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## The Politics and Poetics of Laughter in *De la Bourgoise d'Orliens* and *Dame Sirith*

The distinction into “jest” and “earnest”, as Ernst Robert Curtius formulated it, has been a question of particular controversy as far as the study of medieval literature is concerned. Curtius himself observed an intermingling of those two elements in the literature dating back to the late antiquity and noticed that such a situation continued in the Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>. However, there were numerous attempts at dividing medieval genres and the literary works for the sake of clarity into two distinct groups: the tragic, representing pathos treated as a literary quality, and the comic, belonging to the domain of free and unrestrained laughter. As Lisa R. Perfetti claims,

Scholars of medieval literature have long followed a tendency to separate comic from serious genres, so that comic elements in a “serious” work are seen either as an aesthetic flaw incompatible with the work’s overall purpose, or as a mere sugar coating covering the work’s kernel of meaning.<sup>2</sup>

The typical reaction to earnest overtones sounding in the comic writings was not as exaggerated as it happened in the case of comic elements in “lofty” writings, but it seems that those graver accents were not taken into consideration sufficiently by the critics, either. The source of laughter was not

<sup>1</sup> E.R. Curtius: *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. W.R. Trask. Princeton 1990; for his discussion of the comic and the tragic see particularly pp. 417–435.

<sup>2</sup> L.R. Perfetti: *Taking Laughter Seriously: The Comic and Didactic Functions of Helm-  
brech*. In: *Bakhtin and Medieval Voices*. Ed. T.J. Farrell. Gainsville 1995, pp. 38–60.

analyzed to an adequate extent since the comic genres themselves did not receive such treatment as the serious ones. Anti-feminist satire present in the fabliaux influenced by the so-called estate writing was considered to be the conventional subject matter of literary works, not worthy of more careful analysis in terms of the politics of the laughter directed against women. However, the exact nature of the laughter caused by feminine figures deserves a deeper insight.

One expects the laughter caused by the comic to be all-inclusive and quite vehement, due to the dynamics of the medieval life. At the beginning of his *Autumn of the Middle Ages* Johan Huizinga visualized that life as consisting of two extremes: wild laughter and deep suffering resulting from the highly emotional reactions people tended to demonstrate. It may be even maintained that the laughter provoked by certain medieval literary works embraces all the social classes as its addressees and various members of society become its object. Such statement may be inferred on the basis of the fact that medieval people either cried in a heart-rending manner or laughed heartily in public. It has to be stressed here that the comic genres provoking the latter phenomenon are strongly associated with the social classes literature.

The popularity of the estate writing in the thirteenth-century European literature may be attributed to at least a few factors. Probably the largest part in the flourishing of the social classes literature was played by the new division of the society: George Dumézil's division into fighters, priests and labourers started to be gradually replaced by a more elaborate system based on one's birth, wealth, profession and personal ability. Quite significantly, being a woman was associated with belonging to a separate estate, different from the other ones. Each estate had its own sins that had to be admonished in the literary works whose chief object was the treatment of the *de statu hominum* theme. The goal of those works was purely didactic, as it happened in the case of such poems as Nigel de Longchamp's *Speculum Stultorum* or a much-later one, Nicolaus Frowinus' *Antigameratus*.

Moreover, apart from the purely didactic estate writings there exist other non-didactic genres associated with the estates theme. Their goal is not educational – they aim at provoking laughter on the part of the audience by satirizing certain social classes. As far as women conceived of as a separate estate are concerned, probably the most elaborate treatment of female characters within all the literary works closely related to the estate writings can be found in fabliaux, where women's roles are significant for the development of the plot. Most of fabliaux were written in Old French, yet, the first representatives of the genre were created in Latin in the thirteenth century. The motifs typically occurring in them derived mainly from the comedies written by Plautus. As Elaine Treharne claims in her *Old and Middle English. An Anthology*, in Middle English there exists only one fabliau which was not written by Chaucer

and later incorporated into the *Canterbury Tales*. According to Treharne the only fabliau in Middle-English preserved outside Chaucer's *oeuvre* is *Dame Sirith* constituting a part of MS. Digby 86, where it is preceded by a Latin text on truths and followed by a charm in English which lists seventy seven names for a hare<sup>3</sup>.

