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Response to "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy"

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Response to “#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy”

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Abstract

This response to “#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy” takes up the themes of identification, consciousness raising, and calling out.

Content Warning

This article discusses topics such as sexual abuse, sexual harassment, grooming, (fictional and real) rape, and pedophilia. It also mentions the cases of Woody Allen, Louis C.K., Bill Cosby, Gabriel Matzneff, Roman Polanski, and others.

(written by Renata Flotow and Mareike Huber)

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Reading the first two issues of this new journal—*New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*—you could not miss the point. It is time to experiment, to try something new (Dinshaw 2020, 43-44). In the second issue, "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy," to which I am responding here, Carissa Harris, Sarah Powrie, Rebecca McNamara and Sara Torres, and Holly Crocker show us how—specifically, how to learn from the ongoing #MeToo movement as teachers of Chaucer.[1] Carissa Harris puts the problem succinctly: "In addition to his deeply troubling involvement in Cecily Chaumpaigne's 1380 *raptus* case, Chaucer adds sexual violence to his narratives but 'often directs the readers *away* from reading rape to reading not-rape,' trivializes rape as 'pley' in the *Reeve's Tale*, and uses rape as a literary trope to explore relationships among men, as Christine M. Rose notes" (2019b, 255). These patterns in Chaucer's life and work have consequences in the classroom. As Candace Barrington, Lisa Lampert-Weissig, Katie Little, and Eva von Contzen acknowledge in their introduction to this issue, the texts we teach can "re-traumatize"—we could also say hurt, upset, or infuriate—our students (2021, 6-7). Holly Crocker, in her contribution, extols the virtue of vulnerability (2021, 51). Then we should probably admit that the texts we teach can hurt us too. Maybe you have no idea what I am talking about. Or maybe long ago you were told to get over it, to be more nuanced in your thinking, to grow a thicker skin. I am proud of my thick skin and my nuance, as perhaps you are of yours. I say what so many of us say: I can take it. But I am not sure that I want to teach my students to be just like me—to learn to take it, toughen up, and tolerate the intolerable. At the very least, I do not want that hard lesson to be only one I teach. I would rather, as this issue asks and prepares us to do, try something new.

The contributors to "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy" offer us an enormous variety of innovative pedagogical methods for these purposes. These include the strategy of comparing now and then, past and present, and asking students to "mak[e] connections between medieval texts and their own experiences," as Carissa Harris, the genius of this method, puts it (2021a, 11). When Harris, in her research or in her classroom, compares a rape case from the Middle Ages and one from the twenty-first century (like the 1292 legal case of Isabella Plomet and the 2016 trial of Brock Turner) or a medieval pastourelle with a contemporary short story like Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's "Wolfpack," her double analysis constructs dynamic, dizzying patterns of concordance and discordance (2019a, 109-110; 2021a, 14). The reader's experience of this time-warping analysis is twofold. First, the concordances of now and then, to use a vintage phrase, raise consciousness. This phrase—consciousness raising—has been attributed to the second-wave feminist activist Anne Forer Pyne, who said one night at a meeting, "Would everyone please give me an example from their own life on how they experienced oppression as a woman? I need to hear it to raise my own consciousness" (Cowley 2018).[2] The phrase "MeToo," which originated in 2006 with the visionary activist Tarana Burke, continues this work of consciousness raising (Burke 2018). When the student first recognizes the full scope of the continuity between past and present and feels this sense of "me too," something snaps. I mean that in Sara Ahmed's sense of the word: "We snap. We snap under the weight; things

[1] For a definition and overview of the #MeToo movement, see Powrie 2021, 20-22.
[2] For a how-to manual on feminist consciousness-raising, see Sarachild 1968.

break" (2017, 255). The student sees everything with new eyes, and feels everything with new sensitivity. And they get riled up—in Harris's words, "troubled and infuriated" (2021a, 14).

Secondly, the discordances between now and then can inspire activism. The doubleness of Harris's comparative historicism exposes the rickety constructs that undergird the long history of sexual violence. Her public-facing overview of "800 years of rape culture," recently published in *Aeon*, clarifies that medieval rape culture blamed victims on the grounds that women were assumed to be "naturally hornier than men" (Harris 2021b), while contemporary rape culture finds a way to use the opposite assumption—that men are naturally hornier than women—to justify the same crime. But with the gift of hindsight, the student can see how easily time tinkers with gargantuan systems that look unstoppable, unchangeable, unfixable from the perspective of the present. At first, the student sees the vast and inexorable consequences of the awful crime. But then, as their eyes adjust, they begin to see the smallness of the criminal. After that, of course, the student cannot help but want to get up and *do* something, change *something*. As Harris writes, "The threads binding past and present shouldn't cause us to conclude that changing rape culture is a pointless endeavor; instead, they can inspire us to action by showing us how much farther we still have to go" (2021b).[3]

In his contribution to the inaugural issue of this journal, Anthony Bale would—or at least at first blush—seem to critique this affective comparativism and specifically its explicit valorization of the practice of identification.[4] Bale writes, "I am not a medievalist because I seek a Middle Ages concordant with my own experience" (2020, 9) like (in his guiding example) a twentieth-century nun who imagines that she and Chaucer's prioress share one and the same lived experience (8)—and who keeps the text's representation of Jews and Judaism in her blind spot (9). We could also add much deadlier variants to the list than the Catholic who identifies with one of Chaucer's pilgrims or the Protestant who identifies with a Wycliffite heretic: The incel who identifies with the chivalrous knight; the white supremacist with "the Anglo-Saxon," the hawk with the Crusader, the mass-murderer with the Viking.[5]

But given that identification itself cannot be prevented—it is, as Rita Felski puts it, "a default rather than an option" (2019, 77)—I would distinguish between means and ends. A student can identify with the Middle Ages for good or for evil, with or against the grain. When Bale's colleagues took in his critique of Chaucer's anti-Semitism, they asked, "Are you Jewish?" (2020, 7). Their question revealed the rules of the game of Medieval Studies in that time and place: Only Christians allowed (and, it follows, no critiques of Christianity allowed—except sectarian Big-Endianism versus Little-Endianism.) Bale's refusal to identify (to explicitly identify himself to his colleagues or to practice intentional identification with the past) would seem to provide at least some protection from these

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[3] For up-to-date strategies and resources for medievalists on political organizing, see Chaganti et al. 2021.

