The Medieval Legalities of *Ruptus*: An Exploration of Female Consent and *Sexual Violence* in *The Canterbury Tales*, and *The Book of Margery Kempe*

by

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Abstract

In medieval England, the term *raptus* could be used to refer to sexual violence, abduction, or women voluntarily leaving their husbands or guardians. Historicizing English rape code illuminates literary representations of sexual violence in Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* and Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe*.

In the body of my project, I will refer a secondary source to analyze a correspondence between a father appealing the “abduction” of his daughter in court and the dignitary he reaches out to, Sir Thomas West and John of Gaunt, respectively. These letters immortalize the confusions and ambiguities of the law regarding *raptus*. This case study will productively add to my conversation of *raptus* and female consent by providing a legal framework to analyze the literature from.

Going further, in I will explore this topic of gender politics and unions in Chaucer’s “The Reeve’s Tale,” “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and her “Prologue” (1478). “The Reeve’s Tale” engages with female consent as a currency and the female body as a transactionary object. To delve further into my exploration of female consent as portrayed in The Canterbury Tales, I turn to the Wife of Bath's “Prologue” and “Tale.” The Wife of Bath’s tale and prologue echo the structural violence that is embedded in English rape code, thereby transforming male desire into raptus.

Finally, I will conclude with "The Book of Margery Kempe" (1501), which tells of the life of medieval mystic, entrepreneur, mother, wife, and traveler, and offers a perspective on consent that is more nuanced than haunted by a fear of raptus.
The Canterbury Tales (Middle English: Tales of Caunterbury) is a collection of 24 stories that runs to over 17,000 lines written in Middle English by Geoffrey Chaucer between 1387 and 1400. In 1386, Chaucer became Controller of Customs and Justice of Peace and, in 1389, Clerk of the King's work. It was during these years that Chaucer began working on his most famous text, The Canterbury Tales. The tales (mostly written in verse, although some are in prose) are presented as part of a story-telling Margery Kempe (l. c. 1373 - c. 1438 CE) was a medieval mystic and author of the first autobiography in English, The Book of Margery Kempe, which... In the present day, it is considered a classic of medieval literature but is also considered significant in depicting the life of a woman in the Middle Ages, the lucrative pilgrimage business and travel, and the powerful role religion played in the lives of the people. The book is most memorable, however, for the honesty of the author's voice as she relates the story of her relationship with God and her adventures and near-fatalities among those who professed to believe in that same God but did not believe in her. Early Life & Conversion. Almost all that is known of Margery Kempe comes fro