The general characterization of the fabliau as a genre should include both the stock characters typically present there and the general goal the authors of such stories try to achieve. As Larry D. Benson maintains in the introduction to *The Riverside Chaucer*,

The heroes and heroines, invariably witty and usually young, are those whom society usually scorns – dispossessed intellectuals (lecherous priests, wayward monks, penniless students), clever peasants, and enthusiastically unchaste wives. Their victims are usually those whom society respects – prosperous merchants, hard-working tradesmen, women foolish enough to try to remain chaste. The fabliau, in short, is delightfully subversive – a light-hearted thumbing on the nose at the dictates of religion, the solid virtues of citizenry, and the idealistic pretension of the aristocracy and its courtly literature, which the fabliaux frequently parody, though just as frequently they parody lower-class attempts to adopt courtly behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

It is visible in that short definition of the genre that almost every estate may become an object of satire in the fabliau. Furthermore, most obviously women as a separate estate are usually satirized there, regardless of the fact what their characteristics are. As for the definition of the genre, it imposed a list of limits on the protagonists' characterization, the spatial and temporal setting and the plot as such. In Benson's words:

The style is simple, vigorous and straightforward; the time is the present, and the settings real, familiar places; the characters are ordinary sorts – tradesmen, peasants, priests, students, restless wives; the plots are realistically motivated tricks and ruses. The fabliaux thus present a lively image of everyday life among the middle and lower classes. Yet that representation only seems real; life did not run that high in actual fourteenth-century towns and villages – it never does – and the plots, convincing though they seem, frequently involve incredible degrees of gullibility in the victims and of the ingenuity and sexual appetite in the trickster-heroes and -heroines.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Dame Sirith*. In: *Old and Middle English. An Anthology*. Ed. E. Treharne. Oxford 2000, pp. 380–415. All the numbers of the lines of the original text refer to that edition.

<sup>4</sup> L.D. Benson: *Introduction* in *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. L.D. Benson. Oxford 1987, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

The temporal setting specified in Benson's delineation of the genre – the fourteenth century – obviously refers to the fabliaux incorporated in the *Canterbury Tales*. All the other factors contributing to the literary work's subversive effect can also be found in the thirteenth-century representatives of the genre. Women are the necessary characters within them and they are depicted as either unfaithful wives or naively chaste young women, with the ominous figure of an older woman emerging in some of the narratives. The superficiality of "realism" is important in the fabliau – the stories seem to be realistic, yet, they somehow avoid such a categorization due to the ease with which the villains perform the tricks and the victims are tricked. The "reality" seems to be adapted to the satirical purpose the fabliau tries to achieve.

What is more, apart from satirizing certain estates another goal of the fabliaux writers seems to consist in producing a subversive effect. The general topic is transgression of the norms and the hierarchical order within the social structure, or even presenting those norms as entirely arbitrary. Hence, it may be stated that the genre's domain is the Bakhtinian carnivalesque with excess as the dominating feature and its potentially disruptive function. The carnivalesque is associated with the world *à rebours*, which acquires the feature of disturbing fluidity as opposed to the apparent stability of the reality. In that world in terms of the portrayal of a human body the emphasis is placed not on the head, associated with reason, but on the lower bodily parts: hence the fascination with the scatological and the obscene in fabliaux. During the carnival, which in medieval Europe was realized in the so-called Feast of Fools, for a few days, typically sometime between 25 December and 6 January, the socially inferior members of the society dominated over the ones situated higher in the hierarchy. The fool as such would become a regal figure, in the same mode as it happened with poor clerks who posed as bishops. Moreover, the focus of everybody's attention was placed on the figure of an old woman, who was ridiculed as the source of demoniac power in the sense of being the devil's puppet. The old woman was a visual representation of the dangerous aspect of femininity and the purpose of the depiction was to provoke carnivalesque laughter. A more realistic presentation of the old woman depicted her as a bawd prostituting a woman much younger than herself. Those two figures typically present at the Feast of Fools will be significant in the ensuing analysis of the fabliaux.

The laughter caused by carnivalesque elements is the phenomenon that all the estates accepted as their own, as it is visible in the pilgrims' reaction to the *Miller's Tale*, which according to Derek Pearsall is Chaucer's "greatest achievement in the genre, and in many ways the most perfectly accomplished of all the *Canterbury Tales*"<sup>6</sup>. It may be inferred from such a statement that

<sup>6</sup> D. Pearsall: *The Canterbury Tales II: Comedy*. In: *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*. Eds. P. Boitani, J. Mann. Cambridge 1986, pp. 125–142.

