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Jucker, Andreas H ; Seiler, Annina

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Translating Middle English
(Im)politeness: The Case of Geoffrey
Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*

ANDREAS H. JUCKER AND
ANNINA SEILER

ABSTRACT: Some of the bawdy details of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* continue to pose challenges to translators, who must find renderings that are both descriptively and stylistically adequate. The *Miller's Tale* provides an illustrative case study, in which the drunken narrator describes Nicholas's rather physical wooing of the carpenter's wife Alisoun in graphic detail. Existing translations of the key term *queynte* range from the flowery euphemism to the straightforward vulgarism. An appropriate translation into present-day English needs to be based not only on sound philological analysis, but also on a careful evaluation of the register of the original Middle English expression. This article offers a corpus-based assessment of relevant candidate expressions in order to propose a translation that captures the appropriate level of (im)politeness, both of the narrator towards his fellow pilgrims and of Chaucer towards his readers.

KEYWORDS: impoliteness, *Miller's Tale*, obscenity, pragmatics, *queynte*, taboo, translation

The translation of texts written in a historical variety of a language into their present-day counterpart offers a broad range of difficulties and challenges. A particularly interesting theoretical problem that has received relatively little scholarly attention is the selection of the appropriate level of politeness or impoliteness, that is, the extent to which the wording of a text delights and

entertains, or provokes and even offends readers.¹ A source text that poses few problems in terms of its referential meaning might nonetheless be difficult to translate because its level of politeness or impoliteness is difficult for the modern reader to assess. Was the text meant to entertain, please, or provoke? Or entertain by provoking? And how exactly was that achieved?

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* contains several narratives that pose particular challenges because they delight in the description of what might be considered indecent behavior. Evaluation of what is indecent behavior may have changed over time, however, and a distinction must be made, in each case, as to whether what is considered shocking and indecent is the behavior described or the words used. In each situation, a translator must decide how the passage can be rendered in the target language so as to give modern readers the best possible access to the original text.²

In this article we discuss a passage from the *Miller's Tale* translated in many different ways and receiving much comment from philologists and Chaucer specialists. It is the passage in which the lodger Nicholas indecently approaches the carpenter's wife Alisoun. He woos her not only with words of considerable urgency—"Ywis, but if ich have my wille, / For deerne love of thee, lemman, I spille" (I 3277–78)—but also with a physical action that the narrator describes in graphic detail, which some commentators describe as a manifestation of sexual violence.³ There is little doubt as to the precise action that is depicted, but it is far from clear how the action should be rendered in present-day English so as to provide a reading both descriptively accurate and stylistically appropriate. As a starting point, we provide the passage with the translation given by Andreas H. Jucker.⁴ In the following discussion, we reassess the adequacy of this translation in terms of its values of politeness or impoliteness understood on two levels: the narrative given by a drunken

We would like to thank the editors of *The Chaucer Review*, the anonymous reviewers, and Andreas Fischer for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

1. Andreas H. Jucker, *Politeness in the History of English: From the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (Cambridge, UK, 2020), 29.

2. Andreas Fischer and Roland Lüthi, "Der deutsche Chaucer: Eine bibliographische Übersicht mit Kommentar," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 231 (1994): 44–58, discuss this problem briefly in their survey of German translations of Chaucer's work; they point out that many early translators preferred to omit offensive passages or at least tried to "tone them down" (57). More recent commentators, however, appear to be more concerned with the depicted events than with the wording. They see the transgressions by Nicholas in *MilT* or Aleyne in *RvT* as examples of a culture of rape. See Carissa M. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies. Transgressive Talk and Sexual Education in Late Medieval Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 2018).

3. Nicole Nolan Sidhu, *Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature* (Philadelphia, 2016), 87; and Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 30.

4. Jucker, *Politeness*, 64.

narrator to his fellow pilgrims, and the narrative given by Chaucer to his readers:

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 hir 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.”

(I 3271–78)⁵

Now, gentlemen, and again, gentlemen, it so happened that one day this gracious Nicholas happened to sport and play with this young wife while her husband was away at Oseney—as these clerks are very cunning and clever—and secretly he groped her private parts, and said, “Certainly, unless I have my way, I’ll perish for secret love of you, sweetheart.”

A key problem in this passage occurs at lines 3275–76, where the adjective *queynte* (clever) rhymes with the homonymic noun *queynte*, whose grammatical status and translation prove difficult and controversial. In the translation given above, Jucker employs the euphemism “private parts.” Larry D. Benson suggested an even more euphemistic version, “elegant, pleasing (thing),” on the assumption that it is a nominalization of the adjective *queynte* (pleasing),⁶ while other translators have proposed a range of translations that most dictionaries classify as taboo, offensive, or vulgar slang (see Part 1, below). The lines in the *Miller’s Tale* describe an action that has entertained generations of readers, but they are also part of what Carissa Harris has called “rape culture” in the context of the *Canterbury Tales*, and which she links to a recent rape trial involving professional athletes in Wales, and also to Donald Trump’s famous encouragement to “grab ‘em by the pussy.”⁷

While aware of this ambivalence, we wish to reassess the translation problem to get as close as possible to the stylistic level of (im)politeness

5. All citations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

6. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 69 (gloss for I 3276).

7. Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 10.

chosen by Chaucer for his audience. We do this by triangulating the relevant philological arguments with insights from recent theorizing about (im)politeness and translation. Our aim is to find a translation that accurately captures the details and the vividness of the depicted action, while also capturing, as far as possible, the passage's stylistic potential to delight (or possibly offend) its audience. Needless to say, audiences have always been diverse. What may come across as delightful bawdiness to one reader may seem unnecessarily crude and offensive to another—both in terms of action and in terms of chosen words. This individuality of response makes it difficult enough to gauge precise levels of impoliteness or offensiveness in present-day English texts, and it becomes even more difficult in dealing with texts from earlier periods for which no native-speaker intuitions can be consulted. We propose, therefore, a method that looks, first, at the stylistic value of key terms in the source language by checking the genres and stylistic contexts in which they occurred in Middle English. Second, we assess a range of translation candidates in a relevant corpus of present-day English in order to ascertain whether the translation's level of politeness accurately matches the source's level of politeness.

In the first section of this article, we briefly discuss theoretical backgrounds that underlie the translation of Chaucer's poetry into present-day English, as well as the challenges posed by the translation of levels of politeness and impoliteness. In the subsequent section, we review some of the philological arguments that have been used in the analysis of *queynte*, in particular, an analysis given by Benson, where he argues for reading the word as a nominalized adjective and considering it a euphemism.⁸ We also provide a brief overview of the Middle English semantic field of female genitalia as a way to better represent the stylistic quality and register specificity of the relevant terms. In the third section, we assess a range of translation candidates against the philological and pragmatic analysis that we give in Part 2. This assessment is based on corpus evidence that reveals how the depicted act tends to be described in present-day English.