[4] My understanding of identification derives from Felski 2019, 77-126, and Frow 2014, 36-70.

[5] For more on the identification of the incel with the knight, see Janega 2018 and Waśniewska 2020, 74; of the white supremacist with "the Anglo-Saxon," see Wilton 2020 and Rambaran-Olm 2020; of the hawk (in the political sense of a hardline advocate of war, the opposite of a "dove") with the Crusader, see Holsinger 2007 and Kim 2018; of the mass-murderer with the Viking, see Kim 2019.

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rules. But the essays in "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy" suggests that identification has the power to rewrite those rules—to rewrite even the text itself.[6]

The Autobiography of Malcolm X describes the feeling of watching Butterfly McQueen in *Gone with the Wind*: "I felt like crawling under the rug" (1965, 32).[7] Disgusted by the simulacrum of Butterfly McQueen's Prissy, Malcolm X rewrote America's memory of its history. Likewise, when Harris teaches her students to identify with the milkmaid rather than the knight, with the survivor rather than the rapist, she teaches them how to realign, reinterpret, and rewrite the text.[8] I think of *Meeting the University Halfway*, in which the feminist philosopher and theoretical physicist Karen Barad asks us to shift our paradigm of reading from the old metaphor of reflection to "the quantum weirdness" of diffraction (2007, 83)—to read not as mirrors attempting to faithfully reflect images of sameness but rather as edges that diffract (bend, disturb, interfere with, reconfigure) what passes through us, experimenting with the text to create something new (90). We can rewrite Chaucer—as Bale, Harris, and generations of Chaucerians already have (Heng 2006; Seal and Sidhu 2019, 225). The diffracted text reads differently in light of their work.

The authors of this issue invite us to experiment on the text in partnership with our students as "critical co-investigators" (Torres and McNamara 2021, 35). Taken with this image of the classroom as a collaborative laboratory, I asked my students, "What can you see in the text that I can't? What can we do together that I can't do alone?" In this experiment, we made use of our material conditions, generational differences, and our precise historical moment. Beowulf, they showed me, is asexual (Miranda Viederman, Class of 2022, English major), and Héloïse is a power bottom (Mitchel Jurasek, Class of 2021, English major).[9] COVID inflected their readings: Grendel, they pointed out, is "unhælo" ('unhealthy', 'diseased') and strikes Heorot like a plague (Kasey Cunningham, Class of 2022, English and Environment Studies).[10] Gawain, marked by death, self-isolates in the wilderness (Sofie Brown, Class of 2023, English and German). Their insights into representations of gender fluidity blow my mind—how had I not noticed the importance of the hind with the horns of stag in *Guigemar*?[11] And likewise, as the authors of "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy" repeatedly emphasize, our students' ability to recognize and refusal to condone rape culture put us to shame. "The time seem[s] ripe," Barrington et al. write in their introduction, "for exploring how best to confront these issues with a generation of students attuned to identifying and condemning sexual violence" (2021, 2).

This pedagogical mandate—to "confront" and "condemn" sexual violence in the text—reflects the call-out culture associated with the #MeToo movement. There is so much to call out. I think of that damning sentence from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*: "If you took the trouble to note

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[6] Frow makes a persuasive case for the interactivity of identification, which he defines as a "process" of "affective investment" between text and reader that alters both (2014, 37)—as an "interface" between the real and the virtual (2014, 43).

[7] For the recent debate about *Gone with the Wind*, see Ridley 2020 and Stewart 2020.

[8] For more on how identification has functioned as a feminist practice in Chaucer studies, see Seal and Sidhu 2019, 225.

[9] My thanks to these students, and all the students cited in this piece, for granting permission to cite their work. For more on asexuality, see Catri 2021. For more on power bottoming, see Scott 2010 and Nguyen 2014.

[10] See line 120 in Mitchell and Robinson 1998. For more on the word "unhælu," see Wallace 2019.

[11] All references to *Guigemar* are taken from Waters 2018, in which this passage appears on pages 58-59, lines 89-92.

them," he writes, "you would be surprised at the number of expressions that equate the black man with sin" (1952, 165-66). The number of expressions that (in one way or another, whether unmistakably or subtly) make up part of rape culture, would likewise be, I think, quite surprising, if I took the trouble to note them. As Fanon's phrasing suggests, I do not want to know this innumerable number. I do not want to take on the trouble of noticing exactly how many. It is too much—in more ways than one. Seo-Young Chu writes, "sexual violence—so sickening, so vile—is itself difficult to acknowledge as part of our reality. The work of thinking and writing about it is then sometimes misperceived as dirty, 'salacious,' toxic, dangerous, undignified, and unreal" (2017).

