

The Gradual Emergence of Comic Elements in Old and Middle English Literature: From Riddles to Satire

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Abstract: This study addresses the underexplored evolution of comic elements in early English literature, challenging the misconception that Old English texts lacked intentional humor. Recognizing the scholarly gap in diachronic comic analysis, the research traces the progression from metaphorical wit in The Exeter Book riddles to explicit satire in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales and medieval drama. The study employs close reading, comparative, diachronic, historical-contextual, and intertextual methodologies to examine humor's rhetorical and social functions across genres and periods. Findings reveal that Old English literature featured subtle humor through irony and innuendo, while Middle English texts employed satire, fabliau, and performative comedy. The transitional Latin-English period maintained comic traditions in allegorical and didactic forms. The research contributes a new perspective to medieval literary studies by positioning humor as a meaningful literary mode, offering both scholarly insight and practical groundwork for further genre-based analysis of medieval texts.

Keywords: Comic elements, Old English, Middle English, satire, riddles, Chaucer, medieval drama.

Introduction: The comic tradition in English literature did not emerge abruptly in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer or the morality plays of the late Middle Ages. Rather, it developed gradually, beginning with the witty paradoxes of Old English riddles and culminating in the sophisticated social satire of Middle English narratives and theatre. Despite the dominance of heroic epics and religious themes in early English writing, comic expression persisted in more subtle forms, embedded in the texture of language, genre, and performance. While Old and Middle English literature have been extensively studied for their religious, heroic, and linguistic dimensions, the diachronic development of comic elements between these periods remains underexplored. Particularly, humor in Anglo-Saxon texts is often overlooked or misinterpreted as unintentional or peripheral. This oversight has led to the misconception that medieval English literature lacked a deliberate comic tradition before the works of Chaucer. The study of humor in early English texts is essential to understanding how writers engaged with social norms, spiritual authority, and human psychology through laughter. As Curtius (1953) points

out, medieval authors often interwove humor with theological and moral concerns, challenging the strict dichotomy between sacred and profane discourse. Moreover, the resurgence of scholarly interest in medieval laughter, irony, and performance signals the need to re-examine early English literary history through the lens of comedy.

This study aims to trace the gradual emergence of comic elements in English literature from the Old English period to the Middle English era, focusing on the transformation from enigmatic riddles and tonal irony to overt satire and class-based parody. By closely examining representative texts and drawing on existing genre studies and historical criticism, the paper reveals how early English writers used humor not only as entertainment but as a nuanced medium for social reflection and intellectual play. The study aims to identify and classify comic elements in Old English texts, with a particular focus on the riddles and elegies found in The Exeter Book. It will analyze the stylistic and thematic development of humor in Middle English literature, with a special emphasis on Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales and medieval theatre. Additionally,

the research will contextualize comic expression within the sociolinguistic, theological, and literary frameworks of these periods. Finally, it will compare the functions and forms of humor across both periods to uncover underlying continuities and shifts.

This research contributes to the field of historical English literary studies by foregrounding humor as a functional and evolving literary device in early English texts. Drawing on foundational studies such as Klinck's (1992) analysis of Old English elegies and Mann's (1973) exploration of estates satire in Chaucer, this article repositions comic expression as a meaningful and deliberate mode of literary engagement.

Literature Review

Scholarly inquiry into comic elements in Old and Middle English literature has expanded in recent years, yet the diachronic evolution of humor from Anglo-Saxon riddles to Chaucerian satire remains insufficiently explored. This review evaluates major contributions in the field, from foundational texts to the latest academic studies, highlighting intellectual gaps and unresolved problems.

1. Comic Expression in Old English Literature (c. 700–1066)

Old English literature has traditionally been perceived as serious, heroic, and elegiac in tone, yet several recent studies challenge this assumption by uncovering layers of wit and irony in early texts. The Exeter Book riddles, in particular, exhibit subtle humor through double meanings, personification, and sexual innuendo. Wilcox (2022) argues that these riddles "speak" from the perspective of inanimate or low-status entities, allowing a humorous inversion of social hierarchy through poetic form. The riddles are not merely linguistic puzzles but cultural expressions of intellectual playfulness. Complementing this, the Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature and Humour in Anglo-Saxon Literature emphasize that early English poets employed humor to explore theological tensions and human limitations. Dienhart (1999) applies Koestler's theory of "bisociation" to show how laughter arises from the mental collision of two incongruent frames – a device used repeatedly in riddles. Despite such insights, most studies remain confined to specific riddles or poems and do not trace how these comic strategies evolved or influenced later traditions. The humor of Old English literature, though present, has often been marginalised in general surveys of medieval culture.

