Chaucer and Bawdy

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RANCE.	Had you committed the act you wouldn't now be facing the charge.
PRENTICE.	I couldn't commit the act. I'm a heterosexual.
RANCE.	I wish you wouldn't use these Chaucerian words. It's most confusing.

<div align="right">Joe Orton, What the Butler Saw (1969), p. 55.</div>

The reputation of a medieval poet is such that a successful dramatist of the 1960s could rely on the mere mention of his name to convey to the audience of the play the ideas of naughtiness and bawdy. Presumably the expansion of senior-secondary and tertiary education after World War II, the gradual relaxation of sexual mores, and the ready availability of a lively translation of the *Canterbury Tales* had all been factors that contributed to a popular dissemination of Chaucer's reputation for bawdiness. If that is so, it occurred in the absence of scholarly activity and interest in the topic. It is true that Chaucer shares with Shakespeare the singular honour of having a book devoted to his bawdy; yet that book was published as recently as 1972 and, modelling itself on Partridge's pioneering work on Shakespeare, takes the form of discursive glosses, apart from a brief, conceptually uncritical introduction.[1] In general, before the later 1960s, while many medievalists privately took pleasure in Chaucer's treatment of sexual and excretory matters, they did not write upon this aspect of his work with the same unembarrassed candour that the poet himself had shown. Among general readers this aspect of Chaucer, and to an extent Chaucer's very name, was very often an occasion for sniggering.

Such a reaction is assumed and indeed invited by Haldeen Braddy of Texas Western College at El Paso who, in two papers penned in the late 1960s, seeks to defend as 'realism' what he refers to as Chaucer's 'bawdy tongue' and 'obscenity' ('In the original Middle English, the sensitive reader will find that the ribald passages reveal Chaucer's insight into the uninhibited lives of the folk rather than his unhealthy concern with pornography and coprophilia')[2] and to refute Chaucer's 'reputation as an off-color writer' ('Chaucer is no pornographer; he not once

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[1]T. W. Ross, *Chaucer's Bawdy* (New York, 1972); E. Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London, 1947; revised edition, 1969); E. A. M. Colman, *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (London, 1974); James Henke, *Renaissance Dramatic Bawdy (Exclusive of Shakespeare). An Annotated Glossary and Critical Essay*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature, Jacobean Drama Studies, 39–40 (1974).

[2]Haldeen Braddy, 'Chaucer's Bawdy Tongue', *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 30 (1966), 216.

endeavors to excite us sexually or incline us toward vice; he often enough turns us from obscenity by ridiculing it').[3] We cannot help noticing that he assumes pruriency on the part of his implied audience and titillates it:

> The Wife of Bath . . . speaks pointedly of her erotic relations with her numerous husbands, five so far, in her *Prologue*. She has no inhibitions when she there refers to her private part, or her 'play-pretty,' as 'my *bele chose*' (447). This epic boast of hers is hardly offensive and probably no overblown exaggeration, either. She comes nearer the sensational when she tells of wives who slew their husbands in their beds and let their lovers 'shag' them all night long (WBT 767–68). Now Chaucer does not say 'shag'; he says 'dighte.' Most editors gloss 'dighte' in its amorous meaning 'as 'lie with,' but obviously 'dicked,' a homely word in which *gh* has evolved into *ck*, speaks more directly.[4]

His latitudinarianism has its limits, however, which sharply exclude what he coyly (and erroneously) calls the 'carminative faculty' of Chaucer's characters:[5]

> *The Pardoner's Tale* is a corker, but that intolerable business tacked on at the end about the man soiling his breeches just about gags me; the Summoner's portioning of the flatus does gag me. This discreditable sort of filth, Chaucer at his worst, figures small in the total.[6]

Unconscious puns and all, this feeble defence of Chaucer's bawdy breaks no new ground. It accepts old assumptions, and instead of disapproving, expresses a somewhat awkward delight in Chaucer's 'realistic' handling of human sexual foibles. These assumptions are the common ground of the previous century of academic Chaucerian criticism and originally represented an adoption of prevailing opinion by the emergent new profession of English studies. In matters of decency in literature the first professors of English were men of their times and did not dispute conventional notions of bawdiness. There was no question in their minds but that Chaucer needed defending on this score, and defend him they did, with enthusiasm or distaste, depending on their individual temperaments. Influential writers of the day had, after all, condemned Chaucer's ribaldry.

Ruskin, although a great admirer of Chaucer, who he thought had 'taught the purest theological truth',[7] nevertheless did not share most readers' enthusiasm for the *Canterbury Tales*. Indeed, he proposed to exclude them from his planned

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[3]Haldeen Braddy, 'Chaucer — Realism of Obscenity', *Arlington Quarterly*, 2 (1969), 131, 137.

[4]Haldeen Braddy, 'Chaucer — Realism of Obscenity', p. 122. The etymological nonsense in the last sentence of the quotation requires no comment.

[5]Haldeen Braddy,'Bawdy Tongue', p. 217.

[6]Haldeen Braddy, 'Chaucer — Realism or Obscenity', p. 137.

[7]*Fors Clavigera, lxi* (January, 1876), quoted in C. F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357–1900*, 5 vols (London, 1908–17; reprinted, 3 vols, Cambridge, 1925), I, lxiv.

edition of Chaucer, presumably because they contained a higher proportion of 'those momentarily jesting passages which stoop to play with evil'.[8] It was probably the work he had in mind when he complained of those 'forms of humour which render some of quite the greatest, wisest, and most moral of English writers now almost useless for youth'.[9] Edward Fitzgerald declares that the Persian poet Jami was never '*licentious* like his contemporary Chaucer'.[10] Leigh Hunt, whom Spurgeon calls 'perhaps . . . the most constant and enthusiastic lover of Chaucer in the early nineteenth century',[11] deemed it necessary, when praising 'the greatest narrative poet in the language', to concede that 'there are passages, it is true, in Chaucer, which for the sake of all parties, persons of thorough delicacy will never read twice'.[12] Nine years earlier in his *Wit and Humour, Selected from the English Poets*, Hunt had regretted being able to give only one story out of Chaucer:

> but the change of manners renders it difficult at any time, and impossible in a book like the present. The subjects with which the court and gentry of the times of the Henrys and Edwards could be entertained, are sometimes not only indecorous but revolting. It is a thousand pities that the unbounded sympathy of the poet with everything that interested his fellow-creatures did not know, in this instance, when to stop.[13]

Similar considerations prevented the older Wordsworth from permitting the republication of a modernization of the *Manciple's Tale* that he had evidently perpetrated in his rasher youth. He was now (1844) of the view the subject was 'somewhat too indelicate, for pure taste, to be offered to the world at this time of day', and castigated the editor of the collection of modernizations in question for including a 'softened-down' version of the *Reeve's Tale*, which 'after making all allowance for the rude manners of Chaucer's age, is intolerable'.[14] He had perhaps forgotten that forty years earlier he had not scrupled to listen to his sister read aloud the *Miller's Tale*.[15] Perhaps Wordsworth agreed with the anonymous person who 'altered and abridged' Dryden's version of the *Parson's Tale* in 1841; after noting approvingly Chaucer's 'sorrow and regret at the ribaldry and pollution contained in his writings', this literary pigmy averred: 'An author should never forget, that when he has passed into another world, his works, if calculated to corrupt, may still be

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[8]Spurgeon, I, p. lxv.