What have I not taken the trouble to notice? I find myself seeing something I had not clearly seen before in those much-memorized lines from the General Prologue. (Much-memorized specifically by my students: I have probably assigned hundreds, at this point in my teaching career, to recite these lines by heart.) When April ejaculates into the drought of March and Zephyrus impregnates the young vegetation ("the tendre croppes"), he reprises his rape of the nymph Chloris, the Queen of Flowers and Goddess of Spring—a story that she tells, her lips breathing roses, in Book V of Ovid's *Fasti* (1931, 274-75).[12] In this passage, the subjects that act—that fuck—April and Zephyrus, get personified with gendered pronouns in parallel phrases ("his shoures soote" and "his sweete breeth") that describe their chiasmatic methods of ejaculation (liquid that penetrates down to the root and air that inflates up towards the sky), while the objects that get acted upon, that get fucked—the drought, the crops, and the vines—remain half-personified, un-gendered, and totally passive. Things: Drought-dry (empty, lacking, thirsty), tender (vulnerable, childish, unready), and plural, legion. Objects as opposed to subjects: Singular, individual, virile, decisive, ready, sweet and ripe, and generative. April exudes so much potency that even the semen of his semen, the virtue of his liquor, has the power to create new life. The impregnated object, on the other hand, following in the logic of Aristotelian theories of reproduction, is mere raw material, blood, gunk; it is only the impregnating subject's will, power, and spirit that make that stuff, that "it," live. The consent, agency, and subjectivity of the object have no place here.[13] Let me pause to admit that I cannot count how many times I have lectured to students on the cosmic beauties and gorgeous pleasures of this passage. When I took the trouble to notice the reference to the rape of Chloris or the pattern of the earth's strange stillness, I did not linger. Sara Ahmed has my number: I didn't want to spoil the fun (2017, 252-59).

But then there is the other, opposite problem. I also don't want to spoil the spoiling. The task of calling out sexual violence, of confronting and condemning, would seem to demand clarity, not complication. In my classroom, students tend to bring the clarity, and I tend to bring the complication—a combination that can generate tension. Sarah Powrie acknowledges that "#MeToo has exposed a generational fault line between baby boomers, who are more inclined to see #MeToo activism as excessive and unnuanced," and millennials, who are more willing to call out and to cancel (2021, 26). She writes, "I draw attention to this generational fault line since it may exist between you and your students; so mind the gap" (26). As a millennial, I would only add that the same dynamic can play out between my generation and Gen Z. I also need to mind the gap. My Gen-Z students want clarity—unambiguous, enthusiastic consent. My clarity has been compromised. This is what I see in

[12] All quotations from Chaucer are from Benson 1987.

[13] There is one word in which I can find a hold for a reparative reading: The "drought" of March could mean "thirst" as well as "dry spell" or "lack of moisture" (MED "drought[e]"), implying March's desire for April's water.

the text: The poet has created the fiction of a beloved (some Adonis, Criseyde, Ganymede, or Leda) and then has scripted that character to say no, only to pause the plot so that the narrator can tell the reader in an aside that, with full access to the character's interiority, he knows for sure that no really means yes. How do you prosecute that case?

In a passage that I often think about, Marlowe compares Leander's rape of Hero to the act of wringing a bird's neck in "our" hands, constructing with that first-person pronoun a plurality that includes the author and the reader in the subjectivity of the rapist (774).[14] Like a dying bird, Marlowe tells us, Hero "trembling strove" against this violence (775). "This strife of hers" Marlowe compares to "that / which made the world" (775-76). That is how it seems: Like rape made the entire world that we find in this literature—the virtual place that Chaucer in the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* calls "the world of autours" (308). In this world, rape explains ontology: the name of this kingdom, the bend of that river, the origins of the universe. Every flower and tree is a victim of rape, and every rapist a victim of Cupid, penetrated without consent through the eye or the heart. Even gods have no power to say yes or no. God may have ravished the Virgin Mary, but the Virgin Mary ravished Him first.[15] Jupiter may have raped a thousand victims and metamorphosed them into a thousand forms, but Venus raped Jupiter a thousand times and metamorphosed *him* into a thousand forms first.[16] How can we extract unambiguous consent from this miasma? In "that place," Michaela Coel's self-portrait Arabella says in the most famous monologue from *I May Destroy You* (2020), "rules, clarity, law, and separation cease to exist."[17]

Like any of us, I just try to do my best. Sometimes I do not complicate my students' takes, and sometimes I do. It depends. Sometimes I trust that they must be right and I must be wrong. Sometimes I know that I need to back off. Sometimes I feel the need to push back. I have developed strategies for creating self-contained, small spaces for difficult conversations. By the time my class meets for discussion, I will have had one-on-one and small-group conversations in writing and face to face.[18] During class, I run surveys, process anonymous feedback, and get out of the way for group work.[19] At the beginning of term, I assign group leaders, pairs of seniors interested in pedagogy or people skills, whose responsibility it is to tell me straight what I need to know—to ask me questions, to try out new ideas, to call me out. I get called out.

This past semester, like every semester, I had arguments with my students that continue to bounce around in my head ages after, one of which comes to mind at this moment. It was about a particular

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[14] All references to Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* are taken from Gill 1987, 208.

[15] Perhaps the clearest articulation of this idea appears in the work of Bernardino of Siena; see Bernardino 1950-1965, 2.376. For a translation of the key passage, see Rubin 2009, 299. See also Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* 3.8-14 and the corresponding passage in Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*; Boccaccio 1986, 172-73. For the definitive guide to the reading of the Annunciation as a rape, see Schaberg 2006.

[16] See Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* 3.15-21 and Boccaccio 1986, 172-73.

[17] This quotation is taken from Arabella's monologue in Episode 8, "Line Spectrum Border," and can be seen here on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EreKhzIKF_A.

