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**HUMOUR IN THE CANTERBURY TALES  
UNDERGRADUATE THESIS**

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

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vlastnoruční podpis

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## ABSTRACT

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The subject of this bachelor thesis is the exploration of the humour in one of the most famous and most acclaimed medieval works of the father of English literature, English language and humour - Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. At the very beginning the origin of this humour is explored, its purpose and its theories. It focuses on humour in medieval times, in particular, on Chaucer's wit. Then *The Canterbury Tales* itself is unveiled and the specific humour in the whole work and in selected tales, particularly in "The General Prologue", "The Knight's Tale", "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale" and "The Miller's and Reeve's Tales" is analysed. The quotations in this bachelor thesis are written in Medieval English on the left side and in consideration of the potential reader there is a modern interpretation of *The Canterbury Tales* by A.S. Kline on the right side.

This thesis explores not only the book itself but it also compares the humour in the book with the humour in some film adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales*.

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# INTRODUCTION

The possibility of laughing without worry is one of the signs of a healthy society. There were times when inappropriate laughing at various occasions could be ruthlessly punished. It was in the Middle Ages when Geoffrey Chaucer lived and when he shared his objections to problems in his society via the humour in his works. People in those days wanted the heaviness of their lives to be lifted off. It is not said in vain that laughter heals, and that it is one of the most beautiful things you can give to someone. Because of its innocence and lightness, humour is one of the greatest enemies of politics and in Chaucer's times it was the greatest enemy of the Church, of the ideology of patriarchy and of all other instances of those who preached water and drank wine. Where politics and other institutions in charge seek to create impenetrable boundaries, humour can break them down with ease and insight. They give us the themes of grace, humanity, and sensitivity to avoid succumbing to the false impression that this is what it is about and what we need. It is true nowadays and it was true in every time period. That is how every ideology works. The humour stands in opposition; it can be cruel, insensitive, and intolerant. Geoffrey Chaucer was a brilliant writer who was able to use humour, especially satire and irony, in a way that enabled him to educate people and literally to open their eyes to be cautious of ruling institutions. He drew attention to the flaws of noblemen, clergymen, men ruling their women, etc. in order to make people think critically not only about themselves alone but also about the ruling classes. The prevailing behaviour of poor people in the Middle Ages was to blindly obey whatever rule was given them and Chaucer wanted this to be changed. He is sometimes disrespectful but his humour is also fair, targeting nearly everyone with no regard for social class, wealth or personal conditions. And if there is anybody treated unjustly, the reader can be certain that the person deserves that exact treatment.

The ability to laugh at serious things and keep one's distance makes us real people. Therefore Chaucer used his wit and filled *The Canterbury Tales* with humour from page one to the very end. Geoffrey Chaucer is even able to laugh at himself. That is what makes the author of satiric works more sincere when he puts himself on the front line.

In my undergraduate thesis I have focused on the humour in *The General Prologue*, *The Knight's Tale*, *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, *The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*. First, there is a chapter dedicated to a description of different kinds of humour to provide a theoretical background to the whole work. Then particular tales are scrutinized together with their film adaptations. The film adaptations are given with an eye to how they

contradict the book and also include an evaluation of their similarity to Chaucer's targets of humour.



# 1 HUMOUR IN CHAUCER

Many contradictory theories on sense of humour exist. However, they agree on one thing: humour is difficult to define. Humour is what makes the reader smile or laugh. It is a “pervasive feature of human life. We find it everywhere – at work, at play, in private and public affairs.” (Carroll, 2014, p. 6). There are many types of humour in literature and in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* some of them may be found.

While it might seem that the Middle Ages was a dark time of serious matters such as the plague and other disasters, it was also a period of blooming chivalry, desire for learning, prosperous romance and yearning for amusement. Literature here played an important role in spreading humour throughout the country (Ackroyd, 2005).

The most common form of humour in the Middle Ages were rude and often crude practical jokes, usually directed towards foolish husbands, bad wives, local priests and even historical figures, which were full of trickery and sexuality. People tend to think that it is a twenty-first century concern to see a lot of sex on television, in magazines and so forth. Therefore, it might be shocking to some that these bawdy stories the reader approaches in *The Canterbury Tales* come from the medieval imagination.

Twelfth and thirteenth century texts among others included Medieval Latin adaptations of classical comedy and French fabliaux. Together with *Facetiae*, one of the best known joke books by Italian scholar Poggio Bracciolini, they are the most famous funny stories in the Middle Ages. The French fabliau is “a short story in verse...relating a comic or bawdy incident from middle-class life” (Preminger, 1972). The fabliau became very popular in the fourteenth century in England and its favourite theme was the cuckolding of a foolish husband. They all included bawdy humour, adultery, jealous husbands, younger lovers, etc. (Fichte, 1987).

Chaucer had an excellent education, he studied law and was fluent in French, Latin and Italian, and therefore it is probable that he was familiar with these Latin texts and French fabliaux as they are clearly visible in his *Canterbury Tales*. Brown (2002) presents several original stories and their revised versions in the *Tales*. Chaucer uses the form of French fabliau for the Cook, the Merchant and the Shipman. It is noteworthy to mention the French fabliau of *The Miller and the Two Clerks* that Chaucer used for his “Reeve’s Tale”, the Flemish tale of *Heile of Bersel* for “The Miller’s Tale”, and Chaucer also reworked and used as a source several

Latin comedies such as *Lydia* that was used as an episode in “The Merchant’s Tale” and *Pamphilus* whose name Chaucer mentions in “The Franklin’s Tale”.

Even though Chaucer was definitely inspired by French and Latin texts his humour is essentially English. His humour is considered by almost every critic as being sympathetic. Although he criticizes particular institutions and particular problems in Medieval society, he makes more fun of the individual than of the institution to which he or she belongs.

There exist several medieval definitions of the word comedy. According to Brown (2002), there are two main definitions. One definition results from the compound formed from two words: “oda”, which means song, and “comos” meaning peasant or rustic. Comedia in this sense is rustic poetry that is used by peasants, contains low vocabulary and deals with peasant life matters such as the cultivation of land, stock raising and rural sexual activity.

An alternative etymological definition ascribes the creation of the word comedy to the word “banquet” which means festival banqueting. Festive occasions were traditional contexts for medieval comedy. Brown states that the abundant use of alcohol and great amounts of food led to people breaking the rules, and the telling of jokes together with vulgarity became a common means of entertainment (Brown, 2002).

Even *The Canterbury Tales* itself are connected to feasting. At the opening of “The General Prologue” the pilgrims gather in the Tabard Inn and, refreshed with alcohol, they start their journey to Canterbury. Likewise, the final prize for the best tale promises to be a banquet in honour of the winner.

Although Chaucer himself never used the word comedy in his *Canterbury Tales*, he refers to such a comedy when describing an amusing story that the pilgrims are supposed to tell and the others would prefer to hear.

Chaucer had an astonishing knowledge of people and was a penetrating observer. This ability was gained throughout his rich life. His family members left the countryside; they were successful in the city and even in the royal court, and thanks to them Chaucer could experience quite a number of professions. He worked as a squire, a page, a soldier, a courtier, an officeholder and a diplomat. Chaucer was a successful burgher, a gentleman and a modern person with modern tendencies.

He travelled a lot and met plenty of people from different levels of English and European society. He knew English, Italian, Flemish and German courtiers, soldiers, scholars, merchants, monks, clergymen, ladies and maidservants, and they were a huge inspiration and served as models for the characters in his work. He is considered to be a great humourist because he loves people in spite of their weaknesses.

Chaucer practises humour repeatedly in *The Canterbury Tales* not only to entertain but also to call attention to the social problems of his day. His object is to present life as he sees it. He does not simply describe the events and people around him; he uses humour to convey a message. The most commonly used type of humour in *The Canterbury Tales* is satire which is a work that uses irony and exaggeration to expose problems, hypocrisy and other negative sides of people or events. The best example of humorous exaggeration is the Friar in the following excerpt:

Ther was no man nowher so vertuous;  
 He was the best bagger in al his hous.  
 (GP ll. 251-252)

There was no man half so virtuous.  
 He was the finest beggar of his house.

