PEDAGOGY & PROFESSION
NEW CHAUCER STUDIES

Volume 02 |Issue 01 Spring 2022

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Carissa M. Harris
Temple University, U.S.

Harris. 2021. Teaching Consent: Medieval Pastourelles in the Undergraduate Classroom. *New Chaucer Studies: Pedagogy and Profession* 2.1: 10-17.
https://escholarship.org/uc/ncs_pedagogyandprofession/ | ISSN: 2766-1768.

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Temple University, U.S.

Abstract

Students' familiarity with the #MeToo movement, with its emphasis on multiple narratives of different kinds of violations, creates a valuable opportunity for educators to use medieval pastourelles to teach about long histories of power and sexual consent. Focusing specifically on the undergraduate medieval literature classroom, this essay argues for the importance of teaching pastourelles—a genre frequently overlooked by instructors—and outlines concrete strategies for doing so with knowledge, sensitivity, and care. It discusses multiple frameworks for teaching pastourelles, including connecting them to street harassment, intersectionality, or contemporary survivor narratives. It closes by discussing larger-scale strategies for cultivating a supportive classroom atmosphere and providing students with resources to navigate these difficult but important texts.

One notable feature of the #MeToo movement is its "ability to network a large variety of sexual violence narratives under a common interpretive framework," ranging from accounts of rape and sexual abuse to threats, coercion, pressure, and harassment (Clark-Parsons 10). Medieval literature instructors can use students' awareness of this narrative range as an opportunity to educate them about the long history of consent and to give them conceptual tools to deepen their understanding of violence, power, and resistance. Pastourelles—verse debates between a man and a woman on the topic of sex and consent—are perfect for this task. Like the personal accounts spotlighted by the #MeToo movement, pastourelles' narrative diversity reminds students that rape does not follow a single trajectory, and it highlights how sexual violence involves coercion, manipulation, and exploitation of inequality in addition to outright force. Pastourelles enable students to understand how sexual aggression has always been inflected by systemic power inequalities and to make connections between medieval texts and their own experiences. They revolutionize students' understanding of sexual violence in the Middle Ages, which is too often portrayed in contemporary media as an era characterized by pervasive brutality with no concept of consent.

Medieval pastourelles are pedagogically useful in the undergraduate literature classroom due to their brevity, their dialogic structure and inclusion of multiple voices, and their range of outcomes and scenarios.[1] Most importantly, as I argue here, they resonate with contemporary experiences of violence and harassment. In keeping with this issue's governing theme, my essay explores how instructors can use pastourelles to grapple with the questions central to #MeToo.[2] Overall, I hope to give fellow educators the tools to teach these difficult texts with confidence, knowledge, and care.

My guidelines for teaching pastourelles are most fitting for an introductory-level medieval or premodern literature survey. I pair them with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, since they similarly feature predatory knights who victimize maidens walking alone.[3] Instructors can also teach pastourelles alongside courtly literature because the aggressors in pastourelles typically use courtly

This essay would not exist without my Temple students, and I am indebted to their willingness to read pastourelles, engage with them thoughtfully, and share their thoughts with me. I am grateful also to Candace Barrington, who encouraged me to develop what was originally a one-off conference paper into a published essay; to my writing group members (Claire Falck, Marissa Nicosia, and Thomas Ward as well as Kinohi Nishikawa and Rebbeca Tesfai); and to the kind and insightful peer reviewer who asked productive questions. This essay was completed with the support of a Temple University Summer Research Award.

[1] Two hundred and ten pastourelles with modern English translations are available in Paden. A new teaching edition of sixteen Middle English and Middle Scots pastourelles with introductions, glosses or full translations, and notes is forthcoming in Baechle, Harris, and Strakhov. All pastourelle citations come from this edition.

[2] For more on teaching medieval texts about rape, see the essays in Gulley.

[3] In the early British literature survey, I teach *Come over the woodes fair and grene* and *Throughe a forest as I can ryde* with the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, and I teach Tudur Penllyn's *Conversation between a Welshman and an Englishwoman* (available in the *Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Concise Edition, Volume A*) in my unit on histories of English colonialism. In courses on medieval gender and sexuality, I teach pastourelles as part of a two-week unit on rape and consent with Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale,* Waymack 2017, Khor, Harris, and documents from the Chaucer-Chaumpaigne *raptus* release (Waymack 2016-2019). Pastourelles also work well in a course that foregrounds rape, consent, and desire or histories of #MeToo (either medieval or trans-historical) alongside Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Roxane Gay's *Not That Bad.*

rhetoric before resorting to more violent tactics, enabling them to be read as critiques of chivalric masculine ideals.

