

Reading Rape in The Canterbury Tales
by
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Aviseth yow, and put me out of blame – And eek men shal noght make ernest of game (1. 3185-3186).¹

How is a 21st century feminist to read violence toward women in *The Canterbury Tales*? Although the text itself invites us to laugh at or ignore rape and other forms of gendered violence, particularly in the fabliaux, I believe the tension between “ernest” and “game” invites an inquiry that neither discounts the genius of the text nor overlooks the sexual violence.

As readers, we are directed to see sexual violence as “pley,” something that makes us laugh. In fact, the fabliau genre invites this response. The Reeve-narrator in telling about the rape of Malin by Alein, very quickly (in a matter of one line) turns the readers attention away from the rape with the direction: “Now pley, Alein, for I wol speke of John” (1. 4198). What follows is a skillfully crafted and very funny scene the end of which lands the miller’s wife in John’s bed, where she too is raped: “He priketh harde and depe as he were mad” (1. 4231). It’s all highly amusing but it’s not just amusing. It’s also uncomfortable, likely more so in the body of the female reader.

“Only joking” is a common way that we deflect the contentious, uncomfortable and taboo, yet it’s exactly this underlying seriousness that creates an anxiety that makes the humour work. Michael Billig in a discussion of humour from a Freudian perspective notes society’s requirement that aggressive and sexual instincts be repressed and that jokes “bear the traces of repressed desires”² and where “sexual and aggressive thoughts, which are forbidden in polite society, can be shared as if they are not

¹ All citations of *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Penguin Press, 2005).

² Michael Billig, “Freud and the Language of Humour,” *The Psychologist* Volume 14, No. 9 (September 2002): 452.

serious.”³ There is something “earnest” hidden behind the “pley,” the “game.” It’s what makes the joke work.

In an introduction to her article, “*Reading Chaucer Reading Rape*,” Christine M. Rose suggests the need for a model of double reading, where one would understand and appreciate how the trope of rape contributes to the aesthetic of the work while at the same time not diminishing its horror, keeping the violation at the forefront. She asks that we hold the tension between the actual and the metaphoric without privileging or resisting either: “Such a critical reading practice ensures the empowerment of readers who must see the real rape and its figurative meanings as part of the art of Chaucer and of how, as a man of his age, he reinscribes the anxiety over sexual control of women prevalent in his culture.”⁴

Underlying the *Tales*, but at times easily forgotten, is the fact that this is a pilgrimage. This ragtag bunch of characters “to Caunterbury they wende/The holy blisful martyr for to seke” (1. 17-18). I think it’s crucial to keep this in mind because an important theme in *The Canterbury Tales* is power, who has it, who doesn’t. One must recall that Thomas Becket, the “blisful martyr” was murdered for daring to place Church authority over the rights of kings. Rape too situates itself within the arena of aggression and power. As such, it stands in not just for the helplessness of women in terms of actual rape and other violence, but also for the more universal theme of helplessness in confronting a disorderly and uncontrollable world and the anxieties inherent in this human condition. And the desire to control it. It’s a theme established early in *The Knight’s Tale* with Theseus’ preoccupation and intense busyness as he attempts to restore order from chaos, a preoccupation with which he was never fully successful at resolving despite all his efforts. It produces a tension, an anxiety.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Christine M. Rose. “Introduction,” in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 8.

In “*Playing in the Dark*,” African-American novelist, Toni Morrison, explores how white American literature in its encounter with the Africanist “other” has been shaped by that encounter. I believe it’s a relevant inquiry also in terms of men writing about women. She admits that as a reader she had long assumed that black characters were peripheral, that they weren’t included in any sense that really mattered, rather “when they were there, they were decorative – displays of the agile writer’s technical expertise.”⁵ And further, she could see how she was complicit in reading in a way that the author was directing. But from a writer’s perspective she began to view these peripheral characters differently: “As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious.”⁶ I would suggest that one could substitute here “text” for “dream” and “author” for “dreamer.” And further that the “other” that Morrison refers to in terms of the peripheral black character in white American literature applies similarly to “woman as other” in *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories written by a man for a primarily male audience.

