MONEY AND THE MAN: ECONOMICS AND IDENTITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

In “Money and the Man: Economics and Identity in Late Medieval English Literature,” I explore the relationship between the profound economic changes of the late medieval period and shifting models of subjectivity. I argue that often-noted economic transformations, such as the expansion of the money economy, the commercialization of English society, and the general increase in personal wealth, had consequences far beyond the marketplace. Indeed, such changes had a significant impact on how people imagined themselves and others to be defined, causing a shift from societal models of birth and function to paradigms emphasizing economic activity and income. Increasingly, I suggest, being was related to having. Further, I posit that these changes were awkwardly embraced, generating widespread yet local anxieties among various groups, such as the gentry, the religious, and the merchant class. It is the work of this dissertation to explore a group of texts—romances, saint’s lives, and ballads—which chronicle the struggle to formulate meaningful identities in a society in flux.
Mil gracias a mi esposo, Cesar. Sin ti, este documento no podría existir.
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INTRODUCTION

Of Money, Men, and Late Medieval Social Change

Yt ys all wayes sene now a days
That money makythe the man.

-from the 15th c. Reg. MS 17B XLVII

There are key moments in literary history that attract the attention of scholars not simply because they coincide with the production of great works or the lives of great writers but because they represent a paradigm shift, a real break with what has gone before. The late medieval period in England, a period characterized by sustained military conflict, plague, famine, and financial crises, is just such a moment. A complex series of social and economic changes—“the decline of serfdom, the demise of feudalism, and major progress towards capitalism” (Hatcher and Bailey 106)—was taking place, changes that necessarily affected the ways in which medieval subjects understood themselves, their place in society, and their relationships to each other. Indeed, my dissertation argues that one of these changes, the rise of a commercial economy in late medieval England, had profound and far-reaching effects on identity, as subjects scrambled to revise their notions of money and its relation to selfhood.
In the last twenty years, there has been a veritable explosion of studies that make an argument for the emergence of commercialization in medieval England. First, there have been recent authoritative investigations of the increasing monetization of the late medieval English economy. Despite early skeptics, such as M.M. Postan, who derides the use of “the rise of a money economy” as a *deus ex machina* (123), there is clear evidence of a discernible rise in a money economy in England by the end of the thirteenth century (Bolton 12 and Britnell “The Uses of Money” 17).\(^1\) As Peter Spufford cogently puts it, this was a “transition to an economy in which money was the measure of all things” (*Money and its Use* 243). This rise of a money economy was, of course, not an isolated incident, as James Bolton rightly notes that a money economy needs more than money (4). In addition to an increase in amount and circulation, there must be “parallel developments in law and legislation, in literacy and numeracy, and within the economy itself in terms of growth in population and in the number of markets and fairs” (Bolton 5-6).

This monetization, then, went hand in hand with the overall commercialization of the medieval economy, a phenomenon that has by now been well established.\(^2\) Richard Britnell argues that England became a highly commercialized society during the

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thirteenth century, a trend that did not subside even with the economic recessions of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Other studies have shown that “England in the High Middle Ages…possessed thriving industries, towns, and trades which offered substantial scope for employment, specialization, and the enhancement of the productivity of labour” (Hatcher and Bailey 129). While not a full-fledged capitalist economy, “the profound changes between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries” (An Age of Transition 43) were clearly moving in that direction. Today, many medieval economic historians feel confident that “few would now doubt the pervasive influence of money and monetary equivalences, or the impact of the market” (Galloway 23). To be sure, there were surges and declines in this commercialization process, but the ultimate outcome was the establishment of a market-centered economy that endured through the end of the middle ages and set the stage for the later commercial revolutions of English society.

While important, these structural shifts in the medieval economy are only a preliminary to the real heart of my discussion, which centers around the consequences these often-noted economic transformations had beyond the marketplace. That is, the institution of money as a measure of value for all things and the predominance of exchange relationships had more far-reaching effects than the commutation of rents from kind to cash. As Joel Kaye argues, “the accelerated use of money had ever-expanding social, economic, and intellectual consequences” (16). Kaye’s assertion, and the historical work on which it builds, opens up new areas for scholars, as we begin to delineate exactly what these consequences might have looked like. D. Vance Smith’s recent study Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary is exemplary
of this trend, as he attempts to elucidate the social and psychic impact of the day-to-day running of the medieval household.

In this dissertation, I take up the question of how a society’s “accelerated use of money” affects the formation of individual and group identity. I argue that such changes had a profound impact on how people imagined themselves and others, causing them to view identity as constructed by income and economic activity rather than strictly by birth or function. Concomitant legislation, such as the sumptuary laws, focusing on classifying persons primarily by income, offers one telling example of the ways in which being was becoming increasingly connected to having. In other areas, too, “administrators discovered that they could greatly simplify the process of assessing and collecting the dues their institutions required by replacing older, less quantifiable determinants of wealth and status with the easily gradable, numerable, and standardized determinant of monetary income from landed and moveable property” (Kaye 17).

In addition to monetary income, medieval subjects had an ever-expanding set of economic tools to use in order to forge and maintain economic selves, such as letters of credit, mortgages, partnerships, and accounts, all of which offered ways to create or reposition financial status. In addition to these concrete financial objects, there was also a wide range of ritual behaviors and gestures related to economic identity, including aristocratic largesse, pious poverty, or criminal theft of goods. Every economic act, from the simple possession of wealth to its distribution to its consumption, came to exist more

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3 The most famous of the functional models of identity, of course, would be that of the three orders: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work. While I do not believe that this was ever an accurate description of medieval society, I do believe that it represents a key imaginative construct of societal organization and identity.

4 I will discuss these laws in more detail in Chapter 1 in relation to Sir Amadace.
and more as an assertion of identity. Moreover, these increasingly important connections between what one had and what one was were disturbing ones. Indeed, they suggested that the very foundations of hierarchy and societal organization were in doubt.

As one might imagine, such changes could not take place without generating widespread anxieties as old and new economic ideologies met and clashed. As Peter Spufford understatedly puts it, “the transition from an economy in which money had had a relatively minor role to one in which it was the measure of all things was not without difficulties” (Power and Profit 65). Many of these difficulties arose because older concepts and economic forms, such as ideas of inborn distinction or the gift economy, did not cease to exist but continued as concurrent discourses with newer ideas which suggested that status was more malleable, especially when sufficient wealth was involved. The concurrence and increasing incompatibility of these ideologies generated anxieties, as medieval subjects struggled to forge identities that were necessarily riddled with the fissures caused by the clashing discourses.

While widespread, I also argue that these anxieties were decidedly local in the sense that different groups viewed these changes in various ways. For example, while both the religious and the chivalric orders felt threatened by quantitative ideas of status, the religious were able to embrace an ethic of poverty which would have effectively ruined a nobleman. Indeed, I take the examination of these different groups and their

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5 When I say “came to exist” here, I want to highlight the fact that these behaviors already existed prior to the financial shifts that I have been chronicling. However, I would argue that these gestures change in meaning as the financial context shifts around them, causing them to now take center stage as key components of identity formation.
particular anxieties as the organizing principle for my work, as I discuss the gentry, the religious, the merchant class, and the societal outsider.

In terms of methodology, I rely largely on what one might call a materialist performance model. Because many performance studies take sex as their central category of study, they often jettison materialist concerns out of fear of being labeled essentialist. However, in the case of economic performance, a currently understudied area, I suggest that close attention to material conditions offers meaningful ways to read these texts’ deployment of spending, saving, stealing, and giving as class performances. Moreover, because I want to pay close attention to the issue of anxieties, I often focus on the failures in performance, arguing that as subjects struggle to adapt to new economic models, these unsuccessful moments most clearly display both the inadequacies of past ideologies and the tensions produced by new ones. Therefore, unlike the majority of performance studies in my field, which focus on the successful or seamless performance of identity, I investigate the places where identity is ruptured or breaks down, exposing the new and often uneasy mix of old and new economic and cultural practices.

These concepts of unease, tension, and ruptures are not just theoretical constructs imposed on literature; rather, they were suggested by the texts themselves. An ungrateful dead man, a kidnapping ape, a rich poor man, and a series of malfunctioning disguises: each of these represents an oddity or an anomaly in one of the texts analyzed in this dissertation. In each case, I was initially intrigued by the fact that the anomaly always had a financial element, but as I dug deeper, I also discovered that these financial

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6 This is, of course, in sharp contrast to the folkloric tradition of the “grateful dead.” See the Grateful Dead tale group, numbers 505-508, in Stith Thompson, The Types of Folktales (Helsinki: Helsingin Liikekirjapaino Oy, 1961).
elements were also directly related to the articulation of identity in each text. For example, the ape from the Octavian romances, who serves as a bestial doppelganger for the figure of the merchant, Clement, is more than just a random figure; it is a repository for a long tradition of bestiary literature, religious commentary, and art connecting the animal with avarice. Or, in the Robin Hood ballads, we see Robin and his men assume a series of disguises which never seem to perform the primary function of disguise—to hide identity—but rather always seem to break down, significantly always during moments of financial misbehavior.

In Chapter One, “Knights and Merchants Part One: Sir Amadace, Magic Economics, and Chivalric Identity,” I begin with Auerbach’s famous model of chivalric economics, which suggests that romances seek to suppress economic and material concerns. Against this model, I read Sir Amadace, a romance which aggressively exposes some of the key economic underpinnings of chivalry by having Amadace’s knightly values come into conflict with the financial demands of his position and with the mercantile ethic espoused by the “white knight,” a dead merchant whom Amadace has aided. The central question, of course, is why Sir Amadace seems to veer so far from the course of traditional romance texts, which work assiduously to suppress the financial details of the creation and maintenance of knightly identity.

In response to this question, I argue that the romance engages in this insistent economic emphasis in order to draw attention to one of the central conundrums of late medieval chivalric identity—the necessity of being seemingly insensible to finance while maintaining the economic solvency that supports class status. Through the figure of the dead merchant, we get to explore the underside of chivalric identity and its
commodification of land, goods, and people. At the same time, however, I recognize that
the text ultimately backs away from many of these questions in its second half,
suggesting that the potential dangers of eliminating aristocratic distinction, by connecting
its maintenance with financial activities, are greater than the rewards.

Chapter Two, “Knights and Merchants Part Two: Narrative Structure and Class
Politics in the Middle English Octavian Romances,” focuses once again on the knight and
merchant dyad, a relationship I argue is essential for understanding the medieval
economic imagination. Rather than a neat oppositional pair, with the knight utterly
removed from traditional economics and the merchant completely immersed in the
financial world, I suggest that the two have a complex inter-relationship of shared
economic thought and action. Rather ironically, the complexity of this relationship may
be best revealed by a pair of texts, the Middle English Octavian romances, which attempt
to simplify the intricacies, the former by hardening divisions between the two groups and
the latter by eliding them.

More importantly, these textual strategies reveal the more intricate play at work in
the articulation of economic and social politics through their enforced patterns of
opposition or rapprochement. Specifically, each of the romances is actively involved in
the construction of merchant identity. In the case of the northern Octavian, the poet tries
to accentuate the differences between the noble characters and Clement in order to
preserve aristocratic privilege by locating all undesirable economic interests in the
character of Clement, reducing him to a simple cipher for the cash nexus. In the southern
Octavian, by contrast, the poet attempts to complicate the figure of the merchant by
offering a more nuanced portrayal of Clement and his milieu. Far from a stock profit-
centered merchant, this character is shown to have diverse motives and interests, and, at the same time, the chivalric figures are shown to engage in mercantile activity.

In Chapter Three, “The Eye of a Needle: St. Alexius and Poverty as a Language of Power,” I confront the question of why an ancient saint’s life, which focuses centrally on poverty, should have enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England just as poverty was falling out of favor as a sign of sanctity in the official Church. During this period there was an apparent end of the virulent debate of the poverty question by the secular and mendicant clergy in the fourteenth century in Pope John XXII’s bulls denying the absolute poverty of Christ. However, I suggest that the questions lingered on not only in the mendicant orders, but also in the larger population, especially as problems of the actual poor increased and as heretical groups, such as the Wycliffites, took up the banner of poverty as their own.

Rather than fading from view as an important issue, I argue that the Middle English versions of the Alexius legend demonstrate the important ways in which poverty was a contested language of power for the official Church, the increasingly devout secular populations, and heretical sects. At a time when performances of poverty, like barefoot preaching and the wearing of russet, seemed more suspect, this tale of a stubborn ascetic who rejects the world for poverty took on new urgency and significance, becoming a contested ground for contemporary anxieties about money, sanctity, and orthodoxy.

Although trying to identify a historical figure as the “real” Robin Hood has largely fallen out of favor in recent years, much recent Robin Hood criticism still works very hard to pin the outlaw down in some way. In one of the most important strands of
this movement, there has been an ongoing attempt to associate these late medieval outlaw ballads with a specific interest group or class. In Chapter Four, “The Late Medieval Robin Hood Ballads: Radical Economics Revisited,” I argue that this impulse may end up masking what is most radical about the economic politics of the figure of Robin Hood: the ways in which he functions, through his variability and instability, as a site of resistance to restrictive identity positions.

Specifically, I argue that Robin, and sometimes Little John, in the already unstable identity of yeoman, assume other supposedly more stable identities, such as potter or knight through some type of disguise. However, rather than engaging in seamless performances, they offer deliberately bad ones, drawing attention to the failure of their disguises. More importantly, these failures are always economic in nature, as when Robin refuses to accept a bounty although he is a bounty hunter or when he undervalues his merchandise even though he is in the guise of a vendor. I argue that these failures ultimately serve to critique not only the systemic problems of medieval economic structures but more importantly the ways in which these systems position or interpellate subjects through their economic activities. That is, Robin denies the call to take up his appropriate economic position within the system (or misrecognize himself in Althusser’s formulation), thus drawing attention to the constructed nature and limitations of each position. This chapter also serves as the conclusion to my dissertation because I suggest that the Robin Hood ballads talk back to many of the economic models offered in the previous chapters, taking on chivalric, religious, and merchant identity concerns.

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Despite the brilliance of a few studies, such as D. Vance Smith’s *Arts of Possession*, there is a paucity of criticism that attempts to address the relationship between the economic shifts in late medieval society and the cultural productions that accompanied them. However, with the new economic histories being written, histories that emphasize the commercialized nature of late medieval England, it behooves us as scholars to pay more attention to what effects such a change might have had on a population that had until recently lived under very different socioeconomic structures. At the least, we will come away with a more profound and complete understanding of the history, culture, and people of late medieval England. At best, investigating the origins of our own financial and cultural logic will help us better understand the ways in which our own lives are shaped by economics, something which has become an invisible, if omnipresent, activity under late capitalism.
CHAPTER 1

KNIGHTS AND MERCHANTS PART ONE: SIR AMADACE, MAGIC ECONOMICS, AND CHIVALRIC IDENTITY

“Money, money, money, money, money”

-Introduction to The Apprentice theme song

I.

Sir Amadace appears in a household miscellany belonging to the Ireland family, which contains both a series of romances and a set of detailed economic and legal manorial records pertaining to Hale Hall. More than one hundred years ago, John Robson, commenting on the manuscript, indignantly observed, “we ascertain the period when the parchment book, instead of recounting the wonderful feasts of King Arthur and his knights, became a record of the squabbles of alewives and tolls upon pigs” (xli-xlii). Clearly, for Robson, the Ireland collection takes a social downturn as it moves from the world of romance to the world of the workaday. After all, what do poems celebrating the highest expression of chivalric values have to do with the quotidian world of petty financial squabbles and the exaction of tolls? We might allow Robson’s nineteenth-century elitism to carry the day and answer absolutely nothing if not for the fact that Sir Amadace, one of the three chivalric romances in the manuscript, presents the reader with a similarly jarring juxtaposition of finance and romance.
In fact, this juxtaposition in the poem has been the central area of contention, whether recognized as such or not, for most critics, causing many to see the romance as “failed” because of a lack of thematic or stylistic unity. In a general vein, Laura Hibbard discusses the way the tale slips from humor to didacticism and from romance to morality tale (73-74). However, given the episodic structure of much romance and its uneven artistic practice, Sir Amadace would hardly seem unique in this respect. Edward Foster, more perspicaciously in my view, refines the more general unity hypothesis and suggests that the tale suffers from an “ambiguity of its ideal” because “the poem uses much of the idealistic paraphernalia of conventional romance in the exposition of an ideal that sometimes seems merely materialistic” (111). So, the problem is not one of unity in general but of the unity of the poem’s financial ethos in particular.

Part of the critics’ difficulty in judging Sir Amadace stems from the nature of chivalric literature itself. Long ago, Erich Auerbach established that the principal mechanism operative in chivalric self-portrayal (i.e. romance) is suppression. Specifically, he argues that “the geographical, economic, and social conditions” of romance, and thus chivalry, are never explained but obfuscated in order to allow knighthood to portray itself as a thing apart rather than a thing of the world (133). For romance, this means that while wealth is certainly present in chivalric texts, the reader

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1 In his *Middle English Literature*, J.A.W. Bennett, too, suggests that the poem’s material focus makes it unsuitable to modern ideas of the romantic (165).

2 While Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* draws its examples principally from the twelfth century French romances of Chretien de Troyes, he viewed his interpretive claims on a much grander scale. I, too, think a strong argument can be made for applying his thesis to later periods given the heavy borrowing from French romance by English redactors and authors, the existence of a strong set of core chivalric values and practices, and the repetition of these values in the body of chivalric literature as a whole.
rarely becomes privy to any specific financial details surrounding sources, accrual methods, or dollar amounts. Therefore, early critics of the poem are, in disdainfully noting the work’s hyperawareness of economics, simply judging Sir Amadace by the rules that chivalric literature has established for itself and finding it wanting.

I want to be clear here that I am not suggesting that other romances do not have financial elements—elements that I would argue become more highly developed toward the end of the fourteenth century—however, this poem lends itself to an interpretation of exchange and economy on a very literal level, in a way that most other romance narratives do not. Other narratives do, of course, discuss money but only in generalized ways. For example, Sir Launfal, an interesting economic tale in its own right, speaks of “wealth” and “gifts” but never in concrete amounts. Other narratives, such as Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, certainly deal with exchange but not with Sir Amadace’s tenacious grasp on monetary exactitude, reciprocity, and equality. In fact, the poem is highly unusual among its fellow romances in its direct and consistent confrontations with economic matters.

In order to get a better sense of why Sir Amadace arouses such strong critical responses and specifically how it differs from more typical romance offerings, let’s turn briefly to a summary of the main events in the poem. The first half of the story, focusing on didactic elements, begins as Amadace finds himself in financial crisis. Although both

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3 I would include here the Northern Octavian as a very important exception, as some of the arguments advanced by D. Vance Smith in Arts of Possession make clear, especially in its insistent emphases on a series of exchanges of money for chivalric objects and its use of the amount of forty pounds, which Smith rightly identifies as a marker of chivalric identity.

4 This emphasis on monetary amounts can be directly related to the late medieval economic shifts, as Diana Wood argues that “at all levels of society, to a greater or lesser degree, the development of the monetized economy and the consciousness of numbers were inseparable” (Medieval Economic Thought 12).
manuscript versions are acephalous, there seems to be little doubt that Amadace has almost bankrupted himself through liberal spending despite his comfortable £300 per annum income. Rather than learning to live more frugally, Amadace, with his last £40 and a small retinue, abandons his home before his poverty becomes evident. While traveling, he comes upon a chapel where a woman is keeping vigil over the rotting body of her merchant husband, a debtor like Amadace, who cannot be buried until a £30 debt is paid. Amadace ends up not only paying the man’s debt but also his burial costs with his last remaining funds. Destitute, Amadace dismisses his remaining servants and goes off into the forest alone. Up to this point, the focus seems clearly placed on the dangers of reckless spending. However, it is here, as I will argue, that a second tale begins. The second half of the story more closely resembles a traditional romance plot with magic, tournaments, and beautiful princesses. In the forest, Amadace meets a figure dressed as a white knight, who offers a contract in which he provides financial support so that Amadace can attend a nearby tournament and win fame and fortune in return for half of all profits. Amadace, of course, wins lands, goods, the hand of a beautiful princess, and a kingdom. A year later, after Amadace has married the princess and had a child, the white knight comes to claim his half of the profits. Rather than accept the proffered riches and lands, the white knight insists on a literal half of Amadace’s wife and child to settle the debt. To keep his word, Amadace is about to cut his family in half when the white knight relents, reveals that he is the spirit of the merchant Amadace had helped, and the tension of the moment dissipates, leading to a happily ever after finale.

Unlike Auerbach’s rather subtle example of the toiling maidens in Chretien’s Yvain, then, Sir Amadace offers a rather blatant and thus jarring account of the ways in
which chivalry and finance are intimately connected. Given its focus on debts, financial contracts, and specific monetary amounts, it would seem that the critics are correct in viewing *Sir Amadace* as an oddity among romance texts in its financial sensibilities. For example, we are given very specific information on how much Amadace earns yearly, how much he has remaining in funds, how much he spends on individual items, and the like. However, simply noting the text’s non-conformity to traditional models fails to engage some far more interesting and productive questions, principally why the poem chooses not to engage in standard practices of economic suppression. I choose the word standard here purposefully because, in the final analysis, I believe that suppression is the text’s ultimate mode.

More recent critics, such as James Simpson and Ad Putter, have begun to answer this question of the text’s unusual financial dynamics by shifting the focus to this poem’s complex relations to late medieval England’s economic and social milieu. In the most recent, and in my view the best, criticism of *Sir Amadace*, James Simpson invokes Auerbach’s suppression schematic only to suggest that the poem rejects it, arguing that “a more reflective reading reveals a confession of the intimate connection between knighthood and merchants,” a connection which Simpson characterizes as traumatic and shameful for the chivalric classes (269). Ad Putter’s study, on the other hand, chooses to view the text as articulating a positive relationship between Amadace and the dead merchant, ultimately embedding them both within a humanistic Christian framework, suggesting that “in the poet’s final analysis, all gifts are heaven-sent, [so] the poem ends with a thanksgiving to God, who gives and forgives so that Amadace and the White Knight may give and forgive each other, and both be better off for it” (394). Thus, where
Simpson focuses on the tensions in the relationship of the merchant and Amadace, Putter reads the text as creating a new and positive alliance between the two groups. While both of these critics offer useful readings of the merchant/knight conflict, I would like to shift the attention to the conflicted nature of chivalric identity itself. As I will discuss in more detail in the chapter on merchants, I believe that a false ideological dichotomy is often assumed between merchants and other groups, often preventing us from seeing the inherent financial dynamics within such groups as the knighthood and the religious, instead reading any economic sentiment as a manifestation of merchant sensibility.

I would like to suggest, instead, that there is a somewhat different purpose in the construction and ethos of the romance, and that is to trace the social and economic tensions inherent in the late medieval gentry’s life. Indeed, it is imperative to note that this poem’s focus on financial areas is not a naïve one, say of a person of another class viewing the gentry from the outside. Rather, I would argue that the poem offers an insider’s view into the often obfuscated economic foundations of chivalric identity by tracing the difficulties inherent in being true to the ideals of knighthood while maintaining economic solvency.\(^5\) In order to do this, I suggest that the poem offers a doubled narrative—a romance embedded within a morality tale—in order to draw attention to these inconsistencies on a structural as well as thematic level. In my view, then, far from being the artistically uneven composition alleged by early criticism, Sir Amadace is a carefully arranged work designed to reveal the complex financial foundations of chivalric identity.

\(^5\) D. Vance Smith makes a similar argument about these types of financial anxieties in Winner and Waster in Chapter 3 of Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary.
II.

In order to better understand the poem’s relationship to gentry life and struggles, we might usefully turn to the actual gentry family which owned the manuscript—the Irelands of Hale. In most ways, the Ireland family was a rather typical gentry family of some importance in the North. Adam Ireland married the heiress of Hale Hall, Avena Holland, in 1308 and the male issue of the Ireland family possessed the holdings up to the seventeenth century (Ireland-Blackburne 5-6). The medieval Irelands included Adam Ireland (1308), John’es de Hibernia (1350), David de Ireland, and Sir John de Ireland (1401), and William Irelande (1413), the family member who possessed our manuscript (Ireland-Blackburne 56).

The Irelands were responsible, as all gentry families would have been, for the maintenance of their lands and fortunes. Much of their success depended on having a good head for business to keep the manor and attached properties running smoothly. In addition, as lords of Hale manor, the Irelands were in charge not only of their lands but also of the local court which heard cases relating to residents’ disputes, such as Robson’s “squabbling alewives.” In fact, the second half of the manuscript is devoted solely to the court’s proceedings and other family business documents. Many of these business references give detailed financial information as to fine amounts, value of livestock, and toll amounts paid (Ireland-Blackburne 72). Historians of the medieval gentry document

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6 The occupation of Hale Hall by the Irelands is “distinctly traceable as far back as 1190” (Ireland-Blackburne 3).

7 Dates refer to the year in which the heir took possession of the family’s property and holdings, including Hale Hall.

8 “This family, which had received knighthood in the previous generation, preserved three romances (Awntyrs off Arthure, Sir Amadace, and Avowyng of Arthur) in a coarse parchment manuscript bound between wooden covers, along with a collection of town and manor records” (Ramsey 209).
the impressive amount of knowledge about mundane matters that even warrior knights had about prices and the running of their estates (Kirby 93). The dual use of the book—as both a source of entertainment and as a record of their stewardship—reflects the complexity of the lives of the gentry class in late medieval England. Theirs was not simply a life of leisure, listening to romances and engaging in other polite pursuits, but one also of significant financial and political responsibility.

D. Vance Smith has recently taken up the intersections between the differing discursive domains of finance and romance in his *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary*. He argues convincingly that the families and households themselves are inextricably bound up in the economic domain, and that records like those in the Ireland manuscript show how these households were involved in “the complex dialectics of the art of possession, the techniques of accumulation, expenditure, consumption, and exchange” (9). ⁹ Given the intricacy of their lives and identifications, it is not a stretch to suggest that the Irelands might have viewed their family manuscript—in its very makeup—as reflecting the often disparate parts of their lives, both the idealistic class behaviors typified in the chivalric romances and the realities of financial livelihood. Indeed, they might have found a poem like *Sir Amadace* pertinent in that it attempts to trace out, rather than ignore or paper over, the difficulties in sometimes reconciling chivalric ideals which eschew financial considerations with the realities of existence and economic livelihood. At the same time, they would have been keenly

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⁹ Of course, Smith is referring to manuscripts which combine financial treatises with imaginative literature, but I feel that his point holds up in connection with this manuscript because it clearly displays an interest in both household management and literature (15).
aware of the ways in which ignoring this connection was a necessary class fiction, a part of what differentiated them from lesser persons.

On one side of this conflict, we have the very real existence of a chivalric class with ideals and sets of behaviors meant to differentiate and validate their position and privileges. Romances often occupy an important position in this process, serving to chronicle the exploits of knights. Indeed, Auerbach’s classic definition asserts that “a self-portrayal of feudal knighthood with its mores and ideals is the fundamental purpose of the courtly romance” (131). As the gentry were inheritors of a certain set of cultural traditions stemming from chivalric practice, it is not unusual that a gentry family like the Irelands would want to read chivalric romances in their leisure time. As Lee Ramsey suggests, “the stories that had once appealed to the nobility and the functionaries of the larger courts were now becoming the property of country families and the middle classes with their aspirations of dignity and courtliness” (Ramsey 209). In some ways, these documents served to describe them and their values as members of a certain class.

The force of this class ideal persisted throughout late medieval England despite the waning of military service and the expansion of the gentry class to include non-knights. Indeed, while official knights were only one segment of the gentry and even these knights were no longer all officially military, the squires and gentlemen who made up the rest of the class were just as influenced by the models of knighthood. Christine Carpenter writes,

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10 The Ireland family possessing the estate had both knights and non-knights, but the chivalric connection always seems clear. For example, the William of Ireland who possessed our manuscript is never referred to as a knight, but in many documents, he is “Willielmo Irland filio Johannis Irland militis” (William Ireland, son of John Ireland, knight). For example, see Ireland-Blackburne, Hale Hall, 67.
Landowners as a body, whether knighted or not, had continued to see themselves as the repository of the knightly virtues throughout the period in which knighthood itself was in decline. Military prowess, even if no longer universally indicated by knightly rank, remained the spiritual raison d’être of the landed class for many centuries to come and these were qualities that were still associated in the landowning psyche with the knightly caste. (Locality and Polity 49)

What Carpenter is suggesting is that even lacking the formal ceremony or the functional occupation of knight, the gentry class identified with the ethos of chivalric practice.¹¹ A large part of their identity, then, was based on the centrality of and adherence to codes propagated by the initially military caste of knight.¹²

Perhaps the most useful way to think about this idea of chivalric identity so central to the late medieval gentry is as the aggregate of ideals—largesse, courtesy, prowess, loyalty—espoused in the contemporary literature of romance, chivalric handbooks, such as The Book of Chivalry of Geffroi de Charny and Ramon Lull’s Book of Knighthood and Chivalry, and the lived practice of its members. While we should be careful about generalizations, Richard Kaeuper convincingly argues that “there was probably—within flexible limits—a fairly common chivalric practice over centuries” (“Chivalry: Fantasy and Fear” 63). This does not mean that there was an ironclad

¹¹ This idea is echoed by other scholars, such as Michael Hicks, who supports Carpenter: “Nobility and gentry were members of the English aristocracy: they shared the same lifestyle, education, outlook, and aspirations” (Bastard Feudalism 8).

¹² Maurice Keen writes, “Medieval writers used the term chivalry in three distinct but related ways: great deeds done with edged weapons; the body of men who did those deeds (meaning all those in one particular location or even all knights considered as an ‘order’ in society); and, more broadly, the code animating such men, their ideals and their ideal practices” (Chivalry 63). I am here writing of both the body of men—official and non-official and the code of values.
agreement on all the possible meanings and ideals of chivalric practice, but it suggests that there were important enduring shared beliefs.\textsuperscript{13}

Having said that, we can turn to one of these manuals for clues as to what connections may have existed between chivalric practice and finance. Since Richard Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy suggest that the \textit{Book of Chivalry} of Geoffroi de Charny “epitomized knighthood in the 14\textsuperscript{th} century for those on both sides of Channel” (3), we might usefully begin there. Charny suggests that material gain is a factor in warfare and martial exercise, but prowess should be the true focus of a knight’s energy (93, 95). These sometimes conflicting obligations are summed up by Geffroi in the following way,

And one ought instead to be wary of the booty which results in the loss of honor, life, and possessions. In this vocation one should therefore set one’s heart and mind on winning honor, which endures forever, rather than on winning profit and booty, which can be lost in a single hour. (99)

In a way that seems strikingly consistent with Auerbach’s readings of medieval romances, Geffroi suggests that financial interest should be deflected or subsumed in favor of behavioral ideals. Profit is practically set up to be at odds with the winning of honor, which he feels should be the true motivation of any soldier.

In fact, a focus on wealth can be antithetical to the performance of chivalry because of its dangerous effect on the mindset of the warrior. Geffroi writes,

You should not care about amassing great wealth, for the more worldly goods a man acquires, the more reluctant he is to die and the greater his fear of death; and the more honor a man gains, the less he fears to die, for his worth and honor will always remain, and the worldly goods will disappear. (117)

\textsuperscript{13} Andy King argues that these values were of great importance to English knights despite the lack of a chivalric manual in English until Caxton (23).
Again, he opposes the two terms, honor and goods, suggesting an antithetical relationship. However, Geffroi is practical enough to admit that that wealth is necessary to the chivalric mode of living, so he suggests a way in which it might be accrued. I refer to this method, one of the preferred of romance texts as well, as “magic economics.” In essence, he insists that those knights who focus on reputation and the pursuit of honor through prowess will ultimately acquire wealth (117). Hundreds of romance texts chronicle this strategy of a young knight who has lands, princesses, and goods fall into his hands not because he sought them but because he sought only honor.

While the majority of chivalric ideals set themselves up as, at the least, antagonistic to financial matters, largesse is the unique virtue in the knightly code that explicitly involves money. Again, the chivalric authors of the period have a complex and conflicted view of how economics works in chivalric life. The Chandos Herald, writing of the chivalric paragon the Black Prince, says: Qui fu le parfite racine / De tout honour et de noblece / De sens, de valour et largece [He who was the perfect root of all honor and nobility; of sense, of valor, and largesse] (ll. 60-62). Among his many values, largesse figures largely in a practical sense, as he gives liberally to his followers throughout their many campaigns in France. Of course, to have military success, one needed to pay for the soldiers. However, this largesse of the prince seems to stem not from a practical money manager but from his character, one unique to the chivalric class: “De sa volonte noble et france/Prist la doctrine de largece” [from his generous and open will, he took the doctrine of largesse] (ll.74-75). Largesse, then, rather than being connected with purely financial maintenance relationships is seen as the manifestation of
a free and generous nature. Again, we see the move to deflect the attention to issues of behavioral ideals rather than financial foundations for actions and relationships.

Even when we turn to that most obvious financial target of chivalric life—booty—we encounter a complex web of rhetoric and motivations. Booty and prizes, usually won at the expense of other knightly competitors, offered tempting opportunities for augmenting one’s financial position. In contrast to the accounts of the Chandos Herald or Geffroi de Charny, Keen’s reading of Richard II’s war ordinances paint a somewhat more balanced picture of ideals and realities. To be sure, honor is still an important player, but finance moves up to take a key place. The soldiers that can be constructed from the ordinances are savvy players who have a desire for securing their best interests even when that means compromising chivalric values. Mechanisms were built into the ordinances to manage these practical matters. The cry of “havoc” is a notable example, where the soldiers need to hold the line until this cry signals to everyone that they can break away and start looking for their own personal profit (“Richard II’s Ordinances of War of 1385” 43). The most telling aspect of the centrality of finance is the length of the ordinances themselves. Keen notes that the ordinances discussing prisoners and ransoms are “among the longest, most detailed and most complicated” (“Richard II’s Ordinances of War of 1385” 43). However, even Keen notes that there is a dual motive, “the quest for reputation, and the desire for profit” (“Richard II’s Ordinances of War of 1385” 37) involved, and even here, it cannot be reduced to pure profit-seeking.

As we can see even from these few examples, the relationship between economics and chivalry was a fraught one, characterized for the most part by a denial of the integral
relationship between the two areas. While money was clearly needed in order to maintain an honorable lifestyle and participate in knightly activities, there seems to be a deep aversion in the chivalric literature, both romances and handbooks, to suggesting that wealth is any way what makes one a knight or characterizes or comprises a significant amount of one’s activity. Rather, wealth becomes something which comes naturally to those who focus on the appropriate class behaviors, an effect rather than a cause of class status. However, Charny’s hesitations and the war ordinances of Richard II suggest that the self-representation advanced in chivalric literature buries a more foundational connection, suppressing as do Auerbach’s romances the financial element of chivalric identity.

If on the one side of this conflict we have a chivalry attempting to promote an ideology of financial disconnect, on the other side we have seen that the gentry had very real and significant responsibilities for maintaining their own financial livelihoods as well as those who depended on them. In addition, key changes in late medieval England brought money to the forefront of status politics for the gentry and others, profoundly affecting the ways people viewed themselves and others, specifically sumptuary laws and poll tax regulations, which suggested social status was far more connected to monetary level rather than functional activity. The 1363 Statute on Diet and Apparel is one of a long series of statutes known collectively as sumptuary laws. These laws attempt to limit the external markers of the different estates in order to maintain the idealized hierarchy of classes in medieval society, which is threatened by rapid social and economic changes.

In order to do this, the statute separates people by income and estate level. For instance, esquires and other gentlemen who earned less than £100 annually would be permitted to
use cloth worth four and a half marks and some types of fur (Statutes of the Realm 380-381). Through this logic, one should be able to identify different groups clearly.

This clarity is complicated, however, by the fact that an increase in the amount of money possessed could level the playing field among different social groups. For example, a merchant with possessions of £500 annually was entitled to the same privileges as an esquire with £100 (Statutes of the Realm 381). To be sure, there are still differentiating markers which do not depend purely on amounts. For example, merchants are described as possessing “goods and chattels,” while knights or gentlemen are possessed of “lands and rents” (Statutes of the Realm 381). This subtle distinction tries to place the two groups into different social classes, one the inheritor of landed wealth and the other possessed of cash and goods. However, of the competing economic and class markers here, the move seems to be inexorably toward the dominance of economic markers. The ultimate message seems to be that a certain amount of wealth equalizes status.

Another bureaucratic instrument adding to this sense was the poll tax. For example, the Poll Tax of 1379 has been described by Strohm as “a very finely calibrated estimation of the estates and occupations by their condition or ability to pay” (Strohm 7). As Strohm suggests, “likening of the conditions of the various estates could only lessen the sense of their fundamental difference” (Strohm 8). Again, we have the sense that bringing money into the picture in concert with status, class, or identity muddies clear distinctions, even suggesting that those distinctions are no greater than the amount of money in one’s possession. We could go on and discuss the 1415 Statute of Additions and other laws in this same context, but the conclusion is already clear. Late medieval
England is advancing laws and taxes which suggest that status is economic rather than behavioral. Max Weber views such a scenario with trepidation, suggesting that “if mere economic acquisition and naked economic power still bearing the stigma of its extra-status origin could bestow upon anyone who has won it the same honor as those who are interested in status by virtue of style of life claim for themselves, the status order would be threatened at its very root” (Weber 192).

These changes were probably felt even more acutely as just such threats because they were taking place at the very moment that the knightly class was losing a sense of itself militarily, as fewer and fewer gentry actually take up military service and some avoid even the title of knight because of the sometimes onerous financial obligations attached. In a society which is starting to change its perceptions about what creates status or identity, we might view Carpenter’s assertion that chivalry was just as important for late medieval gentry as ever with some skepticism. However, that would assume that there was complete comfort with the idea of fuzzier class distinctions and an unabashed embrace of a money culture.