Chaucer exaggerates the best Friar in the friary with twinkling eyes as well as the Franklin that has no equal or the best Doctor of Physic in the world or the world-famous cloth-making Wife of Bath.

By means of irony and satire Chaucer attacks two institutions of medieval society, the Church and marriage. The Roman Catholic Church is, according to Chaucer, permeated with hypocrisy and is only concerned with earning money, and the members of the church constantly break their own rules. Chaucer is upset with the Church's hypocrisy and he wants to see it change. The reader can find many remarks and criticism in almost every tale and every prologue. Here is one specific example occurring in "The Pardoner's Prologue" where the Pardoner is describing his own hypocrisy and corruption in the Church:

I stonde lik a clerk in my pulpit,  
 And whan the lewed people is down y-set,  
 I preche so as ye have herd bifore,  
 And telle hem an hundred japes more –  
 Than peyne I me to strecche forth my necke,  
 And est and west upon the people I bekke  
 As doth a dowfe syttyng on berne.  
 Myn hondes and my tonge goon so yerne  
 That is it joye to se my busynesse.  
 Of avarice, and of such cursednesse  
 Is al my preching; for to make hem fre  
 To geve here pens, and namely unto me;  
 For myn entent is nought but for to wynne,  
 And nothing for correccioun of synne.

I stand like a cleric in my pulpit,  
 And after the unlettered people sit,  
 I preach thus as you have heard before,  
 And tell a hundred false stories more.  
 Then I take to stretching forth my neck,  
 And east and west nod with due effect,  
 Just like a dove sitting on a barn.  
 My hands and tongue then work so hard  
 That it is a joy to view the business.  
 Of avarice and all such wickedness  
 Is all my preaching, thus to set them free  
 To give their pence, and namely, unto me.  
 For my intent is only gain to win,  
 Not to correct them when they chance to sin.

<p>I rekke never when thay ben y-beryed          Though that here soules gon a-blakeberyed!          (<i>Pard. Pro. ll 103-118</i>)</p>	<p>For I care nothing, at their burying,          Whether their souls have gone blackberrying!</p>
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Chaucer is using satire to make fun of the Church's hypocrisy on purpose. He is educating the readers to be aware of the Church and its corrupted and authentic members. He points out that religious people are usually well-educated and good spokesmen, that is why the reader should be aware of them. The best examples are the aforementioned Summoner and the Pardoner:

<p>He was in church a noble ecclesiaste;          Weel cowde he rede a lessoun or a storye,          But altherbest he sang an offertorie,          For wel he wiste whan that song was songe,          He most preche and wel affyle his tunge,          To coynne silver as he right wel cowde,          Therefore he sang ful meriely and lowde.          (<i>GP 702 – 708</i>)</p>	<p>He was in church a noble ecclesiast,          He read a lesson well or a story,          But best of all he sang an Offertory.          For well he knew, when that song was sung,          He must preach and well tune his tongue          To win silver, as he well knew how;          Therefore he sang more sweetly and loud.</p>
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The second institution criticized in *The Canterbury Tales* is the institution of marriage and the position of women in society. Women were subordinated to men and they had to obey their husbands and fathers completely. A man could even beat his wife if she were disobedient. In medieval times there were strictly specified women's roles. For a peasant woman it was childbearing, housework and fieldwork, and for an aristocratic woman it was childbearing and household supervision. According to Mann (2002), Chaucer strongly disagrees with this division and submission and criticizes it. His is the first feminised voice in medieval times, which can be seen especially in the character of the Wife of Bath (who will be described in detail later), but also, for instance, in "The Clerk's Tale" where the reader can feel a strong criticism of patriarchy (exaggerated here) as well as criticism of the Church itself. Chaucer wants women to be equal to men and he requires women to be treated well, with care and tenderness. He presents marriage as something beautiful. In his stories the cheating partner often gets "disciplined" or ridiculed at the very last. Chaucer is not only aware of the pleasant side of marriage but also of its obstacles.

His humour is often directed at human bodily functions and sexuality. Everyone has some kind of imperfection and Chaucer describes these imperfections in a light way. His humour also contains signs of sympathy and the reader easily gets to the stage when he feels some regret or

sympathy for the particular character. Chaucer makes the reader appreciate a character even when he or she is laughing at this person. The reader might even appreciate the malevolent Miller at the end of “The Reeve’s Tale”:

Thus is the prowde miller wel y-bete  
And hath y-lost the gyndyng of the whete,  
And payed for the soper everydel  
Of Alyen and of John, that beten him wel.  
His wyf is swyved and his doughter als.  
Lo, such it is a miller to be fals!  
And therto this proverbe is seyde ful soth –  
He thar nat weene wel that evel doth.  
A gylour schal him self bygiled be,  
And God, that sittest in thy mageste,  
Save al this comaignie gret & smale –  
Thus have I quyte the miller in his tale.  
(*Reeve’s Tale ll 461-472*)

So the proud miller they did soundly beat,  
And he has lost his grinding of the wheat,  
And paid for the supper there as well,  
Of Alan and John who wrought as I did tell;  
His wife is had, and his daughter else.  
Lo, what comes of being a miller false!  
And therefore the proverb still proves true:  
Don’t hope for good if you evil do.  
A trickster himself beguiled will be.  
And God, that sits in high majesty,  
Save all this company, both great and small.  
- Now my tale has paid the Miller and all.

*The Canterbury Tales* is an estate satire which effectively criticizes the main social classes of the time described. Chaucer expresses the opinion that a person does not necessarily belong to a social class by birth, but rather by effort and work. Many of Chaucer’s characters do not even fit in any of the three classes or estates – the clergy, the nobility and the peasantry - but they are part of a kind of rising middle class as in the case of the Wife of Bath.

## 2 HUMOUR IN PARTICULAR TALES

### 2.1 HUMOUR IN THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

“The General Prologue” of *The Canterbury Tales* is not the sort of prologue to a book that might seem unimportant or boring, the kind which people would rather avoid. “The General Prologue” is an absolutely necessary part of *The Canterbury Tales* and must not be omitted. It is also considered to be the most important part of the whole book.

“The General Prologue” functions as a frame tale to all the remaining stories in the book. It consists of facetious brief sketches of each character. The sketches describe both the inside and the outside of each character.

Chaucer introduces each character through a narrator whose name is also Chaucer but a reader has to be alert and has to carefully distinguish between Chaucer the writer and Chaucer the narrator because they are not the same person. While Chaucer the writer is being very critical, uncharitable and sometimes severe, Chaucer the narrator is naive, unsuspecting, agrees with almost everybody, and always says how great the characters are regardless of their sins and bad behaviour. We cannot trust him. There is an example in the description of the Monk in “The General Prologue”:

He gaf nat of that text a pulled hen  
That seith that hunters been noon holy men,  
Ne that a monk whan he is cloysterles  
Is likned to a fische that is watirles:  
This is to seyn, a monk out of his cloystre –  
But thilke text hild he not worth an oystre.  
And I seide his opinion was good –  
What schulde he studie and make himselfe  
wood  
Uppon a book in cloystre alway to powre,  
Or swynke with his handes and laboure  
As Austyn byt: how schal the world be  
served?  
Lat Austyn have his swynk to him reserved!  
(*GP ll. 177– 188*)

He gave not for that text a plucked hen  
That says that hunters are not holy men,  
And that monk when he grows heedless  
Is like a fish that's all waterless –  
That is to say a monk out of his cloister –  
But he held that text not worth an oyster.  
And I agreed his views were scarcely bad:  
What! Should he study, drive himself  
quite mad,  
In his cloister over a book must pore,  
Or labour with his hands, and toil the more  
As Augustine bids?  
How would the world run?  
Let Augustine keep his labour for his own!

