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Female Consent and Affective Resistance in Romance: Medieval Pedagogy and #MeToo

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Abstract

This essay offers several pedagogical strategies for teaching medieval romance in the time of #MeToo. Drawing on the robust feminist tradition that has focused on women's compromised consent in romance narratives, as well as on the insights of trauma-sensitive pedagogy, we offer a range of approaches for addressing literary representations of sexual violence in the classroom, with a focus on Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Franklin's Tale*, on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and on romances and *novelle* within larger story collections by John Gower, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Marguerite de Navarre. These teaching approaches seek to position students as critical co-investigators and to open up ways in which sexual and social consent participate in the formation of gendered subjects. We aim to problematize the power hierarchies dramatized in medieval romance texts, while also encouraging students to attend to women's resistance and their survival.

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Introduction

At a time when #MeToo has heightened our sense of collective responsibility for seeing and changing the inequitable social and political structures that tolerate, facilitate, and perpetuate the violation of sexual consent, we have found medieval romances to be an effective means for exploring women's agency and sexual consent in the classroom. In these medieval narratives, we find women voicing their desires for futures independent of sexual relationships with men, seeking to adhere to their own articulations of truth and honorable renown, and forming female alliances to create survival strategies as well as to remedy injustice in their social and political communities (Edwards 107-36; C. Harris 2017; Heng 1996; Kaufman; Lipton). These medieval narratives depicting the overlapping roles of social, political, and sexual assent are especially salient in the era of #MeToo, as survivors of sexual violence voice their stories to promote healing and systemic change (Alcoff; Burke; McCauley, Campbell, Buchanan, and Moylan). We have found that by placing medieval romances—narratives that already benefit from a robust feminist analysis—in conversation with #MeToo, we can further two pedagogical goals. First, our teaching strategies allow students to identify the wide range of roles women play in medieval romances and to analyze their strategies of subject articulation and bodily protection.[1] Second, by helping students to recognize parallels between then and now, we provide them with opportunities to attend to women's resistance and survival.

We contend that today's students are well positioned to be "critical co-investigators" in exegesis that centers on questions of female consent and agency (Friere 81). Students who have experienced Me Too's activist advocacy (Burke) as part of their developmental years are primed to assess power imbalances in sexual relationships, to identify affirmative consent and its absence, and to witness the force of individual and collective voices in shaping narratives, whether those narratives privilege survivors or perpetrators of sexual violence (Linder).[2] For teachers of medieval romance, this generation of college students brings insights into the classroom that help us analyze the ways sexual violence and subject formation operate specifically in romance narratives, as well as more broadly in literature and culture.

The pedagogical strategies below include examples of reading approaches, discussion prompts, assignments, and critical contexts centered on Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and *Franklin's Tale*, on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, and on individual romances and *novelle* within larger story collections by John Gower, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Marguerite de Navarre. These teaching approaches aim to position students as critical co-investigators and to open up the ways sexual and social consent help form gendered subjects. The selected texts exemplify different aspects of sexual violence (including individual wrongdoing and rape culture), and they present different strategies for representing women's consent or non-consent (including resistance to and survival of sexual violence), as well as multiple ways to articulate grief and suffering (whether privately or more

[1] Our study seeks to add to pedagogy written and compiled prior to the rise of #MeToo on teaching rape and sexual assault in medieval literature, including Alison Gulley's important 2018 edited collection.

[2] Tarana Burke launched The "me too." Movement™ in 2006, and, in October 2017, Alyssa Milano's #MeToo hashtag brought international publicity to a movement designed to promote healing in survivors of sexual violence and to actively transform systems of oppression that facilitate sexual violence, especially violence towards "young people, queer, trans, the disabled, Black women and girls, and all communities of color" (Burke). See also Rodino-Colocino.

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publicly). We have organized our presentation so that the strategies and narratives can be adopted individually or taken *in toto* as a unit exploring a range of depictions of and responses to sexual violence in medieval romances. Our approaches encourage students to take seriously women's resistance, even if the texts validate male agency. Additionally, by looking beyond gendered interpersonal sexual violence to examine questions of individual will versus the grander designs of providence or destiny, this methodology teaches students to recognize the various narrative strategies that articulate women's agency and consent. In this way, we seek to empower students in this #MeToo era to use and develop their awareness of consent, voice, and power dynamics. This awareness, in turn, helps students deepen their critical readings of medieval texts, historicize cultures of sexual violence, create anti-rape strategies, and explore the power of narrative to articulate more equitable sexual subjects.