the laughter provoked by such a tale also constitutes a certain ideal, here being the phenomenon that brings people belonging to different classes together. In *Fabliau, Confession, Satire* Davenport insists that for Chaucer laughter was a unifying element of social life, as it can be deduced on the basis of the fabliaux' reception among the pilgrims:

Chaucer seems to claim, in the case of the *Miller's Tale*, that laughter unifies all classes: nobody but the irascible Reeve is offended by the story and he is annoyed not because of the smutty bits, but on behalf of aggrieved carpenters.<sup>7</sup>

The satirical perspective in reflecting the surrounding reality is supposed to cause the merriment of all the estates, almost regardless of the fact which social class is ridiculed in a given story. The source of humour is clearly related to the motif of the world upsidedown Ernst Robert Curtius elaborated on. In the passage of *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* devoted to the topic he quotes a poem from *Carmina Burana* as the most self-explanatory instance of "the world upsidedown":

Florebant olim studium,  
Nunc vertitur in tedium;  
Iam scire diu viguit,  
Sed ludere prevaluit.  
Iam pueris astutia  
Contingit ante tempora,  
Qui per male volentiam  
Excludunt sapientiam.  
Sed retro actis seculis  
Vix licuit discipulis  
Tandem nonagenarium  
Quiescere post studium.  
At nunc decennes pueri  
Decusso iugo liberi  
Se nunc magistros iactitant...

[Once learning flourished, but alas!  
'Tis now become a weariness.  
Once it was good to understand,  
But play has now the upper hand.  
Now boyish brains become of age  
Long before time can make them sage,

<sup>7</sup> W.A. Davenport: *Fabliau, Confession, Satire*. In: *Chaucer*. Ed. C. Saunders. Oxford 2001, pp. 252–269.

In malice too of age become,  
 Shut wisdom out of house and home.  
 In days long gone and passed away  
 A scholar hardly dared to say  
 When he had reached his nineteenth year,  
 'My hour of toil from rest is here'.  
 But now see little boys of ten  
 Lay down the yoke, strut out as men,  
 And boast themselves full masters too...]<sup>8</sup>

In that image of such a world people seem to have lost the sense of proportion. They pose as somebody they cannot be, as it happens in the case of very young pupils whose self-complacency and independence equal those of the clerks twice their age. The young boys aspire to the scholarly and social position they do not have any right to. Their mastery cannot be acknowledged since they strive to occupy a place in the society which cannot be granted to them. Very characteristically, in that motif the noble past is juxtaposed with the faulty present, which is clearly associated with the nostalgic theme of "ubi sunt que ante nos fuerunt". The present is depicted by means of hyperboles, whereas the past is presented in an idealistic manner. The portrait of the present-day students, or even present-day people as opposed to those who lived in the past is highly satirical in such literary works.

It has to be stated that precisely such a mixture of jest and earnest constitutes the fabliau's characteristic feature. When discussing the politics and poetics of laughter in that genre Jean Emelina's conception involving the comic and its serious implications can be taken into consideration. In *Les Grands Orientations du Rire* he juxtaposes the concept of *le monde inversé* [the world upsidedown] with another notion, namely *le monde redressé* [the world set upright again]. As a consequence of the process, the subversion inherent in the world upsidedown is overcome and the revolution returns to its place of origin:

Let's place on the list something that should not be called the world upside down, but *the world set upright again*, where the attempt at subversion, systematically ridiculed, ends in failure and invites us to return to the point of departure.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> E.R. Curtius: *European Literature...*, pp. 94–95.

<sup>9</sup> [Plaçons d'abord dans cet inventaire ce qu'il conviendrait d'appeler non pas le monde renversé, mais le *monde redressé*, ou la tentative de subversion, systématiquement ridiculisé, se soldé par un échec et invite au retour à 'endroit']. J. Emelina: *Les grands orientations du rire*. In: *Rires et sourires littéraires*. Ed. A. Faure. Nice 1994, pp. 55–71. The translation of the quotations from the article is all mine.

What is even more significant, Jean Emelina's example of such a discursive process has a lot in common with the fabliau, where we find women outwitting their husbands and cuckolding them as a result. At the beginning the woman masters her gullible husband, but afterwards "the comedy of the *inverted couple* in which the woman dominates over the man progresses in the same direction [as it happens in the process of constructing *the world set upright again*]"<sup>10</sup>. The apparent dominatrix returns to her previous position of the one who is dominated. Such a superficial subversion of the patriarchal order definitely takes place in numerous fabliaux and the Old French *De la Bourgeoise d'Orliens* [*La Bourgeoise d'Orléans*] is a classic representative of that tendency.