Chaucer the narrator confirms the Monk's opinions that a clergy man does not have to stay in the cloister and does not have to obey the Church's rules, but Chaucer the writer completely

disagrees because he criticizes the Church for its hypocrisy and for the instant breaking of its own rules. Brewer (2013), when talking about “The Prologue”, states “For all the variety of attitude in this extraordinarily rich *Prologue*, comic satire predominates.” Chaucer the writer is wise and sees the things that the narrator does not see. The narrator calls himself social and naive, is robust and is interested in astrology, medicine and dream interpretation. He also presents himself as short-witted. Chaucer is preparing a kind of “an escaping or excusatory way” at the end of “The General Prologue”. Chaucer the writer knows that he may upset a few people, therefore he uses the narrator to tell the reader that he is only going to interpret what the pilgrims say, and if anyone feels offended, it is not his fault because he is only reporting the stories. He says that he has to tell the truth because firstly, Christ always reminds us to tell the truth, secondly, because Plato advises us to tell the truth and thirdly because he excuses himself. He says that if he offends someone, it is not his fault because he is not responsible for it.

Later in the work Chaucer says what he wants to say and he uses satire and irony not only to entertain but also to teach and educate people. For example in the introduction of “The Miller’s Tale” the innkeeper talks to the Monk while describing him:

I vow to God, thou hast a ful fair skin.	I swear to God you have a full fair skin!
It is a gentil pasture ther thou gost;	They’ll be gentle pastures to which you post,
Thow art not lik a penaut or a goost.	You look not like a penitent or ghost.

*(The Monk’s Prologue, ll 45-47)*

Through Harry Bailey’s words Chaucer satirizes the character and behaviour of clergy men and educates people that they must not believe all the preaching and doctrines of the Church as the Church itself is neither honest nor incorrupt.

All the characters introduced in “The General Prologue” are the future storytellers of particular tales. Chaucer will make up these stories by himself but he will have these characters tell them. There are 29 pilgrims, Chaucer the narrator, and the Host, Harry Bailey, who is the owner of the Tabard Inn, where everything starts and the one who escorts the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury. “The General Prologue” is a kind of a “trailer” by which Chaucer wants to attract the reader’s attention and make him willing to read more and more. Each pilgrim represents a particular group of people and is called by the name of the occupation that he or she represents. Chaucer pays attention to the speech of each person, their clothing, appearance, their possessions, behaviour and other details and he gives us great insight into medieval society.

Not all the characters in “The General Prologue” are satirized or ironized. There are at least three persons described as perfect representative of three society estates previously described. They are the Plowman, a positive and perfect example of peasantry, the Knight, a positive and perfect example of nobility and the Parson, a positive and perfect example of the clergy. They are not satirized because they are supposed to represent good examples of uncorrupted, clean types.

On the other hand, other characters stand for what people should not be and how people should not behave not only in the Middle Ages but even in our time. Chaucer uses here an estates satire to analyse society and its problems through these characters. An interesting fact is that Chaucer completely excludes the higher aristocracy and the really poor. They are not satirized and the Knight is the highest ranked person in the whole *Canterbury Tales* and even positively described as an ideal figure.

Chaucer often puts people together and creates juxtapositions or ironic contrasts between two details or two characters as for example between the Parson and the Friar or the Monk. Also the perfect example of chivalry, the Knight, is imminently followed by his profligate son, the Squire, etc.

Satire appears in “The General Prologue” from the very beginning when Chaucer describes the arrival of spring with all its beautiful and poetic aspects but the irony is that the pilgrims on their way to Canterbury have to pass 50 miles along muddy roads which are far from being poetic.

The whole story starts at the Tabard Inn which is situated in an entertainment district of London next to the hotel Bell. Chaucer is using irony because he mentions the hotel Bell as the high class hotel but it is in fact a disorderly house. The fact that pilgrims meet each other in a pub is also very ironic because the pilgrimage is a holy and religious enterprise and clergy should not spend their time drinking and enjoying themselves in taverns.

The first pilgrim that Chaucer introduces is the Knight. He is not satirized because he represents the virtues of nobility. He is a very important character because he stands in contrast to other characters that are satirized. The Knight comes from the upper class and practices chivalry, the code of knights. He is a very honest, truthful and generous gentleman. He is wise and experienced as he travelled a lot. He has just returned from a battle and is dressed modestly and unobtrusively. The Knight is not concerned with money and labour but only with battle and the defence of the country.



A knight ther was, and that a worthy man,  
That from the tyme that he ferst bigan  
To ryden out, he lovede chyvalrye,  
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curtesie.  
(*GP ll. 43 – 46*)

There was a Knight and he a worthy man,  
That from the day on which he first began,  
To ride abroad, had followed chivalry,  
Truth, honour, courtesy and charity.

In juxtaposition to the Knight stands the Squire, his son. He is approximately 20 years old; he is a warrior like his father, but he is fighting for other purposes. He is a lover, and in order to gain ladies he must prove that he is a great warrior. Therefore, he fights only in nearby battles so he can stay near his ladies.

And he hadde ben some tyme in chivachie  
In Flaundres, in Artoys and in Picardie;  
And born him wel as in so litel space,  
In hope to stonden to his lady grace.  
(*GP ll. 84 – 87*)

And had served a while in the cavalry,  
In Flanders, in Artois and Picardy,  
And done so well, and in so short a space,  
He hoped for favour from his lady's grace.

The Squire does not really enjoy battles as his father does, but uses them as a great instrument to attract women.

Chaucer often describes personality through appearance. The Squire is quite interested in his own appearance. He is of average height and has outstanding curly hair that looks as if it has been pressed. He is well-educated, loves to sing, dance, write poetry and songs, and play the flute. Chaucer satirizes him for his insincerity. He calls him a player. The Squire is expected to be loyal but he is not. He is only diligent when his father is near.

Together with the Knight and the Squire the Yeoman is also introduced, a man who was the Knight's servant but is now independent. He is not truly satirized but he wears green clothing to show that he loves hunting. He also wears his weapons visible since they are his passion.

After these three representatives of chivalry the description of the Nun, the Prioress or Madame Eglentyne follows. She is the first clergy person described and the first character that is satirized in real terms. Even though the satire and irony used here are milder than the satire and irony applied in the characteristics of other Church members.

The Prioress is an entertaining, pleasant, friendly, attractive and cheerful person who has courtly manners that she is not supposed to have. She likes to pretend she is a part of the court. Chaucer satirizes here her desire for a lady-like behaviour and emphasises the contradiction between the nun and her personality:

At mete wel y-taught was sche withalle –  
Sche leet no morsel from hire lippes falle,  
Ne wette hire fyngers in hire sauce deepe.  
Wel cowde sche carie a morsel and wel keepe  
That no drope fil uppon hire brest:  
In curtesie was sett al hire lest.

(*GP ll. 127 – 132*)

At meals she had been taught well withal;  
And from her lips she let no morsel fall,  
Nor dipped her fingers in the sauce too deep;  
Well could she take a morsel and then keep  
The slightest drop from falling on her breast;  
Courtesy it was that pleased her best.

All her desires are to maintain courtesy. She is also concerned with her appearance, which might be a problem for a nun as nuns are supposed to be humble. She wears a medallion with an engraved courtly motto in Latin: “Amor vincit omnia” – Love conquers all” (*GP, l. 162*). She does not only love people but animals as well. She would be very alarmed and worried if someone were to hurt even a mouse, and she loves her dogs. Chaucer also satirizes her desire to speak French. She only knows a few French phrases which she repeats over and over again and pretends she speaks French fluently. People who do not speak French might assume that she has an excellent knowledge of it. Chaucer expresses her hypocritical behaviour. He also describes her appearance by using irony:

But sikurly, sche hadde a fair forheed:  
It was almost a spanne brood, I trowe,  
For hardily sche was not undurgrowe.

(*GP ll. 154 – 156*)

But certainly she had a fair forehead,  
It was almost a span broad, I deem,  
Fro she was not small of build, I mean.

“Not small of build” here or “not undurgrowe” in Middle English means in a gentle way that she is quite large because she loves to eat, which is another type of behaviour not appropriate for the Prioress as she is supposed to live in poverty. She is accompanied by another nun and three priests.

The Monk is another representative of the Church in “The General Prologue” and here Chaucer begins to use irony and satire in a graver and sharper form. If a person in the Middle Ages, or even nowadays, is a true believer, he or she is not allowed to have love affairs; she or he is supposed to live in celibacy if unmarried, and the person is also not supposed to be rich. On the contrary, she or he is supposed to give all money to the Church.

