

Skeptical Humanities

Learning is Cool

Chaucer's Cunt

Now that I have your attention, I regret to inform you that he didn't have one. On several occasions recently, sometimes in conversations about censorship, I have heard people say that Chaucer used the word "cunt." Indeed, [Wikipedia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cunt) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cunt>) says, "The word appears several times in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1390) in bawdy contexts, but it does not appear to be considered obscene at this point, since it is used openly." Similarly, [RationalWiki](http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Cunt) (<http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Cunt>) proclaims that "Chaucer used the word unblushingly in his *Canterbury Tales*."

Oddly, these statements are followed by quotes from *The Canterbury Tales* that belie them, for the word that Chaucer uses is not "cunt," but "queynte." "[Queint](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED35505&egs=all&egdisplay=open) (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED35505&egs=all&egdisplay=open>)," as a noun, literally means "a clever or curious device or ornament" (*Middle English Dictionary*) or an "elegant, pleasing thing" (*Riverside Chaucer*). When used to refer to a woman's genitalia, it is both a euphemism and a pun.

Chaucer uses "queint" several times in his earthier tales. *The Miller's Tale* is a [fabliau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabliau) (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fabliau>) about a carpenter, his much younger wife, a young Oxford clerk who is lodging with them and another clerk, who is somewhat squeamish about farting. Both clerks have naughty feelings toward the young wife, and she reciprocates the lodger's lust. The tale involves adultery, farting, pissing, a badly misplaced kiss, a burning poker in a very sensitive area and a fake deluge. One day, when the carpenter is away, the lodger, Nicholas, begins "to rage and pleye" with Alison, the young wife, and...

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." (MT I (A) 3275-3278)

(As clerks are very ingenious and clever, and discreetly he caught her by the pleasing thing and said, "Indeed, unless I have my will, I will spill (die) for secret love of you, my dear.")

Chaucer also uses "queint" in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. In lecturing one of her husbands, she says that, as long as he has enough of what he wants, he shouldn't care what other folks get:

For, certeyn, olde dotard, by youre leve,
Ye shul have quente right ynogh at eve (WBP III (D) 332-333)

(For indeed, old dotard, by your leave, you shall have plenty of the precious thing (or, more generally, sexual gratification) in the evening.)

Later she asks,

What eyleth yow to grucche thus and grone?

Is it for ye wolde have my queynte allone? (WBP III (D) 444-445)

(What ails you to complain and groan so? Is it because you alone would have my precious thing? NB One of the manuscripts, Cambridge, University Library II.3.26, does read "cunte (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED9133&egs=all&egdisplay=open>)" in this passage)

A few lines later, she refers to her favorite body part as her "bele chose" (Fr. *belle chose*, lovely thing).

"Cunt," like many naughty words for body parts and bodily functions, probably has its origins in Old English. It certainly has cognates in other medieval Germanic languages, such as Old Norse *kunta* and Old Frisian, Middle Low German and Middle Dutch *kunte* (*Oxford English Dictionary*). There are no known instances of it in Old English, however. James McDonald, in *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Obscenity and Taboo*, suggests that it may be related to Old English *cynd*, which means "origin, generation, birth, kind, offspring" and can also mean "genitalia" (*Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*).

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest use of "cunt" is in the street name "Gropecuntelane" (c. 1230). The earliest instance of "cunt" used to refer to the vagina comes from around 1325 (*OED, MED*). McDonald also cites several personal names that incorporate "cunt" (a number of these are earlier than "Gropecuntlane"). He lists the women's names Gunoka Cuntles (1219) and Bele Wydecynthe (1328) and men's names Godwin Clawecuncte (1066), Simon Sitbithecunte (1167), John Fillecunt (1246) and Robert Clevecunt (1302). Ladies, if you ever meet a man named Godwin Clawcunt or Robert Cleavecunt, *run!*

According to McDonald, "cunt" was used to refer to the vagina without any suggestion of vulgarity until roughly the end of the fourteenth century. Chaucer, who died in 1400, was therefore writing *The Canterbury Tales* at a time when cunts were disappearing from polite society; consequently, he hinted at the word without actually using it.

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