DOI: 10.17846/aa-2025-17-2-31-51

Paying it off – An analysis of humorous potential in Geoffrey Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale"

Larissa Pia Zoller

Larissa Pia Zoller holds an MA in English/American Literature and Linguistics, as well as a BA in German Literature and is currently a research fellow and PhD student at Friedrich-Schiller-University Jena, where she is working on her doctoral thesis entitled "Fabliau and Schwänke: A Structural Analysis of Bawdy Humour in Middle English and Middle High German Texts." Her research interests include vernacular and religious literature of the medieval period, modern adaptations, interdisciplinary approaches, and humour theory.

Orcid id: https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5676-9938

Abstract:
The fabliau seems to be a good starting point when discussing humorous structures in medieval literature. There is only a small corpus surviving, with most of the texts having been written by Geoffrey Chaucer. The "Shipman's Tale" shows a plot and humour that appear to be so straightforward and to adhere so strictly to the restrictions of the fabliau, at least at first glance, that they exclusively play into the expectations of the reader familiar with the genre. As a consequence, the text appears to be so predictable that it seems unattractive from an academic perspective. In this paper, I argue that even though the outcome is rather easy to guess, especially for those familiar with the genre, the text remains humorous, either despite, or exactly because of its predictability. I will do so in pursuit of answering the following questions: Firstly, does the "Shipman's Tale" ultimately bear humorous qualities because of the pre-determinedness of its plot, which equates personal relationships with commercial interaction? Secondly, if the humorous potential is really rooted in the pre-determined nature of the plot, how exactly is this humorous potential created and what does the fact that these certain aspects are humorous mean?

Introduction

When considering Middle English fabliaux, the first name that comes to mind is Geoffrey Chaucer. With only six texts of this genre surviving, five of which were written by the "father of English literature" himself, this is not very surprising. While the most intriguing and discussed texts seem to be his "Miller's Tale" and the subsequent "Reeve's Tale" with their interplay and tight connections, there is another fabliau within the *Canterbury Tales* that deserves academic attention: the "Shipman's Tale." At first glance, it appears so predictable that it almost seems boring. But even though the outcome is rather easy to guess, especially for those familiar with the genre, the text with its clever plot and strategic execution remains funny and humorous, either despite, or even exactly because of its predictability. In her essay "Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's 'Shipman's Tale'," Helen Fulton claims that "the plot of the *Shipman's Tale* rests on a commercialism which is so over-determined that it becomes humorous" (pp. 318-319). The question I seek to answer in this paper is two-fold. Firstly, whether the "Shipman's Tale" ultimately bears humorous qualities *because of* the pre-determinedness of its plot, which equates personal relationships with commercial interaction. Secondly, which seems to be the more pressing question, if the humorous potential is really rooted in the pre-determined nature of the plot, how exactly is this humorous potential created, and what does the fact that these aspects *are* humorous mean?

In its essence, the issue I am trying to solve can be broken down to the question of why the "Shipman's Tale" is perceived as funny by the reader, and how it was designed to be perceived as such. To answer this question, I will take a closer look at the humorous structures within the fabliaux in general and provide a short discussion of Chaucer's sources. This will be followed by an attempt to establish the necessary theoretical foundation, where several theories of humour will be considered before finally moving on to an analysis of the humour of the "Shipman's Tale".

Fabliau humour

In order to understand the humorous structures within Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale" and to answer the proposed questions, several aspects have to be considered. Firstly, one has to understand how humour works and how it is constructed within the fabliaux. The latter seems to be the simpler starting point. Humour within the fabliaux can be found on several levels – most notably on the plot level. That is because, in its essence, every fabliau has to be a comic narrative. Their content itself is funny, with reference to the breaking of taboos, cheating, betrayal, trickery, and one-upmanship, all of which we find in Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale."

In the case of this tale, the plot unfolds in the form of the *topos* of the "lover's gift regained".[1] Here the cleric, Don John, is longing to be with his friend's wife. The wife, as expected in a fabliau frame, gives in to the monk's advances while her husband remains oblivious. The wife's motivation here is not, as can be observed in many other texts of the genre, an internal longing to be intimate with the monk, rather she is seeking to gain payment for her services, money that can then be used to pay off the debt she has acquired by purchasing expensive clothing. This is paired with Don John's trickery, where he asks his friend, the merchant, to lend him 100 francs, exactly the amount the wife asks for in exchange for her services. Upon his return, the merchant asks for his money back, to which the monk, in another clever twist, states that he has already repaid the money to the wife, who then, after negotiating a deal of her own, offers to repay her debt to her husband in bed.

Other humorous instances in fabliaux, in addition to the general plot, are usually found in the language used, which frequently, especially in the form of puns, becomes a tool to create humour within the texts. This is something that can also be observed in the "Shipman's Tale" as there are numerous puns that link indirect references to sexual relationships with vocabulary taken from the field of mercantile trade and economic exchange, as, for example, when Don John approaches his friend about the loan and states that he needs the money "For certein beestes that I moste beye" (1462). Thus, he compares the merchant's wife to an animal that is to be purchased, which is obvious to the reader – but not to her husband.

An attempt at improving his sources?

The "Shipman's Tale" stands out from the other fabliaux we find in the *Canterbury Tales*, because it is a fabliau that "some regard as 'the most typical Chaucerian representation' of the genre" (Finlayson, 2002, p. 347), and it meets most of the expectations that the genre "fabliau" invokes. With his "Shipman's Tale", which is set in north-eastern France, Chaucer wrote "something archetypal in the fabliau genre" (Scattergood, 2002, p. 565) that is closer to its French ancestors than any of the other Chaucerian fabliaux (Scattergood, 1977, p. 210). This commitment to follow all the guidelines of the genre, including certain language and plot lines, is what creates a repetitive and predictable tale that plays into the expectations of the reader.

