Humorous Structures of English Narratives, 1200-1600
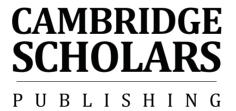
Humorous Structures of English Narratives, 1200-1600

By

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For the laugh

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CHAPTER ONE

THE "MAGIC" OF HUMOUR

No one likes to have to explain a joke. We all know from experience that if a joke fails at first, an explanation will aid the understanding of the joke, but it cannot rescue the humour. We always want to know how the rabbit is pulled out of the hat, but it is not knowing that makes it magic. So by revealing the mechanisms of humour, are we destroying the magic? Humour studies has always had to defend itself against the accusation of ruining the fun for everyone. But as I will show, within the mechanisms of humour lies not disappointment, but more magic. Even if this study cannot promise any laughs, its explanation of the machinery of humour, the minute detail and magnificent skill that create the comic effect, can promise to not ruin the tricks of humour. Because instead it will show that humour is more than a phoney deck of cards, it is magic.

This study employs a prominent theory that claims to know the secret of the magic trick that allows humour to appear out of nothing: Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo's *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (1991). The central aim of this study is to test the usefulness of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* on a specific corpus by identifying and interpreting the particular narrative structures that create humour. How well can this theory explain how the humour in a particular tale 'works', and can it provide us with interesting, novel interpretations? This study will provide a number of additions and enhancements to current scholarly research. First, I will apply the theory—which has, so far, been tested predominantly on jokes—to longer and more complex texts and thus prove its value for the literary scholar. Second, I will apply the theory—which has not been tested on texts written before 1600—to older texts and thus assess its universality. Third, I will apply the theory to tragic texts (which are often seen as the opposite of humorous texts) in order to find out whether this theory truly proves the presence of only humour and nothing else that might resemble it.

The theory of humour is the focus of this study, and I will use literary texts to discuss the quality of the theory, rather than using a theory to

make new interpretations of the texts. Although new insights into the selected texts will be provided, the focus of the study remains on the theoretical questions of humour theory. My findings will show that the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* provides a useful terminology and methodology that indeed are valuable for the analysis of humorous narratives. However, I will also argue that the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* alone is not enough to adequately describe the elusive artistry of more complex humour. I will therefore incorporate Thomas D. Cooke's (1978) *Comic Climax* as a complementary perspective. Cooke's approach concentrates on the narrative 'flow' and the interaction of narratological elements from a more global point of view, while the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* offers a precise analysis of individual humorous instances. In the course of the study, I will enhance the scope of the *Comic Climax* by developing it into an approach that I call the *Comic Effect.* This modification overcomes the *Comic Climax*'s restriction to tales that culminate in one final comic outcome, similar to the punch line of a joke. Moreover, I will argue that the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* does not indicate humour *per se*, but the p o t e n t i a l for humour. Whether or not this potential is actually realized is outside the grasp of the theory. It is the *Comic Climax/Comic Effect* which is needed to make this judgement. I put forth this combination of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* and the *Comic Climax/Comic Effect* as an effective means of undertaking what I call a 'humorist reading' (following the terms 'feminist', 'structuralist' reading, etc.) of any given text.

In this introductory chapter, I will elaborate on the above statements, lay out the preconditions of this study and give an outline of its structure.

1991, a linguistic-based approach to humour has become the focus of humour studies which claims to explain the mechanism of humour, both of short jokes as well as complex humorous narratives, with the tool of the cultural script: Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo's *General Theory of Verbal Humor* (1991). Scripts are defined as chunks of cultural knowledge and, according to Raskin and Attardo, any humorous instance can be explained as a simultaneous occurrence of Script Opposition and partial script overlap. The humorous instance is then classified into certain categories called Knowledge Resources. In a longer humorous text, every humorous instance (also termed *jab line*) is then defined according to the Knowledge Resources to reveal underlying patterns and make informed statements about the humorous text. These Knowledge Resources comprise Script Opposition as explained above, Logical Mechanism (the 'mechanism' according to which the Script Opposition can be resolved, such as exaggeration, inversion, verbal irony, etc.), Situation (scripts that

are not part of the joke but need to be understood in order to comprehend the joke), Target (the butt of the joke), Narrative Strategy (such as dialogue, decription of the ongoing action, etc.) and Language (only relevant if the joke depends on language, such as word play). This, of course, is only a short and reduced description of the theory and will be clarified with detailed explanations and applications in this study.

