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Authors
Barrington, Candace
Lampert-Weissig, Lisa
Little, Katie
et al.

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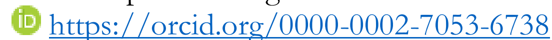
Editors' Introduction: #MeToo, Medieval Literature, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

Candace Barrington

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8782-1001
Central Connecticut State University, U.S.

Lisa Lampert-Weissig

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7053-6738
University of California-San Diego, U.S.

Katie Little

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4465-4052
University of Colorado Boulder, U.S.

Eva von Contzen

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0871-4978
University of Freiburg, Germany

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Candace Barrington

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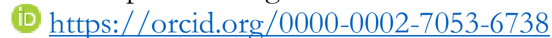
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Eva von Contzen

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0871-4978
University of Freiburg, Germany

Abstract

This issue explores some best practices for confronting issues of sexual violence in medieval literary texts with a generation of students attuned to identifying and condemning sexual harassment and assault. Because many of our students—whatever their gender identification—have histories with many kinds of sexual harm, articles by Carissa M. Harris, Sarah Powrie, and Sara Torres and Rebecca McNamara offer thoughtful, trauma-informed pedagogical approaches to aid us as we approach these difficult texts. Our fourth article, by Holly A. Crocker, illuminates the deep-rooted systems that feed women's vulnerability and work to silence even the strongest among us.

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When we solicited articles for this, the second, issue of *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession*, we chose for our topic one of the most pressing issues in schools and workplaces today: sexual assault and harassment. We all knew how generations of women have had to navigate hostile (whether openly or latently) environments and have suffered many kinds of harm, from aggressive language to violence. We also knew that we likely teach texts every term that take sexual assault for granted or present it in admiring or glamorizing terms. We also knew we teach texts written by men, such as Geoffrey Chaucer and Thomas Malory, who were themselves accused of rape. The time seemed ripe for exploring how best to confront these issues with a generation of students attuned to identifying and condemning sexual violence.

The wheels of academic journals move slowly. Two years have passed since we first publicized our call for papers. And though much has happened in the intervening years—the global COVID-19 pandemic, #BlackLivesMatter marches, increasing climate instability, an attempted *coup d'etat* in the United States, the UK's exit from the EU, and protests against authoritarian governments in Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Uganda—these dramatic events have not made #MeToo feel like old news. Sexual assault not only continues to grab headlines, but fear of sexual assault continues to shape the ways individuals move through the world, throughout the world (Smith). While many other topics demand our attention, #MeToo hasn't lost its relevance or left our classrooms.

After its dramatic emergence in 2017, #MeToo continues to re-shape our preconceived notions. To see this re-shaping, we first offer two examples drawn from recent cinema. Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020) depicts not a woman's rape but her friend's systematic revenge in a startingly empowering response to sexual violence (Buchanan 2020). In this film, however, revenge (as temporarily satisfying as it might be) becomes less important than reconstructing the initial narrative, from "everyone was drunk and just having a good time" to "a rape happened while many bystanders encouraged the rapist to take advantage of his drunken victim." Likewise, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering's investigative documentary, *Allen v. Farrow* (2020), re-examines and reconstructs a past narrative: Dylan Farrow's claims that her father, Woody Allen, assaulted and molested her when she was seven years old. Rather than pooh-poohing her claims as planted by her mother Mia Farrow, or sighing that bringing the assaults into the light would be too traumatic for the young girl, or simply regretting the lack of credible witnesses (as many previous accounts have done), the film brings together witnesses and evidence that present a "discomfiting alternate history to the one many people reflexively accepted in the 1990s" (Hornaday 2021). What changed in the intervening years? Why do we sympathize with the friend's years-long outrage in *Promising Young Woman*? Why are we no longer able to look away from child molestation, despite the horror and disgust it provokes? The events have not altered, and the victim's stories have remained the same. The awareness surrounding them, however, has certainly changed.

