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Good Fun: Cecily Chaumpaigne and the Ethics of Chaucerian Obscenity

MARY C. FLANNERY

ABSTRACT: This essay examines the interplay between enjoyment of Chaucer's obscene humor (particularly in the *Canterbury Tales*) and scholarly interpretations of the most troubling episode from Chaucer's life: Cecily Chaumpaigne's accusations of *raptus*. It argues that, because scholars and readers are determined to protect their ability to enjoy Chaucer's work freely, they often allow their views of Chaucer as a bawdy humorist to infiltrate their discussions of the Chaumpaigne case. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's figure of the "feminist killjoy," this essay concludes with the suggestion that we approach Chaucer's work and biography with the willingness to think critically about our enjoyment of his work, and how it might affect our judgment of the poet himself.

KEYWORDS: biography, Cecily Chaumpaigne, humor, obscenity

No other episode from Chaucer's life has as much potential to trouble that comfortable image of "Father Chaucer" as the Cecily Chaumpaigne case. In 1380, Chaumpaigne, a baker's daughter, released Chaucer from a charge of *raptus* ("de raptu meo").¹ As Christopher Cannon has pointed out, despite the

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1. Close Roll 219, 3 Ric. II, m. 9 d., The National Archives, Kew C 54/219; see Martin M. Crow and Clair C. Olson, eds, *Chaucer Life-Records* (London, 1966), 343. Anna Fore Waymack has also assembled translations of the legal documents related to the Chaumpaigne case and a useful bibliography, included in her "De raptu meo" resource, online at: <http://chaumpaigne.org> (accessed Feb. 6, 2020).

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fact that this memorable word (whose precise meaning here has been much debated) is the very reason why these documents have been so much discussed, “modern scholars have shrunk from even mentioning either the noun *raptus* or ‘rape,’ its modern English translation; they have repeatedly tried to protect Chaucer’s reputation from any association with so repugnant a crime as rape by simply avoiding that wrong’s mention” and substituting any number of euphemisms in its place.² Among the euphemism-prone scholars Cannon cites is legal historian T. F. T. Plucknett, who—while acknowledging that, in this case, *raptus* likely referred to rape rather than to abduction (the other possible legal meaning)—insisted that “we must be fair to Chaucer”:

Rape is a brutal crime and implies a degree of depravity which should make us cautious in fixing such a charge. There is really no evidence for it. That he seduced Cecilia we may well believe; that she was angry with him, and still more with herself, is extremely probable. She may have honestly thought that because it all happened against her better judgment, that therefore it was without her consent. Her scandalised family would naturally treat that as an irrebuttable presumption. But there is nothing to suggest that Cecilia could have convicted Chaucer of felony. The single word [*raptus*] on the close roll is the only word anywhere suggesting crime of any sort in this affair, and we must bear in mind that no one incurred legal responsibility for its use in that document, or undertook to prove its truth. Doubtless there was some angry recrimination at the moment and hard words were used. It was unlucky for Chaucer’s memory that one of them was engrossed in chancery.³

In the passage above, Plucknett is not taking issue with the suggestion that Chaucer might have participated in a sexual relationship of some kind with Chaumpaigne; instead, his main issue is with the language used to characterize that encounter. The alternative account that Plucknett puts forward begins with vague speculations that ultimately devolve into statements whose reliance on the passive voice displaces and disperses agency so thoroughly that it all but disappears (“hard words were used,” “one of them was engrossed in

2. Christopher Cannon, “*Raptus* in the Chaumpaigne Release and a Newly Discovered Document Concerning the Life of Geoffrey Chaucer,” *Speculum* 68 (1993): 74–94, at 92. See also Henry Ansgar Kelly, “Meanings and Uses of *Raptus* in Chaucer’s Time,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998): 101–65.

3. Theodore F. T. Plucknett, “Chaucer’s Escapade,” *Law Quarterly Review* 64 (1948): 33–36, at 35–36.

chancery"). His implied criticism of Chaumpaigne's use of *raptus* exemplifies the kind of logic underlying what philosopher Kate Manne has termed "himpathy," "the excessive sympathy sometimes shown toward male perpetrators of sexual violence," whether actual or alleged: how *unlucky* for Chaucer that one of the *hard words* used in Chaumpaigne's dispute with him should have been recorded on the Close Rolls.⁴ With fewer than two hundred words, Plucknett transforms the grave charge of *raptus* into a non-event and an unhappy coincidence that linked a revered author to legal circumstances he seemingly had no hand in creating. Such views are, regrettably, not particularly rare among those that have been articulated in Chaucer's defense, some of which originate in the proclaimed "congeniality" of Chaucer studies so ably delineated by Stephanie Trigg, or in the biographers' urge to identify with their subject (as Susan Signe Morrison has suggested).⁵ What is noteworthy, however, is the particular term Plucknett uses in place of *raptus* in the title of his short essay: "Chaucer's *Escapade*" (my emphasis). In selecting this particular word, Plucknett imbues the putative sexual encounter between Chaucer and Chaumpaigne with playful, adventurous overtones (not unlike Chaucer himself, who turns away from a student's sexual assault of a miller's daughter with the phrase "Now pley, Aleyn" [I 4198]). That he is consciously inviting us to make light of what we might otherwise view as a "brutal crime" committed by Chaucer is clear from the very beginning of his note, where he refers to the careful discussion of the case by P. R. Watts in an earlier issue of the same journal as Watts's "entertaining article."⁶

I wish to use Plucknett's lexical choices as a jumping-off point for reflection on what I believe to be an underacknowledged factor shaping scholarly discussions of and allusions to the Chaumpaigne case: the degree to which scholars and readers are invested in protecting their ability to enjoy

4. Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford, 2017), 197, where Manne identifies "himpathy" as one of the key factors behind the outcome of Brock Turner's 2016 trial for rape (among other examples).

