

THE LOGIC OF OBSCENITY IN CHAUCER'S *LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN*

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When some thirty years ago Helge Kökeritz opened the discussion of Chaucer's puns, he was careful to stress the continuity of the rhetorical tradition in which Chaucerian word-play participates.¹ From the late-classical treatise *Ad Herennium* to the high-mediaeval artes of Geoffroi de Vinsauf and John of Garland, various sorts of word-play were recommended. They were also, of course, common practice in Latin and French mediaeval poetry, including many of Chaucer's favoured sources. Indeed the work of Roger Dragonetti suggests that pun can be seen as a linguistic manifestation of a trait fundamental to mediaeval thought: the analogic epistemology that searches out resemblances among things, or between things and qualities. It is a theological tradition, this conjuncture of disjunctive things, whose model can be found in the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville.²

Although Kökeritz was not specifically concerned with obscene word-play, he did urge the acceptance of several obscene puns. In fact, obscenity has as ancient and continuous a pedigree as word-play does, and is one of its commonest forms.³ Obscenity appears in classical tragedy. It was a prominent feature in Attic comedy, whence it was later transferred by Ovid to erotic elegy. It had an important place in Roman comedy and mime and in the poetry of Ovid, Catullus, Martial, and others. During the so-called "Dark Ages," anality and involuntary nudity appear as stock motifs in Merovingian literary humour: there is the fabliau-like short prose narrative of Liutprand, Bishop of Cremona, offered in Erich Auerbach's discussion of late-Carolingian

mannerism; there are the plays of the German nun Hrotswitha with their often risqué plots. Latin "elegiac comedy" of the twelfth century was frequently obscene. Homosexuality, often treated comically, was a frequent topos in mediaeval clerical lyric and other clerical genres, as Chaucer would have been aware from his reading of the *De Planctu Naturae* of Alan of Lille. One of the best-known debates on homosexual versus heterosexual love, the Anglo-Latin debate of Ganymede and Helen, survives in many mss., including one at Cambridge University where it is bound with the rhetorical treatise of John of Garland. Some troubador poets used obscenity: it might be crude and overt as with William of Aquitaine, or indirect and punning as with Arnaut Daniel. Andreas Capellanus used obscene imagery and pun in *De Arte Honesti Amandi*; French popular literature is full of obscene humour in its fabliaux, songs, riddles, and jokes. The *Roman de la Rose* was considered by some contemporaries of Chaucer to be pornographic in its forthright defense of vulgar anatomical terms and in its allegorical representation of coitus. Even the French epic does not escape the occasional grossity.

In light of recent work on mediaeval European literature, and in light of changing social and critical attitudes, we need be neither coy nor defensive about locating sexual word-play in Chaucer's poetry and analyzing its function. My premise is that in the hands of an accomplished writer, obscenity has, like any other stylistic device, a logic of its own, an aesthetic reason for being. In *The Legend of Good Women*, that reason is to extend into poetic practice the aesthetic credo established in the Prologue to the poem. As I have argued elsewhere, the Prologue allows Chaucer to define himself as a poet faithful to the contradictions inherent in nature.⁴ The legends are perfectly integrated with the Prologue in their subversion of the reductive propagandistic task laid on the poet by the God of Love: to portray women as nothing but good (F 548-75). What the poet offers instead is a view of woman as no more and no less than a natural creature: a "maculate muse," to borrow Jeffrey Henderson's happy phrase. Slicing through the vapid formulae of courtly love with surgical astringency, dissolving the whitewashed version of womanhood that the poet has been ordered to produce, the obscenity helps to re-establish what I believe Chaucer considered a healthier equilibrium: a more accurate, balanced, and "natural" view of women than could be provided either by courtly love or by its inverse, clerical misogyny. We are reminded of the paradoxically sanitizing function of Harry Bailly's anal and genital obscenities to the Pardoner (VI.948-55), the effect of which is to annihilate the Pardoner's attempt to bilk his fellow

pilgrims. If we may speak there of the morality of obscenity, here we must speak of its aesthetic.

Edmund Spenser was doubly wrong, then, in referring to Chaucer as "well of English undefiled" (*F.O.* IV.ii.32): wrong with respect to foreign vocabulary, wrong with respect to low humour. Haldeen Braddy also erred in asserting that Chaucer's obscenity is "hearty and robust, without snigger or leer,"⁵ for there is, in the legends, plenty of snigger and leer. I shall first briefly indicate my findings, then give the "purple passages," and finally suggest some conclusions.