Despite the recent popularity of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, this theory has been put into practice only insufficiently, as Attardo himself emphasizes in a current article:

> [I]t is clear that many issues remain to be dealt with. For example, further analyses of longer texts comparable to those in Attardo (2001a) and Corduas et al. (forth.) would clarify if the results found for those texts are unique or can be generalized to a class of texts (and of course, which class). […] The role and significance of such traditional narratological concerns such as characters, point of view, narrator, etc. in humor is almost entirely to be determined and assessed. (Attardo 2008, 121)

In this quotation, Attardo mentions important starting points for further research that will be addressed in my study. For instance, the theory has been widely discussed and refined, but this has remained mostly in the theoretical realm.[1] If the theory is useful, then surely it should be much more than a self-sufficient theoretical construct. Instead, it should be put into practice and only then criticized and improved from this vantage point. One aim of my study, therefore, is to test the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*. As one of the most extensive applications of the theory to date, this study will allow me to discuss the general validity of the theory, while also revealing its limits and the need for further refinement.

Secondly, the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* has mainly been tested on shorter humorous forms, such as the joke (Raskin 1985; Zabalbeascoa 2005), the cartoon (Paolillo 1998; Tsakona 2009) or conversations (Antonopoulou and Sifianou 2004; Archakis and Tsakona 2005). This would appear to be in line with linguistic-based studies that, for a long

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[1] Cf. Brock (2004), Brône and Feyaertes (2004), Davies (2004), Larkin Galinanes (2005), Hempelmann (2004), Morreall (2004), Ritchie (2004), Triezenberg (2004), Tsakona (2003) and more. A recent special issue of the *International Journal of Humor Research* discusses the "*General Theory of Verbal Humor*: Twenty Years After" (2011) and also contains many interesting (theoretical) discussions of the theory. Only few practical applications of the theory have been carried out: Attardo (2001), Hempelmann (2000) and other shorter articles.

time, concentrated on shorter humorous forms, such as the pun[2] and the joke[3]. In fact, the joke is often seen as the ideal subject of investigation, since it is succinct and uncomplicated enough to fit neatly into the 'test tubes' of linguistic analysis. This allows the researcher to develop a theory of humour on a smaller scale with fewer components to consider. Jokes have been widely used in the research of semantics, pragmatics or even neurolinguistics[4] and computational linguistics[5], still in their early years. For semantics and cognitive linguistics, the understanding of humour as an incongruity[6] between meanings or scripts is especially relevant and has inspired important studies, such as Attardo (1997, 2001), Attardo and Raskin (1991), Giora (1991) or Weiner (1997). There is also much interesting research in the field of psycholinguistics[7] that can be fruitfully used in a literary/narratological context. However, due to their simplification and formalism most of the joke-based theories and discussions are deemed insufficient by literary scholars. Literary critics strive after an understanding of not simply how a humorous effect is achieved, but how this effect influences the interpretation of longer and more complex literary texts.[8] They are more interested in the magic than in the mechanisms of humour, as it were. Research on spontaneous conversational humour[9] or humour in cartoons[10] and films[11] only to a

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[2] There is a vast body of research on puns and language-humour issues, to name but a few recent studies: Alexander (1997), Guidi (2012), Hempelmann (2004) and Pollack (2011).

[3] This covers the majority of linguistics-based humour reseach, from inflential works, such as Raskin (1985) and Ritchie (2004) to very recent studies, for instance Viana (2010) or Davies (2010).

[4] Cf. the work of Coulson and Kutas (2001), Coulson and Williams (2005) and Goel and Dolan (2001).

[5] Important works in this field are Hulstin and Nijholt (1996), Nijholt (2007) or Ritchie (2001).

[6] This understanding of humour goes back to antiquity and is described in detail in chapters two and three in this study.

[7] Cf. research that discusses the influence of the context on the appreciation of jokes; among others Katz, Blasko and Kamerski (2004) or Mitchell, Graesser and Louverse (2010). Cf. also research that discusses the role of expectations, such as Wimer (2008).

[8] The same is true for shorter but equally complex humorous poetry, a field that has still great potential for future research; cf. the special issue of the *International Journal of Humor Research* on "Humor in Contemporary American Poetry" (2009) or Martiny (2010).

[9] Important works on conversational humour have been conducted by Kotthoff (1994) and Norrick (1993). For example, investigations about the function of

certain degree applies to longer narratives because it is tailored to a different medium. This leaves, therefore, two paths for the literary scholar: to either concentrate on their own discipline and disregard results gained from linguistics or other related disciplines, or to extend the usability of linguistic theories to longer texts. Attardo and Raskin have taken the latter path (albeit as linguists): the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* is largely based on a study of jokes that was famously and controversially[12] extended to also accommodate longer and more complex texts. In its current state, the theory relies on several fields of linguistic inquiry: semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics, but it has also been challenged by scholars of these fields. I will discuss the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* from the standpoint of a literary scholar. My study is designed to assess whether the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, a theory that has its birthplace outside literary studies, is useful within the scope of literary studies, i.e. for the analysis of longer and more complex literary narratives.[13]

