

COMMENTARY



THE following essay is the third in a series of commentary columns devoted to the intersection of feminism, history, and literature. Anyone wishing to contribute to the dialogue should contact E. Jane Burns.

SOME THOUGHTS ON HISTORY, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND RAPE



ON MAY 1, 1380, a woman named Cecilia Chaumpaigne signed a document releasing Geoffrey Chaucer from “actions of any kind either concerning my rape or any other matter.”¹ Chaucer’s critics and biographers have quibbled over the meaning of the word *raptus*, but legal historians have concluded that the term most certainly refers to a sexual assault of some kind.² In this very brief essay, I would like to consider the extent to which this archival fragment might help us—as feminists and as medievalists—to think about some of the problems facing those of us interested in forging a methodological alliance between feminism, historicism, and literary criticism.

It has not gone unnoticed that the date of this release intersects with Chaucerian romance in a rather unambiguous way. This bit of historical irony can be said to foreground or unveil the repressed relationship between romance and sexual violence, in that it evokes the courtly fantasy—the “observance of May,” to paraphrase Pandarus—even as it implicates the great English romancer in an act of real violence against a real woman. Leaving aside the question of Chaucer’s reputation for the moment, one of the most salient issues raised by this uncanny document would seem to be the problematic relation between textual fantasy and material reality. This question has a particular urgency for historicist literary critics, concerned with the relation of text to context, and for feminist theorists, for whom textual fantasies of the feminine always have a political resonance. It is also the key issue in the legal question of rape, both medieval and modern. Rape is “difficult to prove” because, legally speaking, it depends so much on attitude—that is, on particular configurations of intention on the rapist’s part and consent, or lack thereof, on the victim’s part. The victim’s story is never enough; unless it is supported by empirical evidence on the body itself, it is dismissed as fantasy.³ Not surprisingly, traditional Chaucerians have followed this model in dismissing the matter. The most common (pre-feminist) assessment of the *raptus* suggests that Cecilia consented, then revoked her consent; lacking the evidence of her body, her (implicit) story is assumed to be false.⁴ Interestingly enough, some scholars have turned to Chaucer’s own *corpus* for the material evidence Cecilia herself cannot provide: the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the General Prologue, the Knight’s Tale, the *Troilus*, and the Second Nun’s Tale of St. Cecilia have all been cited as evidence that Chaucer did have a problematic relation to the question of rape.⁵ As Stephanie Jed, Carolyn Dinshaw, and others have pointed out, however, rape can be a productive metaphor:⁶ not only Chaucer, but also Homer, Ovid, Shakespeare, and Richardson (to name but a few) have asserted a generative relation between sexual violence and writing.⁷ Literary rape thus becomes bound up with the rhetorical and epistemological problem of origins—a fact which the invariably specular nature of the event covers over. In medieval romance (in sub-genres such as the *pastourelle*),⁸ an appeal to specular desire works to eroticize the violence

whereby masculine discursive mastery is predicated upon feminine corporeal lack. The myth or fantasy of male generativity—of patrilineal descent—that underwrites both nationalism and its vernacular literary canons depends upon this violent imposition of sexual difference. Because rape forces passivity upon women, it serves to naturalize sexual difference; as the most irreducible of binary oppositions, sexual difference enables other binaries such as private/public, fantasy/reality, inside/outside. In short, rape, and particularly scopophilic rape, facilitates the creation of “woman” as a literary symptom.

