



Indecent Exposure: Gender, Politics, and Obscene Comedy in Middle English Literature (The Middle Ages Series)

Nicole Nolan Sidhu

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Men and women struggling for control of marriage and sexuality; narratives that focus on trickery, theft, and adultery; descriptions of sexual activities and body parts, the mention of which is prohibited in polite society: such are the elements that constitute what Nicole Nolan Sidhu calls a medieval discourse of obscene comedy, in which a particular way of thinking about men, women, and household organization crosses genres, forms, and languages. Inviting its audiences to laugh at violations of what is good, decent, and seemly, obscene comedy manifests a symbolic instability that at once supports established hierarchies and delights in overturning them.

In *Indecent Exposure*, Sidhu explores the varied functions of obscene comedy in the literary and visual culture of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England. In chapters that examine Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale* and *Legend of Good Women*; Langland's *Piers Plowman*; Lydgate's *Mumming at Hertford*, *Troy Book*, and *Fall of Princes*; the *Book of Margery Kempe*, the Wakefield "Second Shepherds' Play"; the Towneley "Noah"; and other works of drama, Sidhu proposes that Middle English writers use obscene comedy in predictable and unpredictable contexts to grapple with the disturbances that English society experienced in the century and a half following the Black Death. For Sidhu, obscene comedy emerges as a discourse through which writers could address not only issues of gender, sexuality, and marriage but also concerns as varied as the conflicts between Christian doctrine and lived experience, the exercise of free will, the social consequences of violence, and the nature of good government.

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