[18] I structure the week so that students complete a written workshop online (using Blackboard's test function) in advance of class. This workshop previews the content of class and asks for students' input. I read the work of the entire class, but only give written feedback to one small group. I then follow up with that group in office hours to discuss their answers. I rotate through the class, going through this process with each group twice per semester. I created this specific system for remote learning at a small liberal arts college during the pandemic.

[19] I have Dr. Kelly Hogan and Dr. Viji Sathy's workshop on "Promoting Equity through Inclusive Teaching Practices" to thank for these strategies. For an overview of their advice, see Hogan and Sathy 2019.

passage from Marie de France's *Guigemar*.[20] In this passage, Guigemar interprets the lady's no as yes according to some truly twisty turns. She wants to say yes, he assumes, but has been taught that she must perform chastity. This performance, he assumes, must necessarily be false—because, it is implied, chastity is a false construct. Guigemar then attempts to reassure her with what sounds like a threat—an "ultimatum" that is "coercive/weird/disrespectful," as my students put it (Taran Sun, Class of 2021, English major). If she says no again, he will take her for a whore (it is even implied that he will call her out as a whore, endangering her safety, which is contingent on the public reception of her performance of chastity)—because if chastity is false, then the woman who performs it must not only be a liar, but also a traitor who perpetuates and leverages a lie in order to increase her social capital at the expense of others. The passage begins to slip out of Guigemar's voice and into what sounds like direct advice from "Marie" to her readers: Ladies, she seems to say, if you find a man you want, don't make a scene by saying no; Say yes fast and then you can fuck him before anyone finds out. My students took this one way: The text (the character in cahoots with the narrator) is coercing and slut-shaming the lady. I took it another way.

In a written exchange on Blackboard, then the next day on Zoom in group discussion, then in class, and all week in office hours, we got into it. I kept thinking of the contrast between Marie's Guigemar and Chaucer's Man in Black. When propositioned by the Man in Black (1224-25), Lady White chastely says no (1243) and then, after a year, yes (1258-70). Her 'no' gets heard and respected, and her consent, when it comes, is enthusiastic and unambiguous. And yet in this scenario, I take the lady's initial "no" to mean "I am not a whore" and her final "yes" to mean "I am not a bitch." The Man in Black keeps telling us that this exceptional lady was "lyke noon of the route" (819)— not like other women (see also 971-84). She is not a nag ("Ne chide she koude never a del" [937]). She is not a flirt (She never looks "to wyde" [861], "asyde" [862], "overthwert" [863], "foly sprad" [874], or "wildely" [875]). She is not a tease ("She ne used no suche knakkes smale" [1033]). Her perfect performance of chastity (just enough but not too much), in keeping with Marie's analysis of rape culture, increases her price at the cost of anyone around her who might want to say 'yes' or 'no' in a different, less convenient way. Lady White's 'yes' and 'no' do not represent her sexual desires, which—in keeping with her perfect decorum—remain unspoken.[21] Marie, by contrast, begins with an extensive establishment of the lady's desires, and then constructs an upside-down fantasy in which 'yes' rather than 'no' becomes the signifier of virtue. That, she seems to suggest, would be so much better—so much less risk and so much more fun.

My students were not convinced. They pointed out that in this line, Marie resembles all those poets who make a game of coercing the beloved by manipulating the logic of compulsory chastity. (Actually virgins are whores and whores are virgins. If you love virginity so much, then make more. But we already fucked in a flea.) I had to agree that they had a point. And yet I also suspected them of harboring a tendency towards sex negativity, which, it seemed to me, somehow kept getting

[20] See Waters 78-81, lines 500-29.

[21] The Man in Black is much too polite to mention whether his lady felt or expressed sexual desire for him before they become one and he incorporated her into his subjectivity (1295). He does tell us that, before their marriage, Lady White felt desire for life (878), goodness (891), gladness (993), truth (1003), and the perfection of "hir owne name" (1018).

attached to and combined with the concepts of feminism, agency, and consent, in their readings.[22] They accused me of undermining consent by giving more credence to imaginary subtexts than to the words that come out of characters’ mouths. I thought that they were too quick to rubber-stamp the surface-level meaning of contractual language rather and too slow to dig into a diagnosis of deeper contexts and conditions—more like lawyers or HR representatives than analysts. They thought that I was in too deep to see straight—desperate to repair something irreparably broken. And back and forth we went.

Donna Haraway tells us to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway 2016). So, let’s stay with the trouble. In their introduction, Barrington et al. acknowledge that “in many ways, it’s been easier for us to deal with literary depictions of sexual assault than to confront the alleged sexual misbehaviors of our medieval authors”—most urgently, the ambiguous presence of Chaucer’s name in the legal documentation of a case of “raptus” (2021, 3). As Barrington et al. continue, “For some, uncertainty exonerated Chaucer; for others, uncertainty allowed us to overlook his possible culpability” (*ibid.*). Lauren Berlant liked to prompt discussion in their classroom with this question: “What would it mean to think that thought?” (Winant 2021). These days, we are getting more and more used to trying the thought out, to putting the possibility into words: “He is a rapist” (Seal and Sidhu 2019, 229). If he is, what then? What would it mean to think that thought?

For years before #MeToo, I had been comparing Chaucer to Woody Allen and Louis C.K. in the classroom. Something struck me about the way that these three men constructed comical, self-deprecating authorial personas as nebbishes, losers, rejects (elfish, antisocial, apologetic, bald, out-of-shape, old and old-fashioned, crotchety, unlucky) that, inversely, only ever functioned to heighten their power. Something about their talent for creating irresistible and fascinating women (and I specifically mean irresistible and fascinating to me)—the Wife of Bath and Criseyde, the many parts played by the incomparable Diane Keaton, and the roles written on *Louis* for brilliant comediennes from Joan Rivers and Maria Bamford to Sarah Silverman and Pamela Adlon. In recent years, during the #MeToo movement, these comparisons have taken on another level of meaning.