I would not go so far as to agree with Roland Barthes’ assertion in his article, “*Death of the Author*,” that literature is so “tyrannically centered on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions”⁷ that we therefore need to rid ourselves of him entirely. The reason for my disagreement relates to what Toni Morrison is getting at. I don’t agree with Barthes that the author’s power is such that it “impose[s] a stop clause”⁸ on the text or “close[s] the writing.”⁹ Rather I would agree with Morrison in this regard:

⁵ Toni Morrison, “Playing in the Dark,” in *Literary Theory, An Anthology, Third Edition*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1169.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Literary Theory, An Anthology, Third Edition*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 519.

⁸ Ibid, 521.

⁹ Ibid.

that one can sense the unconscious fears of the author in *The Canterbury Tales*. I believe there's much Freudian id-ness at "play" with his desires and fears with regard to women being displaced onto his characters in a sometimes "earnest" manner. As Morrison says, once you see it, it requires "hard work *not* to see this."¹⁰ I believe Christine Rose's model of double reading might be applied also in thinking about the reader/author divide, recognizing the importance of both while privileging neither.

Complementary to what Morrison is suggesting, Mark Ledbetter in his article, "*Doing Violence to the Body: an Ethic of Reading and Writing*," proposes that the "ethic of writing is to discover and to make heard silenced voices; an ethic of reading is to hear those voices."¹¹ He also advises that we look to the places in a narrative that are interrupted, disrupted or seem to be mere distractions as potential moments of "ethical discovery,"¹² or the narrative's "most profound and defining moment[s]."¹³

When it comes to "woman as other," *The Canterbury Tales* provide ample opportunity to listen to the lost voices by paying attention to the peripheral female characters. We can more finely attune our listening by untangling literal violence from its use as a literary device that transmutes rape to metaphor or that looks like it is simply moving the master plot along. Key themes important to the master plot in *The Canterbury Tales* are about power focused on male bonding and/or rivalry, crimes against property (including women) and rivalry between classes.

The Knight's Tale begins the pilgrimage stories and establishes some of these key themes. At the same time it invites a double reading of the text, as recommended by Rose; paying attention to the importance of the peripheral characters, as recommended

¹⁰ Toni Morrison, "Playing in the Dark," in *Literary Theory, An Anthology, Third Edition*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 1169.

¹¹ Mark Ledbetter, *Victims and the postmodern narrative, or, doing violence to the body: an ethic of reading and writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

by Morrison; and slowing down to wonder about the disrupted moments as places of important discovery, as recommended by Ledbetter.

Through the use of a literary device called *occupatio*, early on we're made acutely aware of the dangerous nature of women and the threat they pose to men in the Knight-narrator's description of "the grete bataille for the nones/Bitwixen Athenes and Amazones/ And how asseged was Ypolita" (1. 879-881). A detailed description of the fierce battle between the Amazon women and the Athenians goes on for close to twenty lines, this after the narrator has claimed that the story is "nere to long to heere" (1. 875). *Occupatio* calls attention to itself by telling of that thing that you're pretending you're not going to mention. It signals a peripheral yet important disrupted moment. Although on the surface the Knight is treating the "bataille" as incidental, we as readers know that it bears deeper significance. That's the nature of the device. At this point in the narrative, Hippolyta and Emily are still the spoils of war, not yet securely established domestically within Athenian society and Theseus' household. Clearly they are fierce, war-like, powerful adversaries and, as such, absolutely a threat to the warrior man. It's a threat that Theseus needs to conquer, first on the battlefield and later by domesticating them within marriage. And while an actual rape is not directly described in *The Knight's Tale*, the overpowering, kidnapping and forced marriage of Hippolyta certainly is that. But it occurs somewhere else, in the margins.

Juxtaposed equally against the anxiety of the warrior man about the strong, warrior woman who needs to be tamed is another anxiety, that of the temptress woman.