1. *Translating Chaucer's (Im)politeness*

Editors and translators of Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* have made very different decisions about the most appropriate present-day rendering of the word *queynte* in line 3276. The following extracts taken from a range of well-known, and

8. Larry D. Benson, "The 'Queynte' Punnings of Chaucer's Critics," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Proceedings 1 (1984): 23–47.

perhaps less well-known, translations and editions illustrate the broad range of options (the relevant words are highlighted in bold). They are ordered chronologically according to the year of publication.

1. (for clerics are subtle and sly), and he slipped his hand intimately **between her legs**⁹
2. Students are sly, and giving way to whim, / He made a grab and caught her by the **quim**.¹⁰
3. these clerks are strange artful fellows . . . / He slyly caught hold of her **cunt**,¹¹
4. And when they were alone he grabbed her **between her legs**¹²
5. As clerks are subtle beyond measure, / He briskly grabbed her **nether treasure**¹³
6. As clerks are full of subtlety and tricks. / And covertly he caught her by the **sex**¹⁴
7. **queynte**: elegant, **pleasing (thing)**; i.e., pudendum¹⁵
8. Since this student was sly and crafty, he stealthily stroked her **cunt**¹⁶
9. as these clerks are very cunning and clever— / and secretly he groped her **private parts**,¹⁷
10. For clerks are very subtle and very clever; / And intimately he caught her by her **crotch**,¹⁸

While *caughte* is translated as “caught,” “grabbed,” or another verb that denotes sudden touching,¹⁹ the scale of renderings of the word *queynte* clearly

9. R. M. Lumiansky, trans., *The Canterbury Tales of Geoffrey Chaucer: A New Modern English Prose Translation* (1948; repr. New York, 1960), 62.

10. Nevill Coghill, trans., *The Canterbury Tales: Translated into Modern English* (Harmondsworth, 1951), 91.

11. David Wright, trans., *The Canterbury Tales: A Prose Version in Modern English* (Oxford, 1964), 64.

12. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson, eds., *The Canterbury Tales. Nine Tales and the General Prologue: Authoritative Text, Sources and Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York, 1989), 75n6.

13. Joseph Glaser, trans., *The Canterbury Tales in Modern Verse* (Indianapolis, 2005), 74.

14. A. S. Kline, trans., *The Canterbury Tales: A Complete Modernisation* (2007), 102.

15. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 69 (gloss for I 3276).

16. Gerald J. Davis, trans., *The Canterbury Tales: The New Translation* (Bridgeport, CT, 2016), 71.

17. Jucker, *Politeness*, 64.

18. “Harvard’s Geoffrey Chaucer Website: *The Canterbury Tales: Text and Translations: The Miller’s Prologue and Tale*,” Harvard University (2021), online at: <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/millers-prologue-and-tale> (accessed February 15, 2022).

19. The only exception here is Davis’s rendering “stroked” (*The Canterbury Tales*, 71).

ranges from euphemisms (“pleasing thing,” “nether treasure”) to vulgarisms (“quim,” “cunt”), with several different shades between the two. One might have expected, perhaps, earlier publications to prefer more euphemistic translations and more recent ones to prefer cruder translations. But this does not appear to be the case. Crude and euphemistic versions are available throughout the seven decades covered by these translations and editions. In some cases, the translation appears in the notes as an explanation, and in other cases it appears as part of a running text. Several translations replicate the poetic structure of Chaucer’s original verse with end-rhymes. Rhymes pose additional challenges to the translator who may have to sacrifice some accuracy in favor of poetic form.²⁰ However, for our purpose here, we are interested in the semantic and pragmatic accuracy of our translation. We therefore ignore the constraints imposed by verse translation, not considering, that is, how well our translation fits into the line’s syllable count or whether the translation of *queynte* rhymes with the previous line.

Mari Pakkala-Weckström (based on Roman Jakobson) distinguishes between two types of translations: translations into a target language clearly different from the source language, and translations into a later, diachronic version of the source language. The second type can be considered a specific form of intralingual translation, that is, retranslation or modernization.²¹ In her study of translating Chaucer, she analyzes three modernizations into present-day English and one translation into Finnish, basing her investigation on three fabliaux and the power plays of married couples. As analytical categories, she uses Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson’s conceptualization of positive and negative politeness and Jonathan Culpeper’s corresponding adaptation to positive and negative impoliteness.²² In the *Miller’s Tale*, for instance, Pakkala-Weckström notes the way in which the young wife

20. See also André Lefevre, *Translating Poetry: Seven Strategies and a Blueprint* (Assen, 1975).

21. Mari Pakkala-Weckström, “Translating Chaucer’s Power Play into Modern English and Finnish,” in Alaric Hall, Olga Timofeeva, Ágnes Kiricsi, and Bethany Fox, eds., *Interfaces between Language and Culture in Medieval England: A Festschrift for Matti Kilpiö* (Leiden, 2010), 307–27, esp. 307–9; and Roman Jakobson, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation,” in Reuben A. Brower, ed., *On Translation* (New York, 1966), 232–39. See also Douglas Robinson, “Intertemporal Translation,” in Mona Baker, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (London, 1998), 114–16; and Hilla Karas, “Intralingual Intertemporal Translation as a Relevant Category in Translation Studies,” *Target* 28 (2016): 445–66.

22. Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge, UK, 1987); and Jonathan Culpeper, “Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 25 (1996): 349–67.

Alisoun indulges her husband John with endearments in order to distract him from her adulterous plans with Nicholas.²³

“I am thy trewe, verray wedded wyf;
Go, deere spouse, and help to save oure lyf.”
(I 3609–10)

She observes how the three present-day English versions, which stay relatively close to the original, retain the elements that stress Alisoun’s love and fidelity—“trewe, verray wedded wyf” and “deere spouse”—with only minor differences in the way the adjectives are translated or left out. The Finnish version, on the other hand, takes more poetic license and expands these elements, rendering “deere spouse” as “suloinen sulhoni ja puolisoni” (my sweet groom and spouse), enhancing the poetic touch with the alliteration and assonance in “suloinen sulhoni.”

In terms of translating impoliteness, Pakkala-Weckström quotes the scene in which Alisoun finds herself with a lover in her bedroom and another would-be lover serenading her in front of the bedroom window. To fend off the unwanted suitor, she resorts to a series of insults and blunt commands.

“Go fro the window, Jakke fool,” she sayde;
“As help me God, it wol nat be ‘com pa me.’
I love another—and elles I were to blame—
Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon.
Go forth thy wey, or I wol caste a ston,
And lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!”
(I 3708–13)

Here, Pakkala-Weckström compares the different translations for how they retain or change six features of impoliteness identified in the passage: three orders to leave, one instance of name-calling (“Jakke fool”), one threat (“I wol caste a ston”), and one instance of scorn (“I love another . . . / Wel bet than thee”). The differing translations modify or expand these features in various ways, and again the Finnish translation takes more liberties with the original than do the modern English versions. It adds another term of scorn and

23. Pakkala-Weckström, “Translating Chaucer’s Power Play,” 314.

upgrades several other elements, causing the Finnish-speaking Alisoun to be “if not the rudest, by far the cruellest” version.²⁴

It must be noted that Pakkala-Weckström’s four translations are all rhymed translations, for which the translators were perhaps forced to compromise semantic and pragmatic accuracy in favor of poetic accuracy. Pakkala-Weckström assesses the translations in terms of how well they retain, modify, or omit polite or impolite elements in their translation. In our investigation, we adopt a more microscopic viewpoint by focusing on one particular word. We are interested in the semantic and pragmatic accuracy of possible translations or, more precisely, in how the register of impoliteness carried by this particular term can be rendered most accurately in present-day English.

