

‘One thing, one body, one word, one letter gratuitously replace each other, resulting in misidentifications and misunderstandings that are responsible for so much of the humor of the fabliaux’ (Root, 1997: 24). Is this the case in any *maeren*, too?

As tales with the primary purpose of entertaining an audience, both fabliaux and *maeren* contain humorous elements.¹ This essay will explore whether the humorous episodes in *maeren* are created by substitutions of ‘one thing, one body, one word, [or] one letter’ as Root argues is the case in the French fabliaux.² The humorous aspects of *maeren* stem from multiple features, including substitutions that lead to ‘misidentifications and misunderstandings’, as well as other types of replacements that function in different ways to create a comic effect.³ Although these substitutions play an important role in generating humour in *maeren*, substitutions are not the only amusing aspect. Further factors are important and these will be analysed alongside the substitutions that occurs in these *maeren*.

Substitutions are often used by characters in *maeren* to gain power or invert the original, socially accepted – and expected – power dynamic. The cunning wife in Herrand von Wildonie’s *Der betrogene Gatte* (BG) employs the use of substitutions to this end. She devises a scheme to meet her lover in secret during the night.⁴ She informs him that ‘an einer snuor ein vingerlîn hangent’ for him to alert her when he arrives without disturbing

¹ Sebastian Coxon, *Laughter and Narrative in the Later Middle Ages: German Comic Tales 1350-1525* (London: Legenda, 2008), p. 12.

² Jerry Root, ‘The Old French Fabliau and the Poetics of Disfiguration’, in *Historical inquiries*, ed. by Paul Maurice Clogan (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), pp. 17-32 (p. 24).

³ Root, p. 24.

⁴ Herrand von Wildonie, ‘Der betrogene Gatte’, in *Kleinere mittelhochdeutsche Erzählungen*, ed. by Jürgen Schulz-Grobert (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006), pp. 64-85.

her sleeping husband.⁵ Much to her husband's surprise he is awoken 'wan sî im gie über ein sîn bein' and finds his wife's lover at the end of the string.⁶ Despite his discovery, her schemes to outwit her husband only continue. She replaces the man 'daz ir mir gâbet in mîn hant' with 'einen esel, den sî vant' in an attempt to convince her husband that her lover has been turned into an ass.⁷ The substitution used here appears to serve multiple purposes. Firstly, and most simply, to ensure that her lover can escape unharmed so that they will not face any consequences and can continue their liaisons. Secondly, the wife is able to mock and outmanoeuvre her husband simultaneously. Her lover is nowhere to be seen and she expects her gullible husband to believe that he has transformed into a donkey. By replacing her lover's body with that of an ass, she also makes 'einen esel' of her husband. Furthermore this 'deception [...] and women's cunning ultimately are concerned with pleasures other than the erotic. The kind of "winning" sought by women is [...] making a joke that others (particularly arrogant husbands) don't get'.⁸ Perhaps this move is less about her adulterous behaviour or desire for sex, rather the wish of 'ein wîp, diu het ein also schœnen lîp' to make a joke of her 'vil alt' husband and invert their typical marital power dynamics.⁹ She successfully makes her husband the butt of her jokes and tricks him with her substitutions.

Still wanting to spend the night with her lover, she 'bat ein wîp' to take her place in her marital bed with her husband and remain 'swîget'.¹⁰ The husband misidentifies the woman

⁵ BG, ll. 51-52.

⁶ BG, l. 63.

⁷ BG, l. 173, l. 139.

⁸ Lisa Perfetti, 'The Lewd and the Ludic: Female Pleasure in the Fabliaux' in *Comic Provocations: Exposing the Corpus of Old French Fabliaux*, ed. by Holly Crocker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007), pp. 17-31 (p. 20).

⁹ BG, ll. 25-26, ll. 28.