I wish to push this point even further and apply the theory to mainly medieval literature, using more complex tales that were produced between 1200 and 1600. This will allow me to test the proclaimed universality of

humour in conversations (Holmes 2000) or the relation of humour and laughter in conversation (Chafe 2001; Jefferson 1979) are discussed in the field of pragmatics. Moreover, the *Relevance Theory*, which sees a conscious violation of Grice's cooperational maxim as an explanation of humour, is discussed by several scholars, among others Raskin (1985) and, more recently, Yus (2003), Furlong (2011) and more. Sociolinguistic issues are also the subject of recent conversational analyses, for an introduction cf. Kotthoff (1994). Humour and gender are discussed in Crawford (2003), Kotthoff (2006) or Palma-Metha (2009). For humour and race cf. Silvar-Villar (2008); racial humour in the medium of film (McNair 2008), TV-shows (Howells 2006) or stand-up comedy (Azlant 2007). Finally, humour and class are discussed in the *International Journal of Humor Research*'s special issue on "Working Class Humor" (2010).

[10] Cf. among others El-Refaie (2011) on the pragmatics of humour reception; Paolillo (1998) and Tsakona (2009) apply the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* to cartoons and Marín-Arrese (2008) uses a cognitive approach to discuss political cartoons.

[11] Cf. among many others DeRochi (2008), Mansfield (2008), or the special issue in *p.o.v. A Danish Journal of Film Studies* (2008).

[12] For a more in-depth discussion of the research and criticism surrounding the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, as well as a discussion of the position taken in my own study and how it contributes to research, cf. chapter four.

[13] Only few studies have discussed literary texts with a linguistic-based methodology, for example, Attardo (2001), Chłopicki (1987; 1997), Larkin Galinanes (2005) or Ermida (2008).

the theory: is the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, a modern theory, applicable to the humour of pre-modern tales? This is a research question that has yet to be answered, since Attardo himself does not use examples that were written before the sixteenth century.[14] Although research into medieval humour is far from extensive, several excellent studies have followed Bakhtin's seminal *Rabelais and His World* (1984 [1965]). Today, researchers of medieval humour can avail of reference guides (Nilsen 1997), general introductions (Le Goff 1999 [1989]) and essay collections (Classen 2010 and Pfister 2002).[15] As with the study of literary humour in general, research tends to focus either on a particular author[16] or genre[17]. Specifically narratological studies of medieval humour are, however, rare, as Müller (2010, 69-71) states in a recent article.[18] This is therefore one of the first studies to explicitly develop an analytical framework that combines humour studies, narratology and medieval studies. It provides medievalists with a detailed discussion of two major humorous genres in the Middle Ages, the fabliau and the parody with regard to the narrative construction of their humour. My corpus includes all extant texts of these two genres within the timeframe of 1200-1600 and thus incorporates a wide range of texts within its focus of humorous tales. The medieval tragedy will also be discussed, though I will concentrate on

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[14] Cf. Attardo (2001, viii). However, cf. Hempelmann (2000) for a few medieval examples.

[15] The titles of these last two works, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times* and *A History of English Laughter*, show a tendency in medieval studies to focus more on the external sign of humour, laughter, than on the phenomenon 'humour' itself. A reason for this is certainly the difficulty to determine intended and perceived humour in a culture distant from us in time. On the important differentiation between humour and laughter (since laughter by no means always implies humour), cf. chapter two in this study. Other valuable studies focussing on laughter are Freeman (1999), Seeber (2010) and more.

[16] Cf. among the vast body of research on Chaucer and humour: Arner (2005) and Kendrick (2008; 2010); but also on Boccaccio (among others, Arend 2004; Jakobs 2006) and, to a lesser degree, on Gower (Barney Burke 1989).

[17] Prominent medieval genres that have been to object of humour research are the fabliau (Blamires 2007; Pearcy 2007; for more references, cf. chapter five), the parody (Bayless 1996; Taylor 2002; for further references, cf. chapter six) or the sottie (Ross 2010; Marculescu 2010).

[18] While I agree with Müller on this matter, I do not share her equally bleak assessment of the research situation concerning the narratological discussion of humour in general. Cf. among others Preisendanz (1976); Fludernik (1996) who discusses jokes in relation to her 'Natural' Narratology; or the efforts of Vandaele (2010) to define narrative humour.

a selection of tales rather than covering all extant variants of the genre. I will provide an exemplary humorist reading of a medieval tragedy and show how the theoretical tools can be used to inspire new interpretations of older texts.

