



Review Article

The Sense of Humor in Geoffrey Chaucer's Works

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ABSTRACT



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Geoffrey Chaucer is widely regarded as the most influential literary figure in the development of contemporary English. Since he was able to elevate the linguistic melting pot of Anglo-Saxon, French, and Latin to the level of a literary vehicle independent of any other languages' impact, he has maintained a strong following around the world. As with most things, humor can be taken both literally and figuratively. Strictly speaking, it refers to an inoffensive form of laughter. In a larger context, it can refer to both dry and sarcastic humor (Satire). All these varieties of humor can be found in works by Chaucer.

Also, that the works he brought up that presented the subject of satire in a literary form for the first time made this a transformation in literature. His major work, *The Canterbury Tales*, is a literary light on (Satire) from which emerges the black comedy and its concept presented in literature today. However, this study aims to identify the sense of humor in Geoffrey Chaucer's works, and study aims with understanding and analyzing Chaucer's intentions in literary work and his role in the birth of satire and black comedy through what came in his satirical objectivity.

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1. Introduction

Geoffrey Chaucer early life his and education are a mystery to historians, despite Geoffrey Chaucer's mythical prominence as a literary giant and the so-called "founder of the English language" (Bradley, 2018). He was born into a middle-class family in the years between 1340 and 1345, perhaps in London. John Sr. was a prosperous dealer of fine wines and, on occasion, a Butler to the royal family. He probably joined the monks at St. Paul's Almonry when he was seventeen, where he gained a deeper understanding of Latin and an appreciation for Ovid's poetry, both of which would later have a profound impact on his work. During his long and eventful life, he held many positions for the English government, including those of soldier in France, government commercial agent in Italy. He oversaw the lucrative London customs, served as a country justice of the peace, was a member of parliament, was clerk of the King's Works, and was the deputy forester for the crown. (Murton, 2017). Therefore, his early life is considered one of the important pillars in his life, so that he will then become at this familiar level in literature

When King Edward III of England launched his invasion of France in 1359, Chaucer was serving as a squire in the King's army. The siege of Rheims was where he was finally captured. He was held captive for three months before the King had him ransomed, and upon his return to England, he was appointed a valet to the royal family. Through his keen memory, he amassed a wealth of interesting, relevant, and important first-hand experiences that he could have later drawn upon with great skill in his more developed compositions. Because of his close relationship with the king's sister-in-law, John of Gaunt (the king's fourth son) became a patron and friend of Chaucer, Philippa Payne Roet, whom he

married. Perhaps he attended the now-defunct Inner Temple School of Law before becoming a secret agent with connections to multiple embassies. The significance of their literary reputation in Europe cannot be overstated. Instead of being influenced by the French, Chaucer developed a deep and abiding love for the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. His death on October 25, 1400, came after a string of unfortunate events, including the loss of all his preferment. He was laid to rest in what became known as The Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey (Rothwell, 2007).

2. Overview of Chaucer's Life

Geoffrey Chaucer was born about the year 1342; the exact date is not known. His father, John, and his grandfather, Robert, had associations with the wine trade and, more tenuously, with the Court. John was Deputy Butler to the King at Southampton in 1348. Geoffrey Chaucer's mother is believed to have been Agnes de Copton, niece of an official at the Mint. They lived in London in the parish of St Martin's-in-the-Vintry, reasonably well-to-do but in a humbler walk of life than that to be adorned so capably by their brilliant son. (Coghill, N. 2003) The time he lived in and wrote was the late Middle Ages, when England was undergoing societal shifts that would eventually usher in the Renaissance. This bachelor's thesis is focused on Geoffrey Chaucer, often regarded as the first humorist in English poetry, and specifically for his estate's satire *The Canterbury Tales*.