To the contrary, I would argue that the very opposite is the case. Although I don’t wish to belabor the point, I want to be clear about how my reading of these now very familiar statutes and taxes differs from that typically advanced. Certainly, I agree that the existence of such codes and laws indicates an anxiety about class and identity no matter the actual enforcement rate or efficacy. However, I would like to add that the very anxiety that these laws are designed to fix is compounded by the focus on money and its function as indicator of status. That is, there is one type of discomfort bred by the thought that a commoner might be mistaken for a knight because of a too rich garment,
but there is a potentially more dangerous and profound worry attached to the idea that the only difference between classes is a purely monetary one. I would argue that it is this very anxiety that keeps Sir Amadace from being purely a condemnation of a hypocritical financial myth because the gentry did have an investment in the maintenance of real and significant class difference. Rather, the poem offers a complex exploration of the life of a gentry often trapped between the dueling demands of its financial exigencies and necessary class fictions.

III.

Before the poem begins, we understand that Amadace has attained an important place in his chivalric community through lavish feasting and generous gift-giving. The first half of the poem recounts Amadace’s desperate attempts to maintain his position in the face of increasingly grim financial circumstances. The opening lines of the text depict Amadace and his steward in consultation over the knight’s financial maladies. In light of Amadace’s impending bankruptcy, the steward suggests that:

Sir, ye awe wele more  
Thenne ye may of your londus rere  
In faythe this sevyn yere,  
Quoso may best, furste ye mun pray,  
Abyde yo till anothir day.  
And parte your cowrte in sere;  
And putte away full mony of your men;  
And halde butte on, quere ye hald ten. (ll. 4-11)

[Sir, you owe a lot more than you can raise from your lands in seven years. You must ask the creditor who best can to put off your payment until another day. And divide your court, put away many of your men, and keep only one where you had ten before]

In effect, the steward suggests that Amadace ask for debt relief and economize by reducing his court. What seems like perfectly logical advice, however, is
incomprehensible to Amadace, who is portrayed as the ideal knight unconcerned with vulgar financial matters. To cut expenses would mean to put a rein on one of the chief knightly virtues: largesse. To openly ask for time to pay debts would be to expose one’s failure to maintain one’s expected lifestyle. Both would represent an intolerable rupture in the identity that Amadace has so carefully crafted through his extensive gift-giving and extravagant court. He is in very important ways a character out of his element, an ideal romance knight trapped in a prosaic tale of financial ruin.

Amadace’s predicament would have been a familiar one to any late medieval landowner. The gentry, caught between the opposing poles of fiscal responsibility and conspicuous display, often found themselves in situations similar to Amadace’s. Christine Carpenter, in her extensive work on one such gentry family, notes that “the Stonors seem to have had a tendency to overreach themselves financially” (“The Stonor Circle in the Fifteenth Century” 189). S.J.A Payling, too, in his essay on Sir John Gra, cites “apparent extravagance” as the reason why Gra was not able to parlay his assets into a better career (119). The necessity for the “extravagance” and “overreaching,” which caused the financial embarrassment of so many gentry families, is related to the interconnections of identity, honor, and the performance of wealth.

Because of its ubiquity and the often reductive readings of honor offered by early scholars, honor as a key category is often ignored. However, recent work by scholars such as Lee Patterson and Susan Crane is starting to reassert honor’s importance. Lee Patterson, for example, provides an illuminating reading of the Scrope-Grosvenor arms dispute, suggesting that the possession of a coat of arms was linked to the honor of the family, an honor connected to their very identity, and that the defense of this honor was
only part of a never-ending series of performances by which chivalry sought to sustain itself.¹⁴ Susan Crane, too, has argued that “late medieval courtiers constitute themselves especially by their staging of their distinctiveness: their feasts, tournaments, entries, and weddings define their particular elite splendor, generosity, power, and lineage” (Performance 2). She goes on to specifically link these performances with honor by suggesting that “for late medieval courtiers, the category of honor is large and central, encompassing not just courage for men and chasteness for women, but many behaviors relative to personal comportment and social standing, everything indeed that distinguishes courtly status from vulgar” (Performance 4). Building on these arguments, I would like to suggest that honor is perhaps best understood in a chivalric context as the descriptor used to indicate successful performances of knightly identity.

The literature of chivalry, in a fairly overt manner, offers honor as a type of framework for measuring the successful performance of its tenets. All properly knightly behaviors are honorable, and honor serves as the almost exclusive evaluation for behavior. In his handbook for knights, Geffroi de Charny tellingly writes of chivalry, “all such matters are honorable, although some are honorable enough, others more honorable on an ascending scale up to the most honorable of all” (85). The repetition of “honorable” alone is compelling, especially as this is just the first paragraph of a long treatise in which honor serves as the exclusive measure for rightness of conduct. And far from being the exaggerated fancy of a single author, a quick perusal of romances, male conduct literature, and chivalric treatises assures that honor, and its opposite number shame, loom large in any discussion of knightly conduct. In his work on Thomas Gray’s

Scalacronica, Andy King goes so far as to suggest the work posits an “equation of chivalry with honor” (32).

Honor and shame are especially important markers because of their connection with identity and performance. In the case of chivalry, largesse, courtesy, martial prowess, and hospitality—just to name a few knightly virtues—cannot be understood outside of the context of honor and shame. One gives to accrue honor, one fights to accrue honor, and one is hospitable to accrue honor. To not engage (or maybe not engage in the “right” way) in these honorable behaviors would be to shame oneself, a daunting prospect given the repercussions. The repercussions are so great because the honor continuum and one’s place on it are crucial to both individual and group identity. Chivalric behaviors, whether martial or courteous, are practiced by knights as a form of self-representation, and they invest much energy and money in the public performance of their values. Honor and shame are, in effect, byproducts of the chivalric process, indicating whether the performance of the desired behavior has been successful or not. At some basic level, then, the possession of honor, in a chivalric context, means “I am a knight.” Without honor, one does not exist in a sense, leaving a void or a ruptured, damaged identity, an idea explored in depth in Sir Amadace.

The more we learn about medieval society, the more we see that ideas of honor are not simply vague ideals but are an essential part of the way in which the gentry viewed themselves and were viewed by others. Christine Carpenter has done some of the best and most innovative work on the gentry in medieval England. On the subject of honor, she writes,
This interpenetration of the public and private worlds of the gentry lies at the heart of the form and function of the local network. Thus, if a family failed to hold up its head locally or was unable to persuade its kin and neighbors to stand behind it, the family business risked assault from all sides. A gentry family’s concern for its local standing, its worship, is a constant thread running through the letters. (“The Stonor Circle” 192).15

Here, we can see that the possession of worship or honor is at the heart of status/identity issues, and that the failure to properly perform one’s expected role had potentially disastrous consequences.16

Of course, many studies, including those by Patterson and Crane discussed above, have offered valuable insights into the chivalry/performance connection; however, I would argue that there is more work to be done on this subject, especially in the heretofore under-described realm of chivalric economic performance. In saying this, I certainly do not suggest that chivalric identity is limited to the simple possession or lack thereof of money, although that is indeed more important than has been thought. Rather, I am referring to the surprising dominance of economic behaviors—circulation of goods, the spending of money, and the use of financial documents—in forming knightly identities, and the concurrent reluctance to recognize these behaviors as a basis for said identity.

The Amadace poet, however, seems to revel in just these types of connections and takes every opportunity to foreground Sir Amadace’s economic performance of chivalric identity. At the poem’s start, he is, like most members of the late medieval gentry, 

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15 See particularly letters 21, 98, 118, and 58. Also, see Christine Carpenter, The Armburgh Papers: The Brokeholes Inheritance in Warwickshire: Hertfordshire and Essex c. 1417-c. 1453 (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), especially pages 48 and 54 on the importance of honor and reputation.

16 See especially letters 75, 76, 99, 221, 242, 298, and 299 for worries about “worship.”
working from a set social script where the only appropriate economic behaviors revolve around disinterested expenditure and consumption, not measured financial reasoning. Therefore, despite his harsh financial straits, Amadace refuses to even entertain the notion of saving himself through practical financial maneuvers. He insists that he “myghte lung spare / Or all these godus qwitte ware, / And have noghte to spend” [might save for a long time before all of these accounts were settled and have nothing to spend] (ll. 13-15). Amadace knows that economizing would mean a necessary break from spending, something he is not willing, and, I would even argue, not capable of doing. This inability to imagine economizing is explicitly linked in the narrative to his identity, more specifically to the economic identity, which he has created. He says that if he did not spend, he would dwell:

    Bothe in hething and in scorne—
    And I am so wele kennit.
    And men full fast wold ware me,
    That of thayre godus hade bynne so fre,
    That I have hade in honed. (ll. 17-21)

[in contempt and scorn, and I am so well known. And men would be suspicious of me who before were generous with their goods, which I have had in my hands]

His spending is clearly connected to his reputation and identity in the community. If he stops spending, he will be shamed and the men with whom he has engaged in gifting will hold him in suspicion because of his inability to engage in exchange. This inability to exchange would create a rupture in his carefully presented identity. In an important sense, he would no longer exist in his community because he would be unable to take part in the necessary economic activities required of his class. He would no longer be Sir Amadace.
This problem of exchange and kinship networks was one with which a gentry family such as the Irelands might very well identify. One common factor of gentry life was the complex ties holding them together in groups or affinities. Theirs were large, flexible networks of relationships built on business, friendship, and many times, eventually, cousinage (marriages between families in circle) (“The Stonor Circle” 181-182). Looking through the business documents in the Ireland manuscript, one must be struck by the interconnection of the gentry. Most all official transactions have long lists of witnesses to the agreements, many of the names being repeated various times, suggesting an ongoing connection between the gentry families. For example, on a rental agreement that William makes with a lessee, we have the names of “John de Stanley, Knt., Richard de Molineux, Knt., Radulph de Langton, Knt., Henry Blundell, Henry Dickfield, Thomas Ireland, and others,” some of whom come from very prominent and well-connected families in the North (Ireland-Blackburne 88).

Part of the glue that held these networks together was the practice of gifting, a practice that was often portrayed as a more appropriate and financially disinterested exchange than the marketplace. Felicity Heal discusses the economic links explicitly created by gifting in her essay “Reciprocity and Exchange in the Late Medieval Household.” She writes, “in this culture the maintenance of reputation demanded the display of good lordship and of largesse, the most material forms of that quality of magnanimity that the Aristotelian tradition placed at the heart of true aristocracy” (180). As she suggests, the gift economy is not a one way street, but requires movement to sustain itself (186). Amadace, by not being able to reciprocate gifts, would stop the
movement and throw a wrench into the complex machine of social and economic relationships dependent on its functioning.

Amadace is acutely aware of the pressures of his situation, and he understands what fate awaits him if he is found out by his peers. The fear of shame stemming from a revelation of his true economic status ultimately forces Amadace to flee as the only hope for salvaging his reputation. In order to understand how crucial Amadace’s flight is in terms of identity, we might consider other romance heroes who flee after receiving a crushing and shameful blow. Yvain, after being publicly disgraced by Laudine’s messenger, runs off aimlessly into the woods, where he lives like an animal until he recovers his senses and slowly regains his reputation. Sir Orfeo, too, runs off to the woods after his wife is spirited away by fairies, while he and his men stand impotent. Sir Launfal, having been passed over by the king’s largesse, leaves Arthur’s court because he can no longer afford to stay there. Each of these instances intimately connects a failure of each man to live up to the code of chivalry: Yvain, to be faithful to his love; Orfeo, to defend and protect his innocent wife; Launfal, to live in the style which would allow him to maintain face.

Each of the men runs away, and most of them strategically plan their exit. Noah Guynn’s comments on shame and its relationship to identity offer a useful insight into this behavior. He suggests “shame is…the conscious or unconscious awareness of the impossibility of subjective or narrative mastery” (113). Using the language of performance, we might reread his comment as shame results when the performance fails. When Orfeo fails as the protective husband, Yvain fails as the warrior, or Amadace as the gifting partner, each fails to perform his role adequately. However, Amadace is able to
maintain his failure as a secret from those outside his household, and, in an attempt to maintain “narrative mastery” and thus his honor, takes charge of the situation and puts his finances in order and plans an elaborate sendoff for himself.

In her roughly contemporary *Le livre de l’advision Cristine*, Christine de Pizan reinforces this need for narrative mastery in the maintenance of class fictions. She offers a poignant account of the significance of appearances and the ways in which they cover that which the aristocracy seeks to hide, noting that there is work behind the façade:

Et avec ce cuides tu point, chiere maistresse, que grevast a mon cuer la charge de la paour que on s’apperceust de mes affaires et le soussi que a l’estat n’apparust a ceulz dehors ne aux voisins le decheement de ce maleureux estat venu de mes predecesseurs, non pas de moy; lequel ignorance tant amer me faisoit que mieulx eusse choisi mourir qu’en dechooir? Ha! quel fardel ey quel pointure a cuer qui trop l’aime le vouloir soutenir, et Fortune ne vueille!…Si te prometz que a mes semblans et abis pou apparoit entre gens le faissel de mes anuys. Ains soubz mantel fourré de gris et soubz surcot d’escarlate, non pas souvent renouvellé mais bien gardé, avoie espesses fois de gran friçons, et en biau lit et bien ordonné de males nuis. (102-103)

[And with all this, dear mistress, don’t you think my heart was heavy with fear that people might become aware of my financial situation and with the worry that by the way things looked the downfall of my estate—due to my predecessors and not to myself—would become apparent to outsiders and neighbors? And that ignorance made me so bitter that I would have chosen death over bankruptcy? Ah, what a burden and pain for a heart that is so bent on maintaining our former way of life and Fortune does not permit it!…I assure you that the extent of my troubles was not obvious to others from my appearance and dress. I often shivered under my fur-lined cloak and my fine surcoat that was not refurbished but kept in good condition; and I spent many bad nights in my beautiful and well-arranged bed]

Like Amadace, Christine invests a great deal of effort in protecting her financial reputation, while attempting to make it seem natural and effortless. This passage emphasizes both the importance of finances in the construction of gentle identity and the need to maintain that important secret by controlling the performance of one’s financial
identity. Moreover, her language, emphasizing fear and pain, draws attention to the anxieties associated with attempting to construct and maintain viable economic identity positions.

In planning his departure, Amadace has the very symbol of nobility at his disposal: the ownership of land. His land and the financial possibilities it represents allow Amadace to manipulate his financial appearances in ways closed off to those without land. He says, “For sevyn yere wedsette my lond, / To the godus that I am awend / Be quytte golly bidene” [for seven years my land is mortgaged until the goods that I owe are all paid back] (ll. 31-33). Amadace is going to mortgage his land and use the income in order to pay off his debts while he is gone. Amadace’s ownership of land and the financial device of the mortgage allow him to maintain the appearance of economic well-being in front of the community while he is gone.

Of course, the device of mortgage was not without its financial risks and its employment here adds to the sense of impending doom surrounding Amadace’s ever more desperate financial situation. Again Payling’s work on Sir John Gra provides a powerful corrective to viewing a mortgage as a magic solution to financial difficulties.17 In constant debt, Sir John Gra had mortgaged land to stay ahead of his creditors (Payling 119). After losing most of his lands, he returned to France enfeoffing Multon Hall (Payling 122). He was to pay 400 marks plus interest and he would receive an annual allowance of the manor’s value until the repayment (Payling 122). Cromwell came into possession of the mortgage and refused the payment offered by Gra in 1437 (Payling 126). This case is a “precise illustration of a general phenomenon: the difficulty a late-

17 For utility and dangers of land mortgage, also see Christine Carpenter, Locality and Polity, 256.
medieval landowner faced when he attempted to redeem land he had once mortgaged” (117). This danger is even more threatening because “the ever-closer identification of land and status...meant that the loss of land was not only damaging in itself but could entail loss of status” (Locality and Polity 94).

However, as we see repeatedly, Amadace ignores the potentially disastrous consequences of his actions in favor of forging ahead with his former spending habits. After entering into a possibly risky mortgage, Amadace further impoverishes himself with one last display of conspicuous expenditure. Again, against whatever traditional logic which might dictate care at this financially precarious time, Amadace throws caution to the winds and affirms his chivalric economic identity by spending.

Acknowledging how much of his identity is bound up in exchange, Amadace says:

Yette wille I furst, or I fare,
Be wele more riall than I was are,
Therfore ordan thu schall,
For I wulle gif full ryche giftus
Bothe to squiers and to knyghtis;
To pore men dele a dole. (ll. 37-42)

[I will, before I go, be more royal than I have been before. Therefore, you will see to it because I will give very rich gifts to both squires and knights, as well as give alms to the poor]

Amadace’s final gesture, then, is calculated to affirm a financial well-being which only exists in his performance of it. He makes gifts and gives alms that the audience knows he can ill afford, but these expenditures are clearly key to his class identity, making him “more riall” when he spends liberally. “Riall” (“roial” in its standard spelling) in the Middle English Dictionary has the meanings of “highborn, noble” and “noble in nature, princely, honorable, glorious.” In this text, “riall” is used to indicate Amadace’s
successful economic performances, those which accrue him honor. In addition, he affirms the bonds of kinship between himself and his chivalric brethren, while separating himself from other groups.

Amadace’s last moves in front of his community are clearly designed to establish an image of financial health in order to preserve his reputation. However, it would be a mistake to see this as a step in any kind of reformed economic sense on Amadace’s part. He has no intention of giving up his habits, for the performance of these habits is integral to his presentation of who he is. Amadace can only have honor, and thus be a knight, by spending liberally. Any reform would signal a compromise in the value of largesse and noble living and hinder Amadace’s ability to be himself. His lack of reform is reiterated when Amadace runs away. While it is with the clear intention of gaining more money, however, one should not think that this signals a reform in his spendthrift ways, because Amadace is clear that he wants “gold, silvyr to spende” (l. 35). Amadace is not going to find money for any thrifty goals but rather continue in the very track which has led him to such hard straits financially.

The amount, £40, which Amadace is left with after all of his spending, is symbolic. As numerous historians have noted, 40 pounds was the common income amount to qualify for the designation of knighthood (Acheson 35). That Amadace is left with exactly this amount is certainly a statement about the connections between money and status, as well as an indication of the hairsbreadth separating him from the loss of his ability to retain his place.

18 More specifically, 40 pounds “had become a more significant threshold, marking a useful divide between landed families of perennial stature, whose members were frequently knighted, and the rest of the gentry” (M. Bennett 83).
All the economic moves heretofore now converge in the figure of the dead merchant, who suggests serious questions about exchange, honor, and chivalric identity. The way in which the narrative introduces the figure of the merchant is especially suggestive of the possibly uneasy relations between the knighthood and the mercantile class. While this motif of the unburied dead is a familiar one from folktales and romance, this particular episode stands out for several reasons. First, there is an exaggerated emphasis on the stench of the corpse. There are no less than five separate references to the smell of the place, plus numerous references to covering of the nose and an inability to remain in the same place as the body. Certainly, on a purely realistic level, an unburied, rotting corpse is sure to smell, but given later events, this stench also takes on a thematic layer. The smell is an indication that something is wrong, and given the previous discussion, it is important to figure out exactly how the identity of the body relates to the literal and figurative stench.

Upon encountering the widow and her dead husband, Amadace cuts straight to the heart of the matter. Ever mindful of social station, he quickly moves to the point of the dead man’s status, asking “Quat a mon in his lyve wasse he” (l. 139). While this question might have many answers, not all of them about social status, the widow’s response, “Sir, a marchand of this cité” (l. 140), leaves little doubt about the kind of social question being asked. The dead man’s status as a merchant is especially important because, in all but one of the analogues for the tale, the unburied man is a fellow knight. Amadace continues on in the same vein, carefully extracting information from the merchant’s wife regarding her husband’s identity and social status, especially his relations with others in the community, including the knights whom he feasted and the merchant whom he owes.
Given the economic bent of the text, it might be useful to think about what the figure of the merchant may represent. The most lucrative starting place for such a discussion is in the relationship between the merchant and chivalric classes, a relationship which will be replayed on a small scale in the poem. Many historians suggest that the relationship was a tense one, fraught with oppositions. One scholar writes, “not only was the ethics of accumulation in conflict with religious doctrine; it also was in clear contradiction with the fundamental orientations of the aristocracy, among whom the frank and ostentatious possession of wealth and expenditures for public display were considered virtues” (Gurevich 252). The very values and aims of the two classes are often diametrically (and perhaps too simplistically) opposed as spend and save. This attitude is certainly evident in literary evidence, where we have the 14th century poem Winner and Waster taking as its object the diametrically opposed views on wealth of the aristocracy and the merchant.

However, much recent work has suggested that the differences were fewer than the similarities. For example, there is significant evidence that merchants moved up in station, buying property and living as gentry. S.J.A. Payling writes about an interesting case in his article “A Disputed Mortgage: Ralph, Lord Cromwell, Sir John Gra and the Manor of Multon Hall.” Sir John Gra’s father, Thomas, came from an upwardly mobile mercantile family. In his quest to move into the gentry ranks, he married a wealthy woman who “enabled the Gras to complete comfortably the transformation from mercantile to landed family” (Payling 118). In his turn, John was able to capitalize on this new status and make a very good marriage with the daughter of a rich knight, Sir Roger Swillington (Payling 118). Her eventual unlikely inheritance of her father’s lands
put them in the big leagues with the “magnificent sum” of £327 0s. 4d. (Payling 119).

With the sum of more than £300, “his wealth now rivaled that of the greatest north midlands gentry families” (Payling 119). Indeed, as we saw in the sumptuary statutes, a merchant of a certain income level could perform a “knightly identity.”

On the other hand, there is substantial evidence that knights engaged in trade, and many are listed as merchant-knights in business documents, a point that D. Vance Smith takes great pains to point out. Pamela Nightingale also discusses a basic contradiction in the relationship of knights and merchants, in that trade money is seen as tainted and prohibits entrance into upper echelons of society, while from the thirteenth century, we see knights active in trade (37-38). She also notes that the involvement of powerful families in trade lessened the dishonor of it (45) and that there were strong commercial alliances between merchants and gentry families (51-56). All of this goes to suggest that there was a certain degree of fluidity or slippage in status categories.

In Sir Amadace, we have a similar slippage between these categories as can be seen in the widow’s description of her husband and his activities. Of his falling into debt, she says:

Sir, on gentilmen and officers,

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20 Nightingale also views this as a changing relationship, with the fourteenth century having the urban merchants gain control of the wool market and, with the general drop in prices, force the knights out. The reaction to this was one of hardening group identity (41-42). This idea of a stiffening of group identity is very suggestive in that one might read texts which assert strong upper class identities as reactions against this economic disenfranchisement, an interesting explanation for the continued significance and centrality of the chivalric ideal itself.

On grete lordus, that was his perus,
Wold giffe hom giftus gay.
Riche festus wolde he make,
And pore men, for Goddus sake,
He fed hom evyriche day.
...
Yette he didde as a folle.
He cladde mo men agaynus a yole
Thenne did a nobull knyghte. (ll. 148-159)

[Sir, on officers and gentlemen, on great lords who were his peers, he would give gay gifts. He would make rich feasts, and feed poor men everyday….Yet, he acted like a fool. He clad more men at Christmastime than a noble knight did]

Her speech makes clear that profligate spending was her husband’s downfall. The widow also explains how her husband acted in the same way as a knight, emphasizing the performance of economic behaviors in the creation of this “knightly” identity. We should note echoes from the merchant’s list of expenditures and Amadace’s farewell feast. Both spent money on extravagant feasts, numerous gifts, and alms.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the linkages between Amadace and the merchant, we should not read this as an unproblematic connection. Some scholars, notably Ad Putter, attempt to play up this relationship as a rather warm brotherhood, but I would suggest that it is anything but. Certainly, Amadace notes similarities between himself and the dead merchant, noting that “yondur mon that lise youndur chapell withinne, / he myghte full wele be of my kynne, / For ryghte so have I wroghte” [yonder man that lies in that chapel might well be of my kin for just so have I done] (ll. 208-210). And, as mentioned above, there was real movement in social categories. However, success stories like that of the Gras should not lead us to believe that this social mobility was always unproblematic or desirable. We need only think about the Pastons’ great distaste at the thought of their heiress marrying into a merchant family in order to see that class
consciousness is a far from obsolete issue (The Paston Letters 177). That is, we should not be too quick to assume that because one engaged in trade that one wanted to be considered a tradesman, dine with them, or have one’s daughter marry a merchant necessarily. The ethos of the gentry, unlike that of other landowning classes in Europe, was not necessarily opposed to the mercantile (Nightingale 60), but I would also argue that it was not fully aligned either.

Therefore, this identification that Amadace notes between himself and the merchant is not necessarily a comfortable or pleasing one. Rather, scholars such as James Simpson describe these connections as “striking, unavoidable, and shameful similarities between merchants and knights in this narrative” (Simpson 268). What Simpson’s point makes clear is that social distinction and mobility are directional. It is illogical that a person such as Amadace, heavily invested as he is in class status, would aspire to downward social mobility and look favorably on the idea of being like a merchant. It would be more feasible to him that the merchant was acting like a knight, something he would easily be able to see the value in. His later actions, where he moves to consolidate his class status through gifting and consumption despite his financial straits, suggest the continuing currency he sees in his class script.

Complicating the identity question even further, the romance pushes us to ask whether the merchant was living out his correct social identity. As Christine Carpenter writes, “the classic terms for status in this period, ‘honour’ and ‘worship’, are used, and it is apparent that consumption had to be very precisely judged so that the worthy

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22 Du Boulay also relates Walsingham’s disdain for the de la Pole family, who were “more suitable for trade than knighthood” (67-68) because of their mercantile origin and refers to Paston letter 514 II, where the lineage of the Duke of Norfolk is traced back to its trade roots.
connotation of the words did not become the unworthy ones of consuming beyond one’s station and income” (Stonor Letters 22). As scholarship about honor teaches us, one of the strongest features of honor involves the need to act according to lineage or appropriate to social position. According to his wife, the dead merchant “cladde mo men agaynus a yole / Thenne did a nobull knyghte” [clothed more men at Christmas than a noble knight did] (ll. 158-159). While this might normally be a sign of honor, commentators as far back as Aristotle have noted that honor accrues by spending only when the right people spend. What is honorable for Amadace might simply be wrong for the merchant. It seems that there are limitations on the merchant’s capacity to manipulate or change his economic identity. The excessive suffering of his wife and the excessive stink of his body seem to point to an identity boundary that should never have been crossed.

Amadace’s next move is to look to clearing the debt of the dead merchant. In order to accomplish this, Amadace decides to have a feast with the debt-holding merchant. Again, Amadace is concerned with the appearance and performance of his economic identity. Feasting was one of the areas in which a medieval person could spend money ostentatiously, highlighting the concept of conspicuous consumption and performing the role of economic well-being. Amadace says to his pack-bearer, “Go, loke thu dighte oure soper syne, / Gode ryall metis and fyne, / And spicis thenne spare thu noghte” [go prepare our supper then, good royal meats and don’t spare the spices] (ll. 214-216). These are two clear ways of performing his economic identity. Several studies on feasting and household consumption propose that types of meat offered and the use of
spices in cooking were two ways in which the nobility demonstrated their difference and highlighted the extravagant nature of their consumption.\textsuperscript{23} That the gentry valued this type of consumption seems clear. For example, McFarlane’s “The Investment of Sir John Fastolf’s Profits of War” takes up these economic links by making clear the kind of conspicuous consumption common to the knightly classes, especially those like Fastolf who were eager to prove that they belonged.\textsuperscript{24} He writes that much of the war profits from his service in France were invested in objects of gold, fabulous buildings, and plate (191). Moreover, it was not only Fastolf, but most of his brothers in arms who engaged in this behavior, in keeping with the degree of each (191). So, not only is there a performative wealth aspect to knighthood in the pure possession of objects of value, but also a graded hierarchy as to quantity and quality of those possessions as related to one’s social status. For all of its supposed disavowal of economic ties, chivalry itself seems to operate in strangely similar ways to the sumptuary laws. Fastolf was certainly not immune to profit-making, despite all of his chivalric ideals, and he worked hard at commerce and extracting more value from his lands (195). Ultimately, McFarlane sees Fastolf as not insensible to financial advantage but imbued with a sense of the value of display and worship-seeking typical of the knightly class (196-197).


\textsuperscript{24} On the conspicuous expenditures of the gentry class, also see Joan Kirby, “A Northern Knightly Family in the Waning Middle Ages,” \textit{Northern History} 31 (1995): 101-102.
Despite his tour de force display of knightly performance, Amadace’s plan is less than successful, as the merchant resists forgiveness of the dead merchant’s debt. The attitude of the merchant seems harsh, especially in light of the largesse of Amadace. However, I would like to emphasize the nature of the transaction. The merchant is owed money. This was not a gift, but a business loan or a credit for goods exchanged between two merchants. The merchant says, “God gif him a sore grace, / And all suche waisters as he wasse” [God give him a sore grace and all spendthrifts like him] (ll. 247-248).

Being a waster is certainly not a typical merchant quality. Again, we have the suggestion, through the use of the word “waster,” that the dead merchant was living outside of his proper social role, something that has caused great pain and shame.

The response of the merchant to Amadace’s attempt to make him see the mercy of the action is intense and needs explanation. He says:

Be Jhesu, Mare sun,
That body schall nevyr in the erthe come
My silvyr tille that I have.
Till ho be ded as wele as he,
That howndus schall, that I may se,
On filde thayre bonus tognaue. (ll. 259-264)

[By Jesus, Mary’s son, that body shall never come into the earth until I have my silver. Until she is dead, as well as he, and I may see hounds gnawing their bones in the field]

This speech, especially its gratuitous violence and mean-spiritedness, suggests something going on beneath the surface. In contrast to Amadace’s generous behavior, the merchant seems avaricious and devoid of sensibility, suggesting a substantial gulf between the two. Amadace tries to shame the merchant into forgiving the debt. After throwing a grand dinner, Amadace casually mentions the dead merchant’s debt and the attractions of largesse. Again, Amadace and the merchant play out the stark contrast in ideals between
classes. Amadace suggests that the merchant “take the till a bettur rede/Thenke that God forgave his dede. / Grete merit thu may have” [Take better advice and think that God forgave his death. You may have great merit] (ll. 253-255). The merchant, however, cares nothing for honor accrued by largesse—suggesting that he knows it is not for the likes of him—but instead focuses on the instant payoff of the cash owed to him. Amadace, foiled by this foreign attitude, has little option, given his vow to resolve the situation, but to pay off the debt himself.

This whole elaborate scenario, from the lavish banquet to the speech on forgiveness, has been an attempt by Amadace to reject being like the merchant class and affirm his own class status. Where merchants have contracts, Amadace allows no sense of quid pro quo; where merchants have stinginess, Amadace demonstrates largesse; where merchants count every penny, Amadace revels in reckless spending. For example, he makes a production of calling his servant before him to collect the money. Then, he asks “Awe he the any mare?” [Does he owe you anymore?] (l. 277). The suggestion is that he would bring more money if that were necessary. The gesture is all the more resonant because he and the audience know that he is almost out of money and could not afford to pay another large debt even if it were owed. This suspenseful moment underlines the delicate house of cards on which Amadace’s self-representation rests. However, at the same time, the question and its seeming air of indifference underline the very real social difference between Amadace and the debt-holding merchant.

Amadace throws a dinner in celebration of the burial, thus exhibiting himself as the benefactor of the merchant, accruing social capital, albeit by dissipating what remains of his economic capital. With his last ten pounds, Amadace arranges for a Christian
burial, readings and songs for the dead man, and “offurt a ring / Atte evryche mas” (ll. 296-297). What Amadace loses in money, however, he more than makes up for in the eyes of the bedazzled townspeople. The attitude of the townspeople is clear in their descriptions of Amadace. He is described as a “full riall knyghte,” just the impression that Amadace has been aiming for, even echoing his earlier desire to be more “riall” before his departure from his home. This affirmation of his honor again affirms that Amadace is successful in his performance of economic identity. The creditor merchant announces the payment of all the goods by Amadace, emphasizing the expenditures of Amadace, and inviting all to a grand feast. This feast, like the previous, is described in terms of conspicuous consumption.

Again, Amadace’s departure is managed to maximize his financial identity. The juxtaposition of Amadace’s seeming well being and his imminent utter economic ruin is striking. The poet writes, “Quat wundur were hit thaghe him were wo / Quen all his godud were spendutte him fro” [Was it a wonder that he was woeful when all of his goods were spent?] (ll. 331-332). However, whatever woe that Amadace may have is not apparent to his audience, and the townspeople believe that his funds are limitless. They say, “This gud full lighteli he wan, / That thusgate spendutte hit on this man, / So lightelt lete hit scape” [He won this wealth easily that spends it on this man, so easily he lets it go] (ll. 340-342). Emphasized several times is the gap between what the townspeople see and what is really happening with Amadace. They “knew full littile his state” (l. 345) and “the trauthe full littul thay wote [knew]” (l. 348).

Again, in this crucial scene, the difference between Amadace and his servants is emphasized, as the steward “thoghte hit was agaynus skille” [thought it was against
reason] (l. 271). However, this is because the steward is thinking on the literal level. He knows the contents of the chest are forty pounds. However, for the observer, this forty pounds must be only the beginning of possibly unlimited funds if Amadace spends it with such apparent ease. The way in which one publicly dispenses with money, then, creates the social capital which, in turn, assumes the existence of substantial wealth, an odd and vicious financial circle.

Finally, this scene also sets up the brutal reciprocity—where the white knight asks for half of Amadace’s wife and child—in the narrative. The gift, as Marcel Mauss convincingly argues, is not necessarily a positive or even a neutral action. Many times it is openly aggressive as each giver tries to one up the other in an escalating contest of goods and will. As one scholar puts it, “however unrestricted, altruistic, and voluntary the gift may appear to be, from the beginning it has, so to speak, an evil twin” (Groebner 11). Given this, it is not a stretch to see Amadace’s gift as an aggressive opening gambit rather than a generous act. However, there is yet another dimension to this problem. Anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers suggests that gifts also depend on the social status and respective ability to pay of the participants. He writes, “if the offer of a favor between equals awaits a return of grace, between unequals if it cannot be returned it can also mean a claim to superior status, and can thus even be resented by a person who does not wish to admit this claim” (224).

In terms of late medieval gentry families, these explanations hold up. For example, Felicity Heal argues that gifts sustain the “asymmetrical relationships” of power between lord and dependent (184). The gift does this by creating roles for the two parties involved, such as giver and receiver. For instance, livery was considered as both a wage
and gift. Certainly it represented an economic boon, but it also suggested a relationship connecting the two parties, a relationship where the power was decidedly one-sided because of the ability or inability to reciprocate. In an important sense, this is the raison d’être of the gift. As Bataille writes, “the gift would be senseless (and so we would never decide to give) if it did not take on the meaning of an acquisition. Hence giving must become acquiring a power” (Bataille 69). To allow a reciprocal gift, then, would alter the power dynamics of the original exchange, as “the return gift threatens a transfer’s status as a gift and love offering” (Groebner 12) and threatens the giver’s performance of largesse.

For his part, the merchant, being both dead and destitute, is in a decidedly difficult position to return Amadace’s gift. In fact, the episode tries to eliminate the idea of exchange altogether and simply focus on Amadace’s image as donor. Given later events, however, we can see that Amadace has made the first offering in what becomes an escalating exchange of honor and goods, where the idealistic definitions of exchange and economic disinterest of the chivalric classes are exposed as mythic. The white knight later returns Amadace’s gift with interest and expects an interest payment in return, thus suggesting a possible explanation for an episode which leaves scholars scratching their heads, most settling for labeling it as a nasty, gratuitous request.

One of the problems with a benign reading of the above scene is that it leaves many questions unanswered. Putter concludes that the merchant is an admirable figure, especially in comparison with the debt-holding merchant, because he participates in an exchange community with the knightly class. He even concludes that this is the formative event in his exchange relationship with Amadace, as the gift of burial and debt
clearance are seen as payment for the merchant’s gifts to other knights. He goes so far as
to suggest that “giving turns Amadace and the merchant into blood-brothers” (374). I
would argue, however, that the text goes to great pains to prove just the opposite: gift
exchange never represents something other than *quid pro quo*.

Sir Amadace would not be alone in suggesting that there is a certain cynicism
connected with the idea of a separation of purchases and gifts in late medieval England.
The word “yift(e)” itself presents many complex associations. Of course, according to
the Middle English Dictionary, its main sense is “that which is given or offered; a gift,
present.” However, there are secondary associations, which include “a grant or bequest
of property or income; also, a dowry.” Gift can even mean “a gift given in remuneration,
a reward, a payment for services,” “a premium or profit as the equivalent of interest on a
loan,” “a contribution of money, goods, etc. given in discharge of a feudal obligation,”
and a “vow.” D. Vance Smith writes convincingly about the problematic distinctions in
reference to Sir Launfal, suggesting that “even in these magical and distinctively
chivalric gifts there inheres a powerful form of calculation” (182).

Another striking episode, concerning the marriage of Richard II and Anna of
Bohemia, presents itself in The Westminster Chronicle. The chronicler writes that a
certain poem was circulating about the marriage of Anna and Richard,

Digna frui manna datur Anglis nobilis Anna’; set scrutinabis verum videbatur
non dari set pocius emi, nam non modicum pecuniam refundebat rex Anglie pro
tantilla carnis porcione. (The Westminster Chronicle 25)

[Worthy to enjoy manna,/To Englishmen is given Anna; but to those with an eye
for the facts it seemed that she represented a purchase rather than a gift, since the
English king laid out no small sum to secure this tiny scrap of flesh]
Of course, as Richard would like to present it, Anna is a precious and lovely gift in the chivalric tradition. However, the ditty, with its bald statement of facts, strips away all of the mystification that has gone into the Anna exchange. Rather than a noble gift exchange, the chronicler suggests that it was a crass sale. This is much the same movement we see in *Sir Amadace*, where the ideas of gifts and knightly exchange are exploded by their juxtaposition with market values.

However, as with Amadace’s recuperation of the chivalric ideal later in the poem, the existence of these economic ties was always seen to exist with an important difference in chivalric circles. Christine Carpenter writes about how important it was to describe transactions of this kind in the guise of real affect. For example, while the marriage negotiations were fierce and focused on money, they were often garbed in the language of love. Carpenter sees this as revealing “the values of a society that expected some kind of emotion to be expressed amidst the business” (*Stonor Letters* 24).25 I would like to emphasize that this was not a cynical show, but rather a real belief in the difference of chivalric behavior which suggested a more profound difference in being.

