



Whose Chaucer? On Cecily Chaumpaigne, Cancellation, and the English Literary Canon

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ABSTRACT: While Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobceki's new archival discovery absolves Geoffrey Chaucer of the supposed rape of Cecily Chaumpaigne, it does not offer an absolution for the literary critics and historians who have exploited and appropriated the imagined figure of Cecily Chaumpaigne for the sexual titillation of themselves and their reading public. Briefly recounting the last century and a half of Chaucerian historiography, this article argues that the study of Chaucerian literature remains a place in which sexual violence has been exalted, before concluding that the transformations that feminist scholarship has brought to the field—especially in relation to the Chaumpaigne release—will never be erased.

KEYWORDS: cancel culture, Cecily Chaumpaigne, Chaucer studies, feminist studies, rape prosecution

Two years ago, in the introduction to *The Chaucer Review*'s special issue "New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer," I called Geoffrey Chaucer a rapist. I named Chaucer several other things too, of course. Writing alongside Nicole Nolan Sidhu, I spoke of Chaucer: "He is a rapist, a racist, an anti-Semite; he speaks for a world in which the privileges of the male, the Christian, the wealthy, and the white are perceived to be an inalienable aspect of human existence."¹

1. Samantha Katz Seal and Nicole Sidhu, "New Feminist Approaches to Chaucer: Introduction," *Chaucer Review* 54 (2019), 224–29, at 229.

For Nicole and me, reflecting on the study and reading of Chaucer in a world ever more (rightly) concerned with the ethics of our literate practice, it seemed essential to acknowledge how alienating and inherently exclusionary the reading of Chaucer and his poetry can be—and to acknowledge, moreover, how often critics and readers of Chaucer have exploited and magnified the moments of ugliness that lie in his poems, wielding the medieval poet like a weapon of abuse. And yet, despite all that, we refused to give up on Geoffrey Chaucer or to concede that what the poet has been in the past is the complete sum of all that he might yet still be.

Like our pioneering foremothers, we wish to seize Chaucer from the comforting bosom of the patriarchs in which he all too often rests, to bend this poetic father away from the privileges of his sons, to make him yield instead towards that vision of justice demanded by his daughters.²

We argued, in short, that Chaucer's poetry surpasses the specifics of biographical circumstance and historiographic tradition, and that ultimately every poet—even a rapist—is recreated all anew by readers in the act of reading.³

For many readers, however, it was our labeling of Chaucer as “rapist” that was the most significant aspect of the piece. That sentence was interpreted as a call to “cancel Chaucer,” with connections made to recent attempts at universities in the United Kingdom and the United States to restructure English curriculums to incorporate the work of more female and non-white authors (with the resultant displacement, to varying degree, of traditionally canonical authors like Chaucer).⁴ The implication was that one could read Chaucer, or advocate for the *teaching* of Chaucer, only if one did not believe the historical Geoffrey Chaucer to have been a rapist (or racist, anti-Semite, etc.); that somehow by acknowledging the moral and ethical complexities of the

2. Seal and Sidhu, “New Feminist Approaches,” 229.

3. For an extremely thoughtful reflection on how such rethinkings of Chaucer should inform our pedagogical practice, see Emma Margaret Solberg, “Response to #MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy,” *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 2 (2021): 134–53.

4. A. S. G. Edwards, “Gladly wolde he lerne? Why Chaucer is disappearing from the university curriculum,” *Times Literary Supplement* (July 2, 2021); Jill Mann, “Letter to the Editor,” *Times Literary Supplement* (July 23, 2021); Colin Fernandez, “Cambridge don hits back after Chaucer is labelled a ‘rapist’—blasting criticism of the father of English literature as a ‘self-righteous assertion,’” *The Daily Mail Online* (July 30, 2021); 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> (accessed May 11, 2022).

medieval past and its most prominent representatives, we do some violence to it. And while this argument is, on the one hand, very much of the present political moment, on both sides of the Atlantic, it struck me as remarkable how very consistent an argument it has been for the last hundred and twenty-nine years in Chaucer studies, ever since Frederick James Furnivall first dug up the archival document (in 1873) in which Cecilia Chaumpaigne released one Galfridus Chaucer from all legal consequences regarding “de raptu meo.”

