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Filthy Chaucer

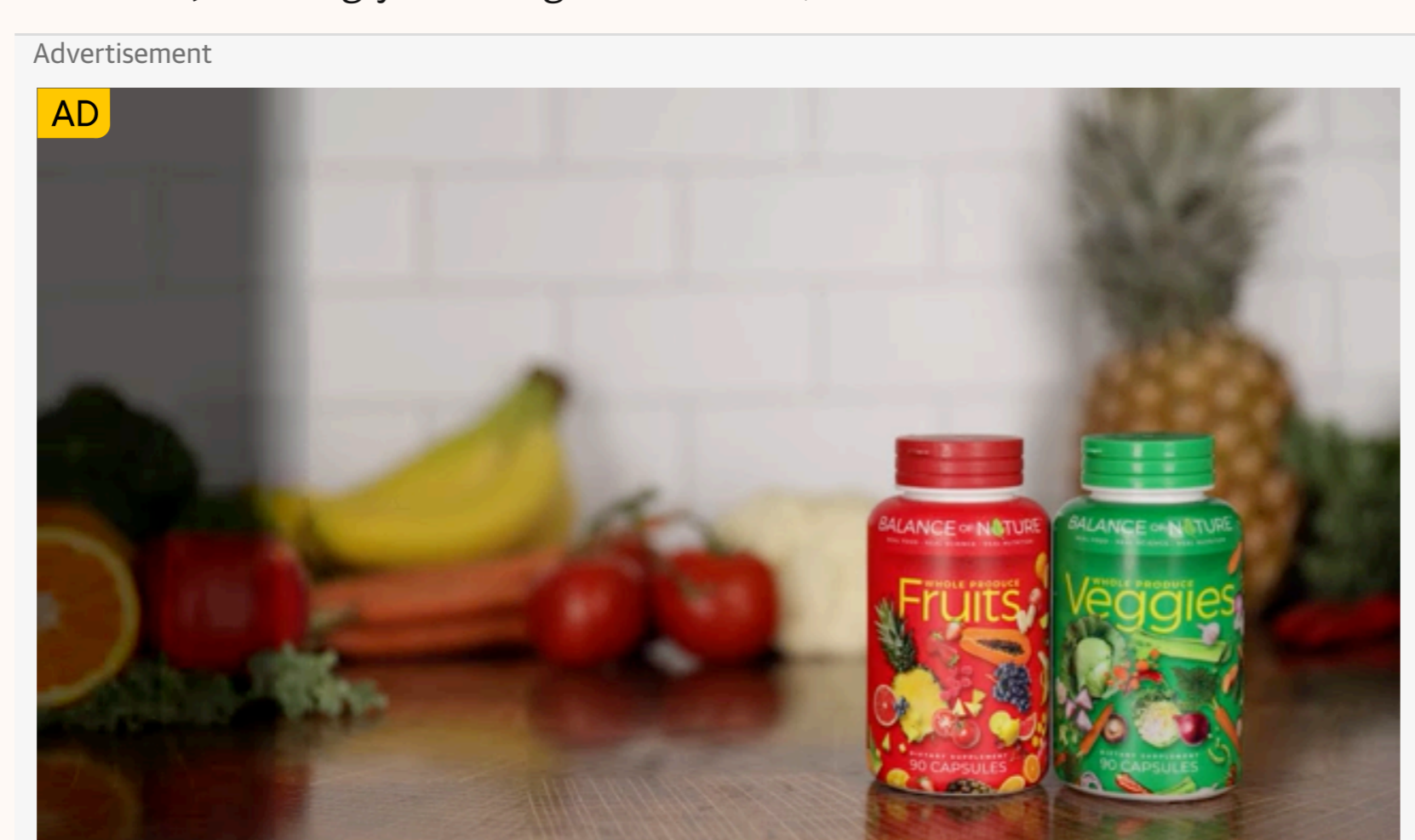
John Sutherland

A Tale of Two Chaucers; or, How Examination Boards Are Using Sex to Sell Their Syllabuses

Last Friday, Paul Johnson informed us that his beach book this summer is *The Canterbury Tales*. "Best read out loud," he adds ominously. According to the *Sage of the Spectator*, "Few children nowadays hear of Chaucer at all, or read him only in a modern rendering."

Wrong. With the explosion of A-levels, more Chaucer is being read in the original than at any time since the 14th century. But children nowadays read a different *Canterbury Tales*. The current preference among examination boards (which compete energetically for pupil-customers) is for "bawdy" and "socially relevant" Chaucer - notably the *Miller's*, *Reeve's*, and *Wife of Bath's* tales and prologues.