5. Stephanie Trigg, *Congenial Souls: Reading Chaucer from Medieval to Postmodern* (Minneapolis, 2002); and Susan S. Morrison, "The Use of Biography in Medieval Literary Criticism: The Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne," *Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 69–86, esp. at 70, 73, 76–77. Trigg discusses some of the defenses and apologies offered on Chaucer's behalf by his modern readers (36–37), including Derek Brewer, whose revised introduction to Chaucer noted of the Chaumpaigne case: "The incident may also suggest the powerful passions which surged within this remarkable man who seems normally to have maintained a genially self-deprecatory un-aggressive appearance, and whose poetry, though often satirical, is so free from personal anger" (*A New Introduction to Chaucer*, 2nd edn. [London, 1998], 118). Commenting on the implications of Brewer's statement, Trigg remarks that "It is one of the most threatening passages in Chaucer criticism I have ever come across" (37).

6. Plucknett, "Chaucer's Escapade," 33. See also P. R. Watts, "The Strange Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecilia Chaumpaigne," *Law Quarterly Review* 63 (1947): 491–515.

Chaucer freely. As I will show, this investment in the pleasure and entertainment involved in encounters with Chaucer's works (which is not infrequently attached to his deployment of obscene humor) has on more than one occasion infiltrated discussions of Chaumpaigne's accusations against Chaucer. My objective here is not to offer yet another "take" on the evidence surrounding the Chaumpaigne case; instead, I wish to consider some of the preconditions that have made it possible for *any* Chaucer reader to assess the case in terms such as those that Plucknett employs. In what follows, I will consider the ways in which euphemistic scholarly references to the Chaumpaigne case are problematically entangled with Chaucer's reputation as a good-humored author of bawdy tales. I begin with a brief overview of the controversy that has attended interpretations of the phrase *de raptu meo*. I then consider how these debates sit alongside Chaucer's reputation as a master of bawdy medieval humor, after which I examine how this reputation has informed discussion of the Chaumpaigne case. In the final part of this essay, I put forward Sara Ahmed's figure of the "feminist killjoy" as a potential model for how we might begin to think critically about our own reluctance or hesitation to use the word *rape* in connection with Chaumpaigne's initial allegations against Chaucer.⁷

Language and the Surviving Evidence

In her recent survey of shifting trends in Chaucer biography, Jane Griffiths describes the small cluster of documents pertaining to Chaumpaigne's charge of *raptu meo* as "an aberration," the "striking exception to the high level of public and private discretion" that otherwise characterizes "the life records of this period."⁸ Despite (or because of) their exceptional status, these documents have attracted an impressive amount of attention ever since F. J. Furnivall announced the discovery of Chaumpaigne's release in 1873.⁹ As Sebastian Sobocki has pointed out, this and the rest of the documents linked to the case "embarrassed Victorian Chaucer scholars by threatening to undermine his reputation as an authoritative and, hence, ethically palatable, figure

7. On the principles that define feminist killjoys, see Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, N.C., 2017), 255–68 (presented as part of Ahmed's "Killjoy Manifesto"). I derive the phrase "toxically masculine" from a paper delivered by Marion Turner at the 2018 New Chaucer Society Congress in Toronto on July 10–15, 2018 ("Rethinking Biography," in a session on "Loving and Hating Chaucer in the 21st Century").

8. Jane Griffiths, "Biography," in Peter Brown, ed., *A New Companion to Chaucer* (Oxford, 2019), 37–49, at 40.

9. *The Athenaeum* 2405 (Nov. 29, 1873): 698–99.

in the English literary canon.”¹⁰ Consternation has attended the study of these documents ever since.

In the midst of documents that tell us something of Chaucer’s life as a civil servant, little about his personal life, and nothing of his work as a poet, the phrase *de raptu meo* seems to leap at the reader from Chaumpaigne’s initial quitclaim as it is recorded on the Close Rolls. It is conspicuous by its absence from a later quitclaim discovered by Cannon in 1993; this quitclaim, made by Chaumpaigne to Chaucer on May 7, 1380—that is, three days after her original quitclaim was enrolled—refers not to “omnimodas acciones . . . de raptu meo” (all kinds of actions . . . concerning my rape) as in the quitclaim of three days prior, but rather to “omnimodas acciones tam de feloniiis, transgressionibus, compotis, debitis quam aliis accionibus quibuscumque” (all manner of actions both concerning felonies, trespasses, accounts, debts, and any other actions whatsoever).¹¹ This latter document’s deviation from the wording of Chaumpaigne’s original enrolled quitclaim has served to stoke scholars’ interest in unpacking the likely significance of *de raptu meo*. Indeed, that charged phrase has been the cause of most of the speculation and debate surrounding this thinly documented episode from Chaucer’s life.