The problem of how Chaucer could have been simultaneously a rapist and a great poet has vexed Chaucerians inordinately. Some critics simply wished that the *raptus* document might disappear—“Such discoveries as this . . . we might be excused for wishing unmade,” one critic wrote in 1880—while others turned the question of Chaucer as accused rapist into a litmus test for the reader.⁵ Edmund Wagenknecht offered this latter viewpoint rather bluntly in his 1968 monograph on Chaucer:

For my own part, I would add only that anyone who can believe the man who wrote the poems we know could possibly have been guilty of committing rape under any circumstances must be capable of accommodating far more complicated and contradictory notions of human character than I can.⁶

In other words, we know that Chaucer *cannot* be a rapist because we have read his poetry and it is not, we may be assured, the poetry of a rapist. In his 1932 Chaucer biography, G. K. Chesterton similarly argued, “Quite apart from morality, in which any man may fail, it was not at all typical of Chaucer’s temperament to engage in any personal or isolated violence or lawlessness.”⁷ We recognize this logic, of course, from the failed rape prosecutions of our own news headlines, in which men’s defense lawyers present good grades and athletic accomplishment as evidence of criminal innocence, relying upon the unimaginable incongruity that sexual assault would represent in an otherwise complementary narrative.

And, yet, this is also of course an argument about reading, about the intimacy and understanding attainable by a contemporary reader with the medieval poet whose works he has inhabited with such dedication. Thus, it is to the text that Chaucerians have turned to vindicate their poet, whether

5. Adolphus William Ward, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (New York: 1880), 85.

6. Edmund Wagenknecht, *The Personality of Chaucer* (Norman OK, 1968), 109.

7. G. K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (New York: 1932), 101.

that means advancing arguments about Chaucer's character or citing lines from Chaucer's poetry when he utters disapproval of sexual violence. That one might equally, and perhaps more convincingly, cite lines from Chaucer's poems in which he uses sexual violence as a punchline or narrative device is, of course, deemed irrelevant: we *know* Chaucer and his temperament. What would it say about our knowledge of Chaucer if he might do something so out of character?⁸ Moreover, these arguments implicitly—sometimes explicitly—state, we also know women; more specifically, we know how women lie about rape, how they use it as a weapon. As Paull F. Baum summarized this oft-cited theory about the case, “Most of the legal tangles would be less tangled if Chaucer had seduced the lady, if she then lost her temper and threatened suit for rape and then under pressure compromised by releasing him for certain considerations.”⁹ If the fault is Cecily's, then we may keep our vision, our knowledge, of the poet. For English literature has nothing at all invested in knowing Cecily Champaigne and a great deal invested in knowing Geoffrey Chaucer.

Euan Roger and Sebastian Sobceki's brilliant archival discovery has changed the ground seismically, irrevocably, under our feet. They have absolved Chaucer of raping Champaigne, have cast clarity upon a subject we thought inevitably consigned to uncertainty and to the mists of the historical unknown. This is a rare, almost unthinkable gift, to our field, to English literary history, to the legacy of Geoffrey Chaucer himself. But it is not, I wish to caution now, an absolution to the critics. To know that *de raptu meo* told the story of a servant woman wooed away by Chaucer from her employer with perhaps an offer of higher wages does not erase the stories *we* have told, the stories about women and rape and who gets to know Chaucer best. For, in the stories our field has told about Champaigne, we see some of the darkest legacies of misogyny and sexual violence. We witness the way that Chaucer (like many of his fellow poets) has been wielded to form a coterie of male readers, with a few women tolerated as long as they were willing to laugh along at their own sex. We see, damningly, in mocking lines from Chaucerian biography—such as “into his busy schedule of 1379 or '80 Chaucer managed to fit at least one pretty wench,” or “inside many a fat middle-aged man is a randy little thin one trying to get out. Perhaps he [Chaucer] sometimes

8. Or, as E. W. Edmunds states, if Chaucer has committed “a kind of activity that consorts uncomfortably with those activities that produced his ‘life of St Cecile’ and the translation of Boethius’ *De Consolatione Philosophiae* about the same time” (*Chaucer and His Poetry* [London, 1914], 66).

9. Paull F. Baum, *Chaucer: A Critical Appraisal* (Durham NC, 1958), 58.

did”—the reflection of academia’s history of sexual violence and exploitation of female scholars and students.¹⁰ And, finally, we see the way that scholarship and apologetics become powerfully linked, so that any attempt to draw attention to the inequities of race and gender reinforced within Chaucer’s poetry becomes labeled “cancellation.”