¹⁰ BG, l. 181, l. 185.

in his bed as his wife. In a final attempt to control his adulterous wife he 'sneit ir ab ir schœene hâr'.¹¹ Since the audience knows that this woman is not his wife, the tension created by the dramatic irony is amusing, as well as uncomfortable. The sense of discomfort is created by the other woman suffering the wife's punishment, but this is juxtaposed with the humour that the husband is so gullible that he cannot even recognise his own wife. Although a misidentification of this nature may seem illogical, such 'cases of mistaken identity are common in the fabliaux, where characters are gullible and unaware of individual differences, seeing only gender and class'.¹² The women in fabliaux and *maeren* are interchangeable, and easily replaced, as they are not necessarily to be seen as characters in their own right, rather as 'stereotypical [...] everywoman characters [...] [who] typify, embody, and exaggerate [...] the human body'.¹³ The wife in this tale can be seen as a representation of all adulterous wives. To continue such a reading of the 'everyman [...] characters', this *maere* not only mocks this husband in *BG*, but also any man who is duped and cuckolded by his wife.¹⁴ As humour is intrinsically bound to societal norms and context, it can be suggested that the (mostly male) contemporary audience would have enjoyed the mockery of this foolish husband. The 'superiority theory' of humour is useful here to further show that the wife's mockery of her husband through these substitutions would have been considered humorous.¹⁵ The humiliation of the cuckold through the schemes and tactics of his adulterous wife would paint him as a fool. This humour theory suggests that the humour

¹¹ *BG*, l. 231.

¹² Sarah Gordon, *Culinary comedy in medieval French literature* (West Lafayette, IND: Purdue University Press, 2007), p. 114-115.

¹³ Gordon, p. 119.

¹⁴ Gordon, p. 119.

¹⁵ Shiela Lintott, 'Superiority in Humor Theory', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74.4 (2016), 347-358 (p. 348).

of his humiliation may have been reinforced by the audience's sense of superiority, perhaps as they believed that they could not fall for the same tricks.

Despite being the man of the house, he is unable to maintain his superior position of power. His wife's 'tactics undermine this fixity [of power], challenging it with a mobility of signs and bodies'.¹⁶ She is in total control of the events. The wife uses her tactics to substitute her body and that of her lover in her home and the private spaces that she shares with her husband so that the lovers can be together away from her husband. Her substitutions create distance in their marriage and the husband experiences a 'double infidelity, [...] [of] lies and adultery'.¹⁷ She is able to undermine him and moulds the situation to align with her desires due to these substitutions, thus usurping her husband's position of power. The replacement of the bodies in this *maere* is used as a tool of deception by the wife. Her devious actions enable her to 'wol ir friunde bôt' without facing any consequences from her husband.¹⁸ Instead, she makes a fool of him and convinces him that he was, in fact, in the wrong.¹⁹ The implications of one body replacing another and the husband's confusion that follows each replacement allows the wife to assume control. This amusing inversion of the marital power dynamic gives the wife the opportunity to continually dupe and humiliate her husband with humorous effect.

¹⁶ Mark Chinca, 'The body in some Middle High German Mären: taming and maiming', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 187-210 (p. 191).

¹⁷ Chinca, p. 191.

¹⁸ BG, l. 240.

¹⁹ BG, l. 336.

