

ACKERMANN, CANTERBURY TALES AND
WITTENWILER'S RING: THE LATE MEDIEVAL
NOTION OF CRISIS IN LITERATURE

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Literary scholarship understands the word „crisis“ as the poet's subjective awareness but not as an objective statement based on historical facts. In the Late Middle Ages' world of ideas, the failure of the old values of the High Middle

Ages gave the individual reasons enough to comprehend human life in terms of crisis. Strongest represented in literature because it matched the practical interests of the rising middle class was the theme of love and marriage. But the middle-class matrimonial state was not yet in a position to supplant the aristocratic ideal of *Minne*. It was still frequently viewed only as a way of avoiding a worser evil. Even more marked by crisis symptoms were the themes of human sinfulness and death. The loss of the earlier knightly ideal of morally standing the test in the service of what was good also in this world left behind the notion of a completely sinful world with which no compromise was permissible. Since death put an end to all that seemed of value, there was no longer any socio-moral goal. All that mattered was the salvation of the soul in the hereafter. The more enticements the world offered, the louder were the warnings against their moral dangers. They were depicted as guileful temptations, and recognition of this offered the only possibility of escaping the dangers. Only a few poets came to terms with this crisis sensibility. Chaucer encountered it with witty irony. The *Ackermann* poet saw the passionate struggle of the living with death as a human achievement rendered honorable by God, even if this life had to fall prey to death.