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Title: Boundaries and laughter in the Chester "Noah's Flood"

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Citation style: Czarnowus Anna. (2016). Boundaries and laughter in the Chester "Noah's Flood". W: P. Bogalecki, Z. Kadłubek, A. Mitek-Dziemba, K. Pospiszil (red.), "Polytropos : na drogach Tadeusza Sławka" (S. 277-289). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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Boundaries and Laughter in the Chester *Noah's Flood*

The collection of articles entitled *The Boundary of Borders* edited by Professor Tadeusz Sławek and published in 1992 remains one of highly inspirational volumes of texts not only because of a carefully chosen topic, which commented on the end of the Iron Curtain, but also due to the introduction attached to it by Professor Sławek. In the preface he invites us to meditate on “border as event,” since “the border, a line of difference, becomes a necessary part of human thinking” and the human self-positioning in the world.¹ The periphery is brought closer to the centre in the postmodern world,² and even if the phenomenon of boundaries is not central to some text, boundaries, also those of laughter, as is the case with the comic *Noah's Food*, deserve our closer inspection.

When we place side by side the ideas of “boundaries” and “laughter,” what may emerge is the concept of the boundaries of laughter. Then we may ask ourselves the basic questions of what is laughable and when it becomes laughable, since laughing communities (*Lachgemeinschaften*) certainly have their own objects of laughter and also the objects they would not laugh at.³

1 Tadeusz Sławek, preface to *Boundary of Borders*, ed. Tadeusz Sławek (Cieszyn: Proart, 1992), 7.

2 Sławek, preface, 7.

3 For a discussion of *Lachgemeinschaften*, see Werner Röhe and Hans Rudolf Velten, eds., *Lachgemeinschaften. Kulturelle Inszenierungen und soziale Wirkungen von Gelächter in Mittelalter und Früen Neuzeit* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005).

What will be analysed here is the question of those boundaries that either render laughter acceptable or make it out of question and also how the boundaries separating respective characters in the Chester *Noah's Flood* influence what was possibly risible for the play's audience.⁴ Not only Noah's wife, but also Noah himself becomes a possible object of laughter in the text. Another set of boundaries are the physical ones designated by the spatial structure of the ark and the boundaries that created illusion and made laughter at the plot safer for the medieval audience, who otherwise probably realised their own sinfulness. Laughter was also a criterion that allowed the audience to distinguish between human characters and animals, devoid of both reason and laughter according to the way of thinking predominant in the European Middle Ages. Yet another set of boundaries that influenced the question of laughter were the social ones: between estates, but also between the sexes, which made women closer to animals, as Margo DeMello reminds us. She writes that "another reason why [in the Middle Ages – A. c.] pet keeping was seen as trivial ... is the fact that, historically, women are the primary caretakers of companion animals."⁵

In a medieval play one would never expect God to become the object of laughter for the audience. When Jesus became a laughing stock, it was during the crucifixion and mockery by the soldiers was tantamount to despicable laughter for medieval audiences.⁶ Writes M. A. Screech: "After Christians had meditated upon the Crucifixion, never again could laughter be thoughtlessly seen by them – if ever it had been – as a sign of simple joy and buoyant happiness. Laughter is one of the ways in which crowds, thoughtless, cruel, and wicked, may react to the sight of suffering."⁷ Mockery during the crucifixion would seem to be sacrilege and an act of pure stupidity and evil if this laughter was directed against Jesus. The Chester *De Deluvio Noe* presents God

4 What is meant here is what Anca Parvulescu terms "a clear prohibition against certain kinds of laughs"; Anca Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, MA, and London: The MIT Press, 2010), 7.