We find a comparably reshaped depiction of assault and harassment in recent Young Adult literature. Rather than focusing on the horrid and traumatic effects assault has on the victims, recent YA novels feature strong female characters who take extreme measures to revenge acts of sexual violence, strikingly similar to *Promising Young Woman*, or provide opportunities for foregrounding the victim's version of the story, as in *Allen v. Farrow*. Examples are Mindy McGinnis's *The Female of the*

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Species (2016), Hannah Capin's *Foul is Fair* (2020), Elana K. Arnold's *Red Hood* (2020), and Kim Zarins's *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (2016). The latter three novels—modern retellings of *Macbeth, Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Canterbury Tales*, respectively—demonstrate how premodern and mythical stories can offer a rich set of sources for problematizing and reversing our perspective on assault and rape.

We are, in short, teaching medieval literature in a cultural moment when victims' stories are being retold and newly heard. At the same time, we are realizing how those stories often include strategies for overcoming vulnerabilities.

In similar ways, the culture has changed around the medieval literary texts that our authors explore in this issue. Although these medieval texts have been studied for generations, no one began to question or excuse the sexual assaults until second-wave feminism gave us the eyes to see them and the vocabulary to describe what we saw. Carolyn Dinshaw's *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (1989) was pathbreaking in its suggestion that reading and interpretation are socially constructed, gendered responses to the text. In her analysis, identifying the process of "reading like a man"—that is, treating women characters as objects—is the first step for seeing how generations of readers have been implicated as abetting bystanders (Dinshaw 1989, 29). While today Dinshaw is a recognized leader in the field, when she published her book as an untenured professor, she took a huge risk, and she did suffer backlash. Now, her brave approach has benefited us all. Medieval feminist scholarship has shifted its focus from recovering women's voices, as in Mary Carruthers's "The Wife of Bath and the Painting of Lions" (1979), to thinking about how gender is defined in medieval texts and how these texts affect students who read them. We are thinking of such recent works as Alison Gulley's immensely insightful and useful *Teaching Rape in the Medieval Classroom* (2018), as well as Suzanne M. Edwards's *The Afterlives of Rape in Medieval English Literature* (2016), Carissa M. Harris's *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (2018), and Holly A. Crocker's *The Matter of Virtue: Women's Ethical Action from Chaucer to Shakespeare* (2019).

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. Cecily Chaumpaigne's charges against Geoffrey Chaucer for *de raptu meo* hover over this #MeToo issue, even though none of this issue's essays deals explicitly with these unresolved accusations—unresolved only insofar as we can't know what they mean exactly. For a long time, the question of whether Chaucer could be the perpetrator of sexual assault was settled with a simple reliance on his character: the Father of English Literature was too much a Christian gentleman to engage in such sordid behavior. Then we moved to semantic defenses: *raptus* had a range of meanings in late-medieval English jurisprudence; therefore, Chaumpaigne's accusations (and her dropping those accusations) most likely referred to a "kidnapping" related to a legal formality involving a wardship, marriage, and the transfer of property. For some, uncertainty exonerated Chaucer; for others, uncertainty allowed us to overlook his possible culpability (Barrington 2019; Cannon 1993; 2001b; 2001a; Harris 2017; Kelly 1998; Rose 2001; Sobecki 2019; Waymack 2016). Rather than simply saying "We don't know what happened," we would be more correct to say "Something happened, and Chaucer knows a thing or two about *raptu meo*." He knows how easily women's stories can be disbelieved: speak up and everyone calls you a whore. He knows how few options a woman has: pray to the gods for deliverance from a forced marriage, and you'll find there's a price to pay for having your own will. He knows how easily women can find themselves in compromised positions: say the wrong thing, and you've just committed to having sex

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with some dude you barely know and have no interest in. By not contributing further to the question of Chaucer's own case, the journal's editors and contributors are not ignoring the significance of this question. We are, however, saying this: No matter what Cecily might have meant if she could have raised her hand and shouted (or whispered) "Me Too," we can recognize in Chaucer's works and the works of his contemporaries, predecessors, and successors that sexual assault was so deeply ingrained, so taken for granted, that it took us centuries to see what had been there all along.

