



On Servant Women, Rape Culture, and Endurance

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ABSTRACT: This response to Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobceki's discovery of two new King's Bench documents proposes two new directions for Chaucerian feminist scholarship. First, it argues for the importance of focusing on the servant women who populate Chaucer's texts, analyzing the obligations that are placed on them and the conditions they are expected to endure. Second, it suggests that scholars use the rich multiple meanings of the capacious Middle English verb *endure* as a set of ethical charges for approaching structural attitudes toward rape and consent in Chaucer's work.

KEYWORDS: Cecily Chaumpaigne, Gille, rape culture, servant women, women's labor

I spent many years wishing ferociously for the knowledge that Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobceki's astonishing archival discovery grants us. I did not think this knowledge about the meaning of *raptus* in Cecily Chaumpaigne's May 1380 release was possible.¹ Its elusiveness frustrated me to no end. I wanted to march into Westminster Abbey's Poet's Corner and exhume Chaucer myself to demand answers. Now that we have some of those answers, I am excited about the new possibilities they enable for Chaucerian feminist

1. On the contested meanings of *raptus* in Chaumpaigne's release before Roger and Sobceki's discovery, see Christopher Cannon, "*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer," *Speculum* 68 (1993): 74–94; and Anna Waymack, "Teaching *de raptu meo*: Chaucer, Chaumpaigne, and Consent in the Classroom," *Medieval Feminist Forum* 53 (2017): 150–75.

scholarship. I outline two of those new critical directions here. First, I hope this knowledge spurs us to explore anew the role of servant women, who occupy the fraught intersection of gender, social status, labor, and sexuality in Chaucer's work. Second, I look forward to continuing to analyze Chaucer's—and Chaucerians'—vexed role in the enduring structures of rape culture. The term *rape culture* might raise hackles or invite accusations of hyperbolic feminist anachronism, but it is nonetheless useful here for designating what Nicola Gavey calls “the cultural scaffolding of rape.”² Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry define *rape culture* as a constellation of widespread attitudes, practices, and myths

in which sexual violence is tolerated, accepted, eroticised, minimised and trivialised. In a rape culture, violence against women is eroticised in literary, cinematic, and media representations; victims are routinely disbelieved or blamed for their own victimisation; and perpetrators are rarely held accountable or their behaviours are seen as excusable or understandable.³

The newly uncovered King's Bench documents do not change the fact that Chaucer writes about consent and sexual violation in complicated, unsettling, and disturbing ways.⁴ It is irrelevant whether Chaucer the individual endorsed these views himself, for the fact remains that many of his narrative choices both reflect and reinscribe constitutive fictions about gender, desire, sex, and violence that persist in causing harm to living individuals today.⁵

2. Nicola Gavey, *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape* (New York, 2005), 3. On approaching sexual violation through a structural framework, see also Carine M. Mardorossian, *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered* (New Brunswick NJ, 2014).

3. Anastasia Powell and Nicola Henry, “Framing Sexual Violence Prevention: What Does It Mean to Challenge a Rape Culture?,” in Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell, eds., *Preventing Sexual Violence: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Overcoming a Rape Culture* (New York, 2014), 1–21, at 2; and Carissa Harris, “800 Years of Rape Culture,” *Aeon* (May 24, 2021), online at: <https://aeon.co/essays/the-hypocrisies-of-rape-culture-have-medieval-roots>.

4. Classic overviews of rape and consent in Chaucer's work include 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); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, 1989); and Christine M. Rose, “Reading Chaucer Reading Rape,” in Robertson and Rose, eds., *Representing Rape*, 21–60. On Fragment I, see Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca NY, 2018), 26–66.

5. On rape culture's foundational myths in medieval texts, see Carissa M. Harris, “Pastourelle Fictionalities,” *New Literary History* 51 (2020): 239–42. For a classic overview, see 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.

Many of those wounded by these structurally entrenched attitudes are readers of Chaucer's work. As Sarah Baechle trenchantly observes, Roger and Sobek's discovery invites us to read Chaucer in the context of rape culture, as a poet who produced work shaped indelibly by its enduring structures.

