THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 129: CHAUCER'S VULGAR TONGUE

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[This episode contains a frank discussion of vulgarities, obscenities, profanity, sexual hijinks, and flatulence. So fair warning.]

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 129: Chaucer's Vulgar Tongue. In this episode, we're going to look at the vulgar side of Geoffrey Chaucer. And when I say *vulgar*, I mean it in both the modern sense of the word and the original sense of the word. *Vulgar* originally meant common or ordinary, and Chaucer was one of the few English writers of the Middle Ages to paint vivid portraits of the common people of England. And those portraits included their language – the common language of common people. Chaucer's ordinary characters curse and swear, and they tell stories that many people would consider dirty or obscene. It's a side of the English language that we don't see very often in the Middle Ages, and it's partly how the word *vulgar* evolved from its original sense of 'common or ordinary' to its more modern sense of 'dirty, inappropriate or unrefined.' So this time, we'll examine how Chaucer used his vulgar tongue to depict his common and ordinary characters in the Canterbury Tales.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now a quick note before we begin. In this episode, I'm going to discuss the history of certain obscenities and curse words in English. So if you're sensitive to foul language, be aware that we will be looking at some of those words in the episode. Also, I'm going to explore this topic in the context of the Miller's Tale as set forth in the Canterbury Tales. I had originally intended to include the Reeve's Tale in this discussion as well, but due to time considerations, I've decided to move the Reeve's Tale to the next episode where I also intend to discuss Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Those two stories actually have one very important thing in common. They both illustrate the nature of English in the north of England in the late 1300s. So I'll cover those two stories next time.

But for now, let's turn our attention back to the bawdy side of Chaucer and his fascination with the more vulgar aspects of English. Before we began our look at the Canterbury Tales, we briefly looked at another one of Chaucer's important poems called Troilus and Criseyde about two lovers during the time of the Trojan War. There's a scene in that poem where Troilus tries to convince Criseyde to run away with him. He tells her that if he can speak plainly about treasure or money, they have enough to live together comfortably for the rest of their lives. The line begins with the passage 'And vulgarly to speken of substaunce of tresour' – 'And vulgarly to speak of substance of treasure,' but it meant 'to speak plainly or bluntly about money.'

Now notice that Troilus didn't say that money was obscene, and he didn't use any curse words in the passage. When he said that he was speaking 'vulgarly,' he simply meant that he was speaking in the common or ordinary way that someone would speak about money. In other words, to speak 'vulgarly' was to speak plainly or bluntly. And that's because the word *vulgar* actually meant

'common or ordinary.' It is a loanword from Latin, and according to the Oxford English dictionary, this passage uttered by Troilus is the first known use of the word *vulgar* – or a form of the word v*ulgar* – in the English language.

This sense of the word *vulgar* as 'common or ordinary' is the same sense that we have in the term Vulgar Latin. Many language historians refer to the Vulgar Latin dialects that were spoken in Western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. Those dialects ultimately produced French, Spanish, Portugese, Italian and the other Romance languages. Now when scholars refer to these Latin dialects as 'vulgar,' they don't mean that the dialects were crude or dirty. They simply mean that those were the Latin dialects spoken by the common or ordinary people in the various parts of Western Europe, as opposed to the formal Latin used by the Church.

The point is that the word *vulgar* has always been used to make this basic connection between ordinary people and ordinary speech. But the modern sense of the word *vulgar* points to something else. It shows us that common, ordinary people often speak in ways that can be blunt and coarse. They don't always use the formal rules of language taught in schoolbooks. And they sometimes use words that aren't found in those schoolbooks, and sometimes aren't even found in dictionaries.

It is probably fitting that Geoffrey Chaucer was the first known English writer to use the word *vulgar* because he was also one of the first English writers to explore that basic connection between the common people and their common language.

As we saw last time, Chaucer sometimes wrote in a high register when writing about noble characters or elevated topics. But he also wrote in a lower register when writing about common, ordinary people, especially peasants and people who were 'rough around the edges' – the type of people who Chaucer and some modern speakers would call *churls*.

Words like *vulgar* and *churl* reflect this old idea that the common people tend to speak and behave in ways that are crude and unrefined. As I noted, *vulgar* originally meant common, and now it means inappropriate or obscene. *Churl* originally meant a common person. Now it means a rude or unpleasant person. *Villein* was originally a feudal term for a peasant, Now, with a slightly different spelling, it means an evil person or a criminal. And as we've seen before, the word *lewd* originally referred to common things in the secular word. It was often used to refer to common people who were not part of the clergy. But again, the word *lewd* has experienced this same decline over the centuries. Today it means vile, lustful or obscene.

We see the same development in the word *profane* which I also discussed in an earlier episode. The word *profane* is derived from the Latin words *pro* and *fanum*. *Pro* meant 'in front of,' and *fanum* meant 'temple.' So when those two elements were put together, it literally referred to things in front of the temple, but that also inherently meant that those things were outside of the temple. Again, it simply referred to common things in the secular world, as opposed to the Church. But over time, it came to refer to things that were not appropriate for the Church, so it came to mean dirty or vulgar. All of these words – *profane*, *lewd* and *vulgar* – have experienced this same evolution from common to obscene.

And this is an important reminder that words tend to change their meanings over time. When we use words today that are considered vulgar or dirty, we should keep in mind that those words didn't necessarily have that same sense in earlier centuries. Very often, they were just common ordinary words with common ordinary meanings.

A good example of this is one of our modern four-letter words for excrement – the word *shit*. It's a very old word that was used by the Anglo-Saxons, and it probably goes all the way back to the original Indo-Europeans. The original Indo-European root word was something like **skei*, and it apparently meant 'to separate or divide.' That meaning included situations where something was cut off or removed or separated from a larger object. Since bodily waste was removed from the body through defecation, this old root word was applied to that process.

The same root word was applied to the process of removing objects from the outside of the body as well – like clothing. To remove clothing or other objects from the body was to 'shed' them from the same root word. Of course, it could also apply to skin as when a snake 'sheds' its skin. The same root word was also applied the process of removing wool from a sheep. In that case, it produced the word 'shear.'

Sometimes ancient people would split a large tree trunk in half, and then they would hollow it out to create a boat or sailing vessel. This process of division and separation and removal of wood waste created the word *ship* from the same root. Sometimes, a flat piece of wood cut from a tree was used as a roof covering. That piece of wood was called a *shingle* also from the same root.