5 Margo DeMello, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 152.

6 Parvulescu, *Laughter*, 166.

7 M.A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (London: Penguin, 1997), 17, qtd. in Parvulescu, *Laughter*, 166.

as the first character speaking. God speaks in those first lines with dignity and force, which indicates his highest position in the world of this pageant. The later theatre would make this speech a prologue, but in the so-called mystery plays (from the French *mistères*, since in English they are Corpus Christi plays),⁸ the first character to speak utters a text that evolves into the next scenes. In the Chester play God is neither a “joker” nor a “jokee,”⁹ but rather a figure exposing the tragedy of humanity:

GOD. I, God, that all this world hath wrought,
 heaven and yearth, and all of nought,
 I see my people in deede and thought
 are sett fowle in sinne.
 My goost shall not lenge in mone
 that through flesbe-likinge is my fone
 but tyll six score yeares be comen and gone
 to looke if the will blynne.
 Man that I made will I distroye,
 beast, worme, and fowle to flye;
 for on yearth the doe mee noye,
 the folke that are theron.
 (1–12)¹⁰

The perspective that God will save Noah and his family gives the audience small consolation, since he addresses the patriarch: “Destroyed all they worlde shalbe / save thou, thy wife, thy sonnes three, / and theme wyves alsoe with thee / shall fall before thy face” (37–40). Jennifer R. Goodman comments on this quasi-prologue as “a fundamental linking technique in the

8 However, Clifford Davidson reminds us that even though the plays were primarily played at Corpus Christi, they were not the “Creation to Doom” cycles that it was once thought in the criticism; Clifford Davis, introduction to *The York Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2011), 2.

9 David L. Hall, “Dancing at the Crucifixion,” *Philosophy East and West* 39, no. 3 (1989): 319.

10 All quotations and subsequent line numbers will be taken from Gerard NeCastro, ed., “The Chester Cycle PLAY III (3) – Noah’s Flood,” in *From Stage to Page – Medieval and Renaissance Drama*, accessed December 17, 2015, http://ummutility.umm.maine.edu/necastro/drama/chester/play_03.html.

mystery cycles,” and it appears that the prologue can link not only the introductory part with the scenes to follow, but also, as here, a discussion of the tragedy of the inevitable loss of lives on the part of humans and animals with the more humorous scenes.¹¹ This part of the play is religious and didactic, since the consequences of being “set fowl in sinne” (4) are exposed in it, while the more humorous parts can be expected to provide entertainment, but again they are tinged with religious and didactic content.

Middle English drama, whenever entertaining, resorted to humour that mainly relied on farce. Farce and fabliaux were interrelated phenomena: depending on the text’s purpose, one and the same scene could be analysed as an instance of farce or fabliau, to mention only *Dame Sirith*. Usually identified as the only preserved fabliau in Middle English that was not authored by Chaucer,¹² it could just as well be seen as a farce, as it is probably a text of theatrical provenance.¹³ The example of *Dame Sirith* shows the two ways of identifying humour involving women in medieval texts as interlocking.¹⁴ As a result, the type of humour directed at Noah’s wife can also be identified either as farcical due to its theatrical location or as presenting a fabliau-like image of the bourgeois woman to the audience. If we read this character as if the play was a fabliau made theatrical, the wife would be a socially respected tradeswoman ridiculed for her limited non-spiritual perspective on life. This would be in accord with Larry D. Benson’s diagnosis of fabliaux as texts ridiculing those who have a high position in the social hierarchy, but what would be missing is a character who outsmarts her (one of Benson’s “dispossessed intellectuals ..., clever peasants, and enthusiastically unchaste wives”).¹⁵ On the other hand, perhaps

11 Jennifer R. Goodman, *British Drama before 1660: A Critical History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), 80.

12 “Dame Sirith,” in *Old and Middle English. An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 380–415.

13 Goodman writes that the text could be a short farce performed by the travelling entertainers in the thirteenth century; Goodman, *British Drama before 1660*, 9.

14 Goodman, *British Drama before 1660*, 51.

15 Larry D. Benson, “Canterbury Tales,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7.

the edge of the satire is also directed against Noah—a patriarch, whereas Noah's wife is a scorned gossip who to some extent demonstrates her rebellious nature by disobeying her husband and a social superior.

