

The Wife of Bath's Tale

Rape and Justice in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*

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Introduction

Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* often offends readers' sense of justice. It follows an unnamed knight from King Arthur's court who rapes a maiden, avoids legal punishment, and is ultimately rewarded with a youthful, fair, obedient, and faithful wife. The victim-survivor never speaks, and she disappears entirely from the tale after her assault, never to be mentioned again. Instead, Alisoun follows the perpetrator's journey—"This knyght, of which my tale is specially," she says, underscoring her narrative focus (WBT 983)—and details his thoughts and feelings, inviting readers to identify with his perspective. But in spite of its seemingly unjust ending, the tale grapples ferociously with the question of appropriate justice for sexual violence, and it portrays rape justice as a collective endeavor. It forces audiences to contend with important questions about violence and reparation: How can a rapist atone for their actions? And who determines justice for rape: the victim-survivor, the head of state, the legal system, or the community?

Media representations of medieval rape, including the brutal and recurring sexual violence in HBO's fantasy series *Game of Thrones* (2011-17) and the movie *Braveheart's* (1995) fictive *jus prima noctis* ritual, granting the lord of the manor the right to rape a peasant woman on her wedding night, portray sexual violence as occurring rampantly and with impunity during the Middle Ages. This false historical narrative enables contemporary audiences to view rape as a past issue rather than a present concern, and it excuses us from having to grapple fully with the problem of sexual violence in our own culture. Alisoun of Bath, however, challenges readers to acknowledge historical continuities between past and present sexual violence. On one hand, her use of the past undermines nostalgia for the "good old days" of knighthood and chivalry, as she dissuades audiences from wallpapering over historical violence perpetrated by respected men. At the same time, she challenges contemporary audiences' sense of superiority regarding the brutality that we often attribute to the Middle Ages, and her tale encourages readers to seek innovative justice solutions to address rape's harms.

Tools

Legal and Literary Contexts for Rape Justice

The legal penalty for convicted rapists in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is death by beheading: “[D]ampned was this knyght for to be deed, / By cours of lawe, and sholde han lost his heed,” Alisoun relates (891-92). Fourteenth-century legal terminology for rape—the noun *raptus* and the verb *rapere*—contained overlapping meanings of forced sex, theft, and abduction. This overlap is reflected in Chaucer’s tale, where we are told that the knight “rafte” the woman’s “maydenhed,” as Alisoun chooses a verb meaning both “to tear, stab, or split” and “to steal.” Medieval English law viewed rape primarily as a property crime against the woman’s husband, father, or next of kin, and conviction rates were low. It prescribed hanging and castration as punishment for *raptus*, a crime categorized as a serious felony, although these punishments were rarely enforced even upon conviction. A woman could initiate criminal prosecution of her rapist by raising the hue and cry like the “clamour” [loud outcry] that arises after the assault in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The hue and cry, in which the aggrieved party raised her voice to declare publicly that she had been assaulted, officially set the legal process in motion much like calling the police does today. Women could also bring civil suits for sexual mistreatment, as happened in 1292, when Isabella Plomet brought a civil suit alleging that her doctor had used a narcotic beverage to incapacitate and rape her.^[1] The jury ruled in Isabella’s favor and required the doctor to pay a significant fine in addition to imprisoning him, demonstrating that medieval society recognized that sexual assault could be facilitated through intoxication as well as physical violence.

The *Wife of Bath's Tale*’s exploration of multiple forms of punishment for its rapist knight reflects the fact that there were many mechanisms of rape reparation in medieval England, ranging from marriage to monetary settlement to vigilante justice. In 1405, Isabella Gronowessone and her daughters Johanna and Petronilla ambushed Roger de Pulesdon in a field, tied a cord around his neck, cut off his testicles, and stole his horse, only for all three women to be pardoned shortly thereafter.^[2] Historians have suggested that the women were exacting a brutal form of extralegal justice for rape.^[3] If so, this case shows women banding together to execute violent punishment on a rapist, targeting the body parts central to his crime. It implicitly authorizes castration, theft, and retaliatory violence as a fitting response to sexual violence. While this case is unusual, it illustrates how women could take rape justice into their own hands. This medieval view that there are multiple valid responses to sexual violence both within and outside the legal system is echoed in recent scholarship on rape justice mechanisms that go beyond criminal punishment, including naming perpetrators online or in public spaces, giving victim-survivors an opportunity to tell their stories in a meaningful way, perpetrator education, monetary compensation, public apologies or admissions of wrongdoing by the perpetrator, and restorative justice that allows the victim-survivor to confront their assailant directly through a victim impact statement or a conference facilitated by counselors.

