliefs or conditions enable her assault. We might observe, for example, that, despite the multiple narrative strata signaling Malyne's assault, the affective center of the tale remains the two assailants, whom the text follows back to Soler Hall in the morning, leaving the aftermath of the assault—the work of recovery—untold.²³ Or, we might consider the ways that familiarity and access, especially in tandem with class difference, make women vulnerable to assault and restrict their ability to seek justice. The *Reeve's Tale* stresses the proximity of Soler Hall to the mill, which lies “nat fer” (I 3921) from Cambridge, and such proximity appears to have bred familiarity: Symkyn's reputation encourages the two clerks' outing to the mill, and on arrival they appear already familiar with his family, even addressing Malyne by name (I 4236). At the same time, the tale emphasizes the class disparity between Symkyn's family and the clerks as its teller reiterates their peasant origins juxtaposed with the upwardly mobile pretensions offered by Malyne's maternal ancestry: her clerical grandfather's status is more closely linked to that of the students than to his own offspring, a difference underscored by Malyne's “kamus nose” (I 3974), which is like her father's (I 3934), and her broad buttocks (I 3975), which bespeak the genetic inheritance of peasanthood.

These qualities taken together call to mind the paradigmatic narratives of *pastourelles*, wherein knights ride into the countryside to seek entertainment—much like Aleyn and John, who request the errand to Symkyn's mill “oonly for hire myrthe and revelrye” (I 4005)—and then attempt to seduce or assault the attractive shepherdesses they meet there, staging negotiations of sexual

23. Rachel E. Moss, “Chaucer's Funny Rape,” *Rachel E. Moss* (Sept. 11, 2014), online at: <https://rachelemoss.com/2014/09/11/chaucers-funny-rape-addressing-a-taboo-in-medieval-studies/>. For an account of similar centering of the assailant in *WBT*, see Carissa M. Harris, “Rape and Justice in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*,” *The Open Access Companion to the Canterbury Tales* (Sept. 2017), online at: <https://opencanterburytales.dsl.lsu.edu/wobti/>.

consent that ask gendered power differences to speak flexibly for class.²⁴ Like the *pastourelles* and their generic cousins (the clerk and serving-maid ballads), the *Reeve's Tale* positions women's labor as offerings of access to their bodies, as Carissa M. Harris reminds us in this issue.²⁵ Malyne's class facilitates her assault: her family's labor—both legal and illicit, in which she takes part—brings the clerks to her home and occasions the rape wherein her stolen body substitutes for stolen grain. Linked to larger patterns that emerge from invocation of the *pastourelle*, the *Reeve's Tale* participates in a discursive script that insists that a woman's entry in the public sphere to earn a living automatically turns her body into a public commodity. Such scripts continue to shape the lives of working women.²⁶

A structurally oriented reading might also alert us to the ways by which such familiarity—particularly, again, when linked to a woman's need to work—could facilitate the denial of justice for victim-survivors. Aleyn and John's triumphant return to Soler Hall, in possession of their grain and largely unscathed, locates the burden of assault squarely on Malyne and her mother, whom the clerks rape, and on Symkyn, whom they brutally beat (I 4308). The clerks' consequence-free retreat is linked to the apparent familiarity between Aleyn and Malyne, who returns the cake of flour as Aleyn takes his leave (I 4242–46); the two bid each other farewell in somewhat intimate terms, Aleyn addressing Malyne by name (I 4236) and calling himself her “awen clerk” (I 4239), while she calls him “lemman” (I 4240, 4247).

24. William D. Paden, ed. and trans., *The Medieval Pastourelle*, 2 vols. (New York, 1987), 1:ix–xxi; Geri L. Smith, *The Medieval French Pastourelle Tradition: Poetic Motivations and Generic Transformations* (Gainesville FL, 2009); Michel Zink, *La pastourelle: Poésie et folklore au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1972), 30–39; Edmond Faral, “La Pastourelle,” *Romania* 49 (1923): 204–59, at 236–41; and Christopher J. Callahan, “Hybrid Discourse and Performance in the Old French Pastourelle,” *French Forum* 27 (2002): 1–22. See also Kathryn Gravdal, “Camouflaging Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in the Medieval Pastourelle,” *Romanic Review* 76 (1985): 361–73; and Sarah Baechle, “Denying Consent and Manipulating Victimhood in *Come over the woodes fair and grene*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 44 (2022): forthcoming.

25. See Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 214–19.

26. Studies published by the Institute for Women's Policy Research and the National Sexual Violence Resource Center suggest that a significant percentage of women—up to 80 percent—experience sexual harassment or assault in the workplace. See Elyse Shaw, Ariane Hegewisch, and Cynthia Hess, “Sexual Harassment and Assault at Work: Understanding the Costs” (October, 2018), online at: <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-publications/briefing-paper/sexual-harassment-and-assault-at-work-understanding-the-costs/>; and National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “Sexual Violence and the Workplace: General Information and Statistics” (2013), online at: <https://www.nsvrc.org/sexual-violence-and-the-workplace-general-information-and-statistics>. See also Bernice Yeung, *In A Day's Work: The Fight to End Sexual Violence Against America's Most Vulnerable Workers* (New York, 2018).