Already more than thirty-five years ago, Roger D. Sell pointed out the need to distinguish carefully between what he called “selectional politeness” and “presentational politeness” in the *Miller’s Tale*.²⁵ Selectional politeness, he argues, concerns the observance of social and moral decorum by avoiding taboos, while presentational politeness concerns the author’s cooperation with the audience (along the lines of Grice’s Cooperative Principle). Sell also points out that *too* much politeness is not desirable: “Too much selectional politeness makes for obsequiousness, too much presentational politeness is merely dull.”²⁶ He argues that an author must strive for a right level of politeness. The *Miller’s Tale* clearly takes considerable risks in this respect because it infringes the “socially accepted standards of decorum” by depicting Alisoun and Nicholas’s frivolous, adulterous escapades.²⁷ Sell adds that these infringements

are reinforced, here and throughout, by the miller’s brazen use of words such as *swyved*, *ers* and *queynte*, words whose lasting challenge to a reader’s face is evidenced by their euphemization in the glossary of the major twentieth-century reading edition of Chaucer: ‘lie with’, ‘buttocks’, ‘pudendum’.²⁸

24. Pakkala-Weckström, “Translating Chaucer’s Power Play,” 321.

25. Roger D. Sell, “Tellability and Politeness in ‘The Miller’s Tale’: First Steps in Literary Pragmatics,” *English Studies* 66 (1985): 496–512.

26. Sell, “Tellability and Politeness,” 505.

27. Sell, “Tellability and Politeness,” 507.

28. Sell, “Tellability and Politeness,” 506.

We concur with Sell's evaluation of Alisoun and Nicholas's behavior, which may indeed be experienced as frivolous and offensive by many readers. But we would like to propose a more nuanced view of the actual words used to depict these activities. Are they as brazen and face-challenging as Sell suggests? And how far off are the euphemisms he criticizes? Thus, while we are not concerned with what Sell calls presentational politeness, we wish to take a closer look at the selectional politeness of one specific expression. Did Chaucer use a taboo expression to depict the frivolous content of this tale? Or did he use a euphemism as some commentators have suggested (see Part 2 below)? In an essay on the translation of medieval taboo expressions, Mary C. Flannery asks whether it is possible to provide a translation that conveys a similar shock to a modern audience.²⁹ We, however, want to know whether Chaucer used, in this case, a taboo expression at all. To find an answer, we need to assess in detail the philological evidence within the larger context of the pragmatics of Chaucer's narratives.

However, before going into this, we need to remember that any potential risk that Chaucer takes with his stories and language is softened by the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*. Sell labels the pilgrimage framework "a way of being impolite politely," for it allows Chaucer to introduce hedges at different levels.³⁰ The face-threat caused by crude actions described in the *Miller's Tale* is mitigated by multiple embeddings of the narrative structure, in likeness to a Russian doll.³¹ The immediate narrator is not the I-narrator of the *General Prologue* who relates individual tales to an implied audience, but rather the Miller who speaks to his fellow pilgrims, and who is introduced as an uncouth, ill-mannered character in the prologue to his tale. He takes the floor forcefully, and he is drunk—a fact to which he himself draws attention, and which might exonerate him from blame should he misspeak:³²

29. Mary C. Flannery, "Unspeakable Words: Translating Linguistic Taboo into Medieval Historical Fiction," *postmedieval* 7 (2016): 300–303.

30. Roger D. Sell, "Politeness in Chaucer: Suggestions towards a Methodology for Pragmatic Stylistics," *Studia Neophilologica* 57 (1985): 175–85, at 182.

31. See Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1996), 347.

32. Sell describes it as "turn-snatching" ("Politeness in Chaucer," 182).

“Now herkneth,” quod the Millere, “alle and some!
 But first I make a protestacioun
 That I am dronke; I knowe it by my soun.
 And therefore if that I mysspeke or seye,
 Wyte it the ale of Southwerk, I you preye.”
 (I 3136–40)

Moreover, within the frame narrative, Chaucer the pilgrim, as narrative persona, takes care to warn his implied audience about possible infringements of politeness. He uses almost twenty lines of the *General Prologue* (I 725–42) to apologize in advance, claiming that anyone who recounts a tale needs to repeat it as faithfully as possible—even if this rehearsal entails speaking “rudeliche and large” (I 734). One alternative is to “fynde wordes newe” (I 736), but Chaucer lists this option alongside either telling a story inaccurately or making it up, which implies that it is not an option at all. As further justification for using offensive language, Chaucer the pilgrim points out that Christ himself spoke plainly, and he cites Plato, according to whom “wordes moote be cosyn to the dede” (I 742).³³ Given that the *Miller’s Tale* is the first fabliau in the collection—and only the second tale to be told—these words seem pointedly directed at the Miller and his crude story.

As Sell points out, the structure also impacts the extradiegetic relationship between Chaucer and his actual readership. Chaucer places two narrators between himself and a potentially face-threatening story: he projects a polite version of himself as first-person narrator for the frame and the churlish Miller as the immediate narrator of the fabliau. Nevertheless, as author, Chaucer is ultimately responsible for all these choices: “It is, after all, Chaucer himself who chooses that the tale be told, and told in this manner, and by this narrator.”³⁴ When it comes to translations of the *Canterbury Tales*, the risk of impoliteness is passed on to the translator, who must face his modern audience. Translations thus need to conform to contemporary notions of politeness while being at the same time accurate representations of the

33. On the source of the quotation, which Chaucer probably knew indirectly via Boethius, see Christine Ryan Hilary, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 825 (note to I 725–42).

34. Sell, “Politeness in Chaucer,” 182.

original. Interestingly, the same moves undertaken by the Miller and the pilgrim Chaucer are found in some translations.

2. *Middle English Cunte and Its Semantic Field*

Some issues connected to the translation of the *Miller's Tale*, I 3275–76, arise from the fact that the etymology of the Middle English noun *queynte* is obscure. The form is generally considered to be some sort of variant, or cognate, of ME *cunte*, “female sex organs, vulva,” the ancestor of Modern English *cunt*. However, there is no straightforward way to explain the attested spelling in terms of its phonology. To account for the labiovelar and diphthong, some scholars have proposed interference with Old French *coign*, *coing* (wedge, anvil, corner, etc.), which, however, does not seem to have been used metaphorically in a sexual sense.³⁵ As mentioned above, one prominent solution, and the one adopted by the *OED*, was proposed by Benson, who holds that the noun occurring in line 3276 is not in fact a variant of *cunte* but should be considered instead as a conversion of the adjective *queynte* (elegant, pleasing) into a noun.³⁶ This interpretation underlies Benson's translation of *queynte* in line 3276 as a “pleasing thing.” He argues that “*Queynte* is not a forerunner of the modern obscenity; it was not the normal word for ‘vagina’; and it was not considered vulgar or obscene.”³⁷ If we were to accept this line of argument, the euphemistic expression would not be attributed to Benson but to Chaucer. As a euphemism, it would complement the usage of the Wife of Bath, who refers to her genitals as a *bele chose* (beautiful thing) (III 447).³⁸ However, this would beg the question as to why the Miller as narrator would choose a similarly pseudo-elegant euphemism.

