cadernos pagu (62), 2021:e216201
ISSN 1809-4449

Humour as a Subversive[1] Feminist Strategy in "The Portable Virgin" by Ann Enright[*]

María Elena JAIME DE PABLOS[**]

Abstract

This article analyses "The Portable Virgin", a short story published by the Irish writer Ann Enright in 1991, in order to establish the way in which gender and humour interact in it, to define the characteristics and functions of the comic elements that Mary, the protagonist, uses to render her reality, and to show the strategies employed by Enright to subvert the myths, particularly that of the Virgin Mary, on which the patriarchal feminine identity rests.

Keywords: Gender, Humour, Subversion, Sexual Identity, Patriarchy

[1] In this article, subversion is defined as the action and effect of making the established social order visible with the purpose of effecting changes in it to make it more logical, fair and egalitarian. According to the author, humour can be a strategy of feminist subversion insofar as it can contribute to the weakening of the patriarchal system (thus giving rise to a more feminist society) by showing its wicked nature and perverse logic through humour and tools such as satire, irony and the grotesque.

[*] Received March 03 2020, accepted March 22 2021.

[**] Senior Lecturer, Department of Philology (English Studies), University of Almeria, Almeria, Spain. mjaime@ual.es / orcid.org/0000-0001-6845-7670

http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/18094449202100620001

Representation of the Human Condition through Humour

Throughout the history of humanity, humour, as a way of presenting human reality through comic elements, has had strong defenders and detractors. Umberto Eco in the novel *The Name of the Rose* presents some of the reasons argued by both the former and the latter to justify their positions. Thus, while the monk Venantius of Salvemec avers that humour is beneficial, quoting Aristotle, who "had spoken of laughter as something good and an instrument of truth" (Eco, 1986:68), the monk Jorge of Burgos considers it harmful because of its subversive power, that is, because of its potentiality to alter the nature of the established social order: "Laughter frees the villain from fear of the Devil, because in the feast of fools the Devil also appears poor and foolish, and therefore controllable" (Eco, 1986:277).

Today, the general trend is to see humour as a positive phenomenon, hence we find it both in simple informal conversations and in elaborate literary, film, cultural, media and political discourses, to mention but a few. Stefan Vanistendael reveals the benefits of humour in the prologue of the book *Resiliencia y Humor* (*Resilience and Humor*):

> […] with its modest forms, it helps cement many of the dimensions of human life: perception, intelligence and emotions, bodily well-being and social relationships; including our values and the discovery of the meaning of life. It is humour that broadens our perspective on life and makes it more realistic, beyond worries and disappointments, overcoming empty pretensions and the narrow-mindedness of strict utilitarianism. It is humor that gives us the freedom to smile and laugh, if not reflected on our faces, at least in our hearts. Like beauty, humour lifts us up and gives us encouragement.
> Therefore, it is not surprising that humour establishes deep links with philosophy, literature and spirituality (Vanistendael, 2013:1-2)[2].

In addressing the nature of humour, three fundamental characteristics are usually highlighted: its pleasant character, its cathartic function and its critical potential, with all three able to operate both individually and socially. Referring to the first quality, Bettina Caron and Carlos Maria Caron affirm that humour allows "enjoyment similar to that produced by a playful activity", this is so because "a message coded in a humorous key" (Caron and Caron, 2004:27) implies some kind of "dialectical game between its sender and its receiver". María A. Alasia de Bosch affirms that humour is a "symptom of the human condition par excellence" due to its cathartic function and its critical potential. Her opinion is that "the ability to produce humour and be humorous is an extraordinary gift that allows you to sharpen your consciousness and fully assume your own condition. In that shaking off of the old skin, in that catharsis, the human being is reborn fresh and healthy" (Alasia de Bosch in Caron and Caron, 2004:21).