Although some of the garden imagery in the later tales, especially the allegorical ones, seem to allude to Guillaume de Lorris' "*Romance of the Rose*," in this earlier tale the imagery seems more Eden-like. We have young, innocent, virginal Emily enclosed in a beautiful garden, "at the sonne-upriste,/ She walketh up and doun, and as hir liste/She gadreth floures, party white and rede/ To make a subtil gerland for hir hede,/And as an

aungel hevenisshly she song" (1. 1051-1055). Read metaphorically, the reference to the "garland for hir hede" could allude to Christ's crown of thorns at his crucifixion, the "rede" of the flowers to his blood, and the "white" to humanity's lost innocence caused by the original sin Christ was sent to redeem. Yet here in this garden before the fall, Emily seems innocent, still guilt free. But she poses a threat because unbeknownst to her, prisoner Palamon "thurgh a window" (1. 1075) sees her in the garden below and tells Arcite: "The fairnesse of that lady that I se/Yond in the gardin romen to and fro/Is cause of al my cryinge and my wo" (1. 1099-1100). It reminds us of the temptation of Adam by Eve in the Garden of Eden and how it has been interpreted by many as the cause of all of our human suffering and woe. The plot turns on this moment. Emily as a "real" woman is one-dimensional, the idealized woman, one for whom in the courtly model men will fight and die. Yet, she's totally unaware of the twist in the master plot that her appearance has just maneuvered. The plot turns away from her and to the important theme of male bonding and rivalry between Palamon and Arcite. They (and the story) are less interested in the female object of desire, Emily, than they are on besting each other and proving their masculinity. How dangerous this woman's sensual/sexual temptation will be for them, deadly in fact for one whose "rede" blood will be spilled.

Another question comes up in this tale with regard to marriage. How are we to read the literal implications of the forced marriage of Emily to Palamon at the end of the tale? Rape is an act of power that exists on a continuum of violence and I think we do need to consider the control of women's sexuality through marriage as an aspect of that violence. This theme is explored in a much more clear and violent way in *The Merchant's Tale*; however, in a subtle and therefore more insidious form, we can read it here as well. In her prayer to the Goddess Diana, Emily is clear about her desire "to been a maiden al my life,/Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wif" (1. 2304-2306). Yet in the end, she has no choice but to acquiesce to the demands of Theseus and the Gods (or God) and marry Palamon. She, like her warrior sister, is domesticated and her sexuality

contained and controlled within the bounds of marriage. It's presented as a happy ending.

The Reeve's Tale provides the clearest example of how Chaucer very quickly and skillfully wields humour to displace actual rape for other concerns. The rape of Malin by Alein is called "pley" by the Reeve-narrator; however, as in *The Knight's Tale* the actual rape is peripheral to the key concerns of the male characters. On the surface, the conflict between the miller, Simken, and the two clerks is about the theft of their grain, so a crime against property. So raping women is equated with stealing grain, suggesting that both are equally property of the men in this eye-for-an-eye equation. In fact, Alein explains his entitlement to Malin's body as a lawful act: "Again my los,/ I will have esement"(1. 4184-4185). The rape is interpreted also as "not-rape" by the Reeve-narrator but rather as the student's "quyting" of the miller for his own greediness and social pretensions and concludes, "Thus is the proude miller well ybete" (1. 4313-18). Rape here is revenge between men, a playing out of their power.

In this essay, I make no attempt at knowing the mind of the author and whether or not he presents a positive or negative view of women. Where would I look? To Chaucer the man, Chaucer the poet, or Chaucer the pilgrim? Although I sense he may have had some misogynist views of women, it's only a gut feeling. A gendered gut feeling. I think the question remains highly ambiguous in the text itself, and beyond the scope of this paper.

Neither do I make an apology for running the risk of being seen as having a poor sense of humour by pointing out gendered violence in *The Canterbury Tales*. As a reader, I too feel the tension between "ernest" and "game." And as a female reader, I acknowledge that I read with my real 21st century feminist body and that I enter the world of *The Canterbury Tales* with my own experiences of gender violence. I agree with Christine Rose that the tension between the two must *both* be present in the readings we do. In

fact, she would say that the “ironic interplay of the multiple facets of ‘erdest’ and ‘game’ ... can and should serve to demonstrate the elasticity of the poetry and its continuing appeal to interpreters of different eras, ideologies, and aesthetic agendas.”¹⁴

I believe that bringing modern sensibilities to bear on the text enriches the conversations about it and ensures its relevance for generations of women to come.

¹⁴Christine M. Rose. “Reading Chaucer Reading Rape,” in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 23.