Chaucer’s exploration of different forms of rape justice in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is particularly intriguing given his own experience with rape law. In May 1380, a London baker’s daughter named Cecily Chaumpaigne filed a court document releasing Geoffrey Chaucer from legal responsibility “*de raptu meo*” [regarding my rape]. Although scholars have long debated the precise meanings of the noun “*raptus*” here, Christopher Cannon has argued persuasively that it likely refers to forced sex, what modern audiences would call rape. It is possible that Chaucer assaulted Chaumpaigne and paid her an out-of-court settlement, leading her to release him from criminal culpability. Chaucer wrote the *Wife of Bath's Tale* between 1388 and 1396, eight to sixteen years after the Chaumpaigne case. Of all the rapes and attempted rapes in the *Canterbury*

Tales, including the *Reeve's Tale*, *Physician's Tale*, and *Man of Law's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is the one that most prominently features rape law. Using numerous terms from Anglo-French legal vocabulary, Alisoun names the knight's crime as an "oppressioun" [legal term for injury or harm], invokes "the statut tho" [law of the land at that time], claims that the legal process is initiated through the "clamour" of the hue and cry, refers to the resulting "pursute" [formal legal charge], states that the knight has been "dampned" [legally condemned] to death, and notes that he faces beheading "by cours of lawe" [in accordance with the law] (889-93). In addition to its overt emphasis on the legal language of sexual violence, the *Tale* points to Chaucer's involvement in the Champaigne case by encouraging readers to empathize with its rapist-protagonist, highlighting his sorrowful sighs and displeasure—"Wo was this knight, and sorwefully he siketh," Alisoun says (913)—when he is forced to account for his actions.

I always teach a few lyrics known as pastourelles alongside the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. Just as the *Wife of Bath's Tale's* legal context illuminates its complicated portrayal of rape justice, its literary context sheds light on medieval views of power, consent, and the perspectives of victim-survivors. Pastourelles are debate poems between a man and a woman who give alternating speeches, and they are centrally focused on the dynamics of sexual violence. In a typical pastourelle, a knight or cleric encounters a young peasant woman in a rustic, secluded location and engages in dialogue with her, with the poem's circumstances reflecting those in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*. He attempts to seduce her with compliments, promises of marriage, and gifts of clothing or jewelry. She resists initially, often rebuffing him with harsh language. In some pastourelles, the knight responds by raping or threatening to rape the maiden. About twenty English and Scots pastourelles survive from the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries. Examples include *As I stod on a day* (circa 1325), copied at the end of the Anglo-French romance *Gui de Warwic* in London College of Arms MS Arundel 27; *In a fryht as Y con fare fremede* (circa 1331-41), from British Library MS Harley 2253, where it is sandwiched between two erotic lyrics voiced by amorous men; *Hey trolly loly lo* (circa 1510-13), copied with music in British Library MS Additional 31922, a lavishly-decorated songbook associated with the court of Henry VIII; and *Throughe a forest as I can ryde, Come over the woodes fair and grene*, and *When that byrdes be brought to rest* (circa 1475), which are copied in a cluster in Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson C.813, a collection of poems and political prophecies compiled by lawyer and Parliament-member Humphrey Welles.^[4] The pastourelles portray a variety of outcomes to the isolated outdoor encounter between man and maiden—in *As I stod on a day*, the maiden responds with witty retorts and sends the man on his way; in *Throughe a forest as I can ryde*, the man rapes the maiden, after which she attempts unsuccessfully to negotiate with him for marriage or monetary compensation; and *Hey trolly loly lo* depicts a milkmaid resisting an aggressive man until he finally lets her go unharmed, although he promises to assault her if he ever encounters her in the future. The pastourelles' contentious back-and-forth dialogue, which provides insight into medieval ideas regarding sexual difference, power and powerlessness, violence, and resistance, fills in the silences of the *Tale's* sparse five-line rape scene. Unlike the *Tale*, whose maiden never speaks and whose readers are given access to her rapist's thoughts and feelings instead of hers, pastourelles articulate the perspectives of victim-survivors and encourage audiences to empathize with them, portraying rape as a physical and emotional violation. The pastourelles show that, even though the maiden disappears from the *Wife of Bath's Tale* after her assault, other medieval texts vividly depict women's experiences of resisting, suffering, and surviving rape.