What *is* there (as our authors reveal) is not only individual and personal but also structural, as befits The "me too." Movement (Burke). As initially activated by Tarana Burke in 2006, this movement promoted "empowerment through empathy" among survivors and a means "for exposing systems of oppression and privilege of which sexual harassment and assault are cause and effect" (Rodino-Colocino 2018). That is, "me too." draws attention to the ways systemically marginalizing people and communities (particularly those of color) allows sexual assault. It also draws attention to the ways sexual assault has been used to reinforce that same systemic marginalization. Indeed, when we consider the cascade of events we have all experienced in the last year, we can see many points of intersection in the power structures that encourage and perpetuate exploitation and violence. This point was brutally brought home to us the week we worked together on this introduction, in the wake of the murder of eight people in Atlanta, Georgia, including six women of Asian descent (Richardson 2021). Studying medieval texts, as our authors repeatedly demonstrate, can help us see these intersectional strategies at work. These texts invite us to shift our focus from individual cases (as #MeToo tends to do) to the systemic power structures (as "me too." asks us to do). In doing so, we see that these power systems are not modern inventions but deep, long-standing structures that require more work than simple sloganeering can provide. As Suzanne Edwards reminds us,

> to call today's misogynist or callous representations of rape "medieval" intertwines ethical superiority with a narrative of historical progress and sidesteps enduringly difficult questions about political power, autonomy, social responsibility, and belief (whether in God or science or justice). For these reasons, teaching rape and its representations in the Middle Ages can help students to think more deeply about their own views and—one hopes—ultimately to foster more substantive and nuanced political conversations about rape today. (Edwards 2018, 25)

So, while some might find it depressing and frustrating to learn about the deep roots of sexual assault and its long history of keeping women in their place, medievalists are obliged to show students how persistent these power structures have been. They can help students not only understand that rape culture isn't something natural, too easily summed up with a shrug and a boys-will-be-boys sigh, but also recognize that these deep structures permeate much beloved literature of the past.

This particular (and painful) process of learning is helpfully described by Amy Ziering, one of the directors of *Allen v. Farrow*, in an interview on Slate.com.

> Western culture is littered with horrible people who made brilliant art. It's too reductive just to dismiss the art, but it is instructive to take their biography and learn from their art in a different way. What are the ideologies that they're touting in their art? Maybe their biography informs that. Maybe I can analyze that rather than adopt it and inhale it without critical inquiry. The second level is, if I know someone is currently

> perpetrating crimes and my economically supporting them is giving them more power and impunity to do so, maybe I can make a different economic decision. Those to me are the two nexuses. Everybody is going to come up with their own way of landing. I'm not going to stop reading Heidegger, and my dad was in concentration camps. Make of that what you will. I learn a lot from Heidegger, and I still do and always will.

To which she then adds, "I'm glad he's dead so I can buy his books" (Adams 2021).

Medieval Texts, Consent, and Women's Vulnerability

As this issue's four contributions demonstrate, we can turn to medieval texts because they have much to teach us about the long history of consent. In addition to acknowledging the ways sexual violence is deeply rooted in systemic power structures, they also show us ways to notice the modes of resistance and understand what works and what does not. Though some texts (such as Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*) expose the limits of individual resistance, others (such as Gower's *Apollonius of Tyre*) assert the power of clever women to outwit sexual predators. The female allegorical figures in Langland's *Piers Plowman* expose the deep roots of women's vulnerability to silencing, while pastourelles illustrate strategies for emphatically speaking out. Perhaps most importantly, these texts teach us a certain humility as we look at the past. Not only have we been blind to the ways we continue perpetuating systems of violence against women, but women's tools for dismantling these systems and asserting their consent remain familiarly limited.

Carissa M. Harris's article, "Teaching Consent: Medieval Pastourelles in the Undergraduate Classroom," provides a foundation for teaching depictions of vulnerable women in medieval literature classrooms.[1] Far from presenting pastourelles as playful teasing, a view that perpetuates the predators' perspectives, Harris offers strategies for recovering the women's voices. As she carefully guides us to understand, hearing their voices is not about exposing what is unsaid but exposing what's been there all along, hidden behind a screen labeled "courtship" or "wooing-games" (Holman and Harmon 1986, 363).