Since I am not considering as obscene those cases where sex is clearly intended but coyly circumlocuted, I shall not list such common euphemisms for sexual activity as "grace," "ease," "labour," "refreshment," "dalliance" or "play." Nor am I interested in ordinary symbolic imagery for sexual activity, such as "joust." What I have looked for primarily are the places where an anal or a genital interpretation of a word or line or image is clearly *not* the first level of meaning but is, rather, invited by certain clusters of words or images so that innuendo is created alongside the literal sense. In a few cases an actual pun is produced that makes coherent sense on two levels (*significatio*). More often, however, there is no actual pun but rather a homophonic sound-play (*annominatio*) where the sexual term has no coherent meaning in the sentence but constitutes instead a free-floating referent or gratuitous association, with the effect, more or less, of an elbow in the ribs. A third category relies less on language than on an image or situation that provokes erotic associations. (A table of classifications is appended.) The terms are primarily anal and genital, the latter referring to both male and female organs and activity. Homosexuality appears but not prominently, though to be certain of this we would require more familiarity with the language of gay subculture in mediaeval England than is presently available. I also found no outright scatology, and this is somewhat surprising for a period when scatology was a staple of popular humour; but then our text is not a popular but a courtly production.

Skeptics in the matter of Chaucerian obscenity will naturally welcome my assurance that not all occurrences in Chaucer of the words or images discussed here are necessarily sexual pun. "A word is known by the company it keeps," as Hilda Hume reminded us when she wrote about Shakespeare.⁶ All of my examples in the present paper occur in clusters. Where we have one word isolated in a passage, there skepticism is legitimate, but where we have three, or ten, possible *doubles entendres* in a passage we must perforce accept the probability of authorial complicity.

I will proceed through the legends in order, confining myself to the most persuasive examples.

In the first legend, that of Cleopatra,⁷ Chaucer's account of the battle of Actium contains these lines:

And from the top down come the grete stones.

In goth the grapnel, so ful of crokes; . . . (639-40)

The stones will be used as weapons; yet "stones" also means "testicles"; we recall Harry Bailly's words to the Nun's Priest: "I-blessed be thy breche, and every stoon!" (VII.3448). The grapnel, which is going in (to the water), is a small anchor with several "crokes." A "crook" is a curved segment or a bar with a knobbed top; according to the Middle English Dictionary, the word is used "allusively" of the male genital. Is it sheer coincidence that these two lines contain the secondary image of male genitalia? I think not. The context here is a military scenario sexually suggestive by virtue of its placement, its rhythm, its actual content of frenzied confrontational activity, its imagery, and its progression from start to finish. Nautical imagery, especially that of naval battle, is one of the most enduringly popular images for sexual congress, from Attic comedy to Shakespeare and beyond.⁸ John Fyler remarks that Chaucer recounts the battle "in place of the wedding"⁹ -- the wedding having been dealt with in an *occupatio* -- and I shall show that it is an ironically and uniquely appropriate replacement. The ships meet, up goes the trumpet, out comes the big gun, down come the stones, in goes the grapnel with its phallic crooks, the men press in. Finally there is a pouring forth -- of peas;¹⁰ then a sticky white substance appears -- lime, to be sure -- and the opponents "go together." This last is a common synonym (says MED) for copulation, and I suspect we might well translate it as "come together," maintaining the pun. The episode is summarized this way: "And thus the longe day in fyght they spende" (650). "Fyght" (fight) is homophonic with "fyked," past tense of "fykken," "to fuck"; and if Saussure was correct in his observation that "Nothing enters language without having been tested in speaking,"¹¹ then we not only may but ought to assume that the word "fuck" (or a cognate), first attested in print in 1503, was already in oral circulation in Chaucer's day. While the secondary meaning would be ungrammatical here and thus not a true pun, the homophony itself is the point, especially in context of the rest of this passage.¹²

In "Thisbe," the key passage for my present purpose is the one that describes the wall separating the two lovers (737-81). The passage is

imitated from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* IV, where the corresponding section begins:

Fissus erat tenui rima, quam duxerat olim,
cum fieret, paries domui communis utriue. (65-66)

Split it was by a narrow crack which had formed long ago,
when it was being built -- the wall common to both houses.
(my translation)

A comparison of texts shows Chaucer at pains to emphasize the scurrilous potential of the Latin narrative -- as indeed Juvenal and Alan of Lille had done before him; for Juvenal appropriated the image of the narrow crack as a synonym for female genitalia,¹³ while Alan, deploring the prevalence of homosexuality, incorporated Ovid's image into a triple homophonic word-play in the *De Placitu Naturae*, where Chaucer might well have found it:

Non modo per rimas rimatur basia Thisbes
Pyramus, huic veneris rimula nulla placet. (Metrum I, 53-54)¹⁴

In no way did Pyramus search out Thisbe's kiss through
cracks; the little crack of Venus no longer pleased him.
(my translation)

In Chaucer's version of the Thisbe story, we hear first that the wall "was clove a-two. . . of olde tyme of his fundacioun" (738-39). "Fundacioun" (founding) is nearly homophonic with "fundement" (anus); in combination with "clove a-two" it is difficult to avoid seeing the image of buttocks in these lines. The association is strengthened when we find the word "clyfte" no less than three times in the next seven lines. "Clyfte" is, of course, a crack: the crack in the wall through which the lovers speak. But in English it is distinctively the cleft in the buttocks, as we recall from the *Summoner's Tale* (III.2145). To this cleft the lovers apply their lips, and since they cannot kiss one another they kiss the wall's stone: two suggestions of unorthodox sexual contact. The word "stone" occurs twice in four lines, once in the phrase "thy lym and ek thy ston" (765). Since "limb" is a well-documented synonym for the male genital,¹⁵ this phrase can be read either as "your lime and your stone" or as "your limb and your testicle."

Continuing the genital associations but transferring them to a female context is Thisbe's lament before her suicide:

"My woful hand," quod she,
 "Is strong ynogh in swich a werk to me;
 For love shal yeve me strengthe and hardynesse
 To make my wounde large ynogh, I gesse." (890-93)

In the first couplet ("my hand is strong enough") I would read an allusion to masturbation, a female sexual offense commonly treated in confessional manuals;¹⁶ and, in the second couplet, an allusion to the vulva ("love will make my wound large enough"). Many folklorists testify to the ancient connection between a wound and the female genitalia: the physical resemblance is doubtless strengthened by the homonym *vulva/vulnus*. Later both Rabelais and Shakespeare would use the association to crude comic advantage.¹⁷

Should it be objected that such obscenities are out of place in a tale of tragic double death, I would reply that the tone of this legend is burlesque and bathos throughout. For example, the repeated apostrophe of inanimate objects such as wall and wimple is already risible as an instance of sentimental *amplificatio* gone wild. Especially if the *LGW* were recited aloud, such rhetorical excess would create a comic atmosphere in which a little subtle obscenity would be quite in keeping.¹⁸

The tale of Dido unfolds under the eye of Venus, the anti-hero's mother, and it is suffused with sexuality: all is "amorous loking" and "lusty folk," sighing and kneeling, pity and gentillesse. As if to underline the copulatory theme, the poet uses the word "prick" twice in the twenty lines just preceding the consummation of his protagonists' desire (1192-1213). Between these two occurrences appears the image of "the fomy brydel" (1208) of Aeneas's horse; so that the cluster is prick-foam-prick, with a further play on *bridle/bridal*. While "prick" as noun would not come into documented literary usage as a sexual term until the sixteenth century, none the less the verb -- meaning to spur, prod, stimulate, or ride hard -- was in Chaucer's day well enough known as a sexual metaphor to occur with obvious erotic meaning in the *Reeve's Tale* (4231) and in popular ballads.¹⁹ We ought to recall furthermore that if the word "die" were still current as a euphemism for orgasm (as it was in Chaucer's time), we would hear the heroine's name a little differently -- "Die, do!"

Jason's treatment of Hypsipyle is both an economic and a sexual betrayal. He bribes the queen's counsellors so as to win her affection and her fortune; he "tok of hir substaunce / What so hym leste" (1560-61). Now "substance" meant property or wealth, and Hypsipyle is a lady of substance. But the word also meant physical matter in a more intimate sense -- semen,

specifically -- and this gives us a true pun. The accepted medical and popular view of female sexual physiology was that female "semination" coincided with orgasm, and that female sperm had to be emitted for conception to occur. This belief extended back to Ovid and would continue well into the sixteenth century.²⁰ We know that the sequence has occurred with Hypsipyle because we are told that Jason begat two children "upon" (another pun) her.