"Cecilia in servicio": Maidservants and Wenches

"Galfridus Ceciliam Chaumpayn nuper servientem predicti Thome in servicio suo apud Londonium retentam," (Geoffrey retained Cecily Chaumpaigne, former servant of the aforesaid Thomas, in his service at London) reads Thomas Staundon's writ filed in October 1379.⁶ Because these two new documents illuminate Chaucer's legal dispute with another man over entitlement to Cecily Chaumpaigne's "service," it is imperative that we reconsider the numerous female servants, the "wenches" and "maydes," who populate the margins of the *Canterbury Tales*. We must think about how these figures are subject to assumptions about women's labor and who owns it, how they embody gendered vulnerability, and how they are expected to subordinate their wills to those of others. We should scrutinize what, precisely, a servant woman is expected to endure in Chaucer's texts.⁷

Teresa Phipps discusses how the multivalent language of *raptus* recurs in cases involving servant women in late medieval town courts, just as it appears in Chaumpaigne's May 1380 release of Chaucer from legal responsibility for the "raptus" of her labor from Staundon: "Many . . . men complained about abduction of their maidservants, along with various household goods, but the nature of the records mask whether these were instances of sexual violence, attempts at forced marriage, elopement or rather the stealing of labour from the household."⁸ Osteologist Mary Lewis's work on medieval skeletons sheds

6. Kew, The National Archives (TNA), KB 136/5/3/1/2.

7. On women's work as servants in late medieval England, see P. J. P. Goldberg, "Female Labour, Service and Marriage in the Late Medieval Urban North," *Northern History* 22 (1986): 18–38; P. J. P. Goldberg, "What Was a Servant?," in Anne Curry and Elizabeth Matthew, eds., *Concepts and Patterns of Service in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2000), 1–20; P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300–1520* (Oxford, 1992), 158–202; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, *Working Women in English Society, 1300–1620* (Cambridge UK, 2005), 45–61; and Janelle Werner, "Living in Suspicion: Priests and Female Servants in Late Medieval England," *Journal of British Studies* 55 (2016): 658–79, esp. 665–71. On women's compulsory service under the Statute and Ordinance of Laborers (the *ordinacio* repeatedly cited by Staundon in his October 1379 suit against Chaumpaigne and Chaucer), see Judith M. Bennett, "Compulsory Service in Late Medieval England," *Past and Present* 209 (2010): 7–51, esp. 28–41.

8. Teresa Phipps, *Medieval Women and Urban Justice: Commerce, Crime and Community in England, 1300–1500* (Manchester UK, 2020), 141–42.

light on the difficult physical conditions endured by urban servant women, with the evidence of their lives' hardships surviving in their very bones.⁹ Lewis concludes, "There are suggestions that domestic service caused strain on the legs and backs of the urban females. . . . Overall it was the urban females that carried the burden of respiratory and infectious diseases, suggesting they may have been the most vulnerable group in medieval society."¹⁰ Scholars note the high degree of sexual coercion and abuse inflicted on servant women by their employers, employers' family members, and fellow servants.¹¹

Servant women were forced to work under a set of misogynistic expectations of their sexual availability to the men who employed them in their homes. These enduring structural attitudes, by chaining women's consent to labor to their consent to sex, rendered serving women uniquely vulnerable to violation. We are reminded of the fraught nature of servant women's consent in the repeated phrase *inter eos concordati* (agreed between them) to name Thomas Staundon's contract with Cecily Chaumpaigne for her "servicium" (service).¹² Because the writ's legal language is so formulaic, underscored by the note "breve de ordinacione" (writ of the ordinance) written at the bottom of the document, it illuminates more general structural attitudes regarding service and labor in Chaucer's England.¹³ The perfect passive participle *concordati* (agreed upon), repeated four times in these two documents, is a compound of *con* and *cordes*, "hearts together," recalling its close etymological cousin *consent*, whose compounding of *con* and *sentire* means "feeling together."¹⁴ The issue of ownership, obligation, and entitlement to women's labor is illuminated by Staundon's aggrieved use of "in servicio suo" (in his service) to name Chaucer's allegedly unlawful employment of Chaumpaigne against Staundon's will, and in his naming of Chaumpaigne as "Ceciliam Chaumpayn nuper servientem predicti Thome" (Cecily Chaumpaigne, former servant of the aforementioned Thomas), using the possessive genitive to stake

9. Mary Lewis, "Work and the Adolescent in Medieval England (AD 900–1550): The Osteological Evidence," *Medieval Archaeology* 60 (2016): 138–71.