So *shit*, *shed*, *shear*, *ship* and *shingle* are all cognate according to language scholars. They all evolved from the same root word meaning 'to split or divide.' And all of the examples I just gave are words that were used in Old English.

In the case of our common four-letter word for excrement, it is older than English itself. The word was used in that same sense during the earlier Proto-Germanic period, and scholars know that because other modern Germanic languages have their own verison of that word with essentially the same meaning. For example, Modern German has the word as *Scheisse*, and some English-speakers actually use than German version of the word in place of the English word. It is close enough to the English word that most people recognize it, but it doesn't have the same taboo as the English word.

By the way, some scholars think that the German word *Scheisse* is actually the source of the modern word *shyster*. *Shyster* means a crook or a cheat, and it appeared in English in the 1800s. Some linguists think it came from a German word meaning a 'worthless person,' which itself was derived from *Scheisse*.

So English is not unique in having a version of this word. The English version is very old going all the way back to the Anglo-Saxons. But that's not to say that the meaning has remained the same over all those years. While the word has always referred to dung or excrement, it originally has a much more restricted sense. In Old English, it was limited to the waste created by farm

animals, and more specifically, it usually referred to diarrhoea in cattle or sheep. And it wasn't really an obscene word at the time. In fact, Geoffrey Chaucer used it in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales.

In his description of the Parson, he says that the Parson was a true man of God, and not corrupt like some members of the clergy. He then chastises corrupt priests with the following passage:

And shame it is, if a prest take keep,
A shiten shepherde and a clene sheep.

In Modern English, it reads:

And shame it is, if a priest takes keep,
A shitty shepherd, looking after clean sheep.

This passage is generally interpreted to mean that a corrupt priest is basically a 'dirty shepherd' looking after his congregation who are the 'clean sheep.' So in this passage, the word *shiten* is used literally to mean a sheep covered with dung or excrement. It's really just a descriptive term meaning 'filthy or dirty.' The word didn't become truly obscene in its modern sense until the 1800s. So at this earlier point, it was still a common descriptive term.

By the way, there is another popular etymology for the word that has traveled far and wide in the age of the internet. The story goes that ships often transported animal manure to be used as fertilizer, and if the manure was stored in the bottom of the ship, water could seep in causing fermentation and methane gas. And that could cause the ship to explode, so the bundles of manure were stamped with a warning that read "Ship High In Transit,' and that warning was supposedly reduced to the initials S-H-I-T. So according to this story, the word is really an acronym. But as we've seen, the word is much older than this story would suggest, and there's no actual evidence to support this story. No one has ever found any references to that type of warning used on ships. And furthermore, acronyms didn't really exist until the past century or so. They are very much a product of the modern era, so old words that have been around for along time are almost never the result of an acronym.

Now as I noted, the word *shit* was originally a common descriptive term for animal feces, and it wasn't necessarily vulgar, but during the Middle English period, it did acquire an association with vulgar speech. In an earlier episode, we looked at a poem called 'The Owl and the Nightingale.' And in that poem, the author used the term 'shit worde' for vulgar or coarse language. Again, the word *shit* itself wasn't really obscene, but it was used to coin a term for obscene words. That poem also used the term 'fule worde' – or 'foul word.' Again, both of those terms implied that the words in question were dirty or foul, and therefore not appropriate for polite society.

So what kind of words were considered foul or dirty or inappropriate? Well, generally speaking, the most taboo words in the Middle Ages were swears and curses, but not *swearing* and *cursing* in the modern sense of those terms. People were far more concerned about language that tended

to offend God or challenge the teachings of the Church. That type of language tended to be more offensive than words for body parts or bodily functions.

Swear is an Old English word, but in Old English, it meant to declare that something was true, usually on a holy relic or other sacred item. That is very similar to what happens today if you swear an oath in court. You might put your hands on the Bible and swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Well, that was a far more common act in the Middle Ages. It was the way society was regulated. The entire feudal system was held together by lords and vassals swearing oaths to each other. Husbands and wives were bound together by oaths. Written contracts were rare, so most business agreements were confirmed with a similar exchange. Medieval society depended on sworn promises and oaths. And those oaths didn't really mean anything unless they were sworn in the name God, meaning that the person risked divine retribution if the oath was broken.

But sometimes, people would swear to something that was untrue. So they would make a false oath, thereby challenging and ridiculing the power of God. And sometimes, people would make a mockery of the oath, taking the name of God in vain. And they would even swear on the body, or blood or nails of Christ. That invoked the Crucifixion, and it was widely believed that such phrases literally inflicted pain and suffering on Christ. So that type of language was highly offensive, and that's how the word *swear* came to be used the more modern sense of profanity.

By way of example, it was common in the Middle English period for people to utter phrases like 'by God!' or 'by God's bones!' or 'by God's nails!' Those were similar to the more modern expression 'For God's sake!' In all of those cases, the form of the phrase was an oath, but it was being used as an expletive, so it violated the commandment against taking the Lord's name in vain.

Some of these early swears still survive in disguised forms in Modern English. The word *blimey* is apparently derived from the longer phrase 'God blind me!' which was once a common swear. The word *drat* is derived from the phrase 'God rot' as in 'God rot your bones' or some other body part. Over time, 'God rot' was slurred and shortened into *drat*. The expression *Gadzooks!* began as the phrase 'By God's hooks!' And *By George* began as 'By St. George!' At one time, a lot of people used the word *Zounds!* It was a shortening of the phrase 'By God's wounds!'

This was the usual type of swearing in the Middle Ages, and it was the type that Chaucer used throughout his poetry. He was a very active swearer in this regard, and his characters often speak in that way. But in the Canterbury Tales, the elevated or noble characters rarely swear. Most of the swearing comes from the common ordinary characters who tend to come from the lower classes.

The innkeeper and host Harry Bailey is one of the biggest offenders. At one point, he even gets into an argument with the Parson over his language. When he invites the Parson to tell his tale, he says, "for Goddes bones, Telle us a tale" – 'for God's bones, tell us a tale.' The parson responds sharply, ""What eyleth the man, so synfully to swere?" – 'What ails the man so sinfully to swear?"

Later in the poem, the Pardoner provides a sermon on swearing. In one passage he says:

Of swearing says the holy Jeremiah,
"Thou shalt say truthful oaths, and not lie,
Swear in judgment and in righteousness";
But idle swearing is a cursed-ness.