The boundary between tragedy and comedy is not the only one in this play in the case of which one becomes the other. Yet another boundary is that which separates two images of Noah that we have. On the one hand, we have Noah whom God calls “my servante free, ... righteous man” (17–18) and who talks to God in a way that proves he was made in the image of his maker. On the other, however, to quote David, “the echoes of scenes of domestic strife from the fabliau are strong, and Noah is comically ineffectual in his dealings with his wife, in contrast to his dignified dialogues with God.”¹⁶ When asked to board the ark, the wife answers impudently: “In fayth, Noe, I had as leeve thou slepte. / For all thy Frenyshe fare, / I will not doe after thy reade” (99–101) and “By Christe, not or I see more neede, though thou stand all daye and stare ...” (103–104). Like in fabliaux, not only cuckolded husbands are satirised, to name the most obvious example of Chaucer's Carpenter in *The Miller's Tale*, but also the husbands who remain powerless when exposed to their wives' wiliness. The unreasonable Noah's Wife wishes to stay with the sinful ones, as if she did not understand that the ark is built by her husband (on the stage, which shows the technical complexity of the play) in order to shield them from imminent destruction.¹⁷

Boundaries metaphorically separate the righteous ones from the sinful rest of the humanity, but the ark is also literally defined as an object that creates physical boundaries through the use of planks: “These bordes I pynne here together / to beare us safe from the weather, / that wee may rowe both hither and thither / and safe be from this fludd” (85–88), Noah says. This turns out to be another occasion on which God uses borders in order to separate his beloved humans from the rest of the universe. Andrzej Wicher thus comments on the first work that

16 David Mills, “Approaches to Medieval Drama,” in *Medieval English Drama*, ed. Peter Happé (London and Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1984), 46.

17 Miriam Halevy highly praises the technological dimension of the play's staging; Miriam Halevy, *The Evolution of Medieval Drama: From the Life to Come to Recorded Time* (London: A Jewish Quarterly Publication, 1974), 33.

consisted in setting up borders and was accomplished by God: “The work of creation is presented in the Old Testament first of all as a work that consists in setting limits and fixing borders.”¹⁸ The newly created work is separated from the abyss by *raki’a*, which in Hebrew is “vault of heaven, firmament, sky; pavement, floor.”¹⁹ Wicher also quotes from the Book of Job, where Yahwe “hath compassed the waters with bounds, until the day and night come to an end” (Job 26:10), where the bounds are *xok*, “statue, regulation, law, custom, decree, share, task, term, limit, boundary,” but derive from *xakak*, “to cut, to engrave, to inscribe, to trace, to establish, to ordain, to prescribe.”²⁰ There are two ideas of a border here, as Wicher writes, the first one being “a physical, architectonic structure which establishes a space that can be inhabited” and the other rather “a cut, a gap in the fabric of being, ... associated with the processes of Law-making and writing.”²¹ The work of creation was undoubtedly architectural, but the flood during which God wanted to remind the humanity of his law by cutting them off from the ark as the only place of survival rather had to do with what Wicher termed the “negative” concept of the border.²² All the rest of the humanity will be cut off from God’s grace apart from Noah, his family, and paired representatives of animal species.

Not only the text of *Noah’s Flood* specifies that the rescue of single humans and animals can be guaranteed by creating borders. Also the stage directions specify that Noah needs to erect a specific structure on the stage and the marvel for the audience consists in the activity of construction taking minutes and not years, as the biblical source relates it.²³ Still the erection of the structure also creates a specific boundary between the real

18 Andrzej Wicher, “Border as Order and as Disorder (An Interpretation of the Metaphor of the Border in the Writings of Isaiah Berlin),” in *Boundary of Borders*, 11.