When I think about the feminist analyses inspired by the #MeToo movement of the interaction of art, celebrity, and rape culture that have been most instructive for me personally, I think about the work of Lili Loofbourow (2014), Seo-Young Chu (2017), Michaela Coel (2018, 2020), Emily Nussbaum (2019), and Vanessa Springora (2020). This archive teaches many indispensable lessons, most importantly for my purposes at this particular juncture, the analytical utility of refusing to separate the art from the artist. This separation creates a comforting and illusory opposition between ‘good books’ and ‘bad people.’ Just to clarify: I am not raising that question of whether or not sexual predators can produce high-quality, thoughtfully crafted, critically acclaimed artworks—it seems fairly obvious that they can. The real question there is the one that Nussbaum takes from the work of Pearl Cleage: Can we let them? (Nussbaum 2019, 122-25; Cleage 1990, 21). But what I want to focus on here and now is this: The artistic predator does not tend to separate art from predation, but rather creates predatory art. Woody Allen stands accused, specifically, of having molested his seven-year-old adopted daughter Dylan Farrow in 1992, and, more broadly, of tendencies that raise suspicions about

[22] Sophie Lewis gives an illuminating example of an argument between herself and a category of interrogators that Grace Lavery defines as “sex-negative LGBTQ teens” in Lewis 2021.

predation and pedophilia (Farrow 2014). In her #MeToo-inspired analysis of Allen's oeuvre, Emily Nussbaum reveals the presence of the crime of which Allen stands accused in a pattern of recurring motifs. Allen is famous for some of these touches—most obviously the now-unwatchable December-May romance between his forty-two-year old avatar Isaac and the seventeen-year-old high-school student Tracy (played by Mariel Hemingway) in 1979's *Manhattan*. Other iterations of this motif are harder to catch, like his ugly parody hidden in a little-seen one-act play, *Honeymoon Motel*, produced in 2011, of the exact testimony that Dylan Farrow gave to investigators as a child (Nussbaum 2019, 109-10).

Nussbaum argues that Allen includes these imitations of his crime in his art not only "as propaganda for his sexual predilections," but also as a grooming tactic (2019, 130). "Such art could be viewed," Nussbaum writes, "if you were in a darker mood" (which I am), "as a cultural analogue to a sex predator's 'grooming'" (2019, 131). The psychological literature on predation informs us that the serial predator grooms not only the victim, but also the victim's community and environment (Winters and Jeglic 2017). Allen's grooming, Nussbaum admits, worked on her—we can also see that it worked very well for quite some time on the rest of us too. With his art, Allen taught us to collaborate in his long con, and he taught us well. Nussbaum goes on to apply the same analytical strategy to the work of Roman Polanski, Bill Cosby, and Louis C.K., demonstrating that each of these artists made art about his predation that aided and abetted his predation—art that trained the media and the public to dismiss the accusations that would and did inevitably arise, and that supplied a steady stream of carefully selected victims into the artist's web. "Maybe all art," Nussbaum writes, "is grooming" (2019, 132).

This is certainly the impression that I came away with from Vanessa Springora's memoir *Le Consentement*, which exposes not only one writer's (to name names: Gabriel Matzneff's) single-minded obsession with the dual desire of raping adolescents "and then transposing them into one of his books," but also an entire culture's collaboration in that desire (2021, 128). A culture crossing centuries, and interconnecting medieval with contemporary networks of predatory art: Springora describes how Matzneff taught his victims to write him soaring and exonerating love letters specifying their consent using as templates the correspondence of Abelard and Héloïse—letters that he then reproduced in his own books without his victims' consent. Springora writes that Matzneff "breathed" Héloïse's words "onto [the] very tongues" of his victims, "dispossess[ing them] of [their] own words" (2021, 76). The original manuscripts of Héloïse/Springora's letters are currently owned by Matzneff and held in L'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (The Institute for Contemporary Publishing Archives) in the medieval Abbaye Notre-Dame d'Ardenne. In order to access her own letters in this medieval archive, Springora would need to apply for permission. Instead, "although the thought of book burning has always filled [her] with horror," she fantasizes about snipping Matzneff's letters into "a great carnival of confetti" and "throw[ing] them into the air on a windy day" (2021, 186). "At least," she writes, "posterity won't have them then" (2021, 186).

"Writers," Springora concludes, "are vampires"—natural predators, in other words (2021, 152). We could say the same of their familiars, predatory professors. Seo-Young Chu's "Fugues in the Key of English Major" (and its first follow-up, "After 'A Refuge for Jae-in Doe': A Social Media Chronology") interweaves familiar love lyrics from the English canon into her account of being raped, harassed, and stalked by Jay Fliegelman while studying for her PhD in literature at Stanford (2017).

Reading this essay, the distinctions between poem, poet, and professor all collapse into the category of predation. Sentences adapted from Renaissance sonnets, Fliegelman's lectures on eighteenth-century thing narratives, and communications (emails, newsletters, phone calls) from Stanford about alumni donations, library dedications, and departmental teaching awards become indistinguishably complicit. Chu exposes a system in which old books celebrating predation help a predator prey with impunity—often in an astonishingly one-to-one equation, as when, as Chu relates it, Stanford persisted in standing by its man as it acquired his collection of antique books, including rare endpapers from John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* that Fliegelman had used as a prop in his harassment (compelling Chu "to stroke the pages") and that Stanford apparently expunged from its official account of the case (Chu 2018). (In this official account, the manuscript seems to have transformed into the less valuable and less incriminatory form of an untitled "porno video.") As Chu's time-warping collage of past and present makes clear, we have always already known that the poet's laureate crown is made of the dismembered body of Daphne, hunted by Apollo and metamorphosed into a tree.