But how might we understand this *raptus* in historical terms? In their biographical introduction to *The Riverside Chaucer*, Martin Crow and Virginia Leland create an interesting juxtaposition of two traumatic events. After discussing the Chaumpaigne incident, they begin a new paragraph by asserting that “the next year was marked by an event of much wider significance than the Chaumpaigne case: the Rising of 1381, the Peasants’ Revolt.”⁹ I don’t want to argue about the relative historical significance of the Chaumpaigne case and the Peasants’ Revolt. I do think that the historical proximity of these two events—one decidedly private and individual, the other public and collective—invites us to think about their relative epistemological value, however. Within medieval studies, recent historicist criticism has to a great extent been characterized by a privileging of the public and collective realm. Some of these studies have, moreover, invoked sexual difference as a means of sustaining the public/private dichotomy. In a recent article on the Miller’s Tale and the Peasants’ Revolt, Lee Patterson sets in opposition to the Miller’s “political threat” the Wife of Bath’s reactionary “internalization of value”: for Patterson, the Wife represents a privatized subjectivity that is the antithesis of class consciousness.¹⁰ Similarly, Stephen Knight’s essay on Chaucer’s *Troilus* focuses on Criseyde as the “essence” of privacy and introspection, while Troilus is characterized as a “private lover but inflexibly public man.”¹¹ Certainly these two Chaucerian texts problematize rather than naturalize the public/private antithesis; what is more, both the Wife of Bath’s Tale and the *Troilus* deal on some level with the issue of sexual violence. Once Criseyde becomes a token in a very public and collective struggle between nations, she is confronted with the possibility of private violation, of falling into the hands of “som wrecche” should she attempt to fulfill Troilus’ romantic fantasy by stealing away from the Greek camp. Victimized by collective and public struggles between men, i.e., by history, she is nonetheless judged by the standards of romance. The Wife of Bath’s Tale, the story of a rapist’s metamorphosis into a courtly lover, seems to me to be about the interiorization and neutralization of political challenge by a discursive system—romance—which is in fact parasitically dependent on sexual violence and voyeurism. The revolutionary spectacle of a rapist tried by a court of women ultimately recedes into the bedroom; the challenge to history is finally undone by the conventions of romance.¹²

While it is true that Chaucer’s female characters are in some sense symptomatic of the tension between the public and private realms in his works, it is no less true that this historicist/critical insistence on a correspondence between femininity and an apolitical private self encrypts the medieval association of textual “privitee” with the secrets of the feminine body. The etymological relation of the term “private” to Latin *privare*—to deprive—re-evokes the Freudian castration scene, the originary myth that links sexual difference to the perception of lack, and establishes the feminine position as *essentially* privative. From this perspective, the division of private from public life along the lines of sexual difference is symptomatic of a male fantasy of feminine interiority, a fantasy that is not unrelated to the very real historical phenomenon of rape.

I realize that I haven't really proposed anything like a "method" for thinking about the relationship between fantasy and reality, literature and history, private and public historical traumas. To the extent that violence against women has informed the way that we as feminists think about history, it seems clear (for me at least) that a feminist historicism will necessarily look very different from earlier non-feminist models, particularly for those of us who hope to resist the epistemological assumptions in empiricist methods of inquiry, methods which, when applied to both rape and history, invariably turn upon the imagined ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, sexuality from violence, desire from power. If there is to be a feminist historicism of this (anti-empirical, or speculative) kind, it seems to me that it must interrogate not just the real events behind the literary fantasy, nor only the fantasmatic nature of the real, but rather the symbiotic relationship that obtains between fantasy and reality, making each both the cause and the effect of the other. The public/private dichotomy must, I think, be similarly dismantled, insofar as it both sustains and is sustained by politically violent fantasies about sexual difference. Perhaps, in effacing these barriers, we may finally begin to think about establishing a dialogue between the private trauma of 1380 and the public upheaval of 1381. Most important, we may perhaps begin to understand what the Cecilia Champaigne affair only suggests: the connection between literary and historical violence against women.