Sex, humiliation, and substitutions are also humorously linked in Hans Folz's *Die halbe Birne* (HB).²⁰ The knight's culinary blunder with a pear during a royal banquet becomes the source of his ridicule by the princess. The knight halves the pear, then eats it 'ungeschnellt und unbeschitten', and '[die] dochter mit dem ein verert'.²¹ She is unimpressed by his manners – or, more specifically, his lack thereof – and mocks him publicly for his courtly shortcomings.²² Gordon notes that in the French fabliaux mocking often 'functions as effective social satire [...] [and] may mock either "us" or "them"'.²³ In this *maere*, the ridicule of the knight's lack of courtly awareness appears to do both. The audience is presented with an opportunity for 'self-evaluative humor' and reflection upon the strict courtly regulations and expectations one must follow ("us"), as well as the open derision of the oblivious and unlearned knight ("them").²⁴ In order to recover from his public humiliation, the knight's squire formulates a plan. He disguises himself 'alls ein thorn' and his 'munt beschlossen alls eim stumen'.²⁵ In other words, he substitutes his knightly self for a fool. This substitution allows him to subvert all courtly expectations without any repercussions as there is no expectation of courtly behaviour for him in this state. A fool is a humorous figure in itself and the character he creates for himself poses no threats to the order of courtly events. It allows him to enter the princess's private chambers. When the princess finds him naked in her chamber she misidentifies the uncouth knight and falls for his disguise when she is attracted by '[d]er manheit worlichs instrument'.²⁶ The 'stumen'

²⁰ Hans, Folz, 'Die halbe Birne' in *Kleinere mittelhochdeutsche Erzählungen*, ed. by Jürgen Schulz-Grobert (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006), pp. 218-231.

²¹ HB, l. 45, l. 47.

²² HB, ll. 63-66.

²³ Gordon, p. 2.

²⁴ Gordon, p. 2.

²⁵ HB, l. 85, l. 86.

²⁶ HB, l. 119.

embodies a prospect of consequence-free pre-marital sex for the princess, which is an offer she cannot refuse. Schultz argues that women in *maeren* use sex as a means to achieve another goal, whereas men accept an opportunity to have sex for the sex itself.²⁷ However, in *HB* there is a clear inversion of this and the uncharacteristic female desire for sex is presented in a comic way with the naked and erect man in her bedroom.

Their sexual encounter itself is also humorous. A slapstick scene of the princess's maid using a needle to jab the fool 'so offt und er herwider zupfft' amuses the audience with the exaggerated images of the scene.²⁸ With the help of her maid, the knight achieves his goal while the princess remains oblivious to his duplicity. As is often the case in *maeren*, the audience is privy to more information than the characters and this tension builds until the princess discovers the truth. This tension increases the audience's expectation of the princess's demise, and makes it even more amusing when the truth is revealed.²⁹ In the same way that 'many fabliau narratives [...] encompass humorous plots and punchlines involving reversals of fortune', the knight is able to do the same in this *maere*.³⁰ The knight repeats what the princess said during sex, and reveals himself as the fool while making a fool of her.³¹ She believed that there would not be any consequences. However, with this mocking repetition of her words, she knows that she must face the reality of marrying the ill-mannered knight. Often in *maeren*, 'the spark which ignites the overall comic effect of

²⁷ James A. Schultz, 'Love without Desire in Maren of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', in *Mittelalterliche Novellistik im europäischen Kontext: Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven*, ed. by Mark Chinca, Timo Reuvekamp-Felber and Christopher Young (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2006), pp. 122-147 (p. 135-136).

²⁸ *HB*, I. 152.

²⁹ Salvatore Attardo, *The Linguistics of Humor: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 60.

³⁰ Gordon, p. 139.

³¹ *HB*, II. 178-180.

these tales is frequently supplied by speech and dialogue within the narrative world'.³² This is true of *HB* as the knight's clever words immediately signal the princess's demise and the inversion of the earlier power dynamic. The repetition of what she said in the private space of her chambers now forms the basis of her ridicule by the knight.³³ His humiliation of her mirrors the way that the princess used 'the particular setting of the tournament, hence of the public forum, to laugh loudly about the other person and to make the victim of their joke feel the pressure of shame'.³⁴ Through his actions, he is able to shame and mock her in a public setting, but in a private manner as only they and Irmeltraut will know what the princess said during sex. Furthermore, the use of the regular metre of iambic tetrameter throughout the *maere* contrasts with, and thus emphasises, the uncourtly and irregular behaviours of knight and princess. In turn, this then reinforces the humour of the tale. By 'addressing the excess of both female libido and male careless gluttony and weakness', this *maere* subverts and criticises courtly norms and expectations in a humorous fashion.³⁵ Again, the substitutions create a foundation for the humour of this *maere* and these foundations are built upon with exaggerated slapstick and humiliating reversals of fortune.