Teaching Pastourelles

I teach pastourelles at least five weeks into the term so that students have time to develop a spirit of community and accountability with one another and so I can get a good sense of their personalities and viewpoints. When teaching pastourelles, I first contextualize them with a brief lecture about rape and consent in the Middle Ages. In this lecture, I discuss the medieval legal process of prosecuting rape, the necessity of raising the hue and cry in order to pursue a criminal case, the status of "*raptus*" as a property crime, the literary popularity of the false allegation motif, and the prevalence of out-of-court settlements such as marriage or monetary compensation.[4] I mention that women could press rape charges themselves and did not need a male relative or spouse to do so on their behalf, which often surprises students, as does the fact that the sacrament of marriage required both parties' consent. I explain the concept of the marital debt, entailing mutual consent and obligation. I note that marital rape was not legally prohibited, but in order to avoid reinforcing popular fictions of pervasive medieval sexual brutality, I remind students that marital rape was not outlawed throughout the whole United States until 1994. When laying the groundwork for discussing consent and accounting for differences between past and present sexual cultures, I emphasize that while the medieval legal definition of *raptus* was a narrow one with a high standard of proof for establishing the victim-survivor's nonconsent, medieval literature and culture recognized a far wider range of violations. Here, I sometimes pause for a brief discussion in which students—either as a collective or in small groups—discuss definitions of sexual consent and the factors that shape consent. I remind students that medieval notions of consent differ from our own—for example, texts from the time period frequently interpret silence as consent rather than insisting that consent be affirmative, informed, and freely given—but that pastourelles nonetheless show an abiding interest in grappling with what, precisely, constitutes and influences consent.

After this wider-ranging lecture and discussion, I outline the pastourelle's basic genre conventions. I note that the standard pastourelle is a social and sexual clash, a verse debate in an isolated rural setting between a socially privileged man, often a knight or cleric, and a socially disadvantaged woman. A pastourelle often begins with a few lines of idyllic nature description from the perspective of the male speaker. He initiates conversation with the woman, who rejects him, often calling on God and her mother as allies. Pastourelles feature a variety of outcomes: sometimes the man assaults the woman or coerces her into compliance. Sometimes she changes her "no" to a "yes," and other times she continues to resist. I observe that pastourelles typically feature a gendered paradigm of male assailant and female victim-survivor, and I remind students that real-life perpetrators and victim-survivors come from all genders.

Students then spend several minutes writing their responses to the pastourelles on index cards. Sometimes I ask them to identify one particular poem or stanza that stood out to them and to articulate

[4] For more on teaching the false allegation trope, which I do when teaching Marie de France's *Lanval* in the literature survey two weeks before the pastourelles, see Harper. For a brief introduction to medieval legal outcomes to rape cases, see Harris.

why, or to draw connections to the present day or to other texts we have read. This exercise gives students a chance to gather their thoughts, which is especially important when engaging with difficult material. The students' written responses are often more detailed than their verbal remarks, so these index cards enable me to get a better sense of how they are processing the texts when I read them after class and to follow up on any queries or comments in the next class. After this period of writing and thinking, I facilitate a discussion generated by students' reflections before close reading specific passages or leading students through an exercise in breaking down individual poems' sexual scripts. Sometimes I make two columns on the board so we can list the rhetorical tactics that the male speaker uses to attempt to persuade the woman—threats, compliments, claims of love at first sight, offers of gifts, guilt-tripping, manipulation—as well as the strategies that the woman uses to resist him. We discuss how the man's rhetoric often shifts from courtly and deferential to aggressive and derogatory. I encourage students to think about how perspective is deployed and to pay attention to who speaks first and last in these lyrics. I ask them to consider how identification and empathy operate: with which speaker are audiences encouraged to identify?[5] How is this identification complicated in pastourelles such as *In somer quhen flouris will smell* or *I saw me thocht this hindir nycht*, which do not follow a strict perpetrator-victim script or feature speakers who reverse or withdraw their consent? Students often articulate emotions of sorrow or anger in response to these poems, and I assure them that these are normal reactions. I conclude all pastourelle-focused class sessions by affirming everyone for discussing difficult topics together, thanking them for being present and engaged, and reminding them to take good care of themselves.