Despite his grand show in the merchant’s city, Amadace, now completely destitute, must leave again. This time he leaves everything behind and sets off alone, stripped of his servants, the last vestiges of his former wealth and position. At this point in the narrative, too, the differences that Amadace has been maintaining between his own chivalric identity and its connection to disinterested economic behavior begin to break down, as he puts a price on the ultimate signifier of his chivalric identity: his horses, which are said to be “worth the ten pownde” [worth ten pounds] (l. 374).

25 The letters regarding the Blount widow seem especially revealing in this regard.
Alone in the woods, Amadace makes some of his most penetrating observations on the complex intertwining of money and chivalric life:

A mon that litul gode hase,
Men sittus ryghte noghte him bye;
Fir I hade thre hundrythe powunde of rente,
I spendut two in that entente.
Of such forloke was I.
Evr yquyll I suche houssholdhold,
For a grete lord was I tellut,
Much holdun uppe thereby. (ll. 398-405)

[A man that has little goods is thought very little of. I had three hundred pounds of rent, and I spent two hundred for the purpose of being thought highly of. Of such foresight was I. Always while such a household I held, I was held up as a great lord]

He, again, links his economic status to his identity as a knight and his ability to embody honor. He knows that his expenditures, two thirds of his income, were excessive. However, he also sees that chivalric honor, and thus his status and identity in his community, stems directly from the possession and expenditure of cash. In effect, at this moment, the halfway point of the poem, he recognizes the paradox of having to spend in certain ways to achieve acceptable status when that very spending puts that status in jeopardy. Despite these observations, Amadace does not condemn this behavior. In fact, he only laments that he cannot continue in this same way. Amadace then prays never to be seen anywhere where he is known unless he can reclaim his status. His alternative would be, “Or ellus, Lord, I aske the rede./Hastely that I were dede” [Or else, Lord, I ask your help that I were quickly dead] (419-420). He would prefer to be dead

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26 Both Amadace and the merchant had the same annual income of 300 pounds, which was “a substantial income, well above the median for knightly families in the mid-fifteenth century” (Kirby 87).

27 D. Vance Smith makes this same point about Sir Launfal, perhaps preceded by J.A.W. Bennett who argues “its essential theme is the dangers, and rewards, of generosity, the theme also found in Chester’s Sir Launfal; it is an exemplum with an appeal to all who find it difficult to make both ends meet” (165).
than not be Sir Amadace. Here, we can see that the chivalric ethic cuts two ways. He has an obligation to act in a certain way even when those actions are sure to destroy him. This scene is bitterly ironic because Amadace has done everything required by his social position as a knight and yet, in so doing, he has made it impossible to continue being a knight. At the end of this first half of the poem, then, it is fitting that he can only offer the ultimatum to God to redeem him as a knight or let him die.

Moments of self-doubt, or even self disintegration, are not uncommon in romance texts. As Susan Crane has suggested, identity is a fragile thing mutually constructed by the knight and the community. However, this becomes complicated when “there is conflict within the community’s judgment or between the adventuring knight’s self assessment and the assessment of his peers, a space opens up for an identity that is beyond the reach of public determinations” (“Knights in Disguise” 76). In Amadace, I would argue that this gap opens up when he finds himself alone in the woods questioning his course of action and the very basis of chivalric identity. His own inability to veer from his cultural script and his subsequent meeting with the knight, however, foreclose on the need to live in this space and Amadace returns to the fold quickly if not unproblematically.

Again, what I would like to emphasize here is that, up to this point, all of the behaviors linked to the creation and sustenance of Amadace’s chivalric identity have been financial—his ability to exchange gifts, his indifferent expenditure, his conspicuous consumption, and his abundant charity. Rather than the jousting, lovemaking, and filial camaraderie of most romance, we have witnessed scene after scene of financial performance, suggesting that the real stuff of status is money. At the same time,
however, Amadace continues as a sort of innocent player in this, clinging to the ideals of his class, indicating their very real worth and importance. It is in the innocent insistence of Amadace that we find the link to the second half of the romance, which seeks to tell a different sort of tale, one of magic recuperation of status and a chivalric identity based in things other than finance.

At this moment, the arrival of the white knight, the ghost of the dead merchant, signals how Amadace will be able to achieve his redemption. Here, a second narrative begins, moving away from the didactic tale of spending and ruin and introducing a more typical romance plot. Here, we find a wealthy king, a lovely princess, and majestic tournaments, all familiar to readers of medieval romance. It is also here that the poem stops dealing in specific financial details and amounts and returns to general ideas and descriptions of lands and wealth. In fact, the poem moves back to the more typical suppression structure of romance described by Auerbach. Of course, the doubled narrative makes the romance plot haunted by the harsh financial realities of the first half of the story, but it backs away from the disturbing implications introduced in Amadace’s desperate early moments.

IV.

The introduction of a ghost into the narrative at this point has some interesting implications. On the subject of ghosts in the Middle Ages, Jean-Claude Schmitt writes that “in medieval society, as in many other traditional societies, the specific type of existence attributed to the deceased depended on how the “rite of passage” of death had occurred: the dead generally returned when the funeral and the mourning rituals could not be performed in the prescribed way” (2). Of course, in the case of our particular ghost,
who turns out to be the dead merchant, the funeral and mourning rituals were highly unorthodox, perhaps explaining his appearance in the latter half of the story.

Schmitt further argues that the funeral rituals we perform and the masses that are sung are a form of remembrance, but “this word ‘remembrance’ is in fact misleading, for the goal of the *memoria* was to help the living separate from the dead, to shorten the latter’s stay in purgatorial punishment (or in purgatory), and finally, to enable the living to forget the deceased” (5). This idea of the proper burial being, in effect, “a social technique of forgetting” (5) is a compelling one in the context of Sir Amadace’s actions. In his attempts to do the right thing, is he also getting rid of uncomfortable evidence of a connection he would rather not admit to? In whatever case, his social forgetting is unsuccessful, as the white knight is also a figure of resistance.

Schmitt sees ghosts as rebellious figures, who resist the social forgetting (6-7). This plays nicely in what seems to be the very antagonistic relationship between Amadace and the white knight/merchant. The white knight haunts the second half of the tale, which should be a simple courtly romance, with the harsh financial realities of the first half of the tale, something Amadace would surely rather forget.

The romance plot begins typically, with the white knight using courtly language in addressing Amadace and explaining how he can win the hand of the eligible lady:

> And thu art one of the semelist knyghte  
> That evyr yette I see with syghte,  
> That any armes bare.  
> That mun no mon hur wedde ne weld,  
> Butte he that first is inne the fild,  
> And best thenne justus thare. (ll. 475-480)
[And you are one of the seemliest knights to ever bear arms that I have set eyes on. No man may wed her or hold her unless he is first in the field and jousts the best there]

It is worth noting that while the criteria for knightly behavior were purely financial in the first half of the poem—gift-giving, consumption, and display—we return here to more typical chivalric attributes of martial prowess. We must ask, however, if the description of Amadace as a knight of prowess has a hollow ring after the reader has seen the ways in which Amadace’s identity hinges on the financial. Again, returning to the motif of the ghost, the poem seems to be trying hard to forget the first half of its narrative.

The white knight then suggests a scheme for Amadace to recover his financial well being. Amadace should go to a nearby tournament and win enough there to reestablish himself. The white knight is helpful on all details, even suggesting the cover story of a shipwreck to explain Amadace’s lack of attendants. Although he is often seen as the didactic center of the romance, this character seems much more typical of the fairy romance world, for he suggests that the destitute Amadace spend more than ever in the future instead of economizing. He repeats three times that Amadace should give generously. Given the ghost’s complex role, we see both the positive reinforcement of Amadace’s own class ideals and the impulse to engage in the same behavior which has already led to Amadace’s financial ruin in the tale.

The tale soon configures the relationship of the white knight and Amadace in complex economic terms—as both a brotherhood in arms and as a joint business partnership. They create a partnership based on the union of ability and capital. In this case, Amadace will provide the social status and the white knight will provide the cash. The division of resources and responsibilities is quite important because it again
highlights the social divisions, each contributing what he can, based on who he is, of economic or social capital. The only condition in the agreement is that Amadace agree “that even to part between us toe/The godus thu hase wonun and spedde” [to divide evenly between us two the goods that you have won and obtained] (ll. 503-504). This moment seems key in the exploration of social and economic capital, especially the ways in which it molds relationships. The white knight is setting up a way to reveal the economic base at the heart of chivalric exchange practices.

Despite all this talk of gifts, it would be a mistake to read this moment as a gift exchange. According to Marcel Mauss, a gift is a gift precisely because it obfuscates the need for repayment. That is not the case here, however. The white knight explicitly states, “butte a forwart make I with the or that thu goe, / That evyn to part betwene us toe / The godus thu hase wonun and spedde” [but a covenant I make with you before you go to divide evenly between us two the goods that you have won and obtained] (ll. 502-504). This is a business contract not a gift exchange. However, it is the type of exchange that needs to be framed in the affective language of chivalry, such as that seen earlier in the marriage negotiations of the Stonor family. Here, we have recourse to the language of the brotherhood in arms, an often overlooked medieval economic and social pact.

McFarlane’s “A Business-Partnership in War and Administration 1421-1445” offers some interesting insight into the relationship of the two knights in the tale. He writes, “On 12 July 1421 two English esquires met in the church of St. Martin at Harfleur to put their signatures to what for us at least is a somewhat unusual contract” (151). They offered a very detailed monetary policy, as to how much each would pay in ransom for the other, how they would get a larger sum if need be, how they would collect and
distribute the profits of their wartime activities (151). They agreed that “whichever reached England first was to invest their accumulated winnings in heritages as judiciously as he could to their joint advantage. When they married and came to live once more on this side of the Channel, whatever they had purchased or put by was to be divided equally between them. One might have contributed far less than the other, but even if he had gained nothing, he was still to have half of what there was” (151). Provisions were also made for the upkeep of any widows or children should only one man remain and have all of the fortune (151). If both died, “masses for them and their parents were to be bought with the money” (151).

As McFarlane notes, then, “brotherhood-in-arms, as defined in this contract, was thus a business-partnership, an insurance against the heaviest financial loss that could befall a soldier--to be taken alive--and a gamble on survivorship, a kind of rudimentary tontine. The risk of loss was spread and a chance--not a very outside chance--was offered of double gain” (151-152). McFarlane insists that “they make no pretence of fighting for a cause, still less for chivalrous renown” (152). However, he goes on to note that they make a “reference to fraternal love” (152). While he writes this off as an aberration in an otherwise straightforward contract, I think that we need to pay attention to this desire to frame this contract in affectionate language. 28

Indeed, these contacts carried much of the affectionate language of vassalage, resembling the oaths of feudal obligations between lord and vassal: “to help envers tous

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28 Maurice Keen provides a more generous characterization of these transactions, suggesting that brotherhood-in-arms was defined by “the all-pervading nature of this oath. It meant implicit trust…He could demand from his brother any abstinence, and any sacrifice, which did not involve dishonour” (Nobles 44). He does allow that “for humble squires and men-at-arms, the relationship probably appealed because it gave a legal basis to a profitable commercial partnership” (Nobles 46). Therefore, even in an idealized account, we can see that the idea had currency as both a financial and social bond.
et contre tous and aid/service/counsel (Nobles 55). And, these bonds were sometimes taken very seriously as chivalric causes. For example, in 1361 Bernard de Troye bequeathed his feud over a disputed ransom to his brother-in-arms Pelegrin de Cause. Five years later, Pelegrin de Cause obtained payment from Edward III, and he split the money with Bernard’s heirs, thus honoring his obligation to his companion (Nobles 57).

As with the example of Anna of Bohemia, we see that financial relations among the upper classes often get dressed in love’s garb. While it would be crass to say that one is only in it for money, it becomes more acceptable to say X, loving Y like a brother, agrees to share all gains with him. These sentiments were difficult to stamp out in land scenarios, as in the reign of Elizabeth, the Ireland family “held the Manors of Hutte, Hale, Halebank, Halewood…from William, Earl of Derby, in free socage, by the annual tender of two roses on Midsummer-day” (Ireland-Blackburne 18). This display, with its emphasis on the lack of financial obligation—asking only two roses—focuses on the economic disinterest in chivalric exchanges.

The white knight, of course, as a ghostly figure of remembrance complicates this chivalric model of the brotherhood. First, as a part of his aid, the white knight leads him to a “magic” shipwreck, which conveniently provides Amadace with both clothes and money:

He fond wrekun amung the stones
Knyghtes in menevere for the nones,
Stedes quite and gray,
With all kynne maner of richas
...
Kistes and cofurs bothe ther stode,
Was fulle of gold precius and gode. (ll. 520-527)
[Wrecked among the stones, he found knights in miniver at that time, gray and white steeds, with all kinds of riches…chests and coffers both stood there full of goods and precious gold]

This passage offers an unsettling combination of tantalizing images of goods and finery and the harsh reality of the deaths of these knights. While certainly fortuitous for Amadace, I think that the scene is intended to have a more profound significance. The knights found dead in their finery are symbolic of the central problem of the romance: the potential destruction attendant on fulfilling the extravagant financial outlay required to maintain chivalric identity.

It is interesting to read this scene in light of some of the customary privileges owed to the Lord of Hale Hall, which included wreck of sea. Twice in the 1430’s, the manuscript talks of the gains from shipwrecks, including “a frigate, or royal boat, [which] was cast on shore, and seized as a wreck of the sea (Ireland-Blackburne 73). In fact, Sir John de Ireland, father of William, made an official plea for the recognition of his right to wreckage (Ireland-Blackburne 87-88). This makes concrete the idea of profiting from the misfortunes of others as a regulated part of manorial customs.

It is interesting to note that there is specific attention to Amadace dressing himself before his two large public performances in the text, here and before the dinner with the merchant. His clothing is stressed as being synonymous with his performance of his chivalric identity. For example, the fabrics specified in the shipwreck scene have been interpreted by Phillipa Hardman as having a special significance connected to the knightly class. She writes, “meneuere and gold webbe are specifically mentioned; both
fabrics being reserved by the sumptuary laws to those of the rank of knight banneret or above and being regarded as indicative of their social position” (51).

It is in the king’s city that we see Amadace for the first time as a unified social being—with both his economic and social capital intact. Upon entering the king’s city, Amadace is immediately admired and noted by those watching, especially the king. In a very brief passage, Amadace perfunctorily performs his supposedly primary function as knight: that is, he fights. The joust, with the fair maiden as prize, provides Amadace with his opportunity for social reintegration. The familiar patterns of jousting and honor acquisition provide the necessary chivalric verisimilitude so that the earlier parts of the romance start to fade from view, now replaced by magic, jousting, and love. Of course, the movement is not that simple, and I would argue that the concerns of the first half linger on the margins, as does the figure of the ghost, waiting in the wings and subtly suggesting the tensions between the compositions of chivalric identity seen in the first half with that seen in the second.

Because of his magnificent dress and skill, Amadace is quickly noticed by the king, who employs the text’s keyword for successful performance “riall.” The king says that Amadace is “a riall knyghte” (l. 542). Again, the word “riall” signals a successful performance for Amadace. Of course, here, this performance is more typical of traditional chivalric identity, focused on Amadace’s prowess in the tournament. However, Amadace soon reaps financial as well as social benefits from his new position.

A cry is put out through the city for more men to replace Amadace’s “lost” men from the shipwreck. Here, we see the typical largesse of the lord and the loyauté of the men at work. “He wold gif hom toe so muche, or ellus more, / As any lord wold evyr or
quare./And they wold with him be” [He would give them as much or even more as any lord would anywhere if they would be with him] (ll. 598-600). Again, while this is a typical move on the part of most romances, it takes on new significance in light of its embeddedness within a text obsessed with the financial. In a different text, this idea of exchange and maintenance might go unnoticed but here the typical romance elements get read differently because of the Amadace’s troubles earlier in the tale.

This move is repeated again as Amadace participates in a gift exchange with the king: “A hundrithe sedis he wan and more, / And gave the king the ton halve of thoe, / Butte ther othir til his felo keput he” [he won a hundred districts and more and gave the king half of those, but he kept the other half for his partner] (ll. 610-612). This passage shows both that Amadace gives the king as a gift half of what he wins and keeps half for the repayment of the contract with the knight, bringing into juxtaposition the gift and the contract. Also, it shows that Amadace keeps nothing for himself. Half for the king and half for the white knight leaves Amadace effectively with nothing. However, the “magic economics” of chivalric exchange mean that Amadace comes out of his exchange a winner, with both daughter and half a kingdom to come. As Geffroi de Charny suggested, when one concentrates on winning only renown without thought to economic exigencies, the money will come. However, lingering on the edges of this exchange is the audience’s knowledge that none of this could have been accomplished without the cash investment of the white knight.

The king goes on to describe the exchange in typical terms, but terms which now have taken on a new significance. For example, he says “I have a doghtur that myn ayre hi isse. / And ho be to yaure pay” [I have a daughter that is my heir, and she is your
reward] (ll. 629-630). Then he says, “Here a gifte schall I yo gife, / Halfe my kingdome
quilles I life / Take all aftur my daye” [Here, I shall give you a gift, half of my kingdom
while I live and all of it after my day] (ll. 634-636). Phrases like “to yaure pay” and “a
gifte schall I yo gife” seem harmless enough, and one could find numerous examples of
this type of language in romance. However, given the content of the first half of the
romance, one can’t help but think that a point is being made here, much as in the
anecdote about Richard II’s bride. That is, what the chivalric classes seek to display as
economic disinterest has a strongly financial component that seems little different from
other types of market exchange and consumption.

After marrying the princess and having a son, Amadace enjoys a life of luxury. It
is at this moment that the white knight comes to collect his part of the contract. Amadace
is excited about the arrival of the white knight, saying “Is he comun,…myn owun true
fere? / To me is he bothe lefe and dere” [Has he arrived…my own true brother? To me he
is both loved and dear] (ll. 685-686). This is an especially important passage because it
echoes—with an important difference—the earlier lament that he might be the kin of the
dead merchant. Rather than a sad and upsetting realization, this is an affirmation, an
affirmation made possible by what Amadace believes is their shared social status.

While popularly labeled the white knight, it is prudent to notice that the text’s
labeling of him as such is complex. At first, it hedges, saying that he “hade contiens
[countenance] of a knyghte” (l. 441). To have the appearance of a knight is not exactly
the same thing as to be a knight. In fact, as we have seen earlier in the poem and in the
substance of statutes like the sumptuary laws, this kind of identity confusion could cause
distress in those observers who depended on visual cues for sorting people into
categories. Pollard cites one medieval commentator, Peter Idley, who despaired “a man shall not know a knave from a knight, for all be alike in clothlyng and array” (Late Medieval England 185).

The white knight, however, is feeling far from brotherly and rejects Amadace’s hospitality, saying “I will nauthir ete, drinke, no duelle, / Be God that me dere boghte. / Butte take and dele hit evun in toe, / Gif me my parte, and lette me goe” [I will neither eat, drink, nor dwell. But take and divide it evenly in two; give me my part and let me go] (ll. 704-707). Amadace is taken aback by this attitude and struggles to maintain control of the situation, saying “butte lette us leng together here, / Righte as we brethir were, / As all thinone hit ware” [but let us stay here together just as if we were brothers] (ll. 715-717). However, the white knight rejects his offer and his goods, saying:

Broke wele thi londus brode,
Thi castels hee, thi townus made,
…Allso thi wuddus, thi waturs clere,
This frithis, thi forestus, fer and nere,
Thi ringus with riche stone,
Also thi silvyr, thi gold rede.
…But, be my faythe, wothouton stryve,
Half thi child, and halfe thi wyve. (ll. 721-731)

[Enjoy your broad lands. Your high castles, your constructed towns,…also your woods, your clear waters, your woods and forests far and near, your rings with rich stones, also your silver, your bright gold.…But, by my faith, without strife, half your child and half your wife]

Here, in what is surely the most striking and troubling scene of the whole romance, the white knight refuses the proffered half of Amadace’s goods, instead requesting a literal half of his wife and child. We have no option of believing there is a morally imperative reason to commit this act or to make payment in this way. However, it does serve as the most striking moment of demystification of the economic relations underpinning
chivalric identity. Here, it is instructive to compare this list with Mauss’ list of items in the total gift economy, where he writes, “everything—food, women, children, property, talismans, land, labor services, priestly functions, and ranks—is there for possession, and for balancing accounts” (14). In a system, like chivalric exchange, which attempts to avoid economic relations, the request seems unthinkable, but it is, in reality, only a literalization of the logic on which the chivalric gift and honor system is based. Simpson sees Amadace as forced to act like a merchant by commodifying his wife, but this assumes that she has a status that is pre-commodity within the gift economy of Amadace (Simpson 268). I think that the real project is to reveal that she always already is a commodity in this system, not an exempt object of chivalric ideals. The merchant, through his request lifts the veil for a moment, showing chivalry to be a system no less economic than that in which the merchant engages every day.

Of course, traditionally chivalric literature likes to suggest a separation between the two realms of the economic and the chivalric, focusing more heavily on the social capital expressed and validated by appropriate class behaviors. The tale of Amadace complicates this scheme of two capitals also by staging the disintegration of boundaries between the two, showing the ways in which one becomes the other and returns to its original state again. This conversion and reconversion of capital can be seen strikingly when Amadace’s economic capital turns into social capital for the dead merchant. At first, the merchant in his guise as white knight clearly tells Amadace that his economic investment saved his “wurschip.” Amadace later uses the economic capital provided by the white knight in order to accrue social capital in the king’s court, which he again changes into economic gain by winning the joust and taking the lands and goods. This
playing on honor and economics should be read as part of the poem’s important project of attempting to unmask the gift economy, one of the chief economic obfuscations of chivalric practice, and thus reveal the material base of the knight’s social capital.

That is, the white knight’s request is an attempt to reveal, as Bourdieu says, “all the symbolic labour [that is] aimed at transmuting the inevitable and inevitably interested relations imposed by kinship, neighbourhood or work, into elective relations of reciprocity, through the sincere fiction of a disinterested exchange, and, more profoundly, at transforming arbitrary relations of exploitation…into durable relations, grounded in nature” (The Logic of Practice 112). By requesting the wife and the child, the merchant shows that “by the fourteenth century it was well understood: the merchant calculated in terms of his profit by translating values into monetary terms. So too did all exchangers” (Kaye 161), including knightly ones.

Amadace’s lady adds to the economic conversation, upholding both the chivalric values by which they live and using suggestive financial language:

Loke yaure covandus holdun be,  
Yore forward was full fyne  
Sithun Crist will that hit be so,  
Take and parte me evun in toe,  
Thu wan me and I am thine.  
Goddus forbotte that ye hade wyvut,  
That I schuld yo a lure makette,  
Yore wurschip in lond to tyne. (ll. 761-768)

[See that you keep your bargain, your agreement was very proper. Since Christ wishes that it is so, take and cut me in two; you won me and I am thine. God forbid that you had married so that I should be a temptation to you, your worship to lose in this land]
She puts herself in the position of an asset that he has won, just like any of the other goods, and as such to be useful to him. Even more provocatively, she suggests that her specific utility is to save his reputation.

The next section is the most incomprehensible of the poem, as the white knight suggests that Amadace was just as grieved as he had been happy when Amadace saved him. However, what is not explained is the inversion. Why should Amadace be repaid with an equal measure of grief where the merchant had happiness? I could believe that the scene is about simple piety in the form of expiatory suffering if it were not for the aggressive economic stance of the tale. Rather, the insistence on suffering seems to emphasize two things—the tension in the merchant/knight relationship and the economic dangers inherent in the chivalric lifestyle—now almost forgotten by Amadace in his new and comfortable circumstances.

First, the rejection of the brotherly overtures made by Amadace and the revelation of the merchant’s status as ghost bring full circle the set of complex relations that has bound the two figures throughout the poem. The penultimate act of the merchant ghost, putting Amadace to suffer, only seems to make sense within the aggressive, ever-escalating exchange scenario set in motion by Amadace’s initial gift. In addition, this seems a harsh social comment on the credit society, which had its own difficult realities. As Carpenter writes in “The Stonor Circle in the Fifteenth Century,” credit in a landowning society, in which income varied from year to year and essentially only came in twice a year, was an absolute necessity, especially in a period of agricultural depression, when tenants’ inability to sell their own grain might render them unable to pay, while the lord could not easily replace them (188). However, there was a great deal
of anxiety over the use of credit and the possible effects that it could have. Extensive use of credit among groups often led to crises, such as the need for cash by one member of the group, which could lead to a domino effect of calling in debts (189). Here, the white knight’s calling in of the debt is suggestive of just such a moment of crisis and the panic that ensues.

While this threat of acute crisis quickly dissipates when the white knight stops Amadace from killing his family, Amadace’s dangerous dance with potential ruin reveals important chronic anxieties. His constant potential fall into shame and ruin haunts the narrative, as “shame troubles a totalizing, truth-telling historiography by exposing fissures within subjectivity (whether individual or collective) and within those retrospective narratives by which the subject represents itself to itself, by which consciousness understands itself as having continuity and coherence over time” (Guynn 112). Just so, Amadace’s persistent threat of shameful exposure exposes the inconsistencies and fissures in the economic fairytale chivalry presents as its material base.

However, despite this horrific moment at the end, the tale moves quickly to shift gears and focus on the happily ever after ending, ultimately rewarding Amadace’s generosity. The reasons why the tale backs away are, of course, complex, but they center around the earlier discussion of the necessity of certain economic fictions for the maintenance of social distinction. “England in the fifteenth century saw a number of economic and social shifts that further challenged the already blurring line dividing her nobility from her most powerful commoners” (Amos 23). The return to a focus on romance suggests an embrace of a set of values which eschew the financial in favor of the
ideal, a set of values which had enormous social significance. The gentry preferred for
gentle status to be interpreted intuitively (Acheson 35), not by counting how much coin
could produce. As Joan Kirby writes, some gentry families, such as the Plumptons, who
were knights by birth not purchase represent “a recognizable group of old-established
knightly families distinct from the parvenu lawyers and administrators for whom the
knighthood represented social advancement in civilian life, rather than a military
accolade” (Kirby 88). These families embraced the traditional elements of chivalric life
and self-representation, recognizing its power to differentiate them from other groups.

In a very important way, chivalry, with its focus on the ideal rather than the
material, was capable of providing a strong justification for social differences beginning
to erode on other fronts. By insisting on an apparent disconnect between its ideals and its
material base, the knightly class was able to maintain and extend the idea of their inborn
distinction. If money were really the key, then any person could become a knight (or,
even more frightening, any person could become a churl) and the delicate balance of
social and economic power could be in danger. Courtly ideals, in effect, create “the
cultural dispossession which provides the best apparent justification for the economic
dispossession” of the bulk of medieval society (Bourdieu, Distinction 386). Many
romances actively play along with the chivalric game and further the ruse of economic
disinterest in favor of high ideals, as Sir Amadace does too in the final analysis.
However, before its dénouement, this poem boldly interrogates chivalry’s most closely
held economic beliefs and values, chronicling the complex and often difficult position in
which the gentry found themselves in the changing times of the late fourteenth and early
fifteenth centuries.
CHAPTER 2

KNIGHTS AND MERCHANTS PART TWO: NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND CLASS POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH OCTAVIAN ROMANCES

I.

While the figure of the merchant in Sir Amadace serves the important function of calling into question the supposed financial disinterest of the chivalric classes, his role is ultimately of interest for what it elucidates about Amadace. The figure of the merchant himself is as spectral as his ghostly presence in the second half of the romance, and we get to see very little about what it means to be a merchant or perform a mercantile identity. In sharp contrast, the Middle English romances of Octavian, despite the title, devote a great deal of attention to the treatment of Clement, a merchant who comes upon one of the twin sons of the Emperor Octavian and raises him as his own. Rather than a shadowy figure, he is, instead, a robust presence who, through his interaction with Florent, the noble lost son, plays out a complex financial pas de deux that illuminates the ideologies of both the chivalric and mercantile classes as well as the interpenetrating relationship between them.
There are two main versions of Octavian, the northern version and the southern version. The northern version is represented by three manuscripts: Lincoln, Dean and Chapter Library, MS 91 (The Lincoln Thornton Manuscript); Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.2.38; and Huntington Library 14615 (STC 18779), an early printed copy by Wynkyn de Worde. The southern version is represented by the lone manuscript Cotton Caligula A.II. Although both manuscripts have been shown to derive from a French version, the Anglo-Norman Octavian, there are significant differences between their redactions of the French romance, differences that I will suggest showcase the struggle between the chivalric and mercantile ideologies.

Despite their disagreements, however, the two versions tell the same basic story. A royal couple, Octavian and his empress, have twin sons after a long bout of sterility. The mother-in-law quickly insinuates that the twins are not her son’s issue but instead

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1 The manuscript, which dates from the middle of the fifteenth century, is named after the scribe, Robert Thornton, a member of the northern gentry and lord of the manor of East Newton from 1418-c. 1465 (Octovion 1-3). I will return to Robert Thornton at the conclusion of this chapter, offering a hypothesis for his involvement with the northern version of this poem.

2 The Cambridge manuscript is written in a late fifteenth or early sixteenth-century hand (Octovion 7).

3 This printed copy dates from the very early sixteenth century, a determination made from the type used in the edition (Octovion 10).

4 For an extensive description of all the manuscripts of the northern version, see Frances McSparran, Octovion (London: Oxford UP, 1986), 1-10.

5 For a description of the southern version manuscript, see Frances McSparran, Octovian Imperator (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1979), 10-13.

6 This romance of 5, 371 lines exists in one manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 100, which dates from the early fourteenth century (Octovion 38).

7 I will detail the specific relationships between the manuscripts and their differences in the treatment of the French source in the body of the chapter.

8 In the southern Octavian, the reason for the long delay in producing an heir is attributed to a lengthy bachelorhood on the part of the Emperor.
that of the cook’s knave. After arranging an incriminating bedroom scene between her innocent daughter-in-law and the unwitting boy, the mother-in-law has the pleasure of seeing the disgraced empress exiled from Rome with her sons. In the wilderness, the empress has both of her sons stolen, one by an ape and the other by a lioness. The son who is stolen by a lioness, Octavian, is soon recovered and his identity legitimated, and they live together—mother, son, and lioness—in Jerusalem until the end of the romance when they are reintroduced in time for the final family reunion. The second son, Florent, stolen by an ape, follows a more circuitous route to legitimation as he passes from the ape to a knight to a group of outlaws to a merchant named Clement. Under the tutelage of Clement, Florent tries and fails at several business ventures, proving his innate nobility by his indifference to monetary matters. When given the opportunity, he instead pursues a career as a knight, distinguishing himself against a group of Saracens invading his adopted home of France despite his seemingly lowly origins. Through these adventures, he finds true love and is recognized as nobility by the assembled nobility, including his real father, Octavian. Ultimately, the original family is reunited for the final happy ending of the tale.

Even in this severely abbreviated retelling, the story of Octavian seems like the boggling “hodgepodge” of romance plot elements that critics claim it is (Wright 487). A calumniated wife, exiled royalty, kidnapped children, Saracen invaders, and an evil mother-in-law pepper the scenes, and the narrative leaps across space and time, often at a dizzying pace. The tale is so complex, in fact, that some critics question the accuracy of the simple title of the romance. Certainly, when considering the Middle English Octavian romances, one of the questions that must surge to the forefront is the bizarrely
inaccurate title. Harriet Hudson understatedly suggests that “the title seems something of a misnomer” (“Introduction”). 9 Indeed, the characters of Octavian, father or son, play only a limited role in the tale, with most of the attention being focused on the plethora of romance motifs and figures in the poem.

While it would be tempting to excuse all of these details as romance filler, I think that we need to take a closer look and see what connections we may be able to draw among the disparate elements, connections that may reveal a much richer interpretive matrix for the romance than has previously been considered. I would like to take a closer look at one of the various characters—in this case, the ape who steals Florent—which seem like meaningless additions to the author’s everything but the kitchen sink approach to writing. 10 Far from meaningless, however, I argue that the ape and the countless other “hodgepodge” of details point to the real stakes of the romance. 11 In the case of the ape, we should start with the bestiary tradition and the common stories associated with the figure. 12 In most medieval sources, there is a focus on the ape’s supposed mothering behaviors. 13 The mother ape is said to have two children, twins, one of whom she hates and the other whom she loves. The beloved child is smothered by its mother’s loving

9 I should note that the title is that given by the medieval versions of the romance; it is not a modern interpolation.

10 The figure of the ape is a fascinating one, with an extensive presence in the medieval world, especially in manuscript illumination. For an overview of the figure during this period, see H.W. Janson, Apes and Ape-lore in the Middle Ages (London: University of London, 1952).

11 While I discuss the ape in terms of the bestiary tradition here, she is a multivalent figure who will figure importantly in the later analysis for her connections to financial themes.

12 There are various stories and associations for the ape, and I will be delving into more of these later in the chapter when I discuss the abduction of Florent in depth.

13 Versions of this story can be found in Aesop’s Fables, Pliny’s Natural History, and Isidore of Seville’s Etymologies.
embraces, while the hated one goes off into the wilds and survives. This less than ideal behavior on the part of the mother is duly criticized by the commentators as bad mothering, but more interestingly for me is the difference in fates of the two children, one whose end is cut and dried and the other whose disappearance into the wilds is an enticing lacuna full of unexplored possibilities.

Given the presence of the ape in the tale and its connection with Florent’s abduction, it’s difficult to ignore the provocative parallels between the bestiary account and the romance. In this tale, too, we have a story of two sons, twins, the offspring of the emperor and his wife. While it is no fault of the mother, there is an obvious favoritism shown by the romance. We have a favored son figure, Octavian, the namesake of his father, who retains close contact with the mother and with his own royal heritage, his own cut and dried fate. The other son, Florent, the one abducted by the ape, takes on the role of the less favored son and, like his simian counterpart, passes into the wild. However, in the case of this romance, the lacuna of the bestiary account is filled, as we follow the path of “the lost son” as he moves from guardian to guardian until he finally reunites with his family. It is in an exploration of Florent’s circuitous path, a seemingly accidental one, that we find the meaning of this complex and provocative tale. Not only does the ape’s presence provide a thematic link, but its own overdetermined significance also suggests a reading strategy for the poem as a whole, one that asks us to fix on the seemingly meaningless details of the poem and follow their multiple paths of meaning.

In all the versions of the story, Florent’s own path has him passing from his mother’s care into a complex chain of custody, ending in his fostering with the merchant, Clement. As I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, the figure of Clement is
particularly intriguing, as he “is one of the few major characters in romance who is not aristocratic” (Hudson 3). The insertion and prominence of such a figure is cause for careful consideration of what his role may be. In fact, I would suggest that Clement and his relationship with the aristocratic Florent form the cohesive center of the seemingly disorganized romance, offering an exploration of the particular economic ethos of each group.

To argue that this romance treats the subject of class is by no means new. In fact, class difference is a long-recognized theme of the romance. Most of the arguments focus on the concept of a contrast between the two worlds—mercantile and chivalric. For example, one critic, writing about the northern version, suggests that Clement is used as a buffoon, and “we see not a decent and well-meaning man baffled by chivalric behaviour in his humble environment, but a figure of fun striking attitudes which contrast very poorly with the grandeur and splendour of the court” (Simons 110). This concept of contrast is echoed by Harriet Hudson, who argues that “noble character soon asserts itself in contrast to Clement’s bourgeois values” (‘Introduction’). Yet again, Krieg argues that there is a “contrast between the elegant knightly manners of Florent or other nobles, and the shrewd practicality of the butcher” (Krieg 119).

In addition to critical agreement about the romance’s focus on class, there is also an acknowledgment that the northern and southern versions differ in important ways. The most striking difference in terms of the aims of the current study is deftly stated by Glenn Wright, who argues that “while the so-called Southern Octavian treats Clement with considerable sympathy, the Northern is highly critical of him, emphasizing his churlish anti-heroism rather than his utilitarian wiles” (Wright 482). While I agree wholeheartedly with this general idea, I think we need to move beyond an observation and acknowledgment of this textual divide and suggest a theory that accounts for this difference in treatment. That is, there can be no doubt that there is a “contrast” between the classes in Octavian and that this contrast is handled differently by each version of the text; however, what needs to be explained in much more detail is 1) the exact nature of this contrast (i.e. in what specific ways are they shown to be different), 2) the effect of this contrast in each text, and 3) why these related texts might have taken such different directions in addressing the chivalric/mercantile divide.

Given these parameters, I will delineate the connections between finance and identity as they are created in the Octavian romances and explore how each version deploys these concepts of financial identity in order to advocate class separatism, as with the Northern Octavian, or rapprochement, as in the Southern Octavian. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, I would like to suggest that each romance engages in these textual practices of division and elision in the service of an articulation of mercantile identity, again each with its own reasons and aims. The Northern Octavian actively

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15 For a thorough list of these differences, see Frances McSparran, Octovion Imperator, 32-38 and Frances McSparran, Octovion, 48-53.
brings a mercantile identity into being in order to portray the chivalric class as superior in their disdain of financial matters. The Southern Octavian, on the other hand, defines merchant identity in ways that refute that it can be reduced to the cash nexus.

II.

The Northern Octavian,\textsuperscript{16} and its Southern counterpart, show a great deal more artistry and complexity than the popular “hodgepodge” notion allows. Indeed, in the case of the Northern text, the poet shows a single-minded adherence to foregrounding his class fictions, something which is clear if we do not view the time that Florent spends with Clement—which has been the focus of all the “class” studies of the poem—as the only site of economic critique. Again returning to the reading strategy suggested by the figure of the ape, I argue that the early part of the romance, which details the life of the aristocratic family headed by the Emperor Octavian, offers heretofore unacknowledged support for much of the economic extrapolation that comes later in the tale. That is, the seemingly scattershot plot of the romance is actually artfully crowded with signs for those who care to decipher them.