Of sweryng seith the hooly Jeremye,
"Thou shalt seye sooth thyne othes, and nat lye,
And swere in doom, and eek in rightwisnesse";
But ydel sweryng is a cursednesse.

So again, that last line is 'idle swearing is a cursedness' which meant 'wickedness.' That's how the term *swearing* became associated with bad language. And when he says that swearing is a 'cursedness,' he is alluding to another term that has acquired the same meaning over time – the word *curse*.

Again, *curse* is an Old English word, and it originally meant a statement intended to bring about pain or suffering or an evil fate. So it's the same sense we have today when someone places a curse on someone else. So a curse was in effect a call to God to inflict some type of harm on another person. Some of these curses from the 1500s and 1600s still survive in the language. You might hear people use phrases like "Go to Hell," "To Hell with You." Another common swear is "Goddamn" which began as the longer phrase "God damn me" or "God damn you."

Again, these were all types of curses, and even during the Old English period, the word *curse* could be used to refer to someone who was speaking profanely or using blasphemous words. And of course, we still refer to swear words or obscenities as 'curse words.'

Now in early American English in the 1700s, the 'r' sound was sometimes dropped when it appeared before an 's' sound. And so a word like *curse* became *cuss* in American English. And that's why many Americans still refer to these types of words as 'cuss words.' By the way, the same change converted the word *arse* in *ass*, but I'll have more to say about that later in the episode.

So traditionally, words like *profanity*, *swear* and *curse* were associated with blasphemous statements – statements invoking the name of God or violating the teachings of the Church. But in the early Modern English period, these terms started to acquire broader meanings. They came to refer to other types of words – words referring to people's private parts and bodily functions and sexual activities. And that change was part of a much broader change involving the use of obscenities. As the Middle Ages gave way to the early Modern era, people became a little less concerned about swearing to God, and they became much more concerned about those words associated with the human body and the things that people do in private. And there are some interesting theories about why that happened.

First, some scholars believe that traditional swearing and profanity faded with the decline of the feudal system. As I noted earlier, the entire feudal system was based on lord-vassal relationships which were bound together by verbal oaths sworn to God. So swearing an oath was a really big deal, and it was taken very seriously. But when the feudal system declined, and people started to negotiate for their labor services, those old feudal oaths lost much of their relevance. So oath swearing became less important, and the taboo against false swearing declined.

There's also an interesting theory about the increased stigma associated with body parts, and bodily functions and sexual activities. According to some scholars, these words became much more obscene in the early modern period thanks a technological innovation that started to become common around the current point in our overall story in the 1300s. That innovation was the fireplace and chimney. This is the theory advocated by Melissa Mohr in her book called "Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing."

The theory goes like this. Up to this point in history, people lived much more communally. There wasn't much privacy. Anglo-Saxon society was centered on the hall which was typically a large room with a fire in the middle. Everyone gathered around the fire in the hall, and in that large room, they ate and entertained each other and laid down to sleep at night. That type of communal living was still common in the late Middle Ages. Even as people moved into small houses, most of those houses still only had one or two rooms. So people continued to live together. They routinely saw each other in various states of undress. And it was still common for people to urinate and defecate out in the open in common areas. And when people went to sleep at night, they often shared the room with others, so it was much more common to see people sleeping together and even having sex. By most accounts, these were routine matters in the Middle Ages. They weren't scandalous, and therefore words associated with those activities weren't really considered all that taboo or dirty.

But in the early 1300s, fireplaces were developed that could contain the heat of a roaring fire without collapsing or falling down. These fireplaces and chimneys could be easily constructed. And that allowed the fire to move from the center of the room to the walls. And it also allowed people to divide a large common room into smaller separate rooms. Each of those separate rooms could be heated with a fireplace. That process allowed people to have a separate bedroom and even a separate room with chamber pot or bucket to use as a bathroom. Those changes gave people a greater sense of privacy. In fact, the word *private* was borrowed from Latin during this period. It is recorded for the first time in English in the late 1300s around the time that Chaucer was working on the Canterbury Tales. The Latin root word that gave us the word *private* also gave us the word *privy* for a bathroom. That word also appeared in English the 1200s and 1300s.

Through this process, private parts became private. Bodily functions were more concealed. And sex was hidden behind closed doors. All of that meant that those things were less seen in public, and therefore less talked about in public. And over the centuries, words associated with those private activities became more taboo and were considered to be obscene.

Now, that's an interesting theory, and there's probably a large amount of truth to it, but the fact is that people were uncomfortable with private parts, and bodily functions and sexual intercourse even during the time of Chaucer. Those things may not have been as taboo as today, but when we read the Canterbury Tales, the characters don't really seem all that different from us. They share a lot of our modern attitudes and sensibilities when it comes to farting, and burping, and peeing and pooping and having sex.

And there is no better example of that than one of the most popular stories in the Canterbury Tales – the tale told by the drunken Miller. It's a bawdy and humorous story, and it shows that people were fascinated by potty humor and sexual romps even in the 1300s. The stories were entertaining because the subject matter was considered a bit scandalous even at the time.

This type of story was based on a literary style that had been very popular in France in the 1100s and 1200s. During that period, French poets routinely composed humorous tales involving sexual escapades or bodily functions, and they often culminated with one character getting revenge on another character through some type of trick or joke. They almost always involved common people in common, everyday settings like a house or barn or street. And in that regard, they are sometimes considered to be aristocratic in nature because they often depict common ordinary people as crude and uncivilized. So in that sense, they provide another link between the traditional sense of *vulgar*, as something associated with the common people, and the more modern sense of *vulgar*, as something crude or crass or dirty.

Interestingly, these types of stories were never really popular in English. Of course, English wasn't being used very much as a literary language when these stories were popular in France in the 1100s and 1200s. But Chaucer apparently enjoyed the style, and his examples in the Canterbury Tales are some of the very few examples found in English in the Middle Ages.

Now the French word for this type of story was a *fabliau*, and Chaucer adopted this style for several stories in the Canterbury Tales, but the most-well known is probably the Miller's Tale. It's the second story in the collection, and it immediately follows the tale told by the Knight. And in fact, it is told in direct response to the Knight's Tale.