In our close-reading exercises, I read aloud a stanza or two rather than having students perform the poem (because the difficult content and power issues highlighted by the poems might intersect uncomfortably with students' own identities), and then we spend ten to twenty minutes dissecting the passage. I never close read rape scenes in class because that is unnecessarily traumatizing for students. For example, I might read the opening stanzas from *Come over the woodes fair and grene*:

> 'Come over the woodes fair and grene,
> The goodly mayde, that lustye wenche;
> To chadoo yow from the sonne[shene],
> Under the woode ther ys a benche.'
>
> 'Sir, I pray yow, doo non offence
> To me, a mayde, thys I make my mone.
> But as I came, lett me goo hens,
> For I am here my selfe alone.' (1-8)

After I read the passage, I give students a few moments to digest it. I then ask what stands out to them: what particular words or literary features (alliteration, apposition, words linked by rhyme, verb tense or mood) do they notice? With whom are audiences encouraged to identify? What are the effects of opening the poem with lush, descriptive natural language? How can we interpret the man's

[5] One text that works well with discussions of identification and perspective is Smith's "Two Men Arrive in a Village," which is ideal for an early British literature survey syllabus because it is short and helps to diversify a reading list that is often dominated by white male authors.

appositional naming of the woman as both a "goodly mayde" and a "lustye wenche"? What do we make of the maiden's use of polite language ("Sir," "I pray yow") to address her aggressor? How does she characterize herself? What reasons does she give for wanting to leave?

Pedagogical Approaches

Pastourelles illuminate histories of street harassment, a problem that many students encounter regularly. Holly Kearl defines street harassment as "unwanted interactions in public spaces between strangers that are motivated by a person's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression and make the harassee feel annoyed, angry, humiliated, or scared" (5). Street harassment and pastourelles both follow a similar script, in which a man notices a woman in public, "compliments" her beauty, and becomes hostile when she does not respond favorably to his overtures; both, too, are initiated without one party's consent. Sometimes I encourage students to spend a few moments writing and reflecting on their own experiences of street harassment as victims or bystanders and drawing connections to pastourelles' language, rhetorical tactics, and social scripts. We discuss how factors such as race, gender presentation, location, time of day, and socio-economic status can shape the experience and severity of street harassment. Teaching pastourelles through the lens of street harassment, and thinking about how consent shapes pastourelle encounters as well as street harassment, enables students to understand how their experiences are inflected by medieval views of gender, sexual availability, vulnerability, and power.[6] One contemporary text that pairs well with this lens is Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's short story "Wolfpack," which fictionalizes the real-life story of the New Jersey Seven, a group of young Black lesbians who were convicted of felonies for defending themselves against violent street harassment in 2006.

Pastourelles are an excellent tool for teaching students about intersectionality, which Kimberlé Crenshaw defines as "account[ing] for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (1245). Pastourelles stage encounters inflected by numerous intersecting types of power and disadvantage—including gender, age, socio-economic status, and weaponry (since the knight is implicitly armed)—that embolden the men and render the women especially vulnerable to assault. I encourage students to tease out the different ways they see power functioning in these lyrics and to contemplate how power and (dis)advantage shape an individual's capacity to consent. For example, in *Hey troly loly lo*, a man targets a maiden due to her youth (he calls her "mete [fitting] in age" for his predation, 20); her job as a milkmaid, which endangers her because she must work outdoors and alone; and her socio-economic status, which means that she must continue to do her job even though he warns he will rape her "the nexte tyme" she goes to the meadow to milk her cow (33). The man in *Come over the woodes fair and grene* propositions a peasant girl gathering flowers alone and invents a local law requiring her to pay a fee before she can pass unscathed. She offers him her flowers as payment, acknowledging her poverty by stating that "oder goodes have I non" (22). He claims her body instead, leveraging her economic disadvantage rather than using overt force. Lyrics such as this one illuminate how powerful individuals can exploit intersecting inequalities so that they do not need to resort to explicit violence, and students are often troubled and infuriated by the man's deft manipulation of the girl's multiple disadvantages.

[6] For more on teaching street harassment, see Bond.

A third pedagogical framework entails emphasizing pastourelles' status as fictive survivor testimonies. I lead students through a close reading of *Throughe a forest as I can ryde*'s final two stanzas, in which the victim-survivor curses her assailant, states that he has harmed her "body" as well as her "harte," and vows to "recover…agayne" (61-68). We focus on the various harms she enumerates; analyze the role of alliteration, rhyme, and repetition; examine the range of emotions she expresses; and discuss her choice to name her attacker as both "corteor" and "knave." Students find this framework to be meaningful because it reminds contemporary survivors that they are not alone, demonstrates that medieval society viewed rape as both physical crime and psychic trauma, and underscores the survivor's resilience. Texts that pair effectively with this approach include medieval women's rape trial testimonies, essays from Roxane Gay's *Not That Bad*, and Chanel Miller's viral victim impact statement delivered at her assailant Brock Turner's 2016 sentencing (Baker).