While Benson's hypothesis certainly solves the phonological problem, it creates other issues. On one hand, the noun *queynte* occurs in a rhyming position with the adjective *queynte*, from which it is supposedly derived. Yet, as Joseph A. Dane has demonstrated, Chaucer hardly ever uses identical rhyme: “*rime riche* involving a noun and adjective (type 3b)—the type on which Benson's argument depends—[is] perhaps nonexistent.”³⁹ It is

35. Compare Benson, “The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 35; *pace* Eric Partridge, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue by Captain Francis Grose: Edited with a Biographical and Critical Sketch and an Extensive Commentary* (London, 1931; repr. 1963), 111.

36. Benson, “The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 35–41. Compare *OED*, s.v. *quaint* (n.1); and *MED*, s.v. *queinte* (adj.).

37. Benson, “The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 33.

38. On *bele chose*, see Robert E. Bjork, “The Wife of Bath's *Bele Chose*,” *Chaucer Review* 53 (2018): 336–49.

39. Joseph A. Dane, “Queynte: Some Rime and Some Reason on a Chaucer[ian] Pun,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 95 (1996): 497–514, at 500.

therefore unlikely that the two instances of *queynte* in the *Miller's Tale* are etymologically connected. On the other hand, Benson's argument relies on the assumption that ME *cunte* is an offensive word whose impact Chaucer softened by replacing it with the nominalized adjective *queynte* as a punning reference.⁴⁰ However, while *cunt* is counted among the most offensive words in present-day English, the same is not true for its Middle English equivalent.⁴¹ The *MED* lists some thirteen attestations of *cunte*, which occur in a range of text genres, including medical texts, glossaries and poetry, as in the following examples:

11. in wymmen þe necke of þe bladdre is schort, & is maad fast to the cunte. (In women, the urethra is short and is attached to the vulva.)⁴²
12. Vulua: a count or a wombe⁴³
13. Þe maide þat ʒevit hirsilf alle
 Oþir to fre man, oþir to þralle,
 Ar ringe be set an honde,
 And pleiit with þe croke and wiþ þe balle,
 And mekit gret þat erst was smalle,
 Þe wedding got to sconde.
 “ʒeve þi cunte to cunni[n]g,
 And crave affetir wedding.”
 Quod Hending.⁴⁴

40. Many uses of the adjective *queynte* as well as past tense forms of the verb *quenchen* (“to extinguish”) have been interpreted as sexual puns by Chaucer critics, most notably the four instances in *KnT*, I 2333–37, in which Emelye prays to Diana to preserve her chastity. Thomas W. Ross, *Chaucer's Bawdy* (New York, 1972), for example, concludes that “all those ‘queyntes’ in a row could suggest only one thing” (178), though Benson, argues against such a reading (“The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 45–46).

41. The connotation of ME *cunte* is discussed in detail by Bjork, who reaches a similar conclusion to ours but retains Benson's etymology of *queynte* as a de-adjectival noun (“The Wife of Bath's *Bele Chose*,” 337–39). See also Melissa Mohr, *Holy Shit: A Brief History of Swearing* (Oxford, 2013), 90–97, 106–8. On the Modern English term, see Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, “‘Snatch,’ ‘Hole,’ or ‘Honey-pot’? Semantic Categories and the Problem of Nonspecificity in Female Genital Slang,” *Journal of Sex Research* 38 (2001): 146–58; and Jonathan Culpeper, “Taboo Language and Impoliteness,” in Keith Allan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words and Language* (Oxford, 2019), 28–40, at 33.

42. Robert von Fleischhacker, ed., *Lanfrank's “Science of chirurgie,”* EETS o.s. 102 (London, 1894), 172. Translations are our own, unless indicated otherwise.

43. *Medulla grammaticæ*, from Stonyhurst, Stonyhurst College MS 15 (A.1.10), fol. 70b/a (cited from *MED*, s.v. *cunte* (n.)).

44. *The Proverbs of Hending* (ca. 1325), stanza 42, in Hermann Varnhagen, ed., “Zu mit-telenglischen Gedichten. XI. Zu den sprichwörtern Hending's,” *Anglia* 4 (1881): 180–200, at 190.

The maid who gives herself completely to a free man or a servant before the ring is put on her finger, and who plays with the stick and the ball and makes big which first was small, her wedding will be ruined. ‘Give over your *cunte* to cunning, and demand to be married,’ said Hending.

In example 11, *cunte* figures as part of a scientific description of the bladder. The passage from the Middle English translation of Lanfrank’s *Complete Art of Surgery* (ca. 1400) compares the anatomy of the urethra in the female and male body. In this description of the female sex organ, *cunte* contrasts with the male *zerde* (penis). ME *cunte* is used regularly in medical or scientific texts in a similar fashion, hence the medical term *vulva* seems an appropriate modern English translation in this context. In example 12, an entry from the Latin–English dictionary *Medulla grammaticæ* (ca. 1400), ME *count* and *womb* are both listed as translation equivalents of Latin *vulva*. The use of *womb* in reference to the female external genitals is based on metonymic extension, a common device in the creation of designations for body parts.⁴⁵ Other lexicographic works include similar entries; some also list Latin *cunnius* as an additional synonym. Clearly, neither the Latin nor the English terms are taboo words that need to be censured, as happens in later dictionaries.⁴⁶

Example 13 derives from one manuscript of *The Proverbs of Hendyng*, a wisdom poem probably composed in the middle of the thirteenth century. This particular proverb provides advice for young women: if they want to get married, they should avoid having sex before the knot is tied.⁴⁷ The rhymed stanza that leads up to the proverb references not only premarital sex; it also refers explicitly to the male sex organs as *croke* (stick) and *balle* (balls). *Proverbs* covers a range of topics including Christian and pagan wisdom and “bourgeois realism”; they were presumably geared toward both religious and lay audiences.⁴⁸ Similar uses of ME *cunte* in the context of discourse about

45. See J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 3.

46. For further examples from medieval lexicographic works, see Mohr, *Holy Shit*, 97–99, 111–12. According to Adams, *cunnius* is an obscene term in Classical Latin mostly used in graffiti, though in certain contexts it can “be used neutrally . . . in circumstances in which taboos do not operate, as between lovers or intimates” (*The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 81).