Chaucer juxtaposes these two tales right after General Prologue that opens the book. And they illustrate the stark contrast in his writing style. Both stories have a similar theme. They both involve a woman being pursued by two potential lovers, but the Knight's Tale is written in Chaucer's high register. It's an elevated courtly poem featuring traditional notions of medieval romance. It uses a lot of French and Latin loanwords, and it's actually based on a story that had been around in courtly circles for some time. Chaucer's version appears to be an abbreviated version of the story as told by the Italian poet Boccaccio several years earlier. As we've seen before, Chaucer was strongly influenced by Boccaccio.

Despite the elevated approach of the Knight's Tale, it is immediately followed by the bawdy story told by the drunken Miller. His story has a similar theme, but it is written from the opposite perspective. It relies mostly on plain speech and a very high percentage of native English words. It has relatively few loanwords. And it also uses language that is more colloquial and coarse,

including words that were probably risqué at the time. They were words not typically used in polite society or the royal court, but apparently they were quite common among drunken millers, and by implication, they were also common among the ordinary people on the streets and on the farms.

Since the Miller's Tale is told in response to the Knight's Tale, let me give you a quick summary of the story told by the Knight. In ancient Greece, two soldiers are captured in battle by the ruler of Athens, and they're taken back to Athens where they are held in a tower. The men are cousins named Palamon and Arcite. One day, they see a beautiful woman named Emelye, and they both fall in love with her, but since they are being held captive, their love is in vain. Arcite is eventually released and allowed to return home. The only condition is that he can never return to Athens. But his misses Emelye so much, that he risks death and returns to Athens in disguise. Meanwhile, Palamon escapes from the tower. With both men now on the loose in Athens, they soon run into each other and begin fighting over their love of Emelye. The Athenian ruler discovers them, but rather than killing them both on the spot, he allows them to battle each other for Emelye's hand in marriage. During the battle, Arcite defeats Palamon and wins the right to marry Emelye. But immediately after the victory, his horse throws him to the ground and he dies. Both Palamon and Emelye weep and mourn Arcite's death, and after several years, the Athenian ruler finally relents, and lets them marry each other. And they both live happily ever after.

So that's the gist of the Knight's Tale. It a classic piece of courtly romance – the type that would have been told by a knight at a royal court in the 1300s. After telling the story, Chaucer tells us that all the pilgrims agreed that it was 'noble storie.' The next tale was to be told by the Monk – who was next in line in the social rank, but the Miller steps forward and objects. The Miller is drunk, and he says that he a 'noble tale' of his own. Chaucer writes:

And "By the arms and blood and bones," he swore,
I know a noble tale for the occasion."

And swoor, "By armes and by blood and bones,
I kan a noble tale for the nones."

So the Miller begins by swearing – in the medieval sense of swearing. He swears 'by the arms and blood and bones' of Christ. Again, this language is very different from that of the Knight who had just completed his noble tale.

And when the Miller says that has a 'noble tale' of his own, that comment is a bit tongue-in-cheek because, as we will soon find out, the tale is anything but 'noble.'

The Miller is allowed to proceed, even though it isn't his turn. But before recounting the tale, Chaucer issues a warning to his readers. He says that the Miller "tolde his cherles tale in his manere" – 'told his churl's tale in his own manner' – or 'in his own way." So Chaucer admits that this is 'churl's tale.' By this point in time, the word *churl* was already being used to mean a rude or unpleasant person, so this was the story of a rude or unpleasant person told in the manner of that person.

9

Chaucer then begs the reader not to hold the words against him because he is merely recounting the story as he heard it. And if the reader finds the matter to be offensive, Chaucer offers the following advice – first in Modern English:

Turn over the leaf or page and choose another tale,
For you shall find enough, both great and small,
Of stories that touch on gentility,
And holiness, and on morality;
And blame me not if you choose to go amiss.
The miller was a churl, you well know this;
So was the reeve, and many others too,
And obscenities and harlotries were told by the two.
Make up your minds, and hold me free from blame;
And besides, men should not take seriously the playing of games.

Turne over the leef, and chese another tale,
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee, and hoolynesse.
Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys;
The Millere is a cherl, ye knowe wel this,
So was the Reve, and othere manye mo,
And harlotrie they tolden bothe two.
Avyseth yow, and put me out of blame,
And eek men shal nat maken ernest of game.

So Chaucer says he is not to blame for the 'harlotries' conveyed in the following tales. As I noted in the last episode, *harlotries* meant behavior that was considered obscene or crude. And he advises readers who might be offended to 'turne over the leef' or 'turn over the page' and find another story that's more suitable. This is interesting because it shows that Chaucer was composing poetry that was intended to be read. Up until this point, most poetry was still being recited openly in a public performance. But here, Chaucer acknowledges that most consumers of his poetry would be reading it in a book, and therefore, they were free to turn the page if they found something objectionable. This points to the growth of the bookmaking industry during this period, and it also is another example of how society was becoming more private as I noted earlier. Public performances of poetry were gradually being replaced with private readings.

With that, Chaucer begins the Miller's Tale. The tale begins with a wealthy old carpenter named John. He lived in Oxford, and he rented out a room in his house to local students at the university. The current tenant was a poor student named Nicholas. Young Nicholas studied astrology and astronomy, and by observing the skies, he could forecast the weather and predict when it would rain. He was also skilled in the art of love.

And this brings us to the old carpenter's wife who was anything but old. She was a mere 18 years old. Her name was Alison, and the old carpenter was jealous of any man who approached her, so he kept her close and didn't give her any freedom. The Miller says, "For she was wylde and yong, and he was old" – 'for she was wild and young, and he was old.' The Miller says that young Alison was very attractive and she loved to sing and dance. And one day, while the old carpenter was out of town, the young student Nicholas made his move. The Miller says:

Now, sir, and then, sir, so befell the case,
That on a day this clever Nicholas
Fell in with this young wife to flirt and play,
While her husband was down Osney way,
As clerks are crafty and fully quaint;
And in private, he caught her by the quaint,
And said: "Indeed, but if I have my will,
For secret love of you, sweetheart, I will spill."
And held her hard by her haunches!
And said: "O darling, love me at once."

