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Criseyde, Consent, and the #MeToo Reader

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Criseyde, Consent, and the #MeToo Reader

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Abstract

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* features prankish sexual humour wrapped into a romantic comedy love-plot, in which sexual misconduct is coded as harmless fun. Generations of readers have interpreted book three's consummation scene as a delightfully humorous, entertaining escapade. But in order for the episode to be interpreted as comedic, the reader must be willing to accept certain premises about gender norms and sexual violence. The cultural misconception of rape as an attack perpetrated by a stranger as well as social norms giving license to male aggression with "certain kinds" of women have resulted in benign interpretations of the sexual encounter in book three. Our students, the #MeToo readers of the 2020s, will be attuned to the assumptions of rape culture expressed in *Troilus and Criseyde*. The #MeToo movement offers instructors a contemporary repertoire of narratives for discussing gender biases of past and present and for considering how the persistence of those biases fueled a cultural reckoning in 2018.

In a 2018 essay published in *The New Yorker*, Molly Ringwald discusses her ambivalence toward the John Hughes movies of the 1980s that launched her acting career. She acknowledges her debts to Hughes and his remarkable talent in making movies that were touchstones of their times, like *Sixteen Candles* (1984) and *The Breakfast Club* (1985). But she recognizes that after #MeToo, the films' problematic gendered messaging can no longer be ignored. Acts of sexual aggression are normalized and encouraged, being reduced to a prank or punch line. Such acts work to validate a male character's masculinity or to favourably advance his romantic interest. The sexually violated female is either reduced to a comic prop, if she is a minor character, or romantically won over, if she is the male protagonist's love interest. Ringwald observes that the social norms of the 1980s caused her to overlook these troubling dynamics, but in hindsight, with the benefit of life experience and changes in social attitudes, she now recognizes the ways that the films authorize masculine aggression. Observing that art shapes cultural attitudes about gender, Ringwald ends her essay by advocating that the films continue to be watched, but situated in critical conversations that would address both the oversights and insights found within Hughes's narratives of teenage experience (Ringwald).

Like the teen movies of the 1980s, Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* features prankish sexual humour wrapped into a romantic comedy love-plot, in which sexual misconduct is coded as harmless fun. The narrative arc pivots around Troilus and Criseyde's first sexual encounter, an event that is micromanaged through a sequence of compromised male observers who frame her, by turns, as alluring and shameless. Generations of readers have engaged with the consummation scene of *Troilus and Criseyde* in book three as a delightfully humorous, entertaining escapade, in which the ingenious Pandarus helps his sexually inexperienced friend to get a girl into bed, irrespective of her wishes. But in order for the episode to be interpreted as comedic, the reader must either ignore Criseyde's repeated refusals of sex or interpret them as meaningless token gestures. Like the audiences of 1980s teen movies, the reader of *Troilus* is asked to accept certain ideas about gender: that male friendship involves helping a friend toward sexual access, and that the kind of girl who has sex forced upon her is to be blamed for her carelessness and has no right to complain (Grady). Persistent misconceptions of rape as an attack perpetrated by a stranger, social norms giving license to male aggression with "certain kinds" of women, and the comic framing of the sexual scene in *Troilus and Criseyde* have resulted in benign interpretations, which ignore the innuendos of sexual capture and shift blame toward Criseyde's conduct.

The #MeToo movement has helped to foster social awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual aggression, as well as the ways it has been perpetuated by harmful gender stereotypes. In the aftermath of this cultural reckoning, it is no longer possible to overlook or rationalize the ways that Chaucer's *Troilus* aestheticizes predatory sexual behaviors; it is no longer possible to reduce book three's consummation scene to humorous or harmless shenanigans. Our students, the #MeToo readers of the 2020s, will be attuned to the assumptions of rape culture at work in Chaucer's narrative, since they have come of age in a climate of social activism.[1] Thus, the current moment forms a uniquely

[1] Carissa M. Harris's work has been groundbreaking in analyzing the assumptions of rape culture at work in medieval fabliaux, insult poetry, and pastourelles. Her monograph, *Obscene Pedagogies* offers a framework for navigating between sexual violence of past and present.