[9]*Lectures on Art* (1870), quoted in D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols (London, 1978), II, 106.

[10]'Prefatory Letter' to *Salamon and Absal* (1856), cited in Spurgeon, II, iii, 29.

[11]Spurgeon, I, lxv.

[12]*Stories in Verse* (1855), quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, II, 77.

[13]Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, II, 71.

[14]Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years*, II, 242. Spurgeon is trenchantly dismissive of the volume of modernizations (I, lvii–ix).

[15]D. Wordsworth, *Journal*, 26 December 1801.

doing their mischief, and . . . his crimes may thus be extended . . . through centuries.'[16]

Probably unwittingly, he was echoing similar sentiments in Coleridge who, in his Lectures of 1818, dared make no excuse 'for the gross and disgusting licentiousness, the daring profaneness, which rendered the Decameron of Boccaccio the parent of a hundred worse children, fit to be classed among the enemies of the human race . . . [and] which interposes a painful mixture in the humour of Chaucer'.[17] In the same year an anonymous contributor to *The Gentleman's Magazine* wrote in a similar vein:

> But I have a worse fault to alledge against Chaucer; and it is one that his admirers would in vain excuse or soften down: on too many occasions we find his pages sullied with disgusting obscenity, and the lowest ribaldry, conveyed in the most direct and coarse terms[18]

This gentleman and Coleridge discovered merits in Chaucer which escaped Kenelm Henry Digby (1797–1880) altogether. That most quixotic writer on chivalry, despite quoting Chaucer's description of the Knight to illustrate the Age of Chivalry, offered the obiter dictum: 'It is always men who are impious and obscene, like our "reverend" Chaucer, who have the most bitter sarcasm for expressing the impiety and vice of others.'[19]

The most scornful of Romantic condemnations comes, however, from the pen of Byron (of all people): 'Chaucer, notwithstanding the praises bestowed on him, I think obscene and contemptible'.[20]

Still, for all this litany of complaint, no-one seems to have advocated for Chaucer what Thomas Bowdler did to Shakespeare. Francis Jeffrey, the editor of *The Edinburgh Review*, favourably receiving Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare* in 1821, pontificated:

> Now it is quite undeniable, that there are many passages in Shakespeare, which a father could not read aloud to his children — a brother to his sister — or a gentleman to a lady. . . . . Those who recollect such scenes, must all rejoice, we should think, that Mr Bowdler has provided a security against their recurrence; and, as what cannot be pronounced in decent company cannot well afford much pleasure in the closet, we think it better, every way, that what cannot be spoken, and ought not to have been written, should now cease to be printed.[21]

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[16]Spurgeon, II, 241.

[17]Spurgeon, II, 95.

[18]Spurgeon, II, 94.

[19]Spurgeon, II, 161.

[20]1807, quoted in Spurgeon, II, 29. Byron's lack of judgment cannot be excused as 'juvenile', because he still held it in 1819 (Spurgeon, II, 110).

[21]*Edinburgh Review*, 36 (1821–22), 52–53.

The Romantics who largely rehabilitated the Middle Ages did not, it is plain, embrace the medieval legacy in its entirety — only those parts that served their purposes. Their censure of supposed obscenity in Chaucer is a thread linking them to the eighteenth century. However, they never attained to the nicety of discrimination (lacking perhaps the necessary ingredient of nationalism) that enabled one John Pinkerton in 1786 to find Dunbar's *Treatise of the Twa Mariit Women and the Wedo* 'full of knowledge of life, and rich description' and 'much tinctured with immodesty', yet at the same time 'quite free of the nastiness of Chaucer, which, tho foolishly confounded with immodesty, is a very different matter and serves only to disgust'.[22] In general, however, the eighteenth century took a more straightforward view, summed up perhaps by Cowper in his *Anti-Thelyphthora* (1781):

> But what old Chaucer's merry page befits,
> The chaster muse of modern days omits.
> Suffice it then in decent terms to say,
> She saw — and turn'd her rosy cheek away.[23]

Joseph Watson in 1782 marvelled at Pope's decision to imitate Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, 'a choice which, perhaps, nothing but his youth could excuse'.[24] Pope had evidently come to a similar view himself, for not only did he take it upon himself in 1723–25 to expurgate Shakespeare, thereby anticipating Bowdler's efforts by almost a century,[25] but in 1737 used Chaucer to exemplify the deplorable state of public literary taste in his own day: 'Chaucer's worst ribaldry is learn'd by rote'.[26] Similarly, for Lady Mary Wortley Montague, Chaucer could be used as an emblem for ribaldry, which, peculiarly some may think, she makes a child of dullness:

> Shall mortals then escape my power? she [Dullness] cried . . .
> Shall Addison my empire here dispute . . .
> Explode my children, ribaldry and rhyme,
> Rever'd from Chaucer's down to Dryden's time?[27]

Forthrightly, Defoe declares that Rochester's poems have been 'lost': 'blacken'd and eclips'd by the Lewdness of their Stile, so as not to be made fit for Modesty to

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[22]*Ancient Scotish Poems never before in print*, quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 234.
[23]Quoted in Spurgeon, I, 459.
[24]*Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 214.
[25]G. Legman, 'Introduction', *The Limerick* (New York, 1969), pp. xl–xli.
[26]*Imitations of Horace*, Ep. II. i. 37, in *Poems*, edited by J. Butt (London, 1968), p. 636. Perhaps one should add that Pope is reported in 1728–30 as saying: 'I read Chaucer with as much pleasure as almost any of our poets' (Spurgeon, I, 370).
[27]'Unfinished Sketches of a Larger Poem' (1713–14), quoted in Spurgeon, I, 329.

read or hear. Jeffrey Chaucer is forgotten on the same account . . . his Works are diligently buried, by most Readers, on that very Principle, that they are not fit for modest Persons to read'.[28]

Dryden's great Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*, containing his remarks on Chaucer, which recommended the poet to a succeeding age not otherwise well disposed to receive him, was published in 1700 (the year of Dryden's death), when the freedom ('licence') of the Restoration was rapidly passing, and reveals an ambivalent attitude towards Chaucer's 'ribaldry'. One suspects from the general tone of appreciation that Dryden enjoyed Chaucer's low characters as well as anything else; yet he felt constrained to disavow his own 'loose Writings' and eschew, in his selection, the like in Chaucer:

> I have confin'd my Choice to such Tales of *Chaucer* as savour nothing of Immodesty. If I had desir'd more to please than to instruct, the *Reve*, the *Miller*, the *Shipman*, the *Merchant*, the *Sumner*, and above all, the *Wife of Bathe*, in the Prologue to her Tale, would have procur'd me as many Friends and Readers, as there are *Beaux* and Ladies of Pleasure in the Town. But I will no more offend against Good Manners: I am sensible as I ought to be of the Scandal I have given by my loose Writings; and make what Reparation I am able, by this Public Acknowledgment. If anything of this Nature, or of Profaneness, be crept into these Poems, I am so far from defending it, that I disown it.[29]

Dryden's enthusiasm for Chaucer was not typical of his era or, indeed, the century. Although Chaucer continued to be named in the seventeenth century as the father of English poetry, it was a reputation based on tradition rather than on personal acquaintance and judgment. There was no edition of his works between 1602 and 1687, and those few who opened the pages of an old copy tended to find the 'bitter and rough rinde' of his 'style' (language) impenetrable. One part of the tradition that lingered on from the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods was the notion of Chaucer the 'jester', the writer of indecent frivolities. In 1657 one Thomas Jordan revealed what Chaucer, or at any rate, the reputation of Chaucer, meant to him:

> By the wanton memory of *Chaucer* I could turn Poet,
> And write in as Heathen English, and as bawdy.[30]

Among the Elizabethans there was, in fact, debate on the subject. Chaucer had his detractors. *Greene's Vision* (1592) purports to be a retraction by Robert Greene, who, though having much to retract, is probably not the author. This work

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[28]Letter in *Mist's Weekly Journal*, 5 April 1718, quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 174.
[29]'Preface' to *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 167.
[30]*The Walks of Islington and Hogsdon*, IV, i, quoted in Spurgeon, III, iv, 72.

finds against Chaucer for having treated love and brands the *Canterbury Tales* as 'plesant tales, a little tainted with scuriletie',[31] repeating a term that had been already used in this connexion by Sir John Harington, translator of Ariosto and re-inventor of the water-closet. Harington wrote:

> I dare take vpon me that in all *Ariosto* (and yet I thinke is as much as three *Æneades,*) there is not a word of ribaldry or obscenousness; farther there is so meet a decorum in the persons of those that speake lasciuiously, as any of iudgement must needs allow. And therefore, though I rather craue pardon then prayse for him in this point, yet me thinkes I can smile at the finesse of some that will condemne him, and yet not onely allow but admire our *Ghawcer*, who both in words & sence incurreth far more the reprehension of flat scurrilitie, as I could recite many places, not onely in his millers tale, but in the good wife of Bathes tale, & many more, in which onely the decorum he keepes is that that excuseth it and maketh it more tolerable.[32]

However, as Brewer points out,[33] Harington's invocation of Chaucer is disingenuous, and special pleading. He was in no position to invoke the defence of decorum who had incurred banishment for having circulated among the ladies of Elizabeth I his translation of most of the indecent passages of *Orlando Furioso*, with embellishments of his own. (His fitting punishment was to translate all of Ariosto's epic — 'as much as three *Æneades*'.)

The principle of decorum, Chaucer's own defence, was accepted by more classically minded Elizabethans, among them Francis Beaumont, the Master of Charterhouse, who deployed it in his thoughtful letter to Thomas Speght, published in the latter's important edition of Chaucer in 1598:

> Touching the inciuilitie[34] *Chaucer* is charged withall: . . . How much had hee swarved from Decorum, if hee had made his Miller, his Cooke, and his Carpenter, to haue told such honest and good tales, as hee made his Knight, his Squire, his Lawyer, and his Scholler tell? . . . no man can imagine in that large compasse of his, purposing to describe all men liuing in those daies, how it had been possible for him to haue left vntouched these filthie delights of the baser sort of people.[35]

Most sixteenth-century writers would not have agreed with Beaumont. Spurgeon showed that English criticism of Chaucer in that century was profoundly defective. There were two contrary strains, each wrong-headed. Chaucer was valued by some as a reformer, moralist, and satirist, and annexed by the Reformers

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[31]Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 130–35.

[32]*A Briefe Apologie of Poetrie* (1591), in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, edited by G. Gregory Smith (Oxford, 1904), II, 215. Scurrility: '... buffoon-like jocularity; coarseness or indecency of language, esp. in invective and jesting', *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* s.v.

[33]Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 129f.

[34]*OED* does not record *incivility* in this sense of 'coarse or indecent language; bawdy'.

[35]'F. B. to his very louing friend, T. S.' (1597), in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 137f.

as a scourge of Rome, partly on the basis of the ecclesiastics of the *Canterbury Tales*, partly on the basis of supposititious works now dropped from the canon.[36] But others judged him to be unedifying, and the term 'Canterbury tale' was used generically for an untruthful or vain and scurrilous tale. One Edmund Becke employed this usage in a preface to a reprint of the Bible in 1549:

> If all magistrates & the nobilitie, wolde wel wey with them selfs the inestimable dignitie, & incomparable goodnes of Gods boke, . . . and wolde also as willingly vouchsafe to suffurate & spare an houre or ii in a day, from theyr worldly busines, emploing it about the reading of this boke, as they haue bene vsed to do in Cronicles & Canterbury tales, then should they also abandone . . . all blasphemyes, swearing, carding, dysing . . . . Oh what a florishing commune wealth should your grace injoy & haue.[37]

It seems to have been among this latter group that the charge of bawdiness against Chaucer first emerged. Initially it probably meant little more than that sin was presented alluringly, and the allegation was part of an opposition to secular literature which might distract from or supplant bible-study. Tindale expresses an attitude shared by others such as Cranmer and Latimer:

> Fynally that this thretenynge and forbiddynge the laye people to reade the scripture is not for love of youre soules (which they care for as ye foxe doeth for ye gysse) is evidente & clerer then the sonne / in as moch as they permitte & sofre you to reade Robyn hode & bevise of hampton / hercules / hector and troylus with a tousande histories & fables of love & wantones & of rybaudry as fylthy as herte can thinke / to corrupte ye myndes of youth with all / clene contrary to the doctrine of christ & of his apostles.[38]

The literary fortunes of the 'father of English poetry' have waxed and waned. One of the most consistent strands of controversy has been Chaucer's reputation for what we may briefly designate 'bawdy'. This reputation has persisted even when he was unread, ensuring that the mere mention of his name elicited sniggers and sneers from the dirty-minded, and reprobation from the pure-minded. What has been objected to under such diverse terms as 'bawd(r)y', 'ribaldry', 'wantonness', 'scurrility', 'incivility', and so on, has shifted and changed over the centuries, corresponding to the level of social and moral repression of sexuality, and as notions of the relationship between literature and morality have evolved.

Most often objection has been taken to the direct or explicit representation in literature of sexual behaviour and excretory functions of the body. So what modern

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[36]Spurgeon, I, xix–xxi.

[37]Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 102. (*Suffurate* is an ink-horn term for 'steal away'.)

[38]Tindale, 'The Obedience of a Christen Man', quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 87. On Cranmer and Latimer, see Spurgeon, I, 88–89. Compare also, Spurgeon, I, 100 (Thomas Drant), 111 (John Wharton).

criticism calls the *fabliaux* among the *Canterbury Tales* are the works most frequently singled out for opprobrium. But sometimes the grounds of complaint have widened to encompass any literary work held to be an allurement to, or apology for, sin, specifically a persuasion to love, and so *Troilus and Criseyde*, the *Knight's Tale*, the *Parliament of Fowls* have been branded ribaldry. Whether narrowly or broadly conceived, bawdy is, in this understanding of it, largely, though not exclusively, a matter of the subject-matter of the literary work.

