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RAPTUS ET ROMAUNCE

DISCUSSING THE INCONGRUITIES OF CHAUCER
AND FEMINISM

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Discussing the Incongruities of Chaucer and Feminism

TAYLOR MORALES

THIS PAPER SEEKS TO ANALYZE THE INCONGRUOUS NATURE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER AS THE ROMANCE POET AND AS THE COURTIER. IN THIS PAPER, I WILL EXPLORE CHAUCER AS A FEMINIST BY LOOKING AT THE TWO SIDES OF HIS PERSONAGE—PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL. THIS PAPER WILL DELVE INTO THE HISTORY OF *RAPTUS* AND ITS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE AT THE TIME—LOOKING IN PARTICULAR AT THE CASE OF *RAPTUS* BROUGHT AGAINST CHAUCER INVOLVING CECILY CHAUMPAIGNE AND ITS SUBSEQUENT DISMISSAL. MORALES PLANS ON HIGHLIGHTING THE DICHOTOMOUS THEMES OF TWO OF CHAUCER'S WORKS: *THE CANTERBURY TALES* AND *THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN* IN PARTICULAR. THIS PAPER WILL ANALYZE AND CHALLENGE THE ANTIFEMINIST REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN THOSE POEMS FOUND IN *THE CANTERBURY TALES* AS COMPARED TO *THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN*—IN ADDITION TO THE MENTION OF OTHER MISCELLANEOUS WORKS. THIS PAPER WILL ESTABLISH THAT THE INCLUSION OF WOMEN IN CHAUCER'S CONSIDERATION OF HIS AUDIENCE AS WELL AS HIS ENGAGEMENT WITH DIVERSE MODES OF WRITTEN WORD HELPED CATALYZE THE SHIFT FROM THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF WOMEN IN ROMANCE LITERATURE AS COMPARED TO WHAT CAN BE SEEN IN SOME OF HIS LATER WORKS.

The fourteenth century was quite a tumultuous time to be alive in England; the Hundred Years War, Black Death, and Peasants Revolt are just a few examples of the events that occupied this short spread of history. Despite all of this, individuals like Geoffrey Chaucer still managed to produce impactful poetry and literature that are still studied to this day by scholars around the world. One does not think to associate a time of such cultural upheaval as the fourteenth century in England with progressive thoughts like feminism. However, this is not the case as Chaucer took advantage of his position as a well-received romance poet and helped catalyze what I would argue to be the beginning of feminist representation in romance poetry at that time. While it is largely understood that Chaucer, the courtier, perpetuated systems that were inherently anti-feminist and even went so far as to have charges of *raptus* brought against him by individuals of high esteem, it is necessary to look at his contributions to feminism as a poet separate from his personage as a courtier. Feminism—defined as the understanding of women to be autonomous and conscious-minded individuals who exist in a capacity outside of just physicality—was something that was nonexistent within the genre of romance at the time of Chaucer’s career. His shift from the seemingly toxic patriarchal representations in his poems *The Knight’s Tale*, *The Miller’s Tale*, and *The Reeve’s Tale* to the progressive and empathetic depictions of women in *The Legend of Good Women* can only be seen as feministic.

As the succession of King Edward III by ten-year-old Richard II occurred, the ideal time to challenge the status quo had presented itself; a young king coming into power and a shift in the social order of the courts meant more leniency for literary publications. The unrelieved succession of events beginning with the Hundred Years War, Black Death plague, the Statute of Laborers, the Western Schism, and then Peasants Revolt meant there was no respite for English society to stop and think about things as nominal as written work. As new thoughts and cultural norms came and went over this expanse of time, something as outlandish as early feminist theory would be

safe to try out—especially in a medium like romance poetry composed in the vernacular language of Middle English. If early feminism was rejected, it could be chalked up to any number of the societal changes occurring at the time; however, if it stuck, the implications for the succeeding generations of romance poets and women in the realm of literature were great.