47. Based on the association of *cunt* and *cunning* in this line, Marsha L. Dutton, “Chaucer’s *Cunning*: An Incarnational Pun and an Omission in the *Middle English Dictionary*,” *Chaucer Review* 53 (2018): 36–59, attributes a sexual meaning to ME *cunning*. However, this reading is not convincing; rather the passage makes use of the semantic contrast between the two assonant words.

48. Susan E. Deskis, “Proverbs of Hendyng” in Siân Echard and Robert Rouse, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain* (Oxford, 2017), online at: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118396957.wbemblo25> (accessed February 15, 2022).

marriage and/or sex occur in other poetic texts, such as the morality play *The Castle of Perseverance*, when Lechery attempts to seduce Mankynde: “Therefore, Mankynd, my leve lemman, / In my cunte thou schalt crepe.”⁴⁹ These examples illustrate that, while extramarital sex is being discouraged for worldly or religious reasons, the words used to describe the act are not offensive in themselves.

ME *cunte* is also frequently attested as a name element. It occurs in bynames (e.g., *Clevecunt*, *Fillecunt*) and topographical names, most notably *Gropecuntelane* (“?prostitution street”), which is attested in more than fifteen places throughout England.⁵⁰ There is also one attestation in an Old English boundary clause in a charter (*to cuntan heale*), which, according to Keith Briggs may well describe a topographical feature including two streams meeting at an elongated field.⁵¹ Briggs has pointed out that in the Middle Ages, no taboo was operating against these names, but many were “cleaned-up” later on.⁵² According to Melissa Mohr, such names “were descriptive, not derogatory.”⁵³

The noun *queynte* as an anatomical term is restricted to a handful of occurrences, which makes an assessment of its connotation difficult. Of the five citations listed in the *MED*, three are from the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*,⁵⁴ one is the passage under discussion from the *Miller's Tale*, and the fifth appears in the fourteenth-century romance *Sir Tristrem*. In terms of context, the uses of ME *queynte* are similar to those of ME *cunte* in poetic texts. In *Sir Tristrem*, reference is made to Ysonde's *queynt* in connection with marital and extramarital sex. Ysonde needs to cover up her affair with Tristrem and prove her innocence in a trial. To make this possible, Tristrem (disguised as a beggar) stages an incident in which Ysonde's *queynt* is revealed in public:

49. David N. Klausner, ed., *The Castle of Perseverance* (Kalamazoo, 2010), 40 (lines 1189–90).

50. Keith Briggs, “OE and ME *cunte* in place-names,” *Journal of the English Place-name Society* 41 (2009): 26–39, at 28–31.

51. The charter is no. S 683 (A.D. 960); see “The Electronic Sawyer: Online Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Charters,” online at: <https://esawyer.lib.cam.ac.uk/> (accessed February 15, 2022); and compare Briggs, “OE and ME *cunte*,” 27–28.

52. Briggs, “OE and ME *cunte*,” 5.

53. Mohr, *Holy Shit*, 93.

54. On those, see Bjork, “The Wife of Bath's *Bele Chose*,” 337–38.

Tristrem hir bar that tide
 And on the Quen fel he
 Next her naked side
 That mani man might yse
 San schewe.
 Hir queynt aboven hir kne
 Naked þe knightes knewe.⁵⁵

Tristrem carried her on this occasion, and he fell on the queen next to her naked side, which many people could see without attracting attention. The knights saw her *queynt* naked above her knee.

As a result of this incident, Ysonde can truthfully swear that only her husband and the beggar (that is, Tristrem in disguise) have touched her intimately:

“Ferli neighe he wan,
 Sothe thing—
 So neighe com never man
 Bot mi lord, the King.”⁵⁶

“He [the beggar] reached exceedingly close; truly, so close never came any man but my lord, the king.”

The revealing of Ysonde’s genitals is thus intrinsically linked to the development of the plot.⁵⁷ In the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*, *queynte* figures in her discussion of sex with her different husbands, who have, or want to have, access to her *queynte*.⁵⁸ Notably, in one instance (III 444), one manuscript

55. Alan Lupack, ed., *Sir Tristrem*, in *Lancelot of the Laik and Sir Tristrem* (Kalamazoo, 1994), 143–277, at 220 (lines 2249–55).

56. Lupack, ed., *Sir Tristrem*, 221 (lines 2274–77).

57. Benson, though, suggests that the knights who witness the staged accident “perhaps . . . saw only her ‘elegant, pleasing’ thighs” or at least the author of *Sir Tristrem* “carefully avoided the obscenity . . . and used instead the common adjective *queynt* . . . as a euphemism that enabled him to avoid the shocking, direct expression current in contemporary speech” (“The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 37). See also Bjork, “The Wife of Bath’s *Bele Chose*,” 337.

58. The instances are *WBPro*, III 332, 444, 608. On the form *quoniam*, which Hengwrt (Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales MS Peniarth 392D) and other manuscripts transmit at III 608, see Bjork, “The Wife of Bath’s *Bele Chose*,” 339, and the literature cited there. The variant readings are listed in John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols. (Chicago, 1940), 6:63.

(Cambridge, University Library MS li.3.26) transmits <conte> for *queynte*.⁵⁹ Benson argues that the Cambridge scribe “clearly had a filthy mind” as he also glosses *ers* with “osculum ani.”⁶⁰ However, it is difficult to find any evidence that using *cunte* required a filthier mind than *queynte*. ME *ars* is not an offensive term, either, but represents the normal designation for buttocks; it is regularly translated in Latin as *anus*, *culus*, or *podex*, and the Middle English writer Lanfrank uses *arshole* as a medical term.⁶¹ The Cambridge scribe merely substituted a more common variant for the rarer form *queynte*. While there are no attestations of the form *queynte* in scientific or lexicographic sources, there are a few instances among the place-names discussed by Briggs which attest the diphthong, notably <Gropequeyntelane> and <Queynton>, though the etymology of the latter is not quite clear.⁶²

The fact that we find *cunte* and *queynte* in almost identical contexts suggests that *queynte* is a cognate or variant form of *cunte*, despite the phonological issues addressed above.⁶³ Perhaps the lack of a straightforward etymology for the form should not trouble us unduly since many expressions referring to genitalia are etymologically obscure—most notably *cunte*, but also *quim*, which makes its appearance in the early 1600s (*OED*, s.v. *quim* (n.)). While the exact relationship of *queynte* and *cunte* remains obscure, *queynte* appears synchronically as a variant of *cunte*, and one that is no different in connotation.

The discussion above shows that ME *cunte* clearly was not a taboo word. The trajectory of pejoration started only after the Middle Ages. It certainly reached a low point with the infamous definition of *cunt* as “a nasty name for a nasty thing,” which is usually attributed to Francis Grose, *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, a late-eighteenth century dictionary of slang words.⁶⁴ However, Grose actually lifted the entire entry from Guy Miège’s

59. Here and below, angle brackets are used to identify specific orthographic variants.

60. Benson, “The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 40.

61. von Fleischhacker, ed., *Lanfrank’s “Science of chirurgie,”* 94. For a discussion of *arse* and other words referring to anus/buttocks, see Mohr, *Holy Shit*, 94–95.