Other pedagogical approaches include analyzing the roles and ethical responsibilities of bystanders in *All to lufe and nocht to fenyie*, in which an anonymous observer witnesses a rape and does not intervene; male consent in *I saw me thocht this hindir nycht*, featuring a man who withdraws his consent and subsequently faces pressure from his female partner as well as contempt from the bystander-narrator; and coercion in *When that hyrdes be brought to rest*, whose resistant female speaker changes her "no" to a "yes" after the man threatens to drown himself. Or, instructors can focus on rape and reparation in *Beware my lytyll fynger*, whose assailant apologizes and asks to "hele" the "payn" he has caused (40, 31). One tool for encouraging further engagement with the genre is a creative assignment in which students write a contemporary example of a pastourelle. This assignment asks students to demonstrate that they understand the genre's rules and to draw creative connections to the present. In addition to their creative piece itself, students write a one-page introduction to and close-reading analysis of it. Many use the assignment to address street harassment and the sexual politics of campus culture, or sometimes they write queer pastourelles. In their introductions, they typically note how the assignment gave them a chance to reflect on contemporary sexual scripts, issues surrounding consent, and power dynamics that they previously took for granted, demonstrating how pastourelles encourage students to think more critically about sexual culture and their own experiences.

Establishing Foundations

In order to teach texts about sexual violence in an effective and affirming fashion, I establish critical groundwork regarding resources, content, and classroom community throughout the course. First, I give students verbal notice at the end of the previous class that our upcoming readings feature sexual violence. This functions more like a "heads up" than a trigger warning, and it allows students to know in advance that they will encounter potentially difficult material. Second, my attendance policy gives students flexibility in engaging with the material. Students have three "sick days" to use as they wish with no questions asked, rather than distinguishing between excused and unexcused absences. This means that they can choose to take a sick day on the day(s) that we discuss the pastourelles without needing to disclose why they are absent. Third, I introduce the concept of self-care to my students at least one week before I teach pastourelles, with a list of specific strategies such as nourishing themselves with nutritious food, drinking water, making sure to get at least six hours of sleep, getting fresh air, being intentional about doing laundry and making their living spaces habitable, taking regular showers, combating negative self-talk, and designating time to do something that brings them joy. I

include information on my syllabus for resources such as the campus sexual assault counseling and education unit, the campus food pantry, and a local 24-hour rape hotline.

Most importantly, I strive to cultivate bell hooks's conception of the classroom as "a place that is life-sustaining and mind-expanding, a place of liberating mutuality" (xv). On the first day of class, I say, "When you registered for this class, you thought you were just fulfilling a required credit for your degree. But you actually joined a community of souls, and we will work together to be vulnerable with each other and to care for one another as we learn." I tell students frequently that I care about them, and I articulate my expectation that they extend that same love and care to one another. I remind them that they have the power to use the knowledge gained through education to change their lives and to shape their worlds.

Educators can be reluctant to discuss texts about sexual violence because they fear that students will make careless or incendiary comments that lead to classroom discord and hurt feelings. They may also worry that students will disclose their own experiences of assault. This happens rarely in my experience, but when it does, I tell students I am sorry that happened to them and direct them to the resources listed on the syllabus in addition to making a Title IX report, if the disclosure falls within those parameters. In addition to starting from hooks's vision of the classroom community based in an ethics of love, which she defines as "a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust" (131), I remind students that there are survivors among us and that it is important to be sensitive to their experiences. Sometimes we phrase things imperfectly because our classroom is a space of ongoing learning, so I encourage students to be thoughtful in articulating their comments and to take their peers' remarks in the spirit of good faith. I remind them that we all have wounds, and we never know what each other's wounds are. If a student says something inadvertently insensitive, I give them a chance to clarify their remarks, gently encourage them to reconsider their underlying assumptions, or use their comment as a way to point to prevalent cultural attitudes without making them feel as though I am attacking them. For example, if a student critiques a pastourelle victim's response to her assailant, I might say, "Your comment usefully illuminates how our culture often puts the burden on individuals for managing and avoiding risk rather than expecting perpetrators to change their behavior." In general, I find students to be thoughtful, knowledgeable, and socially aware when discussing sexual violence.

Conclusion

When my students reflect on pastourelles, they note how little has changed between past and present experiences of sexual violence. They express exhaustion, sadness, or anger regarding these connections, and I encourage them to mobilize their emotions productively into action so that these continuities do not persist in the future. Overall, they find the experience of reading pastourelles to be at once difficult, valuable, and illuminating. As one student wrote, "they grapple with deciding what exactly consent means, something contemporary society is still trying to figure out."[7]

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[7] I am grateful to Isabella Perri for granting me permission to share her words.

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