Chaucer refers to female semination twice in the *Parson's Tale*: it is a sin if "man or womman shedeth hire nature in manere or in place ther as a child may nat be conceived" (X.577), and if "man or womman spille his kynde" in a church (X.965). Chaucer evidently has the physiological meaning of "substance" firmly in mind when he writes in the *Parson's Tale* about lechery that

Unto the body anyeth it greuously also, for it dreyeth hym, . . .
It wasteth eek his catel and his substance. And certes . . . is
it a fouler thyng whan that . . . women dependen upon men hir
catel and substance. (X.848-49)

One might assume that "substance" here is a synonym for "catel" (property); yet to specify physical desiccation as a consequence of lust is surely to distinguish between social and physiological materials. We have in *Hypsipyle*, then, the same pun that Shakespeare put to effective use in his Sonnet 129, "Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame." Yet in *Troilus* Chaucer goes the bard one better, producing a triple pun on "substance" that plays on proper-tarian, philosophical, and sexual senses. When Troilus tries to persuade Criseyde to elope with him, he argues that "folie is, whan man may chese, / For accident his substance ay to lese" (IV.1505).

In the legend of Lucrece there is suggestiveness -- lines 1818 and 1859 -- but only one sexual pun that I was able to locate. It is "The husbonde knew the estris wel and fyn" (1715) where "estris" means interior or hidden places, normally of a garden or courtyard, but figuratively perhaps of a human body. The same pun appears in the *Romaunt of the Rose*, where Belacueil shows the lover "The estres of the swote place" (3626) and gives him permission "overal to go," thus raising the lover from hell to paradise in the traditional courtly vocabulary of consummation. The exegetical and lyrical tradition originating in commentary upon the *Song of Songs* would have prepared the way for such a parallel between lady and garden; Chaucer's use of this tradition is evident in the *Merchant's Tale*.

Moving on to Ariadne, we pick up the thread again (if I may borrow an image central to that legend): anal and genital obscenity, with a hint of voyeurism. Theseus is imprisoned next to a "foreyne" (1962), or toilet, belonging to Ariadne and Phaedra. There is no dramatic reason for this detail except perhaps to titillate: for if the princesses from their quarters can overhear Theseus lament, does it not follow that he in turn must overhear them when nature calls?

Later, when Phaedra plans to help Theseus, there follows a passage of twenty lines loaded with obscene imagery (1993-2013). "Lat us wel taste hym at his herte-rote," the passage begins: "let us test his character" -- or feel, enjoy, or even taste it. What is the object of this feeling, tasting, testing, or enjoyment? Heart has a well-established connection with lust and genitality, not least because, as a fourteenth-century medical handbook points out, "the risynge of a mannes yerde cometh of a mannes herte";²¹ and as Chaucer reminds us in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, some such connection holds even for birds. For Shakespeare, Partridge glosses "root" unhesitatingly as "either penis or penis erectus"²² and this meaning seems the likely one in the *Romaunt of the Rose* when the lover feels his "herte rote" (1026) affected by the memory of his lady's "every membre." Clearly the princess's project has strong genital overtones, and she goes on to speculate about the ups and downs of penile virility: If Theseus had a "wepen," and "if that he be a man," let's see whether "he dar . . . Fyghten" in the place where "he shal descende." "We shul make hym balles" (2003) proclaims Phaedra -- balls of wax and string, to be sure. But the word also meant then exactly what it does now, its sexual referent providing the pun in a fifteenth-century lyric, "None but she my bales may bete"; that is, "none but she may amend my suffering," or "none but she may beat (or: restore to health) my balls."²³ In any case, the new balls will be cast into the minotaur's throat: another hint of oral-genital contact. The labyrinth is "krynkeled" (convoluted) and has "queynte" turns: the first adjective allusive of, the second a direct pun on, the female genital. Theseus does outwit the monster, thanks to "His wepne, his clewe, his thyng" (2140). Weapon and thing are both well-known euphemisms for the male genital, and I suspect that, framed between them, "clew" (ball) shares their meaning. A riddle illustrates the popular understanding of the word "thing"; it is post-Chaucerian, but other texts indicate continuity of meaning:

Thus my riddel doth begin:

a mayde woulde have a thinge to putte in

and with her hande she brought it to:
 it was so meek, it would not do,
 and at length she used it so
 that to the hole she made it go.
 When it had done as she could wish
 Ah ha! quoth she, I'm gladde of this.²⁴

The answer is "A maid went to thread a needle," but the point obviously relies on the audience assuming that "thing" refers to the male genital. It might, of course, also refer to the female genital, as the Wite of Bath reminds us in using the common French euphemism "bele chose" (III.447).

