

“VICTIM, COCKTEASE, WIMP”: RETHINKING CECILY CHAUMPAIGNE

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“... it's not the telling of the stories that we fear, it's what people will do when we tell our stories.”

Chanel Miller, *Know My Name*

In 1873, Frederick James Furnivall was doing research on the life of Geoffrey Chaucer when he discovered a document dated from 1380 and created in the name of a woman called Cecily Chaumpaigne. The document officially released Chaucer from legal consequences related to “de meo raptu”—a Latin phrase relating to both abduction and rape. Since this bombshell was launched into the world of Chaucer, hundreds of academics have attempted to grapple with the case of Cecily Chaumpaigne and what it implies for their much-beloved author. This paper analyzes the work of three feminist scholars who themselves analyze Chaucer scholarship’s relation to and treatment of the case.

In her article *Chaucer’s Women: Sex and the Scholarly Imagination*, Samantha Katz Seal explores what the scholarship around the Cecily Chaumpaigne case reveals about exploitation and treatment of women. She challenges Chaucer’s biographers to think about the way in which they have manipulated the stories of fictional and historical women as a means to an end. Specifically, she posits that the story of Chaumpaigne has been used as a device to make Chaucer seem more masculine and, perversely, more relatable to his (male) biographers and readers.

Seal examines Cecily Chaumpaigne in the context of the story of Chaucer’s largely fictional “courtly lover.”¹ This figure was popularized by William Godwin’s 1804 Chaucer biography, based on his personal reading of a poem titled *The Court of Love*— a poem which

¹ Seal, Samantha Katz. *Chaucer’s Women: Sex and the Scholarly Imagination*, 334.

has never been conclusively attributed to Chaucer. Throughout the earlier Chaucer scholarship, writers liked to describe his potential encounters with this unknown woman, despite widely acknowledging that she probably did not exist. Even Godwin wrote that her existence was a matter of “conjecture.”² In other words, for these writers and researchers, the question of her existence was entirely irrelevant — it was what she represented for Chaucer’s reputation that mattered. Her existence was meant to popularize Chaucer’s writing, to add depth, drama, and a sense of romance to the poet’s personal life.

Eventually, Seal writes, scholars got tired of the devoted Chaucer, the one who maintained just one lady lover. They began pluralizing the objects of his affection, making his love life ever more salacious: for example, E.W. Edmunds wrote that, “indiscriminate love-making was the commonplace of the decadent chivalry of the time, and Chaucer’s various ‘complaints’ about unknown lady-loves must have had some basis in fact.”³ The courtly lady was phased out in exchange for the imagery of a promiscuous, troublemaking Chaucer; her story abandoned as soon as academics found it unfashionable. Seal writes that, “It is hard to overstate how comprehensively women were marginalized within such a scheme:” despite the issues present in the courtly lady idea, the transition towards a Chaucer that lusted after many objects denied the personhood of any women he may have written about, making them interchangeable and representative.⁴

Eventually, to firmly establish Chaucer’s reputation as a paragon of virile masculinity, the (male) writers turned to his rape accusation. Reading the documents of release, they began to theorize about what this moment in time would have meant for Chaucer. Seal says they “saw the rapist Chaucer as a source of narrative drama, a means of shaping a biographical trajectory.”⁵ For example, John Koch described the incident as a catalyst for Chaucer’s cynical attitude later in life: “He was no longer a devoted believer in women, and may have learned by experience the weaknesses of human nature in general.”⁶ In his scholarship, Koch referred to the incident as a rape — yet he wrote that it was a moment of trauma for the rapist, a forced change in the worldview of the great poet. Other biographers took the quitclaim as an opportunity to assert that Chaucer was still having sex as he got older.⁷

The concern of these scholars in regard to Chaucer’s potential rape of Chaumpaigne was clearly not that he may have committed a sexual act with her, but rather that it could have led to some form of official criminality. Thus, their strategy was to encourage readers to feel excited by the depiction of Chaucer’s sexual activity while discounting Chaumpaigne’s experience just enough to ensure that their great poet did not end up stamped with the label of felony. Seal analyzes some truly disturbing examples of this kind of scholarship, including Howard describing the rape as occurring “in the heat of passion or exasperation” and John

² Seal, 331.

³ Seal, 331.

⁴ Seal, 332.

⁵ Seal, 334.

⁶ Seal, 334.

⁷ Seal, 333.

Gardner's comment that the author could not be blamed for wanting to slip into bed with a "pretty and soft baker's daughter."⁸ These writers, and others, use language fit for a romance novel, not the violent invasion of a woman's body. Seal explains that hidden within this type of writing is a secret (or not-so-secret) feeling of shared masculinity and desire; that the men who describe the incident in this way do so because they wish to "fantasize themselves into the poet's place."⁹ Like the fictional courtly lover, there is no evidence to suggest that Cecily Chaucampaigne was particularly "pretty and soft," but there is no fun for the biographers in picturing it any other way. Here, the possible violent exploitation of a young woman is grossly transformed by writers into a source of male solidarity, a sort of fist bump back through the centuries.