The opening crux of the romance centers on the barrenness of the royal couple, a plot familiar from various medieval romances. Certainly, the trope of sterility has many valences in socio-political terms, especially for the aristocracy, and here the familiar fears are rehearsed for the audience. Octavian reveals his worries about the future to his wife in an emotionally charged scene:

\begin{verbatim}
Now haue we seuen 3ere samen bene, 
And hase no chylde vs bytwene;
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{16} All references except where noted will be to the Lincoln, Dean and Chapter, MS 91 (better known as the Lincoln Thornton MS).
For fay we sall hythen fownde.
And I ne wote how his land sall fare
Bot lyfe in werre and kare,
When we are broghte to grownde. (ll. 64-69)

[Now we have been together for seven years without getting a child between us; and we shall go from here, and I do not know how this land will fare but live in war and worry when we are in the ground]

While fears surrounding the lack of an heir are often charged with strong economic motives, here all of Octavian’s worries are couched in language focused on the potential plight of his country. More importantly, the romance skillfully employs affect in the scene in what will only be the first of its variety of techniques designed to highlight the subordination of economic concerns in chivalric life. Intense attention is given to the emotions of the couple, and we receive much detail about their deep feelings, the physical changes wrought on them by emotion, and their ability to pick up instinctively on the emotions of the other, all of which are repeated and augmented throughout the romance to differentiate the noble characters from the lesser groups.

In later scenes of the trial of the Empress, the royal banquet celebrating the defeat of the Saracens, and the courtship of Florent and the Saracen princess, we see this focus on emotion renewed. The strategic play on emotions is especially notable when we look at the range and intensity of emotions displayed by the noble characters. From the woe and worry of Octavian and his wife to the games and glee of the celebration of the birth of an heir to the deepest depths of despair upon the potential execution and eventual exile of the Empress, there is a constant connection between the noble characters and their ability to feel deeply.

17 In Chapter Three, we see these familiar themes about the dispensation of an inheritance and the need for an heir in the legend of St. Alexius.
That is not to say that this section of the romance has no economic material. Indeed, one of the mistakes that scholars make when discussing chivalric and mercantile cultures in *Octavian* is to suggest that one is wholly involved with money and one is not. For example, in reference to this romance, Hudson argues that “Clement is characterized by his concern for money” (“Introduction”), while “Florent, on the other hand, is unconcerned with money” (“Introduction”). Or, in the words of another scholar, “men and women of good breeding simply do not concern themselves with money” (Krieg 120). To believe this, however, is to buy into the myth that chivalric literature, such as this very romance, attempts to generate. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that the chivalric culture is just as deeply involved in financial matters as in the purported emotion they show, but their involvement is articulated in very different ways, ways the aristocracy consider acceptable in maintaining their class privilege.

In this tale, we see a variety of orthodox financial behaviors from a chivalric standpoint, focusing on gift-giving and conspicuous consumption. For example, when the empress learns of her husband’s worries, she suggests:

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A ryche abbaye schall 3e do make
For oure swete lady sake,
And landis gyffe þeretill.
And scho will pray hir son so fayre
That we may samen gete an ayere,
This land to welde with skyll. (ll. 76-81)
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[A rich abbey shall you make for our sweet lady’s sake and give lands to it. And she will ask her son so fair that we might beget an heir this land to rule with skill]

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18 This sense of contradictory values is a common attitude expressed in romance criticism. See, for example, R.A. Shoaf, *The Poem as Green Girdle: Commercium in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984).
Here, she draws on the common practice of aristocratic religious endowment, which plays an important part in ideas of the gift economy. In this case, their gift will be dedicated to the Virgin who will then act as intercessor on their behalf with Christ so that they may have a son. Gift-giving is also invoked after the empress gives birth to her twin sons, and Octavian rewards the messengers in high style: “Two maydynes hym þe bodworde broghte-- / Withowttyn gyftes 3ede þay noghte: / Aythire hadde townnes three” [two maidens brought him the tidings, and they did not go hence without any gifts, each one received three towns] (ll. 94-96). Conspicuous consumption is the second area in which we see a great deal of economic activity connected with the aristocratic characters. In celebration of the churching of his wife, Octavian holds an elaborate “full riche feste [feast],” complete with a wide selection of games and entertainment, for a host of kings, dukes, and other important officials.

Importantly, the only time “real” money is mentioned in the opening descriptions of the court is when the wicked mother-in-law bribes the boy to pretend to be the empress’s lover and when the empress is exiled into the wilderness. In the first instance, the offer of a “thowsande pownde” (l. 126) is intended, in part, to make the mother-in-law look worse because of her mercenary character and to set her apart from the other noble characters, as she is the only gentle character who “misuses” money. In the case of the Empress’ exile the function of money has an even more profound symbolic significance. Upon her banishment, “the emperoure gafe hir fowrtyn pownde / Of Florence þat were riche and rownde” [the emperor gave her forty pounds of florins that were rich and round] (ll. 280-281).19 This is significant because the money is necessary

19 Surely the use of the word florins here is meant to resonate with the name, Florent, given to one of the
precisely because she won’t be in the protected environment of the court with its magic economics. Rather, she is symbolically entering the other world, here described as a wilderness, where making her own way will require actual recourse to cash.

Financial dealings are not the only way that the romance works to separate social classes. The bedroom scene between the cook’s knave—who has been paid to impersonate her lover—and the empress offers one of the most powerful early views of class divisions. First, both English versions of the tale, unlike their French source, insist upon the extremely low origins of the pretended lover.\textsuperscript{20} Again, this seems to fit with the general pattern taken by this author to work in terms of extremes, especially in matters of class. In terms of lowliness, the Empress could not have done worse than to bed the filthy kitchen boy. However, the boy’s own reaction to his circumstances is still more provocative. Upon taking up his place in the bed, his discomfort is palpable as he feels an acute sense of being out of place:

\begin{quote}
Into þe ladyes beedd he 3ede, 
He dyd als scho hym badd; 
Bot euir he droghe hym ferre awaye,\textsuperscript{21} 
Full sore þan was he drade. (ll. 143-147)
\end{quote}

[Into the lady’s bed he went, he did as she bade him; but ever he drew himself far away, he was full of dread]

The boy’s discomfort and his desire to separate himself by more physical distance from the Empress are emblematic of the stark differences this author draws between social

\textsuperscript{20} In French Octavian, he is simply referred to as “garcons” (Octovion 43).

\textsuperscript{21} It is worth noting that the Lincoln author adds the more intensive “ferre” (both the Cambridge and the Huntington versions simply state “awaye”) to emphasize the distance that he wants or needs to put between him and the Empress.
groups. It is also telling that the only emotion—a category highly important and varied for the nobility—the boy feels is an overwhelming sense of his own inferiority.

Of all the early signs of division, the most powerful and far-reaching involves the twin birth to the Emperor and Empress. Here, the concept of the twin birth is more than just a convenient romance trope, it is part of the structural logic of the tale itself both in terms of the physical structure of the poem and the primary mechanism through which the author creates a dualist economic philosophy, which permits the aristocratic group to disdain the economic matters which are shown to so involve the lesser characters in the romance. The twin birth, with its suggestion that the boys are of doubtful parentage, also allows us to view the anxiety surrounding the correct usage of money, as one boy is quickly proved royal and disappears for most of the tale, leaving the other to navigate his way to his true heritage through a minefield of economic situations which could lead him to certain disaster but which, instead, always serve to prove his innate nobility.

The twin birth is repeated in the dual abduction of the twins by different animals, a move which necessitates a division in the structure of the story in order to follow the story of each young prince. However, the way in which the poet handles this structural choice, by dividing the story into two parts and first focusing on the narrative of one twin, who stays in the royal milieu, and then moving on to the other, who enters the world of the bourgeois, once again works to highlight the class differences established in the opening of the romance. That this is a conscious choice on the part of the author is clear from the source French Octavian, which uses an interlaced structure switching back and

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22 Of course, we have references to twin births in other narratives, perhaps most obviously in Lai le Freisne, which also shares the Calumniated Wife theme with this romance.
forth between the boys and their fates (Octovion 50). The southern version, on the other hand, chooses to maintain the structure of the original and uses it in the service of presenting the two worlds—chivalric and mercantile—as overlapping and permeable.

Each half of the story depends on a chain of custody for the children after they are abducted, in one case a chain which confirms and upholds the royal status established in the opening of the romance and another which tests those values against those it sets up for the mercantile class, represented by Florent’s foster father, Clement. In the case of the young Octavian, he is abducted by a lioness in a picturesque interlude and taken to live in the king’s court in the Holy Lands, a set of events that provides affirmation after affirmation of his identity as royal offspring.

First, Octavian is abducted by a lioness, an animal associated with nobility and royalty (Salter 85). With such a symbolic relevance, the lioness’ natural desire to protect him and treat him as one of her own whelps, even nursing him, is perfectly explicable. Not only is the lion itself symbolic of royalty, but we are also treated here to the folkloric belief in the inability of the lion to harm someone of royal blood (ll. 349-350), a further proof of Octavian’s true parentage (Salter 85). These metaphorical identifications are later literalized in the scene where the Empress hears a sailor’s tale of an incredible lioness who gives suck to a human child. Immediately, she cries “Mercy, syrris, þat es my childe” (l. 455) as the association with the lioness allows her to make a positive literal identification of her lost son.

After recovering her child, the Empress travels into Jerusalem, where the narrative of Octavian reaches its climax, leaving him and his mother aside for the bulk of the story until the final dénouement. Immediately recognized by the king of Jerusalem,
the Empress is taken into the household of the king and treated as an honored guest. The separation, then, of Octavian from his appropriate milieu is a brief one, and he is quickly reinserted into a royal world. As if to emphasize this passage, he also receives recognition in terms of his class status when he is christened and later knighted:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{The childe \( \hat{p} \)at was so faire and fre} \\
\text{The kyng did it crystened for to be:} \\
\text{Octouyane it highte.} \\
\text{When \( \hat{p} \)e childe was of elde} \\
\text{That he couthe ryde and armes welde,} \\
\text{The kyng dubbede hym to knyghte. (ll. 514-519)}
\end{align*}\]

[The king arranged for the child that was so fair and free to be christened; he was called Octavian. When the child came of age to ride and wield arms, the king had him dubbed a knight]

Not only does Octavian receive all of the formal trappings of his rightful estate of knighthood, but he also receives the ultimate marker of his legitimacy, the name of his father.

While Octavian’s path to regaining his heritage is relatively smooth, the peripatetic path of the second son gives pause to the reader. It is, in fact, the relatively easy and direct path of Octavian that draws attention to the complexity which characterizes that of Florent. If everything that happens to Octavian seems to confirm his identity in terms of symbolic encounters and acts, then what are we to make of the ragtag group with whom Florent becomes involved? The first thing that must strike the reader is the bizarre nature of the path that Florent takes: from ape to knight to outlaws to Clement. Like the opening of the romance, these scenes would be easy to dismiss as romance filler, but, upon a closer examination, there does seem to be a meaningful connection between the figures with whom Florent becomes associated: money. Again, because most class
critiques of the poem pick up with Clement’s purchase of Florent from the outlaws, much of the overall coherence of the poem’s socioeconomic politics is often ignored.

The ape represents Florent’s first break with his mother and, therefore, with his identity, and it is an animal that had a symbolic significance as deep for the medieval audience as does the lion. However, while the lion has the title of the noblest of beasts, the ape is often described in bestiary literature as *turpissima bestia*, the worst of beasts (Miyazaki 35). Indeed, as one scholar notes, “rather than symbolising Florent’s status as a royal prince, the ape—with its connotations of low foolishness—emblematically prefigures the humble, bourgeois, and occasionally comic environment into which the child is delivered by providence” (Salter 90). I would like to develop this a bit more specifically because I think that the ape’s association is more than just “low foolishness” but specifically and importantly connected to monetary vice.

In the definitive work on ape symbolism in the Middle Ages, H.W. Janson offers insight into the use of the ape in art and literature. He argues that “from the end of the thirteenth century on, there was an increasing tendency to define the mother ape not as a ‘generalized’ sinner but as the avaricious rich man or, even more specifically, the usurer” (Janson 36). More to the point, in terms of the argument that I want to advance about Florent’s later residence in the house of a merchant, he writes:

In a sense, this represented quite a logical evolution of the motif, since the image of the mother ape carrying her ‘treasure’ was more suggestive of worldly goods than of pleasures. It also fitted in with the theme of “You Can’t Take It With You,” which had assumed particular importance among the moral teachings of the church as the growth of banking and trade opened up new avenues of material wealth. In any event, the association of the ape with riches, especially ill-gotten riches, became a persistent feature of late medieval moral allegory. (36)
The ape, then, is the worst of beasts in a very particular sense in the late medieval world, a sense that connects it with avarice and monetary abuse, an abuse emanating from a new mercantile context.\textsuperscript{23}

In terms of the chain of persons with whom Florent becomes involved, the ape is just the first step on a complex metonymic chain which bounces Florent from one abuser of money to the next until he lands in the home of his foster-parents, Clement and Gladwin. The only break in this chain is the child’s brief sojourn with a knight, who mainly seems to serve the function of transferring the baby from the ape to the outlaws, as he engages in combat with the ape only to have the rescued baby (and his warhorse) taken from him by the outlaws moments later. However, like so much in this story, this move to the knight is a feint or misdirection on the author’s part to draw our attention to the point being illustrated. Here, there is a brief glimmer for Florent, a promise of a resolution as short and neat of that of his brother. With the knight, he is back in his appropriate place, just like his brother. However, it is the offering and then withdrawing of this neat fate that draws attention to the adventures which follow.

With his brief stay in his rightful place interrupted by the attack of the outlaws, we once again see the focus shifted back to money. In this scene, there is a move to discuss commodification, here in terms of Florent’s own value. Florent’s entrance into a world of mercantile values is predicated on placing a price value on him first. In the case

\textsuperscript{23} This interpretation had wide currency, including England: “Petrus Berchorius, a French mid-fourteenth century cleric whose works constitute one of the most compendious and systematic efforts in this field, was so obsessed with the notion of the ape as the representative of \textit{dives} and \textit{prosperities} that he devoted almost his entire chapter on apes to this one thought, ‘moralising’ even the anatomical details of the animal so as to make them conform to his main thesis. Echoes of this concept may be found as late as the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; in France, there existed a pictorial tradition of the combat of the Virtues and Vices which showed Avarice riding on an ape. This cycle eventually became known in England, too, through the influence of the Paris printers on their colleagues across the Channel” (Janson 36).
of the outlaws, it is not that they don’t recognize Florent’s gentility, but they see it as a
saleable commodity: “It es comyn of gentill blode: / We sall hym selle for mekill gude, /
For golde and syluir enoghe” [he comes of gentle blood: we shall sell him for a lot, for
gold and silver enough] (ll. 565-567). This commodification of Florent is a
misrecognition of Florent’s “true” value in the dominant economic logic of the romance,
a logic which allows true value to be the property of the nobility.

The outlaws continue the chain of Florent’s strange passage by selling the baby to
Clement, “a burgesse of Pareche” (l. 574). Given the set-up of his custodial precursors,
Clement enters the tale in a doubtful light. If the ape and the outlaws are abusers of
money, then how are we to view Clement? In fact, I would posit that these early scenes
set up his characterization, which is the second part of the romance’s economic work.24
After establishing the financial behaviors of the nobility—which to our eyes are based in
obfuscation and sublimation—the author turns his attention to delineating the figure of
the merchant, actively creating and sustaining the idea of a mercantile identity tied to the
cash nexus against which the chivalric identity can be further defined.

Clement, throughout the romance, is characterized by his attention to money
matters, and this initial scene introduces some of the key concepts associated with him,
especially his form of determining value. Clement, ever the canny bourgeoisie, bargains
with the outlaws, who want to receive £40 for the baby. While Glenn Wright, speaking
of the French version, notes that this moment shows a “crude mercantilism” (487), I
would argue that there is a need to parse this scene a bit more. As in the case of Sir

24 In this reading, I obviously differ from Glenn Wright’s assertion that the Lincoln Thornton author has a
“lack of interest in the Clement material” (493).
Amadace, this amount, being connected with the monetary qualification necessary for knighthood, seems a significant detail. That is, in an important sense, this is the right amount of money for the “gentill” Florent, an amount which signifies his status as a knight. Clement, however, sees the price as high, arguing that “full lange may 3e hym halde / Are 3e hym so selle may” [you may have him a long time before you may sell him for that price] (ll. 581-582). Instead of the asking price, Clement offers them half the amount in cash, which they accept. Clement undervalues, or perhaps differently values, Florent in this purchase, showing an eye for a bargain as a good merchant would but, also in the logic of this text, a clear misunderstanding of what the real value of the boy is, a mistake which he repeats throughout the romance. One of Clement’s key functions in the romance is not to simply stand as a contrast, but to actively demonstrate a different standard of valuation than that of the chivalric class, a standard for which he is ridiculed and mocked throughout the tale.

While Clement’s initial encounter with Florent is certainly different than Octavian’s chain of more suitable and natural keepers, his subsequent raising also provides striking parallels, another indication of the single-minded adherence of this text to its central aims. Where the lioness provides for Octavian out of her natural maternal and class instinct, Clement purveys or buys all of the things that Florent needs. He commands a basket to be made for his transport and “a noresche gatt he hym also,/Into Fraunce with hym to go, / That 3ong childe for to fede” [he also got him a wet-nurse to go to France with him in order to feed the young child] (ll. 595-597), thus commodifying

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25 Remember, too, it is the amount that Octavian gives the Empress when she leaves Rome, again what I would argue is a symbolic gesture of her status.
the relationship that the lioness and Octavian enjoy by virtue of shared status and love. After lying to his wife that Florent is the product of an adulterous relationship he had on pilgrimage, he has his wife agree to take care of him as her own son and raise him with their natural child by promising her a rich reward. In the coup de grace, Clement christens the boy Florent (ll. 633), with its clear association with gold pieces. While the christening of his brother as Octavian brings legitimacy and recognition of his true status, Florent’s name works to obscure his status and associate him with values foreign to his own. Thus, Florent achieves a bizarre semblance of his old life complete with father, mother, and a “new” brother, but it is a family far different than that introduced at the start of the romance, and the bulk of the romance treats his difficulties acclimating himself to them and their values.

From this point, the author traces out a similar pattern of division between classes as seen in the first part of the romance, now specifically focusing on Florent’s inability to be a good bourgeois and Clement’s inability to appreciate nobility. Both of these failures center importantly around the use of money and an understanding of value. In the first key episode, Clement decides that Florent has reached the age to learn a trade. The poet writes:

And Florent bytaughte he oxen two,
And bad hym ouir þe bryge go
Vnto a bouchere,

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Florent is one of the alternate spellings offered for florin in the Middle English Dictionary. It is perhaps no accident that this name was chosen given the fact that this coin was also known as a “noble.”

This section of the romance, with its more heavy-handed treatment of class difference, has unsurprisingly been the main focus for most critics who mount a class-based argument about the text. However, as I hope to show in the following analysis of these scenes, there is still more that we might glean from these familiar episodes, especially when we view them within the critical framework that the first part of the romance establishes.
To lere his crafte for to do—
Als hym was neuir kind þerto,
To vse swylke mystere.  (ll. 646-651)

[And he gave Florent two oxen and told him to go over the bridge to a butcher in order to learn his craft, but he was never of the kind to follow that trade]

While Clement hopes that Florent will parlay his team of oxen into a profession, Florent proves more adept at playing the noble. On his way to the butcher, Florent comes across a squire with a falcon, and he is immediately overcome with a desire for the bird and ends up trading his two oxen for the bird, a deal which has been characterized as “improvident” by many critics (Bamberry 370). Interestingly enough, however, this is not a bad deal in monetary terms, suggesting that the idea that nobles are “unconcerned with money” (Hudson) is suspect. Rather, it would be more accurate to say that they cultivate a different way of manifesting their concern with money, determining value and using cash in different ways than other classes.

Moreover, rather than in the moment of purchase, I would argue that it is the overlooked aftermath of the transaction that these concepts of economic difference are pursued most aggressively. Right away, Clement is irate because of the loss, calling Florent “Thefe” and giving him a severe beating. The only value that Clement can see in the bird is as a source of food through hunting as he threatens Florent that “with odur mete shalt þou not leue / But þat þys glede will þe yeue” [you shall not live on any other meat except that which this bird gets you] (ll. 679-680). His view of the bird’s utility is

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28 For example, see Robin S. Oggins, The King and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2004), especially 110, note 42 of chapter 4, notes 8 and 26 of chapter 3, and note 11 of chapter 2 for pricing information on hawks and comparative prices for other goods and animals.

29 At this point in the text, the Lincoln manuscript has suffered a great deal of damage, so I will quote from the Cambridge manuscript regarding the oxen and horse episodes of the narrative. I feel safe in doing so as the damaged portion begins and ends at points corresponding with the Cambridge text, and they are quite
especially notable because Florent’s desire for the bird is purely aesthetic, beginning with his initial perception of the hawk as a “semely syghte” (l.654).\(^{30}\) It was love at first sight, and Florent’s comments about the bird all revolve around its appearance, especially the way its feathers lay. In defense of his purchase, Florent cries:

\begin{quote}
Wolde ye stonde now and beholde
How feyre he can hys fedurs folde,
And how louely they lye,
Ye wolde pray God with all your mode
That ye had solde halfe your gode,
Soche anodur to bye. (ll. 691-696)
\end{quote}

[Would you stand now and see how fairly he can fold his feathers and how lovely they lie. You would pray God with all your heart that you had sold half of all your goods to buy another such one]

Florent paints a picture that focuses on aesthetic value and ignores commonsense monetary logic.\(^{31}\)

The falcon is, of course, a well acknowledged sign of nobility, one of the many display items that signify courtly status.\(^{32}\) As Robin Oggins writes, “the sport of falconry... implied the possession of wealth and status by those who pursued it” (110).\(^{33}\) More importantly is the stipulation that the use of the bird is important; that is, not similar throughout, mainly differing in phrasing and vocabulary.

\(^{30}\) Adding to this interpretation, this phrase is repeated in l. 657 where the hawk is described as “semly was to see.”

\(^{31}\) Although the hawk might be worth half of Clement’s goods, it would obviously be against Clement’s best financial interest to actually pay half of his goods in order to obtain a hawk which could be of no great utilitarian value.

\(^{32}\) For the hawk’s symbolic value in this narrative, see David Salter, \textit{Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature} (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 92-93.

\(^{33}\) This assumption of status was such that “even in 1361, to take another small but curious example, a finder of a stray hawk might only keep it, if the owner could not be found, ’sil soit gentil homme’; otherwise it was to go to the sheriff” (Du Boulay 67).
everyone receives status from the falcon, just those who possess it for the right reasons. Again Oggins writes, “for those who did not engage in falconry for a living, the practice of the sport was a mark of social prestige” (109-110). Because Florent wants the hawk for its beauty, he gains social prestige by obtaining it. In fact, “medieval falconry was an almost perfect example of conspicuous consumption: it was expensive, time-consuming, and useless” (Oggins 111). Clement, on the other hand, with his crudely utilitarian motives, merely shows his lack of capacity for nobility.

The focus on aesthetics is also not an accidental one here, as the sport of falconry paid close attention to the appearance of the bird, both in its physical upkeep and its accoutrements. John Cummins writes, “great attention was paid to maintaining the condition of the plumage” (209). Even when the bird was damaged, as was common given the vigorous activity of hunting, there was a desire to fix the bird with “an invisible mend” so that there would remain no trace to mar the bird’s appearance (Cummins 209). The focus on the bird’s appearance reached such lengths that some hawks “were sometimes kept simply as decorative royal accoutrements” (Cummins 191).

In a second incident designed to demonstrate the same basic disconnect in values, Clement entrusts Florent with £40 to take to his brother employed as a moneychanger, and Florent proves once again that his heritage is noble. Rather than take the money to his brother, he uses it to buy a horse. Once again, Clement responds by labeling him a thief and moving to beat him for his disobedience. Again, the “knightly” amount of forty pounds appears when he uses the money to buy the chief marker of knightly identity, a horse. This seems an especially apt interpretation here because Florent insists on paying more than the horse is worth, a move that is often connected with his display of nobility.
through largesse (Salter 94). However, I think it may be more important in terms of its status as the most important knightly prerequisite and the system of valuation it displays.

First, Florent once again recurs to aesthetics rather than monetary value in his initial impressions of the animal. He sees a “feyre stede” (l. 715), which “was whyte as any mylke, / The brydyll reynys were of sylke, / The molletys gylte they were” [was as white as milk with bridle reins made of silk and gilt bosses] (ll. 718-720). Also, given the price of forty pounds, I think that we might Florent’s purchase not as an overpayment for the horse (Wright 491) but a more accurate assessment of its real worth. In this regard, we might usefully compare this scene to the earlier one where Clement buys Florent from the outlaws. In stark contrast to Clement’s valuing of his own gentle purchase, Florent proves himself noble by paying what the horse is worth in terms of status value, which is much more, both literally and metaphorically, than its market value.

How far these episodes go in defining Florent’s character or, to put it another way, how much these performative financial moments make up his character is demonstrated by his inability to “learn” to be different despite the strong motivation to the contrary. He receives severe beatings on account of his failures, but in a striking scene, showing the extent to which his attitudes are part of his natural self, he picks himself up off the floor and immediately moves to straighten the feathers of his bird after being beaten for making such a bad bargain in buying it. Far from repentant, Florent is shown as simply and instinctively ignoring financial value in favor of the symbolic value the bird’s aesthetics represent.

In addition to attempting to establish a chivalric identity free from market contamination, these episodes with Clement serve the more important function of
demonstrating the necessity of the idea of a mercantile identity against which the 
chivalric one can be constructed. That is, it is only in contrast to the supposedly 
straightforward and utilitarian profit ideals of Clement that Florent can be noble. We can 
see in formation in this romance those attitudes that Adam Smith will later 
straightforwardly call the “disadvantages of the commercial spirit”: “the minds of men 
are contracted and rendered incapable of elevation, education is despised or at least 
neglected, and heroic spirit is almost utterly extinguished” (20). Clement’s actions of 
selling and valuing, then, serve to create him as a merchant and establish a baseline of 
mercantile identity for this romance.34

After Florent fails miserably at ascertaining market value ideals, he is given the 
opportunity to fulfill his destiny when the Saracens, championed by a terrifying giant, 
conveniently invade France.35 Full of courage and bravado, and possessed of a horse, the 
only thing Florent lacks to confront the giant is armor. Clement possesses armor, but he 
and Florent don’t see eye to eye on its use value. Upon hearing of Florent’s desire to 
fight, Clement warns him that “and þou þerof speke, / I trow I sall thyn hede breke” [and 
if you speak about it, I will break your head] (ll. 762-763). Clement desires to protect 
him from the giant, but in doing so, he also displays his lack of understanding of 
Florent’s desire to prove and test his mettle. After finally giving in, Clement produces 
his armor:

Clement broghte for the schelde and spere
That were vnsemly for to were,

34 In this sense, the work being done here can be analyzed usefully in Foucauldian terms, in which actions 
are translated to an identity for the purposes of containing that identity through the mechanisms of 
knowledge (i.e. power).

35 Here we return to the Lincoln Thornton manuscript.
Soyty and alle vnclene,
A swerd he broghte þe child byforne
Þat seuen [3ere] byfore had noghte bene borne,
Ne drawne, and that was sene. (ll. 798-803)

[Clement brought forth a shield and spear that were unseemly to wear, sooty and all dirty; a sword he brought before the child that had not been used in seven years nor even drawn and that was seen]

The poor condition of the armor not only shows Clement’s own lack of chivalric prowess, a reading well-attested in criticism of this romance (Krieg 117), but more importantly for my argument, it also stands as a visual proof of his disregard for its value. Unlike the beautifully maintained feathers of Florent’s hawk or the milky white perfection of Florent’s steed, the rusty and sooty armor reveals Clement’s lack of appreciation for the beauty of the chivalric life and the aesthetic value system that characterizes it.

Despite his poor armor, Florent is able to defeat the giant and move decisively into the chivalric world. This move also means that Clement enters the world of chivalry, and the author uses this entrance to set up a famous series of scenes which parallel Florent’s inability to adopt mercantile values, this time in reverse. Over and over again, Clement proves himself incapable of comprehending concepts of chivalric value precisely because of his mercantile outlook. More disturbingly, in terms of the class politics of the romance, this series of gaffes is accompanied by laughter at Clement’s expense, something not seen in the scenes where Florent misuses money.  

36 Humor is a common focus of critical attention in Octavian. See Krieg, Simons, and Wright among others.

37 Some critics, such as Harriet Hudson, argue that there is humor in the scenes where Florent sells the objects at less than their value, but this seems unconvincing in the ideological schematic of the northern version of the romance.
The first scene of laughter occurs during the armor scene which I have just described. It is such a disturbing scene that it is worth quoting in its entirety:

Clement drewe þe swerd bot owte it nolde,
Gladwyn his wife sold þe schawebereke holde,
And bothe righte fast þay drewe;
And when þe swerede owte glente
Bothe vnto þe erthe þay wente:
Than was þer gamen ynoghe.
Clement felle to the bynke so faste
Þat mouthe and nese al tobraste,
And Florent stode and loghe.
Grete gamen it es to telle
How þay bothe to þe erthe felle,
And Clement lay in swoghe. (ll. 804-815)

If we were just faced with the picture of the tug of war over the sword, we might view this scene as simply comic, and this is the traditional interpretation of this scene. Even if both of the parents fell, we might still view this as risible. However, the combination of the details of serious bodily harm combined with the laughter serve to make this a more problematic moment. Florent, who has been raised by this couple and believes himself to be their natural son, stands laughing at their ineptitude even though his father has busted his face open and has fainted on the floor. This laughter, like that which comes later, is, as Hudson suggests, “a device…employed to direct the audience’s response” (“Introduction”); it is, in effect, a guide to reading the divisions that have been presented heretofore in the tale. Clement and Florent do not merely have different

38 Typical of this view is Simons, who describes the scene as “slapstick” (109). Perhaps more extreme is Krieg, who describes this scene as “nothing short of hilarious” (118).
systems of value, but one of those systems, Florent’s, is shown to be clearly superior, a fact enforced by the careful manipulation of laughter in the dénouement of the romance (Krieg 121). More importantly for the structural plan of this romance, this laughter, like that which comes later, is the first step in the cohesion that will replace the division as Florent takes up his rightful place as a noble.

Clement’s second trial involves a more clearly financial disconnect between his ideals and those of the court, a court which is synonymous with the emperor’s court introduced earlier, where finance is contained carefully within prescribed orthodox models of gifting and consumption. The difference, and it is an important one, is that those values are now better defined and more valued because the mercantilism of Clement has been carefully brought into being for the purpose of throwing the chivalric values into relief. Taken to the court after Florent’s victory over the knight, Clement and Florent enjoy the hospitality of the assembled kings. Rather than enjoy the celebration, Clement worries about how much of the cost of this extravagance he will have to pay for. In order to assure that he does not bear the cost alone, Clement “tuke þaire mantills alle / And to his howse þam bare” [took all of their cloaks to his house] (ll. 1069-1070). Clement’s plan to hold the cloaks of the kings as surety for their payment, summed up in his heartfelt and solemn message to the kings that “By Goddes daye, / For 3oure mete most 3e paye, / Or 3e gete þam no more” [by God’s day, you must pay for your meat or you won’t get them back] (ll. 1074-1076), is met by more laughter on the part of the court. While this laughter is not as cruel as Florent’s earlier laughter at his foster father’s physical injury, it is still clearly a derisive laughter claimed at the expense of Clement (Hudson) and uniting the kings and court as those who laugh.
While Clement has been soothed by the kings that he will not bear the cost for this feast, he still has not overcome his own profit-minded ideals. After the meal is over, Clement takes out his purse and throws thirty florins on the table, declaring that “I may paye for no more” (l. 1106). The absolute insensibility of this action, more suitable to an inn than a court, is highlighted by the author’s sarcastic commentary, “Clement was curtaise and wyse, / He wend alle had bene marchandyse” [Clement was courteous and wise; he thought everything was merchandise] (ll. 1108-1109). And, as Sylvia Thrupp notes, “the courtesy that was nurtured among the greater families [in late medieval England] remained of a different order and served as a subtle means of asserting superiority” (303). Far from courteous and wise, both prerogatives of the nobility in this tale, Clement’s actions, then, prove him to be completely out of place among this group, who cannot comprehend his desire to pay for the priceless hospitality. As one scholar writes of these hospitality rituals, “the function that the bonding between guest and host had in solidifying class membership and unity remained a crucial aspect of the practice” (Cowell 31). Therefore, Clement proves he does not belong by paying, and the others prove that they do by laughing at him. Here, again, “at Clement loghe the knyghtes alle, / So did þe kynges in þe haulle” [all the knights laughed at Clement, and so did the kings in the hall] (ll. 1110-1111). By identifying those who laugh as the knights and the kings, Florent’s earlier laughter can be reread as a sign of his belonging before the fact.

As in the earlier scene with the kitchen boy, there is also a move to physically place Clement in the wrong position. The poet writes:

And Clement, for þe childes sake,  
Full faire to courte þay gan take  
And gafe hym full riche wede;  
On softe seges was he sett
Amonge grete lordes at þe mete. (ll. 1041-1045)

[and, for the child’s sake, they took Clement to the court and gave him rich clothing; On soft cushions he was set amongst great lords at the meal]

Just as the cook’s knave was out of place in the Empress’ bed, so Clement is out of place among this noble company, and his behavior at the feast only serves to provide the proof that this physical dislocation is related to a more profound social dislocation.

If the unifyng power of the laughter were not enough to identify Florent, the author chooses to make this scene the catalyst for the revelation of Florent’s true identity, something which does not happen until the end in French Octavian and Southern Octavian (Octovion 195-196). Here, however, it is as if the text will no longer bear the weight of the increasingly ridiculous connection between Florent and Clement. After Clement’s last gaffe, the Emperor asks, “3onge knyghte, telle þou me / If 3one man thyn owen fadir be” [young knight, tell me if that man is your father] (ll. 1116-1117).

Florent’s answer is quickly forthcoming, as he says

Sir, lufe hade I neuir hym too
Als I solde to my fadir doo,
Neuir in herte ne wille.
Bot of all the men þat euir sawe I,
Moste lufes myn herte 3owe sekirly. (ll. 1120-1123)

[Sir, I never had any love for him as I should for my father, neither in heart or will. But of all the men that I have ever seen, my heart most loves you]

Florent reveals that he has never loved his father as a father, and, in fact, he has only ever felt that love for the Emperor, who is, not coincidentally, his real father, Octavian. This move to the language of love also brings him fully within the circle of nobility through his display of high emotion, something we have seen demonstrated throughout this romance. So, it is actually through a combination of Florent’s knightly bearing , his deep
feeling, and his “father’s” social gaffes that he is revealed to be the son of the Emperor, terminating with his new christening as “Florent of Rome” (l. 1147) to distinguish him from his bourgeois past as “Florent of Paresche” (l. 1038).

Clement does not go completely unrewarded in this romance, but his reward is a reward demonstrative of his status. Rather than change his social position through his new connections, Clement receives monetary compensation: “The emperoure gafe Clement welthis fele, / To lyfe in reches and in wele, / Aye nowe for euirmore” [The emperor gave Clement much wealth to live in riches and bounty for now and forever] (ll. 1146-1148). As Harriet Hudson notes, “the Emperor makes Clement a handsome settlement for life, but Octavian is not a fantasy of social advancement” (“Introduction”).

These bouts of laughter importantly characterize the reunion scenes of Florent with his family and his place in society. His earlier laughter at his foster father’s accident and his laughter with the kings at Clement’s social ineptitude at the feast serve both to unite him with his peers and legitimate the pattern of social separation advocated throughout the romance. By laughing at Clement, the nobles, including Florent, show their united sense of values, a set of values in which Clement can never hope to share but one whose presence he has been created to legitimate.39

39 One view of Octavian sees the use of the merchant figure as follows: “In the case of the distorted courtly perception of the vilein we witness the treatment of those who cannot be included within the ambit of the courtly yet who cannot be ignored because of their vital economic role” (Moffat 121). While I agree that the perception is distorted, I would suggest that it is purposefully distorted in a self-serving fashion for the aristocracy, allowing the merchant to embody a financial ethic that they don’t want to own as a part of their own ethos. Rather than the bourgeois provoking jealousy and asserting themselves economically as Moffat argues, I would counter that it is not that they “cannot be ignored” but that the upper classes will not let them be ignored because they need them to construct their own identity.
III.

While the northern texts focus on the idea of social opposition, the Southern Octavian works very hard at reinterpreting the source material from the French Octavian to achieve a rapprochement between the aristocratic and mercantile worlds, ultimately suggesting that their economic values are far from incompatible. It does this in two key ways: 1) by characterizing the noble characters in a much more pedestrian manner than their northern version counterparts and 2) by recuperating the character of Clement and making him, in many important ways, the moral center of the romance. Through this double movement of raising and leveling, the romance both advances a more egalitarian worldview and rejects the proposition that the mercantile identity is defined solely by adherence to the cash nexus.

Again, as in its northern counterpart, the southern version is full of details that may seem like meaningless romance hodgepodge, but they actually fit coherently into the larger economic logic of the tale. For example, in the opening scenes of the romance, where the northern author is already working to distinguish the high from the low and create a strong economic differentiation between classes, the southern author is attempting to elide these very differences. One way the poet achieves this elision is through the structure of the poem, one that allows him to weave his characters, high and low, and worlds, chivalric and mercantile, together. The author chooses to use an interlaced structure as he follows the paths of the two boys after they are exiled with their mother from the court.40 While this constant switching has been criticized by some as

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40 McSparran’s assertion that there is both independent access to the French source as well as borrowing from the northern version in the southern implies that the author would have had the option of borrowing either of the structural schemes.
making the tale more disjointed, it has the opposite effect from the northern Octavian, which chooses to separate the tales of the boys completely, in terms of its thematic significance. Rather than highlighting the divisions between the two worlds from the outset, this tale weaves them together, again creating a sense of more complexity and less stark difference than the northern author would like to relate.

In addition to structural techniques, the author also focuses on the presentation of a variety of characters with an eye to leveling social differences rather than exaggerating them as does the northern poet. The episode of the cook’s knave shows one important example of his technique. First, the knave’s motive is more complex than in Northern Octavian, where he has a thousand pounds offered to him. Here, the mother-in-law indeed offers him a payment, but the amount remains unspecified; it is simply referred to as a “warsoun” [reward] (l. 159). Moreover, she convinces the boy that the emperor will “þe auance, / And make þe a man” [advance you and make you a man] (ll. 167-168). In essence, she promises him his freedom, as he will become a “man,” a much stronger motive than the cash reward of the Northern text. Also, the poet makes no reference to the boy feeling uncomfortable in the bed of the queen, something that all three versions of Northern Octavian insist upon. Here, the boy simply “Into hyr bedde… gan crepe” (l. 176). Given that this is one of the scenes in the romance with the greatest verbal correspondence with the northern version, this choice seems weighted (Octovion Imperator 34).