Text

Rape and Justice, Past and Present

Alisoun of Bath's temporal framing of her tale has important implications for how modern audiences can engage with sexual violence. She begins her narrative by setting it "[i]n th'olde dayes of the Kyng Arthour" (857). Hundreds of years ago, she says, spirits called incubi roamed the land of Britain, raping and impregnating women at will, whereas "now"—a term she uses multiple times (864, 865, 874)—they have been replaced by predatory friars who lurk around every corner. By noting that "Britons speken greet honour" of those bygone days (858), she shows how historical nostalgia can excuse or elide sexual violence. She sets up a sharp contrast between past and present—"I speke of manye hundred yeres ago. / But now..." she says (863-64)—only to claim that rape is an ongoing problem linking the mythical past with present realities.

The *Tale's* rapist is a "lustly bachelor" [robust young knight] from King Arthur's court (883). By linking him to Arthur's storied Round Table, Alisoun implicitly critiques chivalric masculinity, which entailed military prowess, noble birth, success with women, and competition as well as bonding with other men. She shows how romanticizing the past can occlude certain harms, as she illustrates the devastating effects of chivalric culture's valorization of masculine violence. The knight encounters the maiden on his way home from hunting water-fowl, an aristocratic leisure activity that emphasizes his courtly status and links the predation of bird-hunting with the violence of rape. He "rid[es]" on horseback while she travels on foot, a contrast which emphasizes their class difference. The nameless maiden never speaks. Instead, we are given details about her status as a virgin, a point hammered home by the repetition of "mayde," "mayde," and "maydenhed" in three consecutive lines; we are told that the knight attacks her with "verray force," or "brute strength"; and we are informed that the rape happens "maugree hir heed" or "in spite of everything she could do" (886-888). The maiden disappears from the tale entirely after these lines, as the narrative focuses instead upon the rehabilitation of her rapist. The *Tale* reflects many of the conventions governing medieval rape narratives; much as contemporary audiences think of "real rape" as a crime committed by an armed stranger lurking in a dark alley against an unaccompanied woman who screams and fights back before he overpowers her, medieval texts often portray rape as perpetrated by a socially powerful man against a defenseless young virgin traveling alone in the wilderness. This stock narrative stretches back to Hebrew Biblical law in Deuteronomy 22:23-27, which decrees that a maiden raped in the city be stoned to death along with her rapist because she did not scream loudly enough to summon help but specifies that a woman attacked in the countryside is allowed to live because there was no man around to hear her cries and rescue her, thus claiming that rural assaults are the only ones which count as "real rape." The *Wife of Bath's Tale's* portrayal of rape as fitting this narrow conventional paradigm depicts sexual violence as something that can be avoided if one "does the right things" and allows other types of assaults, such as those perpetrated by someone known to the victim-survivor, to go unacknowledged.

King Arthur follows the law of the land and condemns his knight to death, only for the queen and other ladies to argue that justice belongs in their hands instead. We can read this as a community response to rape by the specific population who has been wronged: the knight

attacked the maiden because she was a woman walking by herself, and the kingdom's most powerful women unite to claim that women should determine rape justice collectively. In contrast to the law's penalty of beheading, the women claim that perpetrator education is a more fitting form of justice. The women's takeover of the justice process, with "the queene herself sittynge as a justise" (1028), raises important questions about who ought to determine rape justice. The women sentence the knight "to seche and leere" [to investigate and learn] what women most desire (909) in response to his complete disregard of the maiden's desires. "Seche," naming the knight's new sentence, means "to investigate, study" and also "to assault a woman," implicitly linking the knight's crime with its consequences. The knight now must listen to and learn from women, as his life now depends upon their kindness and knowledge. Alisoun repeatedly uses pedagogical language to characterize the knight's educational quest: he travels the country "to lerne" (921, 994); he asks the old woman to "wisse" [instruct] him (1008); and she promises to "teche" him the information that he needs (1019).

The tale proposes a third form of rape justice in addition to beheading and perpetrator education: the knight is denied physical agency by the old woman much as he denied the maiden the right to govern her own body and being. After the elderly woman has "taughte" him the correct answer and saved his life, she requests that he uphold his end of the bargain and marry her. He is horrified, and his response echoes the responses to sexual violence by maidens in the pastourelles, who cry out with woeful lamentations, call upon God or Christ for aid, and attempt to negotiate their escape from their armed assailants. He exclaims, "Allas and weylawey!" in an echo of the hue and cry raised after he rapes the young woman (1058). Like a pastourelle maiden who calls upon God's help to no avail, he begs the old woman to release him "for Goddes love" (1060). He pleads, "Taak al my good and lat my body go" (1061), attempting to use his wealth to bargain for bodily sovereignty. However, like the maidens in many pastourelles whose pleas are ignored by their assailants, his protests are "al for nocht" (1070). The queen decrees that the knight must keep his promise to the old woman, and he is "constreyned" to "wedde / And...gooth to bedde" with her (1071-72). By positioning the knight as a pastourelle maiden attempting to negotiate control over his feminized body and escape unwanted sex, Alisoun forces him to experience his victim-survivor's fear of violation of bodily sovereignty, if only for a fleeting moment.

