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Humour in medieval English literature:
Chaucer and the Mystery Plays

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ABSTRACT

The present dissertation displays an analysis of the use of humour in different texts from the literature from the Middle Ages in England. On the one hand, *The Canterbury Tales*, which is considered to be the most important work written in English before the Renaissance; on the other hand, the Mystery Plays, a type of medieval drama, which started to be developed in England during the medieval period. Both Chaucer and the authors of these dramatic texts used humour as a way of criticism on the coeval society. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation will be to analyse the use of humour in the Middle Ages trying to establish a comparison between both works.

Keywords: Chaucer, Middle Ages, Mystery Plays, humour, carnival subversion, *Canterbury Tales*

RESUMEN

Este trabajo presenta un análisis del uso del humor en distintos textos pertenecientes a la literatura medieval inglesa. Por un lado, los *Cuentos de Canterbury*, considerada la obra literaria más importante escrita en lengua inglesa antes del Renacimiento, y por otro lado, los Misterios, un tipo de obra de teatro medieval. Sendas obras, empleaban el humor como una forma de crítica hacia la sociedad coetánea y este trabajo tratará de analizar el uso del humor en la edad media intentando establecer una comparación entre ambas obras.

Palabras clave: Chaucer, Edad Media, Misterios, humor, inversión carnavalesca, cuentos

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1. Abbreviations from *The Canterbury Tales*

GP	“General Prologue”
CkT	“The Cook’s Tale”
MerT	“The Merchant’s Tale”
ShT	“The Shipman’s Tale”
WBT	“The Wife of Bath’s Tale”
SumT	“The Summoner’s Tale”

2. Introduction

a. Humour in the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, humour was a key element in literature that appears in many different genres. Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, established his own theory about the use of humour in the Middle Ages. In his work *Dostoyevsky's problem of Poetics*, he talks about “the carnival sense of the world,” he establishes a relationship between the use of humour and the image of the world it reflects. In an essay about Bakhtin, Vitali Makhlin delves in this concept when he talks about the reflection of society in Bakhtin’s notion of “carnival subversion”: using as a metaphor a mirror, we see ourselves there, we see our image but we are not able of thinking that we are the same as the rest of people, that is, we must ridicule ourselves, we must look forward and laugh about ourselves; we criticise the people that behave in a bad way but we are not able of seeing that we are like them. He clarifies it explaining the way we talk sometimes about the horrors of the past as if we were not involved in them. Makhlin explains it here:

Decimos: “Gulag”, “Auschwitz”, “el estalinismo”, “el fascismo”, etc., acentuando en estos nombres una realidad y un sentido del que nos estamos excluyendo, como si no se refirieran también a nosotros mismos. (48)

Carnival subversion consists of representing ourselves, the human beings, behaving in the contrary way that the one we pretend to behave. This is a way of creating humour since we disguise ourselves, we represent the contrary behaviour to the correct one that we should have.

In this dissertation, I analyse the kind of humour that appears in two different types of texts written in the Middle Ages trying to connect the use of humour with the notion of carnival subversion explained above. On the one hand, Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*; on the other hand, a selection of Mystery Plays. Carnival subversion is reflected in both texts. We will see how some characters behave in a different way to that they should, or how some characters are depicted in a negative way.

b. Selection of texts

The first text I chose is *The Canterbury Tale*. The presence of Chaucer in this paper is strongly justified; firstly, because for his relevance as the most important writer in the Middle Ages in England. Secondly, because as the philologist Don Nilsen defends, Chaucer started the tradition of humour in literature with the use of irony he does in his masterpiece. Geoffrey Chaucer (1342? -1400) was an English writer considered to be the father of English literature. He was born in London and travelled through Europe where he started to know about the different genres used in other countries. He was author of many different works as *The Book of Duchess*, *Parliament of Fowls*, or *Troilus and Cryseide*. However, his most famous work was *The Canterbury Tales*. Taking as a model Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Chaucer presented a group of pilgrims going to Canterbury. The host of the group proposes a sort of game: each pilgrim should tell 4 stories. However, the work is incomplete since we only have one story per character. Those tales can be classified in different genres, and many times, the use of humour depends on the genre of the tale.

In the Middle Ages, English drama started to be performed in churches but it ended up being street shows on moving stages. These plays dealt with religious topics and were classified as Morality, Mystery, and Miracle plays. The first type had a moral purpose teaching people how to behave, and given that they do not contain relevant elements of interest to the topic of this dissertation, they will not be analysed here. Miracle and Mystery plays are quite similar although the Mysteries deal with topics related to the life of Jesus and the Old Testament, and these are the ones that reflect the best the use of humour. These plays were represented in different cities and they are classified in cycles, depending on the town of origin, so I will focus on a selection of different cycles: the Oxford, the Coventry, the Wakefield, the N-Town, and the Chester Cycles.

In the Middle Ages, both irony and humour became important in literature. In 1066, the Normans invaded England and the Middle English period started. While the literature from the Old English period had as a main audience the aristocracy, in the Middle Ages there will be different voices introduced in literature; rather than having the idealism that characterized the previous period, realism will be introduced and humour will become an

important part in the description of this reality (Villalba 1999). The Normans introduced new genres and topics in literature and, also, they introduced the formal features used in their literary production. Estefanía Villalba has discussed two of those genres that they introduced: the romance and the fabliau. The former type deals with a hero that tries to get the love of a lady defeating monsters and other adversities while the last type is the most relevant in the topic of humour. The fabliau is a genre of French origin and the definition that we find in *The Riverside Chaucer* helps us to know more about this comic genre:

A fabliau is a brief comic tale in verse, usually scurrilous and often scatological or obscene. The style is simple, vigorous, and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places; the characters are ordinary sorts -- tradesmen, peasants, priests, students, restless wives; [...] The fabliaux thus present a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. [...] And the plots [...] involve incredible degrees of gullibility in the victims and of ingenuity and sexual appetite. (7)

In this definition, we can see several elements that are very important when it comes to analyse Chaucerian fabliaux. Scatological humour and obscenity are central elements in these tales; there will be sexual plots and scenes, and, also, lust. Also, characters are low as it is usual in comedy, and the setting, rather than being the idealized places that we find in a romance, will be low settings. Chaucer takes the fabliau as a model of comic tale from French literature since in the Middle Ages there was not a specific humorous genre for English writers. Chaucer copies this genre with the characteristics that it had, as Thomas D. Cooke defends in his work *Chaucerian fabliaux The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux*. Cooke tries to establish the main characteristics of a fabliau, for instance, one of them is the use of satire. Another characteristic is the establishment of a typical plot that will be repeated throughout Chaucerian fabliaux:

The typical victim is a husband who is cuckolded by his wife, but the reversal is usually not ironic because either the husband has no illusions about his wife's infidelity or no knowledge of it. And in many cases where he is operating under an illusion during the story, at its climax he knows the truth. (141)

In the Chaucerian fabliaux, we will find as the main sources of humour sex, misogyny, and the criticism on the Church and its members. The first source, sex, appears in most of

the fabliaux and it is a central element in any tale of this type. The second element, misogyny, is also very important in Chaucer's work, not only in the fabliaux, but we will also see how this element is repeated in many tales that do not necessarily belong to the genre of fabliau. Misogyny and the anti-feminist discourse is used as a way of creating humour in the tales. As to the criticism on the Church, although this is not a central element in a fabliau, this is a characteristic particular to *The Canterbury Tales* that appear in the tales, and also in the description of the characters. We will also try to look for instances of carnival subversion in the description of the characters, especially in women and religious characters.

c. Methodology

The approach I will follow is a comparative analysis since there are no studies that contrast the kind of humour used in both texts. It is true that there are studies of the use of humour in *The Canterbury Tales* focusing only on the study of the fabliaux, as we can read in Cooke's work; dealing with the study of the rest of the tales, there is an article by Edward E. Foster studying the humour in "The Knight's Tale" where he says that humour is created both in the description of the characters and the use of puns while the tale contains examples of the use of irony, especially in the character of the Knight. Also, Luis A. Lázaro Lafuente studies the use of humour in "The Pardoner's Tale." Regarding the study of humour in the Mystery Plays, there is not a study of the different plays that will be presented in this paper both from the comparative point of view with Chaucer's work, as well as the study of carnival subversion. In this comparative approach, I intend to explore the use of carnival subversion in the tales and plays as an meeting point of the use of humour in medieval literature, although I do not expect that humour will be exactly the same since the topics in the tales and the plays are quite different. Taking as a central point the concept of carnival subversion, I will analyse all the tales from Chaucer's work, classifying them in genres, and then, a selection of Mystery Plays, since it is difficult to comprise all the plays from all the cycles, and it is also difficult to access to them in modern English. Finally, I will conclude this dissertation trying to find the common points

in the use of humour in both Chaucer's work and the Mystery Plays as well as the differences.

3. Humour in *The Canterbury Tales*

Not all the tales from *The Canterbury Tales* are humorous, although many of them contain humorous elements. In Chaucer's major work we can find different genres depending on the tale we are dealing with. For instance, humour appears mainly in those tales classified as fabliaux. In the same way, *The Canterbury Tales* was written as a criticism on the society of the late Middle Ages; the fabliaux were a way of criticizing that society. The tales that belong to this category are "The Miller's Tale," "The Reeve's Tale," "The Cook's Tale," "The Friar's Tale," "The Merchant's Tale," and "The Shipman's Tale" which are going to be analysed now.

The first tale is "The Miller's Tale." The Miller is first described in the "General Prologue" and he has the typical attributes for someone who works in a mill: he is chunky, he is ridiculed by the author in the "General Prologue":

Upon the exact top of his nose he had
A wart, and thereon stood a tuft of hairs,
Red as the bristles of a sow's ears; (GP¹, 554-556)

After this description, we can suppose that his tale is going to be different to that of the Knight, which is more accurate for someone with the dignity of a knight because his values are those of a brave, straight man, rather than the way the Miller is described. His tale tells the story of a woman, Alisoun, who has relations with a young clerk who lives in her house, Nicholas. She is married to an older man, John, and she and Nicholas hatch a plan to trick John. At the same time, another man called Absolon, a secret admirer of the wife, tries to have relations with her. If we try to analyse the three main sources of humour that *The Canterbury Tales* have, the first in this tale, which we can consider a way of carnivalesque

¹ All the excerpts are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer* by Larry Dean Benson, available in the bibliography. For the abbreviations, see p. 6.

subversion, comes with the idea of sexual obscenity. The clerk is presented as someone expert on sexuality and sexual satisfaction, not just a student, he is “sly and very discreet” (3201), which gives us the idea that he is probably going to have relations with the wife because he is not just a student renting a room, but a character with important sexual connotations. His cleverness is obvious when he talks about astronomy and religion to John, who seems to be an ignorant of all that. The second source of humour in the context of carnival subversion is the role of Alisoun, which is also very important from the ironic point of view and the study of misogyny.

Tom Grimwood, defends that the use of misogyny is connected to irony. We can study irony through the interpretation of the misogynistic elements of a text. This will be important in this dissertation since the role of woman is strongly important in the development of the tales that contain comic elements. In “The Miller’s Tale” she is an accomplice of the clerk and she wants to have relations with him. We can see, as Rebecca Woods says in her essay on the role of women in the fabliaux tales, the way Alisoun is stereotyped as an unfaithful woman (Woods 2010). The most outstanding instance of scatological humour in this tale comes when the wife and the clerk, after having sexual relations, trick Absolon making him kiss her ass. This scene is repeated at the end of the tale when Nicholas is burned by Absolon in his ass. Even before that, Nicholas farts Absolon in his face. This creates a comic situation in which John believes that Noah’s flood (the trick used to entertain him) has started and he is accused of being mad. We can see both that sexual obscenity of a fabliau and the negative role of the woman as an accomplice of Nicholas. Both the sexual references and the final scene with the ass, contribute to create a humorous tale full of obscenity and subversion. Finally, the critic to the Church is absent in this tale.

All those elements are repeated in “The Reeve’s Tale” which is the response of the Reeve, Oswald, to the Miller. Oswald thinks that the Miller is joking about his profession and decides to answer him making up a story joking about the millers and he achieves it through the repetition of some schemes that the Miller has used. Once again, we have an old man who works as a miller, Symkyn, and his wife living in a mill. They have a

daughter, Malyne, and a son (a baby). Once again, the description of the characters is the first example of carnival transgression that we will find. For instance, the miller: “as bald as an ape was his skull” (3935). His description is like that of the Miller in the “General Prologue,” who, apart from being ugly, is also irreverent and he likes to cheat to his clients. This description uses carnival subversion to joke about the Miller and his profession. That is the way Oswald is trying to answer the Miller’s tale. That description is like that of some characters in the “General Prologue” that we will see later.