The characterization of women in that fabliau is based on the mysogynistic tradition according to which wives are always disloyal and treacherous, as St Jerome maintained in his writings. He condemned especially the natural provocativeness of women and their insatiable capacity for lust. The following citation from *De la Bourgeoise d'Orliens* corroborates with such statements on the female nature, since the fabliau's author claims that "les femmes ont l'esprit très aigu" [women have very sharp minds] because "elles ont trompé bien des homes" [they have cheated numerous men]<sup>11</sup>. Such a statement is uttered in reference to the bourgeois wife whose chief goal in life is cuckolding her husband with a young yet destitute clerk. The stratagems associated with that act (or a series of acts, as a matter of fact) constitute an instance of standard feminine deception depicted in anti-feminist satire. The woman's husband tries to outwit her by eavesdropping on her, but she "soupçonne une trahison et vois très bien et comprend" [suspects treason and she can see it clearly and she understands]. As a consequence, she pretends to be a faithful wife who refers to the clerk with the following words addressed to her servants: "Vous avez souvent vu venir, dans cette maison un clerc qui ne me laisse pas en paix. Il m'a longtemps sollicité. Je l'ai longtemps refusé. Quand je vis que je ne pouvais échapper, je lui ai accordé, à la fin, que je ferais tout ce qu'il voudrait quand mon seigneur serait parti au loin chercher sa marchandise. Alors, il est parti, que Dieu le conduise! Ce faux clerc, qui m'a tant priée, qui ma tant invité à la folie, il a bien su que mon seigneur est sorti de la ville. Il s'est précipité ici cette nuit et je l'ai enfermé là-haut dans ce cageot". [You have seen a clerk coming to this house, a clerk who does not leave me in peace. He begged me for a long time. I refused

<sup>10</sup> [Le comique du *couple inversé* ou la femme domine l'homme, va dans le même sens]. Ibidem, pp. 55–71.

<sup>11</sup> *La Bourgeoise d'Orléans*. In: *Littérature. Texts et Documents. Moyen Age – XVIe siècle*. Eds. A. Berthelot, F. Cornilliat. Paris 1988, pp. 119–121. All the quotations are taken from that edition and all the translation into English is mine.

him for so long. When I saw that I could not escape, I finally agreed that I would do everything he wanted when my lord would leave on a long route in order to fetch his merchandise. So he went, may God lead him! This false clerk, who asked me for so long, who invited me to folly so much, knew well that my lord had left the city. He hurried here tonight and I locked him inside a chest]. The vision of an impostor is so persuasive that the servants beat up the eavesdropping husband.

The speech is a thorough presentation of the whole scheme. What is particularly important is that the woman delivers a speech which presents her as a paragon of courtesy and subservience in relation to her "seigneur". From such a perspective she seems to be a "woman foolish enough to stay chaste" rather than an "enthusiastically unchaste wife" she actually is. Language becomes a powerful tool in the strategy of feminine deception. The story the woman imposes on her servants makes her a victimized innocent in their eyes, when she actually locked up her own husband in order to make him be beaten up "couché et debout" [regardless of whether he is lying or standing]. The courtly language the bourgeois woman uses is convenient more for Doringen from Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale* than for a character bearing a close resemblance to Alisoun from the *Miller's Tale*. The language of the courtly love culture (or, as C. S. Lewis claimed, of the "religion of love") is satirized as yet another strategy used by unfaithful wives in order to pull wool over the eyes of naïve observers. The otherwise innocent discourse acquires an ironic dimension since, as it also happens in the *Canterbury Tales*, the reader is aware of the actual meaning of the words uttered. There is a strong discrepancy between the language and its context. The addressee of the tale is well aware of the fact that the wife has already made love to the clerk at the point when she delivers the eloquent speech about her willingness to remain faithful to her husband.