Because of his family's success in the city and even at the court of the king, Chaucer had the opportunity to try his hand at a variety of occupations. From squire to page to soldier to courtier to official to ambassador, he did it all. If you want to talk about a prosperous burgher, a gentleman, and someone who skews toward

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the modern. He met numerous people from all walks of English and European society thanks to his extensive travels. Many of the courtiers, warriors, intellectuals, businessmen, monks, clergymen, women, and maidservants in his works were based on people he knew from his travels and time spent in England, Italy, Flanders, and Germany. His expansive perspective on European literature served as a source of further inspiration for him. Beginning in the late 1350s Chaucer entered a long phase of his career that involved regular and often extensive travels outside England, with many opportunities for exposure to the literary cultures of the cities, regions, and institutions he visited. (Holsinger, B. 2017)

Chaucer received a superb education, with a background in law, he also spoke French, Latin, and Italian fluently. One may argue that he is one of the original creators of the English language as well. His accent was refined and urban, making his English appropriate for the court and the big city. Late Middle English is a form of English that borrowed heavily from French and Latin. To be sure, Chaucer was one of the first of his day to use several of these terms in context. Chaucer intended his works to be accessible to the common people, thus he wrote in English rather than the more common Latin or French.

Concerning his personal appearance and habits, Chaucer has not been reticent in his poetry. Curry sums up the traits of his aspect and character fairly thus: "He was of a middle stature, the latter part of his life inclinable to be fat and corpulent, as appears by the Host's bantering him in the journey to Canterbury, and comparing shapes with him. (Purves, D. 2014) He penned a lot of verse for his own entertainment, his companions' amusement, and financial gain. He often included himself in his works, such as the role of narrator in the Canterbury Tales. On October 25, 1400, Geoffrey Chaucer passed away in London. His body was laid to rest in Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. All subsequent artists have looked to him for inspiration, including William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Edgar Allan Poe, and Charles Dickens, among many others.

The Late Middle Ages, or the time period in which Chaucer lived, was characterized by significant cultural and social shifts. Both English literature and the English language flourished during this time. Chaucer's work reflects the period of transition between medievalism and modernism in which it was written. This gives us irrefutable evidence that dark periods support society towards progress and prosperity, and difficult periods in which writers and intellectuals move to support society in order to rid it of the problems surrounding it.

During the previous High Middle Ages (1000-1300), the Norman Invasion introduced romance languages like French to England, and also gave rise to the development of urban centers and feudalism, which established the established the social order. When the knights provided security, the peasants farmed, and the lords advised and managed, the system functioned fairly effectively. But because of the crises, this structure fell apart throughout the Late Middle Ages (1300-1450). The agricultural sector began to suffer, and the Bubonic Plague struck the English populace. Due to the increased demand for food and labor, as well as the payment of peasants for their services, the feudal system began to crumble. After mysticism was denounced, people attacked the church and the peasantry rose up in revolt. In the later Middle Ages, chivalry flourished along with a thirst for knowledge and a thriving love life.

Late medieval civilization was stratified into estates based on wealth and status. The clergy, often known as "those who pray," were at the top of the social hierarchy since they were the beneficiaries of the tithe, or the first ten percent of an individual's income. Despite the fact that female clergy members (nuns) were

a part of this group, women were still largely treated as second-class citizens. The stereotype of clergy members living in poverty did not always reflect reality. The second sizable group consisted of "those who battle," the nobles, who were exempt from taxes themselves but had the power to levy levies against the commoners. The last category consisted of peasants, workers, or the common people. Ninety-six percent of the population fell into this category, which included everyone who did not fit into the other two categories. Despite the fact that money is important to all of these estates, the groupings were not based on members' financial status but on their social standing.

In literature, the difficulties of these communities were highlighted while also being mocked in an estate satire style. During this time period, agriculture was crucial to the economy of England, and city dwellers had just as much of a connection to the natural world as their rural counterparts. The pilgrims were a regular sight, transport options were restricted, everyone else rode horses, while the impoverished walked. Similar to how we evaluate others based on the vehicles they drive, people in the past were categorized by the quality of the horses they rode. Robert Swanson said about that, the medieval society can be seen in three layers according to the estate model, "...those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked". (Swanson, R. 2000, p. 397-405) Thus, society was divided according to classes from the rich to the poor, and through this method the number of the poor but, the rich increased, their money increased and multiplied.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Humor

The reader's smile or chuckle is the result of the presence of humor. It's a ubiquitous part of being human. It permeates our professional and recreational lives as well as our personal and public interactions. That's what the numbers say. As a collection of tales, Canterbury contains a wide variety of humorous styles.