***The Canterbury Tales*: Female consent within the "compaignye of man"**

We set the stage for looking at questions of female consent with Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and its opening fantasy of social consent: the pilgrims agree to undertake their Canterbury pilgrimage and to participate in Harry Bailey's storytelling contest as a fellowship. This associative collectivity, redolent of estates satire and the mercantile register of guild culture, mobilizes an idealized political language of political and societal accord (Somerset; Wallace 1997; Strohm 1992). The social coherence of Chaucer's *compaignye* is undermined not only by the tension between the ideal of fellowship and the social contest dramatized by combative narrative "quitting" (Turner 136), but also within the collection's individual tales, where the ideal of social consent contrasts with narrative structures that deny women's consent. Told both in the tragic mode and in the spirit of "pley" (Rose)—a spirit that consolidates "felawe masculinity" (C. Harris 2018, 26-66) or "cherl masculinity" (Crocker)—the pilgrims' narratives of consent are profoundly implicated by issues of political sovereignty, social accord, gendered speech, and marital relations.

After this brief look at the tale-telling contract, we begin with an example of women denied consent: *The Knight's Tale*. Opening with Theseus's conquest of "al the regne of Femenye" (I. 866), his marriage to Ypolita, and his journey to bring her and her sister Emelye "hoom with hym in his countree" (869), Chaucer's compressed retelling of Boccaccio's *Teseida* imagines Theseus's *raptus* of Ypolita as restoring civic order (Patterson 165-230). Pointing students to the ways Chaucer's narrative elisions "silence" the "unassimilable Hippolita" (Wallace, 104-7), we prompt them to consider how the narrator silences Emelye's voice, too. Whether we consider the marriage of Theseus and Ypolita that opens the tale or the marriage of Palamon and Emelye that concludes the tale, consent and resistance are subsumed into masculine hierarchy (Fowler; Crane 80; Somerset 35-6).

To help the class consider the limitations on Emelye's consent, we ask students to prepare a close-reading of one of the three temple scenes, noting especially how each supplicant's prayers mirror the temple's ekphrasis: the fraught depiction of violence in the Temple of Mars, the many unhappy endings in the Temple of Venus, and the coerced consent mandated in the Temple of Diana. In ways they do not understand, the two knights are granted their wishes. Emelye's wish, however, is refused by Diana, and the maiden is compelled to marry the victor of the tournament (Crane 162, 170-85). Constrained between epithalamial bookends, Emelye is trapped within the

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tropes of courtly convention and fixed as the object of a masculine gaze. Emelye's carceral garden entraps her not only within the bounds of a foreign realm and patriarchal system but also within the narrative that renders her passive and largely silent. At the tale's conclusion, she is absorbed entirely into the celebrated (but fraught) Athenian order through marital union with Palamon. Despite Theseus' rhetorical efforts to bend the audience's desire for closure to his own will (3067-74), the Chaucerian rendering of the *Teseida* lays bare for us the ideological tensions between benevolent order and authoritarian oppression.

Because students frequently respond to the *Knight's Tale* by identifying how the knights' desire for Emelye limits her own powers of assertion, we invite students to "rewrite" one of the *Canterbury Tales* (or the Prologue) to reflect contemporary concerns. (Along with their "new" Canterbury Tale, students submit an essay explaining their engagement with Chaucer's work and their interventions into its themes, prosody, figurative language, and formal structures.) Among many insightful and provocative projects, students have addressed the power dynamics of violence or gendered violence in our own culture when they rewrite the *Knight's Tale*. In the Fall of 2017, when the sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein were a daily part of the American news cycle, students staged reparative readings of the *Knight's Tale,* giving Emelye both voice and volition. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of students in that class responded to the burgeoning #MeToo movement by rewriting either the fate of Emelye in the *Knight's Tale* or the sexual politics of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* to foreground issues of consent.[3]

Whereas the epic-historical *Knight's Tale* illustrates the ways political accord and imperial hegemony overwhelm and silence female consent, *The Franklin's Tale* allows us to investigate how conflicting demands upon the chivalric subject subordinate female consent. When teaching the *Franklin's Tale*, we explore Dorigen's subjectivity and sexual agency by prompting students to map out the dynamics of consent between Arveragus and Dorigen and then between Dorigen and Aurelius. From the beginning, the tale emphasizes the consensual nature of Averagus and Dorigen's marriage: "That pryvely she fil of his accord / To take hym for hir housbande and hir lord" (V. 741-2) and, in turn, "Of his free wyl he swoor hire as a knight / That nevere in al his lyf he, day ne nyght, / Ne should upon hym take no maistrie / Agayn hir wyl…" (745-8). This scene of consent contrasts with the desperate, unrequited love of Aurelius, whose futile lyrics expose the limits of courtly rhetoric and Ovidian *ars amatoria* (Bennett). Dorigen clearly sees any amatory union with Aurelius as both infidelity and defilement, as her list of women who choose suicide over sexual violation suggests. While she is adamant that "Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf / In word ne work" (984-5), her "rash oath" compromises her sexual agency. While she has pledged her word, she has done so without *intending* to, complicating the tale's dialectic of language, meaning, and *entente*.[4]

