

Straight out of Chaucer, a respite from the economy

Just when it seems that preoccupation with economics will leave us in despair, sudden insights allow us to shed 600 years of history and reach a timeless look at our human nature. I refer to the key characters in British television comedies, Mrs. Slocum and Mr. Humphries, who are straight out of "The Canterbury Tales," specifically the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner. There are also echoes of the chivalric set on that cast, in the ironic dignity of Captain Peacock.

We undergraduates of 1950 had no idea that 1400 even knew about such people, like the sexually aggressive Wife of Bath, who has buried five successive husbands, not to mention "other company in youth," and the itinerant spellbinding preacher who sold indulgences and was visibly limp of wrist. The author, of course, treats the whole squad with a kind of amused understanding, along with their occupational rivalries and class distinctions; and a great irony in his assigning - in my opinion- the best story to the Pardoner, who would ordinarily use it in sermon. (That tale is a mode of terse construction: three thieves celebrate a robbery, one goes to buy wine and the other two lie in wait to slay him. They do so, but he poisoned the wine.)

And there the two of them stood, side by side, on the threshold of the 15th century, with the new world being discovered and the old order of thinking threatened, the mannish woman and the womanish man; and we pre-boomers spent two required semesters in their company, no translations allowed.

Another reprieve from urgency is the semi-annual catalog of the Catholic University of America Press. It is most encouraging that readership and financing exist for this array of medieval and other studies, largely theological and philosophical, and for five scholarly journals centered there. This is not a series of dissertations; in fact all the authors this time are from other campuses; and perennials like Christopher Dawson, with an introduction by George Weigel, are made available to the next generation. Our traumatized nation would be much the poorer but for enterprises like the Press and its counterparts on other campuses.

Such perspective is the more necessary when one picks up the big Sunday book reviews. They either choose the grimmest and most pessimistic, or there is little else for them to cover. Not to be simplistic, one can suggest that modern science, with all its apparatus and data, would have a tough time beating Chaucer at understanding our human nature.

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