



# TEACHING RAPE IN THE MEDIEVAL LITERATURE CLASSROOM

## APPROACHES TO DIFFICULT TEXTS

Edited by  
**ALISON GULLEY**

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**TEACHING RAPE IN THE MEDIEVAL  
LITERATURE CLASSROOM**

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## Chapter I

# INTRODUCTION: TEACHING RAPE AND MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CLASSROOM

ALISON GULLEY

This volume was conceived and written at a time of unprecedented attention in the United States to rape and rape prevention on college campuses and more specifically grows out of a panel that I organized for the May 2014 International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, in which I and two other presenters explored the problem of how to approach medieval texts that feature sexual violence, in ways that are both academically sound and ethically appropriate for our students. The panel itself resulted from an interaction with a student in a sophomore-level British Literature class. During a discussion of Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale," a student, referring to the rape that precipitates the knight's quest for the thing that women most desire, piped up: "How do we know she was really raped?" I was caught off guard, first, because the rape is unambiguously stated ("By verray force, he rafte hire maydenhed" [III. 886–9])<sup>1</sup> and, second, because the August 2012 rape of a Steubenville, Ohio teenager by her classmates—and the controversial response to it by both the community and the media—was very much in the news that week as the case went to trial. To me, and to much of the rest of the class, if the ensuing discussion is any indication, the question reflected the many disjointed and often contradictory attitudes toward women, sexuality, and violence. Despite having taught the tale many times and to hundreds of students over the years, I came away from the class feeling that I had not anticipated the kinds of questions and assumptions students bring to such a text and thus had not adequately prepared myself to teach the work in a such a specific modern context. Judging by the lively discussion that followed the presentations at Kalamazoo, I was not alone. Many teachers, it seems, are eager to develop pedagogical strategies for addressing sensitive topics in the classroom. To that end, this collection includes articles that contextualize scenes of rape, attempted rape, and false accusations in a variety of literary works within the politically charged environment that our students, and ourselves as teachers, study and learn.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson et al. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 105–22.

The difficulties created by such texts are manifold. Not only can the subject matter itself make us and our students squirm, but our students must also contend with a different language (or a translation, which raises its own issues) and a historical and cultural context far removed from our own. Evelyn Birge Vitz has criticized feminist studies of medieval rape for “being plagued by a tendency toward naive, anachronistic, and inappropriate readings of literary works, high levels of indignation and self-pity, and a pervasive hostility to men,” suggesting that readers who focus on actual rape as they’re reading about literary representations of it are at best simply uninformed and childish, or, at worst, fulfilling negative stereotypes of feminists and feminism. But Carolyn Dinshaw reminds us that reading fiction is far more complex than such a generalization acknowledges. For example, in discussing the well-known and ambiguous charge of rape against Chaucer, she notes that the existence of records showing that he is somehow involved in *raptus* reminds us that “there are not only fictional rapes—the rape of Philomela, the rape of Helen, the rape of the maiden in ‘The Wife of Bath’s Tale’—but there are real rapes as well.”<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on Dinshaw’s words here, in “Reading Chaucer, Reading Rape,” Christine M. Rose describes a “profitable” reading of rape as one that necessitates readers simultaneously holding both kinds of rape—“*figurative* and *real* rape”—in their heads.<sup>3</sup> Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver argue for a conscious rereading of rape in those instances where the act has been “deflected,” that is, “where it has been turned into a metaphor or a symbol or represented rhetorically as titillation, persuasion, ravishment, seduction, or desire.” Such a reading can “reclaim the physical, material bodies of women from their status as ‘figures’ and reveal the ways in which violence marks the female subject both physically and psychologically.”<sup>4</sup> Far from being unrealistic or inappropriate, as Vitz would have it, such readings are *careful* readings in that they ask us to consider both the text’s historical milieu and that of readers and critics.

In addition to the difficulties of crossing time and place, and perhaps even more vexing, is the problem of understanding the nature of rape itself, which even in the twenty-first century continues to be fraught with uncertainty. The question of what constitutes “real rape” is, of course, a thorny one, in that the term—and the act—are polysemous. The word “rape” comes from the Latin *raptus*, which literally means “theft” or “seizure.” Before the late thirteenth century in England, in legal records the word usually denoted sexual assault, while *abductione* (or its verb form *abduxit*) and a variety of other terms (such as *cepit et imprisonavit*, “capture and imprison”) were commonly used for those crimes classified as abduction.<sup>5</sup> The Westminster

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<sup>2</sup> Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Christine M. Rose, “Reading Chaucer, Reading Rape,” in *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose, *The New Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silvers, eds., *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 26–8.