In "Phyllis," several images suggest homoerotic and heterosexual copulation: Demophon is assaulted from behind by a wind that shoved so sore his sail couldn't stand (2412); the sea pushes Demophon "now up, now down" (2420), anticipating his later "doyng to and fro" (2471) with Phyllis; twice he is almost "at the deth," and Phyllis refers to "youre anker, which ye in oure haven leyde" (2501).²⁵

In the last legend Chaucer erroneously gives Hypermnestra's lover Lynceus the name Lino, which is close to the Latin for whoremaster ("leno"); but since the reading "Lino" occurs in several source manuscripts, we can't assume this was other than an innocent mistake. Philomela's story seems to be the only one not undercut by irony, obscenity, or tedious writing; to my mind it is written with a genuine integrity and power. Perhaps Chaucer found this horrifying material too strong for irony; certainly the opening to "Philomela" represents the ultimate in reader-response criticism:

And, as to me, so grisely was his dede
 That, whan that I his foule storye rede,
 Myne eyen wexe toule and sore also. (2239-40)

What may we conclude from this brief study? First and most obvious is that an interpretation of *LGW* that dismisses irony simply does not fit the linguistic facts. For too long the weighty authority of J.L. Lowes has encouraged us to see this fascinating poem as little more than a courtly *jeu d'esprit*.²⁶ It is time to acknowledge *LGW* as an important work in which a strong late-mediaeval poet explores the most intimate concerns of authorship; and to treat it as a methodological field to which a variety of critical approaches is appropriate. We need to approach this neglected work as one whose concern with tradition and originality, historiography and desire, textuality and the literary figuration of woman make it an appropriate focus for the critical methodologies of our own day.

We need to remember, too, that between Chaucer and ourselves falls the long shadow of Calvinism. For many critics the Puritan fact has decisively shaped their notion of what it is to be a poet, a great poet, a moral Christian poet. Yet the universality for which Chaucer's religion names itself is not only geographical but also conceptual. Catholicism is large and inclusive. It contains what look to us like impossible contradictions -- among them the fact that a great and moral Christian poet may well use sexual word play in the pursuit of his art.

It is Desire -- Cupid, the god of love -- who commands Geoffrey to re-write woman all goodness; patience, and faith. And so might any of us wish or desire it to be about ourselves and about love. Indeed, swayed by desire, we may well imagine it to be so. Yet we learn eventually that besides desire there is nature, there is experience, there is literary or rhetorical tradition. The obscene language in the legends reminds us of these; subtly but stubbornly it denies us the easy utopian formulas of blind Desire.

Kökeritz saw Chaucer as a "precursor of the Elizabethans,"²⁷ and I believe it would be useful were we to grant Chaucer the balance we concede to Shakespeare: to see him as a writer who, while exploring major issues of art and the moral life, is not so obsessed with high seriousness as to forget the play of language -- or the language of play.

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CHART

I. True pun (*significatio*), making grammatical and narrative sense on both levels of meaning:

substance	(wealth / semen)	Hypsipyle,	1560
upon	(with / on top of)	Hypsipyle,	1562
estris	(inner parts: architec- tural / physiological)	Lucrece,	1715
taste at herte rote	(test [his] character; taste, feel, enjoy [his] genital)	Ariadne,	1933

II. Suggestive image:

out goes the gun, down come the stones,	Cleopatra,	637-48
in goes the grapnel, in with the poleax press		
the men, he pours, white substance appears,		
opponents go together.		
my hand is strong enough	Thisbe,	890-93
love will make my wound large enough		
foamy	Dido,	1208
toilet ("foreyne")	Ariadne,	1962
convoluted ("krynkeled")	Ariadne,	2012
the wind came from behind and shoved so	Phyllis,	2411-12
hard his sail could not stand		
pushes him up and down	Phyllis,	2421
your anchor which you laid in our haven	Phyllis,	2501

III. Homophone (*annominatio*):

Cleopatra: stones, crokes, they go together, they spend the day in "fyght" and possibly, though not discussed in paper: shete (shoot / shit); St. Anthony's fire (syphilis).

Thisbe: fundacioun, clifte, thy lym and ek thy ston, ston..

Dido: heroine's name, prick, bridle / bridal. Also possible but not discussed in paper: queen (with secondary meaning "loose woman." Of 31 occurrences of this word in *LGW*, 25 are in Dido, even though several other of the heroines are or become queens in the primary sense).

Ariadne: weapon, descend, if he be a man, balls, queynte, clewe, thing. Also possible but not discussed: serve, death.

Phyllis: death.

NOTES

¹ Helge Kökeritz, "Rhetorical Word-Play in Chaucer," *PMLA* 69 (1954) 937-52. See also Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956) 225-46, and "Chaucer's Puns: A Supplementary List," *PMLA* 73 (1958) 167-70. The list of puns and word-play in Chaucer continues to grow as other scholars

contribute to the discussion.