3.1.1 Types of Humor

The humor is anecdotal, relying on a little anecdote to illustrate a larger idea. The purpose of this social narrative by Chaucer is twofold: to provide lighthearted entertainment and to call attention to social issues. As an additional literary device, dry humor is commonly used. The term refers to a style of humor in which the speaker tells jokes or cites humorous passages without displaying any emotion. Sometimes it's hard to tell whether a narrative is meant to be taken seriously or as a joke. Possesses the capacity to be caustic, scathing, and humorous. Dialogue, quotes, and snippets of wisdom are commonplace in written works.

As a subgenre of comedy, senseless humor is also prevalent in literary works. Sends out communications that aren't really logical or coherent. Author Lewis Carol, for one, used it regularly. Black humor, or dry humor, is also present in literature. It mocks taboo subjects with humor. One example of this kind of dark humor may be found in the Canterbury Tales' General Prologue, where the Cook is described as having an ulcerous sore on his shin: "But a terrible pity, it appeared to me." However, he still managed to make a fricassee on par with the greatest. According to (Kline, 2007) Black comedy and sarcasm permeate Chaucer's depiction of a renowned chef with an ulcer on his knee. In literature, the farce is a common form of humor. It's satire, thus there will be nasty caricatures of people, usually affluent and powerful public figures, for laughs.

In literature, a parody serves the same comic function as any other form of imitation. The Canterbury Tales itself is not very comedic, but the book has been the subject of many comedic adaptations in film and literature. Literary spoofs are comparable to parody but are more straightforward. The term refers to a type

of comedy that mocks the creations of others. Satirists is very important point in literature, and satirists may use their humor to inspire reform and change, or they may use it to promote the status quo. If the creators of satire don't have a reform or a solution in mind but are simply holding up an aspect of the world as ridiculous, then they are creating irony or gallows humor rather than satire. (Nilsen, D. & Nilsen, A. 2022)

Juvenile humor, which contains antics, vulgar humor, and inappropriate elements, also appears in written works. Satire, which utilizes irony and exaggeration to reveal faults, hypocrisy, and other unpleasant qualities of individuals or events, is the most popular form of humor. The satire and irony that are so integral to *The Canterbury Tales* are given their own chapter here.

4. The works of Geoffrey Chaucer

The English language owes a great deal to Geoffrey Chaucer, who is widely regarded as the most important writer in the history of the language. Having made the linguistic mashup of Anglo-Saxon, French, and Latin into a literary vehicle separate from the influence of any other languages, he has maintained a global fan base. Furthermore, Chaucer is rightfully acknowledged as the forerunner of the English novel for his ability to create believable people, his wit, his psychological insight, the precision of his observation, and the grace and technical quality of his narrative vein.

4.1 Translation of *The Roman De La Rose*

It's a poem by Guillaume de Lorris with over 23,000 verses. The poem is an allegory of human virtues and vices set in a courtly and academic context. After almost 40 years, Jean de Meung added a slew of new characters, including Reason and Nature, who show more concern for societal issues. As a means to make a living as a writer, Chaucer settled on translating well-known literature. This seminal French poem from the previous century served as his first experimental subject. Satire, with its portrayal of idealized love, had a profound impact on Chaucer's prolific body of work. The only parts of the original that are definitely credited to him date back to 1705. (Marti, 2001).

4.2 Book of *The Duchess*

It is a touching tribute to the duchess Blanche of Lancaster, who passed away from the plague in 1369, and is written in the French allegorical poetry of courtly love in octosyllabic couples. Gaunt's private loss is not addressed. Chaucer's flair for originality and vivid personality shines through in his handling of a succession of opposing pictures. If alone for this work, Chaucer would be the most prominent English author. (Moreton, 1963).

4.3 *The House of Fame*

This incomplete dream-allegory with its nods to classical literature was his first attempt at working with the heroic couplet in the Italian style. The scared narrator is carried away by an eagle on an imaginary excursion to the Palace of Fame, where he meets historical figures from the *Bible* and classical literature. In the midst of this thrilling but baffling adventure, he stops by *The House of Tidings* and the Temple of the Goddess Fame. A sense of disorientation and the changeability of earthly things emerges in the poet notwithstanding the appearance of fame and affection (Steadman, 1993).