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advantageous time for instructors and students to have conversations about the problematic gender biases evident in Chaucer's text and to reflect on ways that the persistence of such attitudes fueled the feminist digital activism of 2018. The #MeToo era has generated in popular media a series of thought-provoking conversations about gendered norms: about the ways that female testimony has been silenced or disrespected, about the ways that masculine aggression has been sanctioned and normalized, and about the legal and ethical dimensions that inform sexual encounters. I propose that the cultural conversations around gender bias, rape culture, and affirmative consent, which unfolded in response to #MeToo, might be productively recruited to inform a contemporary reading of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* within the context of classroom conversations.

#MeToo: Recognizing Gender Bias

Before one embarks upon a #MeToo reading of *Troilus and Criseyde*, it may be useful to begin by situating the movement in context, so as to address preconceptions about it as a "witch hunt" or a "crusade against any form of eroticism."[2] #MeToo activism uses social media to bring sexual violence into the cultural spotlight, so as to honour the silenced and disbelieved testimony of victim-survivors (Mendes, Ringroes, and Keller 236-37; Boyle 1-5). Given the particular history of denial, cultural taboo, and shaming associated with this social issue, the opportunity to share stories about sexual violence in an affirmative setting represents a major cultural watershed.[3]

#MeToo has been driven by collective frustration with the legal and justice systems, which have an inconsistent record of supporting victim testimony and convicting perpetrators. While defenders of the legal system would argue that the privacy inherent to sexual violations makes them difficult to prosecute, more sceptical observers have responded that the social biases of law enforcement lead to flawed investigations, which in turn undermine successful convictions (Doolittle 27-41). The #MeToo movement challenges social biases within the justice system that have historically devalued women's testimony: for instance, the impulse toward "slut-shaming," which criticizes women perceived as being too sexual, and "victim-blaming," which insinuates that the complainant is responsible for her assault. Questions about what the woman was wearing, about her unrelated sexual history, about whether she fought her assailant with sufficient force—all serve to shift the burden of moral responsibility away from the perpetrator's aggression and toward the woman's conduct. These questions reflect the attitudes of "rape culture," which enables sexual violence by scrutinizing female behaviour, while rationalizing male aggression as natural, excusable, or understandable (Powell and Henry 2-8). Furthermore, such questions are irrelevant to determining whether sexual assault took place. As an important reminder: since the legal definitions of sexual assault differ among jurisdictions, it may be advisable for an instructor to familiarize themselves with the definitions relevant to their location, so that any inaccurate cultural perceptions that students may hold can be corrected.[4]

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[2] Michael Haneke described #MeToo as a "witch hunt" that "should be left in the Middle Ages"(Mumford). It would be interesting to consider in a class discussion what "Middle Ages" means in this rhetorical context and how the description may or may not fit the dynamics of #MeToo activism.

[3] It should be noted that advocacy for survivors of sexual violence did not emerge with #MeToo. However, as Karen Boyle notes, "what makes the #MeToo moment distinctive is less the speaking out… but rather the extent to which some of these stories have been widely *heard*"(5).

[4] The recent changes to Title IX, released by the US Department of Education, define sexual harassment as "any unwelcome conduct that a reasonable person would find so severe, pervasive and objectively offensive that it denies a

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In the face of prevailing gender bias, #MeToo has managed to turn the logic of social shaming against the patriarchy itself. Driven by a desire for accountability, but also retaliation, the movement deploys the radicalized justice of social media to identify and shame alleged perpetrators.[5] #MeToo demands that the gendered power imbalance in professional settings be acknowledged. The movement also demands that the dynamics of unwelcomed sexual humour or sexual advances be recognized as an abuse of social privilege rather than as harmless flirtation or innocent humour. And #MeToo forces powerful men to stand accountable for their misconduct. Women have long understood how insinuations of indecency can ruin one's reputation; in 2018 men discovered that as well.