Sometimes, however, offensiveness is held to lie in the language that is used, in contradistinction to the contents. Bawdiness resides in the employment of certain words which are in themselves tainted, or, in other words, taboo. According to this way of viewing matters, it may be permissible to refer to, or speak obliquely of, sexual matters provided that one does not employ 'vulgar' or 'indecent' words. In the twentieth century arguments for and against censorship have often resolved themselves into debate about what became known as 'four-letter words'.[39] Among such words there are gradations of offensiveness, and only two, *fuck* and *cunt*, were excluded from dictionaries from Dr Johnson's dictionary down to *c.* 1970.[40] In publications intended for ordinary, open sale, these two words could not be printed in the English-speaking world until the 1950s, although there were certain exceptions from the 1930s (Joyce's *Ulysses*, Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*). Yet these words were not always taboo. In Chaucer's period the word *cunt* was used in medical treatises and glossaries as well as in literary works of a distinctly moralizing kind.[41] The evidence for *fuck* is less

[39]This locution seems to have emerged in the 1920s, probably in order to be able to discuss 'politely' the language of soldiers in World War I (*OED Supplement* cites quotations from 1934 on). The use of 'Anglo-Saxon' in the same sense also dates from the 1920s (*OED Supplement*), though 'Saxon', same sense, can be traced to the 1880s (my files).

[40]Nathan Bailey's *An Universal Etymological Dictionary* (1721; second edition, 1730) had included them. One dictionary after Johnson's also had them, John Ash's *New and Complete Dictionary of the English Language* (1775). The great missed opportunity to redress this lexicographical evasion occurred when the *OED*'s original editor, James Murray, excluded them. (Notoriously, they did creep in, s.vv., *quaint* (Chaucer's form) and *wind-fucker*.) The biographer of Murray states that, if he had had freedom in the matter, he would have included some of them, those that had 'respectable' pasts. The biographer does not, however, provide information on any particular constraints to which Murray was subject. Evidently he corresponded in 1890–91 on the subject with John Farmer, who did treat both words in his *Slang and its Analogues* (1890–1904) (after Vol. 1, with W. E. Henley). See K. M. E. Murray, *Caught in the Web of Words* (New Haven, 1977), p. 195. Slang dictionaries have a somewhat better record. Francis Grose's *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) included *fuck* (as 'f—k') but not *cunt*. (*Fuck* was deleted from the 1811 revision by Hewson Clark and the 1823 revision by Pierce Egan.) The one-volume reduction of Farmer and Henley, issued by Routledge in 1905 as *A Dictionary of Slang and Colloquial English*, deleted these terms. Partridge, whose *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1937) was based on Farmer and Henley, restored them; he had earlier printed them, along with comments of his own, in his 1931 edition of Grose's third edition (1796) of *A Classical Dictionary*.

[41]See *Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*), edited by Hans Kurath, *et al.* (Ann Arbor, 1954–), s.v. Compare also three fifteenth-century vocabularies printed in Thomas Wright, *A Volume of*

complete, the word not having been found in print before the early sixteenth century; yet the sixteenth-century evidence suggests that the word was no lower in tone than its synonyms of the day, *jape*, *sard*, *swive*, which were more vigorous expressions than *lie with* but still not taboo.[42]   Although from the Elizabethan period on, complaints about low words were common enough, it would seem that these words acquired their taboo status in the course of the eighteenth century when, as we have noted, the custom of banning them from dictionaries was initiated.[43] Through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many other words were also taboo, but none so completely banished from print, even from lexicographical record, as these two.

Since the days of the English Reformers, Chaucer has had the reputation of being a bawdy poet and of having written bawdy . The reputation emerges, as we have seen, more than a century after the poet's death, a fact the significance of which will become apparent. In the fifteenth century and in his lifetime (or the last decade of it, when his writing was largely achieved), Chaucer was highly esteemed, usually on grounds with which modern criticism would not want to cavil, although, as Spurgeon points out, a defective note enters English (as opposed to Scotch) criticism in the later fifteenth century.[44] His technical mastery, his rhetorical skills, his eloquence, were all recognized and acknowledged as raising English poetry to new heights of achievement. More generally, he was praised for the variety of his works, the breadth of his subject-matter, and for his learning, wisdom, and moral teaching. In short, he was everything that a medieval 'maker' should be.

These sentiments receive their most extensive expression in Lydgate, who repeatedly and fulsomely lauded his master. Widely acquainted with Chaucer's œuvre, this monk found no occasion to complain about Chaucer's treatment of love or about the matter of the *fabliaux*. He twice wrote at some length on the diversity of the *Canterbury Tales*, with specific reference to the *fabliaux*, and reveals a considerable understanding of the artistic structure and purposes of the work. In the *Prologue* to *The Siege of Thebes*, Lydgate speaks, with conscious echoes of the exordium of the *General Prologue*, of April:

> The tyme in soth / whan Canterbury talys
> Complet and told / at many sondry stage

Vocabularies (London, 1857), pp. 186 (*Hec vulva, A^e* cuntte), 208 (*Hec vulva,* a cunte), 246 (*Hec vulva, A^{ce}* a cunt).

[42]The fullest discussion of *fuck* remains Allen Walker Read's 'An Obscenity Symbol', *American Speech*, 9 (1934), 264–78, which, remarkably, manages to avoid actually printing the word.

[43]See Read, 'An Obscenity Symbol', pp. 269–74.

[44]Spurgeon, I, x–xx, especially xvii–xx.

> Of estatis // in the pilgrimage,
> Euerich man / lik to his degrè,
> Some of desport / some of moralitè,
> Some of knyghthode / loue and gentillesse,
> And some also of parfit holynesse,
> And some also in soth / of Ribaudye
> To makë laughter / in þe companye. (ll. 18–26)

His further comments on the pilgrims' mutually antagonistic choice of tales take up the issue of register and implicitly allow the use of 'teermës Rude' (coarse, low) on the grounds of decorum:

> '
> the Cook / þe millere and the Reve
> Aquytte hem-silf / shortly to conclude,
> Boystously / in her teermës Rude,
> whan þei hadde / wel dronken of the bolle. (ll. 28–31)[45]

Lydgate perceives that these characters and their tales are intended for our amusement, and edification. In the *Prologue* to *The Fall of Princes*, he merely adverts to the *fabliaux*:

> He made the book off Cantirburi Talis,
> Whan the pilgrymis rood on pilgrymage
> Thoruhout Kent bi hillis and bi valis,
> And alle the stories told in ther passage,
> Enditid hem ful weel in our language:
> Summe off knyhthod, summe off gentilesse,
> And summe off loue & summe off parfitnesse,
> And summe also off gret moralite,
> Summe off disport, includynge gret sentence.
> In prose he wrot. (ll. 337-50)

Whether the phrase 'includynge grete sentence' is construed to qualify the entire list of tale types or only the *fabliaux* ('summe off disport'), Lydgate asserts that they have a moral import.[46]

Even in his lifetime, Chaucer's extensive treatment of love was singled out for particular note. The first version of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, finished around 1390, contains a passage (subsequently omitted) in which Venus addresses a message to Chaucer, her devoted and prolific servant:

> And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete,
> As mi disciple and mi poete:
> For in the floures of his youthe
> In sondri wise, as he wel couthe,
> Of Ditees and of songes glade,
> The whiche he for mi sake made,

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[45]Cited in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 50.
[46]*Fall of Princes*, Prologue, ll. 337-50, quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 54.