As a number of scholars have pointed out, by the end of the thirteenth century the word *raptus* could be applied in legal documents either to forced coitus or to abduction, which so blurred the distinction between the two that it rendered “the records of cases of rape virtually indistinguishable from cases of abduction.”¹² At one point in his careful analysis of the language of Chaumpaigne’s release, Cannon takes note of what he describes as the “obsession in Chaucer criticism” with making a clear distinction “between cases of abduction and cases of rape,” which he says “often loses sight of the fact that abduction in practice may easily shade over into something that is hardly to be distinguished from sexual assault: both wrongs imply physical coercion, and this coercion even if it involves no overt sexual component may be implicitly threatening in clearly sexual terms. Sexual coercion in actions that ostensibly involved ‘mere’ abduction could hardly have been unusual.”¹³ I agree with Cannon’s insistence on acknowledging the many forms that

10. Sebastian Sobek, “Wards and Widows: *Troilus and Criseyde* and New Documents on Chaucer’s Life,” *ELH* 86 (2019): 413–40, at 421.

11. Cannon, “*Raptus*,” 89 (the May 7, 1380 quitclaim cited—with added punctuation—from which I have also taken the translation used above).

12. Cannon, “*Raptus*,” 81; see 78–81 for fuller discussion of the problem. See also Kelly, “Meanings and Uses of *Raptus*”; and Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction and Adultery, 1100–1500* (Cambridge, U.K., 2013), 18–51.

13. Cannon, “*Raptus*,” 88.

sexual coercion might take, but I also find the “obsession” that he identifies to be particularly striking in its own right. It is indicative of more than the natural frustration of any scholar studying a past to which he or she no longer has direct or full documentary access: it points to the degree to which we continue to be invested in salvaging Chaucer as an “ethically palatable” figure of the English literary canon, and to our continued anxiety that any such salvaging may already have been rendered impossible, if not by the historical facts of the case then by the simple fact of how historically distant Chaucer’s life is from ours. The desire to rescue the Father of English Poetry from the charge of rape mingles with the fear that he may have committed the alleged rape in question. At the same time, I would suggest that a more subtle (and more rarely acknowledged) factor is in play: we want to be free to *like* Chaucer.¹⁴ In particular, we want to be free to be entertained by him unburdened by any crimes he may or may not have committed.

This desire to be free to like Chaucer and to enjoy his work is a longstanding one, but one that is also especially complicated in the present historical moment. The list of authors, artists, actors, directors, and other celebrities whose alleged or confirmed misconduct troubles the current reception of their work is seemingly endless. Whether one is speaking of Michael Jackson, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Roman Polanski, or Bill Cosby, the fact remains that those who have loved what they have produced over the course of their careers struggle with the question of how to view that work when their misconduct comes to light.¹⁵ Over the last few years, the question of how (or whether) to separate the art from the artist has regularly featured in headlines pertaining

14. On enjoyment and authorial misconduct, see, for example, Tison Pugh, “Chaucer’s Rape, Southern Racism, and the Pedagogical Ethics of Authorial Malfeasance,” *College English* 67 (2005): 569–86.

15. The 2019 HBO documentary “Leaving Neverland” focused on the allegations of sexual abuse leveled at the late Michael Jackson by two men now in their thirties, Wade Robson and James Safechuck. In 2014, Moira Greyland went public with allegations that her mother, the late Marion Zimmer Bradley, had molested her during her childhood (see Alison Flood, “SFF community reeling after Marion Zimmer Bradley’s daughter accuses her of abuse,” *The Guardian* (June 27, 2014), online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/27/sff-community-marion-zimmer-bradley-daughter-accuses-abuse> (accessed Mar. 4, 2020). Director Roman Polanski has been accused of rape and sexual abuse by multiple women (including as recently as 2019, when Valentine Monnier accused Polanski of having assaulted her in his Gstaad chalet in 1975), and admitted to the statutory rape of a thirteen-year-old girl in 1977. Bill Cosby was convicted of sexual assault in 2018 (his appeal was rejected in 2019, but his conviction was overturned in 2021).

to these and similar cases.¹⁶ In Chaucer's case, of course, the circumstances are rather different; not only is the artist in question separated from us by centuries (therefore no longer profiting from our consumption of his work) and the full facts of the case unknown, but his Middle English literary output has largely remained an object of study rather than an object of mass popular consumption, despite the various adaptations and translations of his works that have been produced over the last two decades, some of which have laid bare Chaucer's problematic treatments of topics such as race and gender.¹⁷ That said, Chaucer is remarkable for the way that likeability, enjoyability, and supposed "congeniality" have become distinguishing features not only of his literary reputation, but also of the scholarly circles that focus their energies on his life and works.¹⁸ How, then, are we to navigate between the troubling hints of his life records and his literary reputation?