Rather than focussing on the retaliatory dimensions of #MeToo, which is potentially alienating, it would be more productive to frame the discussion about #MeToo as an opportunity for all gender identities to become engaged as allies and "conscious resistors" (Bertram and Crowley 66). Whereas in the past sexual violence prevention was addressed as a woman's problem to be navigated by female self-defence and precaution, the #MeToo movement advocates that sexual violence prevention be framed as a social problem to be addressed by collective resolve (Powell and Henry 2-3). The pathway toward allyship invites us to recognize the dangers inherent to certain ideals of masculinity and to resist cultural attitudes that lead to gendered harassment (Flood 285-86). It requires us to recognize the intersectional nature of sexual violence, which disproportionately affects members of racial minorities and the LGBTQ community. It requires us to recognize the African-American origins of Me Too as an expression coined by Tamara Burke to advocate for women of colour who were survivors of sexual violence.[6] Any attempt to foster authentic allyship for victim-survivors must "challenge race- and class-based illusions" and "understand sexual violence as a prism linking various forms of oppression" (Bertram and Crowley 66-67).

Promoting a climate of mutual respect is foundational to sexual violence prevention. Over the last number of years, prevention strategies on college campuses have sought not only to address attitudes that would otherwise normalize sexual violence but also to educate students about the legal and ethical dimensions of sexual consent (Powell and Henry 3; Tamburri and Samson; Doolittle 67-74). A study of sexual assault on Canadian campuses, for instance, found that the most powerful variable predicting the prevalence of sexually abusive behavior was not alcohol consumption but rather the attitudes of male peer groups. Men were more likely to engage in sexual coercion if their male friends held views that normalized the use of force against women and that pressured men to be sexually active to verify their masculinity (Schwartz et al. 625). Since the social assumptions of male peer groups play a critical role in sexual violence prevention, it is vitally important to anatomize the

person equal educational access" (Anderson). For definitions of sexual violence and sexual consent, see the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention Guidelines (Basile et al. 11-14).

[5] The retaliatory inflections are more obvious in France, where #MeToo is expressed as "#BalanceTonPorc" or "swing your pig" (Donadio).

[6] One criticism of #MeToo is that it has focused on "economically and racially privileged US women in mainstream media coverage" while overlooking the stories of Black women (Boyle 4-5). Further, Ritty Lukose cautions that the universalizing tendencies of Western feminist movements risk flattening the diverse expressions of feminism found globally.

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power structures of gender bias and rape culture found in Chaucer's *Troilus* within a classroom context and thereby disrupt their potential to normalize patterns of domination and harassment.

Troilus and Criseyde: Recognizing Gender Bias

The gendered biases coded within *Troilus and Criseyde* are mobilized to pigeonhole Criseyde as manipulative and to dispose the reader to regard her as insincere, even in contexts where she resists sexual pressuring. As Carolyn Dinshaw noted, the "massive explanatory effort" (45) deployed by the text's various male voices collaborate to shift the moral burden of responsibility toward female behaviour and away from male aggression. Chaucer's narrator reveals his gendered biases when he directs the reader's scrutiny to evaluate Criseyde's conduct. He introduces Criseyde through her tainted reputation as she who "forsook" (1.56) Troilus, thus preemptively judging her for actions not yet taken. The narrator's commentary reveals his own fraught attitudes toward women. He is by turns smitten with, patronizing toward, and dismissive of Criseyde.[7] The narrator's interjections and asides claim to defend Criseyde, but they actually engender suspicions and sow doubts in the reader's mind (Dinshaw 45). For instance, when Criseyde sees Troilus ride by her house for the first time, her gaze lingers with admiration over his impressive physique (2.631-37). Chaucer's narrator interjects and draws the reader's attention to her sensation of sexual desire, announcing to the reader that Criseyde *only began* to love Troilus and that one ought not judge her for being an immodest woman (2.666-79). This defense is either inept or disingenuous, since it serves to rhetorically link Criseyde with immodesty, and so by extension encourages the reader to hold that association.[8] The narrator has already informed the reader that Criseyde is a widow, which is to say, a woman with a sexual history, and so one suspects that Chaucer is conjuring the unchaste woman stereotype, thereby insinuating that Criseyde's sexual history predisposes her to desire intimacy with Troilus.[9] In the events leading to book three's consummation scene, when Pandarus escorts Troilus into Criseyde's sleeping quarters and pressures Criseyde to sleep with the prince, the narrator asks a rhetorical question: why didn't Criseyde ask Troilus to get up from her bed? (3.967). In other words, why didn't Criseyde resist Pandarus's coercion or Troilus's advances more forcefully? This rhetorical strategy is a classic example of victim-blaming, as the narrator shifts responsibility away from male aggression and toward Criseyde's response. The narrator suggests that had Criseyde acted more cautiously or if she had resisted sexual pressure more assertively, then she would have avoided harm. #MeToo has prompted us to recognize that a society that frames rape prevention as a woman's problem is one that will fault