> The lond fulfild is overal:
> Wherof to him in special
> Above alle othre I am most holde.
> For thi now in hise daies olde
> Thow schalt him telle this message,
> That he upon his latere age,
> To sette an ende of alle his werk,
> As he which is myn owne clerk,
> Do make his testament of love,
> As thou hast do thi schrifte above,
> So·that mi Court it mai recorde.[47]

The passage does not directly criticize Chaucer's writings on love, and evidently indicates Venus's satisfaction with the poet's service of her. Nevertheless, the Goddess calls upon her servant, in his 'later age', to retire from such writing and record his 'testament of love' (a figurative application of the legal term, meaning a 'final leave-taking', used again in the next century by Henryson). This request presumably means that even the Goddess of Love thinks it appropriate for one of such advanced years to think of other things than love. We can safely dismiss the biographical fantasies that have been erected on the basis of this passage and its subsequent omission. We cannot now know whether Venus's words represented Gower's personal opinion. All that one is entitled to say is that he saw fit to give to Venus the view that even her most devoted poet should bid farewell to writing on love in his old age. Perhaps one may say that it indicates an unease with the extent of Chaucer's dwelling upon worldly love, and that is by no means a necessary inference.

At least one near-contemporary of Chaucer demurred to his worldly subject-matter. John Walton, an Augustinian monk of Oxford and translator of Boethius, writing around 1410, re-opened the ancient debate on the irrelevance of secular literature to salvation and, siding with Jerome, rejected Classical (pagan) subject-matter and even Classical inspiration:

> Hit schold not be a cristenmannes work
> Tho fals goddes names to renewe. . . .
> Suche manere werkes schold ben set on side,
> ffor certaynly it nedeþ noght at all
> To [whette] now þe dartes of cupide
> Ne for to bidde that Venus be oure gide
> So þat we may oure foule lustes wynne,
> On aunter lest þe same on vs betyde
> As dede þe same venus for hyre sonne.[48]

[47]John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, VIII, 2941*–57*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, edited by G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols (Oxford, 1899-1902), III (1901), 466.

[48]'Preface of the Translator' [of Boethius], quoted in Brewer, *Critical Heritage*, I, 61–62.

Walton modestly (and correctly, we may feel) defers to Chaucer's superior poetic skills but implicitly takes comfort from the righteousness of his materials, which will not impede his or anyone else's path to salvation.

This refusal 'to labour ne to muse / Vppon these olde poysees derk' has its equivalent in Chaucer's own writings, if we accept as genuine the Retractions.[49] That troublesome passage revokes those works that are 'translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees', all of his output, that is, but 'the translacion of Boece de Consolacione, and othere bookes of legendes of seintes, and omelies, and moralitee, and devocioun'. The phrase 'worldly vanitees' contradistinguished from homilies, morality and devotions, places the Retractions in the same philosophical discourse as Walton invokes, and therefore the revocation embraces all the courtly poems, some of which are indeed expressly named, as well as the many lecherous lays. The Canterbury Tales that 'sownen into synne' include the *Knight's Tale* as well as the Miller's and Reeve's, the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Friar's and Summoner's. The *Retractions* do not single out the tales that later ages have branded bawdy but relentlessly sweep aside everything that is tainted with worldliness. But then the criteria are not critical but eschatological. Chaucer is, of course, perfectly capable of making critical distinctions, but chooses not to exercise that faculty when, as here, he deems it irrelevant to his purpose. This occasion is non- or rather supra-literary, and distinctions that seem obvious and imperative to the modern reader simply do not matter. Fortunately, for us, he was not always so single-minded.

At one level, his entire output represents a practical embodiment of a profound critical sensibility that was far from being merely intuitive. His mind had ranged over the forms and modes available in his day, not only in the Anglo-French courtly tradition which was his immediate inheritance, but also, on the one hand, the popular native forms practised in England and, on the other, the important new developments in Italy, which offered him ways of renewing what was stale and worn-out in the domestic courtly tradition. After conventional, relatively unadventurous beginnings — translating part at least of the *Roman de la Rose*, and the *Book of the Duchess* — he showed a considerable willingness to experiment, which sometimes led to dead-ends (the *Book of Fame*) and failures (the *Squire's Tale*), but sometimes achieved brilliant successes (the *Parlement of Foules*, the *Knight's Tale*). The experimentation partly involved breaking down the conventions of the genres he inherited and mixing modes in ways that renewed and sometimes transformed those genres. It partly involved establishing a lively,

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[49]Which almost everyone now does. See James D. Gordon, 'Chaucer's Retraction: A Review of Opinion', in *Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor Albert Croll Baugh*, edited by MacEdward Leach (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 81–98.

supple, flexible language suitable for his purposes — a difficult task where a linguistically homogeneous audience was lacking. Chaucer proceeded by shedding worn-out, hackneyed diction and by extending the range of usable registers beyond the formal, the courtly, without sacrificing control over tone. This movement was chiefly into the colloquial, though it also ran in other directions, such as the scientific (*e.g.*, astronomy in the *Franklin's Tale* and alchemy in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*) and philosophical. From the evidence of his practice, it is clear that Chaucer was sensitive to matters of form, genre, and language. He possessed some terms with which to refer to such matters, but the analytical and conceptual tools available to him were not highly developed or comprehensive and, by later standards, inadequate to the task.

We know that later critics and readers (and non-readers) have held him to be a writer of bawdy. Did he see himself in such terms? Did he have a concept or category of 'bawdy'? Is our notion of bawdy really applicable to his work? A number of questions are involved here, and one needs to distinguish between a concept and the names for the concept. It is possible for a culture to have an operative concept within its framework of ideas, without putting a name to it, or for that concept to have a different name from that used in a later period. Both these situations are of frequent occurrence. Even when a concept is held in common, it is usually the case that the nuances of its formulation and application, and sometimes its substantive content, are different, and care and even delicacy in the handling of it are called for.

Fourteenth-century English did not have a noun *bawdy*, meaning 'lewd, obscene language, lewdness, obscenity' (*OED*, s.v.). So much is certain, despite lexicographical problems with the early history of *bawd* and related words that remain unresolved to this day.[50] An adjective *bawdy* formed from *bawd* in the

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[50]*Bawd*, 'procurer, procuress', is first recorded in the second half of the fourteenth century, in Langland and Chaucer. The *OED*, and *MED* following, derive *baude, bawd* as a shortening from OF *baude(s)trot*, which medieval glossaries define as 'pronuba' (in Medieval Latin, *pronuba* had deteriorated in sense to 'bawd, procuress'). This derivation might at first sight seem strange when in form *baude* looks like a direct borrowing from Old French, but the difficulty standing in the way of this origin was that the required sense is not attested in OF *baud* (indeed, Old French dictionaries do not list a nominal form of the adjective *bald, baud*, '1. joyeux, plein d'allégresse et d'ardeur. 2. Fier, hautain, hardi, vain, présomptieux' (Godefroye, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue françoise*, s.v.)). Raphael Levy (in 'The Etymology of English *Bawd* and Cognate Terms', *Philological Quarterly*, 32 (1953), 83–89) attempted to support a case for the direct borrowing on two grounds: (i) by claiming that the proposed etymon *baudestrot* is first attested contemporaneously with, if not later than, the earliest occurrences of *baude* in ME; and (ii) by providing evidence that OF *baud* had the sense of 'wanton, licentious, personally unchaste'. His effort to redate *baudestrot* fails, because there is now earlier evidence of the word in English and French than was available to *OED* and to Levy. The *MED* provides a citation from the *South English Legendary*, *c*. 1300; whilst the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, (*AND*), edited by L. W. Stone, *et al.*, fasc. I, A–C (London, 1977), p. 64, furnishes a good citation from Nicole Bozon's *Contes moralizés*, so *c*. 1320 (see M. Dominica Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature and its*

sense of 'procurer, procuress, go-between, pander' emerged in the early sixteenth century, meaning 'of, pertaining to, befitting a bawd; hence, lewd, obscene, unchaste'. The noun form arose in the mid-seventeenth century, perhaps by way of the phrase *to talk bawdy*, in which *bawdy* was originally an adjective or flat form of the adverb.[51]