According to Rowan Atkinson, the actor who has brought the famous Mr. Bean to life, the human condition may be represented from a comic perspective by placing the subject in an unusual place, by putting the focus on him or her when he or she behaves in an unusual way, or by depicting him or her with a disproportionate size (in Triezenberg 2008:530). A clear example of humorous text is, no doubt, the novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) by the Irish writer Jonathan Swift. Its protagonist, Lemuel Gulliver, reaches remote and incredible spots with such bizarre names as Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Balnibarby, Luggnagg, Glubbdubdrib or Laputa (the latter is particularly striking for its connotations in Spanish, it can be translated as "The whore"). These places are inhabited by beings that are governed by ideas and rules as odd as their size or their behaviour, for instance, the citizens of Lilliput are tiny whereas those of Brobdingnag are gigantic or in the country of the Houyhnhnms, the horses are the ones in possession of reason and power whereas the Yahoos, with perfect human shape, are the ones who act like wild beasts, literally like "brute animals" (Swift, 2010:255):

> The Master Horse ordered a Sorrel Nag, one of his Servants, to untie the largest of these Animals, and take him into the Yard. The Beast and I were brought close together; and our

[2] All quotations originally in Spanish have been translated into English by the author of this chapter.

> Countenances diligently compared, both by Master and Servant, who thereupon repeated several times the Word Yahoo. My Horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure; the Face of it indeed was flat and broad, the Nose depressed, the Lips large, and the Mouth wide. But these Differences are common to all Savage Nations, where the Lineaments of the Countenance are distorted by the Natives suffering their Infants to lie grovelling on the Earth, or by carrying them on their Backs, nuzzling with their Face against the Mother's Shoulders. The Fore-feet of the Yahoo differed from my Hands in nothing else, but the Length of the Nails, the Coarseness and Brownness of the Palms, and the Hairiness on the Backs. There was the same Resemblance between our Feet, with the same Differences, which I knew very well […]; the same in every Part of our Bodies, except as to Hairiness and Colour, which I have already described (Swift, 2010:257-258).

Through the Yahoo's grotesque behaviour and Gulliver's intellectual blindness, Swift produces a scathing critique of humanity. For Katrina E. Triezenberg, this author constitutes a turning point in the history of literary humour because he embodies the figure of the humorous genius that many other writers have taken as a model from the 18th century onwards (Triezenberg, 2008:527).

Humour and Gender in the Context of Irish Literature

Because a myriad of Irish authors have followed Swift's path, humour has become a distinctive feature of Irish literature. This is acknowledged by several critics, with even the prestigious writer Colm Toibin confessing to Anne Enright in the course of a conversation: "I'm not an Irish writer, I'm not funny" (en Moloney, 2003:58).

Writer, actress and journalist Stefanie Preissner points out that Irish people are more prone to humour because they have traditionally used it as a psychological defence mechanism to overcome the tragedies they had to face in the past (in Ganatra, 2018). This, brought to the field of gender, would explain the link between tragedy and humour in the works of a number of contemporary Irish female authors including Edna O'Brien, Emma Donoghue, Clare Boylan, Marina Carr, Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, Rita Ann Higgins, Molly Keane, Julia O'Faolain, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Mary O'Donnell or Anne Enright herself, since their comic effects are linked to the suffering, anger and frustration that women suffer within the framework of the patriarchal system. Their humour, intended to undermine the foundations that sustain this system, has a marked feminist slant.

Hence, Regina Barreca distinguishes between the humour produced by men and that generated by women: "The difference, then, between men's humor and women's humor, is the difference between revolt and revolution. When women's laughter is directed towards authority, it can bring down the house?" (Barreca 1994:16). She also accords enormous relevance to women's humour since it provides them with visibility and voice and empowers them by giving them focal attention and respect:

> Women's humor may be undervalued, but it is priceless. It may have been hidden away, but it has been constant. It may have been ignored or challenged, but it has always been a secretly potent, delightfully dangerous, wonderfully seductive, and, most important, powerful way to make ourselves heard, to capture the attention, the heart, and the respect of our audience (Barreca, 2013:202).

Regarding the type of humor that women produce, Nancy A. Walker (1988: xii) warns that it is more a means of communication than a means of presentation, more a way of sharing an experience than a display of intelligence. She believes that female humorous language is almost never purely comic or absurd and that, even when it is so, it simply renders the absurd situations that women must face in a patriarchal culture, so it does not generates joy, the privilege of the powerful, but rather anguish and frustration. Walker (1988: 29) adds that the type of humour that women produce is closely linked to their life experience, so it has a strong domestic component, frequently addressing aspects related to home, motherhood or couple relationships. Regarding the audience that consumes humour created by women, Walker states that it is fundamentally female.