In the next part of this article, I take a closer look at one particular aspect of Chaucer's likeability that has largely been overlooked in considerations of how we should approach the documents relating to Chaumpaigne's initial charge of *raptus meus*: its connections with Chaucer's skill as an obscene humorist. Some of the most famously entertaining elements of Chaucer's work are closely tied to his depictions of illicit and sometimes nonconsensual sexual encounters (not to mention misplaced kisses and fart jokes). After briefly outlining Chaucer's contemporary reputation as a master of bawdy humor, I will consider how the textual grounds for that reputation have also

16. Two recent examples include Janna Thompson, "Friday essay: separating the art from the badly behaved artist—a philosopher's view," *The Conversation* (May 9, 2019)—online at: <https://theconversation.com/friday-essay-separating-the-art-from-the-badly-behaved-artist-a-philosophers-view-116279> (accessed Feb. 27, 2020)—which argues that "We should expose the wrongdoing of artists . . . but we should not be prevented from admiring their works"; and Constance Grady, "What do we do when the art we love was created by a monster?," *Vox* (June 25, 2019), online at: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/10/11/17933686/me-too-separating-artist-art-johnny-depp-woody-allen-michael-jackson-louis-ck> (accessed Feb. 27, 2020), which suggests that different theoretical models such as New Criticism, postmodernism, and new historicism offer different ways of thinking through the problem. In her live comedy performance *Nanette* (debuted 2017), Hannah Gadsby also touched on these issues during her discussion of Picasso.

17. Such adaptations include the six individual adaptations of *CT* that aired on the BBC in 2003, and the more recent publication of Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (Edinburgh, 2014), a modern version of *CT*; Lavinia Greenlaw's *A Double Sorrow: A Version of Troilus and Criseyde* (New York, 2015), a retelling of *Tr*; and Kim Zarins's *Sometimes We Tell the Truth* (New York, 2016), a young-adult adaptation of *CT*.

18. The most thorough study of this phenomenon remains Trigg, *Congenial Souls*. Marion Turner also discusses the tendency of Chaucer's hitherto all-male biographers "to approach the writing of their biographies with an emotional investment, and often an acknowledged bias, keen to emphasize Chaucer's unique greatness, his paternity, and his friendship" ("Chaucer," in Richard Bradford, ed., *A Companion to Literary Biography* [Oxford, 2018], 375–90, at 377).

informed how his treatment of sex in general has been interpreted, and the implications of this for how we read and write about the Chaumpaigne case.

Bawdy Father Chaucer

George Shuffelton has argued that, while Chaucer may have long been “viewed as canonical *despite* his obscenity, [he] may now be canonical *because of* his obscenity.”¹⁹ The evidence appears to back him up. A number of scholars have expressed views that are consistent with Peter Beidler’s statement that, “Even at his most churlish moments, Chaucer was a consummate artist”; according to scholars such as Beidler, Chaucer’s artistry seems to be confirmed rather than denied by his occasional use of bawdy humor.²⁰ And as Shuffelton shows, in the popular imagination, Chaucer’s name is virtually synonymous with ribaldry. This is almost certainly why, in his 1993 essay for *The Sunday Times* on the use of authors’ names as adjectives, David Mills defined “Chaucerian” as “bawdy in an acceptably Olde Englisshe way.”²¹ This view of Chaucer is also used to market his work to contemporary readers, as in the case of Peter Ackroyd’s 2009 book *The Canterbury Tales: A Retelling*, whose cover proclaims that the book “captures the vigorous and bawdy spirit of Chaucer’s original . . . by explicitly rendering [Chaucer’s] naughty good humour.”²²

At the heart of such references to Chaucer’s “naughty good humour” (most of which are closely associated with the *Canterbury Tales*) is our enjoyment of that humor. For the most part, Chaucer’s satirical depiction of a friar receiving the “donation” of a fart in the *Summoner’s Tale*, the misdirected kiss in the *Miller’s Tale*, and the sexual trickery of characters in the *Merchant’s Tale* and the *Shipman’s Tale* make for a very entertaining read. But how might the consumption and enjoyment of Chaucer’s obscene comedy relate to the way we engage with his biography?

If there is not necessarily a direct line from the way we read Chaucer’s bawdy humor to the way we view his alleged sexual misconduct, the use of

19. George G. Shuffelton, “Chaucerian Obscenity in the Court of Public Opinion,” *Chaucer Review* 47 (2012): 1–24, at 2.

20. Peter G. Beidler, “Art and Scatology in the *Miller’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 12 (1977): 90–102, at 100. See also Rosalind Field’s discussion of the spurious passages included in some manuscript versions of *MerT* and subsequently preserved in most early print copies until Thomas Tyrwhitt’s 1775 edition of *CT* (“‘Superfluous Ribaldry’: Spurious Lines in the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 28 [1994]: 353–67).

21. David Mills, “What Is Pinteresque?,” *The Sunday Times* (London) (Sept. 5, 1993), Features section (cited in Shuffelton, “Chaucerian Obscenity,” 1).

22. Peter Ackroyd, *The Canterbury Tales: A Retelling* (New York, 2009).

words like “escapade” to refer to the allegations against Chaucer certainly suggests that there is, at the very least, some kind of feedback loop in place. The word practically transforms the story whose plot-points we can hardly deduce from the surviving documents into a lively anecdote of Chaucer’s sexual (mis)adventures. An even more obvious form of this kind of transformation may be found in John Gardner’s 1977 *The Life and Times of Chaucer*, which Derek Pearsall has characterized as a “licentious fictional” account of the medieval poet’s life.²³ Enjoyment clearly lies behind Gardner’s speculations concerning what might have transpired between Chaumpaigne and Chaucer. After returning to the thorny question of what *raptus* likely meant in Chaumpaigne’s release, and acknowledging that it might not have referred to abduction, Gardner remarks that “there are reasons for taking a darker—or perhaps more cheerful—view”: Chaucer may very well have “slipped into bed with a soft and pretty baker’s daughter.”²⁴ Gardner’s choice of language here frames Chaucer’s conceivable actions in light terms—this “slipping,” if that is what it was, is presented as inconsequential (to Chaucer, at any rate) and perhaps even unintentional on his part. At the same time, Gardner characterizes Chaumpaigne in terms that clearly demarcate not only her lower social status, but her status as an item to be enjoyed and consumed both by Chaucer and by Gardner’s readers. Here, she is comestible, an almost confectionary item. Like Alison in the *Miller’s Tale*, she is a feast for the senses; indeed, in just a few words, Gardner paints a picture that, like Chaucer’s description of that “yonge wif,” hints to readers that Chaumpaigne was worthy “For any lord to leggen in his bedde, / Or yet for any good yeman to wedde” (I 3269–70).