² Roger Dragonetti, *La Vie de la Lettre au Moyen Age* (Paris 1980) esp. chap. 3. See also Paul Zumthor, "From Hi(story) to Poem, or the Paths of Pun: The Grands Rhétoriciens of Fifteenth-Century France," *New Literary History* 10 (1979) 231-63.

³ Most of the information in this paragraph is taken from the following sources: D.C.C. Young, "Gentler Medicines in the *Agamemnon*," *Classical Quarterly* 14 (1964); George L. Koniaris, "An Obscene Word in Aeschylus (I)," *American Journal of Philology* 101 (1980); William Blake Tyrell, "An Obscene Word in Aeschylus (II)," *ibid.*; Jeffrey Henderson, *The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy* (New Haven 1975); Mary A. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable* (Madison 1924); E.R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York 1953) 386, n. 17, 113-27, 417-35; Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and Its Public in Late Latin Literature and in the Middle Ages* (New York 1965) 152-56; Anne Lyon Haight, ed., *Hroswitha of Gandersheim: Her Life, Times and Works* (New York 1965); Iam Thomson, "Latin 'Elegiac Comedy' of the Twelfth Century," in *Versions of Medieval Comedy*, ed. Paul Ruggiers (Norman 1977); John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago 1980); Charles Jernigan, "The Song of Nail and Uncle: Arnaut Daniel's Sestina . . .," *SP* 71 (1974); Betsy Bowden, "The Art of Courtly Copulation," *Medievalia et Humanistica* N.S. 9 (1970); Bruno Roy, ed., *L'Erotisme au Moyen Age* (Montreal 1977); Eric Hicks, *Le Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* (Paris 1977); Philippe Menard, *Le Rire et le Sourire dans le Roman Courtois . . .* Genève 1969). In *In Defense of French Poetry: An Essay in Revaluation* (University Park, Pa. 1987) chap. 3, William Calin treats obscenity as an aspect of *sermo humilis*: the conscious use of a traditional rhetoric. I am also grateful to Prof. Laura Kendrick of Rutgers University for sending me her MS. *The Game of Love: Troubadour Word Play* (Berkeley, forthcoming). Additional sources are cited in the notes to Charles Muscatine, *The French Fabliaux* (New Haven 1986) chap. 5, "Sexuality and Obscenity." Testifying to the prevalence of obscenity in public life, classical manuals of public speaking generally disrecommend it as improper for the monied gentleman (Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* Bk. IV) and counterproductive for the lawyer or politician (Cicero, *Orator* xxvi; *De Officiis*, I, xxix, xxxv; Quintilian, III,28).

⁴ "Rewriting Woman Good: Gender and the Anxiety of Influence in Two Late-Medieval Texts," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian Wasserman

(Syracuse 1986), and "Women, Nature and Language in the *Legend of Good Women*," paper given at New Chaucer Society, 1986.

⁵ Haldeen Braddy, "Chaucer's Bawdy Tongue," *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 30 (1966). It is not difficult to see how Braddy reached his conclusion, for his definition of obscenity is very mild by today's standards. Thus in "Chaucer: Realism or Obscenity?" *Arlington Quarterly* 2 (1969) he lists as obscene the Squire's loving "hotly" and Palemon's vow to "die" in Venus's or Emelye's "service." Both articles are reprinted in *Geoffrey Chaucer, Literary and Historical Studies* (Port Washington, N.Y. 1971). Lord Byron had another view: he considered Chaucer "obscene and contemptible: he owes his celebrity merely to his antiquity"; cf. in Caroline Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion* (Cambridge 1925, rpt. New York 1960) 29. Standards as to what does or does not constitute a pun, or an obscenity, vary widely. Thus I would not consider many of Baum's examples puns, but only euphemisms or even ambiguities of meaning. Similarly, it is not clear why Thomas Ross, in *Chaucer's Bawdy* (New York 1972), excludes at least three of the most blatant obscene puns in *LGW*: "ball," "clyfte," and "queynte." Perhaps a prior interpretation of the poem interferes with the appreciation of word-play or obscenity; my argument here is that we let the language guide the interpretation.

⁶ Hilda Hume, *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language* (London 1962) 100. Hume is quoting J.R. Firth, but gives no textual reference.