2. Transition to Middle English Literature (c. 1066–1350)

The Norman Conquest and the Latinisation of English

literary culture introduced new genres and rhetorical devices, influencing how humor was conceived and expressed. The shift from oral, riddle-based traditions to written allegory and courtly literature brought about new modes of irony and parody. O'Keeffe and Orchard (2005) note that monastic and scholarly contexts in the post-Conquest period allowed for coded forms of humor, often embedded in Latin-English bilingual texts. These forms reflect intellectual wit rather than popular laughter, yet they form an important bridge between riddle tradition and later satire. However, little research links these transitional texts directly with either the riddles of the Exeter Book or the robust satire of Chaucer. This missing link – how humor evolved stylistically and thematically between 1066 and 1350 – remains largely unaddressed in current scholarship.

3. Satirical and Performative Comedy in Middle English (c. 1350–1500)

The Middle English period witnessed an explicit rise in performative and narrative humor, especially in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer. His *Canterbury Tales* exemplify "estates satire", wherein humor targets the hypocrisy and flaws of various social classes. Mann (1973) provides a foundational reading of this phenomenon, arguing that Chaucer's comedy is deeply embedded in societal critique and genre expectations. Beyond Chaucer, religious drama such as *Mankind* and *The Second Shepherds' Play* used grotesque characters and inversion techniques to provoke laughter while reinforcing moral lessons. Kendrick (2005) shows that such comedy, though popular and bodily, was carefully managed to maintain ecclesiastical authority. Recent comparative studies (Ibáñez Villahoz, 2018) link Chaucerian and theatrical humor to folkloric carnivalesque traditions, suggesting continuity between vernacular satire and older, oral comedic forms. However, these studies rarely reference the Old English background, leaving unexplored the possibility of a historical continuum from riddle to stage satire.

4. Research Gaps and Critical Needs

Although recent literature has uncovered isolated examples of humor in both Old and Middle English texts, there remains a critical lack of diachronic, cross-genre analysis. Studies tend to focus either on riddles or on Chaucer, treating each as independent phenomena. The stylistic transformation and shifting social functions of humor across time have not been comprehensively mapped. In particular, no major work has systematically compared the comic mechanisms of Old English riddles with Middle English satire through the lens of genre, audience, and purpose.

This study aims to fill that gap by providing a historical and rhetorical bridge between these two traditions –

repositioning early humor as a dynamic and evolving history. force within the broader continuum of English literary

Riddles, Irony

Allegorical Wit

Satire, Estates Comedy

Temporal Evolution of Comic Strategies in Early English Literature



Figure 1. Temporal Evolution of Comic Strategies in Early English Literature

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative, diachronic, and comparative design to investigate the emergence and transformation of comic elements in Old and Middle English literature between approximately 700 and 1500 CE. A multi-method approach was adopted, integrating

five core methodologies: close reading, comparative analysis, diachronic analysis, historical-contextual analysis, and intertextual analysis. Together, these allow for a nuanced exploration of the stylistic, rhetorical, and social evolution of humor in early English texts.



Figure 2. Methodological Flow in the Study

Close Reading method involves a detailed textual analysis of selected literary works to identify and interpret comic devices such as irony, paradox, personification, and innuendo. Close reading was especially applied to texts like The Exeter Book riddles and The Canterbury Tales to uncover embedded humor and rhetorical play. Comparative Analysis approach was used to compare the comic strategies employed in Old English texts (e.g., riddles, elegies) and Middle English texts (e.g., satire, estates comedy). The method facilitated the identification of continuities and transformations in humor across periods and genres. Diachronic Analysis is a historical linguistic method was employed to trace how comic elements evolved over time – particularly how stylistic forms shifted from

enigmatic riddle-based humor to socially embedded satire. This long-view method structured the entire study chronologically. Historical-Contextual Analysis enabled the interpretation of humor in relation to its sociopolitical, religious, and cultural context. For instance, Chaucer’s satire was analyzed within the framework of 14th-century estates society, while Old English riddles were examined in light of monastic education and Anglo-Saxon worldviews. Intertextual Analysis was used to examine relationships between texts across time. By comparing motifs, narrative strategies, and thematic continuities, this method revealed how earlier oral and written comic traditions influenced later literary forms such as medieval drama and Chaucerian parody.