4.4 *The Parliament of Fowles*

This *Beautiful Dream Poetry* by Chaucer was written for a very special wedding. There is a conference of birds, representing different social groups, gathered around the goddess Nature on St.

Valentine's Day to make their romantic pairings. There are also vivid depictions of summertime as the love season. (Crane, 2017).

4.5 *Troilus and Criseyde*

This eight-thousand-line poem is written in iambic pentameter and divided into seven-line stanzas that rhyme "abcdefghi" (Troilus stanza, or rhyme royal, in homage to James I of Scotland, king and poet, who made a huge use of it). Troilus and Criseyde are often recognized as the first great and impassioned love-story in English narrative poetry, despite considerable credit to Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*. The prologue provides context for the destruction of Troy and the looting that follows. This lengthy poem describes the courtship between Troilus, son of King Priam of Troy, and Criseyde, daughter of the Trojan soothsayer Calchas. Pandarus, her uncle, encourages her to return his affection by setting up discreet dates. After three years of marriage filled with joy, her father's move to Greece puts a damper on their lives together. Criseyde's loyalties are divided between her father and her husband. She is eventually traded to the Greeks for Antenor, a Trojan prisoner. She says she will be back with Troilus in 10 days and that their love will last forever. Since she is all by herself and desperate in the Greek camp, Criseyde takes up with the Greek prisoner Diomedes. Betrayed and seeking vengeance, Troilus is ultimately killed by Achilles in battle. His spirit soars above the clouds, where he can look down on earth with contempt and worship God for His unending love. Despite being written in verse and full of philosophical musings, this work sets the way for the psychological novel with its psychological acuity and nuanced examination of people (Bradley, 2018).

4.6 *The Legend of Good Women*

After Chaucer denigrated ladies in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Queen (the god of love) ordered him to write this poem as penance. Since it is a collection of short stories introduced by a vision in a dream, the story structure might be seen as a forerunner of *The Canterbury Tales*. In the spirit of medieval love poetry, it honors the historical and mythical ladies who sacrificed themselves for their true loves. The lengthy prologue on nature and spring is the most interesting and enjoyable element of the whole piece. Only nine of the required twenty legends were written by Chaucer, and the incomplete tenth legend was left in the middle of the design.

4.7 *Canterbury Tales* (begun about 1387)

A group of pilgrims traveling from London to the shire of the "holy happy martyr St. Thomas Becket" in Canterbury tell each other a variety of stories to pass the time and keep each other entertained along the way. Most of the poems are written in heroic couplets, which are two lines of iambic pentameter (10 syllables each) that rhyme with one another. The fact that some have suggested that Chaucer may have been inspired by Boccaccio does not take away from the originality of his work. In his mammoth work, which has captivated readers since its initial publication in approximately 1748 by Caxton, Chaucer let loose his literary flair by creating a gallery of captivating characters with virtues and vices typical of English fourteenth-century life. This work reads as though it were written recently, about the corruption of the church and other social institutions. By virtue of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer deserves to be considered one of the greatest authors in history. It has endured the test of time and remains as popular today as it was when it was first published over 600 years ago. (Rothwell, 2007).

5. The Sense of Humor in Geoffrey Chaucer's Works

Chaucer is a brilliant comic and he loves humanity, while he politely exposes the con artists among us, he can't help but be appreciative of the joy they bring him. He has a very accepting and charitable demeanor. Even his humor comes off as gentle jabs of irony that do not intend to harm or destroy. No prior English literary work displays humor in the contemporary sense; hence Chaucer may be considered the first great English humorist. His wit lightens the mood by providing a welcome diversion from dour matters. All of his writing is hilarious and full of unexpected turns of phrase, proving him to be a master of the form. Masfield calls him:

"A great Renaissance gentleman mocking the Middle Ages" ([English Literature, 2017](#))

That Chaucer has all the makings of a great humorist is beyond dispute. For starters, his spiritual Catholicism and tolerant outlook prevent the piece from bordering on ridicule. Second, Chaucer has a sense of comedy that stems from his acute perceptions. Finally, Chaucer exhibits a genuine curiosity about the world and about living. Like other famous English humorists before and after him, such as Shakespeare and Fielding, Chaucer's wit has a distinct English flavor. It's not French wit. From "The Canterbury Tales," we might infer that his wit focuses primarily on common people and events. Minor details, such as the Squire's locks being described as "laid in press," become comical due of the tone in which they are delivered:

"With lokkes cruller, as they were leyd in presse" ([English Literature, 2017](#))

Similarly, the hat of the Wife of the Bath weighing 10 lbs

"Hir coverchiefs ful fyne were ground

I dorste were they we yeden ten pounds" ([English Literature, 2017](#))

What with the Reeve's frail legs, the Franklin's aversion to spicy food, etc. The comic potential of amused observation is on full display in these and similar situations. The term "first humorist of English literature" is sometimes applied to Chaucer. There is no earlier English literature that has such a sophisticated level of comedy. Furthermore, Chaucer outshines Boccaccio as a comic writer. Like Shakespeare, Chaucer's comedy is widespread, constant, and intense. In "The Prologue," he portrays all of the characters in a lighthearted manner. The Knight is as mild as a maid, the Squire is too romantic to get any shut-eye, the friar sleeps with the barmaids instead of the poor, the Parson and Clerk are too pious and unworldly, and the Clerk is too studious to do anything but study. Chaucer does not hold back and even states:

"My wit is short, ye may well understand"

There is nothing offensive about his wit. For instance, he doesn't make it clear whether he's applauding or mocking Prioress's adoration when he says that she paints to copy the court's manners:

"And full pleasant and amiable of port;

And peyned hire to counterfete cheere

Of court, and been es'attich of manere"

Yet, he has a superb sense of humor. The man exudes kindness and compassion, and this is reflected in his voice. He accepts the

fact that everyone on the planet has shortcomings of some kind. He gives a kind diagnosis because he wants to help the patient, not make them feel bad about themselves. It's clear that he has a positive outlook on life. When he goes on to say that "the friar lisps a little out of love and that, when he plays the harp, his eyes twinkle in his brain like shining stars on the cold night, we don't look down on him or his affection."

The humor of Chaucer is not without a touch of compassion. As a result, we begin to feel sorry for him because of the victim's seeming frailty. When he tells us that the Monk is less interested in religious activities and more interested in riding, hunting, and other worldly interests, we feel sorry for him and wish him well. That suggests there's some seriousness behind his jokes. Chaucer's humor is caustic, but it's also very sweet. His goal is to make people more sensitive to the harsh truths of life. People of his generation are naive idealists who cannot see the truth. His wit is sweet and moderate, not acidic. Also, he is not a passionate advocate for change. Only the most corrupt characters, like the Summoner and the Pardoner, are fair game for his satire. He here brazenly criticizes their dishonesty and corruption.

Because irony softens the bite of satire, it's the primary kind of humor in most of Chaucer's works. For example, the irony of calling everyone but the "Worthy" Knight "Worthy" is a great source of comedy. To varying degrees, Chaucer uses irony in his works. In "The Prologue," he used irony of contrast extensively. After praising the Knight's valor, prowess, experience, and majesty, for instance, he explains that the Knight's demeanor is that of a "gentle as a maid" and that he is incapable of causing any harm.

"And of his port as meeke as is a mayde"

Also, he uses irony by exaggeration when he claims that the Prioress has perfect table manners since she can transport and store food with ease. She doesn't dunk her fingers into the sauce and she doesn't allow any food fall from her mouth. All of this is exaggerated, because none of these factors take into consideration social graces, and everyone is familiar with them. The irony in his work is not limited to his use of words, though. He mentions, for instance, that the Monk is a good rider and a brave guy, neither of which justify his religious status. There once lived a monk who was a fair man for the maistrie. An adventurer who cherished piety; a manly enough leader to have made a good abbot. As a result, we are led to believe that, as a Monk, he should not behave in such a sarcastic manner. His activities are at odds with his vocation as a monk.

In terms of humor, Chaucer covers a lot of ground. When depicting the characters' exteriors, his sense of humor ranges from dry to lighthearted. For instance, he writes of Reeve, "Fullonge were his legges," and goes on to proclaim that the Doctor of Physic is the best doctor because of his astronomical acumen. When describing them as a master of comic incongruity, Shipman knows how to make his audience laugh.