Zweierlei Bettzeug (ZB) employs substitutions in a different way.³⁶ An unsuspecting student is mocked by his host when he requests a bed for the night. The farmer 'gereit da stinken' and informs the student that 'der furz ist ein lilach guot'.³⁷ The student must then decide

³² Coxon, p. 108.

³³ *HB*, ll. 178-180.

³⁴ Albrecht Classen, 'Laughing in Late-Medieval Verse (mæren) and Prose (Schwänke) Narratives: Epistemological Strategies and Hermeneutic Explorations', in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. by Albrecht Classen (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010) pp. 547-582 (p. 570).

³⁵ Gordon, p. 124.

³⁶ Schweizer Anonymus, 'Zweierlei Bettzeug', in *Kleinere mittelhochdeutsche Erzählungen*, ed. by Jürgen Schulz-Grobert (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2006), pp. 184-189.

³⁷ *ZB*, l. 16, l. 23.

‘wie er den puren sölt beschissen’.³⁸ He decides to leave the bedding ‘hinter den offen’ for his unwelcoming host.³⁹ However, it is not the “bedding” that the farmer made, rather the student ‘scheiss hinder den offen hin’.⁴⁰ The replacement of the intangible fart “bedding” with the tangible faeces left behind the oven by the student signals the start of the farmer’s demise and allows the student to ‘[deliver] a punchline of his own’.⁴¹ The farmer ‘sass eben in den dreck’ left by the student.⁴² The farmer voices his reversal of fortune as he realises that ‘der schouler hat [in] beschissen’.⁴³ Similarly to *HB*, ‘speech [...] within the narrative world’ has a humorous effect.⁴⁴ Both the verbal realisation of his humiliation and the farmer’s exclamations of ‘pfuch’, ‘dreck’, and ‘schmeck’ emphasise the disgusting nature of his disgrace and add to the humour.⁴⁵ The wordplay created as the farmer repeats the homonym ‘beschissen’ is also humorous. The student has simultaneously covered the farmer in faeces, and played a trick on him, which encompasses its dual meaning. Wordplay and puns are important linguistic tools in the creation of humour in *maeren* and the pun in this *maere* is crucial for the comedic effect of the farmer’s downfall. The student wins by ‘beating the peasant at his own game’.⁴⁶ The moral of this tale is similar to that in *HB*: do not mock others or you will face the consequences. The moral is reinforced through the comedy of the tale created by the substitution of the figural to literal. This substitution ensures the humiliation of the farmer and the student’s new position of superiority.

³⁸ ZB, I. 42.

³⁹ ZB, I. 49.

⁴⁰ ZB, I. 43.

⁴¹ Coxon, p. 109.

⁴² ZB, I. 59.

⁴³ ZB, I. 68.

⁴⁴ Coxon, p. 108.

⁴⁵ ZB, II. 59-66.

⁴⁶ Coxon, p. 62.

In conclusion, the *maeren* examined in this essay employ substitutions in line with Root's analysis of the humour in fabliaux. It is particularly clear in *Der betrogene Gatte* with the direct substitution of one body for another. The substitutions are also evident in *Die halbe Birne* and *Zweierlei Bettzeug*, but these are more complex and involve disguise or transformation of objects from figural to literal. The similarities in the humour of *maeren* and fabliaux go further than their use of replacing bodies or objects with each other. Puns, slapstick comedy and reversals of fortune are important comic features of both types of text. Humiliation and ridicule are also responsible for much of the humour in these *maeren*. In all of the *maeren* analysed in this essay, the substitutions allow the characters who orchestrate these substitutions to gain power and lead to humorous shifts in the initial power dynamic of the respective tales.

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