Chaucer expresses a very critical portrait of the Monk, who ignores the rules of his order and only believes what he wants from the *Bible*:

<p>The reule of Seynt Maure or of Seint Beneyt          Bycause that it was old and somdel streyt          This ilke monk leet forby hem pace,          And helde aftur the newe world the space.          (GP ll. 173 – 176)</p>	<p>The rule of Saint Benedict and Saint Mawr,          As old and somewhat strict he would ignore,          This same monk scorned the old world's pace,          And spurred after the new world, apace.</p>
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Chaucer amplifies the characterization and description of the Monk's personality, opinions and interests. The Monk likes to spend most of his time outside the cloister riding his ponies, hunting and eating a lot. But he is supposed to be poor, be inside the monastery, and should pray all day. Chaucer exaggerates even when describing the Monk's favourite food which is a roasted swan, a symbol of luxury. Chaucer satirizes the Monk's way of life and his total disregard of all rules. Paradoxically, Chaucer writes that he agrees with the Monk. But the reader has to be cautious because this is not Chaucer the writer, but Chaucer the narrator, who agrees with almost everybody, does not criticize, and who is the exact opposite of the writer.

In "The General Prologue" Chaucer expresses his disagreement with the hypocrisy of the Church. He describes this hypocrisy in three different shades. The first and tenderest satire is used for the description of the nun who pretends to speak French fluently and has courtly manners. The second criticized and ironized religious person is the Monk who is supposed to live inside the cloister and follow the rules of his order, but who is the genuine opposite. It is with him that Chaucer uses a bit harsher satire. The third and the strongest satire is used with the Friar who is the worst of all the religious persons described in "The General Prologue".

Chaucer says that the Friar is one of the best in his order but he is very ironic and satirical and according to Bloom (2008) Chaucer was criticized for this kind of writing. The writer says that the Friar is intimate which can have two explanations. Firstly, we can explain it as meaning that the Friar is friendly, but more likely Chaucer intends to express that the Friar is sexually active. He describes and satirizes him in the most appalling way.

<p>He hadde y-made many a fair mariage          Of yonge wyemen at his owne cost.          (GP ll. 212 – 213)</p>	<p>And he had arranged many a marriage          Of young women, granting each a dower.</p>
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This does not mean that the good old Friar marries young women to men of his church, but this rather implies that he makes them pregnant and only after that does he arrange marriage for them with his men.

The Friar also likes to take money from wealthy people when he hears their confessions and he even says that he has a licence from the Pope which he most probably has not. He likes to go to the bars and pubs because this is the best place to sell absolutions. Chaucer is making observations of what is wrong with the church of his days. The reader finds out that the Friar's name is Herbert but this is not certain because the Friar is very untrustworthy.

The Friar is followed by a group of non-clergy people who are satirized only in a light way. First is the Merchant who is defined by his clothes and who flaunts his wealth. Even if he had no money and was in debt, people would not discern this. Chaucer tells us that the narrator does not remember his name which represents another instance of satire because Chaucer does not consider him to be important while the Merchant himself feels that he is the most important person in the world.

The second is the Oxford Clerk. He is described as a thin, poor person with a hollow look who cares about money only because he can exchange it for books. He is keen on education and he is especially fond of philosophers, most of all Aristotle. He believes in Plato's four virtues: wisdom, courage, discipline and justice. He is not interested in women and money and Chaucer places him in juxtaposition with the holy men – the Monk and the Friar - who are corrupted and slick.

The third is the Sergeant at law who represents a person similar to today's lawyer or a policeman. He is devoted to money and pretends to be busier than he really is. The narrator again says that he is a very good and wise man:

Discret he was and of gret reverence;	Discret he was, a man for reverence -
He seemed such, his wordes were so wise.	Or so he seemed, his words being to wise.

(*GP II*. 312 – 313)

But the reader can feel from this fragment that Chaucer the writer is being sarcastic and ironic again.

The Franklin is together with the Sergeant at law. He is a wealthy landowner from the upper class. He is very Epicurean – lives according to Epicurus's dictum: "Eat, drink, be happy for tomorrow we die." He behaves like a celebrity, enjoys his wealth, and has only the finest of everything – food, wine, and servants who do exactly what he says. He has a table set all day which is not normal in Chaucer's day. Because of his money he has political power which helps

him gain more money. The reader might not be sure if Chaucer is serious or ironic when describing him, maybe both.

There then follows a guild fellowship and the people who belong to this group are together because they can demand more money when working together. And they need the money because they are all married and their wives want new clothes, want to be called “madam” and want to be a part of the upper middle class.

One of the shortest introductions is devoted to the Cook who is an essential part of the group and makes really good meals like the delicious traditional British meal Blancmange. But he has one noticeable and serious problem, an ulcer on his knee which he keeps touching while cooking dishes for people. Chaucer satirizes how people blindly trust other people and he makes his readers wonder what is actually going on in restaurants when cooks are preparing meals, even nowadays this may give us pause for thought.

Another character is the Shipman, a person whose name is not mentioned in “The General Prologue” but paradoxically the name of his boat is – the Magdelayne (after St. Mary Magdalene). Chaucer describes him as dishonest because of the theft of wine. He is very uncomfortable while riding a horse because he spends all his life on the sea. This is an entertaining description reminding us of seasickness on dry land. He is satirized because he drinks a lot and does not always follow the rules. People trust him, but he is dishonest. He does not hesitate to throw somebody overboard.

Of nyce conscience took he no keep.	The nicer rules of conscience did not keep:
If that he foughte and hadde the heigher hand	If he fought, and gained the upper hand
By water he sente hem hoom to every land.	He sent men home by water to every land.

(*GP ll.* 398 – 400)

The Doctor is very fond of money and is guileful. He even disregards basic rules of ethics and earns money from people affected by the plague.

He kepte that he wan in pestilence,	He kept the money won from pestilence.
For gold in phisik is a cordial;	For gold in physic is a cordial;
Therefore he lovede gold in special.	Therefore he loved gold above all.

(*GP ll.* 442 – 444)

Chaucer is making fun of this profession in his days because doctors treated the ill more by means of astrology than by the use of medicine.

One of the most important characters in *The Canterbury Tales* is the Wife of Bath. Through the Wife of Bath Chaucer attacks the Aristotelian patriarchy, meaning that men rule women and that women belong to men and have to obey them. The Wife of Bath is the exact opposite to it because she would never be subordinate to any man and, what is more, she would rule men. Chaucer speaks about the fact that women should be equal to men. The reader does not uncover this fact in “The General Prologue” but in the Wife’s own tale and in “The Prologue to the Wife of Bath’s Tale”. The Wife is partially deaf and the reader finds out why in “The Prologue to the Wife of Bath’s Tale”. She likes to talk and here the reader can spot another Chaucerian irony because he creates a person who is partially deaf and consequently cannot always hear what other people say but paradoxically loves to talk all the time.

The Wife of Bath is a cloth maker and hates when somebody wears other clothes than those that she has made herself.

<p>Of cloth making sche hadde such an haunt,          Sche passed hem of Ypris and of Gaunt.          In al the parisshe wyfne was ther noon          That to the offryng byforn hire schulde goon,          And if ther dide, certeyn, so wroth was sche          That sche was thane out of alle charite.          (GP ll. 447 – 452)</p>	<p>In cloth-making she was excellent,          Surpassing those of Ypres and of Ghent.          In all the parish there was no wife, so          Before her to the Offertory might go –          And if they did, indeed, so angry she          That she was quite put out of charity.</p>
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She is very strong minded woman with tremendous self-confidence. She has been married five times and thinks that she knows more about love than other people:

<p>Of remedies of love sche knew perchaunce,          For of that art ache knew the olde daunce.          (GP ll. 474 – 475)</p>	<p>And remedies for love she had, by chance,          For in that art she knew the oldest dance.</p>
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She has also travelled a lot and has made journeys to Jerusalem, Rome, Bologna, Celicia and Cologne which were all significant destinations of pilgrimages in the Middle Ages. Therefore she feels that she is more religious than others because she has visited those places and some of them even more than once.