To work out the implications of language, meaning, and *entente*, we first ask students to identify the ways in which Dorigen's oath to be Aurelius's love is qualified in style and substance. It is delivered, following her initial rejection of his advances, "in pley" (988), and it is based on the "inpossible" (1009) condition that he remove the rocks along Brittany's coast. Although Dorigen

[3] Elsewhere, we have discussed pedagogical approaches to the *Wife of Bath's Tale* in light of #MeToo (Torres and McNamara 2021).

[4] The same tensions are also foregrounded in the frame narrative and other tales. They are likewise negotiated in medieval English jurisprudence (Green 293-335; Caldwell).

clearly does not intend to keep her promise, Aurelius does not hear her words in that way, resorting first to the gods and then to an illusionist to force Dorigen to comply with her spoken "trouthe" (998). Although Dorigen's intent is obscured by the tale's male actors, the narrative nonetheless depicts her as a feeling subject, one whose affective resistance ultimately helps secure her sexual integrity and her life.

As students approach the tale's portrayal of Dorigen's affective subjectivity and its effects in the text, we ask them to think about how the revelation of women's stories of sexual violence through #MeToo amplifies the subjectivity of those women, even as it points to perpetrators' denial of or ambivalence toward the women's sexual agency. To help outline students' understanding of subjectivity and sexual agency, we provide Jennifer Hirsch and Shamus Kahn's description of "sexual citizenship": "the acknowledgement of one's own right to sexual self-determination and, importantly, recogniz[ing] the equivalent right in others. … [It is] a socially produced sense of enfranchisement and right to sexual agency" (xvi). Hirsch and Kahn advocate for the teaching of sexual citizenship at home, in schools, and on college campuses as part of a larger scheme for reducing sexual violence. Their twenty-first-century, ethnographic definition opens up a comparative approach for thinking about the implications of Dorigen's articulation in her complaint to Fortune as a feeling subject among a larger group of women. Dorigen's lament at the prospect of fulfilling her playful oath invokes the contested consent of many women who, like her, faced an impossible decision between rape or death, often by suicide (1355-456). We ask students how Dorigen's #MeToo-like thread of witnesses points readers to these women's subjectivity and sexual agency, even as it frames an untenable dichotomy between shame and death. Although students notice that the lament doesn't directly prevent her rape, they recognize that it amplifies Dorigen's great distress over upholding her "trouthe" and preserving her body, a distress that not only is later recognized by Aurelius but also plays a key role in his decision to release her from her bond. Through both Dorigen's presentation as a feeling subject and Auelius's recognition of her as such, her "trouthe," body, and life survive unharmed. Although the lives of the women in Dorigen's lament are not recovered, their witness to contested sexual consent is preserved in her cry.

We then turn to how the tale finally transforms this issue of Dorigen's coerced will into an aspirational contest of masculine virtue, thereby shifting focus from the gendered quality of liberality (emphasized in the tale's Boccaccian source) to the broader concept of *gentilesse* (echoing the loathly lady's pedagogy in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*) (Blamires). Aurelius—would-be lover, would-be rapist—becomes a more *troth*-ful chivalric subject as he turns from his "cherlyysh wrecchednesse" (1522) to magnanimous comportment. Aurelius's "greet compassion" (1515) for Dorigen and her husband allows Aurelius to see his attempts for what they are: "lust" (1522), coercion, and unknightly behaviour (1523-24). The illusionist, in turn, is able to assert his own *gentilesse*, "But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede / As wel as any of yow, it is no drede!" (1611-12). Dorigen, whose affections and body are the "riches" that stand to circulate among men, is saved from having to submit to the squire's lust to satisfy her husband's honor. Even as it echoes the Wife of Bath's promotion of a feminine "policy of bodily largess" that "[draws] upon the mixed ethical and moral discourses of liberality" (Blamires 138), the tale's competitive male economy of liberality overshadows Dorigen's portrayal as a feeling subject whose consent is contested.