Chu and Springora linger on the idea that the book functions as an accessory and alibi—that its glamor distracts the eye, launders reputations (of the author, the collector, the institution), and makes its readers complicit. In a bracingly honest self-critique, Nussbaum accuses herself of this same crime. She saves the phrase "me too" for the moment when she admits her complicity—specifically in Louis C.K.'s machinations, but, throughout the essay, more broadly (2019, 147). She points out that she is one of few women to have made so far up the ladder in her industry, and that she used her power at least in some small part to promulgate her taste for misogynist art, which she found "mesmerizing," "car-crash compelling" (2019, 128). The latter, she acknowledges, probably had something to do with the former: Her talent for taking in misogyny and turning it into feminism enabled her to make it—at least in some small part because powerful predators found that transformative capacity useful.

After reading Nussbaum's self-analysis, I began to notice the ubiquity of the feminist alibi in the theater of #MeToo—for example, in the two versions of Bill Cosby's wife, Camille Hanks and Phylicia Rashad, the actress who played the role of his wife on *The Cosby Show* (named "The Mother of the Black Community" by the NAACP and Dean of the College of Fine Arts by Howard University) (Brooks 2021; Carroll 2020). These alibis can be counted on to volunteer outraged denials and legitimize a campaign of slut-shaming and victim-blaming on Dr. Cosby's behalf. Another version of this type appears in the filmography of Woody Allen. With his art, he built two types of women: The sweet, old-fashioned adolescent (Mariel Hemingway) and the fantastically bitchy new woman (Diane Keaton). The former type I read as an allegory of his victim and the latter—brilliant, hilarious, tough, self-possessed, intimidating, vicious, fabulous—as his alibi. This trick worked on me, not in that Diane Keaton's feeble, awful defense of Woody Allen in 2018 persuaded me of his innocence, but rather that her charming presence in his films from 1969 to 1979 (*Sleeper*! *Love and Death*! *Annie Hall*!) drew me in and enchanted me, casting a soothing spell. My love for her worked for him.

Even if the alibi refuses to speak in the predator's defense, she has already served a useful purpose simply by means of her proximity. When we (bystanders, witnesses, victims) saw her with him, we thought, well, then, he must not be that bad—he must be harmless. We must have misunderstood. Or, worse, he must be delightful—delightful enough to attract such a star. I recognize this mechanism in the career of Louis C.K., who surrounded himself with ingenious and intimidating comediennes in

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an attempt to protect himself from the implications of his own compulsive half-confessions.[23] The predator's script makes the alibi beholden (implicitly, for the special gift of her safety, and, explicitly, for his priceless favors: an exceptionally good part for a woman of her age, an unprecedentedly good deal for total artistic control of her own series) while also ensuring that she witnesses just enough but not too much of his crime to preserve deniability when things are going his way and yet also to drag her down with him if things start to slip out of his control. Enchanted by the alibi, I have so often, as she instructs us to do by her example, turned a blind eye.

I don't just sympathize with Nussbaum, I identify. Me too. I am woman who has made it this far up the ladder in a profession in which women (even white women, but especially Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color [BIPOC] women) represent the majority of the contingent labor force (according to a recent data snapshot by the AAUP, 53.9 percent) and a minority of full professorships (according to that same snapshot, 32.5 percent) (Colby and Fowler 2021). With these odds, success starts to look suspicious. Sara Ahmed spells out how the complicity of the survivor works at the level of the literal: "A feminist colleague said that in speaking out I was compromising 'the happy and stimulating' environment that 'long-standing feminists' had worked to create. I assumed I was not a long-standing feminist because of the stand I took" (2019, 258). Ahmed lets us know: If we do not speak out or if we silence, actively or passively, those who do, we are part of the problem. She showed us how to do right: She quit. And then there is another, more figurative kind of complicity. If we transpose Nussbaum's insights about her complicity in the crimes of Woody Allen, Louis C.K., and Bill Cosby to our thought experiment about Chaucer and "the unfortunate incident" (Dinshaw 1989, 10), who best fits the role of the feminist alibi?

Why do I teach a single-author seminar on Chaucer? In my first term on the tenure track, I was so excited to try to teach non-canonical texts in my own classroom. My courses were under-enrolled. One got cancelled only days before it was scheduled to begin, annihilating six months of laborious prep. In my second semester, I had only seven students in two classes. I can see now, quite clearly, that my job was not in any danger, as everyone kept trying to tell me. But back then, with my head still in the post-recession job market (which, I realize, looks like a paradise compared to the pandemic market facing candidates today), I felt like it was. Back then, when I tried teaching something other than *Beowulf* or Chaucer, students said to my face, "This isn't very good—it's not really *literature*," and in writing, "She doesn't seem to understand the true mission of the liberal arts." I passed out hazelnuts for a close-reading exercise on Julian of Norwich, and one student said, "You should have brought us donuts." I tried to build my own editions of understudied texts from scratch, but could never manage to produce anything anywhere like the glittering treasury of accessible and affordable resources available on Chaucer—especially not with the time I could find, which was never enough. These were the tiniest of tiny problems—nothing to the ordeals documented in recent investigations of bias against BIPOC candidates (like, for example, Lorgia García Peña and Nikole Hannah-Jones) in the tenure process (Mochkofsky 2021).[24] But, nevertheless, it got to me. To protect myself, I put on the

[23] As Nussbaum points out, he liked to put these half-confessions into the mouths of his alibis, as when he wrote a first-person description of the very act for which he would later be canceled (masturbating in front of women who had not given their consent), switched the genders, and gave the monologue to Laurie Metcalf in *Horace and Pete* (2019, 146-47).