His wife is depicted as “proud, and brazen as is a magpie” (3950). Also, as John in the previous tale, the miller is a jealous husband. In this tale, two young men, John and Aleyn, try to cheat the miller, who is famous for being greedy and cheating his clients selling them less flour than the quantity they paid for. These two characters are like Absolon and Nicholas because they are both facing the old man; however, in this case, they want to revenge the miller for his bad behaviour rather than just taking advantage from his wife or his daughter. They go to the mill and try to avoid the fraud, but the miller seems to be more intelligent than the boys and achieves his objective entertaining them by releasing their horse. They try to catch the horse while the miller cheats them. They feel cheated and finally sleep in the miller’s house (the miller invites them, probably, as a way of making fun of them). Aleyn has relations with the daughter that night, who does not show any resistance, showing once again the lust of the woman, who behaves as an accomplice to the man; the daughter does not care to have relations with someone who has just known. John also tricks Symkyn’s wife and has relations with her, taking advantage of the fact that it is during the night and the wife cannot see anything. In “The Miller’s Tale,” Alisoun and Nicholas also cheat Absolon during the night. We can see how the way the comic situation is created is repeated in both tales. However, in this case the wife believes that she is having relations with her own husband. All finishes in that comic situation with confusion in which the husband tries to kill both boys after he achieves what they have done. They run away with their flour and the old man is, once again, the loser. Sexuality and the role of woman contribute, once again, to create the humour of the fabliau.

The comic elements that we have seen in those two tales are repeated in “The Cook’s Tale,” an incomplete one that describes a young boy, an apprentice who goes to live to the house of a friend who is married, so we can see another young handsome boy introduced in the life of a matrimony. The young boy is described in this way:

He was as full of love and womanizing

As is the hive full of honey sweet; (CkT, 4372-4373)

This is a description like that of Nicholas in “The Miller’s Tale.” All we know in this tale is that the wife is a prostitute. Then, the tale is over although we can foresee that, considering the previous tales and assuming that this tale will be similar, the prentice and the wife are going to have some sexual contact. We cannot say that this tale contains examples of humour, however, we can consider that the first descriptions that we find about the woman are another example of misogyny as a way of creating satire. The next fabliau is “The Friar’s Tale.” This is a very important character from the point of view of the study of humour and carnival subversion. Jill Mann says that his description is the bitterest one from his work (1973, 37). In the “General Prologue,” the Friar is not described with the religious values expected from a friar at that time, but as a “a pleasure-loving and merry one” (208). He is a greedy friar who makes money with the confessions:

He was a lenient man in giving penance,

Where he knew he would have a good gift. [...] (GP, 223-224)

As it has been said, in the article about the humour in the Pardoner (Lázaro Lafuente 1996), he defends that the religious characters are depicted using irony as a way of criticizing the Church. The incongruities of the Pardoner are depicted at the beginning of his tale and something similar happens with the Friar. Although we have seen a crummy description of this character, the narrator uses irony to describe him because this example that will be quoted now seem to be contradictory with the previous quotes:

In all the four orders of friars is no one that knows

So much of sociability and elegant speech.

He was a noble supporter of his order.

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Very well beloved and familiar was he (GP, 210-211, 214-215)

Carnival subversion is reflected in this description. Furthermore, his relationship with other women is interesting since he is described as someone who has relations with women, although this is not explicitly established. He has a libertine life, he likes drinking, money, women... Unlike what is expected from a friar (to have a humble life helping the people who need it), he is described as someone who prefers to be with important and rich people rather than lepers or beggars. All these elements, as in the case of the Miller, imply that the friar is going to tell a story about money or sexual obscenity according to his behaviour, something similar to what has been defended by Lázaro Lafuente about the Pardoner (213).

In “The Friar’s Prologue,” he clarifies that his tale is not going to be about books, religion, authorities... These fields could be expected for a friar, but he decides to discard them even before telling his story. There is a contrast between the Friar and the Monk, being the second the correct straight religious man while the former is not. A similar opposition is established between the Pardoner, depicted in a negative light, and the Parson.

At the very beginning of his tale, the Friar talks ironically about different crimes and offences that someone could perpetrate. He is ironic in the sense that most of the crimes that he mentions are committed by the Friar himself. His tale does not confine the aspects showed in the tales analysed above because there is not a young lady that tempts the male characters to commit adultery, for instance. The sources of humour that come from the anti-feminist tradition and the sexual issue are mainly absent in this tale, where a summoner meets a yeoman who is a demon and they both talk about their jobs. As we will see on page 20, the summoners were a guild bitterly described in the Middle Ages. The summoner in the tale is arrogant and when the yeoman reveals himself as the demon, the summoner is not surprised, maybe because he is worse than the demon. They go to the house of an old woman because the summoner must charge her a tax. The old woman asks the demon to take the summoner with him and the demon obeys. In this tale, the Summoner is ridiculed by the Friar, representing him as an awful person who just cares about money and has no compassion about the rest of the people. Misogyny is also handled in the woman who is poor and swears against the summoner. The summoner is ridiculed in this story, showing

him as a stupid and a greedy man though to Lenaghan, the Friar is also criticising himself, not only the Summoner (Lenaghan 1973).

The next tale considered a fabliau is “The Merchant’s Tale.” This one contains a large amount of comic elements and returns to the characteristics lost in “The Friar’s Tale.” In the prologue, the Merchant talks about marriage which is the key point in this tale. Misogyny is present at the very beginning of the tale, where the narrator states the disadvantages of being married to a woman. The narrator defends that being married for a man means that you will have a sad life, a life full of pain and sorrow:

"Weeping and wailing, grief and other sorrow
I know enough, on evenings and mornings,"
Said the Merchant, "and so do many others
Who are wedded." (MerT Prologue, 1213-1216)

In fact, he says that he would prefer being married to Satan rather than his wife. This exaggeration will be ratified with the tale that the Merchant relates. In that description in the prologue, we can see that he regrets having married with a woman and he reflects that at the beginning of his tale. In this case, we cannot find the female perspective, that is, the disadvantages of being married to a man. The Merchant says that the protagonist of this tale, January (who is an old man), marries because of two possible reasons:

And when he was passed sixty years,
Were it for holiness or for dotage
I cannot say, but such a great desire
Had this knight to be a wedded man. (MerT, 1252-1255)

After that, January says that he wants to be married but this is just a consequence of his sexual appetite:

"No other life," said he, "is worth a bean,
For wedlock is so easy and so pure,

That in this world it is a paradise." (MerT, 1263-1265)

After this utterance by January, he defends marriage, which means a counterpoint to those things that the Merchant said in his prologue. We can see a contrast between both characters. This is a way of depicting the naivety of January who only cares about sex and does not take into account the rest of consequences of being married that the Merchant has described. His brothers also discuss about marriage and one of them seems to think in a similar way to the Merchant. We can see that one of the key points in this tale is marriage. Afterwards, the knight marries the young lady, May; however, while they are married, she also tries to have relations with another man, Damian, and that fits with the misogynist discourse of this tale, because it is the woman the one who cheats the husband. Scatological humour is also present throughout the tale, in which sex is a central element: May is cheating her husband and has sexual relations with Damian while they are married, which is the same type of humour that we have seen above. The main comic element in this tale is the way in which the old man is ridiculed. Firstly, there is a moment in which he describes Damian as the perfect man, a gentleman. January is pushing his wife into Damian's arms. The knight is ridiculed with the way he is unconsciously pushing his wife to have relations with Damian, he seems to be blind. Lust and sex are present in this tale. These two elements are accurate to this fabliau and, also, fit in one of those three sources of humour that we can find in *The Canterbury Tales*.

Probably, the main scene in this tale and one of the most comic scenes narrated in the whole work is the moment in the garden, when the old man is now blind and his wife, who is revealed as an adulterous wife, tries to have relations with Damian while January is in the garden with them. The words of January when he starts talking to his wife are full of lust as well as we can see in other moments in the tale, which reinforces that idea of lust that the old man represents. This scene and its connection with sex is one of the main instances of carnival subversion and scatological humour in the whole work because we see May trying to have relations with Damian in front of her husband; therefore, she does not care about his presence and they are just thinking about having sex in that moment. Apart from that, we see once again the role of the adulterous woman which we could foresee before the tale

actually started, when the narrator talks about the disadvantages of being married. Contrary to the previous tales, this has not that final scene of confusion although it seems to happen that confusion when January recovers his view. The wife cheats him with an excuse and January, in his naivety, does not realize about what has happened between his wife and Damian.

All in all, in this tale we can see the humour associated to the fabliaux, the carnival subversion. The criticism on marriage and the infidelity of woman, that is, the misogynistic discourse, together with the sexual issue. In the epilogue of this tale, the host criticises women for their behaviour although he defends his own wife.

The last tale which is classified as a fabliau is "The Shipman's Tale." It tells the story of a monk, Don John, who visits the house of an old man, a merchant, married to a young woman. He cheats the old man telling him that they are cousins and the merchant invites the monk to stay at home and, in the garden, Don John declares his love to the wife. The carnival transgression is depicted in the moment in which the wife is openly criticizing her husband because she is showing some kind of authority rather than being the obedient wife that we could expect. First of all, she refers to the monk as "my love" (158) and, then, she refers to her husband as "the worst man that ever was since the world began" (162-163). The monk also criticises him in a hidden way, probably for the wife to compare between him and her husband:

"Niece," said he, "it ought enough suffice
To sleep five hours upon a night,
Unless it were for an old enfeebled creature,
As are these wedded men, that lie and doze. (ShT, 100-103)

The subversion is also depicted in the monk who, rather than being a straight religious man, seems to be a libertine and a swindler. This is one of the few fabliaux that contains the third source of humour, the Church, which appears together with the idea of sex and the wife cheating her husband, that is, the misogynist discourse. From a comparative perspective, the humour in this tale is similar to that in the previous tales, especially in "The

Merchant's Tale." Other characteristic is the naivety of the old character, who relies on the monk without knowing who is he. Also, as to the anti-feminist discourse, the wife is depicted, apart from an adultery wife, as a woman who wastes money and has debts. There is an agreement between the wife and the monk because he will lend her money and, in change, she will give him her body, although this is not explicitly said. We can see the connection of the three sources of humour: the monk receives a sexual payment from the bad wife, that is, Church, sex, and misogyny. In the religious field, the monk asks for that money to his "cousin" and he lends him it. He is tricking both the husband and the wife, because at the end, the husband is paying the debts of the wife. All finishes with the monk telling the merchant that he gave the money to the wife. The monk receives the wife's body, the husband is cheated by both her wife and the monk, and the tale has a happy ending for the monk, while the husband and the wife continue with their life.

As we have seen, these tales, which are considered *fabliaux*, have all those elements in common: sex, anti-feminist discourse, and criticism of the Church. These patterns of humour are repeated with a similar plot in each tale: an old man is married, both to a young or an old woman, because if the wife is old, he will have a beautiful daughter. Then, a handsome man appears and this man gets into the house and lives there or spends some days in the house. This young man has sexual relations with the wife or the daughter with consent. The wife and the young man cheats the old one, and, in some cases, there is a final scene full of humour and confusion which derives in the ridicule of the old man. In general, these *fabliaux* have a happy ending and the husband, both naively and stupidly, does not discover what has happened. The comic elements are achieved firstly, through that sexual component and lust that appears in all the tales; secondly through the role of woman who is the main guilty of the events in the tales and reflects the anti-feminist tradition as a way of creating irony; and finally, through those characters that are ridiculed, a merchant, a miller...

There is carnivalesque subversion in some characters as the wives who are libertine and do not behave as the obedient and helpful wife that they should be, as well as when characters as the monk or the friar, behave, or are depicted, as bad Churchmen. Not only is

the old character ridiculed in these tales, but also the religious character, who are not presented as exemplary people; we can see that criticism of the Church in the way they behave, caring about money and sex and not about God. Women, as well as the religious characters, only care about sex, and money. These tales are the ones that have most comic elements and they contrast with other tales that have no humour at all. We will see that, in the case of the plays, some of them contain more comic elements than others.

So far, we have analysed those tales that are classified as fabliaux. Before analysing the Mystery Plays, we will see those tales that are not fabliaux, but still have comic elements.

The first tale which is not considered a fabliau but has many comic elements and uses scatological humour is "The Summoner's Tale." This tale appears as a response of the Summoner to "The Friar's Tale," analysed above. This is similar to the moment when the Miller and the Reeve tell a story criticising each other. The conversation has that humour component of the discussion between both characters, and this is very important since each character tells a story ridiculing each other, depicting a friar and a summoner who are stupidly deceived. As we have seen before in the analysis of the description of the Friar in the "General Prologue," the Friar is one of the worst characters depicted by Chaucer. He is a bad person although he should be a good and straight man. The rivalry between the character of the Summoner and the Friar is already seen in the "The Wife of Bath's Prologue." The Friar says that it is a long prologue for a tale and the Summoner answers this:

"Lo," said the Summoner, "By God's two arms!