62. Briggs, “OE and ME *cunte*,” 28–29. James Orchard Halliwell, *A Dictionary of Archaic and Provincial Words* (London, 1847), s.v. *queme*, cites *queint* as a form used in the North of England; compare Benson, “The ‘Queynte’ Punnings,” 39–40. However, both *Quainton* (Bk) and *Gropequayntelane* (Reading, Brk) are in the South of England, and the language of the main scribe of *Sir Tristrem* is located in the South: “Hand A (main hand) . . . Language of London/Middx border.” (Angus McIntosh, M. L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*, 4 vols. [Aberdeen, 1986], 1:88, cited in *MED*; see bibliography entry for *Sir Tristrem*).

63. Partridge, *A Classical Dictionary*, 110–12.

64. Francis Grose, *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* [London, 1785], ed. R. C. Alston, *English Linguistics 1500–1800* (A Collection of Facsimile Reprints), 80 (Menston, West Yorkshire, 1968). A “corrected and enlarged” second edition was published in 1788, a third edition in 1796.

Great French Dictionary (1688), which has the following entry: “Cunt, the *κόννος* of the Greek, and the *Cunnius* of Latine Dictionaries, a nasty Name for a nasty Thing, *un Con*.”⁶⁵ Grose has no entry for *cunt* in the first edition of the *Classical Dictionary* (1785), but adopts the one from Miège verbatim in the second edition (1788) and onward—the only difference being that Grose changed the spelling of the headword to the euphemistic form C**T, which Miège had printed out in full.⁶⁶ The evidence of the two dictionaries suggests that the process of pejoration of *cunt* took place in the hundred years between their publications. In the seventeenth century, it was evidently acceptable to spell out the word in full, whereas even the written word had to be censored by the late eighteenth century.⁶⁷ Moreover, Grose’s is a dictionary of “vulgar allusions and cant expressions,” while Miège’s has no such restrictions in terms of register.⁶⁸

In present-day English, *cunt* functions not so much as a designation for a body part but as a derogatory appellation for people, often but not exclusively female.⁶⁹ Despite attempts in feminist discourse to reclaim it as a term for the female sex organs,⁷⁰ the taboo operating against *cunt* in contemporary usage remains strong—even our word processing software warns us every time we type the “c-word” in full that “This language may be offensive to your reader.” The taboo also seems to have affected scholarly discussions of its medieval ancestor. Benson, for one, never even spells out what he refers to as the “obscenity” in his 1984 paper. It is, however, clearly anachronistic to map the connotation of the modern English word onto Middle English. There may

65. Guy Miegé, *The Great French Dictionary: In Two Parts: The First French and English, the Second, English and French; According to the Ancient and Modern Orthography . . .* (London, 1688). The definition appears in the English–French section (s.v. *Cunt*); in the French–English part, the headword *con* is translated as “commodity, a woman’s commodity, a cony, etc.” (s.v. *con*). Like the English word, French *con* is a normal term for the female genitals in Old French and only underwent pejoration more recently. See Daron Burrows, “Ele boute son doi en son con . . . : The Question of Anglo-Norman Obscenity,” *Reinardus: Yearbook of the International Reynard Society* 27 (2015): 33–57.

66. As it stands, the *OED*, s.v. *cunt* (n.), incorrectly states that *cunt* “appears as **** in the first edition of Grose . . . and in the form c**t as a headword from the third edition.”

67. The position of C**T in the alphabetical wordlist of Grose’s dictionary is, of course, a complete giveaway of what must be substituted for the two placeholders. Interestingly, C**T is preceded by the entry “CUNNY-THUMBED. To double one’s fist with the thumb inwards, like a woman,” with the orthography not euphemized in the same way.

68. Grose, *A Classical Dictionary* (1st edn., 1785), ii.

69. The shift in reference is first attested in the seventeenth century (as a term of abuse for a woman) and in the nineteenth century (for a man; *OED*, s.v. *cunt* (n.), senses 2 and 3, respectively). On the development of *cunt* as a taboo word, see Kate Burridge and Réka Benczes, “Taboo as a Driver of Language Change,” in Allan, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Taboo Words*, 180–98, at 183–93.

70. Piers Beirne, “Animals, Women and Terms of Abuse: Towards a Cultural Etymology of *Con(e)*, *Cunny*, *Cunt* and *C*nt*,” *Critical Criminology* 28 (2020): 327–49, at 343–45.

have been less explicit means of referring to the female genitals, but ME *cunte* was obviously a perfectly acceptable word.

TABLE 1 The Semantic Field of “Female Sex Organs” in Middle English

Source	Female sex organs
Latin	<i>vulva, wulve</i>
French	<i>bel chose; privy chose, privye thing; membre</i>
English	<i>cunte/ queynte</i>
metaphorical	<i>bell</i> (bell [or <i>bel chose</i> ?]), <i>nether ye</i> (lower eye)
metonymic	<i>lendes, haunchebones, wombe, navel</i>

That various alternative terms for the female genitals are attested in Middle English, makes it possible to delineate the semantic field in more detail.⁷¹ Table 1 provides an overview, with terms occurring in the *Miller’s Tale* highlighted in bold. The terms include borrowings from Latin and French, as well as some metonymic and metaphorical expressions. In medical and scientific registers, *vulva, wulve* (a code-switch into, or a borrowing from, Latin) is occasionally used as an alternative to *cunte* (*MED*, s.v. *vulva*). However, its occurrence is not frequent (seven attestations in the *MED*, none before the fifteenth century). Borrowings from French occur primarily among so-called “blanket euphemisms,” which refer to genitals generally but not specifically to the vulva or female sex organs.⁷² We find the Wife of Bath’s *bele chose* as well as various collocations with the adjective *prive* (private), for example, *prive chose, prive membre, prive thing*.⁷³ The most common blanket euphemism is probably *membre* (77 attestations in a sexual sense), which today we associate with male genitals, but which is also used for female genitals in Middle English, for example, “Of mannys yerde & of wommans membre.”⁷⁴ Other qualifiers, which combine with *membre*, are *secret, shamefast, or synful*,

71. The terms that make up the semantic field of “female sex organs” in ME have been compiled from *The Historical Thesaurus of English*, 2nd edn., version 5.0 (University of Glasgow, 2021), online at: <https://ht.ac.uk/>; category “o1.02.04.21.02 Female sex organs”; and from semantic searches in the *MED*.

72. On blanket euphemisms in Latin, see Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 69.

73. *MED*, s.v. *prive* (adj.(1)).

