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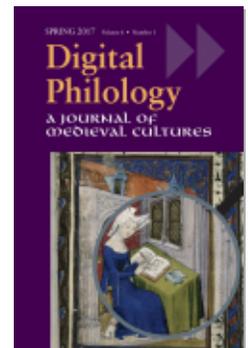
Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature by Nicole Nolan Sidhu (review)

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Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature

By Nicole Nolan Sidhu. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

► In *Indecent Exposure*, Nicole Nolan Sidhu makes the case for recognizing “a widespread medieval discourse” of obscene comedy that can be identified in works spanning languages, media, geographies, and centuries. Although deeply rooted in the fabliau tradition, what makes obscene comedy an identifiable, wide-ranging discourse responds to its transmediality, for it appears in a variety of other media contexts, such as manuscript marginalia and misericords, not a single media or literary genre. This discourse, largely absent from England until the late fourteenth century, subsequently flourishes in the hands of Langland, Chaucer, and their fifteenth-century followers, whose innovative approaches to obscene comedy, Sidhu argues, allow them engage in political discourse by issuing “critiques of established powers that would have been too dangerous to air in other, less abject, discourses” (14). In the current moment, characterized by prominence of obscenity in American political discourse and the use of satirical comedy as the most widespread form of political critique, Sidhu’s analysis of the workings of obscene comedy is timely indeed.

In a wide-ranging and well-organized introduction, Sidhu traces the transmedial, multilingual context of obscene comedy in the Middle Ages, touching on its status, regulation, and the appeal of its semiotic flexibility. Conventionally, authorities, writers, and audiences turned to obscene comedy as a mode of political expression that primarily functioned to uphold established authority and powers. Yet obscene comedy could also interrogate the status quo. Tightening her focus on the use of obscene comedy in late Middle English literature, Sidhu structures the monograph around innovative transformations of this discourse that enabled obscene comedy to be deployed for and engage in such critiques.

The first two chapters, which address the uses of obscene comedy by Langland and Chaucer respectively, collectively evidence a late Middle English foundation of comedic obscenity as a mode of political discourse offering a space for critique. In the case of Langland, while the dominant critical perspective views him as a conformist resistant

to engaging in political critique, Sidhu describes how criticism can be expressed in non-democratic, coercive regimes like that of the medieval period. She suggests that Langland's engagement in political critique has been overlooked in part because his use of obscene comedy works simultaneously on multiple levels. This layering of meaning, explained via the work of political scientist James Scott, enables a hidden transcript of resistance and critique to emerge, while also providing Langland, through the playfulness of the comedic, a semblance of conformism—desirable in a period that sanctioned suppression of those who critiqued the aristocracy. Particularly useful to Langland is the figure of the unruly woman, familiar from fabliaux, which underlies Langland's depictions of Meed, Study, and even Will. Associating these characters with the unruly woman's resistance to authority enables Langland to issue some of his strongest critiques of the failures of gentry and nobility, while the comedic aspects of these characters' portrayals function to diminish their authority as vehicles for judgment.

Sidhu next, relying on Foucault, describes the conventional way fabliaux support normative social order, and demonstrates how Chaucer, in contrast to Langland's use of selected aspects of obscene comedy, subverts the way fabliaux as a genre perform this support. Chaucer's subversion of the genre enables him to use it to provide a critique of gender politics. As Sidhu explains, the *Knight's Tale* promotes patriarchal authority, which the *Miller's Tale* reinforces by the way it depicts carpenter John as foolish. Representing the cuckolded husband in this way implicitly recommends that husbands desirous of not appearing similarly foolish should engage in "a stern, suspicious, and authoritarian form of patriarchal rule" (87). Sidhu argues that even as the *Reeve's Tale* draws on the conventional fabliau narratives of adulterous wives and cuckolded husbands, Chaucer "characterizes women not as the perpetrators of social disruption but as the victims of a destructive culture of male competition and aggression" (92). The *Reeve's Tale* thus critiques the support of patriarchal authority introduced in *Knight's Tale* and advanced in the *Miller's Tale*. In developing this critique, Chaucer demonstrates the power of obscene comedy to temper misogyny in furtherance of a discourse able to address the problems of late medieval gender politics.