Now, sire, and eft, sire, so bifel the cas,
That on a day this hende Nicholas
Fil with this yonge wyf to rage and pleye,
Whil that her housbonde was at Oseneye,
As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte;
And prively he caughte hire by the queynte,
And seyde, "Ywis, but if ich have my wille,
For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille."
And heeld hire harde by the haunchebones,
And seyde, "Lemman, love me al atones,

Now this passage is quite explicit for the Middle Ages, but there's one word in particular that stands out as part of our overall discussion about vulgar language. It's the part where Nicholas catches Alison "by the queynte." Now this is a play on words which would have been very obvious in the time of Chaucer, but a little less obvious today. This is actually the original form of the word 'quaint' – spelled Q-U-A-I-N-T today.

Now today, *quaint* typically refers to something pleasing, and usually something a bit old-fashioned, but originally it meant clever or crafty or something made in a clever or crafty way. So it also had a sense of something that was intricate or elegant. The word was applied to certain things at the time, like certain styles of dress, that later passed out of fashion. So over time, the word has acquired that sense of something nice and pleasant, but a bit old-fashioned. But again, that's a modern development. When Chaucer and other writers of this period used the word, it still had its original sense as something clever or crafty or intricate or elegant.

When Chaucer used the word in this passage, he actually used it twice so that it rhymes with itself. Now today, if we're writing poetry, we don't normally rhyme a word with itself, but at the time, it was perfectly acceptable to do that as long as each use relied on a different sense of the word. So in the first line, the Miller says, "As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte" – literally 'As clerks be full subtle and full quaint.' So he is saying Nicholas the clerk was very subtle and very 'quaint' in the original sense of the word as 'crafty or clever.' He was a clever clerk. But then in the next line, he says, "And prively he caughte hire by the queynte," – "And privately or sevretly, he caught her by the quaint." Now in this line, the word *quaint* is being used in that other sense as an intricate or elegant object, but it is also obviously a disguised reference to a certain word for a woman's private parts. 'Caught her by the quaint' clearly means 'caught her by the cunt.' But again, it's slightly disguised here, and it's made more acceptable by using the word *quaint*.

Now in case you're not convinced by that connection, Chaucer makes this same reference in another part of the Canterbury Tales in the Prologue to the tale told by the Wife of Bath. She has a very explicit prologue where she talks about her five husbands, and she makes several references to her genitalia using this word *quaint*, as well as the French term *bele chose* which literally meant 'pretty thing.' And Chaucer wasn't the only poet to use the word *quaint* in this way. Other writers during this period also used it that way, so much so that the Oxford English Dictionary actually includes 'female genitals' as an early and now obsolete definition of the word *quaint*. And this is good example of how poets and writers got around the taboo associated with some of these words. And it implies that the word *cunt* was considered to be obscene even in the 1300s. But was it?

Well, this points to one of the challenges in trying to trace the history of swearing and obscenities. If the words were truly obscene, they didn't tend to be used very much in the surviving literature. So the general absence of these words can be interpreted as a sign that the words were obscene, but it could also be the case that the words were simply unknown or not common in the language at time. So when one of these words pops up in the literature, we have to look at the context to see if it was considered obscene, and if so, how obscene was it?

Passages like this from the Miller's Tale suggest that the word *cunt* was obscene at the time because Chaucer didn't actually use the word. He only makes a disguised referenced to it. And he has already warned us that the tale has strong language and adult themes. So he could have used the word if it was generally acceptable at the time.

I actually gave another piece of evidence to support this view in an earlier episode. You might remember that the word *countess* was one of the first words borrowed from French after the Norman Conquest. But you might also remember that the English nobility avoided the male equivalent which was *count*. Instead, they retained the native English title of *earl*. So instead of 'counts and countesses,' England had 'earls and countesses.' And I mentioned in that earlier episode that some scholars think that happened because the word *count* closely resembled the word *cunt*. Both words would have been pronounced very similarly during that time period. And prominent nobles may have refused that French title because it so closely resembled an English word that was considered vulgar or obscene.

Again, that's just a theory, but if its true, it's further evidence of the stigma associated with the word *cunt*. But there is also contrary evidence which suggests that the word was relatively common in the language, and it wasn't really considered all that vulgar. Before examining the conflicting evidence, let's consider what we know about the origin of the word. Frankly, the ultimate origin is unclear. Other Germanic languages have a very similar word with essentially the same meaning, so it is generally believed that the word goes back to the early Proto-Germanic speakers on the continent. There are some suggestions that it may have Indo-European roots because Latin had the word *cunnus* with a similar meaning and similar taboo. That word actually gave us the word *cunnilingus*. But most scholars today doubt that the Latin and English words are related, despite the fact that they are so similar in sound and meaning.

Though the word *cunt* appears to have Germanic origins, it isn't found in any Old English documents. That may be because it was in the language, but it was considered so obscene that the Anglo-Saxon scribes didn't use it. Of course, another possibility is that the word disappeared from Old English altogether. At any rate, the word appears for the first time in writing in the 1200s, and that may be because it was reintroduced by the Vikings. Old Norse had essentially the same word which was *kunta*. It's possible that the Norse version of the word was borrowed into English without the same taboo as the native version of the word. And over time, it may have spread into the common language used by ordinary people. As we know, many Norse loanwords don't pop up in the surviving documents until after the Norman Conquest, and that's what happened with this word as well. As I noted, it is first found in English documents in the 1200s. But interestingly, when it first appears, it appears in place names.

The first recorded use of the word *cunt* appears in a document from the year 1230 where its used as part of a street name in London. Believe it or not, the name of the street was 'Gropecuntlane' – literally 'grope cunt lane.' The street apparently had a lot of brothels, so that appears to be the origin of the name. During this period, the word as also used in medical textbooks to translate the Latin terms for female genitalia. So again, that implies that the word was considered to be the acceptable English term at the time.

It also appears in some surnames like Godewin Clawecuncte (1066) and John Fillecunt (1246), but in these cases, the word may have had a different meaning.

So as we put all this evidence together, we get conflicting signals. Some of the evidence suggests that this was a very naughty word, and other evidence indicates that it was quite acceptable. However, it is possible to reconcile this conflicting evidence. For example, it is possible that the Norse version of the word had filtered into the language, and had become somewhat acceptable during the early Middle English period, at least by the people on the streets, which is why it became part of a street name and certain surnames. But in some corners of society, especially among the upper classes, the word was still considered obscene. So that may explain why the nobles rejected the word *count* around the same time. If there was a social or class division at one time, it appears that the old taboo won out, and the word once again came to be viewed as vulgar and obscene. And that old street called 'Gropecuntlane' was later renamed as 'Magpie Lane.'