A friar will always intrude himself.

Lo, good men, a fly and also a friar

Will fall in every dish and also every discussion.

What speakest thou of perambulation?

What! amble, or trot, or keep still, or go sit down!

Thou spoil our fun in this manner." (WBT Prologue, 833-839)

The Summoner and the Friar are depicted in a negative light in the “General Prologue:” whereas for the reader, the description of the Friar is quite negative, that of the Summoner is just the description of an ugly man and there is not a harmful description about his behaviour nor his way of living. However, Mann says that the negative description of the Summoner anticipates his moral corruption (1973, 134):

Who had a fire-red cherubim's face,
For it was pimpled and discolored, with swollen eyelids.
He was as hot and lecherous as a sparrow,
With black, scabby brows and a beard with hair fallen out.
Children were afraid of his face.
There was no mercury, lead monoxide, nor sulphur,
Borax, white lead, nor any oil of tarter,
Nor ointment that would cleanse and burn,
That could cure him of his white pustules,
Nor of the knobs sitting on his cheeks. (GP, 623-633)

The Summoner’s physical appearance is depicted in a unfavourable way, while the several flaws of the friar are mainly related to moral issues. In the Middle Ages, summoners used to collect taxes (as we have seen in “The Friar’s Tale”), and this is a point of conflict between the Summoner and the Friar. Both are greedy and they only care about money. We can expect that their tales will be similar; Derek Pearsall says about the connection between both tales that “Chaucer absorbs satire of the professional activities of summoners and friars into the dramatic comedy” (2000, 139).

This tale contains instances of the three sources of humour that we have analysed above: women, Church, and sex, although it mainly focuses in the issue of the Church. The Summoner jokes about the friars and focuses his criticism on their avarice (in a satirical way since he is similar to the Friar). Nonetheless, we will see that the friar in the tale is guilty of committing many sins. In the tale, a friar is walking through the villages looking

for money. The first criticism comes with the fact that the friar is both preaching and begging and this is similar to that description of the contradictions of the Pardoner that Lázaro Lafuente identifies. We can see the same contradiction as a way of ironizing these two religious characters. The Pardoner is a bad religious person but he is doing the pilgrimage while the friar in this tale is preaching about living humbly while he is begging at the same time. He is not able of doing just the first thing without asking money. The friar of the story shows his avarice when he is in a church asking the people not to spend money in other business apart from the religion. The friar has a notebook to write down who has given money to pray for them because he does not pray for the rest people, although he is not even praying for those who give money because he used to delete those names once they had paid. We can see that in the description of the friar in the tale:

A pair of tablets all of ivory,
And a writing instrument polished carefully,
And wrote the names always, as he stood,
Of all folk that gave him any good thing,
As if he would for them pray.
"Give us a bushel of wheat, malt, or rye,
A little cake, or a bit of cheese,
Or else what you like, we may not choose; (SumT, 1741-1748)

Afterwards, he deletes the names of everyone and continues begging in other places:

And when he was out at door, immediately
He planned away the names everyone
That he before had written in his tables;
He served them with tricks and with falsehoods. (SumT, 1757-1760)

It is very important when the Summoner says that the friar just gave tricks and falsehoods because it is a way of saying that friars and, by extension, the Church, only sold

tricks rather than a real faith. There is a moment in the friar's path that he reaches the house of a man who is about to die and he lies saying that he has been praying for him. He accesses to the house to get money from this rich man who is really desperate. There is a moment when the man's wife appears and the reaction of the friar is this:

Said this wife, "How fare you, cordially (I ask)?"

The friar arises up full courteously,

And her embraces in his arms tightly,

And kissed her sweetly, and chirps like a sparrow

With his lips: "Lady," said he, "right well,

(SumT, 1801-1805)

We can see lust in the behaviour of the friar with the wife, introducing in this tale the issue of misogyny. If we compare this with the fabliaux, the presence of these two sources of humour is weaker. The Summoner continues that rough description established by Chaucer in the "General Prologue." The friar in this story is comparable to that of the "General Prologue" and both his behaviour and the things that happen in this tale, are example of carnival subversion and scatological humour.

Both the behaviours of the friar and the wife are important. The wife is not obedient and she seems to have some kind of flirtation with the friar in some moments. Furthermore, the friar shows his own cynicism when he says that he is just preaching in a humble way while others preach as they burp. This friar has committed so far some of the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, and pride; and, additionally, he continues trying to take advantage of the situation of Thomas, the husband. Thomas says that he has been visited by different friars but any of them has cured him. The friar is annoyed because he has asked other friars to help him instead of calling him; he actually says that if he gives money to different friars, that distribution will not be useful because he is distributing money among many different friars. This is one of the moments when the friar shows clearly his greed. At the end of the tale, Thomas asks the friar to introduce his hand under his bottom because he says that, there, he has money. When the friar puts his hand, the man farts, provoking the ire of the

friar, who commits the sin of wrath. This is a clear example of scatological humour, being a Churchman humiliated by another man. Thomas tells the friar that he must distribute that “gift” among the friars of the monastery in a humorous way. There is both criticism on the Church and the friar while the issue of misogyny and sex is a minor issue, although it also appears. Carnival subversion is seen in the behaviour of the friar, who does not behave as the typical religious man.

The Friar, the Summoner, or the Miller are characters that, in this work, are presented in a humorous light. However, there are other characters that appear as humble characters and they are depicted as brave and good people, as the Knight or the Squire. The description of the Squire contrasts with those of the Friar or the Summoner:

With him there was his son, a young SQUIRE,
A lover and a lively bachelor,
With locks curled as if they had been laid in a curler.
He was twenty years of age, I guess.
Of his stature he was of moderate height,
And wonderfully agile, and of great strength. (GP, 79-84)

He tells an Arthurian story, a romance, which combines both characteristics of chivalry and fantasy. His story has not comic elements since neither knights nor noble characters are criticised by Chaucer. Mann defends that both characters are accurate to the ideal of chivalry (106). Francine Renee Hall defends that Chaucer “is upholding what is essentially the perfect expression of earthly behavior with divine aspiration – knighthood [...] Chaucer's Knight, then, becomes the standard by which the other pilgrims are gauged” (2001, 16-17). That is, the Knight, as well the other characters connected to chivalry, represent that idealize vision of a warrior, so Chaucer does not use carnival subversion neither in these characters nor their tales.