⁷ As Beverly Taylor has pointed out, this choice of first legend already establishes Chaucer's ironic intention, for Cleopatra is "invariably" viewed as a negative example: "The medieval Cleopatra: the classical and medieval tradition of Chaucer's *Legend of Cleopatra*," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 7 (1977) 249-69. All Chaucer quotations in my text are from F.N. Robinson, ed., *Works* (2nd ed., Boston 1957).

⁸ Henderson (at n. 3) lists almost five pages of nautical terminology from Attic comedy (161-66), and Eric Partridge lists numerous examples in *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London 1947) 36 and glossary. Cf. also the "imagine marinaresca" in Boccaccio's *Corbaccio: Opere*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Milano / Napoli; n.d.) 533-34.

⁹ John Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven 1979) 100.

¹⁰ Scholars are not entirely agreed on whether peas or pitch would actually have been poured on the deck in a mediaeval battle; both are called

pois in French, and there is some precedent for both. See Robinson's note to line 648.

¹¹ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York 1959, orig. 1915) 168. "Fuck" seems to be the ghost-word in Middle English. The earliest use attested by the OED is 1503, by Dunbar. OED claims that the German word cannot be shown to be related to the English; yet it posits that the early Modern English "answers to a Middle English type, *fuken*, which is not found." The MED has several homophones with other meanings, one of which is "to flatter or deceive." It is possible that the ballad "In May hit murgeth" contains a pun (deceive / fuck) in the lines: "Wymmon, war the with the swyke / That feir ant freoly ys to fyke" (25-26); the ballad appears as no. 82 in Carleton Brown, *English Lyrics of the XIIIth Century* (Oxford 1932). These very lines are cited by E.J. Burford as evidence of "the free and easy habits of the English women of 1325": *Bawds and Lodging. A History of the London Bankside Brothels* (London 1976) 84. Burford cites MED as his authority for translating "fyke" as "fuck," yet as I have noted, MED has no such entry. A last remark in this digression; the Latin word for a priest's concubine was *focaria* (from *focus*: hearth, hence housekeeper). "Fuck" could be a back formation from *focaria* or "fucker." But this still would not account for the apparent absence of occurrences in Middle English.

¹² Auerbach's section on *annominatio* or homophony (pp. 278-80) shows that the device was highly recommended in the mediaeval artes and widely used in vernacular poetry; it is particularly profuse in Dante's *Commedia*.

¹³ Juvenal 3, 97. The narrator is describing Roman mimes who imitate women so well that you would think a woman, not an actor, spoke, and "Vacua dicas / infra ventriculum et tenui distantia rima" ("You would say / judge everything (to be) empty and flat between the belly and that further narrow crack": my translation). Cited J.N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London 1982) 95. Though Adams gives numerous other examples of the sexual use of "fissa," "rima" and "tenui rima," he does not cite Ovid as the source of this image. It is to be noted that the Loeb translation gives simply "a woman complete in all her parts," suppressing entirely the image of the crack.

¹⁴ Alan of Lille, "De Planctu Naturae," ed. N.M. Haring *Studi Medievali* XIX (1978).

¹⁵ MED refers, for instance, to the circumcision of a child's "limb," or Adam and Eve hiding their "limbs." Also *Piers Plowman* B 20, 194-95:

" . . . the lyme that she loved me fore. and leef was to fele, / on nyghtes namely, whan we naked were, . . ." Chaucer surely relies on this secondary meaning when he has January assert the strength of his limbs "to do al that a man bilongeth to" (IV.1458-49, 1465).

¹⁶ See, for example, James Cleugh, *Love Locked Out: A Survey of Love, License and Restriction in the Middle Ages* (London 1963) 283 on the eleventh-century Decretals of Bishop Burchard of Worms; also John T. McNeill, *Medieval Handbooks of Penance* (New York 1965) 103, 113, 170, 185, 191, 192, 253; and J.J. Francis Firth, ed. *Robert of Flamborough . . . Liber Poenitentialis* (Toronto 1971) 167-68, 229, 242, 244: the text is dated about 1200.

¹⁷ *Pantagruel* II: 15 (an anecdote which, like *Thisbe*, juxtaposes a lion and a woman) and IV: 47 ("How the Devil was fooled"); Shakespeare, *Passionate Pilgrim* IX. That *vulva* and *vulnus* are not etymologically related, the mediaeval reader would neither know nor, probably, believe. In the *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington 1955), Stith Thompson lists numerous instances of tales involving birth from a wound (T541.2). Many cultures connect the menses with either male or female castration, and a common motif in European folk and fairy tale is the prick or cut whose bleeding represents menarche (e.g., *Sleeping Beauty*). See J. Delaney, M.J. Lupton, E. Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York 1976) chaps. 8 and 16; Bruno Bettelheim, *The Use of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York 1976) *passim*.