10. Lewis, "Work and the Adolescent," 163.

11. On servant women and sexual violation, see Ann J. Kettle, "Ruined Maids: Prostitutes and Servant Girls in Later Medieval England" in Robert R. Edwards and Vickie L. Ziegler, eds., *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society* (Woodbridge, 1995), 19–31, at 28–30; Marjorie K. McIntosh, "Servants and the Household Unit in an Elizabethan English Community," *Journal of Family History* 9 (1984): 3–23, at 20; and Werner, "Living in Suspicion," 669.

12. This phrase appears once in Kew, TNA, KB 145/3/3/2 (April 9, 1380) and twice in KB 136/5/3/1/2 (October 26, 1379), in addition to the word *concordati* alone in the latter document.

13. I am grateful to Euan Roger for reminding me of this point.

14. *DMLBS (Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources)*, s.v. *concordare* (v.), sense 1(a).

his claims.¹⁵ The men's competing claims of entitlement to Chaumpaigne's labor inhere in the repeated verb *retinere*, meaning "to engage a person for service" and "to apprehend, catch, grasp," "to hold fast." *Retinere's* tactile connotations of hands grasping tightly to flesh are underscored by its root verb *tenere*, "to hold in the hand or other part of the body," "to exert a sustained grip on," reminding us that these documentary claims of ownership are tied to living bodies.¹⁶

Cecily Chaumpaigne's status as Chaucer's servant, and as the subject of men's disputed claims to "retain" her service, should generate new attention to the maidservants in Chaucer's work. These figures include the "mayde" in Alisoun of Bath's fabricated accusation to one of her first three husbands, "What rowne ye with oure mayde? Benedicite!" (III 241), and in her invocation of the exemplary "wys wyf" who will falsely "take wisse of hir owene mayde" (III 231, 233) to deceive her husband.¹⁷ We can reconsider the *Miller's Tale's* Alisoun's "mayde" (I 3417) who attempts unsuccessfully to rouse Nicholas from his feigned trance. She is later named as "thy mayde Gille" when Nicholas warns John of the impending flood and swears him to secrecy: "But Robyn may nat wite of this, thy knave, / Ne eek thy mayde Gille I may nat save" (I 3555–56), he tells the credulous carpenter.¹⁸ In Nicholas's imagined apocalypse by water, the servants' lives are not worth saving. We can revisit the "squier and . . . mayde" (V 1487) who are ordered by their master Arveragus to convey a terrified Dorigen to "uphold her pledge" to Aurelius in the *Franklin's Tale*. Who is entitled to "retain" or "hold onto" the bodies of these women? Who exerts power over them? What tasks are they obligated to perform, in the name of service, for those who employ them? What options are available for Arveragus's *mayde* to resist her master's command to convey her mistress into harm's way, or for the wise wife's maidservant to refuse to collude with her employer's perjury? In what ways does Alisoun's false accusation, manufactured as part of a performance of spousal jealousy to manipulate her husband, harm her *mayde* with whom she accuses him of flirting?

15. KB 136/5/3/1/2. On servants and contracts, see McIntosh, *Working Women*, 53–54.

16. *DMLBS*, s.v. *retinere* (v.), senses 7(a), 1(a), 3; *tenere* (v.), senses 1(a), 2(a). This verb appears three times in KB 136/5/3/1/2 ("retinere," "retentam," "retenuit") and once ("retenta") in KB 145/3/3/2.

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

18. The longer quotation sheds light on how Alisoun deputizes her maidservant to perform the interpersonal task of rousing Nicholas from his stupor: Alisoun "trowed that he was in mala-dye, / For, for no cry hir mayde koude hym calle, / He nolde answer for thyng that myghte falle" (I 3416–18). On "Gille" as a name connoting lower-status femininity and derogatory sexuality, see *MED*, s.v. *gil* (n.(2)), senses 1(a), 1(c); and Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 124–25.