Background (Oxford, 1963), p. 232, for the date, which the *AND* does not provide). Of course, this does not necessarily mean that Levy is wrong in rejecting the derivation from *baudestrot*. Rather, it means that his argument on chronological grounds is fallacious. He is more successful in providing evidence that OF *baud* had the extended sense of 'wanton, *etc.*'. He does so partly by citing evidence from the Old French dictionary that Godefroy was supposed to supersede, La Curne de Sainte-Palaye's *Dictionnaire historique de l'ancien langage françois*, evidence that convinces me (indeed, at least two of Godefroy's citations seem to me to allow interpretation in this sense, *viz.*, the last two under the sense 'fier, hautain', *etc.*, I, 564, col. 2). He adduces further evidence from French glossaries, originally composed in Hebrew script (pp. 86–88). Of course, this material still falls short of discovering the sense of 'procuress, procurer; go-between' in Old French, although it takes us one step closer. Such a sense in Old French would seem to be a necessary stage in the semantic evolution. As a matter of fact, there is now evidence in Anglo-Norman of *bawde* in the English sense, and evidence from London, as it happens. The *Liber Albus* is a compilation of archival material of the Guild Hall in London made *c.* 1419. It contains, amongst much else, regulations to suppress prostitution, brothel-keeping, and procuration:

> *De punissement de puteyns et baudes.* . . . en diverses Gardemotes . . . sont
> enditz par lez bones gentz de la Garde ascuns homes pur comunes putours,
> comunes avoutours, et comunes baudes; et auxi femmes, pur communes
> putaynes, comunes avouteresses, communes baudes et contenderesses
> ['scolds'].

The first regulation begins:

> Primerement, qe si ascun homme soit trove pur comune putour ou baude, et
> de ceo soit atteint; adeprimes, soit il rasee tout le test et la barbe . . . Item,
> si ascune femme sout trove pur commune puteresse ou baude, et diceo soit
> atteint, adeprimez,

(*Munimenta Gildhallæ Londoniensis*, edited by H. T. Riley, 4 vols, Rolls Series (London, 1859-62), I, 457–58. See also pp. 259 (*bawde*), 332, 337, 591–92.) This particular set of regulations is undated; however, much of the material dates from well before 1419; one section, for example, is expressly dated *c.* 1320. At the very least, then, this Anglo-Norman evidence is only a generation or so later than the earliest recorded English uses of the word *bawd*, and, more likely, is at least as old as the English language evidence. We, therefore, have clear evidence of an insular usage, but none, as yet, from continental French materials. The only sense given for *bawd* in *OED* is the procuring one. Is there any evidence of the word in the sense of 'sexually dissolute person' or 'prostitute'? The *MED* gives a second sense, 'harlot', and gives three citations, one from the A-version of *Piers Plowman* and two from the *Second Shepherds' Play* of the Towneley Cycle. The latter two passages involve vituperative words of address, and do not directly involve prostitution but rather the imputation of immorality and worthlessness (compare Modern Australian English *slut*). The Langland passage, if it has the specific sense of 'prostitute', is a figurative usage. At any rate, ME gives some evidence of a usage that we should expect to find, given the form of the word and the presently known semantic range of the French cognate. However, as this long note shows, there is still some mystery about the sense-development in English. Although cognate forms are widely found in the Romance languages, this English sense is not yet attested in the Romance languages, apart from the Anglo-Norman instance cited above.

[51]The *OED*'s first citation for *bawdy*, *a.* (which *MED* does not antedate) is 1516, and for *bawdy*, *sb.*, 1656. Middle English had an adjective *baudi*, which meant 'soiled, filthy, dirty'. The *MED* lists it as a variant form of *bauded*, and derives it from Welsh *bawaidd*. It became obsolete by the seventeenth century, but it is possible that it contributed to the emergence of *bawdy*, both in form and sense. However, in Chaucer's day (and his use, too: compare *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*, G. 635), the sense was confined to the literal.

Related semantically and etymologically to *baude*, and first occurring in Chaucer, is the word *bauderie*. Chaucer uses it thrice, twice in the sense of 'pandering' (*Troilus*, III. 397; *Friar's Tale*, D. l. 1305) and once in the sense of 'gaiety, jollity, mirth' (*Knight's Tale,* A. l. 1926).[52] Despite the identity of form, both *OED* and *MED* class the latter usage as a separate word, presumably on semantic grounds.[53] The sense of 'pandering' seems not to be attested in Old French, nor the sense of 'wantonness, sexual dissipation'. More recently, however, the *Chaucer Glossary* has treated the uses as one word with disparate senses.[54]

The word underwent semantic change, and a broader, more general sense of 'lechery', 'debauchery' is attested in the fifteenth century.[55] At the end of the sixteenth century, a further expansion occurred whereby the term came to be used for 'lewdness in speech or writing; lewd, obscene, filthy talk', anticipating by half a century the same development with 'bawdy'. Today, in this sense, the words are interchangeable.

In Chaucer's day, English did, however, possess a number of *other* words whose range of meaning embraced a sense approximating the present meaning of *bawdy*, 'scurrilous or obscene talk'. At the same time there are, I think, important differences which prevent one from equating these words with *bawdy*. These differences, vital to the words in the later fourteenth century, have been lost in their later history, and indeed only one of these words even retains a sense of 'lewd, sexually explicit talk or speech'. The words concerned are *ribald(r)y*, *harlotry*, and *vileynye*. Also to be considered in this connexion is the phrase used by the Reeve of the Miller's speech, 'cherles termes' (A. l. 3917), and Chaucer's own phrase 'cherles tale' (A. l. 3169).

Ribaldry preserves a sense of 'obscenity of language', although the notion of 'scurrilous or irreverent jesting' is perhaps now more prominent. In fourteenth-century English there were two main words, *ribaudi(e* and *ribaudri(e*, more or less synonymous, whose meaning was substantially broader. The range of meaning may be briefly indicated as 'lechery; obscene or scurrilous speech; riotous living, dissipation; frivolity, jesting, gossip, mirth, pleasantry'. *Harlotry* has also narrowed its meaning since Chaucer's day when it meant 'crude

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[52]Line references and quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, edited by F. N. Robinson, second edition (Boston, 1957).

[53]The *MED* adds, by way of parenthetical query, '? match-making', presumably with one eye on the other sense.

[54]Norman Davis, *et al., A Chaucer Glossary* (Oxford, 1977), p. 11.

[55]*MED*, sense (c), first in Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. The *MED* also distinguishes a concretized sense, '(b) a brothel', which, however, is not sustained by the citations that it adduces.

or obscene behaviour; sexual immorality, evil conduct; low ribald speech, foul jesting, obscenity; a dirty story'.

Middle English *vileinye* did not have the precise sense of 'obscene speech' (at any rate, on the evidence available to *OED*). It could, however, bear the sense of 'discourteous or offensive words, speech' — in other words, what the upper classes then expected from a *vilein* or serf. The sense developed from the same sorts of assumptions that gave rise to Chaucer's phrase *cherles termes*. It happens that *churlishness* did not acquire a particular sense referring to speech or language.