Such a relationship between language and the reality it reflects is even more strongly emphasized in the internal monologue of the husband, sorely beaten up by his own servants who took him for the clerk: "Mais de sentir sa femme si loyale, de ne lui savoir aucune faute, le réconforte beaucoup. Et il pense que s'il peut guérir, il voudra vraiment la chérir pour toujours" [Yet, to know that his wife is so loyal, that she is guilty of no fault, comforts him a lot. And he thinks that if he recovers, he will always love her dearly]. The foolish man is satirized, but there are also satirical overtones directed towards the unfaithful wife. We may only expect that her husband's affection will become intolerable for her since she is interested only with physical love performed by a young clerk and not by her spouse. The author soothes such anxiety to a certain extent since he presents the woman as the actual winner in that fight between the two sexes. He adds a highly ironic comment referring to the wife's courtesy

and sagacity, both of which cannot be treated literally here, since throughout the plot she was presented as vulgar and sly: “Par ma tête, elle se défendit comme une dame courtoise et sage. Après, il ne la soupçonna de rien le rest de sa vie” [In my opinion she defended herself like a courteous and sagacious lady. Afterwards he did not suspect her of anything for the rest of his life]. The ironic treatment of the woman’s characterization can be found in the statements where she is compared to courtly ladies and not actually described as one of them. The aristocratic language is exposed as merely a part of the trick.

The whole story has to be interpreted as highly anti-feminist, which is understood at that point as directed against women treated as a social group. The anti-feminist satire is very deep, since it is embedded within the plot and not only realized by the author’s misogynist commentary. The wife’s practices are so nefarious that another female, here her husband’s niece, has to direct her own efforts to stop that iniquity. The young girl functions as a spy for the husband since it is she who informs him about the cuckolding. Such a dimension of the whole story adds more anti-feminist overtones to its message since the wife is presented as so demoniac that another woman, the niece, cannot behave loyally towards her: she has to inform the husband. The age difference between the two women becomes quite significant since the young girl’s innocence and honesty act as a foil to the experienced wife’s iniquity.

The world in the story is depicted as an upsidedown one, since within its borders it is the woman who exercises mastery in the relationship. The final statements, however, to a certain extent restate the patriarchal order. The woman acquires freedom due to the fact that it is granted to her by the husband. She outwits her husband, but the outcome reveals the features of patriarchy in disguise: the wife’s independence has to be legitimized by the husband. Her freedom is a result of the trick she performed. Resorting to such stratagems is presented as the wife’s almost everyday policy that has to be adopted in order to gain some mastery over her own life.

The anti-feminism of another fabliau involving similar characters, a merchant’s wife and a clerk, seems to be of a slightly different nature. The main female protagonist, Margeri, is precisely an embodiment of the “woman foolish enough to try to remain chaste” type. She seems to be the exact opposite of her predecessor here, the bourgeoise d’Orléans, both in her motivation and the defending speeches she delivers. Here disloyalty among women acquires a graver aspect, since it results in far more serious consequences. The laughter provoked by the story may be a stifled chuckle rather than a manifestation of open gayety, which proves the adequacy of the statement referring to the interplay of laughter and gravity in the medieval culture. The topic of

the story does not merely consist in the consequences of the spying performed by another woman. The plot is based on the stratagem ("contoise") performed by an older woman, who as such constitutes a significant figure in the realm of the carnivalesque. The comical effect is achieved by the weeping dog motif and not by the young wife's predicament as such, since it can hardly be called humorous.

The plot is similar to that of *De la Bourgoise d'Orliens*, but the roles of the protagonists are different. The suitor is called Wilkin and his would-be lady's name is Margeri. He is a bourgeois clerk and she is a merchant's faithful wife. When Wilkin's attempts to make Margeri his mistress fail, he urges Dame Sirith, an old and therefore experienced matchmaker, to help him. She makes Margeri fulfill Wilkin's wishes by dint of a story about her weeping dog. Dame Sirith's dog was previously fed with mustard and pepper hence it is not difficult to make Margeri believe that the creature is Sirith's daughter, once "fair en fre" [lovely and gracious] (339), who refused to make love to a clerk who transformed her into an animal as a form of punishment. The result of such persuasion is, as Carol Jamison defined it, "more akin to rape than love", since the faithful woman yields to the clerk in order to avoid deformity<sup>12</sup>.

The anti-feminist satire in *De la Bourgoise d'Orliens* consisted in revealing the "true" feminine nature by exposing women's wickedness caused by the insatiable lust motivating their behaviour. The whole motif was a cliché deriving from philosophical writings dealing with the figure of the biblical Eve and her female descendants. In *Dame Sirith* the negative attitude directed against women is strengthened by a new figure: a chaste spouse who refuses to become an object in the mercantile exchange Wilkin wants to subject her to. The object of laughter here is not a naïve husband with the evil wife cuckolding him behind his back, but a wife who strives to remain independent from uncontrollable masculine desire. Courtly language becomes a powerful tool in her hands, since she dominates over him at the first stage of the game of lust. Her chief ambition seems to be expressed in the declaration that she "houncurteis ne will be" [she will never be discorteous] (46). The use of the word "discorteous" is even more relevant to the situation than the word "uncorteous", since it stresses the difficulty associated with going against the grain of the chivalric tradition. Nevertheless, Wilkin's straightforward offer of sexual love has to be refused. The author of the poem uses a distinct division into the *dramatae personae*, as it is visible in the confrontation scene:

<sup>12</sup> C. Jamison: *Dame Siriz and the Devolution of the Courtly Code of Conduct* at: <<http://www.llp.armstrong.edu/5800/sirith.html>>

Dame, if hit is <b>Pi</b> wille, <b>BoP</b> dernelike and stille Ich wille <b>Pe</b> love.'	secretly; quietly
'Pat wold I don for non <b>Ping</b> , <b>Bi</b> hour Loverd, hevene King, Pat ous is bove.	
Ich habe mi loverd Pat is mi spouse, Pat maiden broute me to house Mid menske inou.	
He love <b>P</b> me and Ich him wel: Oure love is also trewe as stel, Wi <b>P</b> houten wou.	honour
	truly (lit. without wrong)

85-96

The woman uses language to defend herself against an unwanted suitor and the words constitute an instrument in that fight. They can be likened to steel, to use a metaphor appearing in the text in reference to the conjugal love of the two people: the lady and her husband. Margeri's statements justifying the refusal are highly controversial in terms of the ideology that lies at their bottom. According to the poetics of the fabliau the woman is satirized since she represents the Christian principles of chastity and fidelity that have to be ridiculed within the poetics of the world upsidedown. Yet, the reciprocity of the affection the wife and the husband have for each other testifies to a relationship based more on partnership than on subjugation. Virginity of the woman is depicted as a gift for her spouse and not as a valuable entity that had to be forsaken as a result of a purely economic contract. Probably such passages as the one quoted above made Carol Jamison describe Margeri as "an independent, assertive female character, well in control of the unfortunate circumstances in which she finds herself"<sup>13</sup>. The question of language, and specifically courtly language, is significant for Jamison when she writes that Margeri uses discourse as a weapon<sup>14</sup>.

The upsidedown world of the Old French fabliau regains its previous proportions in *Dame Sirith*, but the feminist undertones present in the speeches delivered by Margeri are disconcerting. She is not her husband's property, which makes her later subjection to Wilkin's desire doubly painful. The clerk is the exact opposition of her truly courtly spouse, as she implies by saying: "Mi loverd is curteis mon and hende, / And mon of pris" [My lord is a courteous and gracious man, / And a man of excellence] (119–120). The satire seems to be directed here not at Margeri as a representative of the estate all women belong to, but as an emancipated female who is able to decide for

13 Ibidem.

14 Ibidem.

herself. The outcome of such decisions does not have to be directed against the principles of Christianity, but her motivation is not purely religious. As a result of the intrigue, she is to a certain extent punished for her ambitions and her unrealistic attitude towards the question of granting to men what they lust for.

Another independent female in the poem is obviously Dame Sirith, who finally triumphs as the performer of “a juperti, / And a ferli maistri” [a venture and a marvelous feat] (277–278). The plot is similar in that respect to the one in the Old French fabliau, where the main female protagonist is endangered due to another woman’s disloyalty. Here the motivation of the disloyal attitude is realistic, since it is the poverty socially reserved for unmarried older women that drives Dame Siriz to helping Wilkin. As Sirith states it, “Not no mon so muchel of pine / As poure wif Pat falleP in nauisine” [No man knows so much of suffering / That a poor wife that has falls into distress] (305–306). Finally, Wilkin gratifies her for the “lesing” [lying tale] (282) with which she forces Margeri to commit adultery. The old bawd is clearly the *vetula*, an old woman who is experienced in the art of love yet cannot participate in it any more. She is a carnivalesque figure: threatening due to the power she disposes of, here being obviously associated with magic which Dame Sirith so strongly denies to be practising. Another character embodying that *topos* is obviously the fairy from Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, who dominated over her young husband. Sirith’s allusions to the actual nature of her own occupation give the reader a hint as to how she could be treated in her community. She declares: “Ich am on holi wimon; / On wicchecrafft nou I ne con” [I am a holy woman; / On witchcraft I know nothing] (205–206). The irony of such self-characterization consists in the fact that the old woman does not need to perform magic tricks in order to be dangerous for Margeri. Sirith is aware of the predicament of witches in the world she lives in:

For al Pe world ne wold I nout	
Pat Ich were to chapitre ibrout	ecclesiastical court
For none selke werkes.	such
Mi judgement were sone igiven	
To ben wiP shome some-driven	shame; driven on a pack-horse
WiP prestes and wiP clarkes.	By

243–248

The old woman exposes the duplicity of the system directed against women: the clerk Wilkin comes to seek her help whereas she is simultaneously imperiled by other clerks functioning within the ecclesiastical institutions. Sirith is aware of the strategies used to subdue powerful women by labeling them as witches. The powerful woman is satirized: she is merely a matchmaker since

she denies being a witch and she performs her tricks not out of spite, but for profit.