When teaching the *Franklin's Tale*, we take our cue from the story's own *demande d'amour* to consider Dorigen's subjectivity and sexual agency in the context of *fredom*. Indeed, the closing couplet locates *fredom*, or liberality, as a site of discursive contest: "Lordynges, this question, thane wol I aske now, / Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (1621-22). We divide students into four groups and assign each group one of the tale's four characters and the task of arguing, using textual evidence, that their character is the "moost fre." At the end of the presentations, we pass out a "*Fredom* Ballot" and ask students to vote on who represents the most convincing embodiment of *fredom* in the tale—thus modelling how medieval narratives invite readerly or audience disputation. The competition also provides the opportunity for students to reflect on the place of Dorigen among the candidates for most generous, and thereby explore "how the conflicted ideal of generosity drove women, amidst dramatic narratives of trust and betrayal" (Blamires 151). Dorigen's constrained consent in her (averted) relations with Aurelius intersects with the tale's broader themes of truth, intent, mastery, liberality, and *gentilesse*—all of which are echoed in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, another tale that troubles over the danger of what happens when consent is not considered, when *gentilesse* is not enacted, and when empathy is not practiced.

Women's will and the making of honorable men in *Le Morte Darthur*

In teaching Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, our focus turns to helping students discern the problematic sexual ethics operating systematically in the text. As Amy Vines points out for Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the Old French continuation of *Perceval*, sexual violence is a part of the originary stories for some knights who go on to achieve chivalric development, suggesting "the possibility that a fundamental aspect of establishing chivalric identity is male sexual aggression against women" (Vines 174). We examine consent, power, and female agency in the origin stories of King Arthur and Sir Torre (Malory 1-6, 63-65), both of which involve rape, building up to an investigation of the Pentecost Oath of Knighthood (Malory 77) and its implications for chivalric subjectivity, sexual violence, and the social effects of women's wills.

We start by investigating with the class how the potential for male sexual violence is integral to the *Morte*: the threat of rape and the purported primacy of protecting (noble)women are cornerstones of the construction of male subjectivity, chivalric ethics, and broader social order (Gravdal; Hildebrand; Saunders 187-264; Vines). We prompt students to recognize that problematic sexual ethics and the threat of rape operate beyond characterizing individual villains, and we equip students to interpret the ways in which rape functions systemically in the text. We point out how women act in ways integral to the text, not only as part of Malory's construction of chivalric narrative and its subjects (Armstrong; Heng 1996; Hodges; Jesmok; Kaufman; Larrington) but as agents for social change to benefit women (Kaufman). Next, in thinking about the *Morte* in relation to #MeToo, our approach encourages students to question the ways that #MeToo has sometimes focused on the punishment of individual perpetrators (Walsh) and to re-center the ethos of The "me too." Movement, which insists upon "accountability on the part of perpetrators, along with the implementation of strategies to sustain long-term, systemic change" (Burke). By placing the *Morte* and The "me too." Movement in conversation with one another, students are prepared to consider the systemic implications of individual acts of sexual violence.

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We orient students to potential interpretations of female agency and the social structures that operate dynamically throughout the text with a close reading of the *Morte*'s opening episode that focuses on intertwined sexual and social consent (Kaufman). We work with students to identify how contested sexual consent, unequal power dynamics, and transactions to traffic women between men are built into Arthur's origin story. We start by asking students to identify the relative power of King Uther Pendragon compared with his guests, the Duke of Tintagel and his wife Igrayne, as Uther and the Duke iron out a political accord. When Igrayne counsels her husband that they leave because she "wold not assente" to having sex with Uther and won't be so "dishonoured," Uther is "wonderly wrothe" (Malory 3) and wages war on the Duke. Here we see the first example of "a strong sense of emotional evaluation in Malory," including a prioritization of major characters' emotions (Lynch 182). Uther's sickness "for pure angre and for grete love of fayre Igrayne" (Malory 4), coupled with Arthur's destined conception, takes precedence over Igrayne's will. Igrayne is thus trafficked into the arms of a disguised Uther via Merlin, who makes a deal with the king to receive the child who will be conceived. In asking students to identify how this bed trick is rape, students consider Igrayne's initial non-consent, her ignorance of Uther's identity, and the spectre of retrospective consent that is raised when Igrayne learns of her husband's death: she "merveilled who that myghte be that laye with her in lykenes of her lord" and "mourned pryvely and held hir pees" (5). The text registers neither her assent nor its absence as Igrayne and Uther are hastily wed in a marital accord that echoes the earlier political accord between Uther and the Duke. Students identify how Igrayne's will is variously articulated and consider how her feminine agency exists alongside Uther's desires, Merlin's plan, and Arthur's prophesied conception. Although the men's plots take precedence over Igrayne's consent, the text nonetheless registers her as an active subject—one of many ways in which the *Morte* plays out a range of feminine subtexts (Heng 1996). This episode depicting Igrayne's contested will and its relationship to broader social alliances and prophesied destiny becomes particularly salient as students grapple with the overarching teleology of Malory's tragic romance, where free will and destiny—as well as individual and collective action—turn in complex ways toward the inevitable breakdown of Arthur's celebrated fellowship.