Statutes of 1275 and 1285 paired rape with abduction and employed *raptus* in reference to both, but, to further complicate matters, also frequently combined it with *abduxit/abductione*, which almost always meant a woman's seizure and not sexual assault.<sup>6</sup> Despite these recognized patterns of use, the ambiguity continued through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, albeit to a lesser extent. Kathryn Gravdal notes a similar lack of linguistic clarity surrounding the act of rape in Old French: "there is no word that corresponds to the modern French *viol* to designate rape. Medieval culture does not search to find one term to denote forced coitus. The Old French language favors periphrasis, metaphor, and slippery lexematic exchanges as opposed to a clear and unambiguous signifier of sexual assault."<sup>7</sup> Thus we find euphemisms such as *faire sa volenté* (to do one's will) and *faire son plaisir* (to take one's pleasure) or the word *esforcer* (derived from the Latin *fortis*, "force") used within the same text to mean both "to strive" and "to rape."<sup>8</sup>

To complicate matters, not just the language of rape but the act itself is difficult to pin down. In some cases, the concept of rape is embedded in practices that blur the line between consensual and nonconsensual sex. Early medieval Germanic law recognized as legitimate *Raubehe*, or marriage contracted through abduction and ravishment, a practice which continued after Christian conversion and which may have influenced another form of legal marriage, *Friedelehe*, in essence, elopement, which is seen throughout the medieval period.<sup>9</sup> Christopher Cannon, in his study of the already referenced and much-debated release of the charge of *raptus* against Chaucer by Cecily Chaumpaigne, notes other obstacles to understanding, asking,

What definition will we use for rape ... when we ask what *raptus* means? What does the Chaumpaigne release really say if the *raptus* it refers to is an act that, according to the vigorously defended affective states of both those involved in it, is at *once* rape and not rape? What does the Chaumpaigne release teach us if that act is one that we would now call 'rape' (because, say, Chaumpaigne felt it was but Chaucer did not) but that fourteenth-century law was entirely happy to throw into a category it understood as 'abduction?'<sup>10</sup>

He points to an even bigger predicament: "a legal document in the fourteenth century as well as now is necessarily an instrument at some remove from 'what happened' and, second, because sexual violence is itself a crime where 'what happened,' the very act that might constitute the crime, can be variously defined even by those who have

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>7</sup> Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>9</sup> James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 129. For a discussion of elopement in the later Middle Ages, see Dunn, 98–119.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Cannon, "Chaucer and Rape: Uncertainties' Certainities," in Robertson and Rose, 257.

identical 'facts' in hand."<sup>11</sup> None of this, however, is to suggest that we can't try to make sense of the word and act, both as teachers and scholars.