In her article titled “The Language of Ravishment in Medieval England,” Caroline Dunn asserts that “understanding *raptus* is the essential starting point for anyone exploring the offenses of rape or abduction in medieval England” (Dunn 87). As it was a highly contentious issue with an ambiguous etymology, *raptus* in the fourteenth century is something that has proven to be difficult for historians to ascertain. As the *raptus* statutes in England at the time were encompassing to the three different facets of the term—sexual assault, abduction, and theft—when dealing with cases brought to the legal system, it is hard to retroactively pinpoint the exact offense that one Geoffrey Chaucer was found guilty of in his case of *raptus* against Cecilia Chaumpaigne in 1380. While she officially dismissed all charges of *raptus* brought against him, it is important to question the actions of Chaucer and the nature of his crime—especially when considering him through the lens of feminism. The verbiage found within Chaumpaigne’s release of Chaucer has been analyzed by many, particularly focusing on the term *de raptu meo* in the document as it “raises the troubling possibility that Chaucer was a rapist” (Cannon 75). Furthermore, the phrase *de raptu meo* “cannot be found in any other document in [the close rolls] during any of these eight years” (Cannon 77). Cannon goes on to say that “there are in fact only two other records in the close rolls in this period that use some form of the verb *rapere*, from which the noun *raptus* is derived, and only one other record in these rolls that actually uses the noun *raptus* itself. The bulk of the releases during these eight years are so vague that in fact that their contents are described in the Calendar of the Close Rolls as general” (Cannon 77). The incongruity of this particular legal terminology as compared to the rest

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of those of similar nature should not be overlooked. Dunn concludes her scholarship by citing, “Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower offers a view of rape that displays these necessary nuances, for he demonstrates that patriarchy was alive and well in later medieval England but that men’s preference for controlling women, along with their frequent ability to do so, did not make rape morally acceptable” (Dunn 115). Because there is no way of truly understanding the implications of Chaucer’s engagement with *raptus* as a result of the intrinsic nuances present in the term itself, we should take Gower’s lead in acknowledging that because of the nature of the patriarchy in the contemporary society they lived in, there was an affinity for such ravishments that were more normalized than that of what our society accepts today. This understanding does not then free Chaucer from any retroactive judgements but rather allows for future readers and historians to engage with his work in such a way that is mindful of the possibilities of his case of *raptus* while still considering the environment and society that might not be congruous with that of which we exist in.

Dunn works to bring some clarity to the different delineations of *raptus* in the documented cases in the form of a table that classifies the 1,213 cases of ravishment as “abduction, rape, ambiguous, both” in addition to the breakdown by century from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. Her ability to do this lies in her close reading of the additional terms included in the legal documentation of the cases like “*vi concubuit contra voluntatem*,” meaning a man laid “with a woman violently against her will” (Dunn 90). The terminology pertaining to abductions could be traced back to the legal verbiage of “*cepit*,” meaning “s/he took” (Dunn 90). By looking to these external indicators within the documents and taking into account the possibility that “it is possible that some of the sexual relations prosecuted were consensual, and certainly some of the abductions were” (Dunn 90), Dunn is able to get a more holistic understanding of the nature of the majority or plurality of the *raptus* cases at the time. As she was able to deduce through her table in her writing, cases of *raptus* specifically and singularly pertaining to rape were in the gross minority in the fourteenth century—as represented as just 6% of the cases of *raptus* in that century. The majority of the cases—as represented as roughly 52% of the cases of *raptus* in the fourteenth century—were understood by Dunn to be specifically and singularly pertaining to abduction. However, the statistic we have yet to account for, the ‘ambiguous’ category in her table, is of great importance to us when considering these

figures in the present context. Roughly 41% of the cases of *raptus* brought up in the fourteenth-century were ambiguous in nature—including that of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecilia Chaumpaigne. While it would be easy to give Chaucer the benefit of the doubt and assume that his case of *raptus*—as it was released by the victim herself and perceivably by her free will—would have fallen in with the majority of cases as involving abduction, this would be negligent when dealing with a character-based claim pertaining to feminism.

It is difficult to discern the motives behind a well-esteemed courtier like Chaucer when regarding his case of *raptus* since Cecilia Chaumpaigne was likely the daughter of a baker and would have provided absolutely no mobility to Chaucer within court circles. Depending on the type of *raptus* case—either *rapuit et abduxit* (seized and abducted) or *cepit et imprisonavit* (took and imprisoned)—that was brought against Chaucer, one can begin to question and narrow in on the motives that drove him to his crime. What is particularly interesting to note when connecting Chaucer as the potential rapist with Chaucer, the romance poet, is the timing of all of this. *The Legend of Good Women* was understood to have occurred at some point during the composition of *Canterbury Tales* from 1387 until 1400. It is understood that Chaucer undertook this project at the request of Queen Alceste as a sort of “assigned topic” (Benson 587). Separate from all of this, in 1380, Chaumpaigne was drafting and submitting her statements of pardon towards Chaucer. As *The Legend of Good Women* is known to be unfinished, I propose a hypothetical timeline of events that would lend to an explanation of not only the “critical paradox” (Benson 587) that was *The Legend of Good Women*, but also of the external factors that would have lent to the shift in the character of Chaucer.