Arthur's origin story primes students to consider the contested consent in the origin story of Sir Torre, positioned at the start of Arthur and Guinevere's wedding festivities and prior to Malory's famous Pentecost Oath of Knighthood (Malory 77). This episode presents students with further opportunities to consider how social power and gender operate in relation to sexual consent in the text. After Arthur has knighted Sir Torre at the request of his poor, cowherd father, Aryes, Merlin reveals to the court that Torre is in fact King Pellinor's son. The unnamed wife of Aryes, who was then an unmarried milkmaid, confirms that as she was milking her cows, "a sterne knyght…half be force…had my maydynhode" (65). With a nod to Malory's accretive writing practices and the ubiquity of the threat of rape across genres, we provide students with Carissa Harris' reading of *Hey troly loly lo*, an early sixteenth-century English pastourelle featuring a milkmaid threatened with rape (Harris 2018, 109-11). The lyric narrates a man propositioning a young, single, peasant milkmaid, the woman repeatedly refusing his sexual advances until he finally warns her to beware next time she milks her cow. We use Harris' intersectional analysis of the pastourelle to encourage students to explore how gender and class inform the *Morte*'s portrayal of the milkmaid's rape. When students compare this rape with the *Morte*'s depictions of sexual violence involving noble women, the

difference is stark. There is no public outcry, no nobleman taking her as his wife, no knight to defend or avenge her; instead, she gives birth to Torre, who Merlin says will "preve a noble knyght of proues as few lyvynge" (Malory 73; Saunders 241-43). Other romances also feature knights conceived by rape who go on to achieve chivalric advancement and acceptance into familial-social fellowship. Some narratives, like *Sir Degaré*, are less ambivalent about women's consent; there the mother's demonic rape is clearly framed as violent and non-consensual (*Sir Degaré* 107-13). The potential condemnable connotations of the milkmaid's rape in the *Morte*, however, are glossed over, subsumed by Torre as the noble male chivalric subject who not only advances in Arthur's court but also participates in the narrative momentum leading up to the Pentecost Oath as the guiding ideal of Arthurian knighthood and fellowship.

The proximity of Torre's conception story to the Pentecost Oath facilitates students' exploration of how desire, power, and consent animate individual episodes and broader designs of feminine agency and Arthurian fellowship. We ask students to consider multiple interpretive possibilities of women's agency in relation to the Oath and ultimately encourage them to connect the sexual ethics implicated in the Oath to their own cultural moment. The Oath can be seen to prescribe a naturalization of women as sexually and physically vulnerable by centralizing the protection of "ladyes, damesels, and jantilwomen and wydowes" and decreeing capital punishment for knights who "enforce" (rape) such women (Malory 77). We ask how the Oath's claims to protect women are complicated by the revelation of such narrative elements as Pellinor's rape of the milkmaid, Torre's promise as a knight, and Gawain's and Pellinor's ill-advised decisions that result in women's deaths.[5] Students consider Catherine Batt's interpretation of how the Oath's echoes of judicial language on rape socially define women "as physically and sexually vulnerable, even as they proclaim her 'rights'" (85). After discussing Batt's claim, we invite students to break into groups to brainstorm and then share with the class echoes of this definition of women—as physically and sexually vulnerable even while proclaiming women's rights—in the present. Students may list experiences of sexual education in school, or familiar strategies for rape prevention, noting how such strategies position women and men in terms of physical and sexual vulnerability and aggression. Here we introduce Sharon Marcus's work to challenge students to consider how "the violence of rape is enabled by narratives, complexes and institutions which derive their strength not from outright, immutable, unbeatable force but rather from their power to structure our lives as imposing cultural scripts" (388-89).