Chaucer may not have been a rapist. But we ourselves, we Chaucerians, have used Chaucer in ways that violate and hurt, in ways that foreclose and circumscribe the glorious possibilities inherent within English poetry—inherent, as well, within the diversity of readers who have the potential to make Chaucer into something of their own if given the chance. In these brief pages, I wish to muse a bit upon this history, to seize this opportunity to see ourselves clearly as we have been and as we must not continue to be in the future.¹¹ If the Chaumpaigne *raptus* document has been revealed by Roger and Sobecki to be not a magnifying glass to Chaucer’s past, but rather merely a mirror of our own, then let us use it as such. Let us look at our reflections and seek to understand them. And then let us have our Chaucer as we make him, stretched out at last to the larger scale of our unrestricted visions.

Knowing Father Chaucer

Roger and Sobecki have answered a question we previously thought to be unknowable. Did the word *raptus* mean sexual assault or rather abduction in the Chaumpaigne release? It turns out it meant neither, but rather a form of contractual “procurement.” As Christopher Cannon has argued, female consent in medieval England represented an imprecise metric of uncertainty, complicating our interpretations of the release. He neatly writes, “our worry that we will be wrongly certain has prevented us from realizing that uncertainty is itself something we may be certain about.”¹² Cannon’s point is well taken, remaining accurate even in this new landscape of some certainty to which Roger and Sobecki have ushered us. The forms of coercion enforced upon medieval women by their society necessitate a certain confusion about

10. Respectively, John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York, 1977), 251; and Derek Brewer, *Chaucer and His World* (Cambridge UK, 1978), 163.

11. For two excellent and far more comprehensive accounts of the critical reaction to the Chaumpaigne accusation, 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 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.

12. Christopher Cannon, “Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainty’s Certainties,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 22 (2000): 67–92, at 70 (repr. in Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose, eds., *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early-Modern Literature* [New York, 2001], 255–79).

any medieval expression of female consent, whether sexual or otherwise. How circumscribed must a choice be before it is barely choice at all? This is a question that Sarah Baechle and Carissa Harris have considered in their responses, seeking to contextualize Chaumpaigne's economic status with our new understanding of her *raptus*, to show how her choices may have remained constrained.

But a century of strategic uncertainty around Chaumpaigne must be juxtaposed with the role played by certainty and rhetorics of "knowing" in the nineteenth-century recuperation of Chaucer's poetic reputation. While John Dryden had named Chaucer the "Father of English Poetry" in 1700, English readers' appreciation of Chaucer was varied and often limited, with emphasis placed upon the medieval poet's seminal status rather than upon the quality of his verse.¹³ Dryden himself criticized Chaucer's poetry as "not harmonious to us" modern readers, while the nineteenth-century volume of Caroline Spurgeon's *Chaucerian Criticism and Allusions* is replete with slighting aesthetic comment from a wide array of voices, famously including that of Lord Byron.¹⁴ Chaucer's poetry, often so inextricably alien in its language and rhythm and subject to later readers, was simultaneously rarefied and denigrated according to its ancient character. It was Chaucer's entrenchment in the medieval past that made his poetry so difficult for many "modern" Englishmen to like. It was, however, also the supposed authenticity of that medieval past that had conferred upon Chaucer his unique position as the "well of English undefiled," to borrow Edmund Spenser's phrase, of English language and literature.

If later critics did not particularly care for Chaucer's poetry, they nevertheless praised him for the knowledge that he granted them, both of his own personal character and of those characters taxonomized within his *Canterbury Tales*. Despite his dismissive comments about Chaucer's poetic qualities, Dryden crowned Chaucer for his profundity of insight, writing, "As he is the Father of English Poetry, so I hold him in the same Degree of Veneration as the Grecians held Homer or the Romans Virgil: He is a perpetual Fountain of good Sense; learn'd in all Sciences; and therefore speaks properly on all Subjects."¹⁵ And what Chaucer spoke of, in particular, was human nature, offering up a supposedly authentic slice not only of medieval

13. John Dryden, *Fables Ancient and Modern; Translated into Verse from Homer, Ovid, Boccace, & Chaucer, with Original Poems* (London, 1700), 68.

14. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, ed., *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion, 1357-1900*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1925). Volume 2 is concerned with the nineteenth century.