74. Middle English translation of John Arderne’s *Lesser Writings* (?1425), cited from *MED*, s.v. *membre* (n.).

which mirror Latin *pudenda* (*membra*) (private parts).⁷⁵ These expressions indicate that some degree of reticence did apply when talking about genitals in the Middle Ages. There are also various metonymical expressions comprising terms that denote some part of the lower body and reference the genitals more or less specifically. ME *wombe* is a regular translation equivalent of *vulva*; *lendes* (loins) are the seat of male procreation, while *navel* or *haunch-bones* (hipbones) only hint at the sex organs by proximity. The distribution of terms according to source language accords well with the general makeup of the English lexicon: words of Greek or Latin origin figure in medical and scientific registers, the French terms tend to be literary, while native English words are colloquial.⁷⁶ Having said that, it should be stressed that ME *cunte/queynte* figures in all registers alongside these alternative designations. This finding confirms the impression that it is a neutral term for the female sex organs—explicit but not offensive.

3. Assessment of Candidate Translations in Present-Day English

Our analysis so far has established that the word *queynte* in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, I 3276, is a variant form of the present-day English noun *cunt* rather than the present-day English adjective *quaint*. However, the analysis has also revealed rather clearly that, in the fourteenth century, the word was relatively neutral in its connotations and was regularly used in discourse about sex and marriage. It was not vulgar and, therefore, present-day English *cunt* is not a suitable translation because of its very different stylistic impact. At the same time, it appears that a euphemism such as "pleasing thing" is not appropriate either. It does not do justice to the relatively neutral connotation of the word in Chaucer's time, nor does it match the narrative voice of the Miller, who is described as a drunken lout who needs to be excused for his "dronken harlotrye" (I 3145).

On this basis, we can now search for an adequate term in modern English. Normally, as in all translation work, a clear intuition about the relevant vocabulary in present-day English might help to find the right solution, but in this case, we suggest that intuition needs to be supported by an empirical investigation based on corpus evidence. Such an investigation can tell us whether

75. Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879), s.v. *pudeo*.

76. On registers in English by language of origin see Geoffrey Hughes, "A History of the English Lexicon," in Haruko Momma and Michael Matto, eds., *A Companion to the History of the English Language* (Chichester, 2008), 69–80, esp. 73.

any potential translation is reasonably frequent and is actually used for the depiction of actions similar to what happens in line 3276. Moreover, it can tell us in which registers specific candidate translations occur most frequently. In terms of register, it appears to be most appropriate to give preference to a word that is reasonably frequent in fiction. Expressions that are restricted to a scientific register or to spoken language may be less appropriate. There are not many corpora that are sufficiently big for such an investigation. A number of pilot searches revealed that the *British National Corpus*, for instance, in spite of its considerable size of a hundred million words, is not large enough to reveal the appropriate collocational patterns. We, therefore, use the billion-word *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, which contains material from eight different genres (Spoken, Fiction, Magazines, Newspapers, Academic, Web [General], Web [Blog] and TV/Movies).⁷⁷ These genres are intended to provide a more or less representative sample of present-day American English, ranging from very formal written texts (Academic) to very informal spoken language (TV/Movies). The separation of the corpus into different genres allows a detailed analysis of the contexts in which specific words tend to occur. Given the overall size of the corpus, even the individual genre sections have a very considerable dimension. The Fiction section, for instance, contains 120 million words from 26,000 texts, which are drawn from a wide variety of fictional genres, including short stories and plays from literary magazines, children's magazines, popular magazines, book chapters, and even fan fiction. All these texts date from the period 1990 to 2019, as do all the others in the corpus.⁷⁸

As a first step, we looked at the collocational patterns of a range of more or less plausible "translation candidates" to get an idea of which are actually used in the depiction of the action that we need to describe in the translation of *Miller's Tale*, I 3276. COCA provides word profiles for the top 60,000 words with lists of collocates for all nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs that collocate with that particular word.

77. *Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)*, online at: <https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/> (accessed February 15, 2022).

78. "The COCA Corpus," online at: https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/help/coca2020_overview.pdf (accessed February 15, 2022).

Table 2 lists eight translation candidates in the order of their overall frequency, as attested in *COCA*, together with the top ten collocates given on the *COCA* word profiles. They are collected from four different lists (nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs) and listed according to their frequency. The table gives a relatively clear picture of how these words are used. *Pussy* is by far the most frequent word on this list, but some of the collocates in this case suggest that this term often appears with a different meaning, for example, as part of the name of the Russian punk rock and feminist protest group Pussy Riot or as an informal word for “cat.” In fact, it is the node *crotch* that stands out with a reasonable frequency, with *grab* as a top collocate that appears to be compatible with the action we need to describe.

In a second step, we sought to ascertain that the candidate translations have the appropriate genre characteristics. We want to make sure not to choose a word that is mainly academic or technical. And at the same time, it should not be restricted only to spoken language. In this step, we ignored the

TABLE 2 Frequency and Collocates of Candidate Translations in *COCA*⁷⁹

Node	Frequency	Top ten collocates
<i>Pussy</i>	5.72 pmw	riot, eat, fucking, cat, fuck, ass, willow, smell, pocket, bunch
<i>Groin</i>	2.37 pmw	injury, area, muscle, pull, kick (v.), right, throat, strain, kick (n.)
<i>Crotch</i>	2.18 pmw	grab, hand, area, pant, rub, tree, leg, kick, shot, knee
<i>Cunt</i>	1.84 pmw	fucking, little, fuck (v.), stupid, fuck (n.), whore, shit, cock, dumb, ass
<i>Private parts</i>	0.45 pmw	touch, touching, pictures, cover, touched, exposed, exposing, expose, stern, movie
<i>Vulva</i>	0.36 pmw	vagina, development, penis, labia, pain, lip, anus, breast, mutant, clitoris

79. *Quim* (0.04 pmw) and *pudendum* (0.01) are not among the top 60,000 words contained in *COCA*, and, therefore, no word profiles are provided for them. *Cooch*, a term suggested by one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper as a possible alternative, has a frequency of 0.09 per million words and is thus also too infrequent for a word profile in *COCA*. Moreover, a closer inspection of the 93 hits in *COCA* reveals that less than half of them actually refer to female genitalia. The remaining hits refer to a certain type of erotic dance, a personal name, or a city in the Indian state of West Bengal (*Cooch Behar*).