The poetics of *Dame Sirith* is associated with the notion of excess. Margeri is satirized due to her excessive independence and the chastity exceeding bourgeois norms, especially the ones described in such a genre as fabliaux, typically associated with bawdy topics. She lacks the promiscuity expected of lower-class women and has to be punished for that. The subversive under-currents associated with her self-awareness and unwillingness to be objectified have to be overcome due to the general process that takes place in anti-feminist satire. The world upsidedown where women want to decide for themselves must be set upright again and the subversive aspirations have to be satirized.

Margeri dominates the narrative's discourse only up till the point when she is confronted with another woman. The two females are clearly separated from each other as it also happens in the *Roman de la Rose*, which is, to quote Jill Mann, "traditional [...] in separating the beautiful young woman who is able to carry on love-affairs, and the ugly old woman who knows all the lore of love but cannot practice it"<sup>15</sup>. Such a division is typical and it seems to disrupt the continuum of young women becoming old and experienced with time which appears in reality. Literary representations juxtapose those two stages of feminine experience or even set them against each other. The women become an object of laughter: they are satirized either due to their excessive promiscuity or exaggerated chastity. Such texts, in opposition to for instance Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, indicate no female control of the discourse. The women use language as an instrument, but they fail to master their own lives in the end. Once independent, Margeri finally demonstrates her subjection to Wilkin when she utters the following words:

'Welcome, Wilekin, swete <i>Ping</i> ,	
<i>Pou</i> art welcomore <i>Pen</i> <i>Pe</i> king.	
Wilekin <i>Pe</i> swete,	
Mi love, I <i>Pe</i> bihete	promise
To don al. <i>Pine</i> wille.	
Turnd Ich have mo <i>Pout</i> ,	changed
For I ne wolde nout	
Pat <i>Pou</i> <i>Pe</i> shuldest spille.	destroyed

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The discourse that Margeri's address belongs to characterizes masculine power over the world of women. She voices her willingness to forsake her chastity as an alternative to Wilkin's potential destruction of his own life,

<sup>15</sup> J. Mann: *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*. Cambridge 1973, p. 126.

whatever she actually means by such a statement. She is laughed at as a character, yet the laughter is that of defense rather than of genuine merriment since it is caused by the woman's downfall. To quote Jean Emelina again,

Like in the reflex to protect oneself [...] laughter [...] is a *defense reflex* in the mental, moral and social schemata in front of the eruption of the unknown [...] the laughter protects us from anxiety or fear. This emotion without emotion which appears when we are faced with something that is outside our norms allows us to avoid the worst.<sup>16</sup>

The anti-feminist satire attempts to tame the dangerous aspects of femininity or ridicule women as such by presenting them in an unfavourable light. All women are satirized as a consequence due to their being lusty or chaste, materialist or high-spirited. The laughter allows to present the world set upright again instead of the riotous vision of the world being upside down, which is inhabited by independent women who either reject their suitors or perform illicit acts behind their husband's backs. The masculine mastery is restored in the end and the laughter ends the attempts at escaping masculine domination that are made by the female characters.

The subversive quality of carnivalesque laughter turns out to be superficial since it legitimizes the existing order instead of opposing it in an active way. Anti-feminist satire is the genre where defensive mechanisms are at play as far as the politics of laughter is concerned. Hence, the theory of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque has to be exposed here as non-valid in that case, especially when one considers the statement that the idiom of laughter is "never used by violence and authority"<sup>17</sup>. In the fabliaux analyzed here laughing at women legitimizes their social subjection to men and it guarantees the continuation of patriarchal order. Slavoj Žižek even argues that the dominant forces perpetuate such laughter since it strengthens their position: "an apparatus of power does not attempt to evacuate the body of its attachment to pleasure but rather secretly shares in these enjoyments to further its control"<sup>18</sup>. Even if the gullible husband in the Old French fabliau is satirized, his unfaithful wife is even more so, not to mention the punishment Margeri receives for her emancipating attitude. The patriarchal system strikes back and the laughter becomes another strategy of authority.