The story that Chaucer tells in this tale is frequently found in fabliau collections. While the exact source used by Chaucer cannot be determined with certainty (ibid., p. 212), the "Shipman's Tale" is, in its underlying structure, close to two assumed analogues and sources: Boccaccio's, *Il Decamerone*, 8.1 and 8.2, as well as Sercambi's, *Novella* XXXII.[2] Yet, Chaucer's text is also vastly different from the Italian tales and it seems that he did not in fact

simply copy an existing model, but rather took inspiration from already existing texts in order to improve his version of the story, by adding further detail and empowering the female protagonist. Comparing the "Shipman's Tale" to its potential sources, we can assume that the alterations made by Chaucer have been designed to heighten and improve the humorous potential of the text. It seems like he deliberately added elements that make the story more intriguing and, by extension, funnier. This is most prominently observed in the addition of the wife's debt, which she does not have in any of the other source texts, but also in her way of handling her affairs. Instead of putting herself in a position of humiliation, she negotiates and engages in trade with the male characters and takes care of her personal needs, physical and financial, and makes sure that they are met. At the end of the "Shipman's Tale" the wife, although having been tricked by the monk, is successful in her mercantile transactions and has freed herself of her financial debt. Introducing a successful female character who triumphs, in the end, is very much in tune with other fabliau texts and plays into the typical humour of the genre. Chaucer also altered smaller details, for example, the original 200 florins that the woman charges for her amorous services in Boccaccio's tale is lowered to 100 franks,[3] which might seem like a more realistic amount. In humour theory an increase in how relatable a text seems usually correlates with heightened humorous potential, as this way the humorous instance can be perceived as funny by a broader audience.

For the audience, perspective is an important aspect, especially in creating and furthering the humour of the tale. The fabliaux are typically written in a way so that we empathise with one of the characters, usually the one that is successful at the end. Naturally, then, we are more likely to laugh or perceive a tale as funny, if the target of the joke is the one character we do not feel sympathy for. Accordingly, we can see in Chaucer's version of the story a shift with regard to our sympathies. Boccaccio and Sercambi's tales both portray the husband as the victim who deserves our sympathies, and the moral consequences of his wife's behaviour are clearly stated at the end of their tales as she is openly humiliated, whereas in the "Shipman's Tale," we are not provided with the same moral parameters. Rather, we see the wife as a successful trade-dealer who avoids all exposure of her moral shortcomings, and we empathize with her, as she is trying to outsmart the two men and ultimately get what she wants. This revision by Chaucer again echoes the general conditions of most fabliaux. Another shift that we can observe in Chaucer's text is that the lover also changes how he tricks the merchant. Instead of following the Italian sources by creating a situation where, due to the reports of a witness, the monk can directly approach the husband about what is owed to him by his wife, the monk in Chaucer's text heavily relies on the merchant playing by the rules of their society,

in that as a close friend and sworn brother he will not hesitate to offer a loan. This is also mirrored in Chaucer's elaborate mercantile setting, where all characters take on the position they are expected to based on their social status and behave accordingly, while still leaving room for the trickery to take place.

What also stands out is that while fabliaux typically close with a moral instruction for the reader, the "Shipman's Tale" does not provide such a moral tag. This is not very surprising given the overall outcome of the story. At the end, balance is reinstated, and everything continues the way it has been, more or less. The husband has forgiven his wife, and he remains blissfully ignorant about his cuckolding. The Shipman closes by praying for unending assets: "Thus endeth my tale, and God us sende / Taillynge ynough unto oure lyves ende. Amen" (1623-1624).[4]

Setting dominates and oftentimes guides the actions within a fabliau. The tale takes place in the world of well-situated merchants and depicts financial as well as sexual deception (Scattergood, 2002, p. 565). In contrast to, e.g. the "Miller's Tale", where we have a simpler, lower-class environment, the "Shipman's Tale" explores the economic power of its protagonists and desired closeness to higher social classes, as part of its humorous structure. This also explains the frequent showcasing of the financial wealth of the couple, for example through the counting house in which the husband spends significant amounts of time book-keeping and through the lavish garden in which the wife and Don John meet. It can be determined that these slight alterations from the Italian texts are what create most of the unique humorous potential of the "Shipman's Tale".

Humorous potential and theories of humour

Humour is something so universal that researchers across various academic fields, including psychology, literary research, and linguistics, as well as various other social sciences, have attempted to define it. It has been shown that a study of humour and humorous structures can "offer insight in a culture and reveal aspects of this culture that would otherwise not be observed" (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 7). Consequently, by better understanding the humour within the "Shipman's Tale" we might ultimately be able to better understand Chaucer's writing and the context of his tales. While no definite conclusion has been reached as to what humour *truly* is, a definition that seems convincing is the one by McGraw and Warren. They argue that humour is to be considered "a psychological state characterized by the positive emotion of amusement and the tendency to laugh" (2010, p. 1141). Ultimately, what seems relevant to the analysis of the humour of the "Shipman's Tale" is the general understanding that humour is

linked to the social rules of the participants: “Every society has its rules that are governing the behaviour of its members. These rules are part of the common knowledge of the community and they regulate the things a member can and cannot do” (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 11). Based on these rules, humorous utterances can be created either within the restrictions of a society or by explicitly attempting to blur the lines of what is socially acceptable and what is not, something that, as we will see later, lies at the core of fabliau humour.

In order to unpack how humour works within the “Shipman’s Tale”, it seems straightforward to apply to it promising theories of humour that have previously been successfully applied to Chaucer’s texts.[5] Humour theories can generally be divided into three groups: superiority theories, relief theories, and incongruity-resolution theories. Every one of these theories has a different aim, and the theory applied needs to be chosen carefully depending on what claim is trying to be made and what aspect of the complex humorous situation is to be analysed.