Now speaking of groping, I began this digression with the student Nicholas groping young Alison in the Miller's Tale. In the story, Alison initially rejects the advances and pulls away. She says that her husband is so jealous that he will kill her if he discovers that she is having an affair. Nicholas tells her not to worry. He can easily outsmart her husband and keep their affair a secret. He says, "A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, but if he koude a carpenter bigyle." In Modern English it reads, "A clerk has spent his time poorly if he can't fool a carpenter." The two young lovers then begin to kiss and make out.

A short time later, Alison goes to church where she meets a young parish clerk named Absolon. He is effeminate and proper. His hair and clothing are perfectly arranged. He loves to sing and dance, and play the gittern – which was a type of guitar. So he is lively and joyous, but there are some things that disgust him. The Miller says:

But, truth to tell, he was somewhat squeamish
Of farting and of dangerous speech.

But sooth to seyn, he was somdeel squaymous
Of fartyng, and of speche daungerous.

So prim and proper Absolon didn't like foul smells and vulgar language. Here the Miller uses the word *farting*, but was that considered a vulgar term at the time? Well, Chaucer uses it here without reservation, so it doesn't appear to be all that vulgar. You might also remember that I talked about that same word in the early English song 'Sumer is icumen in.' It has the line 'the buck verteth' which is generally interpreted as 'the buck farts.' The 'f' sound was often pronounced as a 'v' in the south of England and in the West Country. So if that was the intended meaning of the word in that song, it was one of the first recorded uses of the word *fart* in the English language.

That doesn't mean it was a brand new word in the language. There is at least one manuscript from the Old English period where the word is used to translate a Latin word for flatulence. So it appears to have been around during the Anglo-Saxon period. But again, it wasn't generally used in Old English, so it may have been considered a bit vulgar even back then.

By the way, the word has cognates in the other Germanic languages, so it appears to be a very old word – much older than the surviving documents tend to suggest. It may even go back to the original Indo-Europeans. Remember that the Indo-European 'p' sound became an 'f' sound in the Germanic languages, so if it came from an Indo-European root word, that ultimate root word would have begun with a 'p' sound. And many scholars think that there was such a root, and it gave us the word *partridge* for a type of bird, as in 'a partridge in a pear tree.' The word is apparently derived from an Indo-European root word for flatulence which passed into Greek with the same general meaning. The Greeks used that word for a specific type of bird which had fluttering wings and made a sound when it was flying around that resembled flatulence. The word ultimately passed through Latin and French and was borrowed into English in the early 1300s. So believe it or not, *fart* and *partridge* are apparently cognate, both being derived from the same Indo-European root word.

Whatever the age or history of the word, it was becoming more common in English documents by the late 1300s during the time of Chaucer. But it still represented something that many people found squeamish – including the prim and proper character of Absolon in the Miller's Tale. He is repulsed by flatulence and foul smells. But he is NOT repulsed by young Alison. When he meets Alison in Church, he is immediately attracted to her, and the Miller says that if she were a mouse and he a cat, he would have caught her straightaway.

That night, Absolon takes his gittern – or guitar – to the carpenter's house to serenade Alison. He strums his guitar and sings to her, but Alison has no interest in him. She is only interested in Nicholas. Absolon returns on many nights to sing beneath her window, but his singing only keeps Alison and her old husband awake at night, annoying both of them to no end.

Meanwhile, Nicholas devises a plan to spend an entire night with Alison by tricking her old husband. One day, Nicholas remains in his room all day, and the old carpenter starts to worry thinking that his young tenant might be dead. When he goes to check, Nicholas is just sitting there, staring up at the sky with his mouth open apparently in a trance. The old carpenter awakes him and asks what is wrong, and Nicholas tells the old man to grab a chair and sit down. He tells the old man that he must swear not to tell anyone, but based on his astrological calculations, a great deluge will begin the next Monday night, and it will consume everything just as Noah's flood did in the Bible. All human life will perish.

The old man begins to panic, but Nicholas explains that he has a plan. They can do what Noah did, and ride out the storm in boat. Since there isn't time to build an ark, he tells the old man to build three large tubs – one for the old man, one for his young wife, and one for Nicholas himself. The carpenter is to place the tubs in the rafters of the barn. On the next Monday night, when the rain is to begin, they are to all sleep in their respective tubs, and when the water rises, they will cut a hole in the roof and float away in the tubs and survive the flood.

The old carpenter thinks this is a great idea, and he spends the net few days building the tubs and hanging them in the rafters of the barn. That Monday evening, they all climb into their respective tubs and await the rain. But the old man grows tired and falls asleep. This is all according to Nicholas's plan. He and Alison climb down and head to Alison's bed to spend the night together. But who should show up at the window but prim and proper Absolon. Since no one has the seen the old carpenter for several days, Absolon assumes that he had gone away on another trip. So he sees an opportunity to once again show his affection for Alison. Finding himself outside of Alison's window, he tries to get her attention. The Miller says of Absolon:

And he coughed softly, in a quite tone:
"What do you, honeycomb, sweet Alison?
My fair bird, my cinnamon sweet,
Awake, my darling, and speak to me!

And softe he cougheth with a semy soun:
"What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,
My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?
Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!

Alison finally reaches her breaking point with Absolon as he is disturbing her on the only night
she has to spend with Nicholas. She yells at him to go away. She says that she is in love with
another man. She warns him, "Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston" – 'Go forth thy way, or I
will cast a stone.' Abosolon begs Alison for a kiss before he goes. He says that he will leave
once he has his kiss. So she goes to the window, and the drunken Miller recounted what
happened next in the dark of the night. He says:

The window she undid, and did so in haste.
"Have done," said she, "come on, and do it fast,
Lest that our neighbors should look and spy."
This Absalom did wipe his mouth all dry;
Dark was the night as pitch, as dark as coal,
And at the window she put out her hole.
And Absalom, he felt no better nor worse,
But with his mouth he kissed her naked arse
Most savorously, before he was aware of this.
Aback he jumped, something was amiss,
For well he knew a woman has no beard;
He'd felt a thing all rough and long haired,
And said, "Oh my! alas! What did I do?"
"Teehee!" she laughed, and closed the window to.