<sup>16</sup> [Comme dans le réflexe de sauvegarde [...] le rire [...] est *réflexe de défense* d'un schéma mental, moral et social devant l'irruption de l'inconnu [...] le rire nous sauve de l'angoisse ou de l'épouvante. Cette émotion sans émotion face à ce que échappe à nos normes nous permet d'éviter le pire]. J. Emelina: *Les grands orientations...*, pp. 55-71.

<sup>17</sup> M. Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. H. Iswolsky. Bloomington 1988, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> S. Žižek: *Re-visioning Lacanian Social Criticism*. Quoted in: J.J. Cohen: *Of Giants. Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis and London 1999, p. 164.

Anna Czarnowus

**Polityka i poetyka śmiechu w *De la bourgoise d'Orliens*  
oraz *Dame Sirith***

**Summary**

Autorka artykułu podejmuje tematykę śmiechu skierowanego przeciw kobietom. W takich utworach jak *Dame Sirith* wyśmiana jest niezgoda kobiet na podporządkowanie się mężczyznom. Literatura opisująca kobiety miała w średniowieczu swoją tradycję wywodzącą się z utworów *de statu hominum*, w których były one traktowane jako osobna grupa społeczna. Gatunkiem szczególnie ważnym jest w tym wypadku *fabliaux*, gdzie postaci zajmujące niską pozycję w życiu społecznym oszukują ludzi wyśmiewanych z powodu swojej naiwności, łatwości i idealistycznych zasad.

Smiech będący nieodłącznym elementem opowieści z gatunku *fabliaux* należy do Bachtinowskiego świata karnawału, rzeczywistości na opak, której istnienie jest kompensacją dla dyskryminowanych w świecie rzeczywistym. Po świecie na opak następuje jednak zawsze świat, który wygląda tak jak dawniej. Tytułowa bohaterka *De la bourgoise d'Orliens* oszukuje i zdradza męża, po czym wmaivia mu, że zawsze była mu wierna, podczas gdy w *Dame Sirith* niezależna decyzja Margeri, chcączej pozostać wierną mężowi i nie ulec pożądającemu jej Wilkinowi, zostaje wydrwiona. Śmiech okazuje się strategią, którą posługują się posiadający władzę. Kobieca emancypacja jest ukazana jako ostatecznie bezskuteczna i do pewnego stopnia śmieszna, ale nie wywołuje jednak w pełni beztroskiego rozbawienia.

Anna Czarnowus

**Die Politik und die Poetik des Gelächters in *De la bourgoise d'Orliens*  
und *Dame Sirith***

**Zusammenfassung**

In ihrem Artikel besaßt sich die Verfasserin mit dem Lachen über Frauen. In solchen Werken wie *Dame Sirith* wird ausgelacht, dass sich die Frauen den Männern nicht unterordnen wollen. Die über Frauen handelnde Literatur folgte der alten mittelalterlichen Tradition, die von den Werken *de statu hominum* abzustammen gewesen wäre, in denen Frauen für eine besondere Gesellschaftsgruppe gehalten wurden. Eine besonders wichtige Gattung war hier das Fabliau, wo die Figuren mit niedriger gesellschaftlicher Stellung die, wegen ihrer Naivität, Leichtgläubigkeit oder idealistischen Prinzipien verspotteten Menschen betrügen.

Das Gelächter, das ein immanentes Element der fabliau-ähnlichen Erzählung ist, gehört zu Bachtins Karnevalswelt, zu verkehrter Wirklichkeit, die für die in realer Welt diskriminierten Personen eine Entschädigung sein sollte. Auf eine verkehrte Welt folgt aber immer die normale Welt. Nachdem die Titelheldin des Werkes *De la bourgoise d'Orliens* ihren Ehemann betrügen hatte, will sie ihm einreden, dass sie ihn immer treu geliebt hat. In dem Werk *Dame Sirith* dagegen wird die Entscheidung der Margeri, ihrem Mann treu zu bleiben und die Bitten des sie begehrnden Wilkin nicht nachzugeben, verspottet. Lachen erscheint hier als eine von Machthabern verwandte Strategie. Die Frauenemanzipation wird zwar als erfolglose und bis zu einem gewissen Maße lächerliche Bemühungen gezeigt, in der Tat aber hat sie keine vollkommen fröhliche Belustigung zur Folge.