Ann Enright: A Great Master of Humour

Critical voices agree that Ann Enright (1962-) is a great master of humour. Undoubtedly, this element is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in her novels: *The Wig My Father Wore* (1995), *What Are You Like?* (2000), which won the Encore Prize, *The Pleasure of Eliza Lynch* (2002) and *The Gathering* (2007), winner of the Booker Prize. It is also in evidence in her short story collections: *The Portable Virgin* (1991), awarded the Rooney Prize for Literature, *Taking Pictures* (2008) and *Yesterday's Weather* (2008), as well as in her book *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood*, and in the countless articles that she has published in *The Irish Times, The Guardian, The London Review of Books*, etc.

Regarding her extraordinary skills to generate comic effects in her writings, Susan Cahill affirms:

> Enright's writing style is fragmentary, episodic, and postmodern in its emphasis on parody, intertextuality, and narrative incoherence. She is continually lauded for her wit and humour, and has been compared to such writers as Laurence Sterne for flouting of narrative conventions and Jonathan Swift for her marked focus on the bodily (Cahill, 2011:97).

In the very same vein, Sara Stenson asserts:

> Critics complain about her intensely sarcastic sense of humor, which Enright blames on her mother. Sharp, often dark, and yet relentlessly innovative, Anne Enright's unhinging irony and decentered writing style capture the momentum, multiplicity, and veracity of the Irish identities in the postmodern age (Stenson, 2006:121).

We can appreciate her "intensely sarcastic" humour in the following quotation taken from an interview with Caitriona Moloney in 2003. To the question "Is it true that in Ireland all new fiction writers are measured against Joyce?" (Moloney, 2003:57), Anne Enright answers:

> I always say that if Joyce was a woman she would have been locked up for writing psychotic, scatological gibberish; for sleeping with the serving classes and getting herself pregnant; for fleeing her native place in a state of hysteria; and all the rest. And when they had locked her up they would have looked at her scrawlings, and if they bothered to decipher them, might have muttered "Hmmmm. Pity. Some of this stuff is almost good you know. Some of it has An Effect (Enright en Moloney, 2003:57-58).

With great humour, Enright states two things very clearly: her opinion about the iconic James Joyce, referring to well-known biographical elements, and about the double standards that literary critics use to analyse and assess the work of male writers and female writers, forever underestimating the latter.

Gender, Humour and Madness in "The Portable Virgin"

Sara Stenson finds similarities between "The Portable Virgin", as a short story collection, and Jonathan Swift's work. According to her, the following parallels stand out: the ingenuity, the daring curiosity and the grotesqueness of the characters, as well as their need to seek refuge in surreal imaginary spaces (2006:121). In other words, she finds a link between Enright's narrative and Swift's due to their ability to capture a myriad of comic elements that generate different effects on the reading public.

"The Portable Virgin", the story that gives title to Enright's collection, uses humour to force readers to reflect on the importance Ireland grants to the myth of the Virgin Mary, and which has permeated religious, political, social, cultural, artistic and literary discourse in order to impose a certain condition and position on women. This has been more and more evident since the Irish nationalist movement gathered strength at the end of the 19th century, it adopted Apostolic and Roman Catholicism as its flag and associated the religious maternal figure of the Virgin Mary with the patriotic one of Mother Ireland. Enright explores the values that patriarchy has traditionally associated with this glorified and stereotyped image of a femininity that is linked to purity, virtue,

chastity, obedience, humility, silence, resignation, simplicity, domesticity, etc. She illustrates this impact on real Irish women through the main character named, in obvious allusion to the referent, Mary.

Mary, a middle-aged woman educated in the Catholic tradition, values the spiritual and despises the corporeal. In the opening lines of the story, she informs readers that she gives little importance to physical appearance as her motto shows: "DARE TO BE dowdy!" (Enright, 1991:53). She even indicates how to be so, for instance, by wearing inexpensive pieces of clothing with poor aesthetic value and which may be impregnated with dirt or body fluids. In these clothes, she "sheaths" her large and voluminous body, deformed by the passing of time, excessive weight, multiple pregnancies and self-neglect (grounded on the aforementioned motto), and which she associates, applying a simile, with "an old sofa, welcoming, familiar, well-designed" fulfilling its purpose (Enright, 1991:53), that of giving comfort to her husband and her progeny.

Mary, emulating the model of the Virgin Mary, presents herself as a selfless, desexualised and domestic wife and mother, thus embodying Ireland's Catholic ideal of femininity. However, her husband prefers a different type of femininity, that linked to another biblical Mary, Mary Magdalene, to satisfy his sexual appetites, and he finds it in a woman much younger and much more attractive than his wife. This psychologically damages the protagonist who ends up suffering from mental instability, which is apparent from the very beginning of the short story through samples of narrative incoherence, lack of connection between ideas (some apparently incongruous with each other), jumps in the narration or changes in the narrative voice (readers find a first person narrator in the opening paragraph, a third person narrator in the second paragraph and, again, a first person narrator in the third paragraph):

> DARE TO BE dowdy! that's my motto, because it comes to us all – the dirty acrylic jumpers and the genteel trickle of piss down our support tights. It will come to her too.
> She was one of those women who hold their skin like a smile, as if she was afraid her face might fall off if the tension went out of her eyes.
> I knew that when Ben made love to her, the thought that she might break pushed him harder. I, by comparison, am like an old sofa, welcoming, familiar, well-designed.
> This is the usual betrayal story (Enright, 1991:53).

This fragment leads us to think that the protagonist is a "wounded" or "split" subject in Freudian terms and that the root of her splitting is to be found in her husband's betrayal. With narrative irony, Ben's lover is also called Mary, but, unlike the protagonist, she represents a more modern, more sophisticated, more sexualized, more integrated in the public sphere, more independent and more uninhibited type of femininity. Yet, she is equally trapped in patriarchal schemes, because, despite having a law degree and a job in a "booming business" (which turns out to be something as prosaic as a van rental), she presents herself as the typical *femme fatale* of the male imaginary, with blond hair, a slender and sensual body, elegant clothes and a complacent attitude, she is always ready to satisfy the sexual fantasies of her partner no matter whether in a toilet or at the back seat of a car. Her name, Mary, therefore, comes to be synonymous with a woman who obeys the will of the patriarch, meets his needs and bends to his wishes, in imitation of the Virgin Mary addressing the angel Gabriel in the scene of the Annunciation: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word." (Lucas, 1, 38).

Ben wants both the comfort that his wife provides him and the pleasure that his lover gives him and plays with the feelings of each woman, both of whom depend emotionally on him. The protagonist makes explicit reference to the coldness and disaffection that she observes in the way her husband treats her: "Ben is tired of love. Ben wants sad sex in the back of cars" (Enright, 1991:55). However, at the same time, she reveals that he suffers what has been coined as "*Madonna–whore complex*", that refers to men who love women for whom they do not feel any sexual desire, and feel sexual desire for women whom they do not love. Chris Kelly and Carmen Hahn describe this phenomenon as follows: "this psychological complex is said to develop in men who see women as either saintly Madonnas or debased prostitutes. Men with this complex desire a sexual partner who has been degraded (the whore) while they cannot desire the respected partner (the Madonna)" (Kelly y Hahn, 2020:129). They also indicate the danger that this polarised

sexuality entails for women: "In sexual politics the view of women as either Madonnas or whores limits women's sexual expression, offering two mutually exclusive ways to construct a sexual identity" (Kelly and Hahn, 2020:129).

Mary thinks that her husband's infidelity has nothing to do with an incompatibility of personalities. Rather she blames the patriarchal ideology for it, its implicit sensualism spreads the prejudice that women are bodies and that the attraction they exert on the male sex is directly proportional to the beauty they radiate, which, in turn, is closely linked to their age. Mary believes that women her age stop attracting men's glances and because they are conceived as commodified bodies, they no longer receive any attention, they become abandoned objects.

The protagonist emphasizes that her situation is due to social rather than personal circumstances. She points out that, like her, millions of women see themselves portrayed in BBC mini-series in which Judi Dench plays the role of "abandoned furniture" (Enright, 1991: 53). It is curious to observe how these pieces of "abandoned furniture", these betrayed women, try to overcome their state of sadness and frustration with a certain dose of black humour, what the protagonist calls "a little sad fun" (Enright, 1991:53). Mary employs this type of humour as a psychological mechanism of resistance[3], that is, an element of protection that her mind generates to preserve her subjectivity in an absolutely alienating personal situation. Thanks to this strategy, quoting Giselinde Kuipers, she distances herself from negative emotions such as fear, grief, or shame and experiences beneficial feelings of comfort, relief, and transcendence (Kuipers, 2008:367).

"A little sad fun" is what we find in the following quotation:

> My poor maimed husband is having sex in the back of our car with a poor maimed woman who has a law degree and a tendency to overdress. She works for a van-rental firm. You would think at least she could get them something with a bigger back seat (Enright, 1991:54).

Mary, who is obsessed with her husband's infidelity, describes her rival, his lover, not to provoke pity and compassion on the part of the reader, but laughter, she achieves it through the repetition of words, parallelism, grotesque elements ("My poor maimed husband", "a poor maimed woman"), exaggeration ("a tendency to overdress"), irony ("You would think at least she could get them something with a bigger back seat"), etc.

Mary uses the adjective "maimed" metaphorically because, in an exercise of intertextuality, she draws a connection between Ben and Edward Rochester, the male protagonist in Charlotte Brönte's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Edward Rochester becomes physically damaged fighting a fire caused by his wife, Bertha, whom he has locked up and abandoned in the attic of their mansion house in order to conceal a marriage that makes him uncomfortable and, thus, woo, without social obstacles, other women, younger and more attractive than Bertha.

Like Bertha Rochester, Mary does not seem to have a life beyond the domestic sphere, although her intelligence allows her to deduce, and her imagination to guess, what happens beyond this domain. In the same way that Bertha Rochester knows of the relationship between Edward and Jane Eyre, Mary is aware of that of Ben and the other Mary. Like Bertha, who alters domestic peace with noises and events that terrify all who can perceive them, Mary says and does things that leave both Ben and the reading public in a state of perplexity. Just as Bertha is associated with madness and laughter generated by her imposed situation of captivity, isolation and dehumanisation, Mary, mentally disturbed by the marital crisis that she is experiencing and by the process of commodification she is going through, relies heavily on irony (a key element in the production of comic effects) in order to explain what happens to her. The following fragment illustrates this, and here readers can observe how the protagonist concatenates ideas which obsess her in a highly incongruous way to describe a reality which is the opposite of that that is true:

[3] The concept of resistance indicated here (fundamentally psychological resistance) is related to that presented by Daniel Bensaïd (2006:29) in his essay *Resistances*. According to this French philosopher, resistance means facing an obstacle to a form of oppression that threatens the integrity of the subject (in the story, the gender norms imposed by patriarchy). For those who exercise resistance, it constitutes both an act of preservation and an act of insubordination (of not giving up in the face of a difficulty or of not yielding to oppressive practices). Bensaïd adds that this phenomenon can be accompanied by a dream of utopian escape (in the case of the protagonist, Mary, this coincides with the creation of a parallel reality).

> It is not a story about hand-jobs in toilets, at parties where everyone is in the van-rental business. It is not a story where Satan turns around like a lawyer in a swivel chair. There are no doves, no prostitutes, no railway stations, no marks on the skin. So there I was knitting a bolero jacket when I dropped a stitch. Bother. And there was Ben with a gin and tonic crossing his legs tenderly by the phone.
> 'Thoroughly fucked?' I asked and he spilt his drink.
> Ben has been infected by me over the years. He has my habit of irony, or perhaps I have his. Our inflections coincide in bed, and sometimes he startles me in the shops, by hopping out of my mouth.
> 'Thoroughly,' he said, brushing the wet on his trousers and flicking drops of gin from his fingertips (Enright, 1991:53).

With the intention of regaining the attention of her husband and, likewise, eliminating the shadow of his mistress, which constitutes a threat to her marriage and, consequently, to the maintenance of her privileged social status as wife and mother in a traditional, Catholic and patriarchal society, Mary devises a plan that is ridiculous. She goes to the most expensive hairdresser in Dublin (the overspending is presented as an extravagance) in order to make her hair, extremely weakened by the passing of time and visibly spoiled by lack of care, look like Ben's mistress, voluminous and blond, and in so doing, expects to assume part of her personality.

Despite the fact that the protagonist identifies herself with the iconic image of the dove, which in the Christian framework is related to the maternal figure of the Virgin Mary and used as a symbol of love, care, devotion, immaculate purity and meekness, Mary aims at emulating Ben's lover, whom she considers "a prostitute", the personification of lust, sin and moral degradation, and this is why she associates her rival with what is "obscene" and "dirty":

> "I want to go blonde", says the wet and naked figure in the mirror and the scissors pause mid-swoop.
> "It's very thin …"
> "I know, I want it to break. I want it blonde". "Well …" My stylist is shocked. I have finally managed to say something really obscene.
> The filthy metamorphosis is effected by another young man whose hair is the same length as the stubble on his chin (Enright, 1991:56).

Mary wants her new hair-cut and hair colour to awaken in Ben the sexual appetite that only his lover seems to arouse. No doubt, she longs with it to severe the bond that holds Ben and his lover together. In the context of the hairdresser's, the psychically unstable personality of the protagonist manifests itself once again when she projects her own identity on to the other clients of the premises, she calls them all Mary and imagines them all middle-aged wives and mothers in the process of becoming blonde so that their husbands find them seductive. The author uses parody, the grotesque and the abject to describe the humiliating beauty ritual that will allow her to complete her "dirty metamorphosis":

> We' start with a rubber cap which he punctures with a vicious crochet hook, then drags my poor thin hair through the holes. I look "a fright". All the women around me look "a fright". Mary is sitting to my left and to my right. She is blue from the neck down, she is reading a magazine, her hair stinks, her skin is pulled into a smile by the rubber tonsure on her head (Enright, 1991:53).

These women, caricatures of the chaste Virgin Mary, whom they emulate with the blue cape that protects their clothes from the corrosive chemistry of the dye (reminiscent of the iconic blue cloak that covers the body of Jesus Christ's mother), are preparing, paradoxically, to be a source of carnal temptation. They are, no doubt, in the liminal space between two supposedly incompatible feminine identities, in this space they are conceived as "frights", frightening subjects with grotesque facial features generated by the tightness of the plastic caps that they wear in the dyeing process, covered by a stinky and slimy substance.

In keeping with Judy Little's thesis regarding the link between the liminal and humour – "Comedy derives many of its characteristics motifs from the ritual practices belonging to 'liminality'" (Little, 1983:2)– it could said that the comic effect of the hairdresser's scene lies precisely in its

representation of the liminal, in the description of the beautification ritual experienced by the clients of the premises, which begins with the placement of the hair colouring cape, proceeding to the hair-cut, the hair dyeing and, finally, the blow-dry. Little adds that rites involve changes in the nature of those who perform them and that they consist of three phases: separation from society, transition or liminal state, and reintegration into society (Little, 1983:3).

In this sense, Mary, aware that her new look, which she associates with a new identity, makes her appear younger and more attractive and, as a consequence, more valuable from the patriarchal viewpoint, affirms: "The new fake me looks twice as real as the old" (Enright, 1991:57). Although "real" in this phrase means "socially acceptable" (Shumaker, 2005:109), Mary's aesthetic change to improve her physical appearance does not prove to be the panacea. In her assessment, Jeanette Shumaker maintains that, through "The Portable Virgin", Ann Enright "exposes the ludicrousness of women's attempts to construct an eternally youthful identity that pleases men" (Shumaker, 2005:107).

The multiplicity of female figures in the hairdresser's all responding to the same name, displaying the same identity, showing the same behavioural pattern and projecting the same abject image, implies, on the one hand, the loss of their individuality and, on the other, the violation of the aesthetic norms by which the female sex is governed, both characteristics of the liminal phase of the rite in which they are involved: "The liminal phase of a rite characteristically emphasizes the annulled identity of the persons undergoing the rite and expresses sometimes their freedom from the usual norms of behaviour" (Little, 1983:3).

Obsessed with her husband's infidelity, the protagonist considers all women in the hairdresser's as potential rivals in capturing the male gaze, and therefore Ben's. In her opinion, all of them could embody the other Mary and therefore constitute a threat to her fragile marital stability. In this concatenation of ideas, founded on a logic derived from her mental derangement, she steals a bag in the absurd conviction that it belongs to Ben's lover. She does it with the purpose of placing her rival in a ridiculous and embarrassing situation when paying: "It affords me some satisfaction to think of her washed up in the hairdressers, out of her nylon shift and newly shriven, without the means to pay" (Enright, 1991:56). Shumaker concludes that the paranoia that leads Mary to appropriate this bag is the result of the competitiveness to which women are subjected in order to gain men's attention: "Through the absurdity of the wife's paranoia and theft, Enright reveals that competitiveness for men's attention may make women go to insane lengths to eclipse imagined rivals" (Shumaker, 2005:109).

Far from the hairdresser's, the protagonist opens the bag that she has stolen and discovers, when exploring inside, that its owner is someone also torn between the two antagonistic and irreconcilable models of femininity already mentioned: that of the virtuous Virgin Mary and that of the lascivious Mary Magdalene (prostitute). The first is linked to a bottle of holy water with a shape that emulates that the Virgin Mary, a souvenir from the Sanctuary of Lourdes; the second, to diaphragms and a wide range of makeup elements that enhance female beauty, all traditionally linked to male desire.

To further appropriate Ben's lover's identity, Mary uses her makeup and drinks the holy water in the souvenir bottle. Makeup, with evocative names that promise eternal beauty and glamour – "Wine Rose and Gentlelight Colorize Powder Shadow Trio", "Plumsilk lipstick", "Venetian Brocade blusher" "Tearproof (thank God) mascara" (Enright, 1991:56)– momentarily increases Mary's self-esteem because it enhances her beauty and, with it, her femininity, but she does know that it only hides the decadence she appreciates in her body. By impersonating Ben's lover, Mary seems to have forgotten her initial motto, the one that invites women of a certain age to disregard their physical appearance once they have achieved their vital goals: marriage and motherhood. She realizes that she cannot be the living representation of the desexualized Virgin Mary as Ben cannot be the incarnation of the chaste and faithful Saint Joseph and that frustration is inherent to any stereotyped variety of femininity. This can be illustrated through the name given to one of the cosmetic products already listed: "Tearproof (thank God) mascara", the mascara that the other Mary uses. "Waterproof", resistant to water, and not "tearproof", resistant to tears, is the adjective with

which this cosmetic item is generally marketed. In her play on words, Mary associates the word tear with God, a fundamental concept in patriarchal thought.

Mary uses Ben's Lover's cosmetic products to hide what horrifies her, the vision of the passing of time in her own body, and, likewise, she drinks the holy water to purify it from the abjection that age represents. John Simon affirms that those who fall prey to madness resort to rituals of purity to compensate for the impact of the horror that it causes (Simon, 1963:106). However, the content of Lourdes' souvenir, far from having positive effects, counteracts the feeling of satisfaction that she experiences after using makeup. This new ritual implies a new transformation, which is nothing but a return to the traditional feminine identity. Imbued by the Virgin Mary's spirit of submission (or rather of resignation), convinced that man is the destiny of woman, and still in love with Ben, she is psychologically blocked and cannot imagine an alternative life. Finally, she decides to accept Ben's infidelity in order to preserve her marital status. Perhaps, because she thinks that although she can integrate the two female identities present in the story, no matter how different they are, "we are great contrarians", says Enright (2010: xviii), of the human condition, Ben has the need to separate and distinguish these two categories, Virgin and prostitute, in different women:

> I root through the bag, looking for a past. At the bottom, discoloured by Wine Rose and Gentlelight, I find a small, portable Virgin. She is made of transparent plastic, except for her cloak, which is coloured blue. 'A present from Lourdes' is written on the globe at her feet, underneath her heel and the serpent. Mary is full of surprises. Her little blue crown is a screw-off top, and her body is filled with holy water, which I drink.
>
> *
>
> Down by the water's edge I set her sailing on her back, off to Ben, who is sentimental that way. Then I follow her into his story, with its doves and prostitutes, railway stations and marks on the skin. I have nowhere else to go. I love that man (Enright, 1991:57).

Although the protagonist of the story shows a reality that she considers tremendously painful and frustrating (male infidelity, hierarchical gender relations, the commodification of women, the worship of youth and beauty), she does so with high doses of black humour that serve to make her existence more bearable. As Allen Nilsen and Don Nilsen point out, in literature:

> Black humor, and its close relatives of absurdist humor and gallows humor, […] are more concerned with tolerating, than with managing, life, […] black humor is a testament to the human spirit and its ability to survive and to laugh in the midst of chaos and destruction (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2008:249).