[24] See also Matthew 2016.

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armor of the canon, and I made it safely to tenure. Even though I am now on the other side, letting go of Chaucer still seems frightening. The House of Fame disorients me. It feels like I am holding the pillar of Chaucer's fame up, like a caryatid, but also standing on top looking down. I could also give another name to this double sensation: White feminism—which means feminism deployed for the benefit of a privileged few no matter the cost to the many (Beck 2021). The white woman's burden, which is also a pedestal.

Like I said, I try my best. I make an inefficacious effort—I listened to Dorothy Kim and added Ana Vega's "Eye-Openers" to my syllabus; I studied the work of Cord Whitaker and added a unit on critical race theory; I poured over *Obscene Pedagogies* and devoted a week to the case of Cecily Chaumpaigne. I opened the unthinkable question up for debate with my students: Should we cancel Chaucer? Never, they said, with complete consensus. Chaucer's words from the Prologue to *The Legend of Good Women* rang true to these students: "And yf that olde bokes were aweye, / Yloren were of remembraunce the keye" (25-26). At first, I felt sure that I must have done right. But then I started to wonder. Not one student would hit delete? Not one student would even take up the position for the sake of a purely theoretical discussion? It suddenly looked to me like my attempts at decentering and decolonization had actually functioned as crisis management on behalf of Chaucer's brand—which, not coincidentally, is also mine. This is the alibi's question: If he goes down, do I go with him? His surname is in the running head of this very page, like that of my grandfather on my grandmother's midcentury stationary. We are entangled. Separation would be so messy. Think of the assets, the acrimony, the paperwork, the children.

Springora writes that for years and years after she escaped Matzneff, she continued to see the world his way. "Whenever a man tried to give me pleasure, or worse still, tried to take his pleasure through me, I had to fight against a kind of disgust crouching in the shadows, about to swoop down on me, against a symbolic violence, which wasn't really there, that I imputed to every gesture" (2021, 161). But isn't it really there? The trigger that superimposes past trauma onto the present moment or that turns a classroom into a predator's hunting ground is easy to pull. We've all seen it done. I remember being a student in a college classroom and hearing my professor insist to me and my classmates that the beloved in some Renaissance sonnet by Wyatt or Spenser or Sidney, I cannot remember which, had to have been between fourteen and sixteen, the objective apex of feminine beauty. The students sitting around me dutifully copied that little insight down in their notebooks. When he had asked, "And at what age are women most beautiful?" my classmate had answered, "Um, like thirty-something?" She was thinking of Bjork, her idol. He did not accept that answer. The story about that professor and that classmate only gets worse from there. But it is not mine to tell. And I think I can trust that you probably know it—or a version of it—already, and by heart, having played some role in its drama. Predator, victim, alibi, bystander.

Let's talk about cancellation. This term has a certain (hysterical, paranoid, reactionary) negative valence (Romano 2021), but that is not how I mean it.[25] I mean it as a catch-all for all the many kinds of accountability that the #MeToo movement constructed, many mostly imaginary, exaggerated, or virtual, but some truly efficacious and *spectacular*—like the downfalls of Bill Cosby, Jeffrey Epstein,

[25] I am more receptive to feminist critiques of "trashing" (Freeman 1976; Faludi 2013) and to the lesson of the parable of the juvenile elephants from *Detransition, Baby*; Peters 2020, 99-103.

and Harvey Weinstein. Cancellation is something new. The crimes of which Cosby, Epstein, and Weinstein have since been found guilty in courts of law were open secrets, easily discoverable in the public record. We knew and did nothing—until the winds changed, and Cosby, Epstein, and Weinstein got fired, boycotted, arrested, prosecuted, sentenced, and jailed. Cancelled. (Of those three, one was found dead in his cell, one is serving a twenty-three-year sentence in a maximum-security prison, and one was just released from jail after his lawyers managed to strike down his conviction on a technicality, a prosecutorial error. So, two out of three.)

But cancellation, as we have found, does not really translate into Middle English. The names that get named are the names of the dead. We cannot fire dust or put bones on trial. Boycotting does not work in the same way on men so far dead and gone that they have neither heirs nor copyrights. Cancellation, in the context of pre-modern studies, would seem to belong more to anti-intellectuals and budget-slashers looking for departments to downsize than to activists and idealists trying to do the right thing. In this moment of crisis that never seems to end, we have been asked to take in the dirty laundry, close ranks, and smile. When in 2019 Samantha Katz Seal and Nicole Sidhu dared to publish the question of "whether the time has come" yet "for feminists to move past Chaucer" (a question which, by the way, they answered in the negative) (229), a flurry of responses (a think-piece and letters to the editor) in *The Times Literary Supplement* suggested that these "radical feminists" (and not COVID-19, or longstanding mismanagement of the university's finances, or late capitalism in the Anthropocene) were to blame for the University of Leicester's recent decision to "decolonize the curriculum" by means of redundancies across various disciplines, including Medieval Studies (Edwards 2021, 8).[26] Now, it seems, is not the time to talk about moving on.