1. Superiority theories

The expectations of what a fabliau plot should look like typically include, in addition to an overall humorous plot, the anticipation that there will be a power dynamic that is introduced, where characters frequently abuse their power in order to alter relationships or cheat, betray, or trick another character. Hence, when trying to determine the humorous structures of the tale, it might seem intuitive to apply the superiority theory to it, which is largely based on the idea that every humorous instance has to have a winner and a loser, with humour being created out of the feeling of superiority that the winner, the person making the joke, experiences (c.f. Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 3). The theory is largely based on the “assumption [...] that [what] we laugh about [is] the misfortunes of others” (ibid.). The structure of the fabliau lends itself to be analysed with this theory, as elements like deceit, deception, and one-upmanship will naturally put one of the characters in a superior position. Such structures can also be identified in the “Shipman’s Tale”. However, in the eventual resolution of the tale – surprisingly quite contrary to typical fabliau fashion – the merchant remains oblivious to having been cuckolded, which means a situation with a superior and an inferior character is never actively created and revealed, and the tale concludes in what seems to be a happy ending. Ultimately, another approach might prove to be more useful and further theories should be considered.

2. Relief theories

The relief theory of humour is largely based on the idea that humour, or rather laughter, is created in the sudden experience of relief, and it has, according to Mulder and Nijholt "a clear physiological or psycho-physiological nature" (2002, p. 4). This is especially notable, as it renders the relief theory not very helpful in trying to determine humour of written texts. The theory "can [...] be seen as a theory of laughter" (ibid.), as it does not explain why we find something funny or account for the quality of a humorous utterance, but rather considers the relief a natural reaction by the body. Consequently, this theory does not prove helpful in unpacking the humour within the "Shipman's Tale".

3. Incongruity-resolution theories

Finally, the incongruity-resolution theory might prove suitable. It "rests on the idea that a set-up for a joke or story generate[s] a prediction. The punch line will reveal that this prediction is incorrect, and subsequent processing will resolve this incongruity in an intriguing way that generates laughter" (Earleywine "Benign Violations," p. 4). It postulates that in order for a situation to be perceived as funny, there need to be two competing readings of an utterance that create an incongruity, which is then resolved, within the punch line at the end of the sentence (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 4). Two modern variations of the incongruity-resolution theory have been developed by linguist Salvatore Attardo: the semantic script theory of humor (SSTH), and the general theory of verbal humor (GTVH; a continuation of the SSTH developed with fellow linguist Victor Raskin). The SSTH is largely based on the concept of script opposition. Attardo utilizes the notion of a semantic script, which entails the entirety of what an individual associates with a lexical item. He postulates that "if a text is compatible fully or in part with two scripts, and the two scripts happen to be opposed to each other, then, and only then, will the text be classified as 'funny' by the SSTH" (Attardo, 2001, p. 20). Unfortunately, there are some shortcomings in this theory, as it "ignores other parameters that have an influence on the funniness of a joke, assuming that script opposition is the most important factor" (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 11). Attardo and Raskin saw the need to further develop the SSTH and came up with the GTVH, a theory which Geame Ritchie considers "more developed than any other theory [of humour]" (quoted in Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 12). In 1991, Attardo and Raskin developed the GTVH by introducing a set of six knowledge resources (KR), which provide an easy way to deconstruct the humour of any text. These six knowledge resources (Attardo, 2001, pp. 22-27) are:

- Script Opposition (SO), which has been retained unchanged from the SSTH

- Logical Mechanism (LM), which includes methods applied to make sense of the SO (it only needs "local logic")
- Situation (SI), which describes the "props" of the joke
- Target (TA), the person or character a joke is aimed at (it can take on an empty value if jokes are made about objects or situations)
- Narrative Strategy (NS), which describes the narrative organization of the text
- Language (LA), which contains all the features concerning the verbalization (can have an empty value if the exact verbalization is not relevant to the joke)

There are some possible limitations, namely that the GTVH disregards non-humorous elements that add to the overall humour of the narrative and that the GTVH was initially only designed to analyse humour within jokes. To tackle this, longer narratives are broken down into relevant humorous instances within the text – so-called jab lines that function as small punch lines – in order to apply the theory to individual parts of the text.

The GTVH is then best applied to these individual chunks of text containing humorous instances. The scene in which Don John claims that the loan is needed "For certein beestes that I moste beye" (1462) could be analysed using the GTVH as follows: The script opposition at play is that of *purchasing animals vs paying the wife*. This is supported by a logical mechanism of *reasoning from false premises* and set in a situation where *negotiation of payment* takes place. The target here is either *the wife or the husband* himself. The narrative strategy is that of *a conversation/dialogue*, and the language that is being used is that of *ambiguity and comparison*.

Part of the punch line serves as a second example: When the wife promises to repay her husband in sexual services: "For I wol paye yow wel and redily / Fro day to day, and if so be I faille, / I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille" (1604-1406). Here the script opposition is that of *financial debt vs marital debt*, the logical mechanism at play is that of *referential ambiguity*, and the situation is again that of a *negotiation of payment*. The target here is clearly the *husband*, the narrative strategy is again *a conversation/dialogue*, and the language applied focuses on *terms of trade*.

Once we take a closer look at these two instances of humour within the "Shipman's Tale," it becomes obvious that both jab lines seem to follow similar structures. Even though they refer to different plot lines within the tale, they both show a similar situation (*negotiation of payment*) which again shows the overarching theme of the fabliau (all relationships are equated with forms of trade), as well as a similar form of narrative strategy

(*conversation/dialogue*), as most of the humorous information is transferred verbally in the characters' conversational exchanges. These conversations always happen under the pretence of a business interaction, as "the mercantile ethos pervades the *Shipman's Tale*" (Scattergood, 1977, p. 213) This also includes the use of vocabulary taken from the language of commerce, not only because the protagonist husband is a merchant, but also because Chaucer employs mercantile terminology to refer to all shifts within social relationships, as seen above when the wife offers for her husband to "score it upon my taille" (1406). Certainly, like in the punch line, there is humour in the form of non-verbal action within the tale. However, these instances are rather limited, as these actions also tend to be implicitly communicated in the form of dialogue and the negotiation of yet another trade-deal, like when the reader is only informed about the wife's plan to pay in favours, rather than seeing her act it out.