15. Dryden, *Fables Ancient and Modern*, 67.

humanity, but of contemporary humanity as well. As Dryden continued, in the *Canterbury Tales* “we have our forefathers and Great Grand-dames all before us, as they were in Chaucer’s Days; their general Characters are still remaining in Mankind, and even in England. . . . For Mankind is ever the same, and nothing lost out of Nature, though everything is altered.”¹⁶ What Chaucer offers to the astute reader is not artistic pleasure, but rather historical verisimilitude; his poetry offers an ancient testimony to the “truths” of human nature.

Such a perspective became incorporated into the traditional attitude to Chaucer’s writings. Indeed, two centuries later, we see the American scholar George Parker Winship offering a judgment so similar to Dryden’s in regard to Chaucer’s unique capacities that one might strongly suspect Winship wrote it with Dryden spread out before him.¹⁷ The great writers, Winship claimed (not only Chaucer, but also Shakespeare and Molière, Horace, Homer, and Aristophanes), “put into verse of permanent value the men and women whom they each knew in different ages and amid widely varying surroundings. Each in his own way drew, true to life, those characteristic qualities that, while they distinguish individuals so clearly, make one generation of mankind so strangely like another.”¹⁸ And of Chaucer, Winship was willing to go still further: “few have known men and women better than he.”¹⁹

It is Chaucer’s certainty, his unique capacity to know his fellow men, that justifies his poetic status, according to this critical tradition. And we, reading Chaucer, are promised that we may likewise come to know our fellow humans with more certainty, gaining insights from Chaucer’s good sense, from his keen capacity for observation. Almost never do we see a Victorian or early-twentieth-century critic venture the idea that Chaucer might have been *wrong* about people, that the *Canterbury Tales* pilgrim portraits, in particular, might be somewhat overdrawn or inaccurate portrayals of medieval people. Nor will any of them utter the anti-Chaucerian heresy that perhaps the diversity of humanity is far wider than what we see in Chaucer’s poems,

16. Dryden, *Fables Ancient and Modern*, 68.

17. George Parker Winship, *Geoffrey Chaucer: A Paper Read by George Parker Winship at a Meeting of the Club of Odd Volumes of Boston, Massachusetts, on the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Chaucer’s Death* (Boston, 1900). Winship was hardly the only critic to hew remarkably close to Dryden in his assessment of Chaucer. Matthew Arnold likewise quotes the lines from Dryden about Chaucer as a “fountain of good sense,” before remarking, “It is by a large, free, sound representation of things, that poetry, this high criticism of life, has truth of substance; and Chaucer’s poetry has truth of substance” (*Essays in Criticism: Second Series* [London, 1898], at 28).

18. Winship, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 8. Winship was a student of George Lyman Kittredge at Harvard and would eventually become a rare books librarian at Harvard.

19. Winship, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 8.

that perhaps here is not, as Dryden claimed, “God’s Plenty,” after all. Chaucer’s particularity of description is held to be at once simultaneously universal; he knows all, if he depicts only a few of the human types. Thus, while one might quibble that the female half of humanity, for example, seems rather poorly done by its exempla of the Wife of Bath, the Prioress, and the Second Nun, still the early critic would rebut that those characters are voluminous enough for such a purpose. Or as Chesterton wrote in his Chaucer biography, “men have ambitions in every age, and women change from age to age even less than men.”²⁰ The continuity of humanity from Chaucer’s time and place to the contemporary time is a pleasant humanist philosophy perhaps; it is nevertheless also an inherently exclusionary one.

However, if critics claimed reading Chaucer gave them knowledge of humanity, they also claimed the inverse: that they themselves might know Geoffrey Chaucer in intimate depth through the medium of his poetry. Victorian boosters of the poet emphasized Chaucer’s personality as the motivation for their work. In the 1868 preface to his groundbreaking six-text edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, Furnivall depicted his founding of The Chaucer Society and his undertaking of the editorial project as tied directly to his knowing of Chaucer: “Anyone who read the *Canterbury Tales*, and gets to know the man Chaucer, must delight in and love him, and must feel sorry that so little has been done for the works of the genial bright soul, whose humour and wit, whose grace and tenderness, whose power and beauty, are the chief glory of our Early Literature.”²¹ There has been an uneasy tension in Chaucerian biography between those who would read historical evidence of the personal from Chaucer’s poems. Critics were particularly burned by the Victorians’ creation of an early doomed love for Chaucer whose poetic source was finally judged misattributed to Chaucer.²² But, however much scholars might judge the biographical mistakes thus accrued, they nevertheless remained consistently drawn to this belief that by reading Chaucer, they might know him intimately, with some certainty.²³

Furnivall cannot imagine the individual who reads the *Canterbury Tales* and does not “delight in and love” Chaucer, who reads the medieval poet and

20. Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 101.