The Southern Octavian also complicates some of the scenes involving the noble characters early in the romance, most notably the figure of the knight. In Northern Octavian, he not only serves to provide a point of exchange between the ape and the
outlaws, having the prowess to defeat the ape and the ability to attract the outlaws because of his status, but also serves as the potential point of noble reclamation for Florent. Here, however, we are given more information about the knight, especially in terms of his views of Florent. In a scene reminiscent of the Robin Hood ballads, the chief of the outlaws sends a group of bowmen after the knight to ascertain if “he hadde ony tresour to spende” (l. 365). The knight’s answer to this question is interesting, especially given that he is the only character in the Northern Octavian chain of custody who has no unsavory financial connection, allowing him to avoid monetary taint and maintaining the northern poet’s strict socioeconomic parameters. In this version, however, he answers “I haue no tresour but þys chylde” [I have no treasure except this child] (l. 368). By commodifying the child, he, like the ape, outlaws, and Clement, is connected to more mercantile views in relation to the child. His own knighthood also seems of a much more pedestrian variety, as the author suggests that, after the encounter with the outlaws, “the kny3t was glad to skapen so, / As euery man ys, from hys foo” [the knight was glad to so escape as every man is from his foe] (ll. 379-380). Rather than carving out a space for the knight as special by virtue of his status, he is, instead just like “euery man.”

In the thread of the story that follows the empress and Octavian, both of the English versions show intriguing correspondences against the French version of the story (Octovion 46-47). In the French version, the empress arrives in Jerusalem and disappears until the end of the story (Octovion 47); however, in both of the English versions, there is a significant description of her life in the city. Of course, in the northern version, this description is focused on her quick return to her appropriate station, but in the Southern Octavian, the author adds in some extra details intended to once again complicate rather
than simplify the class politics of the tale. First, the lady puts herself to work after recovering her son. The author writes:

In Ierusalem sche gan dwelle,
And made cloþes of gold & pelle,
And Crystyne marchauntys hy my3t sel[le]
That sche gan werche,
All vestementys þat felle
To holy cherche. (ll. 619-624)

[She started living in Jersualem and made clothes of gold and fine cloth. And Christian merchants might sell her wares, all the vestments that belonged to holy Church]

Rather than have the lady move magically back into her former milieu of royalty, the author has her take up a craft and involve herself in mercantile activity. This is especially notable because this activity continues even after she is taken in by the King of Jerusalem. In his palace, rather than be the honored guest of the Northern Octavian, she continues to ply her trade as a seamstress, now in the service of the royal family. Moreover, her labor is ennobled by the fact that it is performed first in the service of the church and afterward in the service of the royal family.

These moves to complicate and create linkages rather than divisions are nowhere more evident than in the scenes that involve Clement and Florent in the romance, the exact place in the Northern Octavian where the romance becomes the most divergent in its presentation of chivalric and mercantile economic and world views. From the start, Clement is portrayed as a much more complex and sympathetic character. First, as Glenn Wright notes, there is simply “more of Clement in SO,” with twenty percent of this version focusing on the “Clement” scenes versus thirteen percent in the French and

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41 Because of the strong verbal parallels between the northern and southern versions of this scene, these shifts in emphasis stand out even more.
northern versions (494). And when Clement does appear, he seems a far different figure than that of the northern romance. For example, at the purchase of Florent, he does not offer to bargain for the boy. Rather, he simply pays “well many floreyne” [many florins] (l. 396). Rather than highlighting his cheapness and his undervaluing of Florent’s gentility as the northern author does, the Southern Octavian author simply presents him as having paid a good amount of money for the boy. We also receive an explanation for the choice of name in this text, which further removes Clement from a commodifying position in the text. Rather than being his choice, Florent was printed on a name tag worn by the boy (Octovion Imperator 98), making his name a function of his own background rather than an imposition of Clement’s. All of this early action reduces the emphasis on Clement as a profit-hungry merchant, suggesting a more complex and nuanced view of mercantile behavior.

Clement is also given additional description, both physical and occupational, that serve to complicate his character and steer attention away from his connection with a purely cash nexus. First, he is described more specifically in this version as a butcher, so that he is given an identity and a profession beyond an anonymous mercantile profile.42 Moreover, he is described in superlative terms, suggesting a stronger sense of Clement’s worth than we receive in the Northern version. The poet writes, “of þat crafte he bare þe prys” [he was the best of that craft] (l. 399). We are also told that he is physically powerful, “a man of my3t [might]” (l. 403) and “ten foot of length” (l. 408). So, in addition to being the best butcher, he is also a superlative physical specimen, possessed of more than ordinary strength and height. All of these additional details serve to

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42 A butcher was not a high status mercantile occupation (Thrupp 73).
humanize Clement and offer a more nuanced characterization, making it more difficult to view him as a cash-obsessed caricature of a merchant.

There is even a different handling of the key scenes involving both Florent’s failures to learn to be bourgeois and Clement’s failures to be knightly. First, there is much more background given to these scenes, a detail which is usually overlooked in interpretations of these texts. In Northern Octavian, we are simply told that Florent is sent out because he has reached the age to learn a trade. There is no attempt to offer any further explanation for the act nor are any instructions relayed. In the southern version, however, we are privy to Clement’s motivations, giving him an emotional and psychological depth absent in his northern counterpart. As an explanation for his decision to send the kids to work, Clement tells his wife that:

For ydell hyne for to fede  
Therto hadde we lytyll nede,  
Ech man behoued to do som dede  
For hys sustynanunce. (ll. 673-676)

[We have little need to feed idle lads; it behooves each man to do some deed for his sustenance]

In this exchange, Clement places a high value on the ethic and importance of work, making a clear comparison between industry and idleness. In doing so, he gives a clear moral dimension to the concept of work, something far beyond the merely financial. Again, we have an attempt to nuance the mercantile ethos, this time, by invoking the concept of morals; the author opposes the Northern Octavian view that emotions, morals, and thought are the province of the nobility.
In addition to moralizing work, Clement also gives Florent very specific instructions on how to sell the oxen, where in Northern Octavian, Florent is just handed the oxen and sent to sell them. In Southern Octavian, Clement tells him:

Boy, selle hem no3t
For non eggenges,
Of wat man þey be bo3t
Þan sexty schyllynges. (ll. 687-690)

[Boy, do not sell them to any man, despite whatever urging, for less than sixty shillings]

Clement tells Florent what the market value of the cattle is, and he promises to beat him if he sells them for less. This scene is reminiscent of Thrupp’s assertion that “much of the moral teaching addressed to the young was focused upon the need of making what was considered prudent use of money” (166). Moreover, this more elaborate set-up allows two important things to be established in the text. First, by talking about the price, there is an attempt on Clement’s part to establish a shared understanding of appropriate value. Second, the beating is also rationalized as a known consequence of a specific behavior, the underselling of the oxen. The beating is presented as a surprise consequence in the northern version, making Clement’s character less sympathetic because he sends the boy off with no instructions and then beats him senseless for failing to do the right thing.

In the southern version, however, while the end of this episode is fairly similar to that in Northern Octavian, in that Florent is beaten by Clement, the elaborate set-up makes the scene more about a mutual misunderstanding of value, with Clement not

43 Glenn Wright is unusual in his citation of this set-up—as this section is usually ignored—but his point is a far different one, as he sees the extra information given by Clement as setting up the “joke” that follows when Florent fails to heed the advice, a classic fabliaux tactic in Wright’s reading (494).
understanding the two oxen for a hawk equation and Florent not seeing that the hawk does not equal sixty shillings to Clement. In Northern Octavian, on the contrary, there is never a question about Florent’s concepts of value; they are simply affirmed by the absence of a concrete alternative paradigm. Here, Clement’s sense of value is given a voice and a rationalization rather than simply being discounted as inferior.

Clement’s values are further supported by other details in the text. For example, in his use of the hawk, Florent follows his foster father’s values (Bamberry 370). Unlike the Northern version’s Florent, who merely prizes the hawk for its appearance, this Florent takes his father’s suggestions about hunting to heart and uses the bird to acquire prey, once bringing five pheasants to his foster father. The aesthetic register of value is absent in this account, with no attention given to the beauty of the bird or the tending of his feathers. This is an important moment in the text because it not only affirms Clement’s values of work and value but it also allows those values to be compatible with those of the chivalric class by having Florent use the knightly bird for utilitarian purposes.

Having made these small gains in the training of Florent, Clement is not sure that they could not do even better in the utilization of Florent’s talents. He repeats his injunction against idleness and decides that “Florent schall lerne to change moneye” (l. 785). Of course, as before, Florent uses the proffered goods in ways that are vastly different than what his foster father advises. Here, however, the exchange of the money for the horse is presented in a more complex way than in Northern Octavian, which

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44 Bamberry offers a reading of the southern version as one which further accentuates Florent’s superiority, which I find rather odd given what seem to be clear movements on the author’s part to soften rather than sharpen distinction.
seems to muddy the waters of value determination. This horse—unlike the northern version’s milky steed with glorious trappings—is described simply as a coal black steed, avoiding the aesthetic emphasis of the northern version. The horse is also specifically described as having been stolen, making its passage to Florent tainted. Finally, there is no emphasis on Florent’s largesse or in his ability to know the correct price for the horse. Rather, Florent simply gives the man the ten pounds of sterling that he has. Instead of highlighting Florent’s innate appreciation for beauty and revealing his innate noble economic behaviors, this episode instead makes it seem as if Florent has simply been had by the canny thief. The episode draws critical fire from McSparran, who can only assume a “bungled treatment” on the part of the poet (46). However, given the rest of the evidence, it seems in keeping with the poet’s attempts to flatten distinctions and eliminate aristocratic economic distinctions.

Although there is a less clear distinction between the values of Florent and Clement, it is not non-existent. Florent and Clement are still shown to clash over the appropriate use of cash, but these differences are softened by the carefully constructed context offered by the poet. The romance, then, does not seek to deny social difference; rather, it seems more interested in creating a nuanced view of it. The differences between Florent and his foster family are still enough to provoke suspicion on the part of the wife, here presented as an intelligent and sober woman rather than as the rustic companion of the Northern Octavian. Right away, the wife notices that Florent’s behavior suggests that of a gentleman, and she demands to know the truth from her husband. Upon hearing how he came upon the child, she even manages to put together his true identity based on what she knows of the story of the calumniated empress, here presented as the daughter of the
king of their country, France. Her command of knowledge, especially about the workings of the royal family, serve both to highlight her intelligence and decrease the distance between her world and the world of the nobility in the romance.

Even after learning the true identity of the boy, they still keep him working, suggesting that they see no inherent disconnect between nobility and labor. The poet writes how “that wyf hym tau3t markes & poundes, / He purueyde haukes and houndys” [the wife taught him about marks and pounds; he sold hawks and hounds] (ll. 889-890). While this is a more genteel profession in terms of his merchandise, Florent is again connected with mercantile activity, most specifically his learning about the value of money, his being “tau3t markes & poundes.” More importantly, unlike the northern version, here Florent can be taught, suggesting that his innate nobility does not inhibit his ability to actively participate in the financial world. Here, then, we see another union of the two systems of value, one that suggests that the two worlds can and do achieve economic rapprochement, an important move in a text which delineates identity through financial performances.

While the poet works to make gentle characters, such as Florent and his mother, more conversant and at ease in the world of work, he also does the same for Clement in the world of chivalry. This is most notable in the scene where Florent wants to fight the giant. Rather than threaten to break his head, as in Northern Octavian, Clement instead supports him and wishes him god’s blessing in the coming fight. More remarkably, Clement plays an active role in seeking knighthood for the boy, here serving as his intercessor with the king. Clement says, “3yf our kyng wyll her my steuene / þou schalt be made kny3t” [if our king will hear my voice, you shall be made a knight] (ll. 995-996).
While the Northern texts present Florent’s knighthood as the result of his own prowess (and thus proof of his nobility), he is granted knighthood in the Southern Octavian on the basis of his father’s (a butcher) application to the king. As Glenn Wright argues, the effect of these changes in the text elevate Clement “whose nurture is suddenly seen as relevant to Florent’s warrior mettle” (496).

The armor, too, which serves as a symbol in the Northern Octavian of Clement’s lack of value for the knighthood and its aesthetically based values, is here presented in a far different light. As Bamberry notes, this text “retains some of the original decrepitude of the arms, but…tries to praise them as good ones” (371).\(^45\) It is still not the best-looking armor, but the description is toned down and Florent acknowledges that “hyt ys strong & wyll well dure” [it is strong and will hold up well] (l. 1019). Again, a scene which is used to separate the characters in the Northern version is turned in the Southern version into a chance to bring the characters closer together and affirm a shared set of standards and values, something made clear by Clement’s cheerleading on the sidelines during Florent’s encounter with the giant.

Finally, the banquet scenes in the Northern Octavian, where Clement shows his singular profit-mindedness, are radically altered in this version. While the basic facts of Clement’s initial “kidnapping of the cloaks” remain the same, the king’s response to Clement’s gaffe is much more conciliatory. He calls Clement “my frend” and promises to pay for all. Even though there is a mention of laughter, it does not carry the same

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\(^{45}\) While I agree with her observation, my own reading of this scene diverges from hers in a key way. Bamberry wants to argue that this change in the armor, and the other changes in the southern version, function to elevate and “upgrade” Florent. I, however, would argue that these changes reflect much more on the figure of Clement in the romance.
sinister sense as in the northern version, in large part, because of the absence of the sword pulling scene, where Florent laughs at his injured father. With no precedent for the laughter, it is a milder presence in the romance, and Clement’s status as “frend” even suggests that it might be a shared laughter, a laughing with merchants instead of laughing at them. Also, there is no follow-up scene in which Clement tries to pay for his dinner. Thus, the author of this version greatly reduces both the number and intensity of the “Clement as buffoon” episodes, suggesting a desire to link him to the chivalric world through his foster-son rather than exclude him from it (Wright 495).

This attempt to link Clement to the chivalric world is something that is formalized in his reward in this text. Rather than the monetary reward of the northern text, “þat day Clement was made kny3t / For hys erdedes wys & wy3t” [that day Clement was made a knight for his deeds wise and brave] (ll. 1807-1808). Here, Clement actually moves up in social class rather than simply being moved aside for the entrance of the new-old father Octavian.46 In the end, I think it becomes clear that this is what the romance has been building up to in its movements to elide differences between the chivalric and mercantile worlds; unlike the northern version, this is a fantasy of social mobility.47 The permeability of the social barriers is the final proof of the potential for compatible and overlapping values. Unlike the northern version, which insists on a complete opposition of values in order to maintain class separation and the dominance of aristocratic privilege,

46 We might usefully compare this to the finale of Havelok, as does Harriet Hudson, where Grim and his sons receive similar rewards upon Havelok’s return to power.

47 This idea seems even more likely if we take into account the general critical agreement that this text was written by Thomas Chestre, the author of Sir Launfal, another text rife with economic fantasy.
this romance holds out the possibility for a world that allows movement between classes, a world where a butcher might conceivably become a knight.

IV.

To return to the opening of my chapter, I want to emphasize the necessity for making sense of the appearance of Clement in this romance. In an immense courtly literature, Clement is one of the very few commoners to receive significant attention, and it must be the business of the critic to ascertain why this might be. As I have suggested, the most compelling reason seems to relate to his identity as a merchant, both in its status as an emerging identity position itself and in its relation to other social identities, most specifically the chivalric class. In the terms of the argument advanced in the first chapter, there is a social problem created by the breakdown in functional class structures and their replacement with monetary markers of status. In the face of this problem, the northern and southern versions of this romance advance two potential solutions: opposition and rapprochement.

In the case of the Northern Octavian, the poet chooses to emphasize the differences between the chivalric and mercantile groups by focusing on the innate nature of noble behavior and deemphasizing the brute equalizing force of cash by focusing on its “right” use. In this schematic, Clement serves a twofold purpose: 1) to establish the idea of a uniquely mercantile identity focused on the cash nexus and 2) to use that mercantile identity to reify a non-financial chivalric identity, thus maintaining the class privilege of the aristocracy. Because this manuscript, the Lincoln Thornton, was produced in a
context very similar to that of the Ireland manuscript described in Chapter 1, it is useful to assume that some of the same issues are at work. That is, it is in the interest of a gentry class, which aspires to and identifies with an aristocratic set of ideals, to support a paradigm which protects their privileges from an encroaching bourgeois set. In many ways, I think it was in the interest of such a group that a mercantile identity be created and assigned so that the fictions of innate status could be sustained in the face of spreading wealth that threatened to erase such distinctions.

In the case of the Southern Octavian, we find the poet offering a very different solution. Rather than focus on class divisions by way of the presentation of a univalent mercantile identity, this version seeks to do the opposite. It delineates a mercantile identity position that cannot be reduced to the cash nexus, and thus resists the social implications that such an identity would presuppose. In the world of this poem, the merchant has access to morals, emotions, and attitudes that transcend profit, all of which allows the concept of class difference to be viewed as much more permeable and allows for the possibility of social mobility. It would be easier if we could assume that this text came from a very different milieu than that of the northern version, as it would neatly tie up the issue of class interests. However, all of the evidence points to a similar audience for both texts (Octovion Imperator 47). Because each of these romances offers a very different solution to the wealth and status problem, I think the similar milieu for these

48 George Keiser establishes a gentry context for Robert Thornton, finding not only his estate, but also identifying his name on various legal documents as a witness, showing his association with other gentry in the area, including some of “prestigious rank” (“Lincoln Cathedral Library” 161 and “More Light” 114).
romances suggests that the contemporary dialogue was far from monolithic and, in fact, held a number of conflicting and overlapping views even within the gentry class.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{49} I also do not rule out that there were real economic differences in different regions of England that may account for some of the differences present in these two versions. The south of England was more monetized than the north and the London area, where Cotton Caligula A.II was produced, was clearly more commercialized than the northern regions from which the Lincoln manuscript hails. This would also be supported by Sylvia Thrupp’ notion that the country gentry were more sensitive to the “prestige of birth and lands” (263). She specifically singles out the northern region as the least disposed to tradespeople in terms of status (279-280).
CHAPTER 3

THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE: ST. ALEXIUS AND POVERTY AS A LANGUAGE OF POWER

“We see from experience that the son of an earthly knight is reputed degenerate if he refuses to carry his father’s arms. Any Christian is rightly called degenerate and faithless if he is afraid to carry the standard of his father, the eternal king. But this standard is the sign of poverty, to which he had given special preference. For though he had been ‘the king of kings and lord of lords,’ he yet left this honor to become poor for us.”

-Fasciculus Morum

I.

Despite the aristocratic martial language of knights, lords, arms, and standards, my epigraph seems a world away from the concerns of the romances in the first two chapters. In fact, here a chivalric language we have seen associated with wealth and dominance is refocused to center on an unlikely source of power: poverty. Whereas poverty was a frightening specter in Sir Amadace and effectively absent from the Octavian romances, here it is invoked as an honor and a glory, something that links us with God and holds out the hope for a special preferment in the afterlife if we become poor for him as he “became poor for us.” Despite the simplicity of the directive, however, poverty was a complex phenomenon in the Middle Ages, encompassing voluntary and involuntary forms, involving manifestations both spiritual and literal, and eliciting reactions from praise to disgust. Poverty, like wealth, was, indeed, a language of
power, but it was a complex one that taxed the abilities of those who chose to employ it in the late medieval world.

The power of poverty is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the lives of the saints, where figures like Francis are shown dramatically divesting themselves of all their worldly possessions in order to move closer to spiritual perfection. One of the most famous of these saints to carry Christ’s “sign of poverty” during the Middle Ages, Saint Alexius,¹ is depicted on a beautiful fifteenth-century rood screen found in the Holy Trinity Church of Torbryan, Devon (figures 1 and 2).²

Figure 1: The rood screen (c. 1470-1480) from Holy Trinity in Torbryan, Devon. Alexius is the first figure on the right side of the panel (photo credit: Bernie Duggan).

¹ Although he is called Alexis in modern European scholarship, I am retaining the spelling “Alexius” as it appears in all of the Middle English texts.

² Writing of this particular rood screen, F. Bligh Bond and Dom Bede Camm note, “One of the most interesting and curious series of saintly figures to be found in all of Devon. In this extremely remote parish the people had evidently a passion for out-of-the-way saints” (244).
Figure 2: A detail of St. Alexius (figure on the left) carrying a ladder, his typical symbol (photo credit: Bernie Duggan).

The presence of Alexius and other popular saints on this particular object is evocative of the relationship of the saint to society throughout the late medieval period, a relationship which framed the saint as an intercessor and intermediary in an individual’s union with God. Rood screens serve to shield the area of the altar from the rest of the church, and the screens have varying degrees of transparency. Depending on how open the screen is, the viewer has greater or lesser visual access to the area of the sacrament. Writing about these screens, Christopher Brooke notes that “in many parts of northern Europe, and nowhere more conspicuously than England, the late Middle Ages saw the construction of ever more formidable screens” (165). He argues that the effect of these screens was to make “God’s body seem more distant and remote” (Brooke 175). However, the screens did not leave the viewer without a connection; rather, the
parishioner was offered an alternate spiritual point of entry, the saints depicted thereon. That is, the late medieval churchgoer was invited to ponder the images of the saints, such as Alexius, and view them as intermediaries in their relationship to God. In the case of this particular screen, we need to explore exactly what types of paths to God that Alexius—a pauper saint—provided for the medieval viewer.

Although unfamiliar to much of modern western society, Saint Alexius would have been as familiar a figure as St. Francis for a medieval audience, a true model for the renunciation of material life. The legend of St. Alexius first appears in Greek and Syrian literary accounts dating from the late fifth to early sixth century. In these accounts, Alexius is known as the anonymous “Man of God,” a nobleman who has forsaken great wealth to live in poverty in Syria, where he dies a beggar but is later recognized as having been a saint. According to most scholarship, in later versions, this base story becomes fused with additional details from the legend of St. John Calybite, a young Roman who similarly forsook great wealth for poverty. The most important of these additions from the Calybite tale is the return of the saint from the East to his homeland, an episode which appears in all of the later Continental and insular versions. This “complete account” was introduced to the West by Bishop Sergius, a political refugee from the Eastern church, 

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4 For the Alexius legend’s expansion with material from the legend of John the Calybite, see Hemming, La Vie de Saint Alexis, (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), xii. For a dissenting view of the direct influence of the Calybite legend, see Neil Cartlidge, Medieval Marriage: Literary Approaches, 1100-1300, (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 86-87.
who took up residence in St. Boniface on the Aventine in the tenth century.\textsuperscript{5} Later, the monastery, newly renamed after Boniface and Alexius, quickly became known as a center of learning, and one of the first products was the Latin rescension of the Alexius legend, most commonly associated with BHL 286, often referred to as the standard hagiographical treatment of the saint.

The key events of the legend are standard in almost all versions of the tale, however truncated. A wealthy couple longing for an heir is finally rewarded with the birth of a child, Alexius. Feeling the pull of religious devotion, Alexius faces the dilemma of choosing the secular or religious path, ultimately deciding on the night of his wedding to set off on a pilgrimage to the East. After giving away all of his possessions, Alexius lives as a beggar for seventeen years, keeping only what he needs to survive. Alexius is ultimately discovered by church officials, threatening to enmesh him in the worldly life that he left Rome to avoid. Escaping once again, he returns to Rome after being blown off course by a providential storm and lives, still unrecognized, in his father’s house for another seventeen years in deprivation and humiliation until, sensing his imminent death, Alexius writes down his life story and dies. Another miraculous pronouncement reveals his resting-place, and the people come to view the saint’s body. Miracles ensue as the body is carried through the streets, and Alexius is finally laid to rest in St. Boniface’s church.

Despite Alexius’ important status in the medieval world, Middle English versions of \textit{The Life of St. Alexius} have received very little critical attention, a testament to both

Alexius’ current obscurity and the fact that the English tale never achieved the central importance to national literary tradition occupied by its more famous counterpart, the French La Vie de Saint Alexis.\(^6\) This lack of modern critical work on English language versions of the legend belies its popularity, which, in medieval England, is well attested. First, we have an abundance of insular manuscript evidence from several periods. There are various Latin manuscripts dating from the Anglo-Saxon period, including the Monte Cassino rescension, which is recognized as one of the most important to later medieval English versions of the tale.\(^7\) In addition, we have the presence in Anglo-Norman England of both Anglo-Latin versions of the tale\(^8\) and the St. Albans Psalter, containing perhaps the best-known version of the French La Vie de Saint Alexis. In Middle English, A Manual of the Writings in Middle English identifies nine different versions of the legend appearing in 17 manuscripts and numerous printed copies.\(^9\) English art historical records also exist, the famous illustrations from the St. Albans Psalter and the image of Alexius on the rood screen from the fifteenth-century church of Holy Trinity in Torbryan, Devon.\(^10\) In addition, one of only three churches known to have been

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\(^6\) This paucity of critical attention is acknowledged by Robert Upchurch, “The ‘Goed Fyn’ of Saint Alexius in a Middle English Version of His Legend,” JEGP 102, no. 1 (2003): 1-20, which is one of the only modern commentaries on the legend.


\(^10\) In reference to the illustrations, see Otto Pacht, “The Full Page Miniatures,” in St Albans Psalter, ed. G. Bing (London: The Warburg Institute, 1960), 49-177. For information on the rood screen, see Milburn,
dedicated to the saint was at St. Albans (Germany and Normandy had the other two) (Fox 31). Further, there are definite traces of the tale in popular Middle English romances, such as *Guy of Warwick* and *Sir Gowther*.¹¹

While well known throughout the period, the Alexius legend enjoyed a particularly noticeable surge in popularity in late medieval England, “as can be seen from the fact that the legend was six times versified during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries” (Gerould 227).¹² One of its earliest appearances in Middle English is described by one critic as one of “three ill-written legends” added to the *South English Legendary*, Bodl. MS Laud 108 in a much later hand (Storey 61).¹³ This particular manuscript context tellingly echoes the legend’s own resurgence in popularity. Indeed, just as the legend is a late addition to MS Laud 108, the legend is also a late addition to the Middle English literary tradition, enjoying a newfound popularity in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England.¹⁴ It is, in a sense, written into the Middle English literary record in a later hand, as it is written into the *South English Legendary*.

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¹² The rood screen and the popular romance references also date from this period.

¹³ Storey identifies the hand as late fourteenth or early fifteenth century.

¹⁴ See D’Evelyn, “Legends of Individual Saints,” 565-565 for manuscript dates. Also see Robert K. Upchurch, “The ‘Goed Fyn’ of Saint Alexius in a Middle English Version of His Legend,” 2 for the lateness of the legend’s popularity in ME.
The most obvious question arising from these facts is why this particular tale might enjoy a surge in popularity at this time. Given the previously detailed manuscript evidence, it is clear that the legend had enjoyed several waves of popularity, serving different purposes at different times and in very different contexts. For example, the early Latin versions dating from the late Anglo-Saxon period find a logical connection between the legend’s ascetic content and the reform movement of the eleventh century, a connection made even more compelling by Bernard Hamilton’s suggestion that ascetic Eastern legends like Alexis perhaps influenced the establishment of the Carthusian and Cistercian orders themselves (309). The St. Albans Psalter version has even more specific resonances, as it has long been hypothesized that it was made for Christina of Markyate, a young woman who, like Alexius, fled an unwanted marriage for the love of God. For her, then, the legend would offer a mirror and affirmation of her own chosen path.

Of course, as with the Latin and Anglo-Saxon versions, different Middle English manuscript versions served different interests as well. For example, the version found in the Scottish Legendary (MS Cambridge University Gg.2.6) begins with a long introduction discussing the states of sexuality and their various values, settling on virginity as the prime state. Alexius’ renunciation of his secular life and worldly bride make him a prime example of chastity, and it is not difficult to see how this version of the legend might support sexual continence in a religious or even secular setting. In another

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version, from the *Alphabet of Tales* (MS British Museum Additional 25719), a mid-fifteenth-century translation of the Latin *Alphabetum Narrationum*, Alexius’ story appears in a severely abbreviated form as a valorization of the virtue of patience in the face of great adversity and poverty. Here, his story is one of many anecdotal episodes reduced to a single lesson for the purpose of providing general moral exempla.

Despite this diversity, a clear majority of the Middle English versions focus, first and foremost, on Alexius’ voluntary embrace of poverty and his elevation to sainthood thereby. This focus on the connection between poverty and sanctity is more than a thematic tie; it also serves, I will argue, as the source of the legend’s resurgent popularity in late medieval England. Given the complex economic changes in late medieval England and, more importantly, the continuing debates over poverty and sanctity in the Church, I would suggest that one of the reasons for the newfound popularity of the tale is the need for models which explore connections between economic behavior and subjectivity in various areas of life.16 In this case, the legend of Alexius explores the place of poverty in the formation and maintenance of religious identity for both ecclesiastical and lay groups.

The essence for much of the controversy surrounding medieval religious attitudes about wealth, poverty, and sanctity can be encapsulated by a seemingly simple phrase from the gospels: “Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast,

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16 Lester Little makes a similar suggestion for the popularity of the legend in twelfth-century Europe (*Religious Poverty* 40). However, I find Haney’s suggestion that the Alexis legend is “representative of certain virtues that were stressed by monastic reform movements and emphasized in a scheme of meditational pilgrimage sponsored by Saint Anselm in a Norman revision of monastic life followed at Saint Albans” (145) more persuasive for the Anglo-Norman version specifically. Norman England is clearly feudal and the tale’s monetary logic would not have the same resonance as in the period under discussion here.
and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me” (Matthew 19:21). The “him” in this case was a rich young ruler who ultimately felt that Jesus’ price for salvation was too high to pay; however, these words from the gospel resonated for many as a much wider directive and are at the heart of the key monetary problem of medieval Christianity. That is, do you need to be literally poor in order to be perfect and follow the example of Christ? This question was of more than purely philosophical significance, as the answer had the potential to radically alter medieval Christianity. If the directive were literal, it would hamper a Church increasingly more involved in the material world and give credence to many of the various heresies that took poverty as one of their central tenets. One of the effects of this debate was a constant evaluation and reevaluation of the meaning and place of poverty in Christian discourse.

For some, such as the early Franciscans, the concept of poverty was a clear case of literal interpretation, and they gladly gave up all of their possessions to be perfect like Christ, the ultimate act of *imitatio Christi*. For others, however, including the Church proper, the directive to “go and sell that thou hast” was a much more limited one, suggesting a spiritual adherence rather than a necessarily literal one. For still others, such as much of the secular population, it was a proposition that seemed a non-starter, as their lives were necessarily devoted to the material world, and they searched for alternatives which allowed them to obtain access to the sanctity of poverty without relinquishing their worldly concerns. The one clear conclusion is that there was no clear consensus on the exact definition and nature of poverty; rather, poverty is more profitably viewed as a site of struggle over who had the right to define it and claim its power.
This struggle over the right to claim poverty is tellingly echoed in the Alexius legend in a striking scene that occurs near the end of the tale. After his death, Alexius’ corpse is carried in procession through the streets of Rome, and a mob quickly forms. The commons try to reach the pauper’s body, and everyone who touches it benefits from Alexius’ saintly status, as miracles begin to occur—with the blind becoming sighted, the lame starting to walk, and the insane regaining their sanity. Eager to share in the power of the saint, the pope and the emperor come down to help carry the body as well. The officials, including the pope and the emperor, try to fend off the crowd, in most versions by flinging money onto the street to try and distract the plebes. The people want to touch the body, the officials want to carry the body, and there are attempts to regulate access to the saint. In essence, there is a struggle over the body and who can touch it and benefit from it.

Of course, the idea of the saint’s body as a desired object is a familiar one in hagiography studies. Weinstein and Bell argue:

Just as the icon was not merely a symbolic aid to prayer but also a holy object with its own power, so the saint’s body was not just a vessel of spiritual perfection but also a holy, wonder-working agent. The faithful elbowed forward to touch the saint’s living body; they schemed and paid cash to obtain pieces of the corpse for their altars. (28)

Moreover, while this desire for the saint and contact with sanctity was common, the “control of its manifestations had long been of concern to the Church” (Brown 61); that is, the Church had an interest in directing these desires in orthodox directions. In the case of Alexius, I would suggest that the struggle over the body and the desire to possess it and control it resonates at yet another level because of the legend’s focus on poverty. In
the Middle English versions, the struggle over the body can be more profitably reread as the struggle to control the meaning and power of poverty itself.

Of course, some may suggest that religious poverty was a medieval commonplace and that this tale simply repeats a traditional message by rote. However, to believe this undermines a central tenet of some of the better hagiographic scholarship. That is, we need to trace the changing importance of tropes, not simply chronicle them as static repetitions. As one scholar suggests, “it is important not to assume that traditional elements, where found, persisted through inertia; rather, we should attempt to understand how old elements functioned in new contexts” (Winstead 16). Just such an attempt to understand old elements leads Weinstein and Bell to theorize that economic behaviors by saints can speak not just to past history but to present concerns. They suggest, for example, that “St. Francis’s spiritual goals were fashioned as an explicit counter to the besetting sins of his class and place. His embrace of Lady Poverty, while deriving from the ancient evangelical tradition of the vita apostolica, was his timely solution to the anxieties generated by such worldly Assisians as the merchant Ser Bernardone, Francis’s father” (Weinstein and Bell 8). In a similar vein, rather than seeing a newfound interest in The Life of St. Alexius as a simple echo of traditional gospel verses or orthodox Church rhetoric, I will argue that representations of this type of poverty in a late medieval context engage important and potentially volatile issues of religious identity and economics.

Scholars, such as Lester K. Little, have established important precedents for such claims. In his “Evangelical Poverty, the New Money Economy and Violence,” Little argues that the advances in commercialization created both new religious groups and new
problems for the Church. He asserts that “the story of evangelical poverty and the imitiation of the apostles, is the story of the church’s adjustment to a shift in economic and social realities” (“Evangelical Poverty” 17). More specifically, he posits:

the several religious groups in the ‘evangelical awakening’ arose in response to religious needs, but these needs had been created in turn by social and economic change, in particular the widespread use of money. New forms of wealth and poverty appeared and so accordingly did new perceptions of wealth and poverty. Thus the problem of reconciling ecclesiastical wealth with evangelical poverty appeared as a new problem. (“Evangelical Poverty” 25)

While Little is discussing an earlier period, focusing on the rise of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth century, I believe that his basic thesis is applicable to later periods as well, especially given England’s later commercialization as opposed to Italy’s.

Therefore, we might usefully view legends, such as that of Alexius,\(^\text{17}\) as active participants in the dialogue on church identity and economics, revealing the continuing tensions in late fourteenth and early fifteenth century England surrounding the relationship between sanctity and money. These legends run the gamut, from orthodox expressions of poverty carefully tailored to fit the official Church’s precepts to less rigorous poverty practices more palatable to a lay audience to radical assertions of the necessity of poverty to perfection. Whatever their ideology, the resurgence in popularity of the legend at this particular time evidences the tenacity and malleability of the apostolic poverty problem, not only in relation to church conflicts with mendicants but also with lay populations and heretical groups like the Lollards, all of whom attempted to master and deploy the powerful language of poverty for their own ends.

\(^{17}\) See Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997), 80-82, for her discussion on the specifically financial shifts in emphasis made in the *North English Legendary* as well.
II.

While many versions of the Alexius legend demonstrate fascinating variations on the poverty problem, I would like to focus on three that demonstrate some distinctive engagement with different facets of the issue: 1) The Laud MS 463 version, which most clearly expresses the economic logic of the established church, 2) The Northern Homily Cycle version, which highlights secular concerns with worldliness and poverty, and 3) Laud MS 622, a version which actively rejects both the established church control and the secular world in favor of an active and literal poverty. Each version, through its presentation and manipulation of the basic legend, articulates a particular vision of the relationship between poverty and sanctity.

The Laud MS 463 Alexius legend is deeply invested in tailoring a vision of poverty that conforms to the Church’s preferences. Most importantly, this means deploying the language of poverty in such a way that it does not conflict with the Church’s own status, power, and material wealth. The legend accomplishes this by emphasizing the spiritual rather than literal nature of poverty, the subservience of the ethic of poverty to the ultimate authority of the Church, and the elevation of alternate characteristics to signify sanctity.

The Church’s official history with the problem of poverty is a long and complex one, beginning with the mythical Donation of Constantine that supposedly brought the Church out of its primitive state and established it as an economic and political power.\(^{18}\) Especially in the medieval period, “declaring the church a property-owner gave it

\(^{18}\) On the Donation of Constantine, see, for example, Ernest F. Henderson, Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages (London: George Bell, 1910), 319-329.
considerable power in an economy in which property entailed political power” (Lahey 24). This was a power that the Church, at first, embraced, seeing no inherent problem in their dual occupations in the material and spiritual realms. As Little argues,

The best that society could afford was not too good for the sanctuaries in which the saints were honored and God worshipped. Western monasticism from the seventh century to the twelfth took great pride in the splendor and riches of its churches….Wealth was not opposed to religious devotion but was rather an index of its intensity and validity. (“Religion, the Profit Economy, and Saint Francis” 153)

Far from viewing wealth as a problem, many religious viewed it as a mark of devotion. However, concurrent with these more worldly sentiments, there ran a strong current of opinion that suggested there was a fundamental disconnect between the conspicuous wealth of the Church and the spiritual ideals of its primitive foundations.

Throughout the medieval period, this worldly status and involvement was a source of friction between the Church and the various internal reform movements that called for a more ascetic adherence to the Church’s founding ideals, including poverty.19 While these movements had varying degrees of success, these early confrontations did little to actually threaten the Church’s holdings or its power; however, in the later medieval period, the Church became increasingly embattled in the controversies about its own wealth and secular power. These new threats emerged from both internal and external sources, and they all agreed on the incompatibility of secular and spiritual power.