The second article, Sarah Powrie's "Criseyde, Consent, and the #MeToo Reader," opens with a potent reminder of the cultural moment fueling the #MeToo and The "me too." Movement moments. This cultural nexus means our students are seeing what readers once overlooked: *Troilus and Criseyde*'s supposedly delightfully humorous consummation scene is not very funny, and its depictions of passionate romance ignore Criseyde's (lack of) consent. Beyond pulling examples from contemporary narratives for discussing consent and gender violence, Powrie finds in Chaucer's depiction of Criseyde, Troilus, and Pandarus the deep and pervasive roots of a rape culture that persists to this day.

For their article, "Female Consent and Affective Resistance in Romance: Medieval Pedagogy and #MeToo," Sara V. Torres and Rebecca F. McNamara turn to a cluster of romances that allow students to recognize the power hierarchies at play and the strategies women use to subvert those hierarchies. Starting with Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* and Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* before turning to tales in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, and Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptameéon*, they

[1] For more of Harris's writing on sexual violence, see her website, https://carissaharris.com/.

provide strategies for bringing students' own awareness and feminist analysis into a conversation that identifies ways women deploy their limited options.

We close this issue with an essay that does not explicitly deal with #MeToo, yet its topic—women's vulnerability and repeated silencing—has everything to do with #MeToo. Holly Crocker's "Since March 2020…Rethinking Vulnerability, Taylor Swift's Pandemic Records, and *Piers Plowman*'s Women" reminds us that all these articles were written during a global pandemic, when we all felt particularly vulnerable and found ourselves following new routines and creating new associations between our professional and private lives.[2] Drawing on the example of Taylor Swift, Crocker explores what that musician's career tells us about the link between a woman's cultural authority and her vulnerability. Does her willingness to expose her weaknesses rob her of the right to assert her will? Or can that exposure be the basis of her authority because it identifies the authenticity of her first-hand knowledge? When Crocker asks these same questions of the female allegorical figures in *Piers Plowman*, she shows their essential role in a new light. Although these figures are fundamental to Langland's message that we must care for the vulnerable, it also becomes clear that the allegorical women's vulnerability is (whether paradoxically or conveniently) a reason to deny the women any cultural authority.

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Before teaching these texts, instructors will want to prepare themselves. In addition to knowing medieval theories of rape or recognizing the many medieval representations of rape and sexual assault, they will also need to be aware that our students live in a rape culture. Just as students in university and college classrooms are not as blind as previous generations to the sexual assault in medieval texts, they are not willing to ignore the trauma of reading about and discussing any assault that strikes close to their core. The "me too." Movement and #MeToo have brought the issue to our collective consciousness in ways we've not seen before. Though that greater sensitivity might seem to make our jobs easier, it also requires creating a safe environment for discussing what we find. In fact, instructors need to recognize the potential for re-inflicting trauma when teaching these texts. Because this issue's authors carefully warn instructors to be aware of students' sensitivity to these issues, we close this introduction by briefly restating some basic principles of trauma-informed pedagogy.

Because our classrooms are educational and not clinical settings, our primary goals are grounded in student learning and emotional safety. For that reason, we must be aware that many students in our classrooms—whatever their gender identification—have histories with sexual violence, and we should listen and respond sensitively if the sexual violence in our texts creates trauma. Besides including information about our campuses' counseling services on our syllabi, we should also be prepared to provide referrals if a student shows signs of re-traumatization (Carello and Butler 2014, 163–64). Ultimately, it is our responsibility to remember that

> [t]eaching about trauma is essential to comprehending and confronting the human experience, but to honor the humanity and dignity of both trauma's victims and those

[2] For more of Crocker's writing on feminist subjectivity, see her website, https://hollyacrocker.com/.

> who are learning about them, education must proceed with compassion and responsibility toward both. (Carello and Butler 2014, 164)

If we keep these goals in mind, then we can bring the necessary, yet difficult, topic of sexual violence into our classroom and avoid replicating the abuse of power integral to sexual assault (Crumpton 2017, 137).

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