The vulnerability inherent in women's interactions with the men they know, particularly in their places of work, as depicted in the *Reeve's Tale*, reflects conditions that could likewise shape medieval women's access to justice. The case of Agnes, daughter of John le Chaundeler, offers an example of how a victim-survivor's familiarity with her accused assailant could limit her legal recourse.²⁷ In 1313, Agnes appealed one John of Cornwall, a cordwainer to whose wife Agnes was apprenticed, on charges of rape. Unlike many such appeals, the King's Bench record of Agnes's case concludes with an outcome: the suit is dismissed with an acquittal.²⁸ The jury concludes that Agnes's claim was filed maliciously in response to a fight between John and his wife, who told Agnes's mother that her husband had raped Agnes.²⁹ It presents, thus, a claim of workplace assault in which the victim's preexisting relationship with the accused appears ultimately to contribute to its dismissal. We cannot know the details of who claimed what or what actually transpired between the parties involved, but filing a falsified claim carried serious consequences for plaintiffs who alleged rape.³⁰ Given the expense and difficulty of prosecuting cases, as well as the risk of fine or imprisonment for filing a false claim, it strikes me as unlikely that Agnes would have allowed a charge filed by third parties (naming her as prosecutrix) to proceed if she knew it to be false, but, of course, we can only guess at what the record does not say. We can observe, though, that, in this dismissal, Agnes's preexisting professional relationship with Cornwall's family offered the foundation for an alternate account of events.

27. Kew, TNA, KB 27/220 rot. 96d, online at: http://aalt.law.uh.edu/E2/KB27no220/bKB27no220dorses/IMG_0183.htm.

28. "Iuratores dicunt super sacrum suum quod praedictus Iohannes de cornewaille corde-waner in nullo est culpabilis de praedicto raptu" (The jury say on their oath that the foresaid John of Cornwall, cordwainer, is in no way guilty of the foresaid rape) (transcription and translation mine).

29. The fuller explanation reads: "Agnam appellatrix fuit apprenticia cum vxore praedicti Iohannis de cornewaille et contencio fuit inter ipsum Iohannem de cornewaille et praedictam vxorem eius. Ita quod dicta vxor ipsius Iohannis de cornewaille volens nocere et grauare praedictum virum suum adiuit matrem praedictae agnetae appellatrix et narrauit ei quod praedictus vir suus concubuit cum praedicta Agneta filia sua et mater ipsius Agnetis credens hoc esse verum et cetera." (The appellatrix Agnes was apprenticed to the wife of the foresaid John of Cornwall, and there was a fight between the same John of Cornwall and his foresaid wife. Thus the wife of this John of Cornwall, desiring to injure and oppress her foresaid husband, approached the mother of the foresaid appellatrix Agnes and told her that her foresaid husband had sexual intercourse with the foresaid Agnes, her daughter, and the mother of this Agnes, believed this to be true, et cetera).

30. Along with the acquittal, John of Cornwall appears to have been awarded twenty pounds for the malicious suit at Agnes's or her pledges' cost: "dicunt quod praedictum appellum maliciose formatum fuit et cetera ad dampnum ipsius Iohannis viginti Librarum" (They say that the foresaid appeal was maliciously made et cetera [and] appropriate to the harm of this John [they award] twenty pounds). See also Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 76–78.

Scholars of sexual violence have long acknowledged the ways that pre-existing relationships between victim-survivor and accused rapist make it far more difficult for the survivor to win her case. Even though the rationale for dismissal in Agnes's case looks different—that is, it does not announce presumed consent—we may still see how cases resting outside narrow bounds that continue to define “real” rape—that is, violent rape by a stranger—foreclose women's access to justice, even for cases they appear willing to pursue through jury trial.³¹ The events of the *Reeve's Tale*, when allowed to speak beyond the question of whether its sexual encounters “count” as rape (and to speak beyond the question of Chaucer's own sexual experiences) illustrate cultural scripts for adjudicating consent and violation that conflate the situations of familiarity and the absence of violation that made it difficult for medieval women to prosecute their assaults. A structurally oriented approach to sexual assault in the *Reeve's Tale* reveals the endurance of familiar assumptions about who commits rape that make it difficult for women to prosecute rapes committed by former or current sexual partners, by dates, or by friends.³²

Neither approach is unproductive, of course, and, indeed, structurally oriented discussions of assault must at some stage address individually oriented approaches, that is, they must assess the evidence that assault is coded in a text much in the same manner as a magistrate or jury might assess the evidence of consent or violation in a rape appeal. The crucial step concerns the transformative movement from the individual to the structural, from parsing evidence of rape to ferreting out the traces of widely held beliefs about rape that determine how such evidence will be weighed: whether a survivor's protestations of nonconsent will be believed; whether an assailant will be held responsible; and whether the treatment of the allegations will affirm perceived rights of access to certain bodies and to certain people's sexuality. The *Reeve's Tale* offers but one example of Chaucer scripting narratives of assault and, likewise, but one locus of many for exploring Chaucer's reproduction of myths that buttress rape culture. The work of this exploration remains to be addressed by feminist studies of Chaucer. It is my hope that, liberated from the necessity of endlessly sifting the questions of Chaucer's guilt in an individual instance of assault, Chaucer scholars gain the freedom

31. See Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge MA, 1987), 3–15.

32. Diana L. Payne, Kimberly A. Lonsway, and Louise F. Fitzgerald, “Rape Myth Acceptance: Exploration of Its Structure and Its Measurement Using the *Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale*,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 33 (1999): 27–68, esp. 27–31; Kimberly A. Lonsway and Louise F. Fitzgerald, “Rape Myths: In Review,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18 (1994): 133–64; Kate Harding, *Asking for It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture—and What We Can Do about It* (Boston, 2015), 41–48; and Estrich, *Real Rape*.

to more fully address ourselves to this task. The truth of Chaucer studies (like any other academic discipline) is that, while its dominant discourses have long authorized scholarly voices that cannot speak as survivors, we survivors are also members of this field. Our speech—radical, structural, transformational—likewise belongs. Let us use it to shape the paths Chaucerians follow from here.

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