Beginning with his *raptus* charge against Chaumpaigne in 1380 and its subsequent dismissal that same year, we must look at the potential ramifications of such an accusation on an individual like Chaucer at the time. The permissibility of his offense within the court circles is unknown to us, but the status of Chaucer within these court circles as a low-ranking courtier is known. Word of a charge of *raptus* against an individual with no perceivable social status and resulting in absolutely no mobility on Chaucer’s end could have easily gotten around these circles and, even as far as the Queen. In an attempt of imparting penance on the poet, it is understandable that Queen Alceste might have charged him with writing *The Legend of Good Women* as a way of highlighting the value in powerful female figures

and promoting the cause of early feminism. As he engaged in the composition of *The Canterbury Tales* from around 1387 until his death, it is very much understandable that Chaucer might have tabled the Queen's request until closer to the end of his project. I reason this because of the existence of traditionally patriarchal poems like *The Knight's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, and *The Reeve's Tale* that are found in "Fragment I" of *The Canterbury Tales*. As he reached the end of his writings in *The Canterbury Tales*, I believe he began an engagement with the previously ignored *The Legend of Good Women* until his death in 1400. This hypothetical timeline of events would explain why *The Legend of Good Women* is unfinished and why it appears to be out of place with the rest of the writings found in *The Canterbury Tales*—particularly in "Fragment I."

Taking a closer look at "Fragment I" in *The Canterbury Tales*, in Chapter Two of her book *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature*, Nicole Sidhu recognizes it as Chaucer's attempt at exploring obscene comedy to "indicate that what is at stake in Fragment One goes beyond gender to other power relations in medieval society" (Sidhu 80). She then goes on to compare the tactics employed in this section to those used by Middle English alliterative poet William Langland in his work *Piers Plowman*. Sidhu suggests that while both poets seek to subtly "critique the power holders of [their] society," (Sidhu 78) Chaucer looks to challenge the "ideologies that govern and justify their authority in the first place" (Sidhu 78). While it is true that both poets might have weaponized their words in such a way as to subvert the untouchables within their society, Chaucer's proximity to these authorities makes his work even more important. It is only through the inclusion of such obscene "fabliau[s]" (Sidhu 76) in *The Canterbury Tales* that the reader is able to recognize the power and effectiveness in Chaucer's poetry when it came to challenging the status quo. By introducing subversive narratives, like those found

in "Fragment I," disguised in a chauvinistic way that would appear to appeal to the established attitudes that were maintained at the time—particularly in those circles—Chaucer gains an access point. It is through establishing pathos with these aristocrats and other courtiers that he is able to introduce feminist sentiments like those found in *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and, separate from *The Canterbury Tales* entirely, in *The Legend of Good Women*. While each one of these fabliaux—*The Knight's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale*, and *The Reeve's Tale*—lend to the generally understood misogynistic tone of "Fragment I," each seeks to challenge the anti-female social norms in a different way.

Starting with *The Knight's Tale*, the main character is portrayed as a highly chivalrous man whose moral code seems to highlight a dangerous dichotomy between protecting innocent women and ravaging them—as represented in the line "kan hem therfore as muche thank as me," (*Knight's Tale*, ll.1808) which is understood to mean the women owing a debt of gratitude for bedding her. This line highlights the hypocritical code of chivalry that exists in the Knight character. While the criticism of the anti-feminist code of chivalry through the lens of the Knight is limited to the militaristic and feudal class of knights, *The Miller's Tale* is a lot more inclusive to the low-born peasants—as represented in the line "The Miller is a cherl," (*Miller's Tale*, ll.3182) which is understood to mean the Miller is a low-born fellow. Since the aristocrats and courtiers would have perceived a tale whose main character is a low-born man engaging in obscene comedic endeavors as being lighthearted and nonthreatening to them, Chaucer is able to "use the erotic to obscure the political" (Sidhu 85) agenda behind the poem. Since there is a large gap that separates the low-born peasants from anyone existing in the courts, it is easy to use the Miller as a vehicle for more direct political critique "that patriarchal authorities deserve their power" (Sidhu 86). While it is