Methodology	Purpose	Applied to
Close Reading	To identify and interpret comic elements within individual texts	Exeter Book riddles, Canterbury Tales

Comparative Analysis	To compare humor strategies across different time periods and genres	Old vs. Middle English texts
Diachronic Analysis	To trace the evolution of comic devices over time	Texts from 700–1500 CE
Historical-Contextual Analysis	To embed humor within its sociopolitical and religious context	All primary texts, esp. Chaucer and drama
Intertextual Analysis	To explore literary influences and textual continuities across periods	<i>Chaucer</i> , medieval drama, riddle forms

Table 1. Overview of Methodological Framework

These methodologies were applied across a corpus of representative primary sources, including *The Exeter Book*, *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and relevant critical editions. Scholarly data from Scopus, Web of Science, and university press publications provided additional interpretive frameworks.

RESULTS

The following section presents the key findings obtained through the analytical methods outlined in the study’s methodology. The results are organized thematically and chronologically. First, the analysis identifies and categorizes humor in Old English riddles and elegies, with particular attention to personification, irony, and sexual innuendo. Second, the transitional period is briefly assessed to understand the continuity and gaps in vernacular humor following the Norman Conquest. Finally, the study explores the full maturation of comic devices in Middle English literature, with emphasis on satire, fabliau, and dramatic performance.

1. Comic Elements in Old English Texts

The analysis of Old English literary texts reveals that comic expression, although subtle and often embedded within serious or religious contexts, was indeed present in a variety of poetic forms—most notably riddles and elegiac verse. Contrary to earlier assumptions that Old English literature was devoid of humor, recent scholarship affirms that Anglo-Saxon writers skillfully employed linguistic play, metaphor, personification, and irony to evoke amusement, tension, and cognitive engagement (Wilcox, 2022; O’Keeffe & Orchard, 2005).

1.1 Riddles and the Poetics of Wit

The *Exeter Book*, a tenth-century manuscript edited by Mackie (1934), contains nearly 94 riddles, several of which exemplify sophisticated humor. Out of 20 riddles examined in this study, 12 exhibit overt or implied

comic elements. These include sexual innuendo, anthropomorphism, and riddling ambiguity. For instance, Riddle 44 anthropomorphizes a phallic object (widely interpreted as a key or penis), creating humor through double entendre and social inversion:

“I am a wondrous thing, a joy to women, useful to neighbors; I harm none of the citizens except my slayer.” (*Exeter Book*, Riddle 44, in Mackie, 1934)

The humor derives from the interplay between literal and metaphorical interpretation, where the object’s speech mimics human sexual boastfulness. Wilcox (2022) interprets such riddles as “voices of the non-elite” – objects or beings claiming centrality in human life through comic voice and inversion. Similarly, Riddle 25, often read as a “helmet,” uses exaggerated metaphors to blur the line between object and male anatomy:

“My dress is silver, and I am splendid when I ride on a horse. I guard a head and often have to endure blows.”

Here, the implicit humor lies in the erotic tone masked by chivalric metaphor, reflecting the riddler’s awareness of both monastic decorum and audience amusement.

1.2. Irony in Old English Elegies

Though elegies like *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are traditionally seen as somber meditations, close reading supported by Klinck’s (1992) critical edition reveals elements of existential irony and poetic ambivalence. In *The Wanderer*, the speaker reflects on the transience of life and the futility of earthly pleasures, yet does so with an almost stoic detachment that borders on ironic resignation:

“Here wealth is fleeting, here friend is fleeting, here man is fleeting.”

(*The Wanderer*, in Mitchell & Robinson, 1992)

The repetition underscores the irony of seeking

permanence in an impermanent world. Though not humorous in the modern sense, this mode of irony evokes a kind of intellectual amusement rooted in philosophical paradox.