She is described in a humorous way as being “bigger in the middle section” with gapped teeth which might be used as a means of describing her prowess in sexual practices. She is also wearing the colour red which is associated with prostitution.

Chaucer does not want only to entertain but also to educate. He attacks the hypocrisy in the Church and he wants to see it changed. Therefore he creates a perfect religious person, a kind of prototype, the good Parson who has a good reputation, who is poor, and gives all his money to poor people. He is a true believer and not a hypocrite as are the other religious people described in the book. He is in juxtaposition to the Monk, the Friar, the Summoner and the Pardoner. He is very devoted to God and the church and represents an ideal religious person.

A good man was ther of religion,	A holy man there was of good renown,
And was a pore person of a toun,	Who was a poor Parson to a town,
But riche he was of holy thought and werk.	But rich he was in holy thought and works.
He was also a lerned man, a clerk,	He also was a learned man, a clerk,
That Crist's gospel gladly wolde preche.	That Christ's gospel earnestly would preach;
His parischens devoutly wold he teche.	His parishioners devoutly would teach.

(*GP ll. 477 – 482*)

Chaucer also criticizes the greediness of the Church through the Parson's character.

Another example of a positive prototype is the Plowman. He is the good Parson's brother and he is extremely holy, pays his tithes and does not complain about his poverty. Chaucer ends his description of individual characters here, and because he wants to keep the reader's attention he tells us that there are only a few characters left.

One of the remaining characters is the Miller who is an immensely huge, comic person with a red beard and a red head owing to which he is compared to a fox. Chaucer expresses his bad character by means of his appearance because the Miller has a mole with red hair on his nose, something that the reader will remember and something that others have to look at while talking to him. And here Chaucer the writer uses irony again because foxes are sly and the Miller is sly as well. Chaucer criticizes him, using the satire. He criticizes his desire for strength over virtues. His golden thumb described here implies dishonesty as well as luck in his dishonest trade. Chaucer says that he has a huge mouth and that he is very vulgar. He plays the bagpipes to entertain the others on their way to Canterbury.

The Maunciple is a person who is in charge of purchasing food for institutions. He buys products low and sells them high. He is very clever although he is not formally educated. He has learned everything in the school of life. Chaucer uses irony here to show the difference between being "book smart" and "street smart". However, the Maunciple is not a perfect person either; he keeps insulting the cook during their journey to Canterbury.

The Reeve is a good protector of the pilgrims because of his quick eyes. He is one of the few pilgrims that is endowed with a name. He is called Oswald and his stallion is Scot. He is like a manager in our own time period. He is hard working and always angry and choleric.

Later on follow two corrupted persons piercingly criticized by Chaucer the writer. He uses very mean satire. They are the Summoner and the Pardoner, both representatives of the Church who should follow the rules of the order but are obviously not following them.

And whan that he wel dronken hadde the wyn, Than eolde he speke no word but latyn. A fewe termes hadde he, tuo or thre, That he hadde lerned out of some decree – No wondur is, he herde it al the day. ( <i>GP ll. 631 - 635</i> )	And when he had drunk, and the wine was in, Then he would speak no word but Latin. A few tags he had, some two or three, That he had learned out of some decree – No wonder, since he heard them every day.
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The Summoner is in juxtaposition to the Prioress who pretends to speak French, but Chaucer criticizes her in a more gentle way, whereas the Summoner's criticism is sharper. The writer uses dark satire to describe the Summoner and he makes a distinction between the two religious persons, the Summoner and the Parson.

The Summoner does a lot of impermissible acts, for instance he threatens people with excommunication from the church. That is a horrible threat because in the 14<sup>th</sup> century a person that was excommunicated lost everything – home, friends, family, etc. and had to live on his own outside the church.

The Summoner and the Pardoner create an inseparable pair. They are both representatives of the Church, highly satirized in *The Canterbury Tales*. They use each other to make money. Chaucer uses satire again to describe the Pardoner's appearance. He compares him to all sorts of animals, equates his hair to rat tails, his eye to a hare's eye and his physical appearance to a mare and a gelding. He is a liar and a great persuader. He claims to have holy relics that have been blessed by the Pope but they are only ordinary pig bones. He has become very wealthy through the use of psychology. He is in juxtaposition to the good Parson. The Summoner and the Pardoner are corrupted persons and Chaucer uses them to satirize and criticize the corruption and hypocrisy inside the Church.

At the end of "The General Prologue" Chaucer justifies himself and apologizes in advance for possible indignity. He is doing this on purpose because he is very satirical and ironic not only in "The General Prologue" but in the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*.



Although some film adaptations of “The General Prologue” and *The Canterbury Tales* itself deserve particular attention. One of the best adaptations and authentic interpretations of *The Tales* are Jonathan Myerson’s 30-minute animated episodes, produced by BBC. “The General Prologue” is not presented at the beginning of the film but is fragmented throughout the whole adaptation. Each character is introduced in between particular tales by Chaucer, the narrator. Myerson gives *The Tales* a new modern appeal and makes it accessible to a wider range of people.

Through the use of latex puppets for pilgrims and several kinds of animation Myerson presents amusing introductions of each character. The characters are humorous even without speaking. The author uses modern English and voices from famous English actors such as Sean Bean and Bill Nighty to provide *The Tales* with more entertaining zest of the kind that would be equal to Chaucer’s original wit and satire. The adaptation, as well as the original, includes several humorous interlineations like farting, burping and sexual jokes. One very famous example is visible in “The Miller’s Tale” when Nicholas wants to get rid of Absolon:

This Nicholas anon let flee a fart,	Then Nicholas at once let fly a fart,
As gret as it had ben a thundir dent,	As great as if it were a thunder-clap,
And with that strook he was almost y-blent;	The clerk was nearly blinded with the blast;

*(The Miller’s Tale ll. 681-683)*

These kind of jokes are visible not only in particular *Tales* but especially in the prologues and between narratives. It is quite likely that the humour of flatulence was very popular in the Middle Ages, and even the above-mentioned Latin joke book *Facetiae* included several tales about farting.

Another famous adaptation of *The Canterbury Tales*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, also depicts the characters described in Chaucer’s “General Prologue” throughout the whole film. Pasolini mainly focuses on the Chaucerian criticism of the Church and his adaptation is full of sexual acts and fetishism. Pasolini’s film is permeated with humour represented by singing, dancing, playing pranks, and also by naive characters with silly behaviour. All these features in connection with an amazingly accurate black humour and social commentary create for the viewer an entertaining insight into medieval society.

Chaucer’s portraits of the pilgrims in “The Prologue” are great examples of comic irony. He takes humans as he finds them with their behaviour, weaknesses and deficiencies. Most of his pilgrims are rascals, and even though he knows that they are, he does not practice a malevolent

criticism of them, but rather makes fun of them and satirizes them. On the other hand his attack on corruption in the Church is clear and the reader cannot ignore it. His irony always has moral implications and therefore Chaucer is not an ironist for nothing, not only in “The General Prologue” but in the whole of *The Canterbury Tales*.

## 2.2 HUMOUR IN THE KNIGHT’S TALE

At first sight a reader might think that there is no humour in “The Knight’s Tale” and that it is simply a medieval chivalric romance, an adventure story with a beautiful lady involved. But “The Knight’s Tale” is more than that. It is a philosophical romance containing a lot of satirical features. “The Knight’s Tale” can be said to be farcical because it takes place in a Greek city that is ruled by Roman gods and has an English system of aristocracy. This creates a bizarre world formed by the mix of cultures.

The story is about two cousins, Arcite and Palamon, who are nephews of the Duke of Thebes and who are captured by the Duke of Athens, and put in jail. One day Palamon is looking out of the window and sees the beautiful Emily (Emelya). He immediately falls in love with her. He wakes up his cousin and tells him about the girl and Arcite falls in love with her too. They have a dispute about the beautiful girl and fight over her. The irony hidden in the tale is that they are prepared to die for the girl but she does not even know that they exist. Arcite talks about this appalling misfortune in his speech to Palamon.