My study will thus lay the foundations for future investigations into historical circumstances, the social relevance of ridicule and how humour is used to strengthen or challenge a particular world view. For example, I will show that the evocation of an urban and 'realistic' setting or the introduction of a lecherous monk and a beautiful wife will arouse the expectations of a fabliau and thus of a humorous plot. I will not, however, explain what implications and consequences Chaucer's ridiculing of the Church has, but focus on the development of a theory-based argumentation that can investigate such issues. This study thus presents and evaluates the theoretical foundations that can provide a firm basis to inspire a discussion of how ideology and politics are reflected and negotiated in humour.

Let me add that although most of the selected texts are derived from manuscripts, I will not discuss their status as historical testimonies that have an artistic quality. This study will thus forego a comparison of different manuscript versions of the same text or an examination of how manuscript illustrations contribute to *Comic Effect*. My discussion will focus solely on the edition I have chosen, without taking textual variants or visual components into consideration. The reason for this these is not that these considerations are unimportant or that the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* could not handle visual aspects[19] or consider the historical circumstances behind humorous tales. It is simply for the practical purpose of concentrating on one single aspect in all its scope that such aspects would prove too distracting. However, I have chosen what is currently believed to be the most reliable edition of the chosen texts wherever more than one edition was available.

Let me return to the above quotation in which Attardo states that the narratological aspect of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* is in need of development ("The role and significance of such traditional narratological concerns such as characters, point of view, narrator, etc. in humor is almost entirely to be determined and assessed" Attardo 2008, 121). Raskin (2011, 225) also expressed his hope that other disciplines, especially narratology, would help in the expansion of the *General Theory of Verbal*

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[19] Cf. Paolillo (1998) for an application of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* on a visual medium.

Humor.[20] As my study will show, Attardo and Raskin's theory to a certain extent already includes narratological categories.[21] This is absolutely necessary, since the qualities, structures and techniques of telling a h u m o r o u s story are largely the same as the general qualities, structures and techniques of telling a story. Narratology, as the discipline that seeks to "understand, analyse, and evaluate narratives" (Bal 1999, 3), should be at the helm of research into how a humorous effect is created using particular narrative techniques. And it is also for this reason that this study has a strong narratological focus. However, I will not use narratology as a means of e x t e n d i n g the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* itself, but rather of c o m p l e m e n t i n g it with a literary theory. I intend to use Thomas D. Cooke's *Comic Climax* (1978) as such a complementary theory because it approaches narratological categories more directly and purposefully. My analyses are structured according to narratological categories (such as characters, setting, narrator, plot and language) in order to discuss the influence of these categories on the humorous effect. Cooke argues that within a humorous narrative all of these narratological categories are aligned to serve a final comic outcome—the *Comic Climax*. In the course of my study[22], I will argue that this concept should be expanded in order to encompass not only humorous stories that strive towards a final comic climax, but also any kind of comic effect within a tale. A tale can be considered a comic tale when all narratological categories support the *Comic Effect*. If certain narratological categories work against the *Comic Effect*, the humorousness is considerably reduced. While the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* focuses on the individual humorous instances, the *Comic Effect* adds a global perspective on the narrative and the interaction of narratological elements. It is therefore also more open in its general set up and can take factors into account that are not incorporated by the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*'s Knowledge Resources.

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[20] Cf. Raskin (2011, 225-26): "Attardo and I had been hoping that the experts on the areas of those K[knowledge] R[esources] would rush in and cooperate with us but they have not. […] it is a problem for narrativists to explore […]. [The] G[eneral] T[heory] of V[erbal] H[umor] is explicitly a multidisciplinary theory, with explicitly non-linguistic K[knowledge] R[esources] – the corresponding disciplines should contribute the expertise on those".

[21] Cf. chapter four for a detailed discussion of how narratological elements are incorporated in the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*.

[22] In particular, chapter six.

As I will show in the course of this study[23], comic and tragic tales can have the same fabula, that is, the same "material of plot formulation" (Shklovsky 1965 [1921], 57).[24] That means that any comic tale from my corpus has the potential to be narrated in a way that creates a tragic effect. It is the task of a humour theory to explain how these differences in effect come about. Clearly, if the fabulas are identical, it is the sjuzet, the finished arrangement of the plot, that is to account for these differences. To understand the comic effect of a text, it is essential to look at the way in which the story is narrated. And without a doubt, narratology provides the ideal methodology for doing so.

This study will begin by laying the foundations for the analyses to come. I will define the essential terms *humour*, *laughter* and *the comic* and will then discuss the advancers and key statements of the three main theories of humour that will be referred to again and again throughout this study: the social, psychoanalytical and cognitive theories of humour (chapter two). I will also demonstrate the importance of genre for my study, turning then to the historic development of humour theories up to the Middle Ages (chapter three). After these preliminary considerations, I will provide a detailed discussion of my methodology (chapter four). Since the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* developed from the study of jokes, I have decided to introduce the theory with that particular medium, using several jokes from Renaissance jest books. A discussion of the "Miller's Tale" will show why the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* should be complemented by the *Comic Climax* to embrace more complex humorous tales.