Finally, we elucidate the feminine subtexts of the narrative leading up to the Oath, considering with Kaufman the ways in which the women in these episodes shape the chivalric ideals outlined in the Oath and thus activate positive social changes for women (174-76). Kaufman doesn't directly mention Torre's mother, the milkmaid, but we ask students how this victim-survivor's contested sexual consent, ignored by those at the Arthurian court who first hear her account, nonetheless figures into the Pentecost Oath's protections for women. In this way, we suggest that it might be possible to imagine women in the *Morte* as agents activating social change for women—as medieval

[5] Carissa M. Harris also discusses the Pentecost Oath and its relationship to Lancelot "serving and protecting" women who are raped and threatened by the rapist knight, Sir Peris de Forest Savage, whom Lancelot kills in the *Morte*. We are grateful to Harris for providing us with a copy of her talk, "Service and Protection: Medieval Knights, the Police, and Sexual Violence."

literary forebears of #MeToo. Returning, then, to Marcus's claim about sexual violence being enabled by narratives and institutions that have the power to structure our lives as cultural scripts, we ask students how narratives—in the *Morte* and in their immediate culture—would need to change to create a more just sexual ethic. Students are invited in small groups to rewrite the Pentecost Oath in ways that reflect more ethical sexual dynamics. By moving from individual acts of sexual violence to the systems and scripts that support such violence, we equip students to recognize the patterns and effects of literary narrative as well as the stakes of such narratives in their own lives and their broader culture. Importantly, through this re-writing exercise, we posit that the scripts of rape are, as Marcus argues, "subject to change" (389).

Female Vocality and Anti-Rape Resistance

While our readings above focus on moments when the female voice is subject to erasure and silencing, this marginalization of female agency is not ubiquitous in romance or other medieval genres. Across the literary spectrum, we find female subjects averting the threat of sexual violence in acts of resistance that dramatize their intelligence, cleverness, or virtue. Hagiography frequently relates stories of chaste virgins who, when faced with forced marriage or non-consensual sex, exhibit a miraculous and even muscular capacity to resist bodily harm. Romance, too, which prioritizes mutual consent to accommodate cultural systems of *fin' amor* and aristocratic erotic desire, features women who are at once vulnerable to masculine assault and protected by magic, providence, love, or goodwill. When teaching chivalric narratives and *novelle*, we stress the range of narrative possibilities that the romance mode allows for resistance to sexual coercion.

Crucially, the traffic in women that pervades romance often features women as exchangeable gifts or merchandise, an objectification that potentially undermines representations of female consent. The spatial movement of women in romance suggests the circulation of women in a marriage market conceived in terms of both patriarchal capital and mercantile value. Many romances include a high-born but socially disenfranchised lady cast out to sea or sent beyond the boundaries of court on a perilous journey (Cooper 106-136). In some cases, such as in *Floris and Blancheflour* and *Apollonius of Tyre*, the lady is also enslaved, and we find that these texts offer an opportunity to discuss the erotic economies of romance and the circulation of women within a feudal gift economy or courtly society. When teaching *Floris and Blancheflour*, we encourage students to attend to the romance's mercantile themes, which are intimately interwoven with its erotic and familial plots. Floris pursues his love while disguised as a merchant, referring to Blancheflour twice as "mi marchaudise" (483-84; 563-64); Blacheflour is sold for a jeweled cup that depicts "How Paryse ledde away the queene" (168), overlaying this mercantile exchange with the threat of abduction (Kooper 6-7; Kelly). The specter of Mediterranean enslavement also haunts Thaise in *Apollonius of Tyre*, included in John Gower's *Confessio amantis* as a didactic warning against incest. As a sea-born princess storm-tossed by Fortune, Thaise preserves herself through her musical and discursive abilities. After being sold to a bordello master and refusing to submit to prostitution, she convinces the master, who had resolved to "bereve" her of her maidenhead "with strengthe agein hire leve" (1439-40), to allow her to labor in teaching instead, to which he agreed "for the lucre" (1479). Though the Latin marginalia of the text indicates that Thaise's preservation from rape in the bordello is a sign of grace—"by the intervening grace of God no one was able to violate her virginity" (p. 339)—the narrative

emphasizes the role played by Thaise's cleverness and willingness to save herself. Because she eventually reunites with her father, students recognize how her efforts negate her status as a good to be bought and sold.

Students find a much different form of resistance in the story of Alatiel, the seventh tale told on the second day in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Also an account of a princess's maritime adventures, this *novella* frames the princess's several sexual encounters with strategies that suspend her agency. To help student recognize these strategies, we introduce the concept of survival discourse (Edwards 2-3; Alcoff and Gray). Thus, when Panfilo proposes to "tell you a story about a Saracen girl's ill-starred beauty, which in the space of four years caused her to be newly married on nine separate occasions" (126), students begin to see the cultural force of Alatiel's background, especially when Panfilo attributes her misfortunes to her physical beauty, which no man could resist taking by subterfuge or force. Using an intersectional lens that draws on critical race feminism and acknowledges the importance of cultural, racial, and economic difference in the production of "sexual citizenship" (Hirsch and Khan), as well as the experience of "minoritized" students in accounts of campus sexual assault (J. Harris), we invite students to reflect on what Alatiel's linguistic and cultural difference reveals about the limitations and possibilities of romance as a narrative genre that investigates economies of desire and power within courtly communities. Exploring such questions also allows us to introduce students to Geraldine Heng's important work on the cultural constructions of race and human difference in the Middle Ages (2018).