19 For example, Little notes that “the Camaldolese, Valombrosians, Cistercians, and Carthusians all perceived the old order as compromised by wealth and all tried to avoid the entanglements of urban life, the market economy, and the money nexus” (“Religion, the Profit Economy, and Saint Francis” 156).
Because of the perceived spiritual decay of the late medieval Church, brought on by its massive landholdings and worldly political involvements, many critics worried about the clerical ownership of property and looked at the Donation of Constantine as a second “Fall.” For example, in Piers Plowman, a reformist-minded Langland writes, “Hodie venenum effusum est in ecclesia Dei” (C Passus XVIII 220). Leff demonstrates that this same reformist critique was also taken up by more radical figures, such as Wyclif, who also identified the endowment of Constantine as a moment of doom (Heresy 528). Wyclif believed that only by divesting itself of its earthly property and power could the Church return to its founding values and fulfill its ancient mission as spiritual leader (Heresy 527-528). Both of these writers, orthodox and heretical, identify the possession of property as a source of corruption, which infected the ancient non-material Church.

In part, the Church’s own economic conceptions and philosophies were part of the problem, as they attempted to balance an increasingly material worldview with the ideals of the heavenly city. No one in the medieval Church would have denied that economic language and ideas peppered religious doctrine and discourse. Indeed, “the intersection of religious and economic themes and tropes…was a recognized commonplace in medieval discourses of redemption, which from the earliest Christian centuries had rendered the theology of salvation in economic terms” (Coletti 341). To take just one prominent example, in the thirteenth century, “theologians developed the idea of a ‘treasure of merits,’ that is, the belief that the passion of Christ and the superabundant merits of the saints gave the Church an inexhaustible treasure that it could apply at will to satisfy sins by offering God a quid pro quo” (Ekelund 157). In addition to being based
on an economic model, the treasure of merit also involved an actual monetary component. In order to access this treasure, one had to obtain an indulgence, which was usually done through a donation. It is easy to see where the line could become blurred between donation and payment and merit and commodity.²⁰

If we also consider that this economic language changed in resonance throughout the late medieval period as larger societal shifts were taking place, we begin to see where the problem lies. The same socioeconomic changes that we traced in the first half of this dissertation do not disappear just because we are talking about the Church. That is, in a society that views money as a marker of value for all things, including the previously unquantifiable, the Church’s own financial practices will necessarily be viewed differently. For example, “although the sacraments could not be ‘sold’, some payment was nevertheless expected at baptisms and marriages” (Pounds 222). Despite Pounds’ assurance that these were not commercial transactions, Swanson argues that they were viewed by many as a commodification of the spiritual realm, and “some came to see even the most basic priestly functions, like purification rituals, marriages, and funerals, as items for sale” (Church and Society 215-217).²¹ Diana Wood suggests, “the mathematics of the soul and the tendency to view sacred things in terms of economic exchange were reflections of the progressive dominance of the market-place and its dynamics in late medieval society” (Medieval Economic Thought 69). To many observers, this was an

²⁰ For example, Little comments on “the use of mercantile language and the forms of mercantile behavior of the indulgence sales” (Religious Poverty 200-201).

²¹ Carolly Erickson makes exactly this point in reference to the friars: “hearing confessions, begging and preaching were their primary functions outside the cloister. Both their critics and the friars themselves on occasion doubtless confused the donation with payment for a religious service” (121).
uncomfortable rapprochement and “the visible contrast between Christian precept and clerical practice was [both] unavoidable” (Church and Society 192) and unacceptable.

Precisely because of its awareness of these issues, the overt rhetoric of the Church worked to downplay its financial dealings and emphasize alternate economic roles, often invoking the dualistic scheme of earthly and heavenly realms, each with their own set of often-opposed values. This allowed the contrast between precept and practice to be resolved in the Church’s favor by placing each of them in different realms. One notable illustration of this type of thinking is evident in “The Parable of the Vineyard,” a biblical text particularly favored by medieval preachers, such as the Englishman Wimbledon, who begins his famous sermon “Redde Rationem Villicationis Tue” with the parable. In the story, the owner of a vineyard contracts workers at different times on the same day, but he pays them the same wage at the end of the workday despite the vastly different time investment made by the various groups of workers. Within the parable itself, discontent with this seemingly unfair practice is voiced, but because the “penny” earned is interpreted as salvation in the explication of the narrative, normal economic values, such as length of workday determining amount of payment, are suspended; in a spiritual sleight of hand, we are asked to overlook the reality of the economic disparity and concentrate on the goal of otherworldly salvation. The parable and medieval interpretations of it purposefully reinterpret traditional economic values, drawing attention away from real-world issues and highlighting instead the inverted values of the spiritual economy. The popularity of this parable is just one example of what I call the

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22 This, of course, refers to St. Augustine’s famous formulation of earthly and heavenly cities.
“economic perversity” that characterized much of the Church’s thought on matters of the market and its own enduring economic fictions.

One of the most complex of the Church’s varied economic fictions is that of its own poverty. From the very beginnings of the Church, poverty had been invoked as a response to disagreements about the potential incompatibility between the Church’s vast financial holdings and its religious mission, an incompatibility which threatened to rupture even the Church’s own flexible definitions of its economic status. To that end, all medieval religious were technically poor, as they all took a vow of personal poverty, allowing the Church to have goods but with no single individual possessing them. However, this difference between personal and corporate ownership was, for many, a weak fiction that allowed the Church to evade owning up to its growing worldliness. Whatever one’s thoughts are on the strength of the Church’s arguments, the very fact of their existence points to both the acknowledgement of an economic conundrum and the desire to reconcile their financial activity with biblical law.

In addition to propagating their own economic fictions, the Church also worked tirelessly to police the use of the language of poverty by others, a nod to the power the language of poverty potentially possessed.²³ Perhaps the best place to see these conflicts in action is in the Church’s dealings with the newly-emergent Franciscan order’s claims of apostolic poverty,²⁴ a series of controversies which came to define the Church’s stance

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²³ Because of its connection to both the gospels and the idealized primitive Church, poverty claims empowered the user and endowed them with credibility. On the credibility that poverty provides specifically to the preacher, see John Kilcullen and John Scott, A Translation of William of Ockham’s Work of Ninety Days, trans. John Kilcullen and John Scott (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 6 and Lester K. Little, “Evangelical Poverty, the New Money Economy and Violence,” in Poverty in the Middle Ages, ed. David Flood (Werl/Westfallen: Dietrich-Coelde-Verlag, 1975), 16.

²⁴ While I will deal with some of the heretical movements that claimed poverty as a central tenet later in
on poverty and sanctity. When discussing the poverty problem in relation to the mendicant orders, one must start with St. Francis, who provided one of the most stringent and durable visions of poverty and its relation to sanctity. For Francis, “it was poverty alone which gave the friars the right to call themselves followers of the apostolic life” (Lambert 57). Indeed, Francis’ belief in the unique perfecting power of voluntary indigence was so extreme that “the biographical sources show him eager to engage in a contest to achieve the most strict poverty, and saddened when he meets a man in the world who is poorer than the Franciscans” (Lambert 39).

The equation of the *Apostolica vita* with poverty and the insistent focus on poverty as “a particular sign of Christ” (Lambert 59) were the defining marks of the order and those that caused the most friction between the Franciscans and the papacy. While the strictest devotion to Francis’ own severe standards barely outlived the saint himself, the poverty question was far from a moot issue. In fact, the most heated episodes took place long after Francis’ own death, sparked by the socioeconomic changes that attempted to link status and identity to monetary markers and envisioned money as a measure of all value however transcendent.

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Despite the conflicts featuring William of St. Amour and St Bonaventura and Thomas Aquinas (Hammerich 6-7), the early relationship between the mendicants and the Church was by and large a harmonious one. The papal role, and thus the stance of the official Church, as regards this issue can be traced out in the series of bulls issued throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth century. In the late thirteenth century, both Pope Gregory IX in the bull Quo elongati and Nicholas III in Exiit qui seminat supported the Franciscans’ claim that they owned no property and embraced the perfection of poverty this lack was intended to signify (Kilcullen and Scott 17-18, 31-33). Indeed, as the early records show, the papacy viewed the friars as a means of reform because they were instrumental in allowing the Church to reclaim the doctrine of poverty as their own. As Lester Little argues, “the apostolic life, for several generations outside or on the remote edges of the church, was cautiously guided back into the fold; it was recovered from marginality” (Religious Poverty 169). The friars’ poverty was not first seen as a threat but as a complement to the Church’s work and as an aid in bringing truly heretical sects into line.

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26 Much of the conflict between the mendicants and the other religious was due to the perceived infringement of the friars on duties and services usually performed by the regular clergy. Because many of these services, such as burial, had a financial component, there was an economic conflict as well as a territorial one.

27 The Franciscans claimed, and the pope ratified, that they owned no property. Rather, they had use of property that was officially owned by the Church.

28 Many of the chief heresies—Gnostics, Cathars, and Waldenses—ascribed to a notion of the dualist, “exaggerates and distorts the ascetic, world-renouncing texts of Scripture and postulates an evil material creation” (Ekeland 72). Therefore, an embrace of poverty was a central tenet of their beliefs.

29 For a good overview of heresy during the period, see Gordon Leff, Heresy in the Later Middle Ages: The Relation of Heterodoxy to Dissent c. 1250-c. 1450 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967).
However, things grew more complicated, in part, because the domestication of poverty was interrupted by a split in the Franciscan order itself between the Spirituals (those who were stricter on the point of poverty) and Conventuals (those who were less strict) (Kilcullen and Scott 34). To emphasize their difference, the Spirituals wore “short, patched habits” (Kilcullen and Scott 34), refusing the habits that the Conventual superiors tried to impose. Clement V tried to end the dispute between the two groups by issuing his *Exivi de Paradiso* in 1312, where he repeats and reaffirms *Exiit* (Kilcullen and Scott 35). Later, however, Pope John XXII, sensing the potential danger of the doctrine, was to take a much stricter line with the Franciscans and others who asserted Christ’s poverty.  

As Kilcullen and Scott argue, “in attempting to eradicate the Spiritual party John became critical of the doctrine of poverty set forth in *Exiit*—that is, the doctrine that the Franciscans owned nothing but used things” (Kilcullen and Scott 35). He also objected to the extreme position on evangelical poverty held by some of the Franciscans, a dogma that Christ and his Apostles had lived in absolute poverty, literally owning nothing, neither severally nor in common, and begging for their living. They maintained, further, that a reform of the Church could be attained only if the Church as a whole would adopt the same life in poverty as the Order and—again like the order—abstain on principle from all attempts to usurp the power of the government which belonged by right to the secular authorities. (Hammerich 8) Clearly, such a position was dangerous to a Church which was deeply involved in secular matters. Indeed, “if possession of material wealth was sinful, churchmen and the papacy

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31 In brief, the dispute broke down into 1) The Franciscans’ assertion that Jesus was poor and owned nothing and that the apostles did likewise after joining him and 2) John’s view that Jesus was lord (king and owner) of all temporal things, but he did not use his rights and the apostles owned things but left them temporarily to preach (Kilcullen and Scott 8-9).
above all were among the greatest sinners, and therefore incapable of lordship” (Knowles 63). Therefore, as Leff makes clear, poverty “when taken literally in its evangelical interpretation, as one of renunciation of all rights and possessions…could challenge the very existence of the Church as an entity with its own juridical and material identity” (“The Bible and Rights” 225-226).

This was not merely an issue on the continent but in England as well, as several of the most prominent figures on both sides of the debate had insular connections. For example, Richard Maidstone wrote a pro-mendicant treatise (Rigg 285) and William of Ockham wrote against John’s directives and in defense of the mendicants’ vision of poverty in his *Work of Ninety Days*. On the other side of the debate, one of the most famous English figures was Richard FitzRalph, Bishop of Armagh. FitzRalph enters the official debate to help resolve differences between the factions, differences that were “subversive of ecclesiastical authority” (Dawson 322). Specifically, he was appointed to a commission to study the poverty question and settle the “apparent discrepancies” between Nicholas III and John XXII (330). In response, he “wrote a tract *Unusquisque* (asking for the repeal of *Super cathedram* and the restoration of all rights concerning the cure of souls to the secular clergy)...against mendicancy” (Rigg 270).


34 FitzRalph, of course, was influenced, in part, by the tensions between the secular and mendicant orders (Dawson 332).
FitzRalph continued in this vein with his major work on poverty, *De Pauperie salvatoris*, written between 1351-1356, where he attempts a difficult balance between acknowledging the value of poverty and defending the Church’s right to ownership. FitzRalph does defend the unique apostolic poverty of the Franciscans, but he attacks the current deviations from that ideal (Dawson 333) and moves to reconcile poverty with property (Dawson 334-338). He depends on an elaborate theoretical framework for this reconciliation that can be briefly encapsulated as follows:

He makes a distinction between the highest poverty (*altissima*) and the strictest poverty (*artissima*): all who restrict themselves to necessities may be said to lead the highest poverty, and this poverty does not necessarily exclude civil lordship and civil possession, common or separate; for civil lordship does not necessarily make anyone richer or poorer. Prelates who live from the property of the Church live in as holy a state of poverty as monks; they must defend the property of the Church, which is not their own, in order to provide necessities for those under their ministry, as the apostles did in the Church at Jerusalem. (Dawson 339)

For FitzRalph the “practical application of all this is the same as that found in the sermon Unusquisque in 1350: this standard of strictest poverty bars the Franciscans from all clerical privileges and revenues” (Dawson 340). However, he did acknowledge that “the highest poverty can be made stricter by the renunciation of civil lordship, because it is difficult to acquire wealth without civil lordship. Only through the strictest grade of poverty is it possible to return to the freedom of man’s natural state, escaping from the restrictions otherwise placed on original lordship by positive law” (Dawson 339). This admission is also where his smashing failure points up the thorniness of the poverty problem, as “the more he emphasised the strictness of natural lordship with respect to the

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35 Specifically, “the total abolition of the privileges of the mendicants” preaching, w/out permission of parish priest, confessions, burial of lay people at convent, non-submission to local church authorities (Hammerich 43).
friars’ privileges, the more difficult it became to justify the wealth of the Church” (Dawson 341). Even those who were dedicated to supporting the rights of the Church found it difficult to sustain an argument that accommodated both an adherence to poverty and the possession of wealth and secular power.

Despite all of the controversy and the numerous treatises, the poverty problem had been officially brought to rest by John XXII in a series of papal bulls, beginning with Ad conditorem (December 8, 1322), where he abolished the property arrangement with the Church as “owner” of the Franciscans goods (Hammerich 9). This structural attack was followed up by one more directly on the poverty point. John’s Cum inter nonnullos (November 12, 1323) “categorically declares it a heresy to maintain that Christ and his Apostles had owned nothing neque in speciali neque in comuni” (Hammerich 9). To avoid discussion on the issue, he issued Quia quorondam (November 10, 1324), which forbids opposing Ad conditorem and Cum inter nonnullos (Hammerich 9). John acknowledged that “Great is poverty, but chastity is greater, and obedience greatest” (Kilcullen and Scott 36). These last words became the guiding ones in the Church’s future stance on poverty, one that allowed an acknowledgment of the importance of poverty but a poverty that was increasingly spiritual rather than literal and more importantly, one controlled and endorsed by the Church itself.

John’s words on the greatest act being that of obedience also provide a guiding principle for reading the Laud MS 463 manuscript version of Alexius’ life, as it is one that emphasizes the importance of obedience and the fulfillment of God’s work within the structure of the church rather than focusing on the virtuosity of Alexius’ poverty as
many of the other versions do. While it is mentioned in several of the versions that Alexius is christened in church, this manuscript has one of the lengthiest descriptions of the event, emphasizing the place of Alexius within the church from the outset. The poet writes:

\[ \text{Þo þe child y-bore was,} \\
\text{Þei þonked Crist of his grace} \\
\text{Wîp glad chiere.} \\
\text{Also as þe wone was,} \\
\text{As þei coude with softe pas,} \\
\text{To chirche þei it bere} \\
\text{Þo þis child to chirche com,} \\
\text{To afong Cristendom} \\
\text{As þe ryght is,} \\
\text{His fader & his moder þo} \\
\text{Swiþe bliþe were bo,} \\
\text{& cleped it Alexijs. (ll. 37-48)} \]

[When the child was born, they happily thanked Christ for his grace. Also as was the custom, they took him to church with soft steps. When this child came into the church to receive Christendom as the custom is, his mother and father were very happy and called him Alexius]

More than just a naming ceremony, this extended interlude in the church, described as “to afong Cristendom,” is Alexius’ entrance into the formal Christian community, with an emphasis on the formal and procedural nature of that entrance.

The reader soon sees that this focus on formal religious processes is not an anomaly in the legend but an important part of its overall narrative logic, focusing on the presence of god and the church in the daily life and rule of its devoted population in the tale. Again, we see details in this version that are lacking in the others. Each version of the legend discusses the education that Alexius receives and his love for holy books.

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36 The Laud MS 463 has a counterpart in the Trinity College MS Oxford 57, which is basically the same tale told with some variation in phrasing and vocabulary.
Many of the versions also explicitly link him to clerks. However, this version adds to these basic elements by emphasizing the role that God plays in Alexius’ early precocity:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{This child grew and thrived; Christ’s help was near to him, and that was easy to see. For he learned more in one year than any of his companions did in ten]}
\end{align*}
\]

Rather than have the focus on Alexius and his own internal motivations and qualities, we see that Alexius’ growth is guided and aided directly by God. Moreover, the emphasis on Christ being “ney” to Alexius draws attention to the constant vigilant presence of religion in his life.

Perhaps the most crucial episode involving God’s direct manipulation of Alexius’ actions throughout the narrative is the wedding night scene, which is traditionally used as Alexius’ break with his old life and his taking up of the new. Interestingly, the actual scene between Alexius and his bride is presented as usual, with Alexius telling his bride that he needs to go away and offering her tokens of his good faith. However, in an added scene that only occurs in this version of the legend, Alexius is visited by God before his marriage and told that he will have to go away into strange lands and suffer diverse shames and pains:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And I þe do to vnerstonde,}
\text{Þat þou most þole shame & shonde,}
\text{Al for my sake.}
\text{Into vnkouþ lond þou most wende,}
\text{Sone I wile þe þider sende,}
\text{& al þi kin forsake.}
\text{Into vnkouþ lond þou shalt fare,}
\text{& suffre myche tene & care,}
\end{align*}
\]
[And I give you to understand that you must suffer shame and embarrassment all for my sake. You must go into uncouth lands, where soon I will send you thither, and forsake all of your kin. You will go into the uncouth lands and suffer much vexation and care and all for my love; and afterward you will come again and live in your father’s house and have a good ending therein]

This is a remarkable passage in many ways, but its function in the legend—to put the decision making process in the hands of God rather than Alexius—seems to me to be the most provocative. Here, we not only have God telling Alexius exactly what he is going to do in terms of his particular penance, but we also see that God is also suggesting both the reason for and the outcome or conclusion of this activity. Alexius’ exile here is truly an exile of God, by God, and for God. Rather than viewing the wedding night scene which occurs afterward as Alexius’ decisive break with worldly life, we are encouraged instead to see it as God’s plan, a move which empties out much of the radicalism of Alexius’ chosen lifestyle. This official control of Alexius’ poverty is also emphasized at other moments in the text, especially during his seventeen years as a pauper, where we are told that he lives in this way “Cristes will to wirche” [to work Christ’s will] (l. 246).

In this version, there is also an overall reduction in the focus on Alexius’ poverty both in description and in the lack of clearly drawn associations between Alexius’ poor lifestyle and his sanctity. One clear example of this truncation is in the arrival scene, which is usually a fairly elaborate affair in most versions, describing his disposal of possessions and new ascetic lifestyle. In contrast, Laud MS 463 offers a single stanza:

Po he vp to londe com
He seld his cloþes euerichon,
& bouȝt him pore wede;
And his gold & his feo
Among þe pore delte he
Þat hadde mych neode.  (ll. 193-198)

[When he landed, he sold all of his clothes and bought himself poor clothing. He
distributed his money and goods among the poor who had great need]

The first notable aspect of this description is Alexius’ engagement in commerce, selling
his rich clothes and using the proceeds to buy new ones. He is usually described as
simply giving away his clothes, and this more commercial twist on the theme lessens the
focus on poverty. In addition, the brevity of the account is especially glaring because
there is very little description of his actual life while living in exile. Where other
versions talk about Alexius’ penitential habits, his begging, or just his general existence
among the poor, this version simply states that he lived among the poor in much woe but
that he shared what he could. There is no description of that suffering or any elaboration
on how he has anything to share.

God’s will is brought to the forefront of the legend again when Alexius decides to
leave his hiding place because he has been discovered. Rather than the usual elaborate
search and discovery scene, which often entails multiple attempts for a church official to
look for Alexius and try to identify him, this scene is presented in a much more
streamlined fashion and focuses clearly on the entire process as planned by God. After
living in exile for seventeen years, the poet reveals that “God wolde his care wende, / &
to his fader hous him send, / to bring him out of teone” [God wanted to take away his
cares and send him to his father’s house to bring him out of trouble] (ll. 262-264). In
order to assure this turn of events, God shines a magic light beam on Alexius so that he
will be recognized by the bellward. In this scene, Alexius is also described as “godes
knyght,” further emphasizing God’s possession of him.
Alexius’ return to Rome is—in almost all versions—the one event that is always clearly engineered by God. However, the legend often uses the device of a providential storm or a wind that blows his ship off course and back to his home. In this version, though, this departure and arrival are handled much more directly. Here, Alexius:

Into þe shipe he went a nyght,
Elles-whære þei hadde tight
Into vnkouþe londe.
Þei went fair swiþe right,
& sone at morwe þo it was lyht
At Rome þei gone astonde. (ll. 283-288)

[He went into the ship one night to go elsewhere into uncouth lands. They went quickly and soon in the morning when it was light they were at Rome]

As if by magic, they wake up in Rome although their destination had been “vnkouþ londe,” a phrase that is repeated throughout the legend and seems to set up the sojourn of Alexius in the East not as a return to any true religious simplicity of the early Church but as an exile in uncivilized places before he can return to the true Church of Rome.

Alexius’ final discovery and recognition as a saint is also brought about by God. Most versions have the servant who has been assigned to Alexius identify the dead Alexius—based on his extreme ascetic behaviors—as the holy man being sought by the pope and the people of Rome; however, this version relies only on the revelation of “godes knyght” through divine signs of election. When the people enter into the bedroom, they are greeted by the sweet smell of Alexius’ body, but even more impressively and decisively, they see that:

Out of his mouþ þer stoed a leom

37 It is difficult not to note the repetition of this “mouth-light” in other tales, most notably in the Middle English romance Havelok the Dane, where it serves a similar function of identifying Havelok beyond a doubt as one of royal blood.
Brighter þan þe sonne beom,  
Þat al þe stede atende.  
Adoun þei fellen all on kneo,  
To thanke god þat is so freo  
Of wonder þat he sende.  (ll. 439-444)

[Out of his mouth came a light brighter than a sunbeam that illuminated the whole space. Down they fell on their knees to thank God who is so generous for the miracle he sent]

Importantly, this is the second appearance of a magic light, the first of which was shone on Alexius by God to identify him. Now, the light of God emanates from him, demonstrating that, in death, Alexius has become a receptacle of God. Moreover, the people thank God for what he has done in sending Alexius rather than focusing on the saint himself. All of these elements serve to once again divert attention from Alexius and his behavior to God’s will and Alexius’ utility in serving that will.

The final scenes, focusing so much on the incorporation of Alexius into the Church official, only serve to heighten this impression. Leaving behind the sorrowing parents of Alexius in the house of Euphemian, the scene turns celebratory as the body of Alexius is taken to the church. An important scene, where the plebes ignore the silver thrown down to distract them from the body, is completely omitted here, whittling down further Alexius’ specifically economic powers. Instead, his body is placed before the altar in state. His presence serves to attract a great multitude to the church, as “to chirche com 3ong & olde, / þat holy corps to beholde” [to the church came young and old in order to see that holy body] (ll. 607-608). Rather than aiding the people in defying the wishes of the emperor and pope by causing them to ignore the silver in the streets, we get a much more orthodox picture of people coming to the church to pay proper observance within the confines of official practice, complete with expensive cloths of gold and elaborate reliquaries. The audience is also invited to participate in this orthodox devotion
via the saint by the last words of the poet, who invites us to partake of God’s bliss through “þe loue of Alexij” [the love of Alexius] (l. 635).

On the whole, Laud MS 463 offers a version of the Alexius legend that emphasizes two main areas: the downplaying of Alexius’ literal poverty and the containment of Alexius, and therefore poverty as a discourse, within the confines of the established Church. First, the legend limits the performative signs of real destitution so prominent in many other treatments of the legend, focusing instead on vaguer ideals of poverty. Second, the legend situates this vision of poverty fully within the Church’s purview, allowing Alexius to achieve perfection through denial but only through the official sponsorship of the Church. Rather than a disruptive or dangerous force, in its domesticated state, this sponsored sanctity serves the will of the orthodox establishment by highlighting the greatness of obedience.

III.

As central as the poverty question was for the established Church, it was equally important to other groups in late medieval England, notably the laypeople who desired to take part in the power that the language of poverty could confer. Unlike the religious who, at the very least, took a personal vow of poverty, many lay people were actively involved in the accumulation and maintenance of personal fortunes. Therefore, “for Christians, the reconciliation of other-worldly aspirations with this-worldly existence has always posed problems” (Church and Society 192), specifically, for many lay people, being excluded from God’s circle because of their engagement in worldly activities was a pressing concern. For the Church, then, there was a very real need to effectively address a laity deeply enmeshed in the material world and reconcile their lifestyle with biblical
precedent, which often clearly condemns them. While all of the Middle English versions of the legend necessarily engage with the issue of secular life both in their descriptions of Alexius’ wife and parents and his own pre-exile life, the Northern Homily Cycle vita is the version that most clearly and actively addresses questions of the compatibility between secular wealth and lay sanctity.

Because the late medieval layperson was ever more actively involved in the church and in pious pursuits, they often “sought an accommodation between such spiritual values and active pursuit of their own material interests” (Coletti 340). Poverty, clearly, was one of the more intractable issues in such an accommodation, as “an idealisation of poverty ran contrary to the normal acquisitive ethos of bourgeois society” (Thomson 265). However, various techniques were employed to achieve just such a reconciliation of aims. One of the most powerful tools for achieving this settlement involved the concept of the use of goods. Rather than focus on the renunciation of goods, there was a shift to the concept of right use, which was manifested in two key ways: 1) the wise stewardship of goods and 2) active charity, especially to the poor (Wilson 77). Through these activities, the layperson could utilize the language of poverty and access its power while maintaining his possessions.

First, the idea of stewardship provided a justifiable way of holding wealth (Thomson 266). By focusing attention on the owner of goods as a steward and basing the judgment of his behavior on wise management of funds and just use of goods, his acquisitive tendencies could not only be justified but valorized. One of the most important just uses of goods was charitable acts, which benefited both those who received
the money or goods and the giver by accruing spiritual as well as social capital. In fact, “men of property were expected to give to the church and to the poor, during life and at death, both to justify their inequitable status in the social hierarchy and to buy prayers for their own souls” (Rosenthal 8). Charity could take on an almost magical quality that allowed it to erase problematic issues, such as being overly profit-minded (Thrupp 177). As Pearsall suggests, this thinking even extended to some assertions that “profit was the necessary prerequisite of philanthropy” (“Poverty and Poor People” 173) and that “almsgiving opened the gates of Heaven” (Medieval Economic Thought 63), a clear justification of the ways of the urban elite.

This activity on the part of the wealthy lay population was accompanied by an easing in Church attitudes toward profit. In general, there was a move to not condemn wealth per se, but to evince a concern that the preoccupation with material life detracts from God (Wilson 71). In addition to general attitudes, the Church also took laxer stances on commercial practices:

The scholastic acceptance of financial vehicles such as forced state loans, the census, the licit partnership, the bill of exchange and the triple contract legitimized the progressive weakening of religious controls on the accumulation of capital. (Poitrès 6)

Rather than condemning late medieval business practices, Odd Langholm argues that the Church came to believe that “if the merchant observed due circumstances, his profession was honorable and his remuneration just” (Legacy 123-124). In sum, if one

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38 For the importance of charity to the poor as an aid to the donor, see chapter 5 of Virginia Bainbridge, Gilds in the Medieval Countryside: Social and Religious Change in Cambridgeshire c. 1350-1558 (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 1996).

accumulated riches without deceit, managed his money well, and engaged in charity, he
“achieved a very happy justification of his pursuit of wealth as approved by God”
(Thrupp 174).

This aim of appealing to the laity is enforced by the collection as a whole, as we
can see from the prologue to the cycle, a prologue which occurs in all of the manuscripts
including this version of the legend of St. Alexius. The author writes:

Forthi will I of my povert
Schau sum thing that Ik haf in hert,
On Ingelis tong that alle may
Understand quat I wil say.
For laued men havis mar mister,
Godes word for to her,
Than klerkes that their mirour lokes,
And sees hou thai sal lif on bokes. (ll. 61-68)\(^{40}\)

[Therefore, I will from my poverty show some of what I have in my heart in English so
that everyone can understand what I say. Because laymen have more need to hear God’s
word than clerks who look in their mirrors and see how they should live in books]

Despite this desire for egalitarian access to God’s word, there is a definite hierarchy or
division of labor in terms of the priest and layman. The writer urges that each person
should honor God in his own way:

Lered men wit rihtwis lare,
And laued folk wit rihtwis fare,
Prestes wit matines and wit messe,
And laud men with rihtwisnes. (ll. 35-38)

[Learned men with righteous lore and lay folk with righteous behavior; priests with
matins and with mass and laymen with righteousness]

toward economic activity.

\(^{40}\) All quotes are from the edition of the Prologue reproduced in The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology
There is a clear distinction between the forms of worship shown by laypeople versus clerks, and the clerk is clearly privileged in this difference.

James Carver notes that the author is a particular lover of the poor and suggests that he condemns riches and extols poverty (66-67). This emphasis on willful poverty as a repeated theme (66-68) leads Carver to propose friar authorship for the text (68-73). Despite the author’s love of the poor, Carver notes a moderation in tone (73) and an acknowledgement that the idea of poverty is focused more on the just use of goods and the doing of alms deeds (66-67). This would be a fitting hypothesis, as the friars were deeply involved in the development of complex economic theory and long associated with the urban elites.41

In all the versions of the legend, the parents of St. Alexius serve as a key point for the exploration of the connections between poverty and sanctity. Because of their status as very wealthy lay people, their treatment in the various versions provides important insights into the compatibility in the vision of each legend between the possession of material possessions and the ability to be holy. In the Northern Homily Cycle version42 of the Alexius tale, we are given the familiar description of the immense wealth of the parents. Euphemian, Alexius’ father is described as “a riche mane” (l. 1), and he and his wife are described as “riche…of gold and fe” (rich of money and goods] (l. 5). Even the


42 There are three manuscript versions of The Northern Homily Cycle which include the legend of St. Alexius, Bodleian 6923 (Ashmole 42), Cambridge University Gg.5.31, and Huntington HM 129. Here, my references are to the Ashmole 42 manuscript edited by C. Horstmann in Alteenglische Legenden (1881).
descriptions of the servants are given extra details, emphasizing them as symbols of the parents’ material power:

He had seruandes thre thousande,  
Þat seruid him to fote and hande;  
In sendelle his men3e he cledde  
And daynteli he þaim fedde.  (ll. 7-10)

[He had three thousand servants that served him hand and foot; he clad his men in sandal and fed them daintily]

However, rather than having these descriptions of wealth code the parents negatively, the legend quickly moves to link the possession of wealth with religious activity.

Right after the descriptions of immense wealth, the poet moves to decisively connect wealth and alms. He writes, “So gode and almous gern þai ware / In all þaire welthe & riche fare” [they were so good and eager to give alms in all of their wealth and rich behavior] (ll. 15-16). While the parents are described both as rich and as alms-givers in the main source of the tradition, it is the poet’s conscience and causal connection between their wealth and their alms that is striking here. He follows this up by emphasizing the piety of the couple in a long passage that uses language that conjures up images of sanctity:

And þis godeman him-self gon sitte,  
Als mani men duse 3itte,  
Wiþ gode men of halikirk,  
Þat wald goddess werkes wirk,  
Þat lufid wele myldenes,  
Religioune & halines.  
His wife was almous gerne y noghe  
And euer-more to gode thewes droghe.  
Of hali life ware þai bathe.  (ll. 23-31)

[And this good man himself sat, as many men still do, with good men of holy church that would do good works and that loved mildness, religion, and holiness. His wife was eager enough to give alms and ever drawn to good conduct. They were both of holy life]
Here, in addition to almsgiving, we have the couple’s association with the church extended by having them share the table with religious men actively engaged in doing the church’s good work. This association is so strong that they are both described as living a “hali” life, the same word later associated with their saintly son. How flattering and gratifying this image might be to the contemporary audience is suggested by the author’s casual reference to the behavior of Euphemian here as something that “mani men duse 3itte” [many men still do] (l. 24), allowing the “godeman” listening to the tale to imagine his own life as reflecting the same piety and holiness as that of Alexius’ parents.

These relationships between the laity and the clergy were one important way in which those involved in the material world could participate in holy life. In fact, it was by way of their wealth that they could become a part of this spiritual world. The letters of confraternity are a key example of this type of lay involvement. In this letter of confraternity from the Franciscans of Bridgwater in 1409-10, we can see this process at work:

To his most dear in Christ William Dyst and Joan his wife, brother William, warden of the friars minor of Bridgwater, greeting, by the merits of this present life to receive joy everlasting. Wishing to compensate with spiritual benefits the devotion which for reverence to God you have towards our order, and especially demonstrated towards our convent by the multiple granting of benefits; by the authority of our father the minister and all the provincial chapter, and by the unanimous assent of our abovesaid convent, I receive you by the tenor of these presents into the totality and singularity of the suffrages of the brothers of the said convent, in life as well as in death, granting to you participation in all the good deeds which should be worked by those brothers as the clemency of the Saviour should see fit; adding further by special grace that when your death should be notified to us, that chapter will do for you as is customarily done for our dead brothers in prayers. (Swanson, Catholic England 210)

This letter draws very specific connections between the “multiple granting of benefits” by the donor and his reward in the “participation in all the good deeds which should be
worked by those brothers.” This was a way in which the correct use of wealth was far from condemned, and could, in fact, pave the way for a substantial spiritual gain, allowing the layperson a meaningful participation in the holy life.

In addition to playing up the sanctity of the parents, there is also no mention of a material motive in the production of a son for the couple. This scene is traditionally represented in the legend explicitly as a desire for an heir on the part of the couple, but in this version, the predicament is described quite differently:

Of werldes blisse þai had gode wane,  
Þaim wanted nathinge in erthe bot ane:  
For childe betwene þaim had þai nane;  
For-thi þaim tho3t þaire blisse all gane. (ll. 33-36)

[They had plenty of worldly bliss, and they were missing nothing on earth except one thing: for they had no child between them, therefore they thought their bliss was all gone]

Rather than serving as a repository for their future material hopes, a child is figured as a source of happiness for the couple. This scene serves to make the couple appear much less mercenary than in other versions and more focused on God’s rewarding them for their previous good works.

All of this is evidence of a shift in the attitudes toward wealth, from the impediment for attaining bliss to a way of easing entry. As one scholar writes:

In a society where wealth and power were regarded as signs of divine favour and election, the great of this world were a priori best placed to achieve salvation and distinction in the eyes of the world at large. Their eminent social position and the means at their disposal enabled them to construct places of worship and distribute alms, defend and propagate the Christian faith and support the clergy. (Vauchez 175)

It is because of this connection that literary works such as this version of Alexius were written to acknowledge “the material and commercial worlds as sources of social identity
and power that provide the means by which spiritual practices such as voluntary poverty and almsgiving are defined and achieved” (Coletti 342). Other texts, such as Hilton’s Epistle on the Mixed Life, argue that wealth does not stand in the way of spiritual advancement (Coletti 373). In fact, as we have seen here, it could actually aid in the process.

The second key site to examine in connection with concepts of material wealth and sanctity is the central figure of Alexius himself. The first thing that strikes someone familiar with the Middle English tradition as a whole is the way in which Alexius’ devotion to poverty is, from the start, a decidedly mixed affair. While many of the legends introduce Alexius’ turn from worldly to spiritual concerns early in the legend, The Northern Homily Cycle version hesitates to take up this theme. It is not until almost the midpoint of the legend that the poet makes any overt references to the connections between Alexius’ poverty and his spiritual reward. Instead, in the early part of the legend, Alexius is shown to partake in the same material benefits as his parents with no moral valuation of his action being offered.

Indeed, in the episode involving his marriage to a young noblewoman, a scene often portrayed in the legend as an undesirable distraction from his chosen course of non-worldly meditation, Alexius is in the midst of an elaborate celebration with an emphasis on the material wealth of his family. The poet writes:

And riche gifftis giuen þare:
Robes riche, siluer and golde,
Þat es to riche men full holde;
Þare was myrthe & gammen &gle,
Mete & drink of wynne clarre. (ll. 70-74)
[and rich gifts were given there: rich robes, silver, and gold that is useful to rich men. There was mirth and game and glee; meat and drink of claret wine]

As the principal recipient of these gifts, Alexius is one of the “riche men” of whom the poet speaks, an impression reinforced when he enters his bedchamber “Pat richeli wiþ pall was sprede” [was spread richly with pall] (l. 82). Of course, one could argue that the poet is trying to make a contrast here between the ascetic Alexius and this rich milieu, but there is no sense that Alexius is averse to this lifestyle. Rather, when he leaves, he takes “siluer and golde / And riche clothis” [silver and gold and rich clothes] (ll. 111-112) with him on his journey, and he “purveys” or buys his passage on the ship. The marriage scene is also specifically connected with alms-giving again so that we see a consistent desire on the part of the poet to link scenes of seemingly excessive consumption with ones of giving, suggesting that far from being an evil, having wealth enables you to aid your fellow men.