The GTVH is able to explain the humorous potential found within certain humorous instances (e.g. the puns discussed), and it is also able to determine how humour is distributed across the entirety of the plot. However, it always remains a limited observation, where we will never be able to determine an overarching effect because it will not account for how humorous instances are related. So while the GTVH would certainly be useful in providing a detailed analysis of individual humorous instances within the "Shipman's Tale", like, for example, its pervasive puns – which many current studies regard as the sole source of humour within this tale – a detailed examination of every single jab line within the text is not sufficient to support my claim that an important part of the tale's humour lies within its pre-determined nature.[6] And with that the third traditional group of humour theories also proves unsatisfactory for a thorough analysis of the tale's humour. Nonetheless, the knowledge resources established by Attardo and Raskin still seem helpful in trying to establish a tendency and pattern across different humorous instances within the tale. Finding repetitive patterns within the knowledge resources might be useful when trying to further understand the pre-determinedness of the humorous instances, and how this pre-determinedness results in what Helen Fulton so fittingly described as the "over-determinedness" of the commercialism that is applied. Or in other words, given the pre-determined nature of the humour, the GTVH can be used to identify the form humorous instances typically take within the "Shipman's Tale" and thus make it easy to pinpoint these instances within the text once it is combined with a general understanding of how humour unfolds within a fabliau. Hence, I suggest (while of course, this is not how the GTVH, a linguistic theory, was intended to be used) attempting to determine overarching values for the different knowledge resources, which can act as an indicator of how the humour, predictably, and typically, unfolds in the "Shipman's Tale." This would then lead to the following analysis:

the overarching script opposition we observe is that of *moral behaviour vs amoral behaviour*, with a logical mechanism of *reasoning from false premises*. The typical situation of humorous instances within the tale is that of a *negotiation of a business deal*, while the target in this case remains *irrelevant* (with a tendency of jokes being aimed predominantly at the couple, mostly the husband, and sometimes the wife). The narrative strategy applied is, as observed in the examples, that of *a conversation/dialogue*. Finally, the language used is almost always taken from *mercantile vocabulary*.

Especially the overarching script opposition of *moral behaviour vs amoral behaviour* appears to be an essential aspect to consider when we further investigate the humorous structures of the "Shipman's Tale". I suggest considering one last hypothesis, which has emerged in recent years, that might offer a more elegant approach to the overarching structures of humour that have been determined by means of the GTVH.

A new approach – the benign-violation hypothesis

The violation theory of humour, initially coined by Thomas Veatch (1998), later tested and adapted into the benign-violation hypothesis by A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren (2010) in their study "Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny", attempts to explain humour across multiple domains (1142). It does so by combining elements of the relief and incongruity theories, but unlike the other theories it does not try to account for what is and is not funny, but rather it "suggests that specific conditions are jointly necessary and sufficient to create humor" (Earleywine "Benign Violations," p. 4), which can be summarized in the assumption that an audience will perceive a stimulus as funny, only when the same stimulus is perceived as "violating a specific norm but in a harmless way" (ibid., p. 2). Veatch's original theory provides a set of three conditions that have to be met for an instance to be funny. Only if all of them are met will the situation be interpreted as such.

The three conditions are described as:

- V – The violation of a certain commitment of the perceiver about how things ought to be.
- N – The perceiver has the dominating feeling that the […] situation is normal.
- Simultaneity – These two understandings V and N have to be present in the mind of the perceiver at the same time. (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, pp. 5-6)

McGraw and Warren rephrased these conditions of Veatch's original theory so that they now claim that an utterance in order to arouse humour requires a certain situation, namely "one that

suggests a threat or a norm violation while remaining essentially safe and harmless" (Earleywine "Benign Violations," p. 5). A situation like this, they continue, suggests "that humor arises when something is perceived as simultaneously 'wrong' (i.e. violating a norm or creating a threat) and 'not-wrong' (i.e. clearly 'okay' or 'acceptable')" (ibid.).[7] One of the examples they give for such an instance is this popular joke about *Rolling Stones* guitarist Keith Richards:

> Before he passed away, Keith's father told his son to cremate his body. Then he told Keith to do whatever he wished with the remains. Keith decided to snort his dead father's ashes. (McGraw and Warren, 2010, p. 1143, Table I)

Regardless of whether we find this joke funny or not,[8] it can clearly be seen here how a situation can simultaneously be perceived as "wrong" and "not wrong". Based on a general moral understanding it is thought to be morally wrong to snort the ashes of a deceased person. However, within this scenario, Keith has explicit permission to do "whatever he wished", which also includes snorting the ashes, thus rendering the action "not wrong" under these parameters.[9,10]

With these conditions, the theory is mostly based on other theories of humour and combines some of their central ideas. This especially includes the idea of simultaneity and the thought that two possible concepts exist side by side, with humour being created in the realization of what concept is the correct reading (incongruity-resolution theory) and the sudden experience of a relief (relief theory). Furthermore, the addition made by McGraw and Warren, that the violation needs to be benign in order for an instance to be humorous and the underlying idea that a threat portrayed in a humorous utterance has to be non-threatening, provides the foundation of several humour theories (Earleywine "Benign Violations," p. 6). Yet, previous theories have never "operationalized and tested these same three conditions ('wrong,' 'not wrong,' and simultaneity) as concomitantly necessary and sufficient for humor" (ibid., p. 8).