While it is difficult not to be overwhelmed with revulsion at the suggestion that the “darker” possibility of rape might also be thought of as “more cheerful” than abduction, we should note that the way Gardner invokes such cheerfulness brings matters of pleasure and enjoyment to the fore. It is also worth noting *whose* enjoyment matters here: whereas Gardner’s fantasy leaves us in the dark as to what this particular baker’s daughter might have thought or felt, it focuses our attention on the pleasure Chaucer presumably would have felt on this occasion, as well as on the reader’s presumed enjoyment of this mental picture. Of course, a good deal of this presumed enjoyment relies on a specifically masculine point of view. As Morrison has remarked, “The assumed reader here is clearly male, for why else would Gardner wink and

23. John Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer* (New York, 1977). See also Derek A. Pearsall, “The Problems of Writing a Life of Chaucer,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 13 (1991): 5–14, at 10.

24. Gardner, *The Life and Times of Chaucer*, 252–53.

nudge at sexual desires so blatantly heterosexual and from the male's point of view?"²⁵ More recently, in her presentation at the 2018 New Chaucer Society Congress, Marion Turner (Chaucer's most recent and first female biographer) characterized such perspectives as "toxically masculine."²⁶

I agree entirely with Morrison's and Turner's assessments, but I also think that what has been a little overlooked here is the way that Gardner's "toxically masculine" perspective is entangled with contemporary attitudes towards Chaucer's obscene humor. After all, the picture that Gardner paints is not far removed from the way that Chaucer depicts the actions of his *fabliau* characters, most especially his account of Aleyn's rape of Malyne, the miller Symkyn's daughter, in the *Reeve's Tale*. Symkyn is inordinately proud of his daughter's lineage (her mother is the illegitimate offspring of a priest) and jealously guards her chastity, which may be why Aleyn decides that sex with her is the best way for him to "have esement" (I 4186) and revenge on the miller after Symkyn cheated him and John out of half a bushel of their own flour (I 4093):²⁷

And up he rist, and by the wenche he crepte.
 This wenche lay uprighte and faste slepte,
 Til he so ny was, er she myghte espie,
 That it had been to late for to crie,
 And shortly for to seyn, they were aton.
 Now pley, Aleyn, for I wol speke of John.
 (I 4193–98)

The narrator's parting remark to Aleyn urges him to "pley"—that is, to enjoy himself.²⁸ In this particular instance, Aleyn is enjoying himself with Malyne (a spectacle that the Reeve's listeners and Chaucer's readers have likewise been invited to enjoy), and presumably at the same time that he enjoys himself by means of her initially unconscious body, he, the Reeve's audience, and Chaucer's readers can also enjoy the satisfaction of the revenge Aleyn is carrying out on Symkyn. That the Reeve might be envisioning this enjoyment as specifically masculine is suggested by the fact that he addresses his lis-

25. Morrison, "The Use of Biography," 73.

26. Turner, "Rethinking Biography." See also Turner's discussion of Gardner in "Chaucer," at 379.

27. All citations from *CT* are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 2008).

28. *MED*, s.v. *pleien* v.(1).

teners as such in his prologue (“Now, sires” [I 3909]). By contrast, feminine perspectives are largely absent here; there is no emphasis whatsoever in this passage on Malyn’s response to Aley’s “playing” (apart from the brief observation that, before she knew it, it was “to late for to crie”), although she is friendly to him when he takes his leave of her (I 4240–48). Even this apparent friendliness resists interpretation: as Nicole Nolan Sidhu puts it, “Chaucer leaves us wondering whether Malyn’s words signify real affection for the clerk, or whether she utters them because she has no other choice.”²⁹

This scene, and the following scene in which John assaults Symkyn’s unsuspecting wife, continue to trouble the enjoyment of contemporary readers.³⁰ Sidhu neatly articulates the opinion of many when she observes that “the *Reeve’s Tale* is not much fun.”³¹ And if we compare Aley’s assault of Malyn with Gardner’s imaginative depiction of Chaucer’s encounter with Chaumpaigne, we find that the two are remarkably similar; Gardner’s account suggests that whatever occurred between Chaucer and Chaumpaigne was nothing more (or less) than a simple matter of “slipping into bed” with a woman who may not have been amenable to—or even conscious enough to be aware of—his intentions until it was too late.³²

The parallels between Gardner’s “licentiously fictional” account of Chaucer’s alleged assault of Chaumpaigne and Aley’s assault of Malyn in the *Reeve’s Tale* return us to the problem of enjoyment. Both accounts invite us to view fictional or alleged sexual assault *as entertainment*—specifically, as the kind of bawdy entertainment that Thomas Ross describes in the introduction to his now out-of-print 1972 *Chaucer’s Bawdy*:

Chaucer views copulation with healthy and effervescent good humor. The “swyvynge” that goes on in the “Miller’s” or the “Reeve’s Tales” is supremely good fun for those involved directly. In the latter

29. Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 2016), 110.