Rape as a subject of literary study is a fairly new phenomenon, dating back to the rise of feminist theory and scholarship in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s. In medieval studies, the focus is even more recent, despite the fact that, as Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose note in their important collection *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, the "omnipresence of images of rape in Western literature illustrates how the rapable body has been woven into the very foundations of Western poetics."<sup>12</sup> One of the first books to focus on literary rape was Higgins and Silver's 1991 collection *Rape and Representation*, which spans several centuries and genres, including literature and film, beginning with Ovid's story of Philomela. In reexamining such texts, they argue that discourse about rape is a rhetorical device that, instead of simply denoting rape, symbolizes "other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts."<sup>13</sup> For example, an American rape narrative such as the so-called Central Park Jogger case of 1989 reflects the crime of rape not just as an act of sexual violence but, through the sensationalized press coverage which referred to the suspects as a "wolf pack," as "a conflict between two parties clearly distinguished by race, ethnicity and class."<sup>14</sup> The year 1991 also saw the publication of Gravdal's influential monograph *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature*, which addressed violence against women in medieval law and a variety of French literary texts of multiple genres. Her argument is that, particularly in the romance, rape is not only normalized to the extent that we expect to encounter it, but also that it is even romanticized. That is, when we see a beautiful maiden, we expect a forceful knight to ravish her. At the same time, paradoxically the romance teaches that "rape is wrong," a contradiction that remains unresolved.<sup>15</sup> Although in many ways literature of the medieval period can be seen as silent on the question of rape, in that, paradoxically, it is so pervasive as to be unworthy of comment, Gravdal notes that instead it is rather the silence of literary scholars on the subject that is noteworthy. Ultimately, her study reveals rape in actions that previously had been glossed over by readers. Two influential books appeared in 2001, joining the relatively short list of books on the topic. Rose and Robertson's collection began with the premise that because rape is systemic, the very act of analysis is problematic because our methodology and tools are themselves implicit in the act of rape. The essays in their book explore the ways in which rape, in addition to being an act of violence, also reflects a society's linguistic, social, and institutional practices. Corinne Saunders, in *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England*,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>12</sup> Robertson and Rose, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silvers, eds., *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia Press, 1991), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1. The convictions were later overturned due do a confession and corroborating evidence from another man. For a full accounting of the case, see Benjamin Weiser, "5 Exonerated in Central Park Jogger Case Agree to Settle Suit for \$40 Million," *New York Times*, June 19, 2014, [www.newyorktimes.com](http://www.newyorktimes.com), accessed October 11, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 67.

tackles the legal and religious dimensions of rape, the question of why rape is so present in the literature of the early period, and its function in the power relationship between the sexes. She stresses the problematic nature of applying modern notions to a study of medieval discourse and notes that contrary to modern assumptions that rape was trivialized and treated dismissively in the Middle Ages, it “was rather the subject of a lively, often politicized, dialogue, which could be acutely sympathetic to women as well as misogynistic.” She points to such things as the complexity of law regarding rape and abduction, the Church’s concern for the loss of virginity, and of the rhetorical and emotional effect of rape on medieval writing, “precisely because,” she writes, “there was a marked consciousness of individual and social, public and private trauma caused by rape and ravishment.”<sup>16</sup>

Building on these earlier studies, one goal of this volume is to address the important question of how we as medieval scholars and teachers can provide the appropriate historical, cultural, and literary milieu in which a text is produced. Just as important, however, is how we do so in a way that recognizes that we don’t teach in a vacuum—our students bring a variety of experiences to the classroom that necessarily colour their reception and understanding of what they read, in both positive and negative ways. This reality challenges us, in Tison Pugh’s words, to “create a classroom environment sensitive to ethical issues, to model for ... students a pedagogical ethos that demonstrates our own difficulties with [a] complex issue, and to encourage our students to explore their own relationships to the past through an analysis of ethics, ethos, and literature.”<sup>17</sup>

The contributors to this volume meet these challenges within the broader context of what many perceive as a crisis in higher education, made manifest by political and popular demand for a “relevant” college education, understood generally as one that will get students a job, and by the increasing need to show the connections between what we do in the classroom and life outside the academy. For the humanities, these calls are particularly vexing because of widely held, and frequently inaccurate, views about the relevance of a liberal arts education. I use the word “show” deliberately, for those of us in the humanities in general and in medieval studies specifically know that what we do *is* relevant and connected, even as others, sometimes even within higher education, don’t understand our role. At an institution where I taught earlier in my career, the dean of students drew the ire of my colleagues when he “explained” that *our* responsibility was to provide academic instruction in the classroom, while *his* responsibility was to teach students about life. Students and teachers of literature know, however, that we’re not dealing just with a bunch of words on a page, or even just a bunch of beautiful and entertaining words on a page. On the contrary, good literature (or bad literature for that matter) is about life and can open a whole new world of places, ideas, experiences, and lessons for readers.

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**16** Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2001), 14.

**17** Tison Pugh, “Chaucer’s Rape, Southern Racism, and the Pedagogical Ethics of Authorial Malfeasance,” *College English* 67 (2005): 571.