It is only when Alexius reaches his destination that he exchanges his rich clothes and possessions for “pure clethinge” [poor clothing] (l. 124). Unlike other versions of the legend, most notably Laud Misc. 622, which focus on his poverty as the unique sign of his devotion to God, this version gives more varied details of his ascetic lifestyle, all of which serve to, if not detract from, at least complicate the centrality of poverty to the portrait of sanctity provided in this legend. For example, Alexius is specifically said to “lieu in hongir & thriste” [live in hunger and thirst] (l. 126), wear “haire and brinye” [hair and mail] (l. 131) on his body, and sleep on “þe bare erde” [the bare earth] (l. 132) as part of his seventeen-year exile. While these are certainly ascetic behaviors, they are not necessarily performances of poverty.
By focusing on Alexius’ comfortable relationship with his past, this legend also creates less of a sense of a break with his secular wealth than other versions, making it seem as if he is playing at being poor. This is reminiscent of Lester Little’s argument that “the friars were not really the poor, but rich people dressed up as the poor” (“Religion, the Profit Economy” 162). This kind of voluntary poverty was far superior to the loathsome realities of poverty and confirmed status distinctions rather than challenging them. As Bourdieu argues,

> The dominant agents appear distinguished only because, being so to speak born into a position that is distinguished positively, their habitus, their socially constituted nature, is immediately adjusted to the immanent demands of the game, and they can thus assert their difference without needing to want to, that is, with the unselfconsciousness that is the mark of so-called ‘natural’ distinction: they merely need to be what they are in order to be what they have to be, that is, naturally distinguished from those who are obliged to strive for distinction. (In Other Words 11)

By this logic, Alexius, by virtue of his status and wealth, is naturally a better poor person than an actual poor person himself.

The diversity of Alexius’ signs of sanctity continues throughout the legend, especially in the later scenes which involve Alexius’ recognition as a saint by the people of Rome. When the people arrive at Euphemian’s house at the end of the tale demanding to see the saint he harbors, he is clueless to the presence of a saint in his household. His servant, however, quickly identifies Alexius, saying:

> I haue him sene grete penance do
And lede his life in mikil vnro:
I trowe forsothe þat ite is he,
For he was hali, als think me. (ll. 491-494)

[I have seen him do great penance and lead his life in much suffering. I truly believe that it is him for he was holy as it seems to me]
We also return to descriptions of his garments of “haire and brinie” as well as additional new details regarding the austerity of his bedding, which was “ofe smale stanes” (l. 526), including a stone pillow under his head.

There are references in the legend, however, to overt connections between poverty and sanctity. About one third of the way into the legend, after describing Alexius’ way of life and his receiving of alms from his own former servants, the author inserts a six-line exhortation to poverty:

Graithe ensaunplie here mai i take
Þis werlde welthe to forsake,
For it behoues vs all-gate fle,
Cristis dissipils if we will be;
For so did saint Alexis,
Forthi es he in heuene blisse. (ll. 177-182)

[A clear example I may take here to forsake this world's wealth; for it behooves us in all ways to flee if we wish to be Christ’s disciples. For so did St. Alexis, and therefore he is in heaven’s bliss]

In terms of familiar tropes about apostolic poverty, the passage is nothing notable.

However, because of the rest of the legend’s focus on downplaying Alexius’ poverty as central to his sanctity and foregrounding the compatibility of the parents’ wealth and their own claims to sanctity, it is important as the most open statement in the entire poem about the connection of Alexius’ poverty to his holiness.

The middle part of the legend, of which this six-line passage is a part, chronicles Alexius’ life as a beggar in the East, so perhaps we should not find it surprising that almost all of the overt and positive references to his poverty come in this section.

However, by partitioning them off in this way, it also serves, despite the strong rhetoric exhorting poverty, to make them seem a thing apart from the real world of the legend, the world the parents inhabit back in Rome. We might usefully think back to the prologue to
the cycle, where the poet suggests that there are different forms of showing devotion. For Alexius, and other religious figures, poverty may be idealized, but for those back in Rome, there is a need for a more imitable devotion. This argument seems confirmed by the turn the tale takes in its last third, replacing Alexius’ poverty with a new quality “meekness,” one which requires a less radical commitment and is more easily imitable by those who are not saints like Alexius.

This move to emphasize meekness is consonant with late medieval pious practices, which emphasized humility over poverty. For example, “the ritually inverted maundy ceremony--in which clothing was given to the poor and their feet were washed by the noble—was…undertaken by a number of great households, including those of the duke of Exeter in the early fifteenth century and the earl of Northumberland a century later” (Heal 181). By emphasizing their own humility, the actors could accrue heavenly capital. This virtue of humility also had other advantages, namely its imitability. As Thomson argues, “poverty could also be associated or even equated with humility, and this was something to which the rich might aspire at the end” (269), allowing them the satisfaction of an imitatio Christi without jeopardizing their material interests.

The reader can map this shift in the last two major events of the story, Alexius’ sojourn in the house of his father and his recognition as a saint. As in all versions of the tale, Alexius returns to Rome to pass another seventeen anonymous years in beggary.

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43 This would also seem to fit in with the hypothesis of Franciscan authorship, as the devotion to poverty was what many Franciscans felt made them special but not necessarily something they wanted everyone to practice literally. Indeed, they depended on the material support provided by rich laymen, who would assure the continuation of goods and services that the order needed to survive and thrive.

44 Thomson writes about how this humility was sometimes displayed by modest burial procedures (269-270).
During this time, he is abused by the servants in his father’s household, providing him with another level to his martyrdom, one that is generally interpreted through the mother’s later lament as an affront to his status. Here, however, the author chooses to use this opportunity to insert another authorial comment, like the earlier one on poverty, this time treating Alexius’ meekness:

\[\text{Those that will listen to this tale may learn meekness here. Here you can see that meekness is such a good thing for a Christian man that neither wrong nor woe nor worldly shame may affect him nor anger him; for it is at the root of all goodness, fair speech and meekness}\]

Here, we have the lesson to be learned from this story by those who will “here” presented as meekness. The author even goes so far as to call it the “rute ofe all gudenes,” making meekness the new center of Alexius’ goodness and his soon to be recognized public sanctity.

After his death, this new substituted quality of meekness is emphasized in subsequent descriptions of the saint and his claims to holiness. The people are told to seek out God’s holy man “þat es full meke” [that is very meek] (ll. 425). The author also ends with one final long authorial exhortation to meekness:

\[\text{For all þis lange tale i haue talde} \\
\text{To ger 3ow in 3oure hertes halde} \\
\text{Þe mekenes of sainte Alexis,} \\
\text{To ger 3ow se whate meknes is.} \\
\text{For mekenes es þe beste thewe} \\
\text{Þat ani man in dede maie schewe.} \] (ll. 627-632)
[For I have told all of this long story to make you hold Saint Alexis’ meekness in your hearts, to show you what meekness is. For meekness is the best quality that any man can demonstrate]

And if there remained any doubt about the connection of this behavior, rather than the poverty of the middle section, with the ultimate reward, the author continues:

> For god giues meke men his grace  
> And geris þaim come to þat blisse  
> Þat to all mekemen graithid is.  
> Oure lorde of heuene þidir vs bringe,  
> Þare euer es ioye wiþ-outen gretinge,  
> And leue vs so oure liue to lede  
> Þat we mai all haue heuene to mede! Amen. (ll. 640-647)

[For God gives meek men his grace and brings them to that bliss that is granted to all meek men. Our lord of heaven bring us thither where there is never-ending joy and allow us to lead our lives so that we may all have heaven as a reward! Amen]

In sum, this version of the legend takes several steps to accommodate a more worldly view of poverty, one which downplays the literalness of the act and foregrounds behaviors, such as meekness, which are more imitable by a lay audience not interested in giving up all of their possessions. This fits in perfectly with popular Church thinking on the laity’s role, a role that retained special status and privilege for the clergy. David Aers writes, “Let the friars, enclosed orders, some women and some priests pursue the imitation of Christ, under the supervision of duly authorized ecclesiastic superiors, but let most people be content with their role in the traditional practices of the Church and the traditional social order” (119). This is a language of poverty, then, dependent on the more spiritual and approved aspects of the state, a poverty which one can buy into through participation in the Church rather than own as a personal radical practice.
Rather than follow the more orthodox trajectories of the previous versions, Laud MS 622 confronts the reader with an Alexius legend that combines a rigorist apostolic poverty with a rejection of both obedience to the church and obeisance to secular wealth. Rather than a spiritually based poverty domesticated to the aims of the Church or the wealthy urban elites, this legend espouses a very literal performance of apostolic poverty and makes strong claims for the power that such performances can confer. This move to reject authority and embrace literal indigence calls to mind the dangerous invocations of poverty of the rigorist Franciscans and sometimes seems to echo many of the heretical sects of the Middle Ages. More importantly, this legend witnesses the long afterlife of the language and conflicts of poverty long after it was a settled question for the official Church.

The literal enactment or performance of poverty was something long familiar in the Franciscan tradition. Writing about Francis’ reactions to his brothers’ poverty, Lambert notes that “the response which best pleased him in his brothers was a total and unqualified imitation, down to the last detail” (55). Roger of Wendover, writing about the entrance of the friars into England, also focused on the literal markers of their state:

About this time there sprang up under the auspices of Pope Innocent a sect of preachers called Minorites who filled the earth, dwelling in cities and towns, by tens and sevens, possessing no property at all, living according to the Gospel, making a show of the greatest poverty, walking with naked feet and setting a great example of humility to all classes. (qtd. in Hutton 100-101)

That these gestures endured as important throughout the Middle Ages, despite attempts to quell them, is evident in incidents large and small. For example, the Observants’
insistence on more austere dress standards for the order in the late medieval period demonstrates the continuing currency of performative poverty.  

While the Franciscans, and other groups dedicated to poverty, believed that the “poverty of spirit which reigned in their minds might show itself to all in their dress and actions” (Hutton 101), others found their literal taking up of poverty untoward, despicable, and even hypocritical. For example, the Lanercost chronicler writes that the friars “were ‘simple and despicable, for at that time all born fools differed hardly at all from them in their manner of dress’” (qtd. in Green 7).  

Moreover, this literal embrace of poverty, in a fourteenth and fifteenth-century context, is highly volatile because of the potential connection to heresy. As Leff notes, it cannot be denied that in medieval times, “the two most basic characteristics of all heretical movements [were] a veneration of poverty and the bible; and, more specifically, the desire to emulate Christ in precept and practice” (Heresy 448). One of the most notable examples of this for an English audience would have been the Lollards. Wyclif supported the idea of a return to the ideal of a primitive poor Church and he argued for the disendowment of the Church (Aers 113-114). Like the Franciscans, “Wyclif took as his norm the apostolic life of poverty and preaching practiced by the early church”

45 “For whereas the Conventuals used cloth of four or five or six shillings an ell, they were now brought to coarse rough cloth of two shillings an ell, which was much more suitable to their state” (Hutton 234).


Indeed, we can see the links that poverty creates among unlikely bedfellows, causing the use of the language of poverty to be highly charged and potentially dangerous:

There is a striking affinity between Wyclif’s, the Waldensians’, and the Franciscan Spirituals’ conception of the apostolic tradition and its contrast to the modern church. Each saw in it the direct successor to Christ’s evangelical life of poverty, humility and charity; each extolled its freedom from worldly interests and its egalitarianism; each saw the causes of its subsequent decline in the acquisition of wealth, the growth of a ‘Caesarian’ hierarchy, and civil involvement. (Heresy 527)

Because of these shared ties, there was often a suspicion of the embrace of poverty, which caused traditionally harmless behaviors to be examined more closely for signs of dissent. For example, McNamara suggests that even “beguinages and hospitals came to be viewed as hotbeds of heresy, largely because of their commitment to poverty and care of the poor” (212).

Barefoot and in rags, Alexius’ performance of poverty, then, is variably interpretable as mendicant devotion or Lollard heresy. It has been often asserted of Wyclif and his followers, that “his poor priests closely resemble the friars of St. Francis, they are from the same mould” (Hutton 201). Chronicler Henry Knighton, too, suggests that William of St. Amour’s criticisms, “which some have applied to the mendicant friars, …better apply to those new people, the Lollards” (249). Moreover, Knighton insists on the physical markers of the Lollards, and he relates them to hypocrisy. Writing of William Smith, the Lollard, he says that “he affected the outward forms of sanctity so extravagantly that he despised all earthly desires” (293). He further says, “At the first coming in of that wicked sect, the sham leaders for the most part wore clothes of plain russet, as though to show the simplicity of their hearts to the world, and so cunningly
draw to themselves the minds of those who beheld them” (Knighton 299). “The unflattering stereotype of the deceitful pseudo-apostle, lean, russet-clad, and unshod, which affixed itself to Lollards, was undoubtedly a derivative of mendicant controversy” (Aston 185).

In addition to evoking reformist or even heretical ideologies, a literal adherence to poverty also calls up the specter of the real involuntary poor, an increasingly intractable problem in the late medieval period. Unlike the acceptable and domesticated versions of voluntary poverty that were acceptable to most, the real poor man “aroused suspicion rather, and society lumped him together with vagabond and criminal elements” (Flood 10). For the most part, medieval elites felt “physical repugnance at the smell and sight of the poor” (Medieval Economic Thought 43). Because of the increase in the real poor problem in the later middle ages (Tierney 112-113), any performance of poverty would now take on a new valence. As Miri Rubin writes, for those who continued to practice overt poverty after the social winds had changed, “it was only a matter of time before their voluntary poverty and their ragged, unendowed existence were compared to and identified with vagrants and beggars” (Charity and Community 72).

From the very outset of the legend, the writer focuses the reader’s attention on questions of poverty and sanctity. For example, there is a long prologue—unique to this version of the life—on apostolic poverty in Laud MS 622. The poet writes:

To 3ou alle, hei3e & lowe,
Þe ri3th soþe to biknowe
Þe self waye þat god 3ede

48 For an account of the hardening of attitudes toward the poor, especially the beggars, see Diana Wood, Medieval Economic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 47-48.
To folowe hym I wolde 3ou rede,
Heuene forto craue;
And so duden þapostles alle,
Þat to Iesu wolden calle,
Ffor nou3th þai nolde bilaue,
And to penaunce þai hem took,
Werldes wele þai al forsook
Oure lordeþ loue to haue. (ll. 13-24)

[To all of you, high and low, the correct truth to know in order to save your souls: The same way that God went, I would advise you to follow him in order to claim heaven. So did all of the apostles that were called to Jesus. They practiced penance and forsook worldly wealth in order to have our lord’s love]

This opening presents two key tenets of apostolic poverty: 1) identifying poverty with the practice of Christ and the apostles and 2) presenting poverty as a way to obtain god’s love and salvation. In this opening, we clearly see the poet presenting poverty as the central way to imitate Christ and suggesting that it is through this imitation that one will obtain heaven.49 Alexius is then introduced as the perfect representative of this apostolic poverty, as “he forsook confort of al his kynde, / Richesse he lete al bihynde, / To god al he hym took” [he forsook the comfort of all of his kind, riches he left completely behind, he gave himself entirely to God] (ll. 49-51). One can clearly hear the echo of the gospel verse Matthew 19:21 directing us to divest ourselves of possessions to follow Christ.

Especially striking, too, are the lines in this opening referring to the “comfort of his kind,” which show that Alexius’ poverty is a chosen destiny at odds with his natural social role as a member of the wealthy elite. Unlike the Northern Homily Cycle version, this tale highlights the social rebellion of his poverty, aggressively opposing secular

49 Clopper argues that “The evidence for English mendicant dissent is fragmentary but we can discern two major areas of focus not unlike those elsewhere: opposition to John XXII’s rulings on the Franciscan position on the utter poverty of Christ and his disciples; and infringement of the papal bulls regarding mendicant preaching” (“Franciscans, Lollards, and Reform” 178). As to the former, I think this legend might be one of those documents of dissent.
wealth with the perfection of poverty. In order to make this opposition more apparent, the poet paints a picture of the city and household of Alexius as opulent and excessively wealthy. As with most saints, especially before the fifteenth century, Alexius’ origins in this *vita*, and in all the versions of his story, are noble. However, in Laud MS 622, his father is not just a noble but a favorite of the emperor with great financial resources and worldly power. He is described: “Riche he was of grete honoures, / Of londes, Castels, & of toures” [He was rich in great honors, lands, castles, and towers] (ll. 67-68). In addition to his wealth, he also has extensive chivalric accomplishments, an added detail unique to this version:

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   Stronge he was in armes & li3th,
     Azins Erle, baroun, & kni3th,
     His lorde ri3th to defende;
     Þerfore hym loued þe Emperoure,
     And made hym maister & gouernoure
     Of his tresore to spende. (ll. 73-78)
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[He was strong in arms against Earl, baron, and knight, his lord’s right to defend; therefore, the Emperor loved him and made him master and governor to spend his treasury]

Here, his connection to the aristocracy is highlighted, and he is even described as having control of the treasury, aligning him even more completely with secular wealth and power. While anachronistic to the Roman setting of the story, these details are very

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50 For the traditional nobility of saints, see Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints and society: the two worlds of western Christianity, 1000-1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 8-9.
much in keeping with the medieval milieu for which it was created and would have made
the commentary on the rejection of secular wealth more pointed.\footnote{While one scholar describes this material as “chivalric contamination” (Bradstock 40), I think that a purposeful invocation is much more likely given the narrative’s careful crafting of Alexius’ wealthy lifestyle and his later rejection of it.}

As we have seen, many versions of the tale emphasize the father’s great Christian
color, especially his extensive almsgiving. However, MS Laud 622 truncates a key
episode in the parents’ description, their serving of three tables of food daily for the poor,
widows, and orphans of Rome (the typical paupers Christi). MS Laud 622 reduces this to
a couple of lines: “Men þat æden in pilerinage/And men of ordre, was his vsage / Often
forto fede” [Men that go on pilgrimage and men of orders it was his custom to feed] (ll.
85-87). In sharp contrast to the presentation of these details in the Northern Homily
Cycle, the effect here is to remove much of the balance between the secularism and
religious devotion of the parents from the tale, making Alexius’ departure a much more
significant and stronger break with his family and the secular wealth they represent.

Despite, or perhaps because of, their great wealth, there is a spot on the otherwise
idealized landscape of the parents’ life: their barren marriage. Again, rather than
focusing on the child itself, their concerns have to do with their wealth and position. Of a
child, they hope

\begin{quote}
Conforte of hym forto haue,
Her godes aftre hem to saue,
Her londes & her ledes;
Her eyre of hym forto make,
And her richesse hym bitake,
Palfries & her steeds. (ll. 109-114)
\end{quote}

[to have comfort of him, their goods to keep after them, their lands and their. To make
him their heir and have their riches, palfreys, and steeds]
Notice that the purpose of the child is to possess their goods after them, goods which are then listed, duplicating and emphasizing the opening description of the poem. Also, while this couple does make a vow of chastity after the birth of Alexius, a standard trope in hagiography, the father seems to later forget it. Indeed, after Alexius is lost, Euphemian laments that his wife is too old to produce another child for him, indicating that their relationship is later barren because of age not a holy vow. In these changes, the version is unique among the others in Middle English for stressing the almost purely secular nature of the background from which Alexius comes by omitting the important details about his father’s and mother’s great alms service and replacing those with all of the chivalric description. In this way, Alexius can be clearly differentiated by behavior from his parents. The other versions, by emphasizing the alms service of the parents, especially to the poor, decrease the distance between the saint and his milieu.

This set-up of the situation, coming on the heels of the introduction which stresses the importance of apostolic poverty, introduces the basic tension of the story, a tension which will later be negotiated in the life of Alexius himself. This negotiation begins early in the text when Alexius is torn between the two worlds, religious and secular, he inhabits. Put early to study, Alexius excels but dedicates his work and time to God and the Virgin. His devotion is interrupted by the string of secular activities that others have planned for him, like his introduction to the chivalric games of the court and his subsequent marriage to a wealthy princess. Again, the connections to economics are clear.

52 On the secularization of Laud 622, see E.M. Bradstock, “Sir Gowther: Secular Hagiography or Hagiographical Romance or Neither?,” AULMA 59 (1983): 35.
While in almost all of the versions, the young lady is named as a wealthy or noble person, alternately a rich maiden or a member of the emperor’s household, nowhere are the dynastic implications of the match made as evident as in Laud MS 622. In this version, Euphemian:

\[\text{to a riche prince his son he sent,}\]
\[\text{And afterward to hym he went,}\]
\[\text{Stille wiþouten strijf:}\]
\[\text{A doustter he had, briþth & shene,}\]
\[\text{Þe heritage shulde hires bene}\]
\[\text{Of castel & londes rijf. (ll. 151-156)}\]

[he sent his son to a rich prince and afterward he went to him, still without strife. He had a daughter, bright and lovely; the heritage, of castles and lands, would be hers]

This princess, then, is the perfect worldly equivalent for Alexis in his role as Euphemian’s son and heir with their respective powerful fathers and rich inheritances.

However, this bride is somewhat of an inconvenience for the devout Alexis, who wishes to pass his time in penance rather than pleasure. His displeasure is so great that “leuer hym were to be ded / þan haue ytrowed þat ilk red / By hi owen assent” [he would rather be dead than have by his own assent] (ll. 172-174). Despite this, Alexius decides “to fulfille his faders wille” (l. 185), for the last time putting his earthly father’s desires before those of his heavenly father. That these desires are again clearly economic can be seen clear from both the description of the princess above and from the nature of medieval marriage itself. As many scholars have observed, “marriage was the central social and economic bond of medieval society” (Weinstein and Bell 76). “Chastity ran counter to every expectation of noble behavior” precisely because it meant that the line would be stopped and the goods would fall out of the family possession (Weinstein and Bell 76). Olivi even directly linked having to take a wife and economics: “Thus he who
chooses poverty will automatically choose chastity, which in this case is viewed almost as a subdivision of poverty” (Burr 73).

This episode represents, then, Alexius’ turn away from the concerns of his earthly life and his turn to the spiritual life. This moment in hagiography is a key one, as Heffernan observes in his study of female saints’ lives, because “before Christian women could turn to Christ, they first had to turn away from those totemic figures in whom society had invested power and charisma” (Sacred Biography 267). Alexius, of course, not only turns away from the totemic figure of the father but also that new and increasingly more central totem: money. This seems clearest in the version from Cotton Titus where the marriage seems to be consummated, suggesting that there is something other than chastity being showcased.

At this point in the narrative, Alexius’ decisive turn is echoed by a geographic shift in the action. Alexius flees Rome to head east, ultimately landing in Syria. While Alexius’ attempt to leave the world, the topos of fuga mundi, is clear, the move also places him in a very clear relationship to both his secular past and organized religion. Rome has been clearly characterized as a secular stronghold of the Emperor and his chivalrous band, yet any reference to Rome in a medieval context could only evoke the idea of the seat of Catholicism. While this is a positive tie in MS Laud 463, signifying God’s welcome control of Alexius’ course, here it takes on a different valence as this Alexius attempts to flee the authority of his father and the Church.

Just as Alexius’ geographic movement is clear, his social movement also leaves no doubt. The poet writes, “Alexius from his richesse / In-to pouert & wrecchednesse, / ffrom his frendes he fledde” [Alexius fled from his friends from riches into poverty] (ll.
Alexius is not just fleeing his family and friends but more importantly the riches that go along with that life. And, even more than a negative movement away from riches, the story represents the positive movement of Alexius to poverty. That is, Alexius is not only rejecting his wealth but also embracing a life of poverty. This is, of course, a highly symbolic moment reminiscent of St. Francis and others which resonated for the medieval reader. For many, “the surrender of material goods and worldly status in the name of a newly assumed spirituality was the outer, visible symbol of an inner, invisible event” (Weinstein and Bell 199).

Alexius’ turn from wealth to poverty involves the renunciation of one set of economic performative behaviors and the assumption of a new set of citational gestures. While many versions of the legend in Middle English elaborate on the rich lifestyle of Alexius and his family, no other version insists on the comparison between the two states in purely economic terms to such an extent. Here, after Alexius flees, the author returns again to the ideas of economics, saying:

Thus he that had rich clothing, high horses, and good steeds, and bright and arms. He left all the goods and went barefoot to make his soul clean. (ll. 265-270)

Alexius’ former status, much like Amadace’s, depended on his economic behaviors and markings. His rich clothing, possession of fine animals, and bearing of arms were all key to his economic performance of wealthy status in the first part of the legend. Now, unlike Amadace, he decides to renounce these behaviors in order to forge a new identity for
himself as a man of god. Again, the man of god is defined in almost exclusively economic terms at the outset. He is one who renounces his wealth and goods and goes forth barefoot and dressed in rags. There is an emphasis on the fact that he keeps nothing, only taking what he can use and giving away the rest.

After living in anonymous poverty for a time, Alexius faces the threat of discovery, a threat that sets off a series of events in the narrative that focus attention on the connections between Alexius’ poverty and sanctity. First, his distressed family sends out servants to search for him, eventually finding their way to the church porch where Alexius lives. However, even though Alexius recognizes them, they never identify him as Alexius. They simply give him alms and move on. This scene of non-recognition is only the first in a series of scenes in which people in the tale fail to recognize Alexius. There are compelling physical reasons for this change, as the weather and hard life of penance have given Alexius a gaunt and haggard appearance much at odds with his former pampered beauty. However, we should look deeper into these episodes for a common thread, namely the ways in which Alexius is not recognized because he is acting like one of the poor.

The linkage of the failure to know him with his economic status seems too compelling to overlook. Given that the searchers are looking for Alexius, knight and son of Euphemian, it should seem less surprising that they overlook a beggar among beggars on the porch of a foreign church. In a very important way, Alexius is not acting like himself, especially by receiving alms from his father’s household. In most versions, Alexius thanks God for the humiliation of receiving money from his own servants,
adding yet another layer onto the cohort of economic behaviors adopted by Alexius in his new role of poor man. Here, the poet writes:

And grete ioye he gan make
ffor he ne was nou3th bикnowe
Of his frendes he3e ne lowe,
His welþe gan a-wake. (ll. 369-372)

[And he was very joyful because he was not recognized by his friends, neither high nor low; his wealth began to awake]

In this difficult passage, Alexius’ happiness and “wealth” are initiated by his friends’ failure to know him. Even more than just rejoicing in his shame, Alexius claims a new wealth, based in humility, to replace that literal wealth which he has left behind.

Despite all of his attempts to remain unrecognized, Alexius’ sojourn in poverty is interrupted by an otherworldly effort to bring him to recognition, something he fiercely rejects in the narrative. The image of the virgin speaks to the church officials and tells them of the presence of a great holy man in their midst. They try to find him but cannot, again suggesting that something about Alexius is not recognizable or not consonant with the image of the holy man. Like the servants of Alexius’ father, Alexius as beggar does not fit with what they are seeking. They need to be told again and more explicitly by the virgin who Alexius is before they can pick him out. The Virgin says, “Amonge þe pouere he sitteþ, to-tore / Boþe bihynde & biforn, / wip a lene face” [He sits among the poor, ragged both before and behind, with a lean face] (ll. 490-492). By emphasizing Alexius’ ragged appearance and place among the poor, the conclusion becomes that poverty is what is not recognized as holiness.

While he is finally revealed as a holy man to the church officials, Alexius remains resistant to the attempts to incorporate him into the church body. After being brought
into the church, the people “worschiped hym in word & dede” (l. 505). However, Alexius does not want any worldly glory in his own lifetime. Fearing that it will lessen his merit, Alexius decides to flee from “werldes honoure” (l. 520). While works like the Digby Mary Magdalene and the Alexius legend in the Northern Homily Cycle suggest that a worldly life need not block the way to salvation, this version insists on exaggerating exactly this aspect.

Alexius’ attempts to avoid the worldly life cause him to first flee to the “londe of Galys,” where he once again takes up residence with the beggar population, but upon seeing his father’s servants return, Alexius flees again for fear that he will be forced to return to Rome. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the use of Rome here must have the resonance of the center of not only Christianity but also the official church. Alexius’ attempts to avoid Rome are hard not to read as attempts to escape being confined by the Church, creating a tension between Alexius’ attempts to form and live his own economic and religious identity and the church’s desires to make him a part of the larger system, something that was treated as normal and correct in the MS Laud 463 version. The connection with Rome has a decidedly negative valence in Laud MS 622, which uses the phrase the “wicked londe of Rome” (l. 641). Given that Alexius ends up there for the culmination of his sainthood and his incorporation into the Church, this seems like an odd adjective. Of course, this association of Rome with the “carnal church” as opposed to the “spiritual church” did hold special significance for those who embraced apostolic poverty, such as the rigorist Franciscans (Oakley 188). Also, among other groups, Rome often signified decay and corruption. For example, in Adam Usk’s Chronicle, a roughly contemporary text, he repeats the following verse:
Pitiful Rome, pity yourself,  
For your splendour and glory will die;  
You tell the world it must not sell,  
Yet a constant trade you ply,  
Alas, through such venality,  
Your doom approaches nigh. (189)

This verse clearly plays on the association of Rome with worldliness and materialism, and one must wonder if a similar sense is not intended by the resistance of Alexius and the descriptions of Rome.

This resistant interpretation seems solidified by yet another detail unique to this version of the legend, an interpolation of the story of Jonah into the narrative. After Alexius boards the ship that will providentially carry him to Rome despite his wishes, he is compared to Jonah, a detail that augments the sense that he is disobedient to God’s will in trying to escape when he has been selected. This adds yet another layer onto the struggle between Alexius’ desire to flee and the inexorable pull of the church and seems to solidify the status of Alexius as a figure who actively rejects worldly authority—both parental and institutional—in his attempts to live a life of poverty.

At the end of the legend, Alexius writes his history and dies, and he only releases his writing to the authority of the pope and not to his father, who is the first to attempt to take it from his hand. This action symbolically confirms the passage of Alexius to another realm of authority. However, it is a realm in which the church does not operate as an independent entity. The pope is accompanied by the two emperors, who represent secular authority. It is important to note that “during the fifteenth century, the interests of the church and state were generally coalescing, as these institutions united against heresies that were perceived to threaten the hegemony of both” (Winstead 135).
Therefore, Alexius’ final containment by secular and Church authority neatly mirrors his attempts to escape both throughout the legend.

Although Alexius returns to Rome and is ultimately incorporated into the Church, both literally entombed and spiritually claimed as a saint, the legend’s tidy ending cannot erase the earlier tensions raised by the tale’s stubborn insistence on a literal poverty that flouts secular and Church authority. That is, Alexius’ containment is only a partial one at best, and his burial in a bejeweled tomb at the end of the legend seems a much more problematic incongruence in the face of his near-heretical embrace of apostolic poverty and his continuous disobedience, inviting the reader to ponder the question of what Alexius would have thought of the ultimate claiming of his poverty and his power by the Church, a question that is explicitly not raised in the other versions of the legend.

V.

One of the most important conclusions based on both the surge in popularity of the Alexius legends and their diverse retellings during the late medieval period is that it proves that despite the supposed finality of John’s bulls, which officially put the poverty question to rest, the debate never really went away. In fact, the legends demonstrate that the debate had more far-reaching implications than those suggested by an internal conflict between the mendicant orders and the papacy. In addition to this internal struggle, poverty also played a large role in the daily life of regular citizens, citizens who desired to tap into the sanctifying power of poverty through performances of humility and active almsgiving agendas. Moreover, the problems with poverty were multiplied when we consider the very real increase in the actual poor during the period and the concomitant anxiety over how to both aid and control this social ill. Finally, poverty was a language
that worked not only in the favor of the establishment but one was one that was taken up by various reform-minded and even heretical groups, each of which desired to use the power of the language of poverty to legitimate and advance their own spiritual concerns. Thus, while “the image of the poor Jesus belonged to medieval culture” (Flood, “Gospel Poverty” 63), it was an image that belonged to multiple groups in very different and often opposed ways.
CHAPTER 4

THE LATE MEDIEVAL ROBIN HOOD BALLADS: RADICAL ECONOMICS REVISITED

I.

Good Yeomanry and Bad Performances

If you were to ask almost any person about the economic significance of Robin Hood, you could be sure of receiving a fairly standard response. Robin Hood would certainly be described as a thief, but he would probably also be painted more flatteringly as a dispossessed nobleman who stole only from the corrupt religious and aristocratic orders to aid the oppressed poor classes of thirteenth-century England. Indeed, Robin’s redistributive brand of economic justice has become his key trait, providing the link to all types of modern “good-hearted bandits,” from Jesse James to Bonnie and Clyde. In fact, this idea of stealing from the rich to give to the poor is so ubiquitous in modern culture that “Robin Hood” has evolved from being just a descriptor for like people (i.e. other just criminals) or organizations and functions metaphorically across a whole spectrum of consumer brands and advertising, signaling positive savings for our own oppressed masses of contemporary shoppers.

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1 This description is common of modern depictions of the outlaw, from Pyle’s classic The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood to Kevin Costner’s Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves.

2 In addition to the namesake Robin Hood flour brand and Robinhood kitchen accessories line, the outlaw figure has appeared in a variety of advertising for other products and stores to signal great savings. One of the most interesting and ironic of these is an advertisement for Wal-Mart, where their yellow-dot figure is...
In contrast to this simple modern concept of Robin Hood, the critic who desires to make sense of the complex economic world of the medieval Robin Hood ballads is faced with a host of contradictory and foreign ideas. First, as those who study the medieval ballads are aware, this Robin is no noble outlaw. Unlike his later incarnations who “steal from the rich to give to the poor,” the medieval Robin’s philosophy seems to be steal from almost everyone to keep for yourself, hardly an activist economic politics. Second, and perhaps more importantly, there is the problem of Robin, or should I say Robins, themselves. That is, the medieval Robin is no static figure but one who engages in a remarkable range of often incongruent financial behaviors, such as first offering chivalric largesse, then later waiting anxiously for the repayment of a loan; or selling goods at a loss only to turn around and realize a tremendous profit off a business investment.\(^3\) While such variability certainly suggests instability, I think that we should avoid the trap of believing that it also represents incoherence, especially in matters of financial critique.\(^4\) Indeed, I would like to propose, perhaps perversely, that it is in the instability that we should seek the coherence of the medieval ballad texts’ economic message.

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\(^3\) I certainly do not mean to suggest that every non-medieval depiction of Robin Hood is static, but I do posit that there is much more homogeneity in later Robin Hood texts due to the growing ascendency of the “steal from the rich” theme, a homogeneity that is decidedly lacking in the earlier literature.

\(^4\) It is important not to simply fall prey to the belief that the incongruity or dissidence is a product of poor artistry or defective manuscript transmission, a view that has been applied to not only Robin Hood ballads but to a great deal of medieval literature, especially romances.
I say “perverse” because much of the scholarship surrounding this aspect of the
Robin Hood texts has been dedicated to pinning down the figure in some way. The most
important of these critical strands has been the effort to identify the audience or interest
group served by the ballads by relating the internal evidence of the poems to the
historical circumstances at the time of their production. One of the early theories was
Rodney Hilton’s assertion that the tales were representative of peasants and their
economic discontents, the same discontents present in the rising of 1381. J.C. Holt
moved quickly to counter this view, arguing that the tales show no interest in the agrarian
concerns which were the basis for peasant complaints; rather, Holt argued that the tales
were most probably produced in a gentry context and better represent this class’
interests. While these two starkly different positions have dominated much of the
debate, in recent years their arguments have been augmented by the work of scholars,
such as Richard Tardif, who argues that the tales are more reflective of the life of
journeymen artisans and Thomas Ohlgren, who suggests a broader guild or merchant
context for the works. While all of these scholars have offered valuable readings of
these complex texts, there is a larger question suggested by their very ability to

5 I think that a part of this “pinning down” impulse grows out of one of the original strands of Robin Hood
criticism, which was dedicated to identifying the “true” historical Robin Hood. In lieu of that enterprise,
identifying the audience seems like the next best maneuver.


7 See J.C. Holt, “The Origins and Audience of the Ballads of Robin Hood,” Past and Present 18 (1960): 89-

8 For the former, see Richard Tardif, “The ‘Mistery’ of Robin Hood: A New Social Context for the Texts,”
in Robin Hood: an Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism, ed. Stephen Knight (Woodbridge, Suffolk:
D.S. Brewer, 1999), 345-362. For the latter view, see Thomas Ohlgren, “The ‘Marchaunt’ of Sherwood:
Mercantile Ideology in A Gest of Robyn Hode,” in Robin Hood in Popular Culture: Violence,
successfully produce these varied and often opposed arguments: Exactly how is Robin Hood able to represent each of these very different groups?

I would like to posit that the medieval Robin Hood texts provide grist for so many scholarly mills precisely because Robin cannot be reduced to any one of these class categories. As Stephen Knight suggests, “Robin Hood resists the constraint of precise explanation as well as other unwelcome forms of authority” (Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography xv). Moreover, the insistent effort to argue for a specific class audience ends up masking what is most radical about the economic politics of the ballads: the ways in which they function as sites of resistance to restrictive identity positions. That is, instead of declaring a winner among the differing contenders for target audience, we should view the texts as actively engaged in the interrogation of fixed identity, especially as it is constructed and regimented by economic categories.

Therefore, we see Robin and his men engaged in, for example, chivalric behaviors at certain moments and mercantile behaviors at others and servile behaviors at still others, often within the same text. However, rather than meaningless inconsistency, I would like to suggest that at various times in the ballads, Robin takes on different identities, both through literal disguise and through subtler forms of performance, for the intended purpose of interrogating both the construction and boundaries of the individual subject positions occupied and what I term the economic interpellation of the subject itself. 9 That is, the Robin Hood ballads are interested both in social critique of the various medieval estates—the religious, the mercantile, and the chivalric—and, more broadly, in

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9 Here, I return to Althusser’s concept, outlined in the introduction to this dissertation.
the process by which all subjects increasingly understood themselves to be constructed by their economic activity.

Because of Robin Hood’s penchant for disguise, as well as the legend’s significant history in dramatic works and festival games, these outlaw tales seem like a natural place for a discussion of performances. In one of the most insightful readings of the Robin Hood ballads, Claire Sponsler makes a strong case for the importance of what she identifies as “cross-dressing” in the tales. She argues, “What is particularly striking about the transgressive acts in these and other ballads…is how frequently they are brought about through instances of cross-dressing in which Robin Hood disguises himself in someone else’s clothing” (Sponsler 25). She makes a compelling case for Robin’s ability to use cross-dressing as a means to access official places and identities in order to subvert them.