¹⁸ See Beryl Rowland, "Pronuntiatio and its Effect on Chaucer's Audience," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 4 (1982) 33-51. The abuse of apostrophe was not unique to Chaucer in treating this story but was already present in the Old French *lai* of *Piramus* and *Thisbe*, which, as one of the most popular recitals of the high-medieval period, was inserted into the *Ovide Moralisé*. Chaucer was influenced by the *lai* in his version of the story, as I have shown in "The Naked Text: Chaucer's 'Thisbe', the *Ovide Moralisé*, and the Problem of *Translatio Studii* in *The Legend of Good Women*," paper given at the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, Binghamton, N.Y., 1986. *Piramus et Tisbé* has been edited by F. Branciforti (Firenze 1959); the *Ovide Moralisé* by C. de Boer (Amsterdam 1915). Shakespeare borrowed both rhetorical parody and obscene puns for his "hempen homespuns" version of the *Thisbe* story in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, though W.G. Van Emden has argued that Shakespeare's use of the French *Thisbe* tradition was mediated through the translated version in the Elizabethan miscellany *A Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions*: "Shakespeare and the French Pyranus and *Thisbe* Tradition,"

Forum for Modern Language Studies 11 (1975).

¹⁹ Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford 1952), Nos. 28 and 32; cited in Ross (at n. 5) s.v. "prick."

²⁰ See John T. Noonan, Jr. *Contraception: A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass. 1965) 337 ff.; Georges Duby, *Le Chevalier, La Femme et le Prêtre: Le Mariage dans la France Féodale* (Paris 1981) 43; and the mid-sixteenth century Vicary's *Anatomie of the Body of Man*, EETS, E.S. 53 (1888) 78 on woman's sperm. Chaucer may have benefitted personally from this bit of mediaeval sex-lore. If, as has been suggested by several scholars, the "Lyte Lowys my sone" to whom Chaucer dedicates the *Astrolabe* was the poet's son by Cecily Champaigne, it is probable that the woman's discovery of her pregnancy was what led her, in a document dated May, 1380, to drop charges against the poet for *raptus*, or sexual assault. According to law, her pregnancy would have proved semination, hence orgasm, pleasure, and complicity of will, so that a rape claim would not have held up in court. Cf. P.R. Watts, "The Strange Case of Geoffrey Chaucer and Cecila Champaigne," *Law Quarterly Review* 63 (1947) 491-515.

²¹ *Lanfranc's Science of Cirurgie*, ed. R. von Fleischhacker, EETS, O.S. 102 (1894) 174.

²² Partridge (at n.8) 176.

²³ Ballad #127 in Robbins (at n. 19). See also "For of my ploughe the beste stotte is balle" in *Ballad Society*, Vol. 7 (London 1871), ed. F.J. Furnivall and attributed by John Shirley (1366-1456) to Chaucer. The piece is an extended play on plowing as a metaphor for sexual activity.

²⁴ F.J. Furnivall found the riddle in an early seventeenth-century volume, and printed it in *Love-Poems and Humorous Ones*, for the *Ballad Society* (Hertford 1874). The riddle could of course be a great deal older than the volume. But cf. also Ballad #53 in Brown (at n. 11) with the line "Love is loveliche a thing to womnone nede."

²⁵ Janet M. Cowen has already commented on the likelihood of a sexual pun on "haven" in "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, Lines 2501-3," *Notes and Queries* 31, no. 3 (September 1984) 298-99.

²⁶ J. Livingstone Lowes, "Is Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* A Travesty?" *JEGP* 8 (1909) 513-69. In the contest with Harold Goddard, whose earlier monograph on *LGW* Lowes intended to refute, modern scholarship must, I think, belatedly offer the palm to Goddard -- not only for his general interpretation

but also for many specifics (e.g., the mediaeval ambivalence or negativity about several of Chaucer's "good" women). Cf. H.C. Goddard, "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *JEGP* 7 (1908) and 8 (1909). A more recent statement of the ironic position is Elaine Tuttle Hansen, "Irony and the Antifeminist Narrator in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*," *JEGP* 82 (1983). Others to accept irony or comedy in *LGW* include Robert Worth Frank Jr., *Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, Mass. 1972) and Lisa J. Kiser, *Telling Classical Tales* (Ithaca 1983).

²⁷ KÖkeritz (at n. 1) 952.