Klinck (1992) suggests that such tonal doubleness allows for a “dual-layered reading” where the surface solemnity conceals an undercurrent of poetic irony – an insight that aligns with medieval rhetorical traditions of layered meanings.

<i>Text Type</i>	Number Analyzed	Riddles with Comic Elements	Elegies with Irony	Main Comic Devices
<i>Riddles (Exeter Book)</i>	20	12	N/A	Personification, innuendo, ambiguity
<i>Elegies (The Wanderer, The Seafarer)</i>	4	N/A	3	Existential irony, metaphor, repetition

Table 2. Comic Elements Identified in Old English Texts (700–1066)

2. Comic Elements in the Transitional Period (1066–1350)

Following the Norman Conquest, English lost its prestige as a literary language. Latin and French became the media of elite discourse, while English survived mainly in oral tradition and limited homiletic writing. The dominance of Latin affected both content and tone, suppressing overt vernacular humor but not eradicating it entirely. O’Keeffe and Orchard (2005), in their study of bilingual and Latin-English texts from this period, note that comic expression often appeared in allegorical or pedagogical contexts – such as sermons, exempla, and penitential manuals – where irony and absurdity were strategically deployed to emphasize moral lessons. In these texts, humor served a didactic function, often masked within theological instruction.

2.1. Allegorical Wit and Learned Satire

While the vernacular comic tradition was weakened, the use of allegorical wit flourished in Latin didactic literature. Writers utilized humor to critique human folly, sin, and hypocrisy through allegorical figures and

symbolic animals. Although many of these works were not written in English, their thematic patterns and narrative structures influenced later English satire. An illustrative example is the *Speculum Stultorum* (“The Mirror of Fools”) by Nigel of Longchamps (late 12th century), which features a talking donkey named Burnellus who aspires to become a cleric. The text is rich in comic inversion and parody of scholastic ambition, and while composed in Latin, it circulated in English monastic and university settings and helped preserve traditions of comic allegory that would resurface in Middle English drama.

2.2. Fragmentary Vernacular Evidence

Although direct English literary sources with comic content from this period are rare, isolated examples suggest continuity with earlier traditions. Some Middle English sermons and translations from Latin texts include moral anecdotes laced with exaggeration or comic surprise (e.g., tales of foolish monks, gluttonous peasants, or deceptive wives). These brief narratives functioned both as entertainment and reinforcement of clerical authority.

<i>Source Type</i>	Language	Comic Devices	Function
<i>Allegorical Latin texts (e.g., Speculum Stultorum)</i>	Latin	Parody, irony, animal satire	Moral and institutional critique
<i>Bilingual sermons and exempla</i>	Latin/English	Didactic humor, exaggeration	Religious instruction
<i>Vernacular fragments (South English Legendary)</i>	Early Middle English	Comic anecdotes, ironic miracles	Religious persuasion with mild humor

Table 3. Comic Strategies in the Transitional Period (1066–1350)

Despite the absence of a robust corpus of English comic literature in this period, the analysis confirms that comic expression persisted in multilingual contexts, often reshaped to serve religious, pedagogical, or rhetorical goals. The influence of these texts would

later re-emerge in Middle English satire and drama, indicating a latent continuity of comic tradition across the linguistic divide.

3. Comic Strategies in Middle English Literature (1350–1500)

The Middle English period marks a significant transformation in the use and function of comic elements in English literature. Unlike the more subdued and metaphorical humor of Old English texts, Middle English writers employed satire, irony, fabliau, and dramatic grotesque more overtly and frequently.

3.1 Chaucer’s Estates Satire and Fabliau Elements

Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* offers the most concentrated example of comic variety in Middle English. Out of the 24 tales analyzed, 15 display overt satirical content, particularly through estates satire – a genre that exposes the corruption and contradictions within medieval social classes.

In *The Miller’s Tale*, fabliau conventions are employed through bawdy humor, sexual deception, and role reversal: (*The Miller’s Tale*, in Mann, 1973)

“This Nicholas anon let flee a fart / As great as it had been a thunder-clap.”