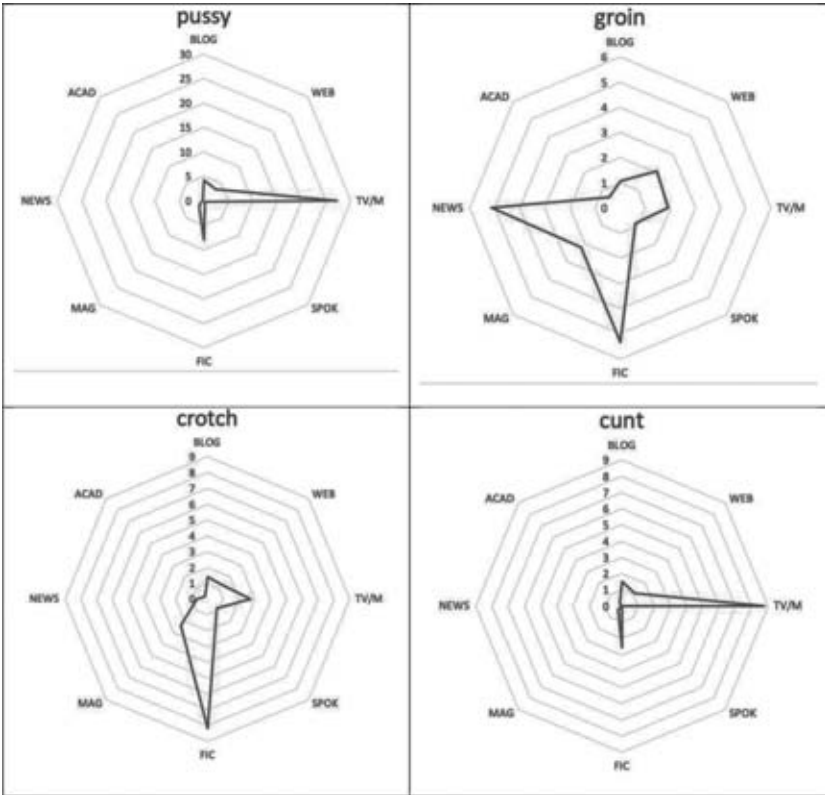


FIG. 1 Genre profiles (frequency per million words) of four candidate translations in COCA (BLOG: Web [Blog]; WEB: Web [General]; TV/M: TV/Movies; SPOK: Spoken; FIC: Fiction; MAG: Magazines; NEWS: Newspapers; ACAD: Academic).

two candidates from Table 2 with very low overall frequencies and included only the four most frequent ones. Figure 1 provides genre profiles for these four terms in the form of radar charts, wherein the frequencies of a particular expression in different genre contexts are plotted on axes that all start in the middle of the diagram. The scales in the four radar charts of Figure 1 differ from each other, but they reveal very clearly that *groin* is attested in a range of registers, while the other three terms are almost exclusively used in one particular genre. *Pussy* and *cunt* are most frequent in TV and movies, while *crotch* is more or less restricted to fiction with a limited frequency in magazines and in TV and movies. Thus, *crotch* is still the most plausible candidate translation.

The first step of this corpus investigation suggested that the verb *grab* might be the most accurate designation for what happens in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, I 3276. In a last step, we need to inspect this collocation in order to ascertain the precise nature of how *crotch* and *grab* tend to collocate. It is relevant to see whether there is a gender pattern of the grabber and the one who is being grabbed in this particular way. Extracts 14 to 22 have been randomly selected out of the 178 attested collocations of *crotch* and *grab* in COCA. This random selection also includes examples in registers other than fiction. The abbreviations in the references to each extract are the same as for Figure 1 above.

14. He grabbed his crotch. (COCA, FIC, 2005)
15. And then, at one point, O.J. grabbed Nicole's crotch and said . . . (COCA, 1995, SPOK)
16. And then he started pinching my nipples and grabbing my crotch area with his other hand. (COCA, 2018, MAG)
17. Men grabbed my breasts. They grabbed my crotch. They grabbed my butt. (COCA, 1992, SPOK)
18. She said Winston grabbed her crotch in the drive-thru of a Mexican restaurant. (COCA, 2018, NEWS)
19. and this random woman from nowhere tackled him on the stage . . . grabbing his crotch area. (COCA, 2012, BLOG)
20. She grabs her crotch and ambles forward in a drunken manner. (COCA, 1996, FIC)
21. Charlie jumps up and dramatically grabs his crotch. (COCA, 1991, FIC)
22. Jimmy's mom reached over and grabbed his dad's crotch; his dad grunted, scooted back, and reached between his mom's legs. (COCA, 1998, FIC)

The contexts provided are not in all cases sufficient to ascertain the precise nature of what is going on, but they show that the collocation is used to describe both self-grabbing and other-grabbing, and it appears that both genders are involved on both sides, the grabber and the grabbed, even if the grabbing tends to affect male genitals more than female ones. A closer inspection of all 178 attested collocations confirms this picture. However, the gender pattern of the interaction between Nicholas as the active part and Alisoun on the receiving end in the *Miller's Tale* is paralleled in extracts 15, 16, 17, and 18.

The stylistic level of these extracts is not easy to assess without more context, but it appears that in all cases an action that many will find indecent or even offensive is described in a straightforward but relatively neutral way. The indecency is in the action, not in the words that are used to describe it. This impression is supported by the fact that a range of neutral terms appear in these quotations for which slang alternatives would have existed, such as *breasts* and *butt* in extract 17, and *between his mom's legs* in extract 22.

Conclusion

As Sell has pointed out, fictional texts are not always “polite” to their readers because too much politeness would make them obsequious or dull.⁸⁰ And, clearly, Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale* takes considerable risks in this respect with its racy and ribald scenes. But these scenes provide a considerable challenge for a translation, or modernization, of the text if the new version is to retain both the details of the depicted events and the level of politeness with which they are transmitted.

In our illustrative case study, we have focused on a scene in the *Miller’s Tale* that continues to challenge translators and commentators. The situation is complex because the scene is embedded in the narrative of an exceedingly polite frame narrator, Chaucer the pilgrim, who relates a story told by the churlish Miller, and who uses a word whose etymology is not entirely clear. Should the translation opt for a euphemistic rendering on the explicit or implicit assumption that Chaucer, either as author or as narrator persona, could not possibly have used a vulgar term to depict this scene? Or should it opt, on the contrary, for a vulgarism on the assumption that the drunken lout of a Miller must obviously have chosen a salacious profanity to tell his story at this point?

We have proposed a more nuanced and more sober approach with a triangulation of analyses. Our philological considerations suggest that Benson’s reading of *queynte* as a conversion of the adjective *queynte* (elegant, pleasing) is unlikely, and that a reading of it as a variant of ME *cunte* (female sex organs, vulva) is more probable. As a next step, we assessed the stylistic value of ME *cunte* in its semantic field and found that all the available evidence suggests that it was a relatively neutral term for the female genitals. It was explicit but not offensive. The pejoration process must have started considerably later. This finding means that even if we consider the Miller to be a narrator who is

80. Sell, “Tellability and Politeness,” 505.

quite capable of using rude obscenities, he does not do so. The scene may be offensive for what it depicts, but the words assigned to the Miller do not have the same provoking impact that the word *cunt* has in present-day English. This result still leaves the question of what is the best rendering of the term *queynte* in present-day English. For this last step in the analysis, we have proposed a corpus-based investigation of candidate translations. An inspection of the most common collocates and of the genre profiles of these terms suggests that *crotch* and *grab* appear to be the most suitable renderings to depict Nicholas's action in line 3276. This outcome is confirmed by an analysis of sample hits retrieved through a collocation search in which similar incidents are described in present-day English texts. Thus, our translation preserves the descriptive details of what is going on. It is just as explicit and graphic as the original text. But it does not embellish the Miller's words with an implausible euphemism, and neither does it aggravate it with a vulgarism that Chaucer does not appear to have used.

University of Zurich
Zurich, Switzerland
(ahjucker@es.uzh.ch)
(annina.seiler@es.uzh.ch)