Of course, not all literature is accessible, particularly when, as medievalists do, we are dealing with writings from a distant time, place, and, not least, world view. The task becomes that much harder given widely held but inaccurate notions about the Middle Ages. Students come to us bearing a pop culture understanding of the era, thanks in part to the popularity of television shows like *Game of Thrones* or *The Vikings*, but are also influenced by the pejorative use of the word “medieval” to describe the atrocities of terrorist groups such as ISIS or the mindset of school boards challenging the inclusion of certain texts in public school curricula. On the opposite end of the spectrum are those who believe that rather than being some barbaric, superstitious Other, far removed from the modern and enlightened Western mind and experience, medieval people are just like us, or at least not that different. Even as we strive to eradicate those persistent myths about the Middle Ages, we are faced with showing our students that there are some real, quantifiable differences between the medieval and modern world views. The readiness with which students accept the “reality” of *jus primae noctis* (thanks to *Braveheart*) or its cousin “the rule of thumb,” which supposedly allowed men to beat their wives with impunity as long as the stick they used was no larger than their thumb, illustrates that medieval women are of particular interest. In one common narrative, medieval women were almost universally and continuously ill-treated, with the exception of courtly ladies, who were placed on a pedestal and treated with courtesy and reverence.

The teacher of medieval literature, then, must navigate a large temporal, perceptual, and linguistic gulf between the Middle Ages and the twenty-first-century student. Each fall since 1998 the Mindset List from Beloit College in Wisconsin provides insight into the lives of entering college freshmen. Describing students who have been born since the turn of the century, among such entertaining facts as “wire-rim glasses are associated with Harry Potter, not John Lennon” and “[s]tudents have always been able to dance at Baylor,” we find more sobering information about the world that our students have grown up in. For example, their memories include seeing “endlessly repeated images of planes blasting into the World Trade Center,”<sup>18</sup> so that the fear of terrorism colours their existence much as the Cold War overshadowed the lives of previous generations of young people. Our students also bring a different set of concerns and preoccupations specific to their college experience. They come to us less academically prepared than their predecessors;<sup>19</sup> they are more likely to seek psychological

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<sup>18</sup> “The Mindset List,” [beloit.edu](http://beloit.edu), accessed April 26, 2015, [www.beloit.edu/mindset/2018/](http://www.beloit.edu/mindset/2018/).

<sup>19</sup> The numbers on student preparedness from the U.S. Department of Education’s National Assessment of Educational Progress are misleading, in that a higher percentage of Americans, from a cross-section of society, attend college. For example, the percentage of eighteen to twenty-four year olds enrolled in college increased from 35.5 per cent in 2000 to 41 per cent in 2012 (National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/>, accessed April 26, 2015). The percentage of students deemed “proficient” in reading and mathematics has remained relatively stable during that time. (Math proficiency has slightly increased, while reading proficiency fell from 1992 to 2009, from 40 per cent to 38 per cent, where it has remained.) [www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_g12\\_2013/#/what-knowledge](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_g12_2013/#/what-knowledge), accessed April 26, 2015.

counselling from student health services;<sup>20</sup> and they will graduate with more debt than their predecessors even as the job market has become less secure for recent college graduates.

Within this increasingly volatile environment, educators are called upon to do more and be more for our students. While the stereotypical professor—old, aloof, slightly dishevelled, pipe-smoking, and of course white and male—has not been around for quite some time (if he ever really was) except on the large and small screen, or, perhaps, in the uppermost reaches of academia, the real professor—still mostly white, but now also female, and frequently contingent—is expected not only to teach, but also to nurture students and engage in crisis management. Of particular concern for the contributors in this volume are demands that colleges and universities find ways to effectively address the problem of sexual violence on college campuses. Several high-profile cases in which students charged that their institutions did not respond appropriately to rape allegations led the U.S. Department of Education to issue reminders, in the form of a letter called colloquially the “Dear Colleague Letter,” that the Title IX portion of the 1972 Education Amendments (usually known simply as Title IX)—which bans sexual discrimination, harassment, and violence in institutions that receive federal aid—also applies to instances of sexual violence.<sup>21</sup> Then, in April 2014, the Obama administration released the findings and recommendations of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, followed in September of that year with the launch of its own campaign against sexual violence on college campuses, “It’s On Us.” As President Obama explained, “This is on all of us, every one of us, to fight campus sexual assault ... [We] are going to organize campus by campus, city by city, state by state.”<sup>22</sup>

While sexual assault is not new among college students, or even more prevalent than in earlier years, because of efforts like these, American society has become more cognizant of it. Although the exact numbers of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence continue to excite debate, a frequently cited statistic is that by the time they graduate from high school, more than one in ten girls will have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse. In college, nearly one in five women, and about six out of one hundred men, will be the victims of attempted or actual sexual assault.<sup>23</sup> We care about these numbers not only because of the academic problems

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**20** A 2013 survey found an increase in the number of students with severe psychological problems and that the conditions most likely to drive a student to seek help continued to be anxiety, depression, and relationship issues. Libby Sander, “Campus Counseling Centers ‘Are as Busy as They Ever Have Been,’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 15, 2013, <http://chronicle.com>, accessed April 15, 2013.