30. See Rachel Moss’s blog post (titled “Chaucer’s Funny Rape”) on enjoying, writing about, and teaching the work of medieval authors (such as Chaucer and Sir Thomas Malory) who were accused of rape, online at: <https://rachelemoss.com/2014/09/11/chaucers-funny-rape-addressing-a-taboo-in-medieval-studies/> (accessed Mar. 4, 2020).

31. Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure*, 77. Sidhu perceives the lack of fun in the Reeve’s *fabliau* to be deliberate: “By violating *fabliau* convention in the *Reeve’s Tale*, Chaucer not only ruins *fabliau* pleasures, he corrects for the *fabliau*’s political failings, enabling a far more penetrating critique of chivalric ideology than the Miller can ever hope to achieve” (79).

32. Turner also notes a connection between Gardner’s speculations concerning what may have transpired between Chaumpaigne and Chaucer and his reading of *RvT* (“Chaucer,” 379).

narrative, the daughter and the wife enjoy immensely their (respective) fornication and adultery. We readers, the indirect participants, enjoy the comic ribaldry too.³³

I do not have the space to re-argue the hopefully now moot question of whether the sexual encounters depicted in the *Reeve's Tale* are consensual, although it is jarring (not to mention telling) to note that *that* tale is the example on which Ross chooses to place particular emphasis here.³⁴ But what strikes me is the way that Ross's comment connects the already-troubling link between rape and "good fun" to Chaucer's "good-humored" treatment of copulation. Ross's reference to Chaucer as someone whose perspective on sex is distinguished by "healthy and effervescent good humor" is fairly typical of those who have made a case for enjoying Chaucer's bawdy humor (or at least not censoring it as pornography).³⁵ But his reference to the *Reeve's Tale* is uncomfortably suggestive of just how much our enjoyment of Chaucer's ribaldry can affect how we read both his depiction of rape and his own alleged assault of Chaumpaigne.

The way we view Chaucer's obscenity and the way we write about Chaucer himself are mutually reinforcing. Although recent studies of medieval obscenity have shed light on its political, pedagogical, and even pastoral functions, the peculiar kind of innocence so often attached to the enjoyment of Chaucer's obscenity suggests a persistent tendency to read that obscenity as *purely* comic.³⁶ As a result, Chaucer's reputation as a bawdy medieval poet licenses and enables the toxically masculine discourse that is occasionally applied in discussions of the Chaumpaigne rape case, and vice versa. In particular, Gardner's remarks—which envision Chaucer in a *fabliau*-like scenario akin to that played out in the *Reeve's Tale*—suggest that Chaucer biography can be problematically shaped not only by toxically masculine takes

33. Thomas W. Ross, *Chaucer's Bawdy* (New York, 1972), 16.

34. As Sidhu has noted in her discussion of Chaucer's use of obscene comedy, "Historically . . . an alarming number of critics have failed even to recognize sexual coercion in the scene and even fewer have considered why Chaucer might have added this detail, which appears to be original to his tale alone" (*Indecent Exposure*, 93 and accompanying note).

35. See, for example, D. H. Lawrence's arguments in defense of literary depictions of sexual activity, which use Chaucer as an example of "lovely and fearless" writing about sex distinguished by "real natural innocence" ("Puritanism and the Arts," in Anthony Beal, ed., *Selected Literary Criticism* [New York, 1966], 52–67, at 53, 57; qtd. in Shuffelton, "Chaucerian Obscenity," 12).

36. See Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure*; and Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies: Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca, 2018).

on Chaucer's supposed congeniality, but also by the way we read his obscene texts.

Killing Joy

How, then, might we go about disentangling our enjoyment of Chaucer from our perspective regarding the rape he may have committed against Chaumpaigne? Is such a disentanglement even possible?

One of Chaucer's biographers, Derek Pearsall, suggests that the best that can be hoped for is "an illusion of impartiality":

Even something admirable like enthusiasm for one's subject may be dangerous in a biographer, though it might well be preferable to the claim to a nonexistent and unachievable "objectivity." In studying the lives of other people, it is impossible to think of them objectively, as objects, or to pretend that they can be understood without imagination, participation, moral concern, and therefore bias. Maybe a frank declaration of interest in finding Chaucer to be a good chap is the most honest course of action. But everyone who has written a Chaucer biography has found him thus, whether or not the interest has been acknowledged. What I shall do, therefore, in a maybe desperate bid for novelty, is to try from time to time to picture Chaucer as a person I do not much like and whose views I disapprove of. This may at least give an illusion of impartiality.³⁷

Pearsall seems to have made an effort to apply this strategy in his treatment of the Chaumpaigne case in his 1992 critical biography of Chaucer. He notes there that "that Chaucer was guilty of *something* is clear from the care he took to secure immunity from prosecution," although he immediately follows up this remark by reassuring readers that "it need not have been rape."³⁸ In her own biography of Chaucer, Marion Turner addresses the Chaumpaigne case briefly but unflinchingly; she remarks that Chaucer

had some kind of encounter, almost certainly sexual, perhaps non-consensual, with Cecily Champaigne, a relationship that, however it started, ended disastrously with lawsuits and damages. . . . What we