[7] Carolyn Dinshaw and Gretchen Mieszkowski both outline ways that twentieth-century male literary critics echoed the narrator's prejudices. Dinshaw demonstrates the masculine biases directing Donaldson's interpretations (35-39). Mieszkowski summons an especially damning quotation, in which Donaldson claims Criseyde has "almost all the qualities that men might hope to encounter in their first loves" (Donaldson 1132; qtd in Mieszkowski 2007, 307).

[8] A similar rhetorical gesture is evident in D.W. Robertson's statement that Criseyde is "no gay deceiver, no strumpet, and no mere graceless wench" (499). The sequence of comparisons invites the reader to consider her in these disparaging terms.

[9] The stereotype that women with a sexual history are predisposed to crave sex is by no means limited to medieval culture. Robyn Doolittle draws attention to a legal case in the 1990s involving a seventeen-year-old female who was sexually assaulted in a parking lot by a thirty-year-old man. The provincial judge found in favor of the accused, writing in his ruling that the complainant had a baby, was living with her boyfriend, and so she was hardly "in a bonnet and crinolines" as a sexually active female. The Canadian Supreme Court overturned the lower court's ruling and criticized the lower court judge for introducing the complainant's unrelated sexual history into his adjudication of the assault (Doolittle, 47-49).

the woman for the sexual violation that she sustains (Mardorossian 751). An instructor might invite a class to consider ways in which the persistent interrogation of Criseyde's character finds contemporary correlations, for instance, in memes or social media comments that use humor to reinforce gender stereotypes that denigrate or shame women (Drakett).

#MeToo and Rape Culture

In spite of the narrator's attempts to direct attention to Criseyde's conduct, it is likely that students will recognize the egregious liberties taken by Pandarus, and Troilus by extension, which the narrator blithely accepts as normative. The allegations of sexual misconduct that surfaced in 2017 and 2018 have parallels with Pandarus's predatory designs and remind us that the cultural disregard for female consent has a tenacious longevity. Pandarus's role in trafficking a woman for the pleasure of a royal prince resembles the charges brought against Jeffrey Epstein, who lured young women to his large estates under false pretences, so that they would be "loaned out" to rich and powerful men (Lewis). Pandarus's language of stalking and conquest recall the actions of Harvey Weinstein or Les Moonves playing cat-and-mouse games with junior colleagues or aspiring actresses who believed that their professional lives would be sabotaged if they refused to participate (Lee; Kantor and Twohey 2017). The secret passageways and trapdoors allowing Pandarus to stage the sexual encounter between Troilus and Criseyde are perhaps not unlike the devices used by Matt Lauer to conceal his workplace misconduct; Laurer installed a secret button in his office desk allowing him to lock his door from a distance and thus hide his interactions with female employees (Setoodeh and Wagmeister). The very fact that a mechanism of concealment would be part of the room's design is a telling indicator of regularized misconduct. As is the case with many sexual predators, Pandarus's most effective method of psychological coercion is his threat to publicly discredit the victim, Criseyde. This is how an abuse of power works: the perpetrator's misconduct is protected by the victim's shame and silence, because the victim risks losing everything in speaking the truth. The victim is the one whose testimony will be contested and trivialized, while the perpetrator remains protected by his authority and continues to reap the benefits of power.[10] As Amy Israel observed, Harvey Weinstein's serial harassment continued undetected for so many years because he intimidated victims into tacit compliance: "He counted on my shame to keep me silent" (Kantor and Twohey 2019, 61).