We can establish a connection between “The Summoner’s Tale” and “The Pardoner’s Tale” because the second has much to do with the seven deadly sins as well as the first one.

At the beginning, the Pardoner says that young people tend to commit several sins and, then, he starts talking about the sin of gluttony, despising the people who enjoy eating and even the chefs. Then, he continues talking about gambling and the way people waste money with that. The tale describes the story of three young men that want to revenge death and they go looking for it. They find an old man and insult him, saying that he is sent by death, and the old man says that he saw the death under a tree and the three men go there. There, they find florins of gold and they decide to spend the night there to keep them and one goes to look for drink and food but he decides to add a poison to their drinks to kill them while the others decide to kill him. They kill him when he comes back and the others drink and die after that. This tale, as it has been said before, establishes the difference with “The Summoner’s Tale,” that describes the sin of greed. In this case, this tale is an example of what greed can do to people. It is a tale that could be classified both as *exemplum* as well as a fantastic tale (we must not forget the character of the strange old man). However, unlike the Squire, the Pardoner is also a bad person with a character similar to the Friar in “The Summoner’s Tale.”

To conclude this section of tales that contain humour but are not fabliaux, it is important to highlight two tales that have not been analysed yet. The first is “The Prioress Tale.” In this case, she tells the story of a child who is killed by a group of Jews. This tale is interesting from a point of view of antisemitism in the Middle Ages, however, there is another point when Chaucer criticises the Church, and especially the monks. The Prioress says that in the tale there is a monk who is a good person, as other monks should be (643).

The other tale which we should include in this section is “The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale.” This tale is connected to alchemy because at the very beginning of the tale, the narrator makes a criticism on chemistry and science by extension. He says that his master has been practicing with it and has come to a point where his master has lost his moral and his belief in God. He rejects having helped his former master to do that and he says that he has returned to his faith in God. He also talks about the search of the Philosopher’s stone. In this tale, we find other attack to the Church when he says that his master, when practicing this “dark science,” is an exception inside the Church, that is, most of the people in the

Church are good people. If he said that intentionally, he would be contradicting himself, so we can see the use of irony. Then, he tells a story about a clerk who practices alchemy and he visits another bishop to cheat him. He tells him that he is able of creating gold and silver. The humour resides on the ridicule of the bishop, who believes blindly in alchemy and pays the visitor to get the formula to create silver and gold. The bishop, once again, is an example of a religious man who commits the sin of greed. This reinforces that idea that the narrator explained ironically before: The Church is full of people who believe in dark magic and alchemy. There is also subversion because we find important religious men believing in this kind of science, that is, rather than believing in God as a response to everything, they do not hesitate in relying in dark magic and alchemy as a way of defying the power of God. It is important to say that this is one of the few tales with no women at all, so we cannot find any instance of misogyny as a source of humour.

These last tales have some comic elements but they are not as comic as those classified as *fabliaux*. While the *fabliaux* are the result of a combination between sex as a central point, and the role of women connected to sex, with few examples of criticism of the Church, the tales that are not considered *fabliaux* are focused on the use of irony as a source of humour to criticise the Church and the people who dedicate their life to religion.

Before moving on to the analysis of the Mystery Plays, we must attend to the rest of tales not analysed before. The reason is that these tales are significantly less humorous than the former tales. Some tales are romances, as that of the Knight (as we said in the introduction, it has been analysed before), “The Man of Law’s Tale,” or “Sir Thopas Tale.” For instance, “The Man of Law’s Tale” tells the story of a girl, Costanza who has to face several adversities throughout her life. She suffers the loss of her husbands and she must face to her mother-in-law. “The Wife of Bath’s Tale,” a well-known tale, is considered to be a lay tale. It tells the story of a man who must answer a question to avoid being executed by King Arthur after having raped a woman. This tale is interesting from the point of view of study of genre, but not from the point of view of humour. However, in her prologue, the Wife of Bath talks about her life, the way she lived. She has married many times and she recognizes that she married to earn money. Her role is scatological since, once again, we

find a different woman, a woman that does not obey to her husbands and openly talks about her relations with them. This is part of the anti-feminist discourse in *The Canterbury Tales*. All in all, these tales deal with tragic stories and introduce the topic of death, which has been absent in the fabliaux.

There are also romances that deal with religious topics. Most of these tales are told by the religious characters, except the Friar. “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” has something particular: this tale is starring by animals and it contains a moral message. We could consider it also an exemplum like the “Tale of the Melibee,” a tale told by Chaucer himself as a character in the work. They have a moral message and they do not contain any comic element. “The Monk’s Tale,” another religious character, narrates the life of different historical characters as well as characters from the Bible. All these historical characters have a tragic life and a tragic end (for instance, Sanson or Julius Caesar). “The Second Nun’s Tale” tells the story of Saint Cecilia, who also has a tragic life. All these tragic stories do not contain any comic element, nor criticism on the Church, or instances of misogyny because, on the one hand, they contain a moral message rather than an attempt of criticism on a particular issue, and, on the other hand, the religious characters as the Monk or the Nun, that are not criticised by Chaucer as the Friar and the Summoner, fit better to the canonical behaviour that a Churchman should have.

4. Humour in English Mystery Plays

After having analysed the use of humour in *The Canterbury Tales*, we move on into the second part of this dissertation, the analysis of humour in the Mystery Plays comparing it with the humour analysed above. In this section, I will focus on the selection of plays from the book *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*. This compilation has a selection of Miracle Plays that come from different cycles (those cited in the Introduction of this dissertation). In this section, I will follow my analysis focusing on the three sources of

humour analysed above as a way of analysing whether the humour is the same or different to that of *The Canterbury Tales*.

Some of these plays use carnival subversion as a way of creating humour. For instance, in the play “The woman taken in adultery,” which belongs to the N-Town cycle, we can see a woman being adulterer. This play is based on John 8: 3-11. Comparing the original version and this one, in the Bible the prostitute does not refuse to go with Jesus to be judged whereas in the play, the prostitute offers money to avoid it. This is notable since a woman who sells her body is offering money to those men. We can see inversion in the way she refuses to obey the authority. We see a woman challenging the authority. This woman is similar to those women that appeared in the tales classified as fabliaux, not only because they are adulterous as well, but also because they use money as a way of achieving their objectives; we find once again the anti-feminist tradition as a way of creating irony. However, the difference between this woman and those that appear in Chaucer’s fabliaux is that there are not sexual scenes nor flirting, that is to say, there is not a scatological representation of a sexual scene but a woman who sells sex.