But at the same time that the knight occupies the structural position of a powerless pastourelle maiden, this depiction of him as "constreyned" [forced, compelled], a term used to name women's experiences of sexual violence in Middle English texts, demonstrates how the suffering of rape can be minimized and co-opted. This portrayal of the knight as ostensibly powerless erases the fact that he is in this position solely as a result of his own actions. The passage's repeated emphasis on his "wo" (1083, 1084) inspires empathy for the knight instead of his victim, while his desperate attempts to bargain his way out of fulfilling his promise indicate that he still believes he possesses the power to escape the consequences for his choices. Alisoun's decision to place the rapist-knight in the structural role of victim-survivor illustrates the problem of using metaphors of rape and its attendant harms for things that are not rape, like a student comparing a challenging exam to rape or celebrities comparing photo shoots or the paparazzi's invasiveness to sexual violence, as these comparisons betray a lack of empathy for victim-survivors, divert that empathy elsewhere, and trivialize rape's harms.

Chaucer uses fiction to encourage audiences to think through the issue of rape justice. The *Tale's* conclusion, in which we are told that the rapist-knight and his beautiful, subservient wife live happily ever after, often strikes readers as maddeningly unjust. This outcome nonetheless serves a twofold purpose: it illustrates the reality that justice for sexual violence is often unsatisfactory and elusive, and it challenges audiences to contemplate new justice solutions. While there is ultimately no form of justice that can fully undo rape's harms, the *Wife of Bath's Tale* demonstrates the pressing need for justice to address those damages and prevent future violence.

Transformation

Negotiating the Past, Understanding the Present, Changing the Future

1. What can we do with this text that proposes multiple forms of rape justice but ends on a seemingly unjust note? How is it useful?
2. How does the *Wife of Bath's Tale* reinforce, revise, or challenge present-day ideas about rape in the Middle Ages?
3. Alisoun shows how nostalgia for the past can occlude its attendant harms in the same way that many Americans still refuse to acknowledge that Thomas Jefferson was a serial rapist of his own slave, Sally Hemings, beginning when she was fourteen or so. Instead, news outlets like the *Washington Post* as recently as 2017 referred to Hemings as Jefferson's "mistress." Can you think of other ways that present-day audiences overlook, excuse, or rationalize histories of sexual violence, particularly when they involve famous or well-respected men?
4. What do you make of the fact that this tale about gender violence is narrated by the Wife of Bath, who is herself a survivor of spousal abuse, as we learn in her *Prologue*? How does it shape her portrayal of the knight, his actions, and their consequences? What connections do you see between her *Prologue* and her *Tale*?
5. How does Chaucer's own experience with rape law shape our reading of the tale? What does it mean for someone accused of rape to tell a fictional story from a rapist's perspective?
6. How does this tale's portrayal of rape compare to other depictions of sexual violence in the *Canterbury Tales*?
7. If the nameless "mayde" had narrated the tale, how do you think she would have written it? What details do you think would remain the same, and what would be different?
8. What do *you* feel is the most apt and appropriate justice in the *Wife of Bath's Tale's* particular situation?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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Notes:

[1]Seabourne includes the full legal record in "Drugs, Deceit, and Damage in Thirteenth-Century Herefordshire: New Perspectives on Medieval Surgery, Sex, and the Law."

[2]See Goldberg (1995).

[3]See Goldberg (1994) and Dunn.

[4]*In a fryht as Y con fare fremede* is printed in *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein with David Raybin and Jan Ziolkowski, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015), 2:148–52 (<http://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/text/fein-harley2253-volume-2-article-35>); *As I stod on a day* in *Medieval English Lyrics and Carols*, ed. Thomas G. Duncan (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 73-4; *Hey troyly loly lo* in *The Lyrics of the Henry VIII Manuscript*, ed. Raymond G. Siemens (Renaissance Text Society, 2013), 61-2. (<http://web.uvic.ca/~siemens/pub/Siemens-HenryVIII-MS.pdf>); and *Throughe a forest as I can ryde, Come over the woodes fair and grene, and When that byrdes be brought to rest* are in *The Welles Anthology: MS Rawlinson C.813, A Critical Edition*, ed. Sharon L. Jansen and Kathleen H. Jordan (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991), 216-28. A total of 210 pastourelles from a variety of European languages are printed in *The Medieval Pastourelle*, trans. and ed. William D. Paden, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1987).



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