Troilus and Criseyde and Rape Culture

Similar strategies of surreptitious coercion occur in the fictional world of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Pandarus's predatory mentality is first revealed when he discovers Troilus's affections for Criseyde and declares enthusiastically, "Here bygynneth game" (1.868). Pandarus regards Criseyde as an object of sport or conquest. "Criseyde is a deer to be driven by the beater, Pandarus, to the hunter's station where Troilus will be waiting in hiding to shoot down his prey" (Mieszkowski 2006, 147). Following the logic of this hunting metaphor, Criseyde becomes a prize to be stalked for aristocratic amusement. She is forced to participate in a sport that threatens to jeopardize her one piece of social capital: her reputation as a "respectable woman." Having little regard for Criseyde's autonomy, Pandarus sets in motion his plans

[10] This observation paraphrases the testimony of Megan Brown, who explains the difficulty she faced in bringing forward allegations that, while still under the legal age of consent, she was groomed for sex by her coach (Doyle).

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to sexually "loan out" his niece to his royal friend.[11] Pandarus devises elaborate contrivances to catch and corner Criseyde, for instance, the secret passageway (3.759) in his house that allows him to usher Troilus into the guestroom where Criseyde sleeps.[12] Criseyde finds herself ambushed and alone, having been trapped by Pandarus's predatory stratagem.

But among his many manoeuvres, the most effective contrivance is the climate of secrecy and fear that he conjures. Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde*, the narrative attention to architectural spaces, particularly doorways and windows, works to emphasize the privacy and intimacy of encounters (Stanbury 142); it also creates an atmosphere of insularity and entrapment. When Pandarus sneaks into Criseyde's bedroom before ushering in Troilus, he warns Criseyde not to call her women sleeping nearby for help: "They myghte demen thyng they nevere er thoughte" (3.763). In other words, he threatens to damage her reputation by insinuating their relationship to be incestuous if she tries to resist him. Knowing that Criseyde's conduct will be held to a higher standard than his own, Pandarus plays on Criseyde's fears of social shame to keep her silent. The social distrust of women's testimony is mobilized against Criseyde to restrain her as a compliant participant in Pandarus's erotic designs.

Pandarus's presumed entitlement to Criseyde's intimate self is most strikingly on display in the morning scene that follows the sexual encounter of the titular characters. Pandarus chides Criseyde about her evening activities and then thrusts his arm into the private space between the bed-sheets and her supine body (3.1572-1575); the evasive narrator, citing the need for discretion and brevity, sums up the scene by saying, "Pandarus hath fully his entente" (3.1582). The incestuous quality of this enigmatic encounter has troubled readers, generating various interpretations that either seek to sanitize or to spell out its sexual implications (Mieszkowski 2006, 172-73). Regardless of what actually takes place, the scene underscores the social imbalances empowering Pandarus's predatory activities and constraining Criseyde's agency. Pandarus's pleasure occupies the narrative forefront: his vicarious enjoyment of the previous night's events folds into his now unmediated contact with Criseyde's physicality.[13] Criseyde's pleasure is marginal, if not irrelevant. For all of her liveliness and intelligence, Criseyde is ultimately powerlessness; she exists as a beautiful setting in which the desires of others are realized (Mieszkowski 1991, 112). Pandarus has fully "his entente," namely, his will, his desire; Criseyde's "entente" is interpreted to suit his own.

The close bond between Pandarus and Troilus is problematic, since it allows Pandarus to socialize Troilus into accepting the same casual disregard for women's sexual autonomy. Pandarus and Troilus bond over their shared scheme for seducing Criseyde. By normalizing attitudes of masculine dominance and trivializing female consent, they authorize their own sexually coercive behaviour toward Criseyde. Clear evidence of their indifference to women's agency occurs when Troilus seeks to express his gratitude to Pandarus for acting as a go-between. Troilus offers to give any one of the women from his own family to Pandarus as a form of repayment:

> "I have my faire suster Polixene,

[11] Dinshaw observes that "trafficking in women is a fundamental activity in Troy, and the real power relations are between men" (58); see also Mieszkowski 2006, 147.

[12] As Mieszkowski observes, "Pandarus has created a standard scenario for a rape…. get the woman into a room with a bed, bring in the man, and shut the door" (2006, 166).