What has to be noted is that there is no distinct restriction to the violations. The violated norms can be social norms, like in the Keith Richards example, but they could also be linguistic norms when language conventions are violated, like in puns.[11] What remains is the fact that the "stimulus must be simultaneously wrong and not wrong, both norm-violating and benign" (ibid.; c.f. also McGraw and Warren, 2010, p. 1147). In order to determine what makes a moral violation benign and as a consequence humorous, McGraw and Warren established three conditions that need to be met in order for a humorous instance to be created:

(a) the presence of an alternative norm suggesting that the situation is acceptable
(b) weak commitment to the violated norm

(c) psychological distance from the violation (McGraw and Warren, 2010, p. 1141)

The increase in humorous perception seems to be linked to an increase in psychological distance. Targets of humorous utterances are more likely to be amused by jokes made about them if they are formulated in a "less direct" way, "less relevant to the targets' self-concept (low commitment)" or in a way that it seems "more exaggerated (greater hypotheticality or psychological distance [...])" (ibid., p. 1147). This way humour also becomes a good way to deal with socially challenging situations and to react to "hypothetical threats, remote concerns, minor setbacks, social faux pas, cultural misunderstandings, and other benign violations" (ibid., p. 1148). Hence, this might also help to account for some humorous instances within Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale". On a plot level, for example, when the merchant has to deal with the obvious setback that the wife (to his understanding) has mistakenly spent the loan that Don John came to repay. Here the violation can be interpreted as simultaneously wrong and not wrong for the merchant, as the wife was wrong in spending the money, but at the same time not wrong, because she allegedly thought that the money was intended for her. But also on a more general level, the fabliaux mirror the challenges the Middle Ages brought with them, possibly making them an appealing way to cope with such situations. McGraw and Warren also note that as humans evolved, their humour and what they perceived as funny did so as well. They state that "situations that elicited humor likely expanded from apparent physical threats to a wider range of violations of personal dignity [...], linguistic norms [...], social norms [...], and even moral norms" (ibid, p. 1142). Hence, identifying (benign) violations in medieval literature might also offer an opportunity to further identify what has been considered threatening to the people's world. This theory seems strikingly relevant when trying to analyse the humorous potential of the "Shipman's Tale", since benign violations are inevitably found within a genre like the fabliaux, which builds upon moral breaches and the breaking of taboos. These norms themselves are restricted by the rules of the society in which the narrative is created, and ultimately these expectations guide the humorous narrative, creating common plot lines and pre-determined humour.

A limited set of relevant morals

Now when turning back to the "Shipman's Tale", something becomes strikingly obvious, namely, that the rules and morals within the fabliau world are quite different from the general morals one would expect to encounter in (medieval) society. We even expect the breaking of

morals and taboos in order to get to the punch line. In the fabliau world, adultery is common, even necessary, and expected by the reader familiar with the genre. Thus, it is not hard for us to accept the initial situation in which the wife and monk need to come up with a trick to conceal their love affair, which helps us render this part of the tale "not wrong" or at least "acceptable" within the fabliau world. Yet, we would still classify this as "wrong" in terms of our general moral understanding. The same goes for the monk engaging in sexual relations, breaking a sworn oath to a "cosyn" (1447), and playing a trick on people in general. The reason for this shifted view is quite simple: if we fail to accept the rules and the morals of the fabliau world, the text will not be funny to us, and we will not be able to decode the contents of the text itself. If we shift our understanding to the fabliau world, similar to a fantasy novel in which we have to simply accept the existence of magicians, dragons, and unicorns, we have to accept that within the realm of the fabliau what is right is different from what is right in our world. Rather than what we have been taught to be right, what makes the trick work is right in the world of the fabliau. In order to understand the actions of the fabliau characters, it might be beneficial to consider what motivates their "moral-breaking" actions. Why does the wife sleep with the monk? Why does the merchant give the loan to Don John? And why does the monk break his oath?

Like many things in life, the actions of the protagonists in Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale" seem to be motivated by an intrinsic desire for power. The form of power they strive for is a different one for each character, but their individual attempts to increase their form of power is what creates the foundation for a humorous plot as it will inevitably lead to a breaking of morals. The merchant's motivation is quite easily explained. He is longing to maintain and, for example, by his trip to Bruges, increase his financial assets. Additionally, he also wants to maintain his position in society by demonstrating his wealth (e.g. when spending hours in his counting house[12] or lending the money to Don John). Don John in turn is longing to satisfy his sexual desires. In order to do this, he sacrifices the social position he has acquired as a member of the clergy, he exploits his position to gain additional profits, and risks his "friendship" with the merchant. He is also willing to give up some of his financial assets, by spending money on gifts for everyone working in the merchant's household. He only desires to achieve a high social standing so that he can be intimate with the merchant's wife. Her most prominent wish is to maintain her social standing, which she does by exploiting the financial assets of others (she uses the money she gets from Don John to repay the debt she has acquired by purchasing fine clothes that serve to outwardly display her elevated status). She is willing to make use of her sexual influence (by sleeping with the monk and repaying her husband in sexual favours).

Morality as the basis of the Tale's humour

These social and economic forms of power and the sexual power that we see at the heart of the comic narrative of the "Shipman's Tale", help us further understand the moral compass of the characters within the world of this particular fabliau, and with that the motivation behind the acts that create humorous potential within the text. Firstly, we can assume that the merchant's desire to maintain his financial assets is the easiest task, as he tries to improve and heighten that form of wealth, of which he already possesses sufficient amounts. In order to increase his assets, he utilizes his social standing to maintain his (personal and professional) relationships, and thus he increases his wealth and economic power.

The monk, on the other hand, does not show primary interest in financial assets, rather he uses them to increase his social influence, for example when frequently giving gifts to every member of the merchant's household. It is a very distinct form of social influence that he holds as a member of the clergy, and it is a very specific form of social relation he is interested in given his social role – a sexual encounter with the merchant's wife. The encounter can have potential effects on his social standing, as well as on how he is perceived by those around him. This can either be positive, as the conquest of a beautiful lady will be met with social approval, or negative, as a monk sworn to celibacy should not engage in sexual activity, especially with a married woman.