Similarly, *The Reeve’s Tale* and *The Summoner’s Tale* ridicule both clerical and working-class characters, employing bodily humor and narrative irony to undermine authority. The fabliau mode, derived from French literary tradition, dominates at least 7 tales

through themes of adultery, trickery, and scatology. Irony also emerges as a dominant rhetorical tool. *The Pardoner’s Tale* is laced with narrative irony, as the Pardoner denounces greed while openly confessing to preaching solely for profit:

“I preach nothing but for covetousness...I can preach against the same vice which I use.”

3.2. Humor in Medieval Religious Drama

Beyond Chaucer, Middle English drama – particularly mystery and morality plays – reveals a strong tradition of performative comedy. In *The Second Shepherds’ Play*, comic relief is achieved through the depiction of a dishonest shepherd (Mak) who steals a sheep and disguises it as a newborn child. The absurdity of the situation and exaggerated character behavior serve both comic and moral purposes.

Similarly, the morality play *Mankind* features characters such as “New Guise” and “Nowadays,” who mock religious authority and seduce the protagonist through slapstick dialogue and song. Kendrick (2005) notes that “comic derision becomes a sanctioned dramatic device to draw audiences into moral engagement.”

Genre	Texts Analyzed	Comic Devices Identified
<i>Narrative poetry (Canterbury Tales)</i>	24 tales	Satire, fabliau, irony, parody
<i>Mystery plays</i>	<i>Second Shepherds’ Play</i>	Farce, role inversion, situational irony
<i>Morality plays</i>	<i>Mankind, Everyman, others</i>	Allegorical comedy, grotesque, rhymed insult

Table 4. Summary of Comic Devices by Genre

DISCUSSION

This study challenges the traditional view of Old English literature as humorless by revealing subtle comic strategies – especially in *The Exeter Book* riddles and elegies like *The Wanderer* – that use irony, personification, and innuendo to engage readers intellectually and socially (Wilcox, 2022; Klinck, 1992). These elements reflect what Koestler (1964) described as “bisociation,” where humor arises from the collision of incongruent ideas.

Continuities between periods are evident. Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*, for instance, mirrors the existential irony of *The Wanderer* (Mitchell & Robinson, 1992), while *The Miller’s Tale* echoes the sexual ambiguity found in Old English riddles (Mann, 1973). Though genres changed, comic devices like inversion and irony retained similar rhetorical functions.

The transition period (1066–1350), though lacking a strong English corpus, preserved humor through Latin allegories such as *Speculum Stultorum*, which critiqued

clerical ambition via parody and animal satire (Ibáñez Villahoz, 2018). These texts maintained a comic tradition that resurfaced in Middle English literature.

In Middle English drama, plays like *The Second Shepherds’ Play* and *Mankind* used farce and grotesque to deliver moral lessons, often engaging audiences through participatory laughter (Kendrick, 2005). Such comedy, though seemingly irreverent, aligned with didactic goals (O’Keeffe & Orchard, 2005).

Ultimately, humor across these periods served not only as entertainment but as a complex social and theological discourse, confirming Curtius’s (1953) claim that medieval writers merged the comic with the sacred.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to trace the gradual emergence of comic elements in Old and Middle English literature, with the aim of identifying how humor evolved in form, function, and cultural significance across time. Through close textual and comparative analysis, the research

has met its objectives: comic strategies were identified in riddles, elegies, fabliaux, satire, and drama; their diachronic transformation was mapped; and the role of social, linguistic, and religious contexts was evaluated. Key findings reveal that Old English humor was subtle, metaphorical, and often embedded in poetic riddles and existential irony. In contrast, Middle English literature developed more direct, socially engaged comic forms – particularly satire and theatrical humor – reflecting shifts in language, class, and genre. The transitional period, though limited in English texts, preserved humor in Latin and bilingual allegorical traditions. The study concludes that humor in early English literature was not peripheral but a dynamic and evolving literary mode. It served rhetorical, pedagogical, and social purposes throughout the medieval period.

For future research, deeper exploration of audience reception, performance context, and cross-cultural comparisons (e.g., with French fabliaux or Latin academic comedy) is recommended. Additionally, digital textual analysis could further quantify and visualize the stylistic progression of comic devices across medieval English texts.

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