[13] As A.C. Spearing comments, "The episode at least makes it unmistakably clear that Pandarus… has gained and is still gaining a vicarious pleasure from the encounter" between Troilus and Criseyde (135).

> Cassandre, Eleyne, or any of the frape—
> Be she nevere so fair or wel yshape,
> Tel me which thow wilt of everychone,
> To han for thyn." (3.409-13)

As a youth with unexamined privilege, Troilus does not recognize the ugly undertones of sexual trafficking that his words express. His unreflective naïveté causes him to be receptive to Pandarus's sexist views, and so the young prince begins to uncritically echo Pandarus's dismissive attitudes toward women, which, in effect, reduce female sexuality to a commodity of exchange. Troilus's initiation into the rites of heterosexual courtship is an initiation into rape culture. The "bromance" between Pandarus and Troilus recalls the dynamics of 1980s teen comedies, in which a good friend is one who helps his friend to find an easy sexual target.[14] It is vitally important to highlight in a classroom setting that the male bonding modelled by Troilus and Pandarus is harmful in the way that it trivializes consent and authorizes sexual aggression.

In the aftermath of #MeToo, after so many disclosures of predatory misconduct, the sparkle of Pandarus's comic genius is undoubtedly tarnished.[15] The #MeToo reader is likely to despise Pandarus with the same intense dislike that Pandarus expresses for Criseyde (5.1732). Given Chaucer's partiality to scatological humour, as well as his personal history with an allegation of sexual misconduct, the medieval poet likely crafted Pandarus's character to be read as entertaining, rather than as morally compromised.[16] Pandarus is the surrogate narrator in the text: he is theatrical and witty; he is quick with clever retorts and ingenious fabrications. He is an outrageous, charismatic character, and his transgressive humour is part of his appeal. Like many accused entertainers in our own time, such as Louis C.K. or Kevin Spacey, he is an artistic maverick, whose disregard of conventional norms becomes repackaged as a performance pitched to entertain through shock-value. In the wake of #MeToo, there has been some collective soul-searching about the ethical demands of audiences—how should we regard or engage with the artistic work of entertainers with histories of sexual misconduct? (Bruinius; Goldberg; Smith). Some of these reflections might be usefully recruited in a classroom setting to guide our students' responses post-#MeToo: we might approach his character with critical distance that resists either demonizing him or being unconsciously drawn into the orbit

[14] This trope is evident in the 1980s film *Sixteen Candles*, but also in the more recent 2005 film *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. In *Sixteen Candles*, the primary love-interest, Jake, presents his drunk, semi-conscious girlfriend, Caroline, to "the Geek" so that the latter can have sex with her; it is clear that a sober Caroline would not give her sexual consent. In *The 40-Year-Old Virgin,* the title character is taken to a nightclub and advised to pursue drunken women since they are easy sexual targets.

[15] See Alfred David's essay as an example of a twentieth-century reader who regards Pandarus's sexual humor as delightfully and unproblematically comic. By contrast, Mieszkowski identifies the ambiguities of interpreting Pandarus's character: "if the poem is seen through the lens of the stories of lust and conquest, he emerges as…. the go-between who is paid off by his vicarious, or even actual share in Troilus's sexual pleasures. If, on the other hand, *Troilus and Criseyde* is seen through the lens of the stories of idealized love, Pandarus's compromising behaviors and incriminating aspects dissolve back into the altogether appropriate role of the helpful friend" (2006, 8).

[16] Chaucer himself was charged with, but not found guilty of, perpetrating sexual violence; for scholarly assessments of this legal case, see studies by Christopher Canon, Susan S. Morrison, and Christine M. Rose. In a teaching article, Tison Pugh asks and addresses the challenging question: "What if Chaucer had indeed been a rapist? How would I encourage my students to negotiate the difficult readerly terrain of enjoying great literature written by bad people?" (569).

of his performative charisma. Such an attitude breaks the entertainer's spell, but it engenders a more attentive, complex, and ethical reading experience.