21. Frederick J. Furnivall, *A Temporary Preface to the Six-Text Edition of The Canterbury Tales, Part 1* (London, 1868), 2.

22. For more details on Chaucer’s “doomed first love” and its relevance for the Cecily Champaigne debates, see Samantha Katz Seal, “Chaucer’s Women: Sex and the Scholarly Imagination,” *Chaucer Review* 56 (2021): 322–40.

23. On the historical formation of such reading communities around Chaucer, see Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis, 2002).

does not know him like Furnivall himself now does. This is a failure of imagination. It is not hard for any of us, I expect, to imagine a reader encountering the *Canterbury Tales* from a place of less intimacy, more alienation: a Jew for whom the reading of the *Prioress's Tale* is far from a delight, or a Muslim who finds a cruel caricature of their faith in the Sowdan's mother. Or, of course, a woman who, having survived sexual assault, finds herself deeply unsettled by the Miller's "hende Nicholas" (I 3199) and the Reeve's young rapist scholars. But this is also a failure of equity, for it inscribes certainty upon Chaucer to such a degree that when, five years later, Furnivall's own discovery would introduce a document to challenge that certainty, it would be already far too late to shake the critics' knowing of the poet. The burden of proof and the suspicions of uncertainty would be placed upon Cecily Chaumpaigne, for the gift of the critics' trust had already been given to Chaucer himself.

Chaucer and the Right to Sex

In their quest to navigate the Chaumpaigne release, Chaucerian critics turned toward mechanisms of legal jurisprudence. It was, after all, a document that testified to a legal proceeding; therefore, they would put Chaucer's innocence to a trial of sorts, even if a heavily biased one. The defenses tended to divide into two camps: either scholars argued that *raptus* was a reference to kidnapping rather than rape, and spun elaborate fantasies by which Chaucer could have kidnapped a girl in an innocent manner; or they argued that *raptus* did indeed mean sexual assault, and therefore sought to enumerate circumstances in which Chaucer being accused of sexual assault should not be counted a black mark against the poet.²⁴ The typical circumstance that such critics turned to in order to excuse the possibility of sexual assault was that Chaucer had had a preexisting sexual relationship with Chaumpaigne, and that therefore "the lady, if she was a lady," as Derek Brewer wrote, must have charged him with rape as some form of jilted vengeance or financial extortion.²⁵

In the critical response to the possibility that Chaucer might have raped Chaumpaigne, we see an unflattering display of twentieth-century misunderstandings of what might qualify as rape, disturbingly reminiscent of the fourteenth-century uncertainty about female consent that Cannon cited.

24. Haldeen Braddy argued that there was a national divide in scholarly opinions, "with most American scholars holding that in the fourteenth century 'raptus' meant the act of kidnapping, and with British critics maintaining the word referred to sexual experience." See Haldeen Braddy, "Chaucer, Alice Perrers, and Cecily Chaumpaigne," *Speculum* 52 (1977): 906–11, at 906.

25. Brewer, *Chaucer and His World*, 126.

In Donald Howard's 1971 biography, for example, he wrote that Chaucer "may have had an intimate relationship with Cecily and she may, when things went wrong, have threatened to accuse him of rape. Or in the heat of passion or exasperation he may indeed have raped her. Whatever mitigating circumstances there were . . ." ²⁶ I have never been able to decide precisely which of these potential circumstances Howard thought the reader would consider to be "mitigating." Likewise, Chesterton's comment that "There may have been almost any sort of complicated comedy of relations; there may have been simply a bad break and nothing else" cannot help but make the reader beg the question of which of these possibilities we are supposed to consider potentially comic. ²⁷

There is no need to rehearse the entire accounting of such comments. As I have argued elsewhere, they served their purpose by allowing these male authors to titillate and bond with one another in the shared lurid humor of the imagined possibilities. It is not by accident, for example, that John Gardner, in his extremely popular *Life and Times of Chaucer*, called the possibility that *raptus* meant "rape" rather than "kidnapping" in the Chaumpaigne release "a darker—or perhaps more cheerful—view." ²⁸ There is a reason that male critics enjoyed writing about Cecily Chaumpaigne, enjoyed speculating about Chaucer's sexual experiences with her. For, having ruled out violent sexual assault due to their knowing and certainty about his character, these critics gave themselves permission to render almost any other sexual scenario licit, and create almost a boon to Chaucer's masculine reputation. As we see in Howard's biography, there are even "mitigating circumstances" for the possibility that Chaucer *did* rape Chaumpaigne: either "the heat of passion or exasperation" is offered as a sufficient excuse for sexual assault.