Now the same passage in the original Middle English:

The wyndow she undoth, and that in haste.
"Have do," quod she, "com of, and speed the faste,
Lest that oure neighebores thee espie."
This Absolon gan wype his mouth ful drie.
Derk was the nyght as pich, or as a cole,
And at the wyndow out she putte hir hole,
And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers,
But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers
Ful savorly, er he were war of this.
Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
He felte a thyng al rough and long yherd,
And seyde, "Fy! allas! what have I do?"
"Tehee!" quod she, and clapte the wyndow to.

So Alison let Absolon have a kiss, but it wasn't the kind of kiss he expected. As the Miller put it, "he kiste hir naked ers" – 'he kissed her naked arse.' As I noted earlier, the word *arse* lost is 'r' in early American English. And *arse* became *ass* in much the same way that *curse* became *cuss*.

We sometimes refer to obscene or vulgar words as four-letter words. And technically speaking, *arse* is also a four-letter word. It has just lost a letter in American English. And to be fair, most Middle English versions of the Canterbury Tales spell it E-R-S, so it was sometimes a three-letter word back then as well.

Arse is another word that can be found in Old English, and in fact, it has Indo-European roots. And that's a good reminder that most of these risque words tend to be very old words, and tend to go back to Old English, and even to the older Proto-Germanic language. *Arse* is no exception. In fact, these types of words are also sometimes referred to as 'the Anglo-Saxon.' If you resort to 'the Anglo-Saxon,' you're using vulgarities. That also explains why these words tend to be short, simple words usually spelled with three or four letters because Old English words tend to be short and simple.

Also, I should note that the passage I just read concludes with Alison giggling and saying 'Tehee!' This is still a common way to express laughter in writing, and this passage is one of the earliest known uses of that expression in the English language.

So Alison laughs at Absolon, and Nicholas laughs at him too. Absolon is furious. He rubs his mouth with sand and straw and insists that he will get his revenge. He goes to a nearby blacksmith's shop and gets a red-hot poker. He then returns to the house and knocks on the window as before. This time, Alison suspects a thief, but Absolon identifies himself and says that has returned with ring given to him by his mother. He will give it to Alison for another kiss.

The passage continues with Absolon's request:

This will I give you for another kiss."
But Nicholas had risen for a piss,
And thought that he would carry on the joke
To have his arse kissed by this stupid bloke.
And so he opened window hastily,
And put out his arse, quietly,
Over the buttocks, his entire bum;
And then said this clerk, this Absalon,
"Speak, sweet bird, I know not where thou art."
Just then, this Nicholas let fly a fart
As loud as if it were the sound of thunder,
And nearly blinded Absalom down under;
But he was ready with his red hot iron
And on Nicholas's arse did he smite him.

This wol I yeve thee, if thou me kisse."
This Nicholas was risen for to pisse,
And thoughte he wolde amenden al the jape;
He sholde kisse his ers er that he scape.
And up the wyndowe dide he hastily,
And out his ers he putteth pryvely
Over the buttok, to the haunche-bon;
And therwith spak this clerk, this Absolon,
"Spek, sweete bryd, I noot nat where thou art."
This Nicholas anon leet fle a fart,
As greet as it had been a thonder-dent,
That with the strook he was almoost yblent;
And he was redy with his iren hoot,
And Nicholas amydde the ers he smoot.

So clever Nicholas got a red-hot poker on his bum. Now I should note that the Miller begins this passage by noting that Nicholas was out of bed because he has "risen for to pisse" – he 'had arisen to piss.' This is another four-letter word, but its not an Anglo-Saxon or Germanic word. It's actually a French loanword. So it's the first vulgarity we've encountered so far that was borrowed from French. I should note that this same word can also be found in many other modern Germanic languages, but they all apparently borrowed the word from French. It doesn't appear to be a native word. This is also another word related to a bodily function that became much more vulgar over time, perhaps because it became less common for people to do it in public. By the 1800s, it had become so vulgar, that people just reduced it to its first letter – '*p*.' It was similar to the way that we refer to the F word and the C word and S word today. And over time, 'p' came to be spelled P-E-E, and it still remains the more acceptable version of the word today.

Now in the story, Absolon has gotten his revenge by striking Nicholas on the butt with a hot poker. The Miller says that Nicholas began to scream and cry. He ran around yelling 'Water! Water!' The noise and commotion was so loud that it awakened Alison's old husband who was still asleep in his tub. Hearing the scream of 'Water! Water!,' the old man assumed that the deluge had begun and the flood was about to take him away. So he cut the ropes that were holding the tub in place. But with no water, the tub fell to the ground breaking the old man's arm. The neighbors came running to see what was happening. And when they arrived, they saw Nicholas and Alison laughing at the old carpenter. The old man told the crowd that he had hung from a tub in the roof of the barn because a flood was going to wipe everyone away. The Miller says that everyone laughed at the old man and though he had gone mad. Even Nicholas and Absolon laughed and made fun of him. The Miller concludes the tale with the following lines:

And every person laughed at all this strife.
Thus swived was this carpenter's wife,
For all his keeping of her and his jealousy;
And Absalom had kissed her nether eye;

And Nicholas had scalded his butt painfully.
This tale is done, and God save all the company!

And every wight gan laughen at this stryf.
Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf,
For al his kepyng and his jalousye;
And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye;
And Nicholas is scalded in the towte.
This tale is doon, and God save al the rowte!

The most notable thing about this concluding passage is the statement "Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf" – 'Thus swived was the carpenter's wife.' Now we don't really use that old word *swive* anymore, but it is an old word for sexual intercourse. It basically meant 'screwed.' And in fact, the word *swive* was derived from an Old English word that meant to meant to revolve or turn or screw. So *swive* was basically the medieval equivalent of our modern word *screw* as a slang term for sex. And it was apparently a very vulgar term at the time. It wasn't the type of word that you would find in Knight's Tale or some other noble story. You would only find it in a 'churl's tale' like the Millers' Tale.

Now even though this old word *swive* has largely disappeared from the language, it does have some closely-related cognates that still survive. It's a Germanic word, and as I noted, the Old English root word meant to revolve or turn, but it also had a more general sense of a repeating motion. So it could refer to either a circular motion or a back-and-forth motion. And that probably explains how it came to be used a term for sex. That root word also gave us the word *swivel* which is based on the sense of something turning or revolving. It's also closely related to the words *swift* and *swoop* both meaning to move quickly. And it's probably related to the word *sweep*, perhaps via the Norse version of the word. *Sweep* has that sense of a back-and-forth motion. So *swive*, *swivel*, *swift*, *swoop* and *sweep* are all related.