The reason why is obvious. These texts are as raunchy as *Ibiza Uncovered*, and (in the *Wife's* case) resonate with contemporary feminist issues (she's a prosperous, sexy, self-educated businesswoman who has outlived five husbands, cunningly avoiding motherhood).



Schools are the last place where censorship still matters - recall, for example, that fuss about some eminently sensible proposals to investigate the etymology of the swear words that kids use in the playground ("Today, class, our word is 'shag', from the Anglo-Saxon 'shog', or 'shake'.")

Chaucer's bawd has always embarrassed the schoolteacher. Dr Bowdler was hot to suppress the naughty bits and his long hand extended over the syllabus well into Paul Johnson's schooldays and mine. Now, thanks to the Thatcherite deregulation of the exam boards, sex is used to sell English literature as cynically as it is for Japanese cars, or Channel 5.

Anything that brings young minds to great books is good. But there is, I think, more to Chaucer than the wholesomeness that Johnson ("What joy! What fun!") discerns. In the *Miller's Tale*, 18-year-old Alison, with a body "gent" as a "weasel", cuckolds her aged husband (no Viagra in the 14th century), playing two randy young bucks off against each other.

It climaxes with *Mistress Alison* poking her rear end through the window at night for the unluckier admirer to kiss. The fool thinks that it's her face. Having snogged her "naked ers" he is mystified to find himself grabbing a handful of medieval Brillo pad ("a thing al rough and long yherd"): the weasel's pussy. Let's hope we're not sitting next to Paul on the beach when he reads that one out.

The *Reeve's* tale is less jolly. Two Cambridge undergraduates (good A-levels, we apprehend) spend the night at a mill. Much bed confusion ensues. One sneaks up on the miller's broad-buttocked daughter while she sleeps and rapes the "wenche". By the third time, she's rather enjoying it. In nine months' time, she'll be an unmarried mother (a fine role model for our sixth-formers).

Student two rapes the *Miller's* unsuspecting wife (who thinks that he's her mysteriously re-energised old man). The matron hasn't been "pricked" as hard and deep for many a year, ho! ho! Having had their fun, the boys run. Less fun for the wenches, perhaps.

The *Wife of Bath's* tale, an Arthurian romance, opens with a knight galloping across the plain. The "lusty bachelour" happens on a maiden. He rapes her brutally ("by verray force, he rafte her maydenhead"). Unlike *Lord Archer*, there is no question of Sir Rapist losing his title. After some purifying "ordeals", he marries his victim (she's no "wenche", but a lady). King Arthur graces the ceremony. The message? Rape with battery's OK, so long as you buy your victim off.

The *Tales* deserve their slot on the literature syllabus but, read attentively, will hardly do for those "citizenship classes" that Estelle Morris is so keen on. And what about Chaucer himself? Johnson bluffly declares, "I would have liked to meet him. I do not say I would prefer an evening with Chaucer to one with Shakespeare. But what about a dinner à trois, possibly with the cheeky Alison, lithe as a weasel, as a fourth?" Paul, I suspect, would be the one left kissing the wench's fundament. Horrible vision.

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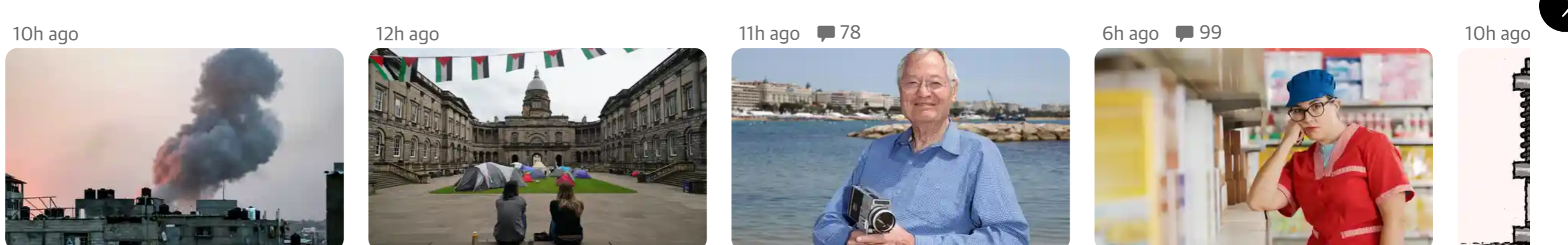
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