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Image 1: Portrait of Chaucer as a Canterbury pilgrim, Ellesmere manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*.

written that even the lowliest of the peasantry, the Miller, recognizes the moral superiority that exists inherently in men as opposed to the “fabliau women [who] are almost always figured as immoral beings, wholly focused on the needs of the body, [and] who will do anything to satisfy their lust.” (Sidhu 86) Finally, we look at how *The Reeve’s Tale* challenges the social norms of antifeminism through the understanding that “all three men [in these tales] are motivated by an anxiety over their social status and a desire to move up the social hierarchy,” (Sidhu 90) and see women as sexual temptresses who seek to lead them astray from this goal.

These stereotypes that Chaucer perpetuates in “Fragment I” in conjunction with the retrospective understanding of the potentially politically-subversive motives that Chaucer maintained while writing these over-the-top fabliaux should only be considered to be deeply ironic and should not be taken at face value. Knowing the nature of the critiques, one would be remiss in reading these tales as anything but the opposite of what they are written to mean. Recognizing these tales as such, the shift in tonality in *The Legend of Good Women* is not as jarring. Unlike the garish tactics used to engage the audience of *The Canterbury Tales’*

“Fragment I,” *The Legend of Good Women’s* “lukewarm critical reception has often been linked to the heavy-handed hints of boredom with which the narrator treats his material” (Allen-Gross 17). One might argue that due to the intrinsically feminist nature of the piece—depicting vignettes of well-to-do historic women as existing independently of their male counterparts. In the G-text of *The Legend of Good Women*, this is represented as a bold statement translated from Legend: “in making of a glorious legend of good women, maidens and wives, that were true in loving all their lives; and tells of false men that betrayed them, that all their (women) lives they did nothing to deserve this test, how many women can claim shame?” In order to offset the possible rejection of the work in its entirety, as a result of content, I argue that Chaucer’s seemingly lackluster portrayal of *The Legend of Good Women* is entirely intentional and meant to draw the criticisms away from the content and towards the quality of the writing. In her book *Feminizing Chaucer*, Jill Mann argues that *The Legend of Good Women* exists as “a provisional response to antifeminism, contradicting but not obliterating it...created as antifeminism’s mirror-image” (Mann 39).

In another effort of painting Chaucer to be a participant of profeminist thought in fourteenth century England, I would like to look at Chaucer’s appeals to a female audience. In her work “Chaucer’s Feminine Pretexts: Gendered Genres in Three Frame Moments,” Madeleine Saraceni states that “Chaucer often sought to affiliate himself with genres of literature that bore strong associations with women readers in the medieval cultural imagination and that may have served to identify him with literature that was deemed feminine, that is, literature perceived as written for and consumed primarily by women” (Saraceni 407). This sentiment is carried on in Alison Wiggins’ “Frances Wolfreston’s Chaucer” where she claims “early modern women are often thought of as having been excluded from literary culture, which is seen as a masculine, homosocial realm” (Wiggins 88). The niche area that was often perceived to be inhabited by women within the literary realm was religious devotional texts. These translations of religious manuscripts for the consumption of laywomen were growing more and more commonplace by the fourteenth century. Saraceni chalks this phenomenon up to “a confluence of factors—including an increase in lay literacy, a climate of devotional fervor, and ecclesiastical reforms that encouraged the production of works designed to aid in the preaching to and instruction of the laity” (Saraceni 416). In the Prologue

“To shift the power of romance away from the male that typically inhabits chivalric romance tales and towards an inherently feminine character of divine status...”

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of Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*, a text known as “De Maria” is referenced as Chaucer's perceived “vernacular devotional text” (Saraceni 415). Though this is a lost text and there is no way to confirm or dispute this belief and we cannot know for sure if Chaucer dipped into the non-secular side of poetry, this could have been a way to appeal to the female-dominated audience that inhabited that space.