Now I know what you're probably thinking. If *swive* was a vulgar term for sex in Middle English, and Chaucer used it here in the Miller's Tale, then what about the F-word? Did he also use the word *fuck*? Well, no. Chaucer never used that word. But apparently, he could have, because it was probably around during the late 1300s when he composed this tale.

This is another one of those words where we have very limited evidence before the 1500s, probably because the word was considered to be extremely vulgar and obscene during that period. Now I say 'probably' because, once again, we have some conflicting evidence in the historical record.

The traditional view is that the word *fuck* was first recorded in an English document around the year 1500 – so about a century after the current point in our overall story of English. And when it appeared, it was actually disguised through the use of a special code. The writer spelled the word by substituting each letter in the word with the following letter in the alphabet. So it was similar to the way Chaucer disguised the word *cunt* by employing the word *quaint*. In both cases, the context implies that the words were so vulgar at the time that a writer couldn't just use them

19

openly. The words had to be disguised by either using a similar-sounding word or by spelling the word in an odd way.

This first recorded use of the word *fuck* is actually part of a poem that is composed in a complicated mixture of Latin and English. The word appears in the following passage, "Non sunt in celi/ quia fuccant uuiuys of heli." Again, that's a mixture of Latin and English, but if we translate it, we find that it's a passage condemning the local monks in the town of Ely near Cambridge. In Modern English, is reads, "They are not in heaven because they fuck the wives of Ely." The word is rendered as 'fuccant' – F-U-C-C-A-N-T – but as I noted, the scribe replaced each of those letters with the following or next highest letter in the alphabet. So in the document, it's actually spelled G-X-D-D-B-O-U. And if you try to decipher that on you own, it's pretty straight-forward, but you may wonder the U was replaced with an X and not a V or W. Well, remember that U, V and W were not yet distinct letters. They were all considered to be different ways of writing the letter U at the time. They became distinct after this particular manuscript was composed. So here, the scribe went directly from U to X.

By the way, there's another passage in this same manuscript that used the word *swive* which we saw earlier. That's the word that Chaucer used in the Miller's Tale. In Modern English, the line in the manuscript reads, "Brothers with knives go about an swive men's wives.' But again, the word *swive* is disguised in the same way by using the next highest letter in the alphabet. So that implies that both *swive* and *fuck* were too obscene to be used openly in this particular manuscript. [*SOURCE: Holy Shit, Melissa Mohr, p.153*]

Now I began that discussion by noting that that is the traditional view of the first recorded use of the word *fuck*. And that particular document with the disguised spelling is also the oldest citation for the word in the Oxford English Dictionary. But a few years ago, in the year 2015, a historian at Keele University in England named Paul Booth found three examples of the word being used in the early 1300s. The examples are found in legal documents from the years 1310 and 1311. And all three examples are actually references to man who had a very peculiar surname. His name was Roger Fuckebythenavel. On two occasions he was called to court to answer a criminal charge which isn't actually specified in the document. On the third occasion, the legal case was decided and Roger was outlawed and presumably never heard from again, which may be a good thing given than surname. The nature of that surname suggests that it was intended as a derogatory surname implying that Roger was too stupid to know how to have sex. But what's most important about this particular surname is that is seems to be a clear example of the word *fuck* being used in the early 1300s.

By the way, most modern scholars agree that the word *fuck* was around in the Middle English period, as well as the Old English period, even though it wasn't generally used in documents. And that's because the word appears to have cognates in several other Germanic languages including Middle Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish and German. The related words either have a similar sexual meaning or they mean 'to strike or thrust.' So that implies that this is yet another Germanic word, even though the lack of evidence in the written record makes it difficult to trace the history beyond the 1300s.

So we've seen how Chaucer incorporated a wide range of vulgarities into the Miller's Tale. And many of those words are still considered to be very offensive – perhaps even more offensive today than they were in the time of Chaucer.

Late in Chaucer's life, before he had a chance to compile a final version of the Canterbury Tales, he wrote a short passage which was intended to be the conclusion of the book. It is known today as the Retraction, and in it, Chaucer asks that the reader to forgive him for anything that the reader should find offensive in his works. Specifically, he begs forgiveness for his sins and his "translacions and enditynges of worldly vanitees" – his 'translations and writings of worldly vanities.' He then includes a summary of all of the major works he composed during his lifetime which might contain offensive material. In each case, he simply included the name of the poem, but when he got to the Canterbury Tales, he described it as "the tales of Caunterbury, thilke that sownen into synne" – 'The tales of Canterbury, those that tend toward sin.'

In the years that followed Chaucer's death, the relatively small number of people who could afford to purchase a book clamored for a copy of the Canterbury Tales. As I noted in an earlier episode it was one of the first books published in England when William Caxton set up his printing press in the late 1400s. But by the 1600s, as people became more concerned about private parts, and bodily functions and sexual activities, the Canterbury Tales started to become too controversial for many readers. What had once been seen as risqué or slightly vulgar had become outright obscene over time. During that period, something obscene or disgusting came to be described as 'Chaucer's Jest.' And people started to refer to a bawdy or vulgar story as a 'Canterbury Tale.' [*SOURCE: Chaucer's Bawdy, Thomas W. Ross*]

The first dictionaries were also produced around that time, and at first, obscenities and vulgarities were included in those early dictionaries. But in the 1700s, those words started to be left out. They had become too obscene to even be listed as English words. Samuel Johnson's 1755 dictionary was considered to be the definitive word on English words at the time. Its impact still reverberates today. And Johnson also chose to omit those words. But a funny anecdote involving Samuel Johnson suggests that people weren't always as offended by those words as they claimed to be.

Supposedly, two ladies approached Johnson one day and thanked him profusely for not including those 'naughty words' in his dictionary. To which Johnson replied, "What! My dears! Then you have been looking for them?"

I'm going to conclude this episode on that note. Next time, we'll conclude our look at this very prolific period of English literature in the late 1300s. And we'll do so by shifting our attention to the north of England which will serve as a reminder that Chaucer's English was only one dialect of English at the time. We'll see how Chaucer dealt with those regional differences in the Reeve's Tale, and we'll also take a quick look at Sir Gawain and the Green Knight which was composed during this same time period in a northwestern dialect that was very different from Chaucer's London dialect.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast