

# Textual Archaeology

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## Between Laughter and Humility: Functions of Irony in the Middle English Poem *Patience*

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У статті досліджується поетика іронії в англійській середньовічній поемі *Терпіння*, яка є своєрідним переосмисленням біблійної історії про пророка Йону та одним із помітних творів алітераційної поезії XIV ст. Попри зростання наукового інтересу до іронії в середньовічній літературі, функціонування іронії в англомовній релігійній поезії цього періоду досі залишається недостатньо вивченим. Актуальність дослідження зумовлена потребою глибшого осмислення способів, в які середньовічні автори поєднували дидактичне, релігійне і комічно-іронічне начала, а також прагненням уточнити роль іронії у формуванні середньовічної художньої свідомості.

Метою статті є визначення типів і функцій іронії в поемі *Терпіння*, простеження механізмів створення іронічного ефекту та з'ясування того, які ідеї автор виражає за допомогою іронії. Особливу увагу приділено вербальній іронії, іронії ситуації, драматичній іронії та самоіронії оповідача, а також стилістичним засобам, які створюють ефект іронії. Для досягнення поставленої мети застосовано метод пильного читання в поєднанні з елементами стилістичного аналізу та компаративного підходу.

У результаті дослідження встановлено, що невідомий автор поеми значно посилює іронічний потенціал, уже наявний у біблійному сюжеті. На відміну від латинської традиції, де акцент переважно робиться на богословському аспекті пророчої місії, середньоанглійський поет надає більшої ваги людській недосконалості Йони, його страхам, емоційній нестабільності та нездатності осягнути Божий задум. Виявлено, що іронія в поемі функціонує на кількох рівнях. Вербальна іронія реалізується через уживання слова в протилежному значенні, удаване схвалення та зіставлення буквального й переносного сенсів. Ситуативна іронія виникає через невідповідність між очікуваннями Йони та реальними наслідками його дій, оскільки кожна спроба уникнути небезпеки лише погіршує його становище. Драматична іронія постає завдяки обізнаності читача з біблійним сюжетом, що дозволяє помічати суперечності, приховані від самого героя. Важливу роль відіграє і самоіронія оповідача, який поєднує морально-релігійні роздуми зі скаргами на власну матеріальну скруту та людською слабкістю.

Дослідження також показує, що для створення іронічного ефекту автор активно використовує антитезу, антонімію, повтор, паралелізм, семантичний контраст і взаємодію буквального та переносного значень. Іронія в *Терпінні* виконує інтерпретативну функцію: вона дозволяє поетові одночасно підкреслювати людську обмеженість і утверджувати необхідність терпіння, смирення та

прийняття Божої волі. Результати дослідження дають змогу точніше окреслити місце поеми *Терпіння* в традиції середньовічної іронічної поезики та засвідчують, що іронія була важливим елементом художнього мислення англійського Середньовіччя.

*Ключові слова:* іронія, англійська середньовічна література, образ пророка Йони, алітераційна поезія, вербальна іронія, драматична іронія, іронія ситуації, самоіронія.

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## Introduction

Though distancing from a complex and multifaceted object generally provides a better perspective on it, a gap of more than six hundred years may involve too great a degree of change. Thus, grasping irony in fourteenth-century poetry can be challenging: numerous shifts in literary conventions and mentality since that time prevent us from seeing the whole picture and interpreting it according to the author's intention. But it is certainly worth trying as closer attention to artifacts of medieval literature, the use of irony there in particular, will deepen our understanding of how literary history evolved and allow us to notice, besides differences, surprising similarities with modern ways of thinking.

In recent decades, medieval studies have increasingly turned toward phenomena that earlier criticism often associated primarily with modern literature, among them irony. Far from being merely an ornamental rhetorical device, irony in medieval texts frequently reflects fundamental tensions within the medieval worldview itself: the discrepancy between human understanding and divine providence, between earthly expectations and transcendent truth, between the visible order of things and their spiritual meaning. As Green observes, medieval authors possessed a clear awareness of ironic incongruity even if they did not conceptualize it through the modern terminology of situational irony [Green, 2009, pp. 8–9]. Likewise, Reiss argues that irony was deeply embedded in medieval consciousness because medieval culture itself perceived human existence as fundamentally paradoxical within the framework of divine creation [Reiss, 1981, pp. 211–212]. Such observations have encouraged scholars to reconsider medieval religious literature no longer as monologically didactic, but as aesthetically complex and intellectually flexible.

Research into irony in medieval literature has expanded considerably across different national traditions. Studies by Green [1979], S. Gaunt [1989], Knox [1989], and Reiss [1981] have demonstrated that medieval rhetorical theory inherited sophisticated understandings of irony from classical tradition and adapted them to Christian modes of thought. Recent scholarship has also explored irony in various medieval literary corpora, including Middle Irish, German, and Chaucerian literature, revealing that medieval irony could function simultaneously as humour, moral instruction, philosophical reflection, and critique of human limitations [Birney, 1985; Boyle, 2021; Classen, 2014]. Yet despite this growing scholarly interest, irony in Middle English religious poetry remains comparatively underexplored, especially in works outside the central canon of Chaucer studies.

One such text is the alliterative poem *Patience*, written in Middle English alliterative verse and surviving, together with three other alliterative poems, in a single manuscript—Cotton Nero A.x., which scholars dated to the latter half of the fourteenth century. The poems are arranged in the manuscript in the following order: *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (these titles have been given to them by modern editors). Their authorship remains unknown, though the manuscript is believed to have been copied by a single scribe.

The prominence of alliteration in these works reflects a broader fourteenth-century English poetic trend commonly referred to as the Alliterative Revival. As Bernau observes, “of the four poems in Cotton Nero A.x, *Patience*, the retelling of the biblical book of Jonah, has attracted the least scholarly attention” [Bernau, 2018, p. 170]. In the light of this, exploring how irony operates on different levels of *Patience*'s poetics will help to sketch a more detailed map of English medieval literature, as well as clarify the role irony might have played in the poetic consciousness of the time.

Retelling the biblical story of Jonah, *Patience* combines homiletic purpose with vivid characterization, dramatic narrative movement, and unexpectedly flexible tonal shifts. Although the poem is overtly didactic in advocating the virtue of patience, its treatment of Jonah repeatedly introduces comic, ironic, and even self-ironic elements that complicate straightforward moral interpretation. The poem presents a prophet who fears suffering, misunderstands divine intention, attempts to escape God through entirely human logic, and repeatedly becomes trapped by the consequences of his own reasoning. Such representation creates a productive tension between sacred narrative and profoundly human imperfection.

The relevance of studying irony in *Patience* lies precisely in this tension. Analysis of the poem's ironic poetics helps illuminate how medieval religious literature could accommodate humour, ambiguity, and psychological complexity without undermining spiritual authority. Moreover, examining irony in *Patience* contributes to a broader understanding of the poetics of the so-called Alliterative Revival and clarifies how medieval English authors negotiated questions of human agency, suffering, and divine justice through literary form. Since the poem amplifies ironic potential already latent in the biblical Book of Jonah, it also offers valuable insight into medieval reinterpretation of Scripture and the creative transformation of exegetical tradition into poetic narrative.

*The aim* of this article is to distinguish types and functions of irony in *Patience*, to trace the mechanisms through which its ironic effects are created, and to examine what ideas are conveyed by the poet through irony. Particular attention will be paid to verbal irony, irony of situation, dramatic irony, and the narrator's self-irony, as well as to the stylistic devices that reinforce ironic meaning. To achieve these objectives, I rely on the *method* of close reading together with elements of stylistic analysis. To highlight the irony in this poem by showing another treatment of the theme, I compare some episodes of Jonah's story in *Patience* with a much earlier version found in *Carmen de Iona Propheta*, a fragment sometimes attributed to Tertullian.

*Patience* is cited in this study in the original [Gollancz, 1913] —in Middle English—but is accompanied by a prose translation into Modern English [Gillespie et al., 2007]. Drawing on Thelwall's translation of *Carmen de Iona Propheta* [A Strain of Jonah, 2000], I also consulted the Latin text [Carmen de Iona, 1851].

Before turning to the analysis of *Patience*, it is necessary to consider what medieval theorists and authors actually meant by irony.

### Literary overview and theoretical background

Irony as a trope was well-known in the Middle Ages. Its discussion by Quintilian in his *Institutio Oratoria* gave rise to a tradition which Gaunt traces through Donatus, Bede, Isidore of Seville, Julian of Toledo, Gervase of Melkley and Hugh of St Victor [Gaunt, 1989, p. 6]. Within this tradition, irony was regarded as a type of allegory, "allegory" being an umbrella term which encompassed a range of other tropes together with allegory proper [Ibid., p. 7]. Both tropes—allegory and irony—say one thing meaning another one, and Green, trying to emphasize a difference between them, concludes that "whereas allegory establishes a correspondence between statement and meaning, irony insinuates a contrast" [Green, 1979, p. 7].

According to Knox, Donatus defined irony as "a trope expressing what it intends through its opposite," and a similar definition is repeated by Bede and other theorists [Knox, 1989, p. 9]. The influential rhetorical treatise *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, though not using the word *ironia*, gives a comparable description of this device [Ibid., pp. 9–10]. But the notion of opposites could be understood in various ways and include four types distinguished by Aristotle: contraries, contradictions, relatives (father—son, double—half), and privation/possession (sight—blindness) [Ibid., pp. 19–20]. Thus, the contrast between what was said and what was meant could be of multiple kinds. In addition, Knox mentions adaptability of *ironia*: medieval and Renaissance authors recognized that it could be combined with different figures and tropes, and Erasmus, for instance, referred to this adaptability as "'stroll' through the figures and tropes" [Ibid., pp. 38–39]. As a result, irony found various ways of expression operating across a wide range of rhetorical forms and contexts.

Besides rhetorical irony, scholars distinguish several other types. Rowland identifies in medieval literature the irony of manner, in which the narrator (as distinct from the poet) assumes a position inferior to that of the audience and wears this mask to mentor them [Rowland, 1985,

pp. xix–xx]. The researcher traces it in Chaucer’s works; a comparable narrator is found in *Piers Plowman*, where he consistently demonstrates a lack of understanding during his spiritual quest.

In modern usage, “irony” is also applied, in Green’s formulation, to “a situation or action incongruously different from our expectations, as if in mockery of what things had seemed to promise” [Green, 1979, p. 8]. Emphasizing that in the medieval tradition the term referred only to rhetorical irony, Green acknowledges the possibility that extension of the meaning may have occurred as late as in the middle of the eighteenth century. If so, the modern understanding of irony encompassing the irony of situation would have been established only at that time. However, he also argues that “it is highly likely that some aspects of the irony of situation, although not designated by the term, were felt as such at an earlier date” [Ibid., p. 9]. Green does not consider the irony of situation in detail, but he devotes a chapter to dramatic irony in medieval romance, which arises from the audience’s awareness of truths unknown to a character [Ibid., p. 250]. Attempting to give a comprehensive definition to irony, Green offers the following: “Irony is a statement, or presentation of an action or situation, in which the real or intended meaning conveyed to the initiated intentionally diverges from, and is incongruous with, the apparent or pretended meaning presented to the uninitiated” [Ibid., p. 9]. The definition is taken up by Gaunt, who draws on it in his research [Gaunt, 1989, p. 5].

A crucial point is made by Reiss, who looks into the core of medieval literary irony and finds its grounds in “essentially ironic” [Reiss, 1981, p. 211] perception of the world in the Middle Ages. He emphasizes that “instead of thinking of irony as a superficial mark of the literature, as a matter of style or tone injected sporadically by the writer in the form of ambiguity, word play, and antithetical expressions, we might best realize that these features are actually the result of irony and are its verbal effects” [Ibid., p. 212]. The ironic world view, as he explains, was rooted in medieval religious mind: it “stemmed from man’s recognition of his place in creation; it was not at all a challenge to God but rather an acceptance of man’s own inadequacy” [Ibid., p. 213]. This is the type of irony which Rowland calls philosophic [Rowland, 1985, p. xxii]. Such an attitude to the order of the world is supported by the Scripture—among the relevant biblical texts there are the following: “There are many devices in a man’s heart; nevertheless the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand” (Prov. 19:21), “Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor. 1:20). Reiss also stresses that this world view involved perception of art as an inherently ironic activity: God had created things in their diversity and multiplicity making even seemingly incompatible elements coexist; in their turn, artists in their limited ability could only approximate this process imitating it by juxtaposing incongruous things [Reiss, 1981, pp. 214–216].

As can be seen, medieval theorists and authors had a broad perception of irony, and a variety of means at their disposal to create the effect. The following section considers how it is achieved in *Patience*.

## Results and discussion

*Patience* is a frame narrative which uses the form of a homily with the story of Jonah as an exemplum occupying the majority of the poem. The poem begins and ends with a line almost identical (“*Paciencie is a poynt, Þa3 hit displese ofte*” [Gollancz, 1913, st. 1] — “*Þat paciencie is a nobel poynt, Þa3 hit displese ofte*” [Ibid, st. 531]), thus the conclusion being the starting point reemphasized and finalized with “*Amen*” [Ibid, st. 532].

The topic established in the frame is advocating the virtue of patience. The poet admits that it is not generally alluring, but can ease the pain of a suffering person, while refusal to endure and resentment (“*Pro*”) bring even greater suffering. Having started as a moralist, he eventually distances himself from the authoritative position and switches to a position of an ordinary human being. He says that patience is one of eight beatitudes about which “*I herde on a halyday, at a hy3e masse*” (“*I heard on a holy day, at a solemn mass*” [Gollancz, 1913, st. 9; Gillespie et al., 2007, p. 71]<sup>1</sup>) —which means that he is not a preacher. Mentioning poverty as spiritual humility (“*Þay arn happen Þat han in hert pouerte, / For hores is Þe heuen-ryche to holde for euer*” /

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, the Middle English poem is cited by stanza numbers (st. / sts.) from Gollancz [1913], and the modern translation is cited by page numbers (p. / pp.) from V. Gillespie, M. Glasscoe and M.J. Swanton [2007].

“they are blessed who have poverty at heart, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven to keep for ever”; sts. 13–14, p. 71), the narrator suddenly pivots to material deprivation (“*Bot [s]yn<sup>2</sup> I am put to a poynt bat pouerte hatte*” / “*But since I am reduced to a condition that is called poverty*”; st. 35, p. 71). So, the presence of two senses creates a semantic play based on the contrast between spiritual and material, and it produces a subtle ironic tension. In addition, the narrator notes that “*suffer me byhoues*” / he is “*obliged to endure*” (st. 46; p. 72) both poverty and patience, as without patience his poverty would be hard to bear, making his praise to poverty sound like an attempt to convince himself. This self-irony brings the narrator to the same level as the audience, whom he invites to share in the moral lesson.

Another argument the narrator uses to justify patience is the futility of resisting inevitable fate. It is pointless to complain if an earthly lord decides to send you to Rome on an errand—all objections will only lead to more trouble. This reference to a superior figure serves as a kind of “glue,” integrating the story of Jonah, who, in valuing his own life, refused to obey his Lord: “*Did not Jonas in Jude suche jape sumwhyle? / To sette hym to sewrte, vnsounde he hym feches*” / “*Did not Jonah once [play] such a trick in Judea? In his attempt to achieve security, he brings misfortune upon himself*” (sts. 57–58; p. 72). In Middle English “jape” meant “a trick, deceit, fraud, fraudulent excuse” [Lewis et al., 2018]. This burlesque detail, lowering the portrayal of Jonah, sets the tone of narration about the prophet’s ordeal. As can be seen, the narrator reveals the outcome of this trick before recounting the story in detail, yet readers familiar with the Vulgate could already foresee it. The discrepancy between Jonah’s horizon of knowledge at different stages of the narrative and that of the audience creates dramatic irony.

The story itself originates in the Book of Jonah, which forms part of the Old Testament and is counted among the Twelve Minor Prophets. It has been observed that it originally contains some humorous episodes. For instance, Hurlbert points to the exaggerated repentance in the city of Nineveh, where even the animals are donning sackcloth. He also states that “the ship being worried about breaking up (1:4) and the piety of the pagans outmatching that of the Lord’s prophet (1:16), are suggestive of humorous irony” [Hulbert, 2023, p. 87]. According to the scholar, this undeniable presence of humour has led some interpreters to regard the whole Book of Jonah as satire, parody, or farce [Ibid., p. 87]. He argues that “the text is ambiguous and open to being read in more than one way” [Ibid., p. 90]. In what follows, I will show that the author of the poem *Patience* not only perceived this humour, but also deliberately amplified the latent irony by adding his own details.

In *Patience*, God, suddenly addressing Jonah “*with a roghlych rurd rowned in his ere*” / “*with a harsh sound whispered in his ear*” (st. 64; p. 72), commands him to go and announce to the Ninevites His imminent vengeance, because they “*hit arn so wykke*” / “*are indeed so wicked*” (st. 69; p. 72), “*her malys is so much*” / “*their sin is so great*” (st. 70; p. 72), “*her vilanye & venym*” / “*their evil and malice*” (st. 71; p. 72) have reached a critical point. But Jonah is afraid to proclaim the message to the Ninevites because God’s description of these people intimidates him. In a monologue he shares his fears with the reader: “*Pose traytours arn typped schrewes*” / “*those traitors are consummate villains*” (st. 77; p. 72); “*Pay ta me bylyue, / Pynez me in a prysoun, put me in stokkes, / Wryþe me in a warlok, wrast out myn yþen*” / “*they [will] seize me immediately, confine me in a prison, put me in the stocks, torture me in a foot-shackle, pluck out my eyes*” (sts. 78–80; pp. 72–73). Jonah thinks that God is too distant to care about what awaits him, “*þa3 I be nummen in Nunniue & naked dispoyled, / On rode rwly torent with rybaudes mony*” / “*even though I should be taken in Nineveh and stripped naked, pitifully torn apart on a cross by many villains*” (sts. 93–96; p. 73). This depiction of torture recalls the “tradition of literary sadism” traced by Birney in Anglo-Saxon literature and later works such as *The Tale of Gamelyn*, Layamon’s *Brut*, and taunting of Christ in mystery plays where the suffering and humiliation of the defeated become objects of mockery [Birney, 1985, pp. 21–23].

The angry Jonah is ironic, even sarcastic, he uses the adjective with a positive colouring to denote the opposite: “*þis is a meruayl message a man for to preche / Amonge enmyes so mony & mansed fendes*” / “*This is a marvellous message for a man to preach among so many enemies*

<sup>2</sup> The square brackets appearing here and elsewhere in the cited prose translation are additions made by the translators into Modern English.

*and cursed fiends*” (sts. 81–82; p. 73). This verbal irony arises from Jonah’s perception of the situation. Concerned for his own well-being, Jonah suspects that it is a punishment prepared for him by God. Yet the Vulgate does not mention any of the exaggerated detailed torments imagined by Jonah. It remains unclear how the sinful Ninevites might truly respond to the prophecy—whether by attacking the prophet or simply ignoring him, so the reader might perceive Jonah’s imagination as excessively vivid. The comic element is enhanced by the fact that he grumbles all the way “*Pat he nolde bole for noþyng non of þose pynes*” (91) / “*that he would not endure any of those torments for anything*” (st. 91; p. 73), and if God is indifferent to his sufferings, he will take care of himself. Jonah is shown as mistrustful and cautious, and he seems to be far from being naïve in dangerous circumstances. By mentioning the rood on which the blood-thirsty Ninevites might crucify the prophet, the poet alludes to the exegetical tradition of reading Jonah as a type for Christ. And it is difficult to disagree with Lee that Jonah is portrayed “rather as an anti-type: a ‘saviour’ who flees from the possibility of being crucified” [Lee, 1982, p. 198]. Thus, the author adds touches of parody which serves not to ridicule and disparage but to assert. As Andrew points out, in his human imperfectness Jonah, who later does go to Nineveh and manages to make the people repent, is “able to briefly emulate Christ... though utterly incapable of doing so consistently. Thus, the poet’s use of simultaneous likenesses and contrasts between Jonah and Christ emphasizes both the greatness of Christ and the feebleness in comparison of even the most worthy of men... the poet encourages us to recognize with the Evangelist that ‘a greater than Jonas is here’” [Andrew, 1973, p. 233]. The only point I would re-emphasize in this explanation is that Jonah is not portrayed as the most worthy of men: neither the Book of Jonah nor *Patience* attributes such a quality to him, and it is not even clear why God chose him, since this remains part of the mystery of Divine design. In *Patience* God’s sudden speaking to Jonah and giving him the command appears even more unexpected. The whole situation looks as if an unbearable burden is imposed on an ordinary person who does not have necessary qualities.

In *Carmen de Iona Propheta* [1851], which I’d like to consider for the sake of contrast, the reason for the flight is explained as follows: Lord is merciful and tends to forgive the repentant, and if the Ninevites are forgiven, Jonah’s words will seem false. He concludes that his prophecy of death and destruction will prove pointless, and the author does not explore the potential of the biblical plot for humor, irony, or satire in Jonah’s line of reasoning. But in *Patience*, Jonah tries to escape in order to save his life—not his reputation.

He finds a ship and intends to reach the city of Tarshish. Then follows a description of the crew’s workmanship in setting sail, which is neither found in the Vulgate nor in pseudo-Tertullian’s text: “*Then he tron on þo tres, & þay her tramme ruchen, / Cachen vp þe crossayl, cables þay fasten, / Wi3t at þe wyndas we3en her ankres, / Spende spak to þe sprete þe spare bawelyne, / Gederen to þe gyde-ropes, þe grete cloþ falles, / þay layden in on laddeborde, & þe lofe wynnes*” / “*Then he stepped on board that ship [lit. on those boards] and they prepare their tackle, hoist the mainsail, fasten ropes; quickly they weigh their anchors at the windlass, smartly fasten the spare bow-line to the bowsprit, haul at the guy-ropes; the big canvas falls; they put in [their oars] on the larboard side and gain the luff [i.e. the advantage of the wind]*” (sts. 101–106; p. 73).

I believe that this succession of verb phrases is intended to create parallelism to the enumeration of the imagined torments which would await Jonah, should he go to Nineveh. In this context the actions of the ship’s crew acquire positive connotation, offering hope in contrast to the destructive actions of the Ninevites. But the irony of situation lies in the fact that the optimistic prospect will eventually turn to the opposite—lead Jonah to suffering.

*Carmen de Iona Propheta* also briefly juxtaposes Jonah’s attempt to escape God on land with his encounter with Him at sea. Although the irony is clearly present, it is not developed to the same extent as in *Patience*. In *Patience*, however, the brief biblical account—a mere mention that Jonah decides to flee from the presence of the Lord—is expanded, and the poet reveals the prophet’s thoughts. Jonah hopes that God will not search for him at sea: “*I wyl me sum oþer waye þat He ne wayte after*” / “*I will go some other way that He does not watch over*” (st. 86; p. 73); “*He wende wel þat þat Wy3 þat al þe world planted / Hade no ma3t in þat mere no man for to greue*” / “*he certainly supposed that the Being who established all the world had no power to harm any man on that sea*” (sts. 111–112; p. 73); “*Hit watz a wenyng vnwar þat welt in his mynde, / Þa3 he*

were so3t fro Samarye, *Pat* God se3 no fyrre. / *3ise, He blushed ful brode: Pat burde hym by sure*” / “it was a foolish hope that revolved in his mind, that, if he had left Samaria, God looked no farther. Yes, He looked far and wide: of that he [i.e. Jonah] should have been sure” (sts. 115–117; p. 73). The irony of the situation develops into dramatic irony supported by a rephrased passage from Psalm 93 in the Vulgate, which emphasizes the omnipotence and omniscience of God. A significant idea the narrator extracts from the psalm is God’s capacity for sight, which makes Jonah’s failure to escape evident to the reader: “*Hit may not be Pat He is blynde Pat bigged vche y3e*” / “It cannot be that He who made every eye is blind” (st. 124; p. 74).

The amplification of blindness / sight opposition creates focus on absurdity of Jonah’s reasoning, which contradicts logic: Jonah attributes to God Almighty a human limitation in overcoming distance. Thus, unlike his speculation about the Ninevites’ probable cruelty, he expresses strikingly naïve ideas. In his attempt to act wisely Jonah only makes a fool of himself, and the poet also stresses as indication of Jonah’s foolishness his old age: “*Bot he dredes no dynt Pat dotes for elde*” / “But he who behaves foolishly because of his age fears no blow” (st. 125; p. 74). The prophet shows a lack of foresight, yet his imperfection is profoundly human, as no person can fully grasp God’s designs. Ironically, every attempt Jonah makes to save himself only serves to worsen his predicament, as he is not in control of the situation. And God has to play a kind of “I see you” game with the prophet, exposing futility of his efforts and correcting his behaviour in a parental manner.

God summons two winds, Eurus and Aquilon, and commands them to blow upon the waters. The winds fulfill God’s command more eagerly than the unreliable Jonah does, and a storm arises quickly. The picture of the storm is conveyed through colour, sound effects, and verbs suggesting rough or rapid movement: there are storm-clouds glowing red beneath, the moaning sea, wrestling winds, and violently rolling waves that make the ship lurch. The Vulgate does not offer a detailed description of the storm. *Carmen de Iona Propheta*, however, does, giving a vivid picture of the gradual transformation of the sky and the sea into a violent whirl. The depiction of the storm in *Patience* cannot be regarded as a direct borrowing from this text, as it differs in various details.

*Patience*’s poet contrasts Jonah’s situations on embarking and during the storm through derivational antonyms—the adjectives “joyful” and “joyless”: “*Watz neuer so joyful a Jue as Jonas watz benne*” / “There was never so joyful a Jew as then was Jonah” (st. 109; p. 73) as opposed to “*Hit watz a joyles gyn Pat Jonas watz inne*” / “it was a joyless craft that Jonah was in” (st. 146; p. 74). It is interesting that in the second case the adjective is used to describe the ship, not Jonah’s feelings. He himself becomes joyless not in this dangerous situation, but later, when God forgives the Ninevites and rebukes Jonah for his constant dissatisfaction (“*Jonas al joyles & janglande vpryses*” / “Jonah gets up all joyless and grumbling”; st. 433, p. 80).

The storm begins a gradual dismantling of the “joyless” ship, in a sequence that seems to reverse the preparations made before the voyage: the rigging and cordage get broken by the wind. The crew in their final attempt to preserve the vessel throw everything overboard and scoop out the water. The *Patience* poet’s remark that the sailors were anxious to save themselves forms a parallel to Jonah’s intentions: “*For be monnes lode neuer so luBer, Be tyf is ay swete*” / “for however wretched a man’s way of life may be, life itself is still sweet” (st. 156; p. 74). In doing so, the author highlights the earthly human aspirations and fears, now presenting the instinct for survival in a serious light, without humour, as both natural and excusable.

The Book of Jonah in the Vulgate tells that the crew begin to pray, and then the shipmaster finds Jonah in the inner part of the ship and has to wake him from his deep sleep. He asks Jonah to pray to his God as well, and then the crew decide to cast lots to determine who has brought this evil upon them. In *Patience* the crew also pray: their gods are Vernagu, Diana, Neptune, Mahomet, Margot, the moon and the sun. But nothing helps, so in despair they decide to find “*sum losynger, sum lawles wrech*” / “some traitor here, some lawless wretch” (st. 170; p. 75) who has offended his God with a sin. The decision to cast lots comes first and then a steersman, gathering all aboard to cast lots, discovers Jonah fast asleep in the bottom of the ship, where he has hidden in fear of the tempest. The poet interrupts his serious treatment of the topic by introducing a comic detail: the roaring of the sea outside is accompanied by Jonah’s snoring inside. Though Jonah’s falling asleep is itself borrowed from the biblical account, the detail of his snoring was added later (in pseudo-Tertullian’s text the prophet snores as well). In *Carmen de Iona Propheta* the sailors are

merely surprised by the incongruity of someone sleeping in such a dangerous and fateful situation. In *Patience*, however, Jonah is reduced to a farcical figure when the steersman forces him to wake and come on deck: “*Be freke hym frunt with his fot & bede hym ferk vp: / Per Ragnel in his rakentes hym rere of his dremes! / Bi Be haspede he hentes hym benne, / & bro3t hym vp by Be brest & vpon borde sette, / Arayned hym ful runyschly what raysoun he hade / In such sla3tes of sor3e to slepe so faste*” / “*The man kicked him with his foot and bade him jump up: may Ragnel<sup>3</sup> in his chains rouse him from his dreams! Then he seized him by the clasped garment, and brought him up by the breast [of his garment] and set him on deck, [and] asked him very roughly what reason he had to sleep so soundly in such dire straits [lit. strokes of sorrow]*” (sts. 187–192; p. 75).

The casting of lots several times points to Jonah as the cause of the tempest. Here the poet again creates the irony of situation. When the sailors start inquiring Jonah, they use the same word which the prophet himself used to describe the Ninevites—“*schrewe*” (st. 197) meaning villain. This reference puts Jonah on the same plank with them: he sees the Ninevites as the frightening “others” (they are not Jews) prone to committing misdeeds, and now the crew perceive him in the same way. They are aware that Jonah belongs to some other ethnos different from each crew member’s and realize that he is guilty of some misdeed, thus posing danger to them. It is quite an accurate retelling of the biblical plot; however, the poet makes the latent proximity of the Ninevites’ and Jonah’s situations more conspicuous by mirroring them. The poet seems to be ironically playing with the idea that the one who accuses shares similarities with the accused.

Jonah is compelled to confess his sin against God and reveal to the crew the power of the Almighty Creator. Terrified by this revelation, the sailors initially refuse to throw Jonah overboard, despite his urging. Only after their oars are broken do they finally yield, submitting to God’s will and casting the prophet into the sea. The tempest ceases, the ship is brought to the land safely, and the sailors acknowledge the only God. After this, the poet turns to the episodes of Jonah’s being swallowed by the fish, his prophecy in Nineveh, and the growth and destruction of the comforting greenery—all drawn from the biblical account. In the episode with the fish the poet reemphasizes the theme established at the beginning of the poem: refusal to be humble and endure leads to more suffering. Inside the fish “*Per in saym & in sor3e Pat sauoured as helle, / Per watz bylded his bour Pat wyl no bale suffer*” / “*There in grease and in filth that smelled like hell, there was built the bower of the man who is willing to suffer no harm*” (sts. 275–276; p. 77). Thus, the irony of the situation is once again brought to the reader’s attention: the poet attaches to Jonah the ironic label of a man unwilling to suffer harm, showing how his attempt at self-preservation leads paradoxically to greater misery. And his whole escape is literally in vain, as after fleeing, he is spat out by the fish in a region “*Pat he renayed hade*” / “he had [previously] renounced” (st. 344; pp. 78–79), signifying his return to the initial position.

When the whole city of Nineveh repents after Jonah’s preaching, God grants His forgiveness. Jonah, “*as wroth as Be wynde*” / “as wrathful as the wind” (st. 410; p. 80), now offers a different reason for his flight, arguing that he had known in advance that God’s mercy would spare the Ninevites and thus make him appear a false prophet. At this point he conveniently omits his earlier fear that the Ninevites might torment and kill him. In response to this, God teaches Jonah a lesson in a scene that is much more elaborately developed by the poet than in the Vulgate. When Jonah makes “a bower” to stay outside the city (the words creates an ironic reminiscence of the “bower” inside the fish), God causes lush greenery to grow, which comforts and cheers Jonah, only to destroy it the next night. This episode demonstrates to Jonah, devastated by the loss of something he did not even create, how dear creation is to God, and how His mercy stems from this fact. As a result, God urges Jonah to be patient as He Himself is patient: “*Be no3t so gryndel, godman, bot go forth By wayes, / Be preue & be pacient in payne & in joye; / For he Pat is to rakel to renden his cloBez / Mot efte sitte with more vnsounde to sewe hem togeder*” / “*Do not be so angry, sir, but go forth on your way; be resolute and patient in sorrow and in joy; for he who is too hasty in tearing his clothes must then sit with more ragged [clothes] to sew them together*” (sts. 524–527; p. 83).

I tend to partially disagree with Birney, who briefly remarks on *Patience*, mentioning it as an example of how “it was in comedy that the dramatic ironist of medieval England felt most at home” [Birney, 1985, p. 26]. Certainly, there are comic episodes in *Patience*, as the previous

<sup>3</sup> Devil.

discussion has shown, but ultimately the poem is pierced with sad philosophical irony. It results from understanding of human condition: happiness is uncertain, the future remains unpredictable, therefore, the only remedy is patience.

God's reply to Jonah contains the imagery of ragged clothing which must be sewn together (but not replaced), and it establishes a subtle link to the mention of poverty in the next sentence where the poet returns to his material circumstances ("*Forþy when pouerte me enprecez & paynez inno3e*" / "Therefore when poverty oppresses me and hardships in plenty" (st. 528; p. 83). This lowering—from the metaphor in God's words to thinking about his limited means—is a device repeated from the beginning of the poem, paralleling the transition made in the initial part of the framing: from the idea of spiritual humility to his actual material poverty. It supports the effect of the narrator's self-irony and contributes to his contemplation of human nature and needs.

## Conclusions

The analysis of *Patience* demonstrates that irony constitutes one of the central principles organizing the poem's poetics and shaping its interpretation of the biblical story of Jonah. Irony permeates different levels of the text and becomes an important means through which the poet reflects on human imperfection, limited understanding, and the relationship between human will and divine design. The study shows that the author of *Patience* significantly intensifies the ironic potential already present in the biblical Book of Jonah, transforming a relatively concise scriptural narrative into a psychologically nuanced and tonally flexible poetic work.

The comparative analysis of *Patience* and *Carmen de Iona Propheta* reveals that the Middle English poet deliberately foregrounds those aspects of the story that expose the contradictions of human reasoning. While the earlier Latin text treats Jonah's refusal primarily in theological terms, presenting his fear that the prophecy might remain unfulfilled if God forgives the Ninevites, *Patience* shifts the emphasis toward Jonah's ordinary human anxieties and instinct for self-preservation. As a result, the prophet is portrayed not as an elevated and consistently authoritative biblical figure, but as a profoundly fallible human being whose attempts to avoid suffering repeatedly place him in even more painful and humiliating situations. The poet thus amplifies the latent comic and ironic dimensions of the biblical narrative while preserving its moral and spiritual seriousness.