Lastly, the wife, who already possesses considerable social influence, especially in the form of sexual attraction, longs to gain a better social standing by means of purchasing clothes that represent her status. In order to achieve this gain, she must increase her finances to repay the debt she has contracted while trying to improve her social appearance.

All characters have a fairly high degree of cultural influence to begin with, which is displayed in the ways they carry themselves and which is rooted in the general setting of the fabliau in the mercantile world. They are all very careful to behave and speak in a socially appropriate way (for example the merchant agreeing to grant the monk a loan without charging interest). As Nicholson observes, they all use "a consciously formal, often highly stilted manner entirely appropriate to the values they represent" (1978, p. 587).

Against this background, the tale appears like an open market for everyone to freely trade their assets – financial and social – with all actions and choices "rooted in self-interest" (Epstein, 2015, p. 28) and makes them gain, in some form, power over the others. As we have seen from the previous discussion of several theories of humour and the genre of the fabliau, the humour of this tale, as well as the underlying conflict, almost exclusively arise from its

setting and the close parallels that are drawn between the mercantile world and the trade-based relations of the characters.

Trade itself remains an integral part of not only the merchant's professional life and references to his business but also of every single interaction between the characters. Every plot line is tied to a contract, a trade, or a deal, that has been concluded and thus creates a very narrow space that is limited by the restrictions of what a fabliau should be and the rules of the displayed social space. These conditions, according to Helen Fulton, lead to "a commercialism which is so over-determined that it becomes humorous – the buying and selling of goods leads to the buying and selling of money, from where it seems a small step to the buying and selling of anything at all, including wives, friends, and sexual favours" (2002, pp. 318-319). This results in all relationships no longer being "governed by social protocols," but rather "controlled by market forces" (ibid., p. 317).

The protagonists and their moral violations

There are several instances within the tale where the protagonists violate morals. Chaucer makes the husband an ideal businessman and a successful merchant. He thus creates a character that, despite the bad reputation that merchants had to live with, is to be read exclusively positively. His only shortcoming is that he seems neglectful towards the needs of his wife (Schneider, 1977, p. 202). This grants us an interesting foundation when we consider him violating morals. He tends to adhere to the moral precepts of the mercantile world and does not necessarily violate any morals. This can, of course, be easily explained by the fact that the husband, more often than the other characters, and in true fabliau fashion, can be identified as the target of the jokes. Hence, he does not actively contribute to the overall humorous structure of the fabliau and does not need to violate any morals. However, that does not mean that he is a character without fault, as he, in his pursuit to increase his financial assets, withholds these, (and possibly physical assets), from his wife, which in consequence makes her feel neglected, and based on this unsuccessful and unfulfilled mercantile interaction, leads her to make new deals with other men.

With regard to the business dealings, it seems that the wife, by ignoring the rules of the mercantile practice her husband strictly adheres to, and by being willing to violate morals, is more successful in negotiating deals (Woods, 1989, p. 142). She engages in sexual intercourse with a man who is not her husband. At the same time, she initiates this interaction as she is looking to receive payment for the intimate favours that she grants. This general willingness to sell her body finds its climax in the deal she makes with her husband once he approaches her

about the loan that the monk allegedly repaid to her. In her final moral violation, she decides to once more offer sexual interaction as a method of payment for the money she has received. It can be argued that the initial conflict of the tale, and thus the underlying reasoning of the comic narrative, is also caused by a moral violation perpetrated by the wife, explicitly when she decides to spend money that she does not have, which results in a debt that she now has to repay.

Don John violates the first moral principle by sleeping with a married woman, which creates the foundation and a necessity for the first humorous instance and a trick that is to be played on the merchant to conceal the planned adultery. Playing a trick on a close friend is the second moral principle that the monk violates. He is violating yet another moral principle by breaking his oath of celibacy and betraying the trust of his "sworn brother". As a consequence, another humorous instance, and moral violation, is created when he lies about why he needs the loan he asks for. Most prominently he causes the final disruption of the tale by not honouring the deal he agreed with the wife and by telling the husband that he has already repaid the loan. Consequently, both husband and wife "have been exploited by the clever bargaining of the seducer" (Nicholson, 1978, pp. 584-585).

While on the surface level, all the characters become skilful merchants, ultimately none of them seem to have been very successful. The merchant fails, because he seems to only profit from foreign exchange rather than from an actual trade of goods; the monk fails, because there is no long-term profit gained from his encounter with the wife and because he might not be a welcome guest at the merchant's house anymore; and lastly the wife's "lack of children" can be read as testifying "to the unproductive nature of all the transactions in the tale, financial as well as social" (Fulton, 2002, p. 320). So, even the sexual transactions have turned out to be unproductive. While at first, it seems like everyone gets off unscathed, it becomes obvious, upon further consideration, that ultimately, no one is any happier than they were before, though they have all received what they asked for. This eventually leads to the resolution that life for the characters will more or less continue in the way it did before, and, very uncommon for a fabliau, the adulterous relationship is never revealed to the husband, and thus no disruption of the social space takes place (Scattergood, 1977, p. 227), which in itself creates unresolved dramatic irony.

Ultimately, all these instances of moral violations carry humorous potential only because they are created within the small cosmos of the narrative, in which all conditions necessary for them to be perceived as funny are met. These plot lines are a result of the pre-determined nature of the fabliau, and thus they contribute to the creation of an "over-determined

commercialism" as they create a parallel to the mercantile practice. With that they can be identified as central humorous structures within the "Shipman's Tale" in which Chaucer uses dealings that are similarly "wrong" since they go against a common moral, yet "acceptable" within the world of the fabliau. In most instances, the moral violations are tied to linguistic violations (e.g. puns), mostly with a focus on the language of economic exchange, which simultaneously creates a repetition of similar humorous utterances, which confirms the pattern for humorous structures assumed earlier using the GTVH. The "Shipman's Tale" does not provide us with either a public humiliation of the cheated husband or moral advice. Rather it stays contained within its own borders, where morality will always compete with the urge to gain power.

