

## **Paying it off – An Analysis of Humorous Potential in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Shipman’s Tale”**

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

In order to unpack how humour within the “Shipman’s Tale” works, different theories will be applied. On the one hand, the oldest known humour theory, the Superiority Theory, which was already discussed by Plato and Aristotle, will serve as a foundation. Furthermore, this theory will be supported by aspects of a newer theory, the Incongruity (Resolution) Theory of humour, especially by means of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* developed by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin (1991). On the other hand, in order to truly understand the implications of the humorous potential created on the plot level, sociological theory will provide additional useful concepts. Here Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of capital as power through accumulated labour, as well as his reading of it as the “principle underlying the immanent regularities of the social world” (1986: 241) will be of help. According to his theory capital can take on one of three forms: economic, social, or cultural. This echoes the power dynamic that develops between the three protagonists of the “Shipman’s Tale”, where essential fabliau elements, like trickery, relationships, and negotiation, find their motivation in a longing for financial, social, and sexual power.

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