Regarding the role of women and its connection with humour in the different plays, the most significant instance of a woman who seems to have some degree of authority is a play that belongs to the Chester Cycle, “Noah’s Flood.” In this play, based on the story narrated in Genesis 6-9, Noah gathers all the animals in the ark to save them, but when the passengers are getting on the boat, Noah’s wife refuses to get there:

Noah. Wife, in this castle we shall be kept;
My children and thou, I would, in leapt.
N’s Wife. In faith, Noah, I had as life thou slept.
For all thy Frankish fare,
I will not do after thy reed.
Noah. Good wife, do now as I thee bid.
N’s Wife. By Christ, not ere I see more need,

Though thou stand all the day and stare. (“Noah’s Flood” 40³)

She seems to be somehow rebel which is an attribute that she has not in the original story from the Bible. Noah tries to convince her but she prefers to remain with the rest of the people in the earth. The dialogue they maintain, together with that scene, creates a humorous scene in which we can see the use of carnival subversion. Rather than representing the role of an obedient woman, Noah’s wife rebels against her husband and, by extension, against God’s command. Noah’s wife is depicted in a negative way, as a shrewish woman who does not obey the authority. Many women in the Bible try to show the role of an obedient religious woman; the Bible tries to instruct them about the way they must behave, as we can see in this instance from the section of proverbs: “She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life” (Proverbs 31:12). There are instances of women in the Bible that do not bring that good; the main example is Eve. She has been depicted through history as the cause of all evils on earth, she is guilty for the condemnation of humanity. We will see how Virgin Mary contrasts with her. St Isidore, in *Etymologies*, tries to explain the etymology of Eve, as a source of human evils: “Eve (Eva) means “life” or “calamity” or “woe” (vae), [...] by her lying she was the cause of death [...]” Her original sin is the cause of death (Barney 2006:162). This depiction of Eve is one of the main sources of misogyny used in throughout the history.

If we compare Noah’s wife and the prostitute with the portrait of Eve in some Mystery Plays, we see that Eve is represented in a more faithful way. In the case of the version in the Chester Cycle, entitled “The Creation, Adam and Eve” (based on Genesis 2-3), the story of Adam and Eve does not contain any instance of humour; Eve behaves in a similar way to the Bible, just biting the apple. The analysis of the version in the York Cycle, entitled “The Fall of Man,” is quite similar although we can see some traces of humour when Eve is speaking with Satan:

Eve. We may of them ilkane

Take all that us good thought,

³ All the excerpts of the plays are taken from *Everyman, and Medieval Miracle Plays*, 1956.

Save a tree out is ta'en,
Would do harm to nigh it aught.
Sat. And why *that* tree -that would I wit-
Any more than all other by?
Eve. For our Lord God forbids us it,
The fruit therefore, Adam nor I,
To nigh it near;
And if we did, we both should die,
He said, and cease our solace sere. ("The Fall of Man," 20)

She seems to know that she must be good and respect God, however, we know that she will finally bite the apple tempted by Satan. The anti-feminist tradition is reflected in the way she is easily tempted and she is represented as a weak, naive character. All in all, since the story of Adam and Eve is considered to be the beginning of all the harm, pain, and suffering of human being, we can suppose that in the medieval society, people would prefer not to add comic elements to this tragic story.

Another play, "The Annunciation" from the Coventry Cycle, provides a different image of the role of women if we compare it both with Chaucer's fabliaux and the plays already analysed. When Gabriel announces to Mary that she will be the mother of God, she wonders how is that possible since, as she says, "Man's company knew I never yet" (73). She shows her purity and she does not refuse to obey to God. She fits in the ideal role of woman that the Bible portrays in the Proverbs section. In this play, Joseph is angry when Mary is pregnant and he is questioning God since he believes that his wife has been adulterer; he is questioning his wife's fidelity.

The difference between the depiction of Joseph and that of the husbands in Chaucer's fabliaux is that Joseph is not an old naive man, however, he still suspects about his wife's fidelity. The end of the play is happy since Joseph discovers and assimilates the truth, that Mary's son is the son of God. This play could be interpreted as another instance of

misogyny in the Middle Ages: Joseph questions his wife's fidelity and God, therefore we can see the idea of adultery behind this play. This is an instance of that anti-feminist tradition that exists in the texts analysed in this dissertation, how a man questions his wife's fidelity, although we all know that she is not an adulterer, keeping that positive image of Mary. Beyond that connection between irony and misogyny, the representation of Mary is faithful and represents that ideal woman described above, which means that the use of humour connected to misogyny is a minor issue in this play.

The next play is "Harod the Great", from the Wakefield Cycle. In this play we can see the story of King Herod, who wants to kill Jesus, based on the Massacre of the Innocents (Gospel of Matthew 2: 1-18). There is use of carnival subversion when the King orders his guards to look for the child. They do not obey when they find children, since they decide not to kill them. It is important to say that the Gospel of Matthew says that Herod killed all the children under the age of two, while in the play, this part is made happier and there are no children dead. Probably this was a way of making both the play and the story more pleasant for the people who were watching the performance in the street rather than introducing humour. Rebellion is a way of creating humour in the plays, or at least a way of easing the tale from too tragic elements, especially if it is at the expense of the character that represents the authority. At the very end of the play, the King makes a speech complaining about himself. This is important since at the beginning of the play, there is a messenger that describes the King as one of the best ones on earth, as he mentions many different places where the King rules (Turkey, Italy, India...) and describes him as the best King ever (112). All this description is exaggerated as a way of magnifying the role of Herod, who will be ridiculed.

These exaggerations contrast with the idea of King Herod described in the Gospel of Matthew, where it says that he is cheated by Mary and Joseph and the three Wise Men. This play is intentionally ridiculing the role of King Herod. He is cheated by his soldiers, who decide not to obey him, and this is the main source of humour in this tale. It has nothing to do with misogyny or a criticism on the Church. Criticism is focused on the

figure of King Herod as a result of the antisemitism that ruled in Christianity in the Middle Ages (which also appeared in “The Prioress’s Tale”).