We should read “Ceciliam Chaumpayn . . . servientem” in the context of Chaucer’s use of the word *wenche* to name the maidservant Gille in John the urban mercantile tradesman’s household in the *Miller’s Tale*, and alongside the term’s other usages in the *Canterbury Tales*, where it labels a woman as subservient and sexually available.¹⁹ We must consider how these structural attitudes about labor, obedience, sexuality, and ownership were so pervasive and enduring in their own time that they rendered female servants vulnerable to harassment and abuse.²⁰ There are countless examples I could cite here, but one from Canterbury, the destination of Chaucer’s fictional pilgrim band, vividly elucidates what some servant women endured. In 1571, a fifteen-year-old servant named Joan Bellingher testified before two town officials that her master, a tailor named Steven Jeffrey, had raped her around six o’clock on a Monday evening in early November when his wife was dining elsewhere.²¹ Joan explained how she tried to escape from Steven when he first tried to assault her: “she slyd away from him . . . and went owte of the parlor into the hall from hym and then he came after hir and toke hir by the arme and pulled hir into the parlor againe.” Joan emphasized how Stephen seized her by the arm and physically restrained her in the confined domestic space of his Canterbury home (“the parlor,” “the hall,” “the parlor againe”), recalling the tactile, possessive connotations of *retinere* in the King’s Bench documents. After that, Joan related in unsparing detail how Steven raped her. She reported “that she did tell him that he did hurte hir, and he said no Joane I do not hurt the, for this dothe me good and thee no harme.” Stephen forced Joan to swear not to tell her parents or anyone else. He tried to rape her multiple times thereafter, “but she withstode yt.” Three days after the rape, Joan shared her testimony before a Canterbury alderman, with another man as witness, and was examined physically by three women who affirmed that “the said Joane is very sore hurt in hir prevy partes.” While this case is almost two hundred years after Chaucer’s pilgrims sojourned toward Canterbury, it illuminates the violence suffered by servant women due to structural inequalities remaining in force and enduring over time. These inequalities, and their attendant yoking of women’s sexual consent to their employment, persist

19. “He sente his knave, and eek his wenche also, / Upon his nede to London for to go” (I 3631–32). On the word *wenche*, see Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 34–35, 48–50.

20. See the cases printed in P. J. P. Goldberg, trans. and ed., *Women in England, c. 1275–1525: Documentary Sources* (Manchester UK, 1995), 96, 120–21, 123, 253.

21. Canterbury, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, CC J/Q/371. I am indebted to Dr. Sheila Sweetinburgh and the organizers of the University of Kent’s 2010 “Bad Behaviour in Medieval and Early Modern Europe” workshop and conference for bringing this record to my attention and sharing the transcription with me.

today, as Bernice Yeung shows in her in-depth analysis of “how immigration status and poverty are leveraged against female workers to hold them hostage in jobs where they are being sexually abused” in the contemporary United States.²²

Enduring: A Set of Charges

In addition to revisiting Chaucer’s servant women in the aftermath of Roger and Sobecki’s discovery, scholars can use the capacious Middle English verb *endure* as a set of ethical charges for thinking more broadly and structurally about consent, sexual violation, and feminine servitude in Chaucer’s poetry. How do Chaucer’s works endure rape culture, in all of the term’s manifold valences? *Endure* comes from the Latin verb *indurare*, meaning “to make hard, harden,” and the multivalent adjective *durus*, connoting a range of hardnesses: “hard, firm”; “hardy, resolute”; “hardened, inured”; “hard-hearted, ruthless.”²³ In Chaucer’s usage, *endure* names a woman’s begrudging, not-fully-voluntary fulfillment of the sexual terms of the marital debt, connecting it to feminine embodiment, will, constraint, and coercion, and illuminating its utility as an interpretive framework for thinking about these issues in Chaucer’s texts. Of her transactional relationship with her wealthy older husbands, Alisoun of Bath relates, “For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure, / And make me a feyned appetit” (III 416–17). She emphasizes how she “endure[d]” marital sex in exchange for monetary “wynnyng,” noting that she “hadde . . . nevere delit” (III 418) in it. In a similar usage, the *Merchant’s Tale*’s lecherous old Januarie gazes at his youthful bride May on their wedding day and thinks to himself, “Allas! O tendre creature, / Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure / Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!” (IV 1757–59).²⁴ Chelsea Skalak incisively shows how these moments of feminine endurance spotlight the prevalence of “legalized sexual violence,” or sexual conduct that is licit or legal but still unethical.²⁵ For Chaucer, the verb *endure* names women’s sexual activity that is technically consenting, yet unwilling and unpleasurable. It has a gendered,

22. Bernice Yeung, *In a Day’s Work: The Fight to End Sexual Violence Against America’s Most Vulnerable Workers* (New York, 2018), 2 (on violence against domestic workers specifically, see 65–92).

23. *MED*, s.v. *enduren* (v.); and *DMLBS*, s.v. *indurare* (v.), sense 1(a); *durus* (adj.), senses 1(a), 3(a), 3(b), 3(d).