19 Wicher, “Border as Order and as Disorder,” 11.

20 Wicher, “Border as Order and as Disorder,” 12.

21 Wicher, “Border as Order and as Disorder,” 12.

22 Wicher, “Border as Order and as Disorder,” 17.

23 Details of the staging have been discussed by David Mills; see David Mills, “Play 3: Noah’s Flood,” in *The Chester Mystery Cycle. A New Edition with Modernised Spelling*, ed. David Mills (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992), 49–50.

world in which the audience lives and the imaginary world, which is constructed by means of words and actions detached from the everyday experience, in which the building of the ark would be a much lengthier and more painstaking process. The physical existence of the stage design once Noah has completed his work separates the audience from the events within the play. They may safely imagine the sinners perish and not to feel overly involved in the plot. Reflection on one's own sins is possible, but not so pervading that it would make the viewing almost unbearable for a religiously minded person. Laughter remains relatively carefree and thus safe, as the peril of being annihilated concerns only the characters; they are confined to the physical space of the stage and their unreal existence is emphasised by the ark constructed above what is a floor for the actors.

Another boundary that is undoubtedly revealed is that between humans and animals. This occurs first when God tells his interlocutor the following in the text:

Of deane beastes with thee thou take
 vii and vii or then thou slake;
 hee and shee, make to make,
 bylye in that thou bringe;
 of beastes uncleane ii and ji,
 male and female, bowt moo;
 of deane fowles seaven alsoe,
 the hee and shee together;
 of fowles uncleane twayne and noe more,
 as I of beastes sayde before.
 (117–26)

All the animals and birds are “unclean,” but they are indispensable for humans to live in the reconstructed world: both the humans and the animals need “meates that mon be eaten” (129) on the ark so that they survived the catastrophe. Noah is bid to “doe this all bydeene / to sustayne man and beastes therm / aye tyll the water cease and blyne” (132–34). The boundary that is delineated here by God is that between human and animals, since, to cite Dorothy Yamamoto:

According to the medieval world view, man is the high point of mortal creation, made by God in his image Man, therefore, stands at the summit and the centre, and beneath (and around) him lie all other animated beings. These – the animals – differ crucially from man in that they lack a reasoning soul and so cannot be held responsible for what they do.²⁴

DeMello calls the animal-human borders “The Great Divide” and emphasises that they are not common to all historical epochs.²⁵ According to the ideology of the medieval play in question reason delineates the boundary that separates Noah from the animals which will be saved on board the ark. The doubts that one may have over the destruction of the innocent other animals can only be remedied with the Hebrew legend that Miriam Halevy quotes, since “it asks why the animals that could possibly have sinned, should be destroyed as well. The answer is: ‘They have been created for the use of Man, and now that Man has sinned, what need have I (God) of them?’”²⁶ The animals are separated from humans also in that no one would determine humans’ right to live by their usefulness, but the rationale of the play openly questions the animals’ existence if there is no practical purpose behind it. Only the existence of humans is meaningful.

According to Aristotle’s famous definition of humans as the only laughing animals, yet another boundary that separates animals from humans is that of laughter.²⁷ This phenomenon is purely anthropocentric if we rely on Henri Bergson’s famous essay. In contrast to humans, who are both capable of laughter and may be laughable,²⁸ animals have stereotypically been thought not to be able to laugh²⁹ and hence they cannot become object

24 Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

25 DeMello, *Animals and Society*, 32.

26 Halevy, *The Evolution of Medieval Drama*, 33.

27 Parvulescu, *Laughter*, 4.

28 Henri Bergson, “Laughter,” in *Comedy*, ed. Willie Sypher (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 61–192.

29 Even though some species do laugh, their laughter may not even be noticed by humans, which renders the “exchange” of laughter between them and the people who observe them always incomplete; the question of monkeys as laughing animals has been raised by Charles

of laughter in the sense humans can. The reciprocity of laughter, so the fact that risible figures are able to laugh themselves, does not happen in the case of animals, so the humour related to them always remains incomplete. It appears that only those two qualities, lack of reason in the traditional human understanding of the word and lack of the ability to laugh which would be recognised as laughter, separate animals from the world of humans with invisible boundaries. A play such as *Noah's Flood*, where animals feature prominently, illustrates these discursive boundaries adequately.

