

## Indecency in Chaucer

Having so little information upon which to base an argument, one might find it difficult to reach any conclusions regarding indecency in Medieval England and, particularly, in Chaucer's remarkable works. But, actually, the problem is not so difficult as it seems because there is a contemporary group which corresponds closely to the type of person whom Chaucer knew.

In the southeastern United States today live a people whose civilization remarkably resembles that of Chaucer. For the most part they are comparatively ignorant, have an intense faith in the fire-and-brimstone type of religion around which their lives center, and, with few exceptions, are pure Anglo-Saxons. Their social and agricultural systems still hint of the Middle Ages, and class distinction is surprisingly prevalent.

The psychology of these people is an interesting and paradoxical one. It can best be illustrated by an example from Faustens on the Seve, the searching collection of Will Percy's recollections of his life in Greenwood, Mississippi as the son of a wealthy white planter. He describes the fear of non-Protestants during the 1920's when the Ku Klux Klan came to bear a remarkable resemblance to the Medieval Church in method, if not in principle. But the most vivid passage in Percy's book is his recollection of the revival meetings, after which the blonde, red-skinned "pure Anglo-Saxons" fornicated in the bushes near the tent.

This may seem disturbing and even far-fetched, but it is an important clue to the understanding of the complex Anglican character. The people of England have never been able to accept fully any religion. Though they are generally considered a staid people, the

only types of religion that appeal to them to any considerable degree are the radical ~~and~~ evangelical sects which play upon peoples' most basic and usually wildest human emotions.

Now, it seems apparent that in the Anglican character there are two great conflicts which aid in the study of Chaucer's "indecenty." They are:

1. The reputation for being a good, religious people versus the basic inability to accept complex, Catholic (Roman or Anglican) religion
2. The reputation for being reserved versus the basic emotional make-up reflected in the response to evangelical religion

Under the Catholic rule of Chaucer's era, it is obvious that the religion's main impression upon the majority of the people was superficial. The catechism, the ritual, and the dogma of the Church never seemed to genuinely affect the great mass of the people, even though they were apparently well -

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Very  
good.

truth about certain segments of the society in which he found himself, even though it turned out to be indecent in the general concept and even in the concept of his particular society.

Tennessee Williams, in the preface to his Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, states that his use of "delicate" themes and violent, vulgar language is only to depict the unpleasant truth about some members of our society and their manner of living.

Chaucer's indecency is well represented in the bold, thoroughly delightful monologue of the Wife of Bath. Here is a woman of his times stripped bare of all the graces usually attributed to members of her sex. It is surprising how close Big Daddy of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof comes to being a contemporary, male Wife of Bath. Knowing that many people like Big Daddy exist today, as they always have, it seems that Chaucer's so-called "indecency" was not that at all, but an attempt to conscientiously describe the

Excellent  
perception.

actions of some of his own contemporaries.

(?) The fact<sup>(?)</sup> that realism is often closely related to indecency and that indecency in the theatre or literature is almost always likely to be commercially successful <sup>do</sup> does not apply to the writings of Chaucer because he could never have hoped to realize any material gain from his work in his lifetime.

(?) This tends to work in Chaucer's favor, his not having any commercial incentive. Rather, he sacrificed his time to portray some of the color of his time. George Jean Nathan, the critic, says that the only person missing from the cast in Tennessee Williams' plays is the box office treasurer. This charge could never be brought against Chaucer.

That his works turned out to be indecent was only an added impetus to the reading public of later years. That it is his vigorous, rollicking, and readable literature

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only attests to the genius of the writer.  
We are fortunate to have a literary  
foundation laid in part by so astute  
a man.

Chaucer Term Paper

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English 201

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This is an extremely interesting and provocative paper. It could, perhaps, be worked into something for publication in one of the scholarly journals — if given a larger reference to Chaucer.

Suggestion: — one side of paper only.

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