As Seal and Sidhu write, "Perhaps that will be the conversation of future years, of future incarnations of medievalist feminism" (2019, 229). Nussbaum talks about the necessity, after #MeToo, of trying something new: "The *other* art, the art that never got made, and, also, the art made in the margins" (2019, 112). She asks herself a series of questions. "[What] if women's work had been the default setting when I was growing up? What if the model of male genius (and most often, white, straight male genius) was not the force that the rest of us needed to get around, to go through, to become who we were? What if I'd absorbed the style of feminism that younger women had been fomenting, these fiery days, more radical, less tolerant of certain compromises that my cohort found acceptable?" (2019, 148). What then?

In 2018, I took a workshop on "Teaching the Premodern in a Time of White Supremacy" at the Shakespeare Association of America with Holly Dugan, Dorothy Kim, and Dr Reginald A. Wilburn. They advised us to do more than add a reading here and retool a unit there—to try something new. I experimented. Inspired by the pioneering course on "Rupturing Tradition: Ancient Past, Contemporary Praxis" taught by Brooke Holmes and Dan-el Padilla Peralta with the Activist Graduate School at Princeton, which "pairs ancient texts with critical race theory and strategies for organizing," I decided to offer a course on medieval women's writings, but with a twist (Poser 2021).[27] I paired each medieval text with a sympathetic correspondent from the twentieth or twenty-first century: *The*

[26] Similar accusations have been made against Dan-el Padilla Peralta for critiquing the discipline of Classics; see Poser 2021.

[27] For more on this course, which is now being disseminated online to the public for free, see https://rupturingtradition.org/.

Lais of Marie de France with Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018)—Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of Ladies* with *The Combahee River Collective Statement* edited by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017)—*The Visions of Julian of Norwich* with Jia Tolentino's codeine-induced ecstatic visions from *Trick Mirror* (2019)—the trials of Joan of Arc and Eleanor Rykener with the trial of Chelsea Manning. I came up with these pairings serendipitously, instinctually, experimentally. Each week, I asked my students to brainstorm pairings of their own to play with—Lucy Siegel (Class of 2022, Art History major) paired Christine's *Book of the City of Ladies* with Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), Kyubin Kim (Class of 2022, English major) paired Marie's *Lais* with *The Bachelorette* (2003-), Taran Sun (Class of 2021, English major) paired *The Letters of Héloïse* with Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016), and Lianna Harrington (Class of 2021, English major) paired *The Book of Margery Kempe* with Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings* (2020).

The chemical reaction of these medieval and modern texts inspired manifestos, awakenings, visions, break-ups, reconciliations, op-eds, collectives, and protests. But perhaps what I found most moving was the solidarity in the Zoom room and across time—the way that the course connected students to each other and to their histories. In the second half of the course, we took apart the words in the title of the course ("medieval," "women," and "writing"), exploring debates about the inutility and imprecision of the category of "women," the authorship of *The Lais of Marie de France* and the letters of Héloïse, the authenticity of the recorded voices of Joan of Arc and Eleanor Rykener, and the tough question of what to include in the curriculum of "medieval women's writing" when so much is anonymous, fragmented, compromised, or lost.[28] These controversies resonated with our contemporary pairings—in the endless series of thefts and erasures documented by Chris Kraus in *I Love Dick* (1998), in the admission by the editor (and literary executor) in the introduction to *I'm Very Into You* (2015) that Kathy Acker would never have agreed to the publication of her emails to McKenzie Wark had she lived (14), in the struggle between writer and character for authority over the meaning of Kristen Roupenian's "Cat Person" (Nowicki 2021). Alongside these readings, students worked on their final projects: Archival research into women's writings in their own family histories. Some students found journals, baby books, and letters going back generations. Others found recipes—published in the local paper, scrawled on the back of a doctor's prescription pad, bound by hand as a wedding gift. Others found little (text messages, birthday cards, grocery lists) or nothing at all. In many cases, illiteracy, language barriers, or calamity had left not a word behind. These students created their own records—whether by transcribing interviews with living relatives, researching the histories of where and when their foremothers had been with the help of Saidiya Hartman's "A Note on Method" (2019, xiii-xv), or, in the manner of Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), by making something new. These voices and those of the medieval texts we were studying in class started to sound as though they were talking to each other, and to us.

It is hard not to say this when talking back to medieval texts—hard not just for my students, but also for me: "I am new, and she is old. I'm here, and she's gone. She got all twisted and broken. Poor thing. That won't happen to me. After all, it was partly her fault. She made so many mistakes." In *Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar point out that the princess in the fairy tale never realizes that the story is a circle coming around again—that after she lives happily ever after, the mirror on the wall

[28] On the inutility and imprecision of "women," see Bychowski and Kim 2019; Lewis 2019, 22.

will start to speak to her with the prince's voice, and then she will become the witch (1980, 42). Lauren Berlant calls this "cruel optimism," an unfortunate side effect of the myth of progress (2011). But this second issue of this journal, "#MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy," suggests that reading the Middle Ages can teach something different. In their introduction, Barrington et al. write about humility: "Perhaps most importantly, these texts teach us a certain humility as we look at the past" (2021, 5). Harris writes about fury (2021a, 14), and Crocker about vulnerability (2021, 51). And in the first issue, Dinshaw refers to Hartman's concept of the "beautiful experiment" (Dinshaw 2020, 39-40), of "reconstructing the experience of the unknown and retrieving minor lives from oblivion" as a way of "redressing the violence of history, crafting a love letter to all those who had been harmed" (Hartman 2019, 31). I taught my new course on *Medieval Women's Writings* for the first time remotely in Spring 2021, during the third semester of the pandemic, to thirty-one little boxes on my screen. During the pandemic, I have sometimes had trouble remembering why I teach Chaucer or *Beowulf*. But in this course on medieval women's writings, neither I nor my students ever lost our bearings. It felt good to experiment, to try something new.

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