37. Pearsall, "The Problems of Writing a Life of Chaucer," 14.

38. Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Biography* (Oxford, 1992), 137.

know is that Chaucer was accused of “raptus”—almost certainly an accusation of sexual rape. . . . What happened between Chaucer and Cecily Chaumpaigne cannot be recovered by us; it remains uncertain, unknowable perhaps to anyone but the two of them.³⁹

Not only does Turner studiously avoid any form of speculation that stretches beyond acknowledgement of available possibilities, but she goes so far as to credit Chaumpaigne with a determination that reads as fearless, rather than conniving: “Cecily Chaumpaigne sued [Chaucer], in her own name, and it paid off. She didn’t retreat or keep silent out of shame.”⁴⁰ Such remarks seem reflective of Turner’s efforts to consciously turn away from the perspectives of earlier biographers such as Gardner—whom she has elsewhere suggested was predominantly interested in depicting Chaucer as “a sexually successful, manly man”—and to center her discussion on what little we can deduce of Chaumpaigne’s agency in the matter.⁴¹

Turner’s biography models one way of pushing back against the problematic ways that past scholarly accounts have framed Chaumpaigne’s accusations against Chaucer. But if our own enjoyment of Chaucer’s obscene comedy is at stake, what forms might this reframing take? If, as some have argued, it is ultimately impossible to separate art from the artist, perhaps the best that we can aim for is a keener awareness of the forces that shape our reception of both. In her survey of biographical approaches to Chaucer over the centuries, Ruth Kennedy maintains that “whatever the data we re-create our subject in the light of our contemporary and our personal image.”⁴² If we accept Kennedy’s argument, then it is worth closely examining the various conditions that appear to be reflective of the time in which the study of an author’s life is undertaken—in this case, our readiness to enjoy and celebrate the bawdy humor of the Father of English Poetry. The resonance between Gardner’s speculations concerning what may have transpired between Chaumpaigne and Chaucer and Ross’s celebration of the “good fun” supposedly had by all in the *Reeve’s Tale* should alert us to the potential risks involved in our enjoyment of Chaucer’s obscene humor. The particular risk to which I

39. Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton, 2019), 210–12; and Turner, “Chaucer,” 378–79.

40. Turner, *Chaucer*, 212.

41. See Turner, “Chaucer,” 379. Also writing of Gardner, Morrison has similarly observed that “Gardner desires Chaucer to be a fun-loving rake. Thus, the *raptus* may be proof of Chaucer’s uncontrollable libido—what fun!—and high spirits” (“The Use of Biography,” 73).

42. Ruth Kennedy, “Re-Creating Chaucer,” in Warwick Gould and Thomas F. Staley, eds., *Writing the Lives of Writers* (London, 1998), 54–67, at 54.

draw attention is not that of reading Chaucer's potential biography too firmly into his literary output (a problem that has been addressed by others elsewhere), but the risk of allowing our enjoyment of his literary output to steer our sense of him as an author, and as a historical figure, without our being sufficiently aware of it.⁴³

Sara Ahmed's recently published "Killjoy Manifesto" suggests that we might be able to begin grappling with the tangled legacies of authors like Chaucer if we aim to think critically about the happiness these authors bring us through their work. Among the principles articulated in Ahmed's "Killjoy Manifesto" is the willingness to cause unhappiness, by which she does not only mean the unhappiness of others:

When we turn away from what compromises our happiness we are withdrawing our efforts from work that needs to be done to enable a more just and equal world. But this principle of being willing to cause unhappiness cannot be upheld by being assumed to refer only to the unhappiness of others. It is possible that we do not register some situations because to register those situations would make us unhappy. Maybe that is why the killjoy appears: because we are desperate not to register what she notices. Maybe this is why the killjoy appears to those who profess to be killjoys: our happiness too might depend on what we do not notice. *Perhaps we keep our happiness through a willed oblivion. We must refuse this oblivion.*⁴⁴

Closer attention to the euphemisms and excuses that attend so many scholarly discussions of Chaumpaigne's initial accusations of *raptus* can help to disrupt the feedback loop in place between our enjoyment of Chaucer's bawdy humor and our reluctance to confront the darkest episode in his life-records. In particular, the vocabulary used by Plucknett, Gardner, and Ross—which resonates so strikingly with Chaucer's own language in the *Reeve's Tale*—can illuminate how Chaucer's ability and reputation as a bawdy humorist contribute to the "willed oblivion" at work in scholarship related to his life and work. I quote Ahmed's stirring words here not to suggest that we move forward in the certainty that Chaucer is/was a rapist, that we expel him from the English literary canon, or that we refuse all enjoyment of his work, but rather that we move forward open to the willingness to kill our own joy, that we practice

43. On the problems attached to reading Chaucer's literary works in light of his biography, see, for example, Kennedy, "Re-Creating Chaucer," 62; and Morrison, "The Use of Biography."

44. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 259 (my emphasis).

inhabiting a constant state of readiness to do so.⁴⁵ This requires that we refuse the oblivion that enjoyment can depend on, and that it can reinforce in ourselves and those around us. Such refusal might take several forms. We might begin by confronting (rather than avoiding) the ways that our own discomfort and hesitation might be shaping our critical engagement with Chaucer's life and work. For example, do we, like Plucknett, balk at the language of rape and assault when referring to Chaumpaigne's accusations, or when discussing the nonconsensual sex of the *Reeve's Tale*? If so, why? These uncomfortable moments have the potential to be informative—they deserve our curiosity.