Despite the Shipman's theft of wine and lack of remorse, he still thinks of him as a fine chap. The comedy of Chaucer's works can be seen from several perspectives. As with most things, humor can be taken both literally and figuratively. Strictly speaking, it refers to an inoffensive form of laughter. In a larger context, it can refer to both dry and sarcastic humor (satire). All these varieties of humor can be found in works by Chaucer. "In the literature of his time, when so few poets seem to have any grasp of the joy in life, the humor of Chaucer is revitalizing and wonderful," E. Alber writes eloquently of Chaucer's multifaceted humor. His wit ranges from gentle (as in the case of the Clerk of *Oxford*) to broad and semi-farcical (as in the case of the *Wife of the Bath*) to pointedly caustic as in the cases of the *Pardoner* and the *Summoner*.

In many ways, Chaucer is the poet of man and is deeply concerned with human issues. Chaucer's wit makes him the poet of the common man. He has a big heart and is tolerant of other people. When it comes to fools and scoundrels, he doesn't look down his nose at them. He enjoys the pleasure they provide, even as he patiently exposes their shady schemes. His amazing sense of humor stems from his penchant for reflecting fondly on their wacky qualities and watching their antics with glee.

6. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to identify all the humorous features and techniques present in the General Prologue, The Knight's Tale, and The Wife of Bath's Tale from Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. According to the literature review, Chaucer employed satire to express his disapproval of societal norms of the time. The study uncovered the prominent role of humor and irony as the critic's primary tools. Most of the newly uncovered criticism focused on the medieval church and its policies, as well as the place of women in society. Chaucer intended to highlight the corruption inside the church and the fact that the institution did not always adhere to its own standards. Researchers have found abundant examples of irony, satire, and hyperbole. The reader gets the sense that Chaucer is trying to teach people a lesson, draw attention to the corruption inside the church, or at the very least get people to stop blindly believing in the church by using the methods he describes.

There are several ways to interpret the humor in Chaucer's writings. Jokes can be interpreted in a variety of ways, both literally and symbolically, just like every other aspect of life. To be more precise, it describes a mild sort of mirth. Dry humor, or sarcasm, as it's more generally known, is a subgenre of a bigger category (satire). Chaucer's works feature all these types of humor. E. Alber talks eloquently about the many facets of Chaucer's humor, describing how refreshing they are in the context of the literature of his period, when so few poets appear to have any sense of the joy in life. His portrayals of the Clerk of *Oxford*, the Wife of the Bath, the Pardoner and the Summoner demonstrate the full spectrum of his wit, from mild to broad to semi farcical to bluntly sarcastic.

Chaucer's comedy stems from his receptive mind and heart. Famous English humorists like Shakespeare and Fielding have tried to follow in his footsteps. Everyone agrees that Chaucer was the first major humorous writer in the country, but they disagree on whether or not he should be considered the "creator of English poetry." Since his tales are mostly meant to be a satire against medieval English society, Chaucer frequently used comedy in them. Thus, satire of the Church, anti-feminist heritage, and the inclusion of scatological humor as a representation of the sex issue all contribute to the comedy. When compared to the comedy found in, say, *The Canterbury Tales*, Mystery Plays tend to be more serious. Moreover, the humor in them is neither centered on sex or a satire against the Church, making them distinct from Chaucer's tales.

Comedy in the Mystery Plays comes from three sources: first, the carnivalesque subversion of biblical characters by depicting them in ways that differ from the idea that appears in the Bible; second, the ridicule that some powerful characters, such as Herod or Pilatus, suffer after being cheated by other characters, both to

create irony and, also, to criticise them for being negative characters for Christianity; and third, the exaggeration of the attributes and way of being of the characters. Unlike some stories that narrated a humorous story (like "*The Miller's Tale*"), the comedy in these plays has nothing to do with the plot. Stories from the Bible have not been significantly altered here. As Bakhtin pointed out, the portrayal of the many people in a comedic light is linked to that carnival subversion. Some of the carnival's most iconic characters, subvert the celebration's anti-feminist heritage. There is a lot of misogyny in these plays; Eve is portrayed negatively, and the other women I've described don't follow the strict orthodoxy they should.

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