There are other plays that do not contain humorous elements, maybe because of the topic they deal with. These plays narrate tragic stories in the Bible. For example, the plays based on Cain and Abel (Genesis 4) are not humorous. Unlike the previous plays analysed, in this concrete episode of the Bible, there is a death. If we compare both versions, in the case of the Chester Cycle version, there is a long dialogue between the two brothers and Cain kills his brother. In the case of the version of the N-Town Cycle, entitled “Cain and Abel”, there are not comic elements. Also, most of the cycles start with the story of the Fall of Lucifer, based on some commentaries of the Genesis and ancient stories from apocryphal texts. In the version that we find in the Chester Cycle, entitled “The Fall of Lucifer,” Lucifer seems to be quite proud about himself even comparing himself to God and, at the end of the play, God expels Satan from Heaven. This play represents the idea of the sin of pride connecting it with the character of Lucifer and we could consider it a sort of exemplum, so there is neither inversion nor humour, just as the version from the York Cycle, entitled “The Creation and the Fall of Lucifer.”

“Noah’s Flood” in the Wakefield Cycle, has not humour in contrast with the version that has been mentioned before. Another episode from the Bible that has several versions in the cycles is the story of Abraham and Isaac, based on the chapter 22 from Genesis, where Abraham is commanded by God to kill his son. The version analysed in this dissertation is one which has not been placed in any cycle, entitled “Abraham and Isaac” and it is like the version that we find in the Chester Cycle. In this case, there are not many elements related to humour, however, as it happens in some tales and some other plays, there is a naive character, Isaac, whose innocence is exaggerated. In the biblical version, Isaac just asks once to his father why he has not taken an animal for the holocaust, while in this version, Isaac asks several times to his father about it. At the end, after a long dialogue between both characters, an angel appears to save Isaac from the sacrifice. Nonetheless, I must say that this does not contribute to create humour in this play. That innocence, even foolishness, of Isaac could be interpreted as another example of antisemitism, since both

Isaac and Abraham and the characters that appear in the last chapters of the Genesis, are considered some of the most important characters for the Jews. We could say that Isaac is ridiculed as a way of making fun of the Jews.

As we move on reading and analysing the different plays that we find in the cycles, we must highlight the fact that in most of them, the last episodes that are performed have to do with the passion and the resurrection of Christ. Obviously, the amount of humour in these plays is less. In “The Resurrection,” that belongs to the York Cycle and it is based on Luke 24, there is an element similar to that analysed in the play of “Harod the Great.” The Three Marys are crying because of the death of Jesus, and then, some roman soldiers appear in order to check whether he is dead or not. Initially, they decide to lie to Pontius Pilate telling him he has not resurrected, but they finally decide to tell the truth, as the soldiers did with Herod. They also represent an attempt of rebellion against an authority although they did not finally do it. Apart from this, there are not other comic elements. The plays “The Crucifixion” and “The Final Judgement,” which belong to the York Cycle, do not contain instances of subversion, ridicule, or exaggeration for this is an important episode in Christianity and, probably, they did not want to ridicule Jesus’s death.

The last play analysed in this dissertation before moving on to the conclusion is “The Harrowing of Hell,” from the Chester Cycle, based on an episode from the gospel of Nicodemus, an apocryphal text. First of all, Jesus goes to Hell and saves some men that live there, namely Adam, David or, Isaiah, who are asking God to save them from Hell. Jesus accesses to Hell and save those men, in the next act, Adam talks to Elias and Enoch when he arrives to the Heaven. At the very end of the play, there appears a woman in Hell which contrasts with those men since she is not asking salvation, she even seems to enjoy in Hell. She explains the life she has had:

Sometime I was a taverner,
A gentle gossip and a tapster,
Of wine and ale a trusty bewer,
Which woe hath me wrought.

Of cans I kept no true measure:
My cups I sold at my pleasure,
Deceiving many a creature,
Though my ale were naught. (“The Harrowing of Hell” 168)

This is another example of misogyny. In this case, we have a bad woman who is paying for those bad things she did in her life. There is a moment when she refers to Muhammad as her master (169). She is portrayed as a crummy Muslim woman. After her speech explaining her life (which remains us to the speech uttered by the Wife of Bath in her prologue), both Satan and his servants, the rest of demons, welcome her:

Satan. Welcome dear darling, to us all three;
Though Jesus be gone with our meny,
Yet shalt thou abide here still with me
In pain without end. (“The Harrowing of Hell” 168)

As we can see, they celebrate her arrival and at the end of the play, one of the demons says that “Now thou shalt have a feast!” (168). She is celebrating the life she had with other demons. Misogyny is clearly reflected in the character of this woman who is put at the same level than the rest of demons celebrating with them all the bad things she did.

5. Conclusion

This dissertation has analysed and discussed the humorous elements in the *Canterbury Tales* and the Mystery Plays. Chaucer used humour in many of his tales since they are largely intended to be a satire against the medieval society in England. Thus, humour is built through three different sources: the criticism against the Church, the anti-feminist tradition, and the introduction of scatological humour represented in the issue of sex. In drama, in general the Mystery Plays contain less examples of humour than *The Canterbury Tales*. Furthermore, the type of humour used in them is different from Chaucer’s tales, since it is not based on sex or a satire against the Church.

In the case of the Mystery Plays, the humour is based on the use of carnival subversion, depicting characters in a different way from the idea that appears in the Bible; secondly, the ridicule that some powerful characters as Herod or Pilatus suffer after being cheated by other characters, both to create irony and, also, to criticise them for being negative characters for Christianity; and, finally, the exaggeration of the attributes and way of being of the characters. The humour in these plays has nothing to do with the story they tell, as it happened with some tales that narrated a comic story (as “The Miller’s Tale”, for instance). These are biblical stories and they have not been changed in depth. Humour is connected to that carnival subversion in the way the different characters are depicted, as Bakhtin said. Carnival subversion appears in the way some characters as the adulterous woman or Noah’s wife are depicted connected to that anti-feminist tradition. Misogyny is a major issue in these plays: not only Eve is represented in a negative way but also other women that have just been mentioned do not behave the rigid orthodox way of behaviour they should have.

The issues of sex and criticism of the Church are deliberately absent in these plays, two topics that are essential when we study the humour in Chaucer’s tales; hence, the common topic in *The Canterbury Tales* and the Mystery Plays is the anti-feminist discourse that lies behind as a way of creating irony and criticise the role of women. Probably, the absence of criticism against the Church and the sexual issue in the Mystery Plays is a consequence of the fact that they were represented on the street (and sexual issues could be obscene for part of the audience), and they were based on the Bible, so playwrights had to be faithful to the texts.

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