Also Noah's wife is unreasonable in her quarrelsomeness and obstinacy. The similarity that can be drawn between her and animals dehumanises her. What is more, her characterisation obviously alludes to the humour which can be found in fabliaux, since also socially Noah's wife has been taken from those texts. She refuses to join her husband as she prefers the company of her "good wives":

Yea, syr, sett up your seale
 and rowe forthe with eve!! hayle;
 for withowten any fayle
 I will not owt of this towne.
 But I have my gossips everyechone,
 one foote further I will not gone.
 They shall not drowne, by sayncte John,
 and I may save there life.
 The loved me full well, by Christe.
 But thou wilte lett them into thy chiste,
 elles rowe forthe, Noe, when thy liste
 and gett thee a newe wyfe.
 (197–208)

As a townswoman she is more interested in the company of other gossips than in participating in greater things, such as the start of the new world cleansed from sinners. Furthermore, she differs from her husband, who resembles other Old Testament patriarchs, not only socially as a bourgeois woman, but also temperamentally. To cite Peter Happé, "admiration for good

Darwin; cf. Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, qtd. in Parvulescu, *Laughter*, 158.

characters portrays them as long-suffering and devoted, responding to the demands of their faith with courage, but also in the case of Abraham and Noah overcoming some pangs of suffering.³⁰ Noah—the sufferer is certainly contrastable with the wife interested in pleasure, low entertainment, and chatting with her companions over ale. When she prattles on to her husband “gett thee a newe wyfe,” she does not display excessive devotion to him. David Mills writes that she typifies “an antediluvian discord, an image of the sin which God is punishing.”³¹ Her character and that of Noah illustrates the social hierarchy on earth: she represents lower classes, whereas he is a spiritual character standing above all the creation.

In contrast to the Towneley (Wakefield) *Play of Noah*, where the main character strikes his wife, no comic violence is used by the anonymous authors; the tone remains relatively lofty also in this respect. This proves that, in contrast to the York Realist’s work and to the rather crude entertainment of the Wakefield Master’s texts, the Chester cycle remains more didactic and possibly less entertaining than the other cycles.³² Nevertheless, the subtlety of humour does not exclude misogyny altogether, as Goodman writes: “Sixteenth-century Chester remained susceptible to misogynist humour. The Chester cycle retains Adam’s tirade against Eve and her ‘woman’s counsel,’ as well as Noah’s rebellious wife and a brief sketch of Joseph’s concern about his cuckoldry.”³³ Anti-feminist humour appears to be the most readily accessible one here.

The good wives are not only shallow, but drunkards, and worry more about having something to drink than about the flood:

30 Peter Happé, *English Drama before Shakespeare* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 29.

31 Mills, “Play 3: Noah’s Flood,” 35–51.

32 Still, bawdy humour and violent action do not exclude achievement of the didactic purpose, as the case of the morality play *Mankind* proves; see G.A. Lester, introduction to *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, ed. G.A. Lester (London and New York: A & C Black and WW Norton, 1999), xxi.

33 Goodman, *British Drama before 1660*, 86.

The fludd comes fletinge in full faste,
 one everye syde that spredeth full farre.
 For fere of drowninge I am agaste;
 good gossippe, lett us drawe nere.
 And lett us drinke or wee departe,
 for oftetymes wee have done soe.
 For at one draught thou drinke a quarte,
 and soe will I doe or I goe.
 (225–32)

The crudeness of lower classes is demonstrated by the wives, who do not wish to be aware of the approaching tragedy, since they prefer to inebriate themselves. It is, however, interesting to note how different Cam's, Sem's, and Jafet's wives are from the gossips or from their mother-in-law. Aware of danger, they do not object to being locked up aboard the ark, which blunts the edge of the misogynist satire. Yet when they speak, it is only to list the objects necessary for the construction and then to list the animals on the ark:

NOES WIFE. And here are beares, wolves sett,
 apes, owles, maremussett,
 wesills, squerrells, and fyrrett;
 here the eaten there meate.