All of these words exhibit the same pattern of semantic development, which is highly significant for our considerations. They are derivatives from occupational / rank names, and those names apply to persons situated at the bottom of the medieval social scale: *ribaud, harlot, vileine* — and *bawd*, too.[56] Moreover, these nouns were used in Chaucer's day, or soon after, as terms of abuse and opprobium. The underlying idea is that of behaviour or speech typical of or expected from a *ribaud, harlot, vileine, bawd*, or *cherle*. Class and class-superiority lie at their semantic core.[57] The rabble, the hoi polloi, were expected to behave and speak crudely, foully, obscenely, scurrilously, and so words derived from names for these types came to denote such qualities in behaviour and speech.

Although Chaucer nowhere discusses what is now called his bawdy in such terms, on a number of occasions in the *Canterbury Tales* the subject-matter and the language of the *fabliaux* are raised as a topic for discussion, and the terms he uses are those which we have been examining. The first such occasion comes towards the end of the *General Prologue* when the poet, having completed the portraits of the pilgrims, addresses his audience directly:

> But first I pray yow, of youre curteisye,
> That ye n'arette it nat my vileynye,

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[56] A *ribald* or *ribaud(e* was 'one of an irregular class of retainers who performed the lowest offices in royal or baronial households . . . and were employed in warfare as irregular troops; hence, a menial or dependent of low birth' (*OED*; see also Du Cange, *Glossarium mediae et infimiae latinitas*, revised edition (1886), s.v. *ribaldi*). A *harlot* was 1. a vagabond, beggar, rogue, rascal, villain, low fellow, knave; 2. an itinerant jester, buffoon, or juggler; 3. a male servant or attendant (*OED*) (the modern sense seems to have emerged in the fifteenth century from the earlier sense of 'lecher, libertine'; compare *OED*, senses 5c and 6).

[57] It is noteworthy that other words employed in the sense of 'bawdy, obscenity' are similarly derived: *scurrility*, from Lat. *scurra*, 1. orig. an elegant, town-bred man, dandy, 2. transf., a city buffoon, droll, jester (Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*); *incivility* (compare Beaumont, above), ultimately from Latin *civilis*, of, pertaining to citizens; *lewd*, lay, not clerical; unlearned; low, vulgar. Perhaps *indecent* may also be advanced: ultimately from Lat. *decet*, it is seemly, becoming, fitting, i.e., notions of suitability, fittingness, propriety, by which the upper and middle classes like to distinguish themselves from those socially beneath them. Compare also *wanton*: *wan*, privative prefix + *ton*, *-towen*, OE *toȝen*, past part. of *teon*, to discipline, train.

Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere,
To telle yow hir wordes and hir cheere,
Ne thogh I speke hir words proprely.
For this ye kowen al so wel as I,
Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,
He moot reherce as ny as evere he kan
Everich a word, if it be in his charge,
Al speke he never so rudeliche and large,
Or ellis he moot telle his tale untrewe,
Or feyne thyng, or fynde wordes newe.
He may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
He moot as wel seye o word as another.
Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ,
And wel ye woot no vileynye is it.
Eek Plato seith, whoso that kan hym rede,
The wordes moote be cosyn to the dede.
Also I prey yow to foryeve it me,
Al have I nat set folk in hir degree
Heere in this tale, as that they sholde stonde. (A. ll. 725–45)

It may seem — it has seemed to many (compare Robinson's note on lines 725ff) — that Chaucer is here seeking to justify his use of *language* that may be offensive in some way; in other words, that he is operating with a concept of bawdy like the modern one, by which some words are held to be inherently obscene or indecent. If the passage is read thus, then it follows that Chaucer claims, by way of justification, that Christ speaks in a bawdy fashion in the Bible: 'Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ'. This is highly unlikely. Rather, his concern is the faithfulness with which he shall create the illusion that his audience listens to the pilgrims themselves recounting their tales. Because he wants us to believe that we hear a Miller or a Reeve or a Summoner talk, he shall give us their *ipsissima verba*: the subject-matter and the words that express it are inseparable from each other and constitutive of the fiction of the frame level of narrative of the *Canterbury Tales*: 'the wordes moote be cosyn to the dede'. In literary terms, the defence that Chaucer consciously invokes is the argument of decorum. The subject-matter and its verbal expression are fitting in the circumstances, since the tale must be one that a Miller or a Reeve would tell, and told as they would tell it.

The operative words in this passage are *pleynly, rudelich and large, brode*, and *vileinye*. Of these words, only one even potentially implies bawdiness, *viz., rudelich*, which the *Chaucer Glossary* glosses as 'coarsely, crudely' and *OED* as 'in an uncultured, uncivil, discourteous, or unmannerly fashion' (both citing this passage). Chaucer is defending 'unreserved or outspoken' speech (compare *OED*, s.v. *broad, adv.* 2a), plain speaking, that lacks cultivation and courtesy and the use of which may be taken for *vileynye*. He remains a courtly poet, even though his poetry contains speech that may more usually be heard from the mouth of a *vileine*: 'first I pray yow, of your courteisye, / That ye n'arette it nat

my vilaynye, / Thogh that I pleynly speke in this mateere' (A. ll. 725–27). Just as Christ's willingness to deal with distasteful or unpleasant matters does not indicate condonation of, or participation in, them: 'Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ, / And wel ye woot no vileynye is it' (A. ll. 739–40).

On a second occasion Chaucer again addresses his audience directly on this matter. Immediately before the *Miller's Tale* Chaucer advises any reader who does not want to hear a 'cherles tale' to skip what is to follow. He again invokes the argument from decorum in justification, and again the argument applies not simply to style but equally to subject-matter: 'this Millere / He nolde his wordes for no man forbere, / But tolde his cherles tale in his manere' (A. ll. 3167–69). Both the content of the story ('his cherles tale') and its expression ('his manere') receive equal stress. The class connotations of *harlotrye* are made explicit when Chaucer goes on to say that the Miller and the Reeve told the sort of tales one would expect from them: 'The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this; / So was the Reve eek and othere mo, / And harlotrye they tolde bothe two' (A. ll. 3182–84).

Chaucer here employs the stylistic device of *confirmation*, which Mark Lambert identified (and named) in Malory. The narrator and the characters use the same words, the verbal repetition serving as a form of emphasis and implicit corroboration. Within the fictional world of the text, if both narrator and characters employ the same expression, then its truth-value is established — hence, Lambert's term 'confirmation'.[58] The narrator's word *harlotrye* (a 'cherles tale') echoes the Reeve's anticipatory description of the Miller's tale earlier in the link. The Miller had announced he would 'telle a legend and a lyf / Both of a carpenter and of his wyf, / How that a clerk hath set the wrightes cappe' (A. ll. 3141–43), to which the Reeve, himself a carpenter, had angrily rejoined: 'Stynt thy clappe! / Lat be thy lewed dronken harlotrye' (A. ll. 3144–45). Of course, it is a case of the pot calling the kettle black, but Chaucer's taking up of the term *harlotrye* is done in such a way as to remind us that both pots and kettles are kitchen vessels and not golden goblets adorning the dining-table.