Indeed, it is hard not to conclude from reading through the plethora of similar critical passages that the real concern of such critics was not in proving that Chaucer did not rape Chaumpaigne, but rather that he could not have been convicted of such a rape. For the greater danger to the critical knowing of Chaucer's ethics and morality appears not to be the poet's deployment of sexual violence (whether in his poetry or in his personal life), but rather the possibility that he might be a felon. One of the most frequently quoted statements on the matter was that of Theodore F. T. Plucknett, a law professor who had decided to weigh in on the controversy: "there is nothing

26. Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York, 1987), 318–19.

27. Chesterton, *Chaucer*, 101.

28. Gardner, *The Life and Times*, 251.

to suggest she could have convicted him of a felony.”²⁹ Even earlier, Thomas R. Lounsbury, advancing the argument that Chaucer kidnapped Chaumpaigne for a friend, pled to the reader that “this, if conceded to be the fact, will strike most of us now as a sufficiently serious offense, without insisting upon the poet’s commission of a felony.”³⁰ Here, I think, we can see the silent part being said out loud. Lounsbury offers us no assurances that Chaucer’s kidnapping of Chaumpaigne so that his friend might marry her would have been with Chaumpaigne’s own consent; it never seems to have occurred to Lounsbury that such an action might have also made Chaucer an accessory to rape. And, of course, at the time that Lounsbury was writing, marital rape was *not*, in fact, considered a crime in England or the United States; marital rape was criminalized in England in 1991. It is not the rape part—the violation of another human body—that these critics refused to allow for Chaucer. It is the criminality that concerned them, for, as we have seen, they could think of plenty of excuses for the rape itself.

In her field-defining 2021 book, *The Right to Sex*, Amia Srinivasan writes:

The anxiety about false rape accusations is purportedly about injustice (innocent people being harmed), but actually it is about gender, about innocent men being harmed by malignant women. It is an anxiety, too, about race and class: about the possibility that the law might treat wealthy white men as it routinely treats poor black and brown men.³¹

This is what we see in the critical history of Chaucerians apologizing for Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucerians have established the belief in Chaucer’s character as quintessential to the reading and appreciation of his poetry. He is a poet whose particular charm is how easily you can know him from his poetry, and how intuitively he knows you and your own world in return. It is the shared humanity between poet and reader—a reader presumed to be male (and white, Christian, English, etc.) or at least capable of appreciating the forms of exclusionary coalition-bonding that describe the *Canterbury Tales* so well. And, thus, to argue that Chaucer could have been a rapist, an

29. Theodore F. T. Plucknett, “Chaucer’s Escapade,” *Law Quarterly Review* 64 (1948): 33–36 (cited by Howard, *Chaucer*, 318; and Gardner, *The Life and Times*, 251).

30. Thomas R. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings*, 3 vols. (New York, 1892), 2:75.

31. Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, 2021), 4–5.

anti-Semite, or a racist is interpreted as an attempt to undermine not only one component of the poet's biography, but to threaten the entire edifice at once. More than Shakespeare, Milton, or Spenser, Chaucer's status has been dependent upon the critic's sense of his transparency, upon the pretense (and, thankfully, contemporary Chaucerian criticism has been more and more willing to show that it *is* a pretense) that he is playing with us fairly, letting us truly know him.