The conclusion of *Chaucer's Women* explains, in more general terms, what Seal believes has happened to the titular women, both fictional and historical, in scholarship on the poet:

The critics have treated women—and, more specifically, female sexuality—as if it were a universal lingua franca designed for the academic mind. Women become the texts through which men translate antiquity, the bodies upon which poet, reader, and critic gather as one.¹⁰

Seal expresses a vague sort of hope that this view could improve, and that the way we as a public read and understand Chaucer could be changed for the better.

Mary C. Flannery seems to agree. In *Good Fun: Cecily Chaucampaigne and the Ethics of Chaucerian Obscenity*, Flannery provides a substantial lens through which to look forward. First, though, she connects Chaucer's humor to his rape case and examines how scholars have viewed the two.

Flannery begins by describing the trivialization of "raptus" by scholars. She notes the use of euphemisms like "escapade" rather than "raptus" or "rape," as well as the common insistence that Chaucampaigne consented to the encounter and regretted it or blackmailed Chaucer afterwards—these she describes as examples of "himpathy", which philosopher Kate Manne defined as "the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence."¹¹

Flannery writes that scholars have behaved this way, purposely cultivating an environment of trust in the possible perpetrator and scorn for the potential victim, because "they want to be free to like Chaucer."¹² Chaucer's reputation in the literary world, she argues, hinges on his likability, his "congeniality."¹³ The possibility of his crime against Cecily Chaucampaigne troubles this image; the idea of having to reconcile the two is disturbing to biographers, who attempt to minimize it in response.

⁸ Gardner and Howard, quoted in Seal, 336-7.

⁹ Seal, 338.

¹⁰ Seal, 339.

¹¹ Flannery, Mary C., *Good Fun: Cecily Chaucampaigne and the Ethics of Chaucerian Obscenity* 362.

¹² Flannery, 365.

¹³ Flannery, 366.

One of the reasons Chaucer maintains this likable image is his humor, which is generally perceived as both good-natured and raunchy enough to appeal to a variety of readers. Flannery explores this humor and the ways in which it engages with his personal life — or, rather, how *we*, the readers, should engage with both of these things. She focuses on the Reeve's Tale, in which main characters John and Aleyn get revenge on a corrupt miller by raping his wife and daughter in the middle of the night. Particularly, Flannery pulls out one line: "Pley, Aleyn."¹⁴ In this tale, the reader is invited to view sexual assault as entertainment, and to enjoy it.

So how are we meant to begin to change our engagement with Chaucer? In the final part of the paper, Flannery looks at Chaucer scholarship through the lens of Sara Ahmed's *Killjoy Manifesto*. The manifesto asks people to think critically about why the media they consume brings them happiness, and to be willing to kill that joy in order to examine it. This is not an argument that no one should read Chaucer ever again, or even that no one can enjoy his stories. Rather, Flannery wants to ensure that the enjoyment of Chaucer does not preclude any constructive conversation about the actions he may have committed or the less savory ideas he may have held.

Susan Morrison's paper *The Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Cecily Chaumpaigne* attempts a unique approach to the case—Morrison seeks a way to foreground Chaumpaigne, rather than Chaucer, in scholarship related to the possible rape. She argues that the treatment of the quitclaim has always privileged Chaucer—not Chaumpaigne, and not the historical document—and that biographers have only used the claim to the extent in which it was convenient for their vision of the life of Chaucer. She describes how Cecily has been denied subjectivity by scholars, who attempt to "impose a single and uniform meaning" onto her.¹⁵

Morrison refers to the scholars' attitudes as a "politics of literary adulation": many who study Chaucer and wish to see him maintain his place in literature refuse to admit we will never know what happened. Instead, they construct elaborate scenarios in which their hero is innocent or, rather, in which he is guilty, but in a way the biographers can identify with. She next taps into the work of Louise O. Fradenburg, who wrote that feminist theory can disrupt the idea of the "other" by acknowledging those to whom the "other" is entirely normal. Fradenburg's work suggests that in regards to the *raptus* of Cecily Chaumpaigne, a female critic would likely find herself identifying with Chaumpaigne, rather than with Chaucer.¹⁶ This would enable a different kind of connection to the past, one that centers the marginalized and mistreated. However, Morrison also notes the ways in which feminist criticism of Chaucer can itself delight in the idea of a rapist author. For example, Carolyn Dinshaw calls the existence of Chaumpaigne's *raptus* record a "very felicitous circumstance," because "it reminds us that there are not only figurative rapes...not only fictional rapes...but there are real rapes as well."¹⁷ For Dinshaw, the rape is useful; despite

¹⁴ Chaucer, quoted in Flannery, 369.

¹⁵ Morrison, Susan, *The Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Cecily Chaumpaigne* 71.