We further investigate these intersectionalities by inviting students to consider their reading of Alatiel's journey as mapping an itinerary of medieval Mediterranean trade. After reading Sharon Kinoshita and Jason Jacobs's essay, "Ports of Call: Boccaccio's Alatiel in the Medieval Mediterranean," students see how the *novella* emphasizes her "thing-ness" (176). Her beauty becomes a trade commodity, a reading reinforced by the attitudes of her various lovers: two "agreed to make the lady's conquest a mutual affair, as though love were capable of being shared out like merchandise or profits" (132), and another bequeaths Alatiel to his close friend, a Cypriot merchant. At this point, we ask whether medieval readers might consider the heroine's travails as redolent of *fabliaux* and consider the degree to which language barriers offer a narrative means of exploring women's vocality or silence in romance. By considering questions of intersectionality—how Alatiel's sexual subjectivities (mediated through linguistic difference and narratorial commentary), her survival of multiple fraught sexual encounters, and the restoration of her previous social status align with her religious identity in a multicultural and multi-confessional Mediterranean space—students are prepared to reconsider the prepackaged interpretation Panfilo provides his audience.

At this point, we ask students to set aside Panfilo's remarks and to attend to Alatiel's voiced and unvoiced statements, as the suspension of her agency takes on different forms in the text. Before her first sexual encounter, Alatiel pledges to remain chaste. Her host/captor attempts to woo her using refined speech (which she can't understand) and amorous gestures (which she can); nevertheless, she recognizes that, "From the way Pericone was behaving, she knew that sooner or later, whether she liked it or not, she would be compelled to let him have his way with her" (129). She recognizes—as the narrator admits—that flattery exists on a continuum of force that ends in physical violence: Pericone held "brute strength in reserve as a last resort" (129-30) and silenced her resistance. Though he knows her religion proscribes alcohol, he plies her with drink at a banquet,

walks her to her room, gets into bed with her, "and taking her into his arms without meeting any resistance on her part [*senza alcuna contradizione di lei* (p. 135, l. 32)], he began making amorous sport with her" (130). In this layered and complicated scene, disturbingly familiar to contemporary readers as a date-rape scenario, the assailant's well-planned assault results, according to the narrator, in Alatiel's intensified desire for sex, and she herself becomes the initiator of later encounters, which she can only do through gestural language.

Students are often startled at the narrative strategies of the tale. The text simultaneously delights in Alatiel's newfound "pleasures" (which it assures us are mutual) and reminds us that Alatiel has no language either to assent or to refuse sex except the language of her body. Students want to know why is there no discussion of trauma, no recognition of consent. The male narrator might be obscuring Alatiel's suffering to focus on male desire, to dramatize her own voiceless state (silenced without the interventions of a translator), or even to emphasize the pragmatic tactics of her survival. The text even goes so far as to locate sexual experience, in which consent is coerced, gestural, or ambiguous, as a site of consolation, an effort "to derive pleasure from the fate to which Fortune had consigned her" (139). This use of consolation is even more problematic considering the euphemistic use of the term elsewhere in the tale and the earlier claims of the Boccaccian frame-narrator that narrative itself is consoling for those who are suffering from lovesickness (1-3). When teaching the story of Alatiel, we bring in Carissa Harris' work on the "medieval histories of intoxication and consent" to give historical context to the rape tactics used by Pericone (2019). We also introduce Suzanne Edwards' *Afterlives of Rape* to interrogate the narrative's simultaneous focus on Alatiel's chaste resistance (premised upon, it would seem, her lack of sexual experience) to Pericone and its insistence upon her capacity to find sexual pleasure, and sometimes consolation, in these coercive situations and relationships. Consent is conspicuously marginalized as a narrative concern—in large part due to linguistic difference or even rape culture's ethos of inevitability—in favor of issues of affective comfort, survival, and resilience.