SEMES WIFFE. Heare are beastes in this howse;
 here cattes maken yt crowse;
 here a rotten, here a mowse
 that standen nere together.

CAMS WYFFE. And here are fowles lease and more-
 hernes, cranes, and byttoer,
 swanes, peacockes-and them before
 meate for this wedder.

JAFETTES WYFFE. Here are cockes, kytes, crows,
 rookes, ravens, many rowes,
 duckes, curlewes, whoever knowes,
 eychone in his kynde.
 And here are doves, digges, drakes,
 redshankes monninge through lakes;
 and eyche fowle that leadenn makes
 in this shippe man may fynde.
 (173–92)

It is puzzling why the catalogues of species are given to female characters, but they may be made to list the animals since they were thought to be closer to animals as people who are more interested in mundane things. In this sense the wives are to some extent similar to the gossips above, as they represent the purely presentist viewpoint of those who can only be engrossed in what happens now. They are also literarily closer to animals in everyday life, since they are the ones to take care of the household and the belongings, such as farm animals.

If Chaucer's fabliaux involve the idea that "laughter unifies all classes,"³⁴ this is not the case in *Noah's Flood*. The medieval *risus* is based here on the social system familiar to the play's original audiences and on the crude humour of anti-feminist satire.

I would not argue then, after Tatlock, that laughter humanises our perspective on the Middle Ages.³⁵ Obviously he cites anecdotes from the chronicles, which proves that rulers and other politically powerful people laughed or at least were described as laughing, which may not be relevant to any discussion of medieval plays, but this poses the question to what extent medieval laughter demonstrates the positively humane quality of people who lived at the time. In *Noah's Flood* and other plays the anti-feminist laughter is not humanistic at all. Rather, it presents prejudice of the period in question. Therefore, when Tatlock writes that in medieval texts thanks to laughter one may recognise "the presence of people essentially like himself," this is not the case with the anti-feminist content and its probable reception in the modern age.³⁶

In the Chester play laughter showcases the boundaries separating men and women, human and animals, and also estates in a medieval society. Another quality of comedy is that it is programmed by its author³⁷ in order to influence the audience in a specific way, to quote Aleksander Głowczewski's synthesis

34 W.A. Davenport, "Fabliau, Confession, Satire," in *Chaucer*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 254.

35 J.S.P. Tatlock, "Mediaeval Laughter," *Speculum* 21, no. 3 (1946), 289–94.

36 Tatlock, "Mediaeval Laughter," 289.

37 Aleksander Głowczewski, *Komizm w literaturze* (The Comic in Literature) (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2013), 36.

of comedy in literary texts.³⁸ In this sense, it may be argued that such authors as the anonymous playwright(s) who wrote the Chester *Noah's Flood* create their own laughing communities rather than simply adjust themselves to the audience's sense of humour as they find it.³⁹ When Erich Segal writes that "laughter is an affirmation of shared values,"⁴⁰ it needs to be realized that the values are not only already the ones in existence, but they are also shaped by the comedy. Values are shaped by humour and boundaries are either constructed or, more frequently, reinforced by a comic text. The laughter of *Noah's Flood* is exclusive rather than inclusive: large social groups are ridiculed and the satire is biting, especially as it ends with the tragedy of destruction and death. Thus, there is a continuing intersection of comedy and tragedy in the text, while the comedy is both farcical and of fabliau origin due to the exposition of differences between Noah and his wife.

38 Główczewski, *Komizm w literaturze*, 34–35.

39 Christina M. Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian write that the Chester plays "demonstrate a close unity of form and style, which strongly suggests either one author or (perhaps more likely) a thorough revision of existing texts over time"; Christina M. Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian, "The Chester *Play of Noah's Flood*," in *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Drama*, ed. Christina M. Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2013), 219.

40 Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 16.