We should also be prepared to think more deeply about the many different functions that obscene comedy can perform. For example, in his recent study of laughter's role in the *Miller's Tale*, Alfie Bown pushes back against Bakhtinian readings of the tale's obscene comedy as "liberating" by drawing attention to laughter's ability to function "as what Julia Kristeva would call an 'abjecting' force, something which creates identity by banishing and rejecting the 'other.'"⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Louise D'Arcens's work on "comic medievalism" reminds us of the importance of distinguishing the act of laughing *at* from the act of laughing *with*, a distinction that becomes particularly weighty if we apply it to the vectors in play in Chaucer's obscene comedy.⁴⁷ Scholarly perspectives such as these offer us an opportunity to better understand how Chaucer's work has been enjoyed in the past, as well as how it continues to be enjoyed in the present.

Refusing the oblivion of enjoyment is particularly urgent in the case of an author such as Chaucer, whose works are rendered enjoyable in part by his skillful use of obscene humor. Carissa Harris has shown how male laymen in Chaucer's *fabliaux* use obscene storytelling to "dehumanize women, to bond intimately with one another, to compete viciously with one another, and to

45. As Ahmed points out, the fear that problems pointed out by the killjoy might lead to some kind of "loss" frequently lies behind the arguments of those who take issue with the killjoy's critiques: "The killjoy exists in close proximity to the figure of the oversensitive subject who is too easily offended. This figure is always evoked whenever social critique is successful: that something has been closed down or removed or lost (a loss that is mourned) because others are offended, where to be offended is to be too easily offended, to be weak, soft, impressionable. . . . Indeed this figure of the oversensitive subject might come up in advance of such a loss, or to avoid such a loss. The moral panic over trigger warnings often evokes this figure, specifically the figure of the oversensitive student who is not attuned to the difficulty and discomfort of learning, as if to say: if we let your sensitivities become law, we lose our freedom. I would argue that freedom has become reduced to the freedom to be offensive, which is also about how those with power protect their right to articulate their own views, no matter what, no matter whom" (*Living a Feminist Life*, 262).

46. Alfie Bown, "Apes and Japes: Laughter and Animality in the *Miller's Tale*," *postmedieval* 8 (2017): 463–78, at 464.

47. Louise D'Arcens, *Comic Medievalism: Laughing at the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, U.K., 2014), esp. at 3–22.

authorize violence against women and aggression against other men,” a phenomenon she terms “felawe masculinity.”⁴⁸ By pointing towards the pedagogical and social effects of obscene discourse within Chaucer’s *fabliaux*, Harris also shows us how and why our own enjoyment of Chaucer’s obscene comedy matters. As Ahmed notes, “humor is such a crucial technique for reproducing inequality and injustice.”⁴⁹ This is precisely why we need to take it so seriously:

It is often through humor (say through irony or satire) that people can keep making sexist and racist utterances. Humor creates the appearance of distance; by laughing about what they repeat, they repeat what they laugh about. This *about* becomes the butt of the joke. It is no laughing matter. When it is no laughing matter, laughter matters.⁵⁰

This is, of course, precisely the problem with the kind of laughter that underlies the euphemistic, dismissive references to alleged or fictional sexual assault by scholars such as Plucknett, Gardner, and Ross, much of which is grounded in a toxically masculine perspective. What we laugh at in Chaucer’s obscene comedy matters. Why and how we laugh matters.

This is not simply a scholarly or critical issue; it is an urgent pedagogical issue, as Tison Pugh has eloquently shown. In the context of a discussion of how best to approach topics like the charge of *raptus* against Chaucer when teaching the author’s work, Pugh observes that

Whether human authors acted unethically as lone agents, or whether they participated in culturally systemic forms of oppressing the Other, these ghostly authorial presences often disrupt the pleasures of the text through their anachronistic presence in relation to today’s ethical values.⁵¹

It is worth noting that, in referring to his own enjoyment of Chaucer’s work, Pugh alludes specifically to its deployment of obscene humor: “how could we not enjoy the company of someone so outrageously funny, so brilliantly adept at deploying scatological humor in the service of cultural and societal

48. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 30.

49. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 261.

50. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 261.

51. Pugh, “Chaucer’s Rape,” 570.

critiques?" As he asks, "What do we do, then, when our favorite authors and historical figures are irredeemable to our modern values?"⁵²

To some extent, the question of precisely what happened between Chaumpaigne and Chaucer (which we will almost certainly never know) is irrelevant to my point. What matters is that our enjoyment of Chaucer's obscene humor is one of many conditions that have long existed that continue to shape our reading of that alleged assault. Even if we cannot bring ourselves to kill that enjoyment entirely, we must be able to look it in the eye and examine it critically. To adapt Pugh's argument, "we need an ethical understanding of the submerged tensions inherent in [reading and writing about] literature we love written by people we might not even like," or who may have done horrible things.⁵³ It is easy to be lulled by the idea that Chaucer's obscene humor is "good fun." But hopefully by drawing attention to how that lulling has shaped, and *can* shape our writing about Chaucer, we can prevent ourselves and others from thoroughly succumbing to its allure.

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52. Pugh, "Chaucer's Rape," 571.

53. Pugh, "Chaucer's Rape," 571.