The research demonstrates that several interconnected types of irony operate in the poem. Verbal irony emerges through the use of words in meanings opposite to their apparent sense, through ironic praise, and through the contrast between literal and figurative meanings. Irony of situation becomes visible in the discrepancy between Jonah's expectations and the actual consequences of his actions: every attempt to escape danger only increases his suffering and further entangles him in the divine plan from which he seeks to flee. Dramatic irony plays an equally significant role. Since the audience is presumed to know the biblical story beforehand, readers are constantly aware of the futility of Jonah's reasoning and can perceive contradictions invisible to the character himself. The study also identifies the narrator's self-irony as an important element of the poem's framing structure. By repeatedly lowering elevated moral discourse to the level of his own material poverty and human weakness, the narrator avoids adopting an entirely authoritative position and instead establishes a more flexible and human relationship with the audience.

The analysis further demonstrates that irony in *Patience* is reinforced through a wide range of stylistic and structural devices. Among the most important are antithesis, antonymy, semantic contrast, repetition, and parallelism. The poet repeatedly constructs mirrored situations and verbal echoes that expose contradictions between Jonah's intentions and reality. Parallel structures link episodes of apparent safety with later scenes of suffering, while lexical repetitions create ironic reversals of meaning. The interaction between literal and figurative senses also contributes significantly to the poem's ironic texture, especially in passages where spiritual ideas are juxtaposed with material realities. Such devices reveal the poet's remarkable control over tonal variation and his ability to combine comic, tragic, didactic, and contemplative elements within a single narrative framework.

At the same time, the study confirms that the irony of *Patience* should not be reduced to simple satire or ridicule. Although the poem contains comic episodes and occasionally presents Jonah in a farcical light, its irony ultimately reflects a specifically medieval understanding of human existence. In accordance with the observations of scholars, the poem expresses awareness of the disproportion between human knowledge and divine omniscience, as well as the inability of

human beings fully to comprehend providential order. The recognition of the incompatibility between human logic and desires on the one hand and divine will on the other formed an important basis of the medieval ironic world view which Reiss writes about [Reiss, 1981, pp. 211–213]. The very fact of such awareness of human imperfection explains why a prophet could be portrayed in a comic role while still being revered as God's chosen. Jonah's errors, fears, and emotional instability are not so much ridiculed as presented as manifestations of universal human limitation. Consequently, irony performs not a destructive but rather an interpretative function: it enables the poet simultaneously to expose human weakness and to affirm the necessity of humility and patience.

The findings of the article therefore suggest that *Patience* occupies an important place in the tradition of medieval ironic writing. The poem demonstrates that Middle English religious literature could employ sophisticated ironic strategies while remaining deeply engaged with spiritual and theological concerns. Further research into irony in other alliterative poems, particularly *Pearl* and *Piers Plowman*, may help broaden understanding of how medieval English poets used irony as a mode of contemplating divine mystery, human suffering, and the instability of worldly experience.

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## Between Laughter and Humility: Functions of Irony in the Middle English Poem *Patience*

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The article explores the poetics of irony in the Middle English poem *Patience*, a distinctive reinterpretation of the biblical story of Jonah and an important example of fourteenth-century alliterative poetry. Despite the growing scholarly interest in irony in medieval literature, the functioning of irony in Middle English religious poetry remains insufficiently investigated. The relevance of the study lies in the need to achieve a deeper understanding of the ways medieval authors combined didactic, religious, and comic-ironic elements, as well as to clarify the role of irony in the formation of medieval poetic consciousness.

*The aim* of this article is to distinguish types and functions of irony in *Patience*, to trace the mechanisms through which its ironic effects are created, and to examine what ideas are conveyed by the poet through irony. Particular attention is paid to verbal irony, irony of situation, dramatic irony, and the narrator's self-irony, as well as to the stylistic devices that reinforce ironic meaning. To achieve these objectives, the study relies on the *method* of close reading together with elements of stylistic analysis and comparative analysis. The comparative approach makes it possible to contrast the treatment of Jonah and selected narrative episodes in *Patience*, the biblical Book of Jonah, and the Latin fragment *Carmen de Iona Propheta*.

The research demonstrates that the unknown author of *Patience* considerably intensifies the ironic potential already present in the biblical narrative. Unlike the Latin tradition, which emphasizes primarily the theological dimension of the prophetic mission, the Middle English poet foregrounds Jonah's human imperfection, fears, emotional instability, and inability to comprehend divine design. The study reveals that irony in the poem operates on several interconnected levels. Verbal irony is realized through the use of words in opposite meanings, feigned approval, and the interaction of literal and figurative senses. Irony of situation emerges from the discrepancy between Jonah's expectations and the actual consequences of his actions, since every attempt to avoid danger only worsens his condition. Dramatic irony is created through the reader's familiarity with the biblical plot, which makes it possible to perceive contradictions hidden from the protagonist himself. An important role is also played by the narrator's self-irony, which combines moral and religious reflection with references to personal poverty and human weakness.

The article further demonstrates that the ironic effect in *Patience* is reinforced through the active use of antithesis, antonymy, repetition, parallelism, semantic contrast, and the interaction between literal and figurative meanings. Irony in the poem performs an interpretative function: it enables the poet simultaneously to expose human limitation and to affirm the necessity of patience, humility, and acceptance of divine will. The findings of the study contribute to a more precise understanding of *Patience* within the tradition of medieval ironic poetics and demonstrate that irony constituted an important element of artistic thinking in medieval English literature.

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