Later on an old friend of Arcite, the Duke Pirithons, releases him but he has to promise to the Duke of Athens that he will not stay in his country otherwise he will be killed. Here, then, is the irony of life. The fates of both knights are dreadfully mutable. Arcite is suddenly free but he is not allowed to stay in Athens so he cannot see Emily. He would rather be in prison to be able to see his beautiful lady. Palamon is still in prison and can see Emily every day. They are both ill-fated but for different reasons. This state lasts for years. Finally Palamon escapes from prison and Arcite succeeds in infiltrating the court of the Duke of Athens in disguise. The irony is that Theseus, the Duke of Athens, starts to like the previously hated Arcite who works for him disguised as the page Philostrates and is paradoxically admired and appreciated:

And thus withinne a while his name spronge,	And thus in a while his name had sprung
Bothe of his dedes and of goodetonge,	To every lip, for deeds and courteous tonge,
That Theseus hath taken him so neer,	So that Theseus advanced him higher

That of his chambre he made him squyer,  
And gaf him gold to mayntene his degree.

*(The Knight's Tale ll. 578-583)*

And of his chamber made him a squire,  
And gave him gold to maintain his degree.

One day the cousins run into each other and decide to fight to the death over the beautiful Emily. They are interrupted by the Duke of Athens, who is accompanied by his wife Hippolyte and by Emily. Theseus is very upset and wants to kill them, because one should be in jail and one in Thebes, but his wife proposes a proper battle. She suggests that each knight should get 100 knights and the winner would gain Emily. The Duke agrees and a spectacular battle field is built with three shrines dedicated to three Gods – Mars, the god of war, Venus, the goddess of love and Diana, the goddess of the hunt. Each character prays to a different god before the battle. Emily goes to the shrine of Diana and asks for everlasting virginity. She ironically does not want to marry anyone. Arcite goes to the shrine of Mars and asks for the victory. Palamon then goes to the shrine of Venus and asks for Emily. Arcite finally wins the battle but falls from a horse and dies. Palamon wins Emily but loses his beloved cousin. Emily does not want to get married and wants everlasting virginity but has to marry Palamon. Chaucer expresses a huge irony through the character of Arcite because, although he survives his term in prison, suffers from unrequited love, works for Theseus, and wins the battle, he dies because of a banal fall from his horse.

Emily is described as a perfect, obedient, beautiful woman, the exact opposite of the Wife of Bath. She is devoted to the gods and she obeys Theseus's command and marries Palamon even though she does not want to do so. Chaucer here criticizes, via the irony of her life, the role of women in society. Another target of Chaucer's satire in this tale is the chivalry that did not always function as it was supposed to, and the Church is also criticised. Arcite and Palamon are depicted so perfectly that they became caricatures of perfect knights. They constantly break the rules of chivalry due to their selfishness.

It would be right to mention Myerson's film adaptation again because of its excellent book-to-film transformation and its humorous portrayal of particular characters. "The Knight's Tale" starts with Chaucer's description of the Knight, who is honest, courageous and honourable. However, there are signs of irony because the Knight in the animated movies is slightly distraught and seems to be annoyed by the telling of stories. The description of the Knight is followed by his tale. The adaptation is more amusing than the tale in Chaucer's book itself. The fight between the cousins is depicted as a fight between two dogs over a bone. Emily is depicted as a slightly simple-minded person who is ruled over by the king. There are also tiny in-jokes

as for example, the expressions of the servants while fulfilling their charges, a builder who keeps hurting his finger while building the battle field area and a cheering person next to the gallows. The scene with dying Arcite is also hilarious even though it should be a serious moment. This film adaptation is very precise and entertaining.

### 2.3 HUMOUR IN THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

Alice, Chaucer's Wife of Bath, is a very strong feministic character that is a challenge to patriarchy. Patriarchy in the Middle Ages was very strong. Women did not have any rights; they had to be obedient and had to follow their men. Aristotle had declared that men and women were not equal, that equality was unnatural. The Church in the Middle Ages held the same opinion and men were above women and could even beat them if they were not obedient (Mann, 2002).

But Chaucer creates a woman that is not afraid of men. She even stands in front of them and talks and she even talks to the clergy men in the group which was something unacceptable in medieval times.

A frequent source of humorous comments in *The Canterbury Tales* is sex and sexuality. It is a theme that pervades the whole book but is most significant in "The Miller's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale". In the case of the Wife of Bath there is the appearance of a carnal love or need. She exploits her men through the use of sex. She wants to gain power over her husbands and gain property by means of sex. Sexual satisfaction is very important for the Wife of Bath and she does not hesitate to show it, even in front of the clergy men. She is showy in her presentation and exudes an aura of sexuality that is actually apparent to everybody.

The Wife of Bath introduces herself in the prologue to her tale. She has been married five times and she is looking for another husband. This is not common nowadays but it was unimaginable in medieval times for a woman to be married five times. People in fact remarried only after the great plague. But she claims that there is no one who would be able to agree upon how many husbands is too many and how many times a person may be allowed to remarry. She excuses herself and chooses examples from the famous philosophers and from the *Bible*:

Lo! Hier the wise kyng, Daun Salamon;  
I trow he hadde wifes mo than oon –  
As wold God it were leful unto me

Lo, here, the wise King, old Solomon,  
I think he had more wives than one!  
As would to God it were permitted me

To be refreished half so oft as he!

To be refreshed half so oft as he!

*(The Wife of Bath's Prologue ll 36 – 39)*

She wants to be guaranteed the same privileges as men. The object of marriage according to her is to have mastery over her husband. Chaucer uses irony and satire through the Wife of Bath who is witty and funny and speaks freely about sex, marriage and desire.

The Pardoner is disgusted with her narration. He interrupts with jovial insinuations because he wants to get married but after listening to her he is now afraid to be involved with a woman:

Up start the pardoner, and that anon,  
'Now, Dame,' quod he, 'by God and by  
Seint John!  
Ye ben a noble prechour in this caas!  
I was aboute to wedde a wif – allas,  
What shal I buy it on my fleisch  
so deere?  
Yit had I lever wedde no wyf to yere.'  
*(WB ll. 163-169)*

Up started the Pardoner, and that anon:  
'Now dame,' quoth he, 'by God and by  
Saint John,  
You are a noble preacher in this cause!  
I was about to wed a wife: I pause!  
What! Should I pay, with my own flesh,  
so dear?  
I'd rather wed no wife, then, any year!'

He now wants to rethink his decision to marry, but the Wife of Bath tells him that he will hear more unpleasant things about marriage and he encourages her to teach “jonge men” such as himself. She also claims that she does not want to upset them that she only offers an amusement. Chaucer has already said this in “The General Prologue” when he excuses himself in advance for telling the truth. Chaucer says this again in “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue” because he is going to be critical.

The Wife of Bath breaks the rules of patriarchy. Chaucer is very satirical in this case. She describes how she used to control men. She even talks about sex in front of clergy men. She says that women love sex as much as men do, which was very controversial in the Middle Ages. She says that her husbands always wanted to control her but she did not want to be controlled but rather to control them. She claims that men are thoughtless, like sheep and that women can easily rule them.

Thou saist, right as wormes schenden a tre,  
Right so a wif schendith hir housebonde;  
This knowen tho that ben to wyves bonde.  
Lordyngs, right thus, as ye han understonde,  
Bar I styf myn housebondes on honde,

You say, that just as insects kill a tree,  
Just so a wife destroys her husband;  
This they know who to a wife are bound.  
Lordings, like this it was, you understand,  
I kept my older husbands well in hand

That thus thay sayde in here dronkenesse –  
And al was fals, but that I took witesse  
On Jankyn, and upon my nece also.  
(*WB II. 372 – 384*)

With what they said in their drunkenness;  
And all was false, but I had wittesses  
In Jankin, and in my niece also.

She cheats on her husband and she also admits that she knows that her husband had affairs but instead of reproofs she made him obey her.

One of the very humorous scenes is when her older husband dies after a sexual frolic with her, and she performs a very hysterical and dramatic mourning for him even though she already lust after the young Jankin and knows that she is going to marry him. She admits that she has made a mistake with her last husband, Jankin, whom she married not for money but because of his appearance and who treated her badly though she loved him the most. Jankin kept reading to her from his book full of stories about women's bad behaviour by famous writers and philosophers.