Finally, it becomes clear that while the tale and its structure give the impression of being, at first glance, utterly predictable, the commercialism that is portrayed seems over-determined, and the way the story will unravel seems pre-determined by the restrictions of the genre, at second glance, the "Shipman's Tale," especially towards the end, breaks free from these restrictions, with what Nicholson calls "a pervasive verbal humor of a sort that does not occur in the French fabliaux, and a structure in which the commercialization of sexual dealings, not the conventional triumph of one character over another, seems to be the major point" (1978, p. 583). In this fabliau, the focus is quite obviously shifted from the characters themselves to the relationships between them and how they agree on deals with each other. Albert Silverman regards the story's overarching "commercialization of the marriage relationship" as "the chief ironic point of the *Shipman's Tale*" ("Sex and Money in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale"). All this supports the claim that Chaucer plays with the concept of pre-determinedness and skilfully uses the expectations of the reader to create a comic tale with humorous instances that are heavily dependent on the structural application of the language of commerce when discussing questions of cultural power, and the predictability and repetition of certain humorous instances in order to create heightened humorous potential and perhaps to comment on his surroundings. Ultimately being able to understand the mechanics of humour provides a deeper understanding of the details of a text, but also of the effects it may have had on the society in which it was created (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002, p. 7).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following observations have been made: firstly, all the characters of Chaucer's "Shipman's Tale" are bound to the restrictions and expectations of their social class. As a consequence, the tale, while being the closest example of Chaucer's texts to the French

tradition, lacks significant fabliau-specific humorous structures, especially with regard to the resolution of the tale. Secondly, trade between certain forms of power ultimately lays the foundation of the trickery within the fabliau. Thirdly, all individual plot lines of the "Shipman's Tale" carry humorous potential, because they are created within the small cosmos of the narrative in which all necessary conditions for them to be perceived as funny are met. These conditions are most notably moral violations and the pre-determinedness of the plot within the genre restrictions of the fabliau. These moral violations, by means of the Benign-Violation Hypothesis, can be identified as humorous. And lastly, we read the fabliau as funny because all the violations of morals in the "Shipman's Tale" can be considered benign – especially within the context of a fabliau.

Additionally, it can be said that the proposed pattern of humour within the "Shipman's Tale" based on Attardo and Raskin's GTVH has proven helpful in determining an estimated structure of humorous potential within the tale and in highlighting the aspects that need to be investigated. Finally, the humorous potential within the "Shipman's Tale" can best be described as follows: the characters' urge to maintain their social standing within the "Shipman's Tale" is always tied to a (benign) moral violation and motivated by the longing to gain a certain form of power, which ultimately creates the underlying humorous structures of the tale.

While on a theoretical level, this now shows that the pre-determined nature of the text is what creates at least large parts of the tale's humour, I do not think it has ever been a point of discussion whether the "Shipman's Tale" itself is funny or not, as everyone seems to agree that the fabliaux as a whole, and the Chaucerian fabliaux in particular, are a humorous genre. Maybe ultimately certain parts of the tale have to be funny for them to create in their entirety a unique genre of humorous texts. My analysis of the humorous potential of Chaucer's tale contributes to seeing Chaucer's work not only within the narrow context of his time and culture, but to uncover some of the elements that give his tales a universal and timeless appeal. In that, I would argue that what truly makes the "Shipman's Tale" funny is that the puns and the breaking of morals together create expectations for a pre-determined plot, and the concrete way in which this is realized (compared to the sources) is then what truly accounts for its humorous potential. Of course, personal taste, as with all humorous texts, plays a role too – and, as we know, *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

Endnotes:

[1] For more information see for example Spargo (1930).
[2] For more information on the sources of the "Shipman's Tale" c.f. Scattergood (2002).

[3] For more information on the value of the money that the wives charge their lovers in the different versions of the tale please consult Beidler (1996).
[4] Claims can be made that these last two lines which do not only complete the string of puns on "taille/taillying," but of course also tie a bow on the continuous reference to the mercantile world and practice by highlighting the biggest desire of those involved (to be rich in assets) to carry some moral meaning. However, these lines do not read like the moral tags we typically find in fabliaux which are usually a lot more instructive.
[5] C.f. for example *The Humorous Structures of English Narratives, 1200-1600* by Theresa Hamilton (2013), in which she skillfully applies the GTVH to some of Chaucer's fabliaux.
[6] Other prominently discussed humorous instances, like instances of verbal irony and further plays on words (e.g. "cosyn" and "coysnage") have been left out of this analysis due to its limited scope. While the GTVH would serve as a useful tool to unpack the humorous structures underlying these instances, they only contribute very little to a discussion of the pre-determinedness of the tale's humour, hence why they have been neglected here. For a thorough discussion of puns within the "Shipman's Tale" see: Abraham (1977) or Gerhard (1983). For a further discussion of the social comedy of the "Shipman's Tale" please consult Hume (2006).
[7] Earleywine in "Are Benign Violations Necessary for Humor?", a follow-up study to McGraw and Warren's initial study suggests that further research in this area would prove to be beneficial as it could account for more variance (Earleywine "Benign Violations," p. 14).
[8] An aspect that cannot be discussed in depth here is the personal reception and the matter of "taste in humour" – there might be aspects that influence our personal perception of humour which will lead to us considering a joke even though it arguably carries humorous potential based on the theories of humour, as "not funny." To ensure an objective and theoretical discussion of humorous instances, personal taste will be neglected and only the *humorous potential* of an utterance or situation will be considered. However, some of the aspects that account for personal perception are entailed in Warren and McGraw's consideration of what makes a violation benign.
[9] Of course, the social perception of Keith Richards heightens the humorous potential of the situation suggested here, as Richards in this proposed scene acts in a way that is in accordance with stereotypical "rockstar" behaviour. This governs our expectation of moral behaviour in this context, and the joke would not work as well with a different celebrity that does not have the same reputation or the joke might be received as less funny by someone unfamiliar with Richards.
[10] It also has to be noted that Earleywine in his follow-up study, claims that the notions "wrong" and "not wrong," while sufficient to create humour, might not be ultimately necessary, as text scenarios with a similar structure but without a moral violation did also elicit laughter (p. 13). A detailed discussion of this aspect of the hypothesis is outside the scope of this paper. Since he concludes that the violation itself is what causes humorous potential where it occurs, and since it has proven to elicit laughter more efficiently, we will, for the purpose of this paper, stick with the initially proposed hypothesis as it serves as a logical and productive foundation for an analysis of Chaucer's work (p. 15).
[11] McGraw and Warren state that they "investigated the benign-violation hypothesis in the domain of moral violations. The hypothesis, however, appears to explain humor across a range of domains, including tickling, teasing, slapstick, and puns" (McGraw and Warren, 2010, p. 1147). While they do investigate "the benign-violation hypothesis in the domain of moral violations," Earleywine highlights that "the benign-violation hypothesis can account for humor outside the domain of the stereotypically moral" as well (p. 2), before concluding that "applying it to more scenarios (particularly other violations of linguistic and social norms) should prove heuristic. Further work on the benign-violation hypothesis using violations of other norms, especially those that vary in import across different samples, will help reveal how perceptions of 'wrong' and 'not wrong' function in the generation of humor" (p. 14).
[12] While spending hours counting his money clearly puts the merchant in a position where his wealth is highlighted as a defining part of his character, this also shows how wealth is created through work (a thoroughly bourgeois approach) and thus stands in contrast to the way the nobility, for example, deals with and displays wealth. This way, Chaucer further underlines the bourgeois setting of the tale. Furthermore, the counting of the money also serves as a simple way to remove the husband from the scene of the fabliau and gives room to the necessary deal negotiation between the other protagonists.