The tale, which emphasizes the preservation of Alatiel's reputation, ultimately features virginity as a performance category. She goes on to marry the King of Algarve, who has no knowledge of Alatiel's past experiences: "And so, despite the fact that eight separate men had made love to her on thousands of different occasions, she entered his bed as a virgin and convinced him that it was really so" (147). In the end, her silence (which she complains rendered her a "deaf-mute" in foreign lands [140]), helps preserve her reputation—the true source of her courtly value. The *Decameron*-narrator focuses on the reactions of the female auditors:

> The ladies heaved many a sigh over the fair lady's several adventures: but who knows what their motives may have been? Perhaps some of them were sighing, not so much because they felt sorry for Alatiel, but because they longed to be married no less often than she was. (148)

At best, these speculations about female affect acknowledge women's status as desiring subjects, but, at worst, they rehearse male conjectures about women's supposed rape fantasies and misogynist conventions about female sexual liberality. Characteristically for the *Decameron*, the text never settles on one particular interpretive stance, an aporia that encourages student consideration.

We often teach the *Decameron* alongside Marguerite of Navarre's sixteenth-century *Heptaméron*, which draws on Boccaccio's frame-story model to focus on gender relations and issues of rape culture (14-17; Cholakian; Frelick). The tenth story of the first day tells of Lady Floride and her admirer Amadour, who, frustrated in his attempts to woo her, attempts to rape her: pretending to be ill, he summons her to her bedside and embraces her, and "began to pursue the path that leads to the forbidden goal of a lady's honour" (140). Amador's advances reveal the violent undercurrent of his courtly discourse: "He struggled with all the strength in his body to have his way" (141). Floride, only partially willing to admit his depravity, wants instead to believe that he is "out of his mind" and calls out to a man nearby who will interrupt the attempted rape (141); later in the story, he makes another unsuccessful attempt to assault Floride. The storytellers' dialogue in the frame-narrative reveals a gendered response to this tale: while the ladies laud Floride's "virtuous resistance" (153), the character Hircan advocates unapologetically for male aggression when met with female resistance (153), upholding and naturalizing Amadour's actions. To help students perceive how the linguistic registers of rape are class-dependent, we teach this story alongside the brief story (found in the *Heptaméron*'s first day) in which two friars engage a ferry, and, after making "amatory proposals" to the ferrywoman, "decided to rape her" (98). She hoodwinks the friars by abandoning them on separate islands, and then fetches her husband and "officers of the law" to apprehend the friars. The outraged community response ensures that their crimes will be fully punished. Such moments can be read in the classroom as disrupting long-standing scripts that identify women as ontologically and "inherently rapable," as inevitable victims (Marcus 387). The wit and character of the ferrywoman provoke a discussion among the *devisants* about whether virtue in the poor or the rich is more commendable. Encouraging students to view such narratives of violence and resistance as part of a larger structure of "heteroglossia" (Frelick) and interpretive struggle allows them to develop a critical perspective that balances local, historicized readings of the narratives with larger theoretical questions posed by the *Heptaméron* about gender, power, and the ethical dimensions of writing.

Conclusion

Witnesses to and survivors of sexual violence pervade medieval romance, articulating individual women's agency, shaping broader narrative designs, and opening up possibilities for change to systemic sexual violence. Emelye voices her non-consent privately to Diana and is subsumed into the socio-imperial and cosmic order of the *Knight's Tale*, and the larger forces of destiny and narrative inevitability in the *Morte*'s Arthurian legend overshadow Igrayne's contested consent and her private mourning following the revelation that the man who had sex with her was not her husband. Alatiel's agency and sexual consent are suspended in the *Decameron*'s narrative of her survival, and the *Heptaméron*'s ferrywoman outwits her would-be rapist friars. We can both problematize the power hierarchies in which these women are located while also encouraging students to recognize women's resistance and their survival: female consent matters in these texts, and it matters that we witness it.

By listening to women's consent and their voices in negotiations of desire and power in romance, we teach the long history of narrative scripts that have shaped rape, and we empower students to understand rape "as subject to change" (Marcus 389) and to resist "the intertwining of poetics and the impulse to rape" in classical and medieval literature (Robertson and Rose 2; Klindienst Joplin). Furthermore, we practice a trauma-sensitive pedagogy when we hear these texts

as witnesses of sexual violence survivors and approach our own exegesis with a sense of witness and empathy (Crumpton; Carello and Butler; Rodino-Colocino). In acknowledging classrooms as consensual spaces within university communities too often divided by power and labor hierarchies, we seek to empower our students' voices by encouraging collaboration and sharing decision-making about evaluation tools and critical methodologies (Imad). Such approaches foster readerly communities where scholarly dialogues can cultivate rigor, resiliency, and hope. In reading the stories of these women with a sense of empathy, we practice our own social consent with the text that centers attentive, resistant, and reparative readings.

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