Other relevant references to our subject also occur in the links. At the end of the Miller's tale the Reeve refers to its content as *ribaudie*. 'So theek . . . ful wel koude I thee quite / With bleryng of a proud milleres ye, / If that me liste speke of ribaudye' (A. ll. 3864–66). Despite this disclaimer, his own tale is intended to pay the Miller back and is just as much *ribaudie* as the Miller's. Indeed, as he launches into his tale, he asserts that it will also be couched in 'cherles termes' (A. l. 3917).

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[58]Mark Lambert, *Malory: Style and Vision in Le Morte Darthur* (New Haven and London, 1975), pp. 8–16.

Ribaudie recurs in the Physician-Pardoner link, where it is again firmly placed as a non-noble interest. When the Pardoner is called upon to speak,

> But right anon thise gentils gonne to crye,
> 'Nay, lat hym telle us of no ribaudye!
> Telle us som moral thyng, that we may leere
> Som wit, and thanne wol we gladly heere.' (C. ll. 323–26)

This the Pardoner accedes to but asks for time to think of 'som honest thyng' (*honest*, 'decent, suitable', *Chaucer Glossary*).

By way of gloss on this discussion of Chaucer's direct comments on the *fabliaux*, one may quote a passage from the Middle English translation of the *Roman de la Rose* in which the God of Love instructs the dreamer on the avoidance of *vilanye* and the nature of true *gentilesse*. This passage comes from a part of the translation usually regarded as not being from the pen of Chaucer, but its relevance makes it worth citing. That it also is concerned to advance the notion that *gentilesse* is a question of personal merit and not of birth does not invalidate its relevance to the argument that I am presenting:

> 'Vilanye, at the bigynnyng,
> I wole', sayde Love, 'over alle thyng,
> Thou leve if thou wolt [not] be
> Fals, and trespasse ageynes me.
> I curse and blame generaly
> All hem that loven vilany;
> For vilanye makith vilayn,
> And by his dedis a cherl is seyn.
> Thise vilayns arn withouten pitee,
> Frendshipe, love, and all bounte.
> I nyl resseyve unto my servise
> Hem that ben vilayns of emprise. (ll. 2175–86)

> For nothyng eke thy tunge applye
> To speke wordis of rebaudrye.
> To vilayn speche in no degre
> Lat never thi lippe unbounden be.
> For I nought holde hym, in good feith,
> Curteys, that foule wordis seith. (ll. 2223–28)

In Guillaume de Lorris's view, *rebaudrye* is *vileyn speche*, an attribute of one who is not *curteys* and therefore not *gentil*.

From the writings of Chaucer's contemporaries and near-contemporaries, and Chaucer's own words, one may conclude that the period and Chaucer had a conception of crude, coarse, uncultivated speech or language which was associated with the lowest levels of the social hierarchy. Such speech had scabrous or obscene subject-matter and was expressed in low terms. The late fourteenth-century words

for such speech were *ribaud(r)ie, harlotrie, vileinye*; *cherle* was also employed in this connexion. All these words had distinct class connotations. This conception, though it partly covered the semantic ground of the modern word *bawdy*, was in important ways different from the modern word and concept. In particular, it does not contain any notion of taboo words.

In its linking of language and class, this way of thinking conforms to the theory of style of the French rhetoricians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, some of whom Chaucer was familiar with. Geoffroi of Vinsauf and John of Garland took the ancient commonplace of levels of style (*Ad Herennium*, IV. VIII–XI), and equated the three levels with the three types of person or more bluntly with the three levels of society.[59] This medieval theory is unsatisfactory to modern critical thinking because it conflates categorically different matters that have no essential connexion. Accidental features are interpreted as substantive distinctions. The Chaucerian concept of *ribaudye, etc.*, suffers from the same flaw. Yet the literary conventions it helped to sustain proved to have much life in them when taken up by Chaucer.

If Chaucer discerned any problems in the concept of *ribaudye, etc.*, it did not suit his purposes to give voice to them. As we have seen, he deploys the concept to defend his inclusion in the *Canterbury Tales* of tales to which he foresaw that some readers might take objection. It allows him to deflect responsibility for the subject-matter of those tales to the artistic requirements of his work. Whether this deployment was opportunistic or sincere, we cannot now determine. In other respects, Chaucer shows himself aware of the philosophical issues of class and morality. The debate about true *gentilesse* — which severs the nexus between birth and the possession of noble qualities — finds a lively place in Chaucer's works (somewhat wryly in the *Franklin's Tale* and more directly in the *Wife of Bath's Tale*). However, the ramifications of this severing, which might have taken up the issues of language, apparently did not extend in that direction.

Chaucer's *bawdy* first emerged in the English Reformation. Puritan Reformers objected to the alluring presentation of sin in secular literature. Often carnal sin was singled out for particular opprobrium. Chaucer's works contained open representations of the sins of the flesh and did not forcefully condemn those sins. These moral objections to the contents of Chaucer's works were reinforced by an emerging sense that language in itself could be tainted. Shakespeare anticipates

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[59][Cicero] *Ad C. Herennium*, translated by M. Caplan, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1954), pp. 253–69; E. Faral, *Les Arts poétiques du xiie et du xiiie siècle* (Paris, 1971), pp. 86–88; J. J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1974), pp. 178–80; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1957), ch. 1, and *passim*.

the future hardening of outlook in Katharine's outburst in her memorable English lesson in *Henry V*, with its extraordinary bilingual puns:

> *Katharine*. Comment appelez-vous le pied et la robe?
> *Alice*. Le foot, madame, et le count.
> *Katharine*. Le foot, et le count? O Seigneur Dieu! ils sont mots de son mauvais, corruptible, gros, et impudique, et non pour les dames d'honneur d'user: je ne voudrais prononcer ces mots devant les seigneurs de France pour tout le monde. Foh! le foot et le count.[60]

The coalescence of the two negative, disapproved aspects, contents and language, in the concept of *bawdy* during the course of the seventeenth century created a powerful new implement of sexual repression. Bawdy formalized puritanical objections to the body and the demands of the flesh. The unfortunate (and, many would now think, unhealthy) consequences of bawdy are prurience and naughty titillation.

These attitudes can be found in much writing on Chaucer. Perhaps the time has finally come when we can abandon the unhistorical application of the notion of bawdy to Chaucer's writings. If we do so, we shall get closer to understanding what he wrote in terms that do not prejudice or distort it. A step towards this desirable outcome is understanding what he himself thought about his *cherles* and their tales. Chaucer's own conceptual apparatus has its problems and equivocations, and certainly will not suffice. Yet it is a better place to start than the notion of bawdy can ever be. It is said that *qui s'excuse s'accuse*, a maxim dating from late Latinity,[61] and both in his *Canterbury Tales* concessions and in his Retractions Chaucer provided conceptual rods for his puritanical detractors to beat him with. However, neither the self-accusations not the equivocations hindered or impaired his poetic practice in his low-life tales, which have outlived continuous vilification since the sixteenth century, and that confident performance, viewed in the context of Chaucer's complete repertoire of poetic modes, is a surer guide than anachronistic concepts designed to serve other ends.

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[60]*Henry V*, edited by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge, 1947; reprinted, 1955), p. 46.
[61]'dum excusare credis, accusas', St Jerome, *Epistola IV, Ad virginem in exilium missam*, ch. 3, in *Patrologia Latina*, edited by J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1846), vol. 30, 58.