Another text that I feel deserves to be mentioned—albeit quickly—when discussing the feminist shift in tonality in Chaucer's poetry is *The Wife of Bath's Prologue & Tale*. The nature of the wife and her portrayal in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* is somewhat brutish and masculine. Her ability to force the submission of her husbands and then the length at which she rants about their shortcomings, as well as the nature of her free speech, approach the idea of feminist representation in a new way. Chaucer attempts to give the wife her autonomy through his stripping of her traditionally-feminine characteristics and replacement of them with masculine ones. Jill Mann introduces this idea in her chapter “Antifeminism” in *Feminizing Chaucer* when she says, “antifeminism is appropriated by a woman's voice in order to articulate feminist truths’, nevertheless, the Wife ‘remains confined within the prison house of masculine language’” (Mann 65). It is only through the voice of masculinity that feminism can exist and be heard as “Chaucer could not invent a new ‘female language’ and sensibly did not try to do so” (Mann 65). So while it may appear that Chaucer's employment of masculinity in the context of the characterization of the Wife in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue & Tale*, it is only as a result of the cutting-edge nature of his thought. Since he was at the forefront of what feminist representation in literature would look like, there were no appropriate systems set in place for him to utilize and, as Mann points out, it was sensible for him to use masculinity as a familiar vehicle for pushing unfamiliar characterizations across to his audience.

In keeping with this notion, I stake the claim that Chaucer's progression as a poet and person towards the end of his

life can be seen as a result of his awareness of and attempts towards inclusivity for women in his readership. This is evident in his contemporary John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*: “Book 8 (*Lechery*)” when Venus, the goddess of love, says, “great Chaucer when you meet him, as he is my disciple and poet: for in the flowers of his youth in various ways, as well as he could, made ditties and songs glad for my sake.” There are two things that must be recognized in this reading: the gender of love and the recognition of Chaucer as an important romance poet in other works of equal prestige. Firstly, the gendering of Venus, goddess of love, as a woman is important to note as it is therefore implied that femininity is at the center of romance. To shift the power of romance away from the male that typically inhabits chivalric romance tales and towards an inherently feminine character of divine status is significant because it falls in line with the more progressive representation of femininity and feminism in romance poetry at that time. Secondly, the acclaim of Chaucer at the hands of the feminine figure of Venus and her subsequent praise of his work on her behalf and the behalf of romance signifies approval of Chaucer as a romance poet—particularly through the lens of women. By adding the line, “as he wel couthe,” Venus acknowledges that Chaucer's romance repertoire is not infallible and his pro-feminist writings were done to the best of his abilities.

So, is there really such an incongruity between Chaucer the courtier and Chaucer the poet? I would argue that the impact that Chaucer had on fourteenth feminist theory and the movement away from the static, archetypical woman that inhabited medieval romance poetry was entirely a result of his proximity to the influential members of society and his ability to stay within those circles. Touching on Sidhu's comparison of William Langland to Geoffrey Chaucer when looking at their ability to use obscene comedy as a vehicle for political challenging, I would like to add that the reason Chaucer was more successful in his critique of the societal status quo—referring to the perceptions of women specifically—because of his physical proximity to London. While Chaucer resided in London, Langland spent most of his

life in the West Midlands—some distance from London. In his thesis, “The Transport System of Medieval England and Wales - A Geographical Synthesis,” James Edwards presents maps of the basic medieval road networks and the known topographical maps of the time. Based on the information presented in these maps, it is inferred that while William Langland was thought to have been socialized in the London circles early in his life, his later years of authorship were not represented in the city. The region he lived in, The West Midlands, were not easily accessible by the known road network and inferred routes of the time. As a result, the political happenings and the shifts in social norms and practices were not as prominent in Langland’s writings, which meant his influence on any of those things was minimal at most. However, Chaucer’s physical proximity to London and the courts meant that he was more directly influenced and, as a result, could reference the happenings through his work. Now recognizing the significance of the proximity these poets had to the inner workings of those who monopolized the social power, we are able to impart some grace onto the seemingly counterproductive and anti-feminist works Chaucer published. I would argue that these poems are not actually anti-feminist at all when considered in the context of their composition and when viewed not myopically, but rather intuitively.