#MeToo and Sexual Consent

Finally, the #MeToo movement raises—but does not answer—the question: How should the sexes interact now? How do we define the difference between sexual aggression and cajoling, between sexual consent, indifference, and passivity? How do we assess allegations of misconduct so as to avoid supporting baseless accusations or dismissing serious complaints? There is no agreement on these questions, least of all among feminist activists. #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 likely to view the movement as generating a necessary conversation about sexual consent (Doolittle 207-11; Bennett). A number of Op-Ed pieces that appeared in January 2018 illustrate this generational divide. A letter signed by Catherine Deneuve and many others accused #MeToo women of embracing victim identity and of escalating non-events into harassment complaints (Collectif; Safronova). Daphne Merkin, writing in the *New York Times*, lamented that, "We are witnessing the re-moralization of sex, not via the Judeo-Christian ethos but via a legalistic corporate consensus" (Merkin). Margaret Atwood's opinion piece cautioned that #MeToo's vigilante justice collapsed the necessary distinction between accusation and guilt (Atwood). I draw attention to this generational fault line since it may exist between you and your students; so mind the gap.[17]

This same generational divide was evident in responses to the Grace-Aziz Ansari incident, which was transformed into a cultural test-case for mapping the emergent boundaries of #MeToo gender politics.[18] The website Babe.net published the experience of a young woman identified as "Grace" who accused Ansari of sexual misconduct during their date (Way). Caitlin Flanagan argued that the essay was unfairly humiliating to Ansari and that Grace should have more clearly expressed her feelings rather than publicizing "3000 words of revenge porn" after the fact (Flanagan). By contrast, Anna North saw the episode as usefully illustrating all-too-common realities about heterosexual dating (North). For North, the problem is fundamentally a social one: the cultural scripts shaping gendered behaviour need to change (Donegan). The debate surrounding this episode is not so much one of legality—it does not meet the threshold of "sexual assault" as Grace suggested — but rather of identifying the ethical obligations that prospective sexual partners owe to each other. The Grace-Aziz Ansari episode captures the challenge of interpreting sexual dynamics, which inherently involve vulnerability and uncertainty, and unfortunately, at times, abuses of power as well. As a cultural example illustrating the complexity of sexual encounters and the expectations of #MeToo feminism, the Grace-Ansari episode might form a useful analogue for discussing the consummation scene of

[17] Differing generational perceptions of sexual norms may account for the hesitancy of scholarly studies to regard the sexual encounter in book three as a violation. For instance, in her 1980 essay "Troilus' Swoon" Jill Mann focuses on the prince's passivity and disorientation (328) thereby deflecting attention from Pandarus's predatory schemes and vicarious enjoyment of the episode. Elizabeth Robertson's 2001 essay on rape and consent in *Troilus and Criseyde* resists describing the consummation scene as a sexual violation, leaving it ambiguous as "a matter for debate" (301).

[18] For the generational divide of #MeToo, see Doolittle (65-66); for discussions interpreting the Grace-Ansari episode through the #MeToo lens, see Bennett and Shapiro.

Troilus and Criseyde, which includes similar ambiguities about interpreting body language, projecting assumptions, and recognizing underlying social imbalances.[19]

Troilus and Criseyde and Sexual Consent

Many readers have likely read the consummation scene of *Troilus and Criseyde* and assumed Criseyde's willing participation based on their own misconceptions about sexual consent. Criseyde is involved in a romantic relationship with Troilus. She has already accepted him as her suitor (3.155-68), and so, some readers may infer that she accepts him as a sexual partner as well. Criseyde has a sexual history, having been previously married (1.97-98), and so, some may suppose that she was more inclined to welcome sexual intimacy. When Troilus embraces Criseyde, she does not fight back. She does not scream or use physical force to resist him, and so some readers may interpret the absence of physical force as evidence of tacit consent. After the consummation scene, Criseyde continues to correspond and visit with Troilus, which some readers will see as evidence that their sexual intercourse earlier in book three was consensual. Each of these explanations relies upon rape myths, and must be exposed as such. Being involved in a romantic relationship does not guarantee sexual consent.[20] A woman's unrelated sexual history cannot be cited as evidence of her sexual consent. Some victims seize up, becoming immobile or mute in the context of assault and so they cannot physically resist attack (Haskell and Randall, 7-8). Some victims continue to associate with perpetrators after an episode of sexual violence in an attempt to construct normalcy from a relationship in which they feel utterly powerless (Torres). The importance of clarifying these cultural misconceptions about rape with students cannot be overstated.