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NOTES

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- 1 Documents and bibliography on the Champaigne case can be found in Chaucer Life-Records, ed. Martin Crow and Clair Olson (Oxford, 1966).
- 2 See, for example, P. R. Watts, "The Strange Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecilia Champaigne," Law Review Quarterly 63 (1947): 491-515, and T. F. T. Plucknett, "Chaucer's Escapade," LRQ 64 (1948): 33-36.
- 3 For a powerful feminist argument on this issue from a legal perspective, see Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge, 1987), 29-41. See also Carolyn Dinshaw's discussion of the Champaigne case in *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Wisconsin, 1989), 10-11.
- 4 D. S. Brewer finds the idea that Chaucer is guilty of rape "unimaginable" (40); John Gardner attempts to interpret *raptus* as "seduction," finding it quite logical that Chaucer occasionally "slipped into bed with a pretty and soft baker's daughter" (253); Donald Howard concedes that there may have been a rape, but wishes "we knew more of Cecily Champain's previous or later life" (320), suggesting that evidence of previous or later "tricks" (319) on Cecily's part might in fact exculpate the poet. See D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (London, 1973); John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York, 1977); Donald Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York, 1987).
- 5 The issue was discussed at a session on "Rape and Chaucer" at MLA 1990 with Christine Rose, Carolyn Dinshaw, Beth Robertson, and Gail Sherman, which I was unfortunately unable to attend.
- 6 Stephanie Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Indiana, 1989); I am grateful to Peter Travis for bringing this rich and important book to my attention during a question-and-answer period at this year's Kalamazoo conference. See also Carolyn Dinshaw's reading of "Chaucers Wordes unto Adam" in *Sexual Poetics*, 3-27.
- 7 See Frances Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* 20 (Fall 1987): 88-112; and, in the same issue, Joel Fineman's essay "Shakespeare's Will: The Temporality of Rape," 25-76.
- 8 For an analysis of rape in the *pastourelle*, see Kathryn Gravdal, "Camouflaging Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in the Medieval Pastourelle," *Romanic Review* 76,

- 4(1985), 361-373. [Ed. note: See also Gravdal's *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (University of Pennsylvania, 1991).]
- 9 L. D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Houghton, 1987) xxii.
- 10 Lee Patterson, "No Man His Reson Herde: Peasant Consciousness, Chaucer's Miller, and the Structure of the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530* (Berkeley, 1990), 113-155.
- 11 Stephen Knight, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1986), 52.
- 12 The rapist's trial by women in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is an especially revolutionary statement when we consider how difficult it was to indict a man on charges of rape during the fourteenth century, and that only a hundred years before, rape had not been considered a felony. For details see Barbara Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities 1300-1348* (Harvard, 1979), 104-110.

FORUM: ON COLLABORATION IN FEMINIST MEDIEVAL SCHOLARSHIP



HISTORY, LITERATURE, AND MEDIEVAL WOMEN'S MEDICINE



IN READING the discussions between historians and literary scholars in past issues of the *MFN*, and in participating in an interdisciplinary feminist study group over the past several years, I have been both fascinated and frustrated by the dynamic interactions between medieval historians and literary scholars. I have been fascinated because I feel strongly that medical literature needs to be assessed critically as constructed texts reflecting many of the same constraints and possibilities for manipulation of genre, rhetoric, and language that characterize other kinds of texts; but as of yet, I have gotten little guidance from literary scholars on how to engage in such analysis, since most work has concentrated on belletristic or devotional texts, rather than technical prose (what the Germans neatly call *Fachliteratur* or *Fachprosa*).

The texts I work with beg for a historical analysis that pays attention to the texts as *texts*. I am currently completing an edition, translation, and historical commentary of the three Latin gynecological and cosmetic treatises attributed to or called "Trotula." (These have no direct relation to the authentic *Practica* of the woman healer Trota.) The first of these, the *Trotula major*, has in its preface a claim that the author wrote the treatise because women were too ashamed to bare their ills to a male physician. Although this is not a direct statement of intended audience, it does imply that the author intended that the text be used by women.

The normal historian's response is to say "Whoopee!" (or something to that effect): here we have a text meant for women and we can use it to see how women, reacting against male interference and taking control of their own bodies, conceived of and treated their medical conditions in the Middle Ages. The problem (and it is a sobering one) is that this same theme of women's use is rehearsed again and again in medieval gynecological texts, even when we know that men were the principal readers. This repetition of the theme of shame need not invalidate the sincere intentions of any specific author or translator, but it does force us to acknowledge that the preface to the *Trotula major* and others like it are perhaps as tradition-bound as the rest of the medical descriptions and remedies that make up the body of the text.