And all these were bounde in oo volume;  
And every night and day was his custume,  
Whan he had leysir and vacacioun  
From other world's occupacioun,  
To reden on this book of wikked wyves.  
He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves  
Than ben of goode wyves in the Bible.  
(*WB II. 655-661*)

And all of these bound in the one volume,  
And every night and day it was his custom,  
When he had leisure and vacation  
From other worldly occupation,  
To read in this book of wicked wives.  
He knew of them more legends and lives  
Than there are of good wives in the Bible.

He provokes her by reading of the wickedness of Eve; of Delilah's treachery to Samson; of Deianira's abuse of Hercules; of Socrates' suffering at the hands of his two wives and of many other unidentified tales of women's iniquity. She ironically comments on them that if a woman wrote such a story it would be completely different. Once she is fed up with his stories and his preaching and she tears several pages from his book. He smacks her so hard that she becomes deaf in one ear as a consequence. The story ends here but the Wife of Bath is so self-confident and loves so much to talk about herself that this is not really the end of her narration of her life. She keeps talking about herself at the beginning of her story, at the end of her story and occasionally at other times on their way to Canterbury.

Alice paradoxically gains power even over her fifth husband. According to Alice a man can beat a woman but she will never love him. If a man wants his wife to love him he has to give her freedom and let her to do whatever she wants.

There is a relationship between her prologue and her tale. The main topic of both is the relationship between men and women. Chaucer attacks not only patriarchy but hierarchy in medieval society as well.

Alice's story is set in the times of the reign of King Arthur. There is a knight who sees a beautiful girl and rapes her. Chaucer attacks the code of the knight and chivalry here. A real knight should be honest and look after the king's dependants. The king is very upset and indignant. He decides that the knight will be executed but his wife, Queen Guinevere, asks for the king's grace and so the king gives the power of sentencing the knight to his wife. This is very strong act. The reader can feel the influence of the storyteller, the Wife of Bath. It was not usual that a man should give such power to a woman in medieval times.

The Queen requires that the knight find an answer to her question: "What is the thing that women most desire?" The knight has one year to find the answer. He travels and asks all women but he gets different answers all the time and he is more and more under pressure as his allotted time approaches. Some women say that women want wealth and treasure, some jollity and pleasure, some gorgeous clothes and some fun in bed, some to be often widowed and remarried. Here the reader can again see Chaucer's strong satire through the Wife of Bath's opinions.

Later the knight spots twenty-four women dancing on the meadow. He decides to ask them to give him the answer to the question but they all vanish when he comes closer. Instead of beautiful women there is an old and ugly lady who knows the answer but wants him to fulfil a wish of her own in exchange for the answer. He agrees and they go together to the queen. Then he reveals to the queen the answer that the old lady has given him. According to her every woman wants power over her husband, wants to master him, and does not want him to be above her. Every woman in the court agrees with his answer, even the women that have previously given the knight different answers. For this moment his life has been saved. The old lady then asks him in front of the whole court to marry her and he has to agree because he has sworn on his honour as a knight and he has to obey the rules of chivalry at last.

He is very unhappy and is not excited about all the wedding issues. This represents Chaucer's comical script because the knight should really be happy after the old lady has saved his life. He even does not see her inner beauty. The lady gives him an opportunity. She gives him a choice because she wants a functional and healthy marriage. She presents him with two choices. She will either stay as she is, an ugly woman, but she will be the most loyal wife in the world or she can be the most beautiful woman in the world but she cannot guarantee him fidelity.

He asks her to make the decision because she is wiser than he is. So she has won the mastery and that is exactly what she (as well as the Wife of Bath and Chaucer) wants. She transforms herself into a beautiful lady and she is loyal as well because the knight has understood that the dominance belongs to women. The knight learns from his mistake but paradoxically the raped maiden does not get her satisfaction because he is not actually punished for his horrible crime. The Wife of Bath's prays to God at the end of her tale asking Him to cut the life of those men that do not want to obey their wives and do not accept their domination so that those women can later marry younger men that will obey them.

Among other things, Pasolini's interpretation of the Wife of Bath is outstanding. He interprets only the Prologue to her tale but Alison is an exact image of Chaucer's concept. She is very brassy and does not hesitate to use abusive language. She is very self-confident and ironically abases the men around her which is very funny. She appears right from the very beginning of the film and attracts attention to herself very loudly. She is also wearing her typical big red hat and rich red dress that symbolise her shamelessness and licentiousness. There are also many scenes involving sexual activity and intercourse but they are all very ironic and funny such as a scene where the Wife of Bath seduces Jankin in the bushes and while satisfying him she proclaims that he should marry her. He feels so comfortable that he finds it very difficult to disagree. The funny side of this act is that Alison is not asking for something, she is doing it on purpose and she already knows that he is going to marry her. The end of the Wife of Bath's part in the film is also very comical. Jankin wants to show her how bad the dominating behaviour of wives is and reads to her from his book while she gets angry and rips several pages of the book. He slaps her and she falls down on the floor proclaiming that he has killed her. While lying on the floor she says to Jankin: "I'm dying. I forgive you. Give me one last kiss, before I die." And Jankin, full of remorse, kisses her and she bites his nose with great force. This is actually the last and most powerful word of the Wife of Bath.

The animated adaptation of "The Wife of Bath's Tale" is a perfectly created adaptation that exactly follows the original story but is told in modern English. The satire in this adaptation is expressed through exaggeration especially in the attitude of men towards women. The men are depicted in superior positions, holding their wives' necks or clapping them over their heads. This actually exposes, not the women, but paradoxically those men who behave preposterously. The old woman is portrayed as being ludicrously ugly, and through her the preposterous pursuit for dominance is satirized very deeply and flawlessly.

The Wife of Bath's proposal that she could convert herself to a beautiful lady and the knight's



torment and succeeding decision that the wife should decide is completely the same as in the original. Through the satire it reflects the Wife of Bath's opinions and attitude towards men. The old woman acquires what she deserves and through her character the Wife of Bath laughs at men.

## 2.4 BAWDY HUMOUR IN THE MILLER'S TALE AND THE REEVE'S TALE

In addition to "The Wife of Bath's Tale" there are two other tales that are permeated with bawdy humour and are full of common lecherous jokes involving adultery, nudity and farting, "The Miller's Tale" and "The Reeve's Tale". Both tales are amusing and catching and both were written under the influence of French *fabliaux*, comic verse narratives set in Chaucer's times and containing a sexual appetite and is meant to be funny.

The main ideas throughout both prologues and tales are trickery, slyness and sin. Through these two tales Chaucer attacks the omnipresent courtly love and the corruption of the Church. The courtly love topic was very common in the Middle Ages but in these tales love is the complete opposite of courtly love. It is especially the Miller who makes a parody of courtly love and what it stands for. He makes it appear vulgar and he talks about his characters in a very sexual manner and turns the ideals of courtly love into a rude fart joke.

"The Miller's Tale" starts with the pilgrims who have just heard and appreciated the Knight's story and the Host has just invited the Monk to tell his tale, but the drunken Miller interrupts and insists that he can tell a story related to the Knight's. The Reeve already knows that he is about to be attacked and voices a protest. And from this point their battle starts, the battle that entertains the reader.

The Miller's story is not a real attack on carpenters in general, it is rather an attack on this particular Reeve. The reader is warned at the beginning of the story that the Miller's story may be as coarse as the Miller's personality. The Miller is a selfish, rude and abusive person and his tale is a mixture of deception, adultery and comic revenge.

There are many examples of satire directed against the carpenter John. The reader can feel many comic insults directed towards the carpenter's choice of marrying the right wife.

For sche was wilde and yong, and he was old,	For she was young and wild, and he was old,
And deemed himself be lik a cokewold.	And thought himself a likely cuckold.
He knew nat Catoun, for his wit was rude,	He knew not Cato – his learning was crude –

That bad man schulde wedde his similitude;	Who advised a man to wed his similitude.
Men schulde wedde aftir here astaat,	Men should wed according to their state,
For eelde and youthe ben often at debaat.	For youth and age, at odds, end in debate.