¹⁶ Morrison, 77.

¹⁷ Dinshaw quoted in Morrison, 79.

feminist intentions, the possible violation of a woman's body is still a tool for the interpretation of her rapist's writing. Dinshaw reads and criticizes Chaucer instead of empathizing with Chaumpaigne.

Morrison wants to do the opposite of this: to privilege Chaumpaigne in readings of Chaucer. She suggests reading the poet's work as "a structure paralleling the construction of Cecily undertaken by critics from the legal documents."¹⁸ As an example, she too examines the Reeve's Tale, specifically the character of Malyne. After her rape, Malyne wakes and gives an affectionate goodbye to her assaulter, Aleyn. Her speech in the tale is an example of the "dawn song" genre, which interrupts the fabliau of the rest of the tale. Morrison relates this to the study of Chaucer's life—if biographers "read" Chaucer's life, the Chaumpaigne release is a fundamental disruption of its genre.¹⁹ Just as it is easier for Chaucer and his readers to believe that Malyne was a willing lover, despite the evidence otherwise, it makes biographers feel most comfortable to remove the issue of sexual assault from the case of Cecily Chaumpaigne.

The article now posits that the quitclaim could be read as a form of "life writing," a place in which to locate Chaumpaigne's voice.²⁰ Records of this nature must ascribe to a particular form, and much of what she said may have been lost in translation or in the scribe's copying. But it's still possible to locate a faint impression of Chaumpaigne herself. Within the document, she represents herself to the public; she calls herself the daughter of her own late parents, speaks for herself as an adult, and acts to release Chaucer from acts concerning her rape. She uses the phrase *de raptu meo*, which is different from other records of the time. These are signs of her; they're not much, but they indicate her presence.²¹

Lastly, Morrison engages with the idea of producing an "anti-biography," a work that refuses to consolidate all the information around a figure into one narrative. The work would instead speculate, theorize, and offer multiple interpretations of a life. The way to "deal with" the Chaumpaigne case, Morrison writes, is to create an anti-biography: not of Chaucer, but of Chaumpaigne herself.²²

All three papers come to the conclusion that it does not particularly matter whether Geoffrey Chaucer committed the crime of which Cecily Chaumpaigne accused him. In fact, debate over the validity of the claim is both inconclusive and largely counterproductive. More important to modern-day Chaucer scholarship is a discussion of how *we* have treated Chaumpaigne and her story. The ways in which biographers have attempted to reconcile *raptus* with Chaucer's life—excusing, downplaying, and even romanticizing it—are about a lot more than just one man and his works of literature. They demonstrate how invested (male) scholars are in preserving the reputation of their favorite author, keeping him up on his pedestal, even (and often) at the expense of the voices of women. In the twenty-first

¹⁸ Morrison, 80.

¹⁹ Morrison, 81.

²⁰ Morrison, 81.

²¹ Morrison, 82.

²² Morrison, 83.

century, we are more aware of this propensity than ever, in worlds far beyond the Chaucerian.

Similarly, *this* paper does not engage with an impulse to “cancel” Chaucer or to prosecute him for a crime. Rather, it exists because of a desire to do right by every woman that has been discarded, invalidated, and sidelined for the sake of our favorite works of art. Morrison writes: “in discussions about gender, sexuality or female characters, present or absent, Cecily matters.”²³ There must be a thousand Cecily Chaumpaignes out there. By clearing the space to search for this one, we pave the way to finding the others. One of the most effective interventions into the treatment of women as a “lingua franca” is to individualize them, tell their stories—to refuse to allow them to be co-opted, commodified, or consolidated into a phrase. Another, as Flannery made clear, is to start asking questions: whose bodies are behind this writing? Whose exploitation enabled the creation of one’s favorite works?

In Marion Turner’s Chaucer biography, she commends the woman nearly every other biographer has written off: “Cecily Chaumpaigne sued [Chaucer], in her own name, and it paid off. She didn’t retreat or keep silent out of shame.”²⁴ I want to know more about this Cecily, the woman who, all the way back in the Middle Ages, was strong enough to bring a powerful man to court, to publicly state that he had violated her in some way. It feels unfair that her rape (or potential rape) is all that the world has of her; despite what history can teach, women are much more than the things that are done to them. I want to be able to look up Cecily Chaumpaigne and read about her life outside of the context of Geoffrey Chaucer’s.

It takes work. There’s a reason these women are so difficult to find within the margins of our history; they’ve been hidden. The task that scholars, academics, and readers—Chaucer or otherwise—must take on is to uncover them, to search for their stories beneath those of the men who have subsumed them. We must embrace the discomfort that we feel, and work to understand where it comes from. We must accept the fragmentary and the uncertain, and resist the urge to change the shape of a woman to fit a story. We must do it for Cecily.

²³ Morrison, 80.

²⁴ Turner, quoted in Flannery, 373.

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²⁵ Used only for the epigraph.