The subsequent three chapters trace how this innovative use of comedic obscenity as a discourse of social critique fares over the course of the fifteenth century and the changing political climate of England. The arc of these chapters begins in chapter three with Lydgate. Responding to the ascendancy of women who exercised political power through par-

ticipation or critique, such as Henry IV's queen, Joanne of Navarre, and Christine de Pisan, Lydgate evokes the obscene comedic figure of the unruly woman to use its sustained misogyny as a means for suppression of women in the English political sphere. Critiquing women's capabilities and temperament enables Lydgate to promote an alternative social vision in which an "all-male political community [becomes] unified across class . . . to promote royal authority" (115). So doing, Lydgate also strategically displaces the mediating role of noblewomen in order to craft a role for the poet as political mediator.

In chapter four, the *Book of Margery Kempe* demonstrates how misogyny and the trope of the unruly woman continue to play prominent roles in the depictions of Margery Kempe's trials, struggles over sexuality (both her own impure thoughts, and social condemnation of her behavior), and marital conflicts. Representing the value of viewing the *Book* as a carefully-developed narrative invested in the rhetoric of critique, Sidhu argues that its treatment of obscene comedy functions to reveal how exclusionary categories respond to contemporary social mores, not Christian doctrine. In this way, the *Book* promotes a discourse in which clerical behavior, noble governance, sexual norms, and marital power structures can be critiqued and re-envisioned.

In chapter five, considering iterations of the character and tropes of obscene comedy across the pageants as a body enables Sidhu, as she observes, to illuminate the patterns underlying their shared and similar use of obscene comedy. Sidhu returns again to her central figure of the unruly woman, exemplified in the pageants through characterization of Mrs. Noah. Mrs. Noah's misbehavior "create[s] a space in which alternatives to the dominant gender norms can be explored more freely" (196), an exploration that particularly centers around a promotion of middle-rank companionate marriage and middle-rank identity criticizing that of medieval elites.

Sidhu's study offers valuable insight on the contributions of obscene comedy to late medieval English literary discourse, and the subsequent suppression of its use in political discourse. It also suggests questions that might provoke further study of the subject. For example, in the wake of the development of obscene comedy as a discourse of political critique in late medieval England, a development in which Chaucer plays a foundational role, how does obscene comedy fare in late medieval Scotland, particularly in the hands of Scottish Chaucerians? Are there other forms of literature in which Middle English writers use or continue to deploy obscene comedy—perhaps in Middle English pastourelles that engage with sexual violence, its resistance, and its critique?

While Sidhu's conclusion does not address these questions, she does engage with others centered around the early modern afterlife of the political discourse of obscene comedy in England. For readers interested in media history and the relationship of medieval and early modern book culture, Sidhu argues persuasively that the development of print technologies and culture contributes to the diminishing role of obscene comedy in political critique over the sixteenth century: as obscene comedy grew more recognizable, the new technology of print that promoted greater access to texts also facilitated censorship of political critique through state and institutional control of presses.

Finally, extending her arguments in the conclusion into the modern reception of obscenity, Sidhu enables readers to identify the medieval contributions to modern sexual representation and its place in mainstream discourse, with particular reference to the contemporary status of media, gender, and political discourse. These intersect in pornography. There, the work of obscene comedy casts into sharp relief the socio-politics of the form and how it supports patriarchal gender hierarchies, which, as Sidhu notes, we moderns resist acknowledging.

Yet it is seldom that scholars can anticipate all the applications of their work. In Sidhu's case, the most recent U.S. Presidential election provides further examples of how easily we can be reminded that "the modern divide between sex and politics is an illusory one" (233). In such cases, the best space for engaging with modern obscenity is to place it where late medieval English society did: in the public sphere, where sustained critique becomes possible. *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* belongs on the bookshelf of not only medievalists interested in vernacular literary studies, humor, political resistance, and gender and sexuality studies, but also readers interested in the long history of media studies and social change.

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