Works Cited:

Abraham, D. H. 1977. “Cosyn and Cosynage: Pun and Structure in the ‘Shipman’s Tale’.” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vo. 11, No. 4, pp. 319-327.

Attardo, S. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humor*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Attardo, S. 2001. *Humorous Texts: a Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Beidler, P. G. 1996. “The Price of Sex in Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale’.” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 5-17.

Benson, L. D. (ed.). 1987. *The Riverside Chaucer.* 3rd edition. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Crocker, H. A. 2007. *Chaucer’s Visions of Manhood*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Earleywine, M. “Are Benign Violations Necessary for Humor?” Available at: <https://www.albany.edu/~me888931/earleywinemankoffbenignviolationsextension.pdf> [accessed November 06, 2023].

Epstein, R. 2015. “The Lack of Interest in the Shipman’s Tale: Chaucer and the Social Theory of the Gift.” In: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 113, No. 1, pp. 27-48.

Finlayson, J. 2002. “Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale’, Boccaccio, and the ‘Civilizing’ of the Fabliau.” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 336-351.

Fulton, H. 2002. “Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer’s ‘Shipman’s Tale.’” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 311-328.

Gerhard, J. 1983. “Chaucer’s Coinage: Foreign Exchange and the Puns of the ‘Shipman’s Tale’.” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 341-357.

Hamilton, T. 2013. *The Humorous Structures of English Narratives, 1200-1600.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Hempelmann, Ch. F. 2014. “Mechanisms of Humor.” *Encyclopedia of Humour Studies*. Ed. Salvatore Attardo, vol. 2. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing Inc., pp. 493-494.

Hume, C. 2006. “Domestic Opportunities: The Social Comedy of the ‘Shipman’s Tale.’” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 138-162.

Martin, R. A. 2007. *The Psychology of Humor: an Integrative Approach*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

McGraw, A. Peter and Caleb Warren. 2010. “Benign Violations: Making Immoral Behavior Funny.” In: *Psychological Science*, Vol. 21, No. 8, pp. 1141-1149.

Mulder, M.P. and A. Nijholt. “Humour Research: State of the Art.” 2002. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/2474262_Humour_Research_State_of_the_Art> [accessed July 28, 2023].

Nicholson, P. 1978. “The ‘Shipman’s Tale’ and the Fabliaux.” In: *ELH*, Vol. 45, No. 5, pp. 583-596.

Raskin, V. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Riley, D. 2017. “Bourdieu’s Class Theory – The Academic as Revolutionary.” In: *Catalyst*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 108-136.

Ruch, W., S. Attardo, and V. Raskin. 1993. “Towards an Empirical Verification of the General Theory of Verbal Humor.” In: *HUMOR*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 123-136.

Scattergood, V. J. 1977. “The Originality of the ‘Shipman’s Tale’.” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 210-231.

Scattergood, V. J. 2002. “The Shipman’s Tale.” In: *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales II*. Eds. Robert Correale and Mary Hamel. Cambridge: Brewer, pp. 571-581.

Schneider, P. S. 1977. “’Taillynge Ynough’: The Function of Money in the ‘Shipman’s Tale’.” In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 201-209.

Silverman, A. H. “Sex and Money in Chaucer’s Shipman’s Tale.” In: *Harvard’s Geoffrey Chaucer Website.* Available at: <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/silverman-sex-and-money-chaucers-shipmans-tale> [accessed October 23, 2023].

Spargo, J. W. 1930. *Chaucer' Shipman's Tale: The Lover's Gift Regained.* Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia,
Streckeisen, P. 2014. *Soziologische Kapitaltheorie: Marx, Bourdieu und der ökonomische Imperialismus*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
Woods, W. F. 1989. "A Professional Thyng: The Wife as Merchant's Apprentice in the 'Shipman's Tale'." In: *The Chaucer Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2, pp. 139-149.

Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena
Ernst-Abbe-Platz 8, Raum 613
D-07743 Jena
larissa.zoller@uni-jena.de