In book three, Criseyde's affirmative consent is ambiguous, and it is necessary to acknowledge this ambiguity in class conversations. Troilus begins his sexual advance by holding her in his arms, and the narrator represents Criseyde's responses from a distance, observing her trembling body (3.1200-01). Whether she shakes with anticipation, anxiety, or fear is left to the reader's interpretation. Her thoughts and feelings remain strangely, troublingly, inaccessible. Only after Troilus has Criseyde in his arms does she express an evasive acquiescence: "Ne hadde I er, now, my swete herte deere / Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought here" (1210-11). Elaine Tuttle Hansen notes the problem of an omitted, retroactively applied consent: "…we can never determine exactly when—or even if—Criseyde 'yielded,' because her consent is a fiction, one that she is forced to invent, believe in, invoke, and revise at crucial points in order to save face and survive" (Hansen 170). Carissa Harris's work in interpreting Old French pastourelles notes that in episodes where the maiden sustains sexual assault, she is subsequently constructed as expressing thanks for the pleasurable encounter. The improbable, artificial response of gratitude for sexual violence sends a message to the reader that female resistance is a token gesture and not to be taken seriously (Harris 2016, 268). Harris's work draws attention to the need to scrutinize expressions of female consent in medieval narrative, so as to determine whether the woman's voice is psychologically consistent with context or whether it is co-opted by the male author to perpetuate rape myths. In this respect, Geoffrey Gust's reading of the consummation scene

[19] Emily Houlik-Ritchey presents a detailed and innovative lesson plan that asks students to adjudicate the sexual episode between Aleyn and Malyne in "The Reeve's Tale" based on medieval and modern legal codes (104-9); the consummation scene of *Troilus and Criseyde* might also be usefully scrutinized within the rubric that she provides.

[20] One third of sexual assaults are perpetrated by a romantic partner (RAINN).

is problematic, since he interprets Criseyde as enacting "the idealized, sexually aggressive woman that is frequently seen in pornographic/erotic literature" (254). If the reader considers that Criseyde has been tricked and trapped, that she has been intimidated with social shaming, that her refusals have been repeatedly dismissed and ignored, does it seem psychologically plausible that someone coerced in this way would suddenly transform into the assertive "woman on top" (253)? There is a long history of scripting female voices to sanction or obscure the harm of sexual violence, and there is a pedagogical imperative to identify the problems attendant to these ventriloquist acts.[21]

Ringwald asks the question, "How are we meant to feel about art that we both love and oppose?" Her question might well be applied in more specific terms to Chaucer's literary works. How do we engage with Chaucerian sexual humour while recognizing its pernicious influence in trivializing female consent? How do we talk about the consummation scene of *Troilus and Criseyde*, while recognizing that it gives license to sexual coercion? #MeToo activism has generated a rich repertoire of conversations about gendered violence, power imbalances, sexual humour and sexual consent that can be productively introduced to enrich classroom conversations. The various opinion pieces provide a vocabulary for interpreting the moral universe within *Troilus and Criseyde*, and, more importantly, for navigating the ethical challenges found beyond world of the text. Questions of gender roles and sexual consent are inherently difficult to discuss and thus all the more important to address. In many respects, the questions are more valuable for learning than any answers could be: the latter offers the semblance of resolution and closure; the former commissions students to remain attentive to the uncertainties and ethical dimensions of human sexuality as expressed in literature, in individual experience, and in the social realities that mediate between the two.

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[21] A recent example of a perpetrator recasting a sexual assault as erotic pleasure involves an episode that took place on the University of Saskatchewan campus in 2011, in which a young woman, who had lost consciousness after drinking, regained consciousness to find herself being sexually acted upon. At the court trial, one of the men accused with her sexual assault claimed that the complainant had initiated sex by saying to him, "come to me, come to me." The judge dismissed this testimony, as "adolescent fantasy" that was so "utterly contrived" that it was "devoid of merit." The judge convicted him of sexual assault (Poisson and Mathieu).

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