24. This use of *endure* to characterize women’s experience during marital sex also appears in the final line of Sir David Lyndsay, *Answer to the Kingis Flyting*; see Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 94–96. Chelsea Skalak discusses the Chaucerian passages in “The Unwilling Wife: Marital Rape in the *Canterbury Tales*,” *Chaucer Review* 55 (2020): 119–46, at 130–32, 137.

25. Skalak, “The Unwilling Wife,” 132.

multivalent, complicated relationship to consent, pointing out the gaps between what is allowed and what is ethical, pleasurable, or just. In Chaucer's texts, women endure sexual conditions that are hard or difficult in one way or another. We should attend carefully to analyzing what, precisely, makes them so hard.

We must first grapple with how Chaucer's poetry *endures* rape culture, in the *Middle English Dictionary's* first sense: "To harden, to strengthen, to fortify."²⁶ We should analyze how certain moments reproduce and thus fortify and strengthen rape myths, hardening them into place. Scholars list them elsewhere far more comprehensively, but these moments include the Reeve framing Malyn's rape as "pley" (I 4198) and "jape" (I 4207); the Reeve's and Cook's insistence that the rapes in the *Reeve's Tale* harm Symkyn rather than the victim-survivors themselves; Nicholas's assault of Alisoun as merely the precursor to her enthusiastic consent in the *Miller's Tale*; and the *Wife of Bath's Tale's* rewarding a rapist with a young, beautiful, and loyal wife who "obeyed hym in every thyng / That myghte doon hym plesance or likyng" (III 1255–56) while eliding the perspective of the nameless "mayde" (III 886), to name just a few.²⁷ We must consider how these moments are part of the way that rape culture "remain[s] in force" and "continue[s] to exist."²⁸ This sense, "of an organization, law, bequest, contract, etc.," points to the entrenched structural nature of this complex of myths, tropes, and false beliefs. These moments participate in rape culture's persistence over time, for they call sexual violation by other names in order to elide its pervasiveness and to downplay its harms. In a related sense, we should contend with how Chaucer's poetry *endures* sexual violation in its sense "to tolerate something, to put up with."²⁹ How do moments in Chaucer's work tolerate sexual violation? And how do critical readings of these moments repeat or reinforce this toleration?

To endure means, too, "to suffer," to experience pain and harm, and we must attend to the effects of Chaucer's poetry on those who have suffered sexual violation.³⁰ Anna Waymack writes eloquently about reading the *Reeve's Tale* in graduate coursework as a rape survivor.³¹ I, too, can attest to the acute anguish of writing a dissertation chapter about the leering fictional student-rapists of the *Reeve's Tale*, alone in my tiny studio apartment during

26. *MED*, s.v. *enduren* (v.), sense 1(a).

27. Rose, "Reading Chaucer Reading Rape"; Cannon, "Chaucer and Rape"; and Waymack, "Teaching *de raptu meo*," 165–66.

28. *MED*, s.v. *enduren* (v.), sense 2(b).

29. *MED*, s.v. *enduren* (v.), sense 3(c).

30. *MED*, s.v. *enduren* (v.), sense 3(d).

31. Waymack, "Teaching *de raptu meo*," 158–59.

the final, sweltering summer of graduate school, beset by flashbacks and the agonizing sense that past and present had collapsed into one another. We who have suffered rape culture's harms, and whose suffering is exacerbated by the ways sexual violence is portrayed in Chaucer's work, can use our scholarly energies to *endure*, in its most emancipatory sense of "to resist, to hold out against," the ways that rape culture's persistent myths have been rearticulated by Chaucer, by other medieval poets, by Chaucerians both past and present.³² We can trace, too, how Chaucer's work resists and holds out against rape culture even as it fortifies and strengthens it.

Roger and Sobecki's discovery requires that we attend to the ways that servant women in particular endured rape culture in Chaucer's texts and in Chaucer's England. It demands that we consider how they are framed as "asking for it"; how their assaults are reframed as "not rape" or simply an expected part of their profession; how their intersecting disadvantages, coupled with the intimate domestic nature of their working conditions, render them uniquely vulnerable to violation. We can now direct our energy to grapple with how rape culture endures in Chaucer's work, and how those texts—and those who read them—endure rape's culture's structures and harms in all their manifold ways.

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32. *MED*, s.v. *enduren* (v.), sense 3(a).