Like many of the characters in *Gulliver's Travels*, Mary has a body that she describes as abject, exhibits an anomalous behaviour and places her mind in surreal spaces, all this derived from the feeling of loss that Ben's infidelity has provoked in her. Anne Enright, like Swift, reflects on the human condition through humour based on irony, parody, the grotesque, the absurd, eschatological hints, incongruity, sexual stereotypes, hyperbole, intertextuality, puns, repetition, and shocking elements, but, unlike him, she does so with the purpose of showing that the feminine stereotypes, whether "doves" or "prostitutes", imposed by the patriarchal order are as inflexible as they are unattainable and that, therefore, trying to accommodate to them can only lead to frustration, if not madness. Nancy Walker states that this dual identity underpins much of feminine humour: "Believed to be sinful yet admired for their purity, women have steered their way through such ludicrous incongruity by means of a subversive laughter" (1988: 86).

Enright's feminist humour is undoubtedly subversive because it aspires to contribute to a restructuring of the social order based on the redefinition of sexual identity, particularly that of women, so that it would not be polarised into two stereotypes: the pure and virtuous Virgin Mary and the lustful and sinful prostitute. By mocking these stereotypes and the essence attributed to them, the author aims at diminishing their strength, at altering their nature and at deconsecrating the first prototype to make the second more comprehensible.

References

BARRECA, Regina. *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature.* Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1994.

BARRECA, Regina. *They Used to Call Me Snow White...but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*. Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 2013 [1991].

La Santa Biblia. Madrid, Ediciones Paulinas, 1964.

CAHILL, Susan. *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years 1990 to 2008*: *Gender, Bodies, Memory*. London, Continuum, 2011.

CARON, Bettina y CARON, Carlos Maria. *Escribir con Humor: Juegos Literarios En El Taller*. Buenos Aires, Colihue, 2004.

ECO, Umberto. *The Name of the Rose*. New York, Warner Books, 1986 [1980].

ENRIGHT, Anne. Introduction. *The Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*. London, Granta. 2010.

ENRIGHT, Anne. *The Portable Virgin*. London, Vintage, 1991.

GANATRA, Shilpa. 'Humour is ingrained into our DNA': meet the Irish women making TV's best comedies. *The Guardian*, 26th January 2018 [https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jan/26/humour-is-ingrained-into-our-dna-meet-the-irish-women-making-tvs-best-comedies].

KELLY, Chris y HAHN, Carmen. *Clinical Psychology.* Waltham Abbey Essex, ED-Tech Press, 2020.

KUIPERS, Giselinde. The Sociology of Humor. En: RASKIN, Victor y RUCH, Willibald (eds.). *The Primer of Humor Research.* Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, pp.361-398.

LITTLE, Judy. *Comedy and the Woman Writer: Woolf, Spark, and Feminism.* Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

MOLONEY, Caitriona. Anne Enright. En: MOLONEY, Caitriona y THOMPSON, Helen (ed.) *Irish Women Writers Speak Out: Voices from the Field*. Syracuse, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2003, pp.51-64.

NILSEN, Allen y NILSEN, Don. Literature and Humor. En: RASKIN, Victor y RUCH, Willibald (ed.). *The Primer of Humor Research*. Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, pp.243-280.

SHUMAKER, Jeanette. Uncanny Doubles: The Fiction of Anne Enright. *New Hibernia Review* 9 (3), 2005, pp.107-122.

STENSON, Sara E. Anne Enright. En: GONZÁLEZ, Alexander G. (ed.). *Irish Women Writers. An A-to-Z Guide.* Westport, Connecticut, London, Greenwood Press, 2006, pp.120-124.

SWIFT, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels.* San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2010 [1726].

TRIEZENBERG, Katrina E. Humor in Literature. En: RASKIN, Victor y RUCH, Willibald (ed.). *The Primer of Humor Research.* Berlin, New York, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, pp.523-542.

VANISTENDAEL, Stefan. Humor y resiliencia: viaje a las profundidades de nuestra humanidad. *Resiliencia y Humor*. En: VANISTENDAEL, Stefan et al. Barcelona, Editorial Gedisa, 2013, pp.1-2.

WALKER, Nancy A. *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988.