I will then turn towards my analytical chapters, which make up the main part of my study. These chapters are structured according to genre in order to assess the versatility of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*. Will this theory truly be able to discuss any (verbal) humorous genre, as the qualifier "general" promises, or does it work better with a certain genre while neglecting others? For my first analytical chapter, I have decided to test the theory on the genre that might well be the epitome of medieval humour, the fabliau (chapter five). My investigation hence starts out by applying the humour theory to well-researched, 'classic' humorous texts in

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[23] Cf. esp. chapter seven.

[24] In this study, I will use the terms *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, introduced by the Russian formalists (esp. Shklovsky 1965), as a differentiation between what is told (fabula) and how it is told (sjuzhet). This corresponds to the terms *story* and *discourse* (Chatman 1978), which will not be used in this study in order to avoid confusion with the word *story* that will be used synonymously with *tale*.

order to test the theory for functionality and applicability on the very texts for which it was designed. Emphasizing the narratological perspective, I have decided to structure the chapter according to the most important narratological elements, such as characters, setting, narrator, plot and language. This allows me to assess the role such elements play in creating a humorous effect and the ability of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* to describe such humorous structures. Already at this stage of the study it becomes obvious that the analytical powers of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* cannot adequately describe the humour of complex tales and need the complementation with a more global perspective—the perspective of the *Comic Climax*. The analysis will incorporate all extant English fabliaux; this covers the time before Chaucer (*Dame Sirith*), Chaucer's fabliaux from his *Canterbury Tales* ("Miller's Tale"; "Reeve's Tale"; "Shipman's Tale"; "Merchant's Tale"; "Summoner's Tale") and later fifteenth- and sixteenth-century fabliaux (*Lady Prioress* and *Dane Hew, Monk of Leicestre*). This will allow me to grasp the genre in its entirety and possibly trace its diachronic development.

The chapter on the fabliau has provided insights into the abilities and limitations of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, but it has not necessarily contributed to novel interpretations of the texts under discussion. While this was not the main aim of the chapter—after all, I deliberately chose well-researched tales with a focus on discussing the theory rather than the tales themselves—it is admittedly not satisfactory for the literary scholar. A theory should not only be descriptive, it should also aid in generating new ideas on the text. In this chapter, I applied a humour theory to a humorous text in order to show that it is indeed humorous. While this is legitimate, it might be more fruitful to test the theory on texts that are more ambiguous with regard to their humorous status. In my second analytical chapter, I have therefore decided to discuss the genre of parody (chapter six). Parodic humour is not necessarily as obvious as the humour of the fabliaux, which thus presents a challenge for both the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* and the *Comic Climax*. Parodies mostly allow two readings, a literal and a parodic one, and hence contain a degree of ambiguity that the fabliau does not. With ambiguous texts such as these, the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* becomes much more valuable: it provides a solid grounding for a humorous interpretation of tales whose humorousness is in doubt. Moreover, the parodies do not strive towards a final comic effect (*Comic Climax*) but induce and maintain humour to a constant degree throughout the tale. Is the *Comic Climax* therefore ineffective for my discussion? This required the modification and opening up of the *Comic Climax* to what I call the *Comic*

Effect. I examined Chaucer's "Tale of Sir Thopas" and the anonymous *Tournament of Tottenham*, whose parodic intent is virtually unquestioned. I also discussed Chaucer's "Wife of Bath's Tale", Gower's "Florent" and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, all of which have the same underlying fabula but have not been universally recognized as parodies. My analysis proved the parodic intent of *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and compared this to the varying degrees of humorousness in the "Wife of Bath's Tale" and "Florent". Finally, the "Nun's Priest's Tale" served as an example of a parody that mocks more than one particular genre.

For my final analytical chapter (chapter seven), it seemed logical to turn to tales that are not considered to be humorous, nor even ambiguous, but entirely tragic. With regard to structure, the tragic tales and comic tales should be opposites, as the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* suggests and one might also intuitively expect. However, I was able to point out Script Oppositions in the tragic tales which are not unlike the ones encountered in the comic tales. Is this an invalidation of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*? From this point, I arrived at the conclusion that Script Oppositions are not a sign of humour but of humorous potential. In tragic tales, the humorous potential is not realized because certain narratological elements work against the *Comic Effect*. The combination of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor* and the *Comic Effect* provided the tools for a humorist interpretation of a 'tragic' tale: it is highly important to point out exactly where the humorous potential of a tale is located and which methods are used to generate it. The *General Theory of Verbal Humor* provides the means for such an analysis. The *Comic Effect* will then be able to assess whether such potential is realized. While the corpus of chapters five and six has aimed at capturing a genre in its entirety, I will provide an exemplary and concentrated discussion of two instances from Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. The tale of Oedipus will serve as an example of a tragedy in which the humorous potential is not realized, and I will illustrate the humorist reading as a parody of a tragedy with the help of the tales of Atreus and Thyestes.