**21** The letter, dated April 4, 2011 and signed by Russlyn Ali, Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the Department of Education, can be found at [www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/dear\\_colleague\\_sexual\\_violence.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/dear_colleague_sexual_violence.pdf), accessed May 19, 2015.

**22** Juliet Eilperin, “Seeking to End Rape on Campus, White House Launches ‘It’s on Us,’” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2014, accessed May 19, 2015, [www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/09/19/seeking-to-end-rape-on-campus-wh-launches-its-on-us/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-politics/wp/2014/09/19/seeking-to-end-rape-on-campus-wh-launches-its-on-us/). The task force report can be accessed at [www.notalone.gov/assets/report.pdf](http://www.notalone.gov/assets/report.pdf).

**23** “Dear Colleague Letter: Sexual Violence Background, Summary, and Fast Facts,” April 4, 2011, [www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-201104.html](http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-factsheet-201104.html), accessed May



that sexual assaults cause—including difficulty concentrating, poor grades, absenteeism, and a lower likelihood of graduating with a degree<sup>24</sup>—but also because as teachers we care about more than our students' academic achievement; while we might not all subscribe to the philosophy of *in loco parentis*, anyone charged with cultivating the minds of students is necessarily engaged in the cultivation and care of the whole person. We are looked to as authority figures, particularly by traditional college students, and within our disciplinary spheres are generally regarded as expert. Thus, when academic and extra-curricular collide in the classroom, as they increasingly seem to, we have the opportunity, and some would argue, the responsibility, to help our students navigate between the two.

Arguably, nowhere is this tension more noticeable than when reading and discussing texts about sexual violence. All the essays in this volume address this point in some form, but Suzanne M. Edwards tackles the issue head on by showing how teaching hagiographical texts can open a dialogue between medieval and modern representations of rape. From there, Christina di Gangi and Wendy Perkins apply principles from victimology to illuminate the nature of sexual assault itself, the characterization of victims, and the function in texts of bystanders. Elizabeth Hubble further focuses on the bystander, in this case proposing a model for actively engaging students in such a way that reading becomes an overtly political act. While most college teachers have been confronted with inappropriate comments during class discussions, sometimes to the point that students become uncomfortable or in extreme cases can feel harassed or victimized, Hubble asks pointedly about commonly assigned classical, patristic, and medieval writings involving women, “what if those inappropriate comments and attitudes don’t come from the people in the classroom, but from the texts assigned and the analyses brought to them?” Alexandra Sterling-Hellenbrand similarly uses the concept of bystander awareness to frame her teaching of an episode in the *Nibelungenlied* in which a humorous scene of thwarted wedding night sex becomes offset by a subsequent scene that can be clearly identified as rape.

Several of the essays in this volume address the works of Chaucer, who continues to figure prominently in the medieval literature curriculum. Emily Houlik-Ritchey shares a two-day lesson plan that helps students distinguish between legal and ethical culpability in Chaucer’s “The Reeve’s Tale”; my own essay recommends using a modern retelling of “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” to wrestle with the sexual violence of the Prologue and tale; and Tison Pugh shows how having students examine gender stereotypes, particularly those involving speech and silence, illuminates the various ways that literary depictions of rape both reinforce and undermine medieval constructions of gender in several of Chaucer’s works.

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19, 2015. Sexual violence is not confined to college campuses, of course, and in fact, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, and as reported in the “Dear Colleague Letter,” the rate of rape and sexual assault was 1.2 times higher for nonstudents (7.6 per 1,000) than for students (6.1 per 1,000).

**24** West Virginia Foundation for Rape Information and Services, 1998–2014, [www.fris.org/CampusSexualViolence/CampusSexViolence.html](http://www.fris.org/CampusSexualViolence/CampusSexViolence.html), accessed May 19, 2015.