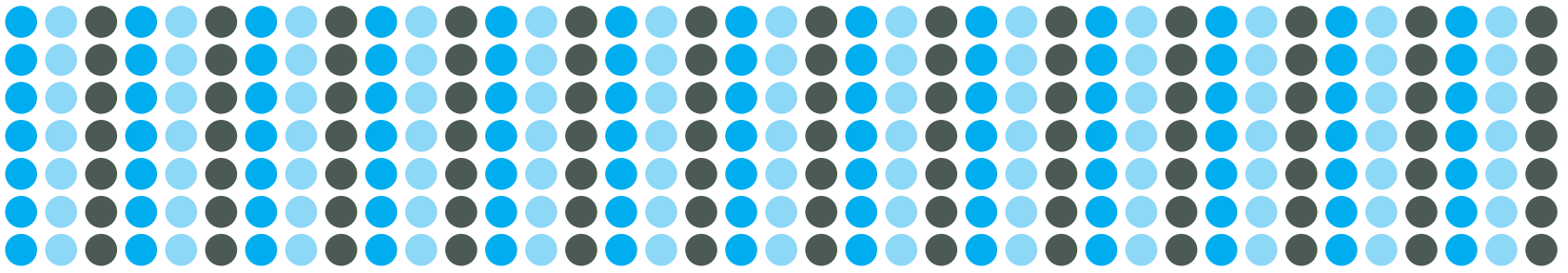
The poems of Geoffrey Chaucer are double-edged and powerful when read as political pieces. In her writing “Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising,” Lynn Arner speaks to this saying, “Chaucer’s and Gower’s writings offer some convergent and some disparate stances regarding this new vernacular poetry in relation to what would now be considered identity politics” (Arner 154). Identity politics in this situation are appropriately attributed to the role of gender identity being called into question in Chaucer’s works. She then goes on to say that “Chaucerian poetry instructed readers how to recognize and understand identity-based claims and encouraged them to discount such concerns as inartful, ignorant, and ultimately dismissible” (Arner 155) at the beginning of English literature. This quote examines the relationship between the original intention of Chaucerian poetry and the presently contested state it is known to be. Arner is pointing out that Chaucer armed his audience with the critical thinking skills necessary for the correct interpretation of the political messaging behind his poetry by giving them a cipher of sorts. The last bit of her quote—regarding the discounting of concerns as inartful, ignorant, and ultimately dismissible—can be applied to the

necessary attitudes that the scholars are choosing to engage with seemingly problematic texts like those found in “Fragment I” (*The Knight’s Tale*, *The Miller’s Tale*, and *The Reeve’s Tale*). Rather than viewing these tales as anti-feministic, Chaucer would encourage the audience to simply dismiss the surface-level understanding of the identity politics at play and go deeper in their analysis of the underlying message that is being expressed underneath all of the bells and whistles that are meant to distract you. These two statements in conjunction with her critical understanding of *The Legend of Good Women* as adopting an “anti-identity stance” (Arner 154) allow for a clear comprehension of the poem’s political significance.

In conclusion, Geoffrey Chaucer was a man of many hats. His contributions to the literary community at a time where there was such uncertainty and a loss of overall culture should not be overlooked or discounted as a result of the single unclear case of *raptus* brought against him. In a world where vapid cancel culture permeates our society, it is easy to pigeonhole an individual on the basis of a single transgression. While it might seem reasonable to assume the worst in Chaucer as a result of the Chaumpaigne *raptus* case, it is negligent on our part as scholars who operate with the innate privilege of retrospect. As a result of my challenging and exploring of *raptus*—its etymological origins, cultural significance, and application to that of one Geoffrey Chaucer—I have been able to critically ascertain that Chaucer’s writings were inherently pro-feminist and existed as vehicles for subtle political subservience. Through this paper, I have come to the conclusion that the perceived incongruities between Chaucer as the poet and Chaucer as the person—and courtier—are nonexistent below the surface-level understanding of his character.

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LIST OF ARTWORK

13 **ESPO WORKSHOP8**

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41 **CHAUCER ELLESMERE**

© Chaucer ellesmere. (2005, September 5). Wikimedia Commons. Retrieved January 18, 2022, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chaucer_ellesmere.jpg

54 **FIGURE 1**

© EnergySage. (2019, May 10). “Storing Solar Energy: How Solar Batteries Work”. <https://www.energysage.com/solar/solar-energy-storage/how-do-solar-batteries-work/>