What started out as an application and assessment of the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*, has turned into a new technique for better understanding the magic of humour: the humorist reading. Like the Marxist, feminist and various other approaches to literature, the humorist approach takes on one key issue as a starting point in order to better understand a text and its place in society. It poses the questions 'why is

this humorous?' or 'why is this not humorous?' and 'how is it humorous?' and provides the theoretical tools to answer them.

Narrative technique has been revealed as the trick that allows the magician to turn a fabula into a tale with any kind of effect, be it comic or tragic. However, revealing and explaining how a particular way of narrating a text can achieve a particular effect does not result in disappointment. When the magic trick is explained, we realize how simple the trick was and how obviously we had been beguiled. The discussion of the comic effect in a humorous tale, on the other hand, shows how complex and intricate it was and how cleverly we had been manipulated. Understanding the various levels of humour and how they interact increases the enjoyment of humour, especially with humour that is distant from us in time. However, even if we understand the humorous structures, or the magic trick as it were, the generation of humour will to a certain degree always remain inexplicable and 'real' magic.

CHAPTER TWO

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

Before diving into the methodology and analyses, this study needs a few preliminary considerations. The following will lay the foundations by discussing and defining key terms, such as *humour*, *laughter* and the *comic*. I will furthermore present three main theories of humour that have remained influential in humour studies up to today and that will be referred to again and again throughout this study. Finally, I will explain the notion of genre and its role in the workings of humour and thus its relevance for the ensuing discussions and analyses.

Humour, Laughter and the Comic

In every-day language, the meanings of words such as *humour*, *comedy* or *comic* and *laughter* seem straightforward. Trying to define them as scientific terms, however, is far from simple. In book titles, such as *On Humour* (Critchley 2002), *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Weitz 2009) or *A History of English Laughter* (Pfister 2002), the three different terms are used to for different emphases. Nevertheless, these terms overlap to such a degree that an introduction to comedy is bound to be an introduction to humour and an introduction to laughter at the same time. A neat separation therefore, is not possible. The matter becomes even more complex with the introduction of a definition against related terms such as *oddity*, *the ridiculous* or sub-categories such as *black humour*, *sick humour* or even *unintentional humour*. The undefinability of humour has been stated throughout scholarly debate[1] as a result of these challenges, and little is likely to change in this regard. However, this must not deter the scholar of humour from laying down the rules of the game as precisely as possible. I will thus attempt to define the terminology relevant to this study while, however, admitting the ultimate impossibility of clear-cut

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[1] Cf. Escarpit (1960, 5-7). Cf. also Andrew Horton (1991, 9), who claims that "like language and like 'texts' in general, the comic is plural, unfinalized, disseminative, dependent on context and the intertextuality of creator, text and contemplator".

demarcations and an irrefutable definition of such mysterious phenomena. I will not yet give a summary of research on humour—this will be the focus of chapter two, in which the most famous humour scholars and their ideas will be discussed.

Humour appears to be the broadest of the terms mentioned here, and it is therefore sensible to use it as the starting point of the discussion. Humour is closely related to the notions of intention (of the speaker / author) and response (of the audience / reader)—two notions that are not without their own theoretical baggage in literary studies. What complicates matters even more is that humour can, of course, also be unintentional. Rod Martin defines humour in his influential book *The Psychology of Laughter. An Integrative Approach* (2006, 5) as everything that is perceived to be funny, i.e. the mental processes that create a stimulus of amusement and arouse the affective response of mirth.[2] This definition is broad enough to include unintentional humour. It also takes idiosyncratic differences into account: funny is what a particular individual finds funny.

Yet this definition needs further specification. What exactly is "funny", what is "amusing"? If one wants to approximate the 'essence' of humour as closely as possible—and again I should stress that this is ultimately impossible, but nevertheless necessary—then one needs to dig deeper into the matter. Martin (2006, 6) puts forth a definition, according to which a perceived incongruity is combined with the paratelic mode. The 'paratelic' mode is a concept based on the writings of Apter (1991), who differentiates between a *telic*, i.e. goal-orientated and serious frame of mind, and its opposite, the *paratelic* mode that is defined as playful. In the fabliaux, the exposition of the setting in the first few verses signals the particular genre and thus puts the reader/listener in a paratelic mode in which every incongruity is likely to be perceived as humorous. The combination of incongruity and paratelic mode that elicits mirth seems to focus more on the individual. However, the social context plays an important role in humour—even more so in laughter, as I will suggest below. "Joking is a game that players only play successfully when they both understand and follow the rules" (Critchley 2002, 4)—"joking" is in this context not reduced to the telling of jokes, but understood in a more general sense as creating and perceiving humour. The creation of the paratelic mode is based on a "tacit social contract" (Critchley 2002, 4)