The remaining essays cover the broad and varied genre of romance. Marie de France is the subject of both Elizabeth Harper's essay, which looks at an instance of false rape accusation in *Lanval*, and Misty Urban's, which discusses approaches to the *Lais* for general education and upper division major courses. Although most of the works discussed in this collection involve female victims and male perpetrators, David Grubbs draws our attention to male victims in chivalric romance, specifically in *Amadis De Gaulle* and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. He approaches these texts with reference to the "positive consent model," which holds that yes-means-yes should replace no-means-no as the standard for sexual consent.<sup>25</sup> Daniel O'Sullivan continues the conversation about the difficult problem of consent, this time by asking students to deconstruct notions of consent and seduction in troubadour lyrics. Alan Baragona's contribution also focuses on men, here as readers of the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, with a peculiarly modern take on the role of chivalry wrought by the values of a public military college, which changed from male-only to co-ed during Baragona's tenure there. Finally, William Smith's essay on *Sir Gowther* takes up the nature of identity in the medieval world, with reference to Gowther's parentage (he is conceived when his mother has intercourse with a demon in the guise of her husband), his sins (which include raping a community of nuns and destroying their convent), and his ultimate repentance.

The reader will find in this collection suggestions for specific classroom activities and student-friendly editions, as well as insight into the needs and concerns of a variety of students attending many different types of institutions. While the included topics might be of special interest to scholars in feminist and gender studies, anyone teaching within the context of current educational and political trends, or with the desire to integrate curricular and co-curricular activities, will find useful suggestions and resources. The essays in this volume also reflect the experiences of teachers at various stages of their career, from those relatively new to the profession as well as those in mid- or later career, and thus also serve to model the method and value of a responsive and reflective pedagogy. The contributors, many of them award-winning teachers, bring their experience from across the higher education spectrum, including two-year community colleges, private four-year church-affiliated institutions, regional comprehensive universities, doctorate-granting universities, and a public military college. In each essay, the writers strive to make connections between the unique needs of students in their particular programs and the needs of college students more broadly. To that end, the collection includes a range of pedagogical strategies appropriate for the general education classroom, upper-division courses for majors, and specialized graduate seminars.

When my co-authors and I began this collection, we spoke of the urgency of the project, given the attention being paid to rape in the media. The words "rape culture"

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**25** For a discussion of the unintended consequences of such a model, see Janet Halley, "The Move to Affirmative Consent," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 (2016): 257–79. Halley argues that while this kind of policy is appealing to many feminists, it reinforces traditional, conservative ideas of female passivity and male dominance.

were being used in a way that seemed if not new in and of themselves, at least representative of a new kind of awareness. And yet I look back at the words of Higgins and Silver, in 1991, when I was just beginning my training as a medievalist. “The urgency of this project,” they wrote, “derives from the fact that rape and the threat of rape are a major force in the subjugation of women. In ‘rape cultures’ such as the United States, the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence all contribute to shaping behavior and identity, in men and women alike.”<sup>26</sup> In the early decades of the twenty-first century, it is unnerving that the same can be said. What I hope is different, however, is that the new awareness of and concentrated effort to address this rape culture will render such studies in the future, if not unnecessary, at least not as urgent. Our hope is that our essays, the literature they address, and the teachers who undertake to help students understand both the Middle Ages and their own culture, will be a step toward that day.

Although the impetus for this volume is the spate of calls to action at the institutional, state, and federal levels concerning sexual violence on campus, there’s nothing new in the fact that most educators are driven to provide their students with the best possible education. What I hope the readers of this book will find is not only practical advice for improving or augmenting their current approaches to the many literary texts discussed here, but also a path to the holistic teaching method so eloquently described by bell hooks. Approaching difficult texts in the college classroom can be a deeply political act. Too frequently professors are characterized as either distant ivory-tower scholars out of touch with day-to-day concerns and intent on avoiding teaching and other student interaction or, conversely, provocateurs exploiting the teacher–student relationship to advance a radical agenda and destroy traditional values. To hooks, and to many of us in education, the true agenda is simple: good teaching seeks to provide an environment in which students and professors recognize each other “as ‘whole’ human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Higgins and Silver, *Rape and Representation*, 1–2.

<sup>27</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14–15.

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