But even more significantly, the Srinivasan quote helps throw into sharp relief some of the additional subtext that has lain underneath this debate for so long. Chaucerians have inevitably classified the controversy as one about achieving justice for Chaucer and his reputation. Lounsbury, for example, wrote, "A man of genius may not be entitled to set up the claim that his faults are to be excused and his evil deeds condoned because he is a man of genius; but he has a right to have his acts judged with that common fairness which would be shown in the case of one intellectually his inferior."³² The logic here is quite remarkable: we must protect Chaucer from being persecuted according to the superiority of his intelligence, which somehow renders him more vulnerable than other men. And, yet, despite the vitriol and lustful fancies cast upon Cecily Chaumpaigne, Chaumpaigne herself was not the ultimate source of Chaucer's vulnerability. For, at the risk of sounding a bit simplistic, both Chaumpaigne and Chaucer are dead enough for this all not to matter. However Chaucer's critics might imagine Chaumpaigne as a malignant woman, threatening an innocent man of genius, the stakes seem too low, I think, for the level of animus that arose.

The "malignant women" whom Chaucer's critics were afraid of were the ones in their classrooms. The privileges of race and class that they were afraid to have jeopardized were not those of Chaucer—who was not, after all, convicted of a felony—but their own, as white men writing during a period of increased women's enfranchisement and liberation. The idea that Chaucer could be seriously threatened by a woman, one of those "sluts and frumps and hussies" that Howard claimed Chaucer wrote about so well, was destabilizing because it was a testimony that no man, however brilliant or well-connected, could truly operate without consequence.³³ After all, Chaucer had paid the release, had compensated Chaumpaigne in order to remove the charges. That smarted and stung. Even the Father of English Poetry could not operate with full impunity; even this fount of English literature was held accountable for

32. Lounsbury, *Studies in Chaucer*, 76.

33. Howard, *Chaucer*, 36.

his actions. Cecily Chaumpaigne might not have been able to convict Geoffrey Chaucer of a felony, but, still, the historical record suggested, she held him to account. No wonder his critics called her a liar.

A Discovery Not Unmade

And, yet, as we now know, Chaumpaigne did not lie. Nor did Chaucer rape her (or at least, we have no documentation that points in that direction). We are left with the most fitting, perhaps, of historical conundrums, in which we all appear to have been pointing off at random, in which we have all heartily missed the mark. Still, as I have argued, there are consequences for the conjectures that we have made. The history we have told of Chaucer's potential rape of Chaumpaigne has ended up having very little to do with medieval England and quite a lot to do with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American world. It is a story not about Chaucer's attitudes to women, but about the attitudes of Chaucerian critics to the female creatures who, by claiming their own humanity, by asserting their rights to vote, attend college, and even, by the 1970s, start competing for English department jobs, seemed to be undermining the very edifices of race and class and gender that had seemed as if they would always be there to lift men of (somewhat variable) genius up.

Thus, while Roger and Sobceki have proved us all wrong, they have not, after all, effected Adolphus William Ward's pleading wish that Furnivall's discovery be "unmade."³⁴ There is no way to erase our knowledge of the *raptus* release. What we are offered now is a chance to contextualize it, to understand it in its historical setting. Moreover, there is no unmaking Cecily Chaumpaigne or what we have made of her. The consequences are daily apparent in our field; they haunt our classrooms and emerge in exposés of our disciplines. The attitudes that made Chaumpaigne into a "malignant woman," that make modern feminists into "malignant women," will not be so easily erased. Indeed, those who wish to turn women into the targets of conservative ire will likely be emboldened by this result. Chaucer was not a rapist after all. They knew him best. That Chaumpaigne was neither a liar nor a vindictive lover is likely to be pushed under the rug. There are no apologies to be offered to women like Cecily Chaumpaigne; she was only ever a lens through which we tried to read Chaucer. Besides, what does the posthumous reputation of a medieval servant woman matter next to that of English poetry itself?

34. Ward, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, 85.

They were right. But not as right as they were wrong. For it is far too late for Chaucer to be kept to those who claim to know him, to those who wish to claim some ancestral intimacy or male sympathy with the medieval poet. The people who are reading Chaucer now are those who can identify with Chaumpaigne (whether as servant or rape survivor or both), those whose great-granddames may never have trekked that road to Canterbury and yet who still will claim Chaucer as their own. It is a different Chaucer they will learn and a different Chaucer they will teach, although still gladly for all that. Chaucer may have been freed of the suspicion of rape. But Chaucer studies will never be free of Cecily Chaumpaigne and the threat she represented to a hegemonic order founded upon race and class and gender. That future is still coming. Geoffrey Chaucer may have been able to win a release from Cecily Chaumpaigne, who left her previous employer to work for Chaucer. But Chaucerian literature has not won a release from all the Cecily's who have claimed it as their own.

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