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[2] The notion of 'mirth' is here defined as the pleasant emotional response to humour. In scholarly literature, there is no established term to denote such an emotion. Rod Martin (2006, 8) thus suggests 'mirth' as such an addition to the terminology.

between the 'sender' and the 'receiver of humour'.[3] If this social understanding fails and we make "ernest of game" ("Miller's Tale" A 3186), miscommunication occurs and the humour is lost on the addressee. In particular, when discussing texts that are temporally distant from us, we might also run into the danger of perceiving something as humorous that might not have been perceived as humorous by contemporary readers. Martin's definition thus appears to play down the sender's role in the communication process.[4]

In opposition to this, Weitz emphasizes the perspective of the sender in his definition: "'Humour' is a *social transaction* between at least two people [...] through which one party i n t e n d s t o e v o k e amusement or laughter" (2009, 2; my spacing, original italics). For the discussion of literary texts that will be conducted in this study, it is important to address the communication process as a whole, and include both 'sender' and 'receiver of humour'. This, of course, is not without its pitfalls. It is, for example, at least speculative, if not even misleading, to attempt to recreate an author's (humorous) intention, even more so in medieval texts. However, humour is a form of social play which indeed contains clues as to its humorous meaning, and each individual has the capacity to read and signal such clues. Even if the addressee, for various individual reasons, did not even feel mirth in response to a joke or a humorous interaction ("That's not funny!"), he or she could nevertheless recognize the intended humorous meaning behind it. This goes to show that a definition based exclusively on the receiver's perspective is helpful, but not sufficient. Moreover, a receiver-based definition could not differentiate a related phenomenon, such as *oddity* or *eccentricity*, from humour. Both *oddity* and *humour* are based on a perceived incongruity and can elicit mirth or even laughter. What sets them apart is the intention of the sender. While humour is aimed at creating mirth, oddity is not. Just as interlocutors communicate humour in face-to-face communication, so too does the literary text give signals towards its possible humorous meaning. The reader could, potentially, read each and every text as humorous (or

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[3] As I will discuss in detail in chapter four, this is in line with the *General Theory of Verbal Humor*: the notion of the script that is at the core of this theory can include both individual and social meanings, while the perceived incongruity is grasped as the Script Opposition.

[4] I want to emphasize that the model of the communication process in which a sender sends a message to the receiver is here used for the sake of convenience. In recent communication research the two participants are seen as senders and receivers at the same time and countless messages go back and fourth between them – both in face-to-face as well as literary communication.

serious), yet the text itself serves as a corrective. Certain structures in a text suggest its humorous meaning, and it is the purpose of this study to unveil these structures.

The word *humour* in its modern sense has only been used from the early eighteenth century onwards.[5] Originally, it referred to the four bodily liquids of blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. A healthy person was said to have a balance of all four humours. Too much or too little of a particular liquid, however, would have an effect on the person's character or physical well-being. The term *humour* became therefore connected to disposition and temperament, not yet, however, connected to the particular cheerful and playful mood. The title of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury's 1709 essay "Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour" is one of the first examples of the term *humour* being used to mean 'ludicrous', 'amusing' and 'jocular'.[6] In the time that this study is concerned with, therefore, the term *humour* had not yet developed to its modern meaning.

Based on the information above, *humour* will henceforth be defined as follows. When a text's intended humorousness is successfully conveyed and perceived as a playful incongruity, it is accompanied by a response of mirth, vocally expressed by means of laughter.[7] Laughter can be the expression of humour, but is by no means restricted to humorous circumstances only. Insecurity, fear or tickling, for example, can also cause laughter. Conversely, not everything that is perceived as humorous is accompanied by laughter.

So what exactly is *laughter*? Martin (2006, 2) describes it as a "distinctive, stereotyped pattern of vocalization" that seems to have important social function in the development of humans. Laughter is contagious (cf. Critchley 2002, 18 and Martin 2006, 10), and it can induce a playful state in others. It signals an individual's agreement with his or her social environment and thus sends a strong message without the need for putting it into words. It is standard in studies on humour to emphasize that there are two social functions of laughter, *laughter with* other people and *laughter at* other people. *Laughter at* somebody creates aggression and serves as a social punishment for deviating behaviour, while *laughter*

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[5] A good overview on the etymology of humour can be found in Martin (2006, 20-23).

[6] Cf. Morreall (2009, 221).