*(MT ll. 120-125)*

He married a beautiful eighteen year old girl which was not really a clever decision according to the narrator. The carpenter in “The Miller’s Tale” is even duller because he totally disregards the situation that he has a young well-known seducer in his house trying to have sexual liaisons with his wild young wife behind his back. His foolishness is actually the reason why his wife is unfaithful. The biggest act of stupidity and a great use of Chaucer’s wit is when the carpenter believes that a great flood is coming and he tries to protect them.

And goth and geteth him a knedyng through,	He goes to fetch a kneading-trough,
And after that a tubbe and a kymelyn,	And after a tub, and one for brewing,
Andy pryvely he sent hen to his in,	And secretly he carried them all in,
And heng hem in the roof in pryvete.	And hung them from the roof in secrecy.
His owne hond hthan made ladders thre,	With his own hands he made ladders three
To clymben by the ronges and the stalkes,	To climb up by the rungs and so after
Unto the tubbes hangyng in the balkes.	Reach the tubs hanging in the rafters.

*(MT ll. 511-517)*

There is an absurd humour largely used in the description of the preparations for the flood and John hiding himself in a tub hanging from the ceiling and waiting for the flood.

“The Miller’s Tale” is a considerable contrast to “The Knight’s Tale” since it is a *fabliau* and “The Knight’s Tale” is a romance that involves courtly characters, love and chivalry. On the contrary “The Miller’s Tale” parodies the ideals of courtly love and manners. The Miller tells a story that is based on a love triangle, commonly used in French *fabliaux* with which Chaucer was familiar. The end of the tale adds to the humour when Nicholas’s pained cry for water makes John cut the rope holding his tub, thus becoming the brunt of his neighbours’ laughter.

Everyone laughs at the Miller’s story except for the angry Reeve, who himself is a carpenter. The Reeve’s desire for revenge means that his tale delivers a less jolly view of the world than does the Miller’s story. The Reeve is bad tempered, revengeful man who is more insulting and malicious in his narration. He is a “choleric” man and a cunning rascal as Chaucer has already described him in his portrait in “The General Prologue”.

The Miller in the Reeve's story is actually similar to the Miller, the pilgrim. The rivalry between the Reeve and the Miller is obvious and the Reeve starts to get his revenge through a more abusive and more insulting narration about an "unknown" miller. His tale concentrates on sex, trickery and practical jokes but its main purpose is the aforementioned revenge. Everything in the Reeve's tale is enlarged. For example there is a young woman who is seduced in the Miller's tale while in the case of Reeve's story there are two women who are seduced. The Miller has a carpenter, John, who is cuckolded, while the Reeve has the student John who cuckolds the miller. The Reeve's tale about the Miller is a great example of trickery and the end, when the trickster himself becomes tricked, is the best part.

In the animated version of "The Miller's Tale" and "The Reeves Tale" both men tell their tales collaterally. They keep disturbing each other and thereby force themselves to attempt to tell a dirtier and more insulting story than the other. It is a great idea to put the two stories together to make it more humorous. The Miller and the Reeve are both interpreted as very mean, malevolent and blackhearted people who try to libel one another. They look very laughable as they fight for victory in a way comparable to little children.

All the characters in both stories are deceitful, thinking only about their own happiness and their own satisfaction. The silliness of all of them is exaggerated through their foolish appearance and therefore the stories are more humorous than in the original book. Unfortunately both tales are shortened in the animated version and if a person does not know the original tales it might be difficult for him to follow and understand the plots and Chaucer's irony as it shifts from one tale to the other. In any case, the experienced viewer should be pleased.

Pasolini's adaptation of "The Miller's Tale" is a promotion of adultery and stays very close to its original. All the characters are depicted very simply in contrast to their imperfections that are emphasized in a comical way. Nicholas and Absolon are both immensely obsessed with Alison. Alison is unfaithful but tries to resist young Nicholas even though it is obvious that she yearns for him, and her husband is foolish with absurd and weird manners. However, there are several differences from the original. In Chaucer's *Tales* the carpenter is an old man and Alison is a young, eighteen-year-old woman. The age gap between them is very important for the story itself, but in Pasolini's film the gap is not so obvious. John, the carpenter, is not so old and his wife is certainly not eighteen. One of the main issues concerning the carpenter's fear of losing his wife because of the age gap is lost in the film. However, another character, Nicholas, is portrayed differently. Chaucer's Nicholas is "lyk a mayden meke for to se" (*MT*, l. 97), but Pasolini's Nicholas is loud and aggressive and likes to order people around.

Pasolini's adaptation is full of sexual activity and scabrous humour and might not be popular with everyone due to its nastiness. Chaucer's *Tales* still remain the enjoyable and amusing book of medieval bawdy humour and no adaptation can truly depict or replace it.

## CONCLUSION

It is obvious, without any doubt, that Chaucer was one of the greatest humourists. He enables us to learn a lot about the Middle Ages and through his greatly painted characters he points out specific problems in medieval society. People like to laugh at humanity's imperfections and they enjoy irony and satire pointed at politics, the Church and other institutions. Chaucer greatly provides both amusement and a criticism of issues prominently appearing in his times.

The intention of this thesis was to inspect humour and its diverse forms and trace the irony and satire in particular sections of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and some of their film adaptations and provide a sufficient amount of information about the amusement in Chaucer's work. Humour, irony and satire can be found in every *Tale* whether obvious at first sight or skilfully hidden behind the characters. The humour appears in the characters' appearance, in their behaviour and in their opinions. Chaucer describes life in England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century with great unworldliness and wit.

Each of the *Tales* described in this thesis has its film adaptations which are examined and compared to the original. Some of the adaptations are far from Chaucer's model but there are those that certainly contain Chaucer's wit and spirit. Those great adaptations are especially Pasolini's *Canterbury Tales* and the animated adaptation of the book. Pasolini's film might seem at first sight to be a pornographic work but it is a well-treated adaptation of Chaucer's thoughts and satire. The animated adaptation provides an excellent figuration of the particular characters that brilliantly correspond with Chaucer's irony. Both adaptations are very entertaining and contribute to the idea of sarcastic comedy.

There are certain connections between the *Tales* described in this thesis. "The Wife of Bath's Tale", "The Miller's Tale" and "The Reeves Tale" all include bawdy humour directed at all parts of medieval society. Chaucer, inspired by Latin bawdy stories and French fabliaux, provides amusing and salty stories that are permeated with great wit. In contrast, "The Knight's Tale" is the exact opposite. It is a story that criticises courtly manners and tampering with the knight's virtues.

In conclusion, Chaucer used humour as an instrument of criticism of the Church and patriarchy and is an expression of the growing anti-clericalism in the fourteenth century. Chaucer used physical appearance, manners and thinking in the description of each character and used a person's imperfections to describe the sinful behaviour of Church members and authority figures.

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## SHRNUTÍ

Tématem této bakalářské práce je odhalit humor v jedné z nejslavnější a nejopěvovanější středověké knize – v Chaucerových Canterburských povídkách. Chaucer je považován za otce anglické literatury, anglického jazyka a anglického humoru. Na začátku této práce je prozkoumáván humor jako takový, jeho cíle a teorie. Tato práce se soustředí hlavně na humor středověký, konkrétně na Chaucerův důvtip. Poté jsou prozkoumávány samotné Canterburské povídky, konkrétně všeobecný Prolog, který je nedílnou součástí Canterburských povídek a popisuje jednotlivé postavy. Již zde se nachází mnoho ironie a satiry, která se později rozvine, když jednotlivé postavy vypráví své příběhy a také mezi jednotlivými povídkami, když se postavy navzájem oslovují, povídají si a také osočují.

Další části jsou věnované „Rytířově povídce“, „povídce ženy z Bathu“, „Mlynářově povídce“ a „Šafářově povídce“. Humor a satira ve všech povídkách je také porovnávána s humorem v jejich filmových adaptacích.

Citace v této práci jsou jak v původní, středověké angličtině na straně levé, tak v moderním překladu A. S. Klina na straně pravé.