[7] This definition of humour is made for the purpose of studying literary sources of humour. Nevertheless, it should also hold true when applied to, for example, conversational and situational instances of humour.

with somebody conveys safety, positive reinforcement (cf. Martin 2006, 10) and the willingness to establish and strengthen, rather than undermine, relationships.[8] To create social in- and outgrouping, it is enough to be humorous, but this effect will be more forceful if the humour is accompanied by laughter. However, the term *laughter*—even if it is not spelled out—has a strong tendency to be used only in contexts that imply aggressive laughter at the butt of the joke from a superior perspective. Thus, in line with this characteristic of both scholarly as well as every-day discourse, *laughter* in this study will signify derision, even though laughter can have various triggers and functions.

The above distinction is closely connected to the notion of ridicule. While not being considered a technical term in its own right, ridicule is used time and again in humour research and will therefore be defined in this study as a criticism that is expressed in a humorous way. Somebody who is ridiculed is laughed at, rather than with.

I wish to proceed by defining *comedy*. As far as I can see, the term is used in two ways. In the narrow sense of the word, it describes a particular genre that prototypically is in dramatic form and contains a significantly higher degree of comic effect throughout its plot, which ends happily. During the Middle Ages, the word was also most likely understood as a "pley that begynnethe wythe mornynge and endythe wythe myrthe".[9] Today, the word evokes modern forms such as stand-up comedy and sitcoms. The second, wider sense of the word overlaps largely with the term *humour*, in that it is a humorous text (with the qualities suggested in the preceding paragraphs) of numerous shapes and forms. To avoid confusion, the term *comedy* will henceforth only be used in its narrow sense of the particular dramatic form. Other humorous literary forms will be described by the broader term *humour* or *humorous narrative*.

Comic, on the other hand, will refer to the characteristics of comedy in the wider sense, defined as displaying humorous intent and aiming at producing a humorous response. *Comic* will therefore describe the particular humorous tone of the text. By comparison to *humorous*, *comic*

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[8] Note that one can laugh at a person or an object. *Laughing at* is only a valid indicator of social outgrouping when a p e r s o n is being laughed at. Laughing at an o b j e c t does not necessarily entail ridicule or derision and often functions as a non-judgemental indication of the humorousness of an object. *Laughing with*, on the other hand, can be experienced in connection with persons, but not with objects.
[9] This is the definition of *comedia* in the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, a medieval dictionary (qtd. in Dalrymple 2004, 59).

implies a more intense feeling of mirth. It is also more restricted to a textual and literary environment. This understanding can be substantiated by the Genettian (1992 [1979]) understanding of the notion of *mode*. *Mode* is a term closely related to linguistics, in particular pragmatics, and describes the particular form of representation in speech which can express a certain state of mind or attitude. For Genette, *mode* comprises the three basic notions of *the dramatic*, *the narrative* and *the lyrical*, derived from the Aristotelian classification. *Mode* is universal and transhistorical.[10] I find this notion useful and believe that *the comic* is best understood as such a Genettian mode (or tone). However, I would like to open up this category[11] to include *the comic, the tragic* or even *the heroic, the didactic, the satiric*, etc. While a genre usually predetermines a particular mode (the genre of fabliau implies a comic mode), the same fabula can assume a comic or a tragic mode depending on the way it is told.[12] Thus, the tone of the tale is detached from the tale's theme and content and is dependent on the particular narrative discourse, the use of narratological elements. This is how I understand *the comic* in this study, also in the terms *Comic Climax* and *Comic Effect* that will be introduced in the chapter on methodology (cf. chapter four and six).

To clarify matters further, it is useful to distinguish the three different levels of macro-genre, genre and text type constituents as suggested by Monika Fludernik (2000). The macro-genre is "constituted by the functions of communication" (Fludernik 2000, 280). An example of this in humorous discourse would be *the comic* in opposition to *the tragic* or *the satiric*. This comic function is then realized on the level of the text as a particular genre (the fabliau or parody, but also the joke, the classical comedy, etc.) with comic episodes as text type constituents. This again helps to demarcate *the comic* in opposition to comedy (and other comic genres) and to differentiate between *the comic* as an overall function of the text (as macro-genre) and *the comic* (episodes) as a specific realization on the textual level (as text type constituents).

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[10] Genette (1992, 74): "[…] the category of mode, which in my view is the most undeniably universal category inasmuch as it is based on the transhistorical and translinguistic fact of pragmatic situations".

[11] In that, I am following the understanding of 'mode' established by Fowler (1982).

[12] This has frequently been pointed out, for example by Vandaele (2010: 777): "Any narration of an action can be made comic or tragic for audiences just by changing the 'tone' or the 'key' of the narrative communication". For a more detailed discussion of when and how plots lend themselves to being comic or tragic, cf. chapter seven.