Christine Chism also offers a reading of the tales in which she singles out performance in the Robin Hood ballads as a key category. She argues, “whether Robin is out-husbanding the sheriff, out-largessing the king, or teaching patient poverty to the friar by inducing him to join his men in a night of spartan discomfort, he continually parodies, in Judith Butler’s sense, the appurtenances of masculinity in its different social guises” (25). At each step, Robin Hood manages to better the performance of the apparently

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legitimate bearer or owner of each identity and, in this way, she suggests that Robin Hood and Little John are able to “infect and parody” these identities (Chism 27).

While both Sponsler and Chism have raised the key point of the linkage between cross-dressing and identity, there are several ways in which their performative models could be shifted in order to better address the ways in which identity and finance intersect in the ballads. First, instead of focusing on the success of the performances, as does Chism, I think we should pay more careful attention to the failures or what I like to call “bad performances” in the texts. Second, rather than focusing on the more general category of masculinity as the central performative node, I want to turn our attention specifically to performances of economic identity. Third, and most importantly, where Sponsler ascribes most of the transgressive power to the act of cross-dressing itself, I would like to suggest, rather, that much of Robin’s power comes from his status as yeoman and criminal. That is, I would assert that it matters very much who is doing the cross-dressing.

Perhaps the most useful place to begin is with the concept of the bad performance, as Robin always manages to outperform his rivals at their own economic games, but he does not do so through seamless or perfect replications of other class behaviors. There are various moments in which Robin or Little John seems to fail miserably in his assumed roles. Robin plays an inept potter selling pots at well below their value, Little John wildly mismeasures cloth in his turn as draper’s apprentice, Robin refuses monetary

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11 I want to be clear that my additions to Sponsler’s and Chism’s arguments grow out of differing objectives rather than differences of opinion. That is, Chisman and Sponsler are simply interested in investigating different areas in the ballads, such as masculinity and the legal system, but I believe that they would not disagree with the tenets of my argument.
compensation for his bounty in his guise as Guy, and Robin offers an uneven performance of knightly largesse in his dealing with Sir Richard. I believe that these textual dissidences are trickster moments,\textsuperscript{12} where the failures or bad performances throw into relief what Butler has termed “the sign’s strategic provisionality (rather than its strategic essentialism), [so] that identity can become a site of contest and revision” (184). That is, these performances of identity are performances of a role with a difference, a difference which shows up the constructedness of the assumed identity, offering a critique of the financial misbehaviors of different groups or classes.

These scenes of bad performance also highlight the way that identity in the Robin Hood ballad texts is shown to hinge almost exclusively on economic performances, again pointing to the centrality of economic identity, rather than sexual or gender identity, as the key category. Time and time again, the figure of Robin Hood or one of his men takes on a disguise, which should function to allow him to “pass” in the external world. However, there is always a moment at which the disguise breaks down despite the fact that the wearer has the correct clothes and the correct accoutrements to perform the role, and this moment is not coincidentally always figured as an economic moment. For example, Robin is able to pass as Guy, the bounty hunter, until he refuses to accept his bounty fee or he is able to pass as the potter until he sells the pots at a loss. It is at these moments that comments are made in the text about the failure to “be the role,” or in Althusser’s terminology Robin’s failure to misrecognize himself as the role, moments which not only offer critiques of the mercantile, chivalric, and religious worlds but also,\textsuperscript{12} Despite the employment of trickster practices, I am reluctant to define Robin as a trickster figure. It seems to me that this type of definition runs the risk of pinning the figure down to a single valence that I suggest he resists throughout the medieval ballad texts.
when taken as a whole, reveal the deep-seated anxiety about how much class roles have come to be connected with ways of possessing and using wealth.

If we read these bad performances as failed “economic passing,” it seems worthwhile to look not just at what Robin and his men are passing as—potters, knights, or servants—but also at their original identity positions, positions I argue allow a special site for the interrogation of subjectivity. The primary category that Robin and his men occupy is that of the outlaw or criminal, and as “crime is determined within the same cultural and historical webs which identify selves and others” (Kahn 34), the outlaws often serve to delineate borders between acceptable versus non-acceptable, normal versus aberrant, us versus them. In sum, criminals are often viewed as natural transgressors who by their actions subvert normal social systems, including justice, public order, and the market.

One of Robin’s most obvious transgressive acts is theft of money and goods, an activity which clearly upsets the normal social order. Michael Presdee argues that “the theft of private property itself presupposes the existence of the social and economic organisation of private property along with the cultural practices that support it. As such, theft is an act which challenges the social and economic organization of life and its culture” (18). Theft is not just disruptive on the personal level of the individual robbed, but more significantly an act which calls into question the cultural logic of the economic system itself. Theft can be economically disruptive in other ways as well “since the thief may value a stolen item at an amount below its owner’s valuation, resources may move to lower-valued uses when items are stolen” (Dnes 71). That is, in addition to the initial act of disregarding ownership, the thief can add insult to injury through a “misuse” of the
acquired goods, something we will explore in detail in the ballad of “Robin Hood and the Potter.”

In addition to disrupting systems of order, one of the most important functions of the band’s outlawry is to illuminate the way existing dominant power structures create criminality. In effect, “the criminalisation process then is that cultural process whereby those with power come to define and shape dominant forms of social life and give them specific meanings” (Presdee 17). In the case of Robin Hood, this point seems especially relevant as regards their status as poachers.13 Medieval poaching, or even wood-gathering, was criminal precisely because the elites claimed both the forest and everything within it as their own, leaving any other activity as illegitimate and unlawful. In part, this was clearly economic, as the forest served as a clear and valuable source of revenue. As Humphries and Geenberg argue, “Exploiting classes will…define as illegal, and try to punish, actions that threaten its interests. For example, it may seek to eliminate forms of appropriation of wealth that are inconsistent with the mode of production in question by defining them as theft and attaching penal sanctions to those who ‘steal’” (467).14 Another more complex part of the equation involves the ways in which hunting helped define aristocratic identity.15 In addition to the clearly differentiated hunting

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15 For the relationship between hunting practices and identity, see Matt Cartmill, A View to Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature throughout History (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 60-75.
practices performed by different classes, there were various statutes limiting the
privileges of the masses so that, theoretically at least, hunting was maintained as their
preserve.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, Robin’s poaching and its criminalization within the world of the
ballads reveals a central site of conflict and focuses attention on the way dominant
powers structure lawful and unlawful activity to maintain their economic and class
privileges.

To the extent that poaching was defined as a crime by the elite, the ballads also
enlist it as a form of resistance on the part of the outlaw in literal and metaphorical
senses. By poaching, they upset the literal spatial boundaries that should keep them in
place, the economic boundaries that try to limit other’s access to valuable forest
resources, and identity boundaries that try to delimit exactly who can take part in the
activity. Poaching, among other illegal activities, means that:

Within the world of Robin Hood, individuals and behavior normally objectified
and marginalized by external social structures are subjectified and
centralized…The inhabitants of Robin Hood’s world can violate the hierarchical
order by adopting social roles other than their own, and can even reverse normal
societal relationships; they may steal form the rich or poach the king’s deer; they
may use violence at will. Normally objectified, marginalized, and dominated,
they become central and dominant. (Singman 150-151)

Rather than being content to maintain their marginal place in the criminalized world of
the other, Robin and his men bring their dangerous bodies literally into the authorized
spaces of the dominant groups and metaphorically into the bodies of those individuals
whose identities they occupy through disguise.

\textsuperscript{16} Later in this chapter, we will revisit this issue in reference to an episode in The Gest where Little John
intrudes on a hunting scene and proceeds to comically redirect the hunt, offering a parody of aristocratic
hunting.
All of Robin’s criminal activities only make sense within this complex interlacing social context. While some argue that “a distinctive feature of the Robin Hood poems is the mysterious separateness of the outlaw realm” (Gray 35), I would suggest that it is Robin’s very embeddedness in the system which allows him to subvert it. First, the forest is not a cultural dead space, but “a hive of economic activity and a center of legislation and rules” (Phillips 209). This is true both on the official and outlaw levels. Certainly, the “authorized” forest has a complex and strict code of law attached to it, as well as a sophisticated system of resource extraction. However, the outlaw forest also has rules and codes, such as who can and can’t be molested, when people are robbed and when they get to keep their money, as well as holding a seemingly inexhaustible supply of natural resources and human quarry to sustain the criminals’ economic activity. That these two systems intersect and overlap is clear in the ballads, and Robin is the more dangerous and disruptive character for both his involvement in and refutation of various social and economic practices.

The last point that I would like to make in connection with the concept of an outlaw identity is that it is not only subversive because it definitively opposes dominant views or because it offers a merely differently defined identity space. Rather, to be a criminal, in a sense, involves entering an undefined state, where the very indeterminacy of the identity claimed allows considerable disruptive potential. Brian Reynolds, writing of early modern ideas of crime, defines criminality as a type of transversal territory or space where potentially unlimited ways of being are opened up. He writes:

To reiterate, people occupy transversal territory when they defy or surpass the conceptual boundaries of their prescribed subjective addresses, opening themselves, as it were, to subjective awareness outside the self that is currently principal. Transversal territory invites people to deviate from the hierarchizing
assemblages—whether vertical or horizontal—of any organizational social structure. (Reynolds 19)

Again, they are invited to deviate but not in set ways. Rather, Robin’s outlawry “expands subjective territory through entrance into a disorganized, possibly unlimited, space by means of processual movement through performances of iconoclasm, impropriety, immorality, criminality, and insanity” (Reynolds 20).

While they certainly draw much liminal power from their criminal status, the band’s designation as a group of yeomen may be more important still to interpreting the social critique of the ballads. As many Robin Hood scholars have realized, one of the key cruxes in the tradition is the term “yeoman.” Robin Hood and his men are clearly and insistently identified as “yeman” through all of the medieval ballads. Maurice Keen writes, “Robin Hood’s status is differentiated, explicitly and emphatically, from that of knighthood and gentility. Their [the medieval ballads] Robin is always a yeoman: his ‘good yeomanry’ is indeed a recurrent theme” (The Outlaws xvi-xvii). However, the ballads’ very insistence, emphatic and repeated, draws attention to the term and begs the question of what a yeoman is and what good yeomanry means in the texts.

If one turns to the definition of yeoman in medieval society, there is a dazzling array of concomitant and conflicting meanings. One of the most common definitions of yeoman is offered by Stephen Knight:

Essentially, the term indicates a free man who is not a bound serf. He may own land or run a business, but he is usually a skilled worker of some kind. Although he may develop a good income, the yeoman is essentially linked to the lower

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orders of society; he is not inherently a member of the gentry, those landowners of substance who fought on horseback and to some degree aspired to the elaborate chivalric culture outlined in medieval romances like those about King Arthur. (Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography 2)

While this definition certainly encompasses many of late medieval England’s yeomen, there are still more ways to define the term. In a very thorough survey of the term, Almond and Pollard have made clear that the term “yeoman” had a complex set of associations for a late medieval audience. It could variously refer to a rank of service (valet), a stage in the career of a young man on his way to becoming a squire, a social category between husbandmen and gentlemen, countrymen akin to the same status as artisans and tradesmen in urban life, freedom of blood and tenure, those of questionable birth and tenant status, and a burgeoning class in the 15th century created by both upward and downward social mobility (52-53). We might also add here the even more specific “yeoman of the forest,” who was charged with guarding the forests and chases of medieval England. Given this varied list, perhaps the most striking feature, then, is the term’s radical instability.

The Robin Hood tales seem aware of this instability and traverse the diverse meanings (Almond and Pollard 76). I would like to offer just a few examples to show the range of “yeoman” in the medieval ballads. In “Robin Hood and the Monk,” we see the sheriff deploying the term as one of social rank. Upon learning of the outlaw’s escape, the Sheriff “made a crye thoroout al the town, / Wheder he be yoman or knave, / That cowthe bryng hym Robyn Hode, / His warison he shuld have” [had announced throughout the town that, whether he was a yeoman or a knave, the man who could bring

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18 This is also a point acknowledged by R.B. Dobson and J. Taylor, Rymes of Robyn Hood: An Introduction to the English Outlaw (London: Heinemann, 1976), 34-35.
him Robin Hood would have a reward] (ll. 291-294). Later in the same tale, when speaking of Little John, King Edward uses the term as a rank of service, saying “I made hem yemen of the crowne, / And gaf hem fee with my hond” (ll. 339-340). In the Gest, Little John says of Robin, “‘he is a yeman of the forest’” (l. 887). These different meanings coexist in the same texts, often describing the same people as variously one type of yeoman, then another. This suggests that, as in life, the medieval ballads’ deployment of yeomen was equally complex and unstable.

The instability of the yeoman designation provides subversive potential in the ballads in two clear ways. First, the very insistence on an identity that is in key ways a non-identity suggests the desire to flout categorization and move freely across diverse social terrain. Rather than choose one meaning, such as yeoman of the forest or yeoman as class status, the ballads instead flit from meaning to meaning, ultimately suggesting that they cannot be encompassed in one category. Dobson and Taylor are on the right track when they suggest that, “it is self-evident that the late medieval audience for the ballads of Robin Hood was being consistently asked to identify with a hero who was neither a knight nor a peasant or ‘husbonde’ but something in between” (Dobson and Taylor 34). In fact, I would argue that Robin’s “in betweenness” is precisely the point in choosing to reiterate his yeoman status. Indeed, “in an era of social flux, when contemporaries frequently complained that no one knew their place any more, the term ‘yeoman’ encompassed several overlapping shades of meaning and incorporated diverse

19 All quotes are from Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales edited by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Middle English Robin Hood ballads are my own.
social groups” (Almond and Pollard 53). Yeomen were thus a sign of disorder and change in the social system.

The yeomen’s disruptive potential may also have been of some concern to the late medieval subject, as with a growing economic power, they began to exercise more political power, sometimes in dangerous ways. While there are various uprisings that involve the yeoman class, we might usefully look at Cade’s rebellion in 1450. If we are to judge from the pardon rolls drawn up afterwards, this uprising involved significant numbers of yeomen. Their part was so important that a prevailing view of the conflict posits that “the rebellion of 1450…illuminates vividly that there was a social group below that of the aristocracy and the gentry who could figure in an important way in political life” (Harvey 185). I would add that, given the fear and unrest generated by the rebellion, it also proved that this group could be potentially disorderly.

The second and perhaps more important move achieved by claiming yeoman status is the ability to queer other social identities through performance. That is, Robin, or sometimes Little John, as a yeoman, with all of that term’s attendant instability and disorder, takes on other seemingly more stable identities, such as potter, knight, and bounty hunter. In doing so, his very presence in their skin raises immediate questions about the security of these identities as well. This type of destabilization must seem even

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20 In one of the famous references to Robin Hood, a sermon writer castigates the public for interest in these tales, but at least one critic suggests that his yeoman status might have made the reference more than just the same old critique. Indeed, “in a sermon concerned to present a picture of an harmonious society, Robin Hood is a particularly apt exemplar of precisely what was to be avoided; in the fifteenth century he generally appears to have conned a yeoman marauder, someone with whom the anti-social and even criminally disposed might be inclined to identify. Class strife and rebellion are a notable energy source in tales attached to him” (Fletcher 153-154).

21 I would like to thank Kellie Robertson for the suggestion to investigate yeoman connections to the 1450 Cade’s Rebellion.
more important given that the Black Death and Peasants’ Revolt of the fourteenth century led to stiffening of boundaries and hierarchy in the fifteenth century (Carpenter, Locality and Polity 44-45). With this framework of disorderly identity politics, we can turn to the ballads for their specific critiques of medieval social and economic ideologies.

II.

Economic Borders and Imperfect Crossings

“Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne”22 begins inauspiciously enough for a medieval poem with a traditional invocation of spring:

When shawes beene sheene and shradds full fayre,  
And leeves both large and longe,  
Itt is merry, walking in the fayre forrest,  
To heare the small birds singe. (ll. 1-4)

[When woods are bright and branches full fair and leaves both large and long, it is merry to hear the small birds sing while walking in the fair forest]

However, in a turn that would make Chaucer envious, the ballad quickly substitutes traditional musings on love with the dark dreams of Robin Hood, whose “sweaven,” or dream, foreshadows his mortal encounter with Guy of Gisborne, the bounty hunter and requisite villain of this piece. This initial dissidence is carried throughout the poem through a series of jarring juxtapositions, most notably Robin’s turn as Guy the bounty hunter, a role play that allows him to critique his new position within a system that defines subjects through economic markers.

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22 The only extant copy of the ballad “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne” exists in a manuscript much later than those of our other medieval ballads, a seventeenth-century manuscript owned by Thomas Percy, who later published it in his 1765 Reliques. However, it is generally accepted that the tale is much older, both because of its archaic language and its having a witness in the late medieval play fragment Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngham, which dates from 1475.
In the initial meeting—between Sir Guy, a bounty hunter who has been
dispatched to take care of the outlaw, and Robin Hood—the poet immediately establishes
the centrality of economics to the ballad through its careful linguistic play. He writes of
“how these two yeomen together they mett, / Under the leaves of lyne, / To see what
marchandise they made” [how these two yeomen met under the lime leaves to see what
business they made] (ll. 87-89). The use of the word “merchandise,” or business, here
highlights the mercantile interest Guy has in finding Robin and receiving his commission
from the sheriff. However, Robin quickly displaces this central exchange, suggesting to
Guy, “let us some other pastime find, / Good fellow, I thee pray” (ll. 105-106). Instead,
the two make a series of alternative exchanges. First, they exchange shots in a contest of
archery, then they exchange blows after Guy learns Robin’s true identity, and finally, and
most importantly, they exchange clothes, with Robin taking up the dead Guy’s distinctive
horse-hide costume.23

Robin carefully frames his stealing of Guy’s garments in the literal language of
exchange, saying, “If thou have had the worse stroakes at my hand, / Thou shalt have the
better cloathe” [If you have had the worst blows at my hand, you will have the better
clothes] (ll. 173-174). Of course, as we have seen throughout this book, clothes are never
merely garments in the medieval milieu but carefully controlled markers of the social
self. In taking on Guy’s clothes, Robin also takes on Guy’s identity, an assumption that
is clearly successful on the level of the physical, as Robin enters easily into the sheriff’s
camp. As if to further emphasize the point that identity is what is truly at stake, “Robin

23 This costume, described in the text as a “capull-hyde, / Topp and tayle and mayne,” is one of the oddest
parts of the poem. It has been described as a ritual costume by Knight and Ohlgren in their edition of the
ballad, and I would also suggest that we should pay attention to the animal nature of the costume, a marker
of the animal/human divide, one often suggestive of identity issues and boundaries.
pulled forth an Irish knife, / And nicked Sir Guy in the face, / That hee was never on a woman borne / Cold tell who Sir Guye was” [Robin took out an Irish knife and cut Sir Guy in the face so that no one could ever tell who Sir Guy was] (ll. 167-170). Robin mutilates Sir Guy, effectively obliterating any trace of him.

In addition to taking Guy’s identity away from him, Robin then assumes it for himself by putting on Guy’s horse-hide, a move which Claire Sponsler describes as Robin literally slipping into Guy’s skin. Other critics, too, identify this moment with a change in self. Stuart Kane argues “where the animal skin served as a marker of Guy’s identity, for Robin it functions as a disguise, that which obscures identity, and allows him to approach Barnesdale. It is also a grotesque costume which allows him to cross the borders between man and animal, and outlaw and agent of authority” (110). While I agree that the assumption of Guy’s identity allows a type of border-crossing, I would argue that it is an imperfect crossing. Rather, Robin is Guy with a difference, a difference which works to undermine the very ground upon which Guy’s own identity was based.

With Robin in Guy’s place, the ballad quickly moves to its real stakes, the refutation of economically defined identity. Of course, as a bounty hunter, Sir Guy is inextricably bound up with economics, as he trades in bodies for cash. Upon meeting the still unidentified Robin, Guy speaks longingly of Robin Hood, saying, “I had rather meet with him upon a day, / Then forty pound of golde” (ll. 101-102). The irony here is that Guy’s implied choice of meeting Robin Hood or receiving money is a false one, as for him the two episodes would be elided into the same result given his profession. This is made clear not only by the sheriff’s offer of forty pounds here, but also in the closely
related play, *Robyn Hod and the Shryff off Notyngham*, where we see the actual negotiation for payment take place. The Sheriff says, “I wyll the gyffe golde and fee This be heste þ holde me” (l. 2), making the body=money equation clear to the reader.

Thus, when Robin/Guy approaches the sheriff, who believes that his quarry is safely dead, he is immediately offered his payment for having killed Robin Hood. The sheriff says, “Come hither, thou good Sir Guy, / Aske of mee what thou wilt have” (195-196). Rather than accept the payment, the new Guy refuses. “‘Ile none of thy gold,’ sayses Robin Hood” [“I will have none of your gold,” says Robin Hood] (ll. 195-197). Rather, he says, “‘Let me goe strike the knave; / This is all the reward I aske’” (ll. 200-201). Robin replaces his cash reward with a non-monetary payment. Claire Sponsler argues that Robin’s conversion move is an attempt to ultimately move bodies out of the system of commodities, which is the economic logic of bounty-hunting (32-33). While I agree that there is a systemic critique here, I also believe that the critique may have less to do with Little John’s body figured as a commodity and more to do with “Guy’s” identity being linked to finance, an important distinction.

In essence, by refusing cash compensation, Robin offers a poor performance of a bounty hunter, a fact that is emphasized by the sheriff. “‘Thou art a madman,’ said the shiriffe, / ’Thou sholdest have had a knights fee; / Seeing thy asking bee soe badd, / Well granted it shall be’” [“You are a madman,” said the sheriff. “You would have had a knight’s fee, but seeing as your asking is so bad, it shall be well granted] (ll. 203-206). Guy, through refusing the bounty, is not only negating his current identity as a bounty hunter, but also rejecting the “knight’s fee,” which would transform his status to that of a

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24 Quotes here are from the edition printed in *Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales* edited by Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren.
knight through yet another economic maneuver. The sheriff clearly thinks madness might be the only explanation for a move so out of character for the bounty hunter and outside of what he sees as a sensible economic system. However, it is to critique this very system that Robin gives his bad performance. He refuses the identity proffered by the sheriff, an identity based in and constructed by economic possessions and roles.

Writing of Robin’s performances, Christine Chism argues that “at every stage Robin Hood both opposes his enemies and mimics them” (Chism 18). I would like to shift the emphasis slightly and suggest that he actually opposes enemies, and here I would interpret enemy broadly to include not only the textual enemies but the extra-textual institutions being critiqued, by mimicking them. That is, performance is not a companion to opposition here but the mode. This opposition through possession of another’s identity plays into what Stuart Kane sees as “the obsessive focus of the narrator on the poem’s bodies and the co-extensive difficulty of defining and regulating them” (Kane 102). Robin’s assumption of Guy’s identity plays havoc with society’s attempts to order its subjects, especially with regard to defining them by their economic activities and gestures.

III.
Selling at a Loss and Making a Profit

These ideas of disruptive identity are only reinforced when we turn to a second ballad, Robin Hood and the Potter, found in a manuscript dating from around 1500.25 In

25 MS CUL Ee 4.35 (early 16C). It “is yet another miscellany, which contains some didactic matter, but interestingly, beside ‘the Boke of Cortesey’, two merry tales similar to those in Ff 5.48: The Friar and the Boy, a high-spirited mixture of bawdy and fantasy, and The King and the Barker (‘a god borde to make yow all lawhe’), which describes a meeting of the king with a tanner that is rather reminiscent of King Edward and the Shepherd” (Gray 18).
this tale, Robin assumes the identity of a potter in order to go into Nottingham and foil his archenemy, the Sheriff. By assuming this identity, Robin once again calls into question ideas about the economic construction of identity as well as the distinctness of chivalric and mercantile values.

As with “Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne,” this ballad too is aggressively economic in its language and action; in fact, the tale is structured by a series of exchanges of money, objects, and people. The action opens with a wager between Little John and Robin, in which Little John bets 40 shillings that Robin cannot make the potter pay “pavage” for crossing their road. Robin, never content to let a wager rest, immediately ups the ante: “‘Here ys forty shillings,’ seyde Roben, / ’More, and thow dar say’” [“Here is forty shillings,” said Robin, “and more if you dare it”] (ll. 29-30). Despite his aggressive wagering, Robin is ultimately defeated by the potter after they come to blows.

However, Robin does receive something out of the exchange with the potter besides blows. Robin asks, “‘Y well prey the, god potter, / A felischepe well thow haff? / Geffe me thy clothyng, and thow schalt hafe myne; / Y well go to Notynggam’” [“I will ask you good potter, will you have a fellowship? Give me your clothing, and you shall have mine; I will go to Nottingham”] (ll. 93-96). Robin initiates this exchange apparently for the purpose of entering Nottingham undetected. However, we soon see the ways in

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which his performance of the potter is marked by striking failures to perform the role correctly, thus drawing attention to him and his actions rather than serving as a disguise.  

Doubtful of the outlaw’s mercantile ability from the outset, the potter says: “Bot thow can sell mey pottys well, / Com ayen as thow yede” [“Unless you can sell my pots well, come again as you went”] (ll. 99-100). Robin, however, has no fear about his salesmanship as he boasts:

Nay be mey trowt, seyde Roben,  
And then Y bescro mey hede,  
Yeffe Y bring eney pottys ayen,  
And eney weyffe well hem chepe. (ll. 101-104)

[“No, by my truth,” said Robin, “and then I curse myself if I bring any pots back if any wife will buy them”]

Seemingly, Robin will be able to effect a seamless transfer into the potter’s place.

When he arrives in town, things start well for Robin, as he immediately sets up his wares “yn the medys of the towne” [in the midst of the towon] (l. 125), where he can have the best traffic for sales. Soon, however, Robin proves the potter’s worse nightmares true as he practically gives the pots away for a fraction of their value.

“Pottys! Pottys! He gan crey foll sone, / Haffe hansell for the mare” [“Pots! Pots!,” he quickly began to yell, “have a present, the more you buy”] (ll. 127-128). His way of selling seems wrongheaded in purely mercantile terms and thus in need of explanation.

The reaction of the townspeople reinforces our sense that he is failing to properly perform his role, as “all that say hem sell / Seyde he had be no potter long” [everyone who saw him sell said that he had not been a potter long] (ll. 135-136). This sense that he

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27 This is especially significant because the potter episode appears in other outlaw narratives (Dobson and Taylor 125), such as those of William Wallace and Hereward the Wake, where the disguise does function properly and allows the hero to escape detection.
does not know how to be a potter seems to be explicitly linked to his way of calculating value. This is important because it suggests that it is not just cross-dressing but a total performance, especially an economic performance, which cements identity. Robin has the potter’s clothes, he has the potter’s wares, he’s in the right place, and yet he still fails to be the potter. Here we see an emphasis on finance rather than function, on commerce and consumption rather than production.

That is, this failure as a potter is a failure simply because he doesn’t sell well.

The townspeople saw that:

The pottys that were worthe pens feyffe,
He solde tham for pens thre;
Preveley seyde man and weyffe,
‘Ywnder potter schall thnever the.’ (ll. 137-140)

[The pots that were worth five pence, he sold for three pence. [and] Privately, the men and women said, “Yonder potter will never thrive”]

Everyone knows that Robin is selling his pots badly because there is an acknowledged economic paradigm for mercantile success, and Robin is openly violating it. More importantly, this paradigm for monetary success seems inseparable from his success at being a potter as well, and Robin’s poor performance draws attention to this effort to define him in purely economic ways.

Despite his violation of economic paradigms for mercantile success and being, Robin is able to ultimately recover all of his previous losses and then some. That he does so by making his most illogical economic move yet simply draws more attention to his artfully flawed performance of the potter. Robin, after selling away most of the pots cheaply, gives the last five as a gift to the sheriff’s wife, a move more appropriate to a chivalric figure than a mercantile one, again suggesting a problematic mercantile
performance. This new guise of the chivalric courtly lover is played upon by his later gifts to her of a gold ring and a palfrey. Such a move seems to bewilder critics, one noting that “this momentary social rise in Robin’s role above that of yeoman seems inconsistent, but may simply be invoked by the presence of a female character of some social standing” (A Mythic Biography 19). However, I argue for the more purposeful nature of this double guise, as we see that these dual performances actually work in similar ways to question economic behaviors and the ways in which they structure identity.

While Robin’s initial gesture of gifting the pots seems courtly, we soon see that it also is a financially savvy maneuver. Through his gift, Robin gains access to the sheriff and is able to dupe him into going to the forest to find Robin Hood, where he promptly robs him. Upon Robin’s return with the sheriff, Little John immediately asks, “‘Master, how haffe yow fare yn Notynggam? / How haffe yow solde yowre ware?’” [“Master, how did you fare in Nottingham? How have you sold your wares?”] (ll. 262-263). Rather than say how much he earned by selling his pots, Robin says “‘Y haffe browt the srrffe of Notynggam, / For all howre chaffare’” [“I have brought the sheriff as a result of our business”] (ll. 266-267). Thus, Robin makes his real business about the sheriff, making the initial “gift” to the wife appear more like an investment for even greater future returns. The sheriff’s wife, the primary recipient of Robin’s largesse in the tale, immediately understands the economic game at work here, and she explains to her bewildered husband: Now haffe yow payed for all the pottys / That Roben gaffe to me. [“Now you have paid for all of the pots that Robin gave me”] (ll. 304-305). Her use of
“paid” and “gave” in this phrase clearly shows the move of the gift from largesse to commerce.28

The final exchange between Robin and the potter serves to further complicate notions of value and economic identity. Back in the forest, Robin keeps his original deal with the potter to give him the correct earnings for his wares. Robin asks:

Potter, what was they pottys worthe
To Notynggam that Y ledde with me?
They wer worthe to nobellys, seyde he,
So myt Y treyffe or the;
So cowed Y had for tham,
And Y had be there. (ll. 310-315)

[Potter, what were the pots that I took to Nottingham worth? They were worth two nobles he said so I may thrive or prosper. So much could I have had if I had been there]

As he explicitly states, in the traditional role of vendor, the potter would have earned two nobles for all of his wares. Robin, on the other hand, in his criminalized guise of potter, is able to sell the pots for ten pounds, outperforming the potter. By giving the potter more than the pots are worth, he is also turning a commercial agreement into largesse, an inversion of his maneuver with the sheriff’s wife.

To bring these two performances into contact and to summarize, we see that Robin has taken on two guises in the ballad, one as a potter, through an obvious disguise, and one as a chivalric or courtly figure through behavioral performance. Both of these performances, the mercantile and the chivalric, are defined primarily through economic gestures, selling on the part of the potter and giving on the part of the chivalric figure.

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28 The sheriff and his wife are another type of economy that gets subverted, as Robin treats them as completely separate entities, ignoring their legal financial ties. Robin directs goods to the sheriff’s wife, such as the pots, the gold ring, and the palfrey as if she were a femme sole. At the same time, he takes goods away from the sheriff. In part, of course, as the wife mentions, this is to pay for the pots. However, the gold ring and the palfrey exist above and beyond any clear connection to the sheriff, subtly suggesting that there are two household economies rather than one in the sheriff’s house.
Robin’s bad performances draw attention to these economic constructions and flout them by having the merchant sell badly and the courtly lover invest rather than give. Further, the redistribution of money in the work reinforces these roles by having the original commercial agreement with the potter turn to largesse, while the largesse of Robin’s gift is turned into commerce as he reaps the rewards of his five-pot investment.

In the final equation, we see Robin’s bad potter as outperforming the real potter through an unorthodox mix of mercantilism and largesse, suggesting that existing economic roles and paradigms are ultimately limiting and need to be questioned. We need only think back to the severe limitations on Amadace’s behavior or the limited vision of the northern Clement to see the value of such a critique. These supposedly comic or parodic scenes, then, seem to be much less about the criticism of any particular position, such as greedy mercantilism or false chivalry, and more about the limitations of the definitional categories themselves, especially given that Robin’s astounding economic successes stem directly from his refusal to conform to the rules of his roles.

The exponential increases in money, which characterize Robin’s success in the ballads, are another of his radical economic practices. As we have seen at the opening of the poem, Robin is always looking to up the ante in his wagers and economic transactions. In “Robin Hood and the Monk,” we see a similar scene where Little John offers a penny per shot wager, but Robin insists on making it three pennies a shot. As a salesman, too, he employs exaggeration by offering his pots at low, low prices. However, through his ability to work as a criminal, he is able to turn even that loss into an exponential gain. Some of the proverbs associated with Robin Hood’s name take up these issues of exaggerated quantity. There is a “Robin Hood’s mile,” which is “a mile of
several times the recognized length” (Dobson and Taylor 291). There is also “Robin Hood’s pennyworths (bargains),” which is “a commodity or quantity sold at a robber’s price, i.e. far below the real value” (Dobson and Taylor 291). This last proverb, although it is not recorded until the sixteenth century, is clearly related to scenes like that in “Robin Hood and the Potter.” Both of these proverbs, and Robin’s own actions in the ballads, place quantities, prices, and commodities into an economic space where market rules are off and criminal inflation is the primary mode of gain.

Given Robin’s rejection of the ways in which identity gets defined economically, it is fascinating to raise one final issue about the possible owner of this particular manuscript. Pollard, among several others, raises the possibility that “Robin Hood and the Potter” belonged to Richard Calle, the Pastons’ bailiff, who famously married Margery Paston (Imagining Robin Hood 163). Her family was horrified by this lowly connection, and her brother vowed that his sister would never sell “kandyll and mustard in Framlyngham.” Having been denigrated by his wife’s family for his lowly status, a status explicitly connected with his inappropriate financial connections, it is pleasant to think that he might have particularly enjoyed this tale where Robin rejects the idea that one is defined by what he has.

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29 The first extant usage of this proverb is from the sixteenth century (1559). It is noted in Dobson and Taylor’s Rymes of Robin Hood as “These are Robin Hood’s miles, as the proverbe is” (291).

30 Also see Thomas Ohlgren, “Richard Call, the Pastons, and the manuscript context of Robin Hood and the Potter.” Nottingham Medieval Studies 45 (2001): 210-233.

31 However, I also agree with Christine Chism who argues that “the socially invasive mimicry that is such an important resistance strategy for the outlaws—their capacity both to parody and to pronounce authoritatively upon kingship, gamesmanship, chivalry, patient poverty, and representative service—would seem to open up the ballads to a plurality of audiences” (38).
Before discussing Robin’s own performances in *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, I would like to first turn to the ways in which the category of performance, specifically economic performance, is foregrounded in the text by the character of Sir Richard, an impoverished knight. When we first meet Sir Richard, he is hardly recognizable as a knight, a fact which the narrator draws attention to again and again through a detailed description and discussion of his appearance and possessions. Sir Richard enters the story in ignominious fashion:

>All dreri was his semblaunce,  
And lytell was his pryde;  
His one fote in the styrop stode,  
That othere wavyd beside.  
His hode hanged in his iyn two;  
He rode in simple array. (ll. 85-90)

[All dreary was his appearance and little was his pride. One of his feet was placed in the stirrup, and the other hung beside it. His hood hung in his eyes. He rode in simple clothing]

As we can clearly see, Richard is far from the picture of a prosperous knight. He is described as being poorly dressed, almost slovenly with his hood hanging over his face. Perhaps more unforgivably, he is not even mounted correctly on his horse but carelessly placed, with one foot dragging. After arriving in the outlaw’s camp, Robin and his followers find that Sir Richard not only fails in appearance but also in wealth, as his coffers contain a poor 10 shillings.

Robin quickly connects the knight’s appearance and lack of funds with his identity. He notes, “‘Moche wonder thinketh me / Thy clothynge is so thin’” [I think it is strange that your clothing is so thin”] (ll. 175-176). Then, he moves immediately to
questioning Richard’s knighthood based on these visual cues. Robin asserts, “‘I trowe thou warte made a knyght of force, / Or ellys of yemanry’” [“I believe you were made a knight by force or else through yeomanry”] (ll. 179-180). Barring that, he suggests that the knight has done something wrong, such as being guilty of usury, lechery, or poor household management (ll. 181-184). Robin cannot accept this knight as normal because he too clearly violates the performative norms of his status in appearance, array, and finances, norms that we have seen continuously repeated and reinforced in the romances of Sir Amadace and Octavian.

Sir Richard defends his knightly status, insisting that his ancestors have been knights for over a hundred years. However, rather than moving the portrait of the knight away from the financial, Sir Richard’s comments cement ideas about the ways in which identity and economics are intertwined. He reveals that he has lost his money because he had to defend his son from a homicide charge after a tournament. While he is not poor for the same reasons as Sir Amadace, a parallel which must assert itself given the focus here on chivalry and economics, his story has striking parallels in that they are both bankrupted in the pursuits key to knightly identity, Amadace with largesse and the knight through his son’s exercise of prowess. Also like Amadace, we learn that the knight has mortgaged his lands to rescue himself financially, but here we see the darker side of the mortgage, as his creditor, the abbot of St. Mary’s, actively works to keep him from regaining his lands.

When asked if he has any friends to help him out in his time of need, Sir Richard responds, “‘Syr, never one wol me knowe: / While I was ryche ynowe at home / Great boste than wolde they blowe. / And nowe they renne away fro me’” [“Sir, not a one of
them will recognize me. While I was wealthy enough, they would make great boasts, and now they run away from me”] (ll. 234-237). Again, as in the tale of Amadace, we see the ways in which money functions to both create and destroy social identities. With his money, Sir Richard is a respected knight, confidently ensconced in his social world and accepted as a knight by his peers. However, denied his funds, he becomes an outcast, avoided by his former companions and difficult to situate as a knight even by the sympathetic Robin.

The important gestures that go into the creation and sustenance of an economic identity are detailed as Robin and his men literally and figuratively aid Sir Richard in regaining his lost place. Sir Richard regains the exact amount of his lost knightly income in the form of a loan from Robin. Then, starting with Little John, the knight’s appearance is altered so that he will look more like a knight, beginning with a new rich array.32 After this, each of Robin’s men shouts out other necessary objects for a knight—a horse, a new saddle, a palfrey, new boots, and a pair of shining spurs—until Richard is just right. This is a striking scene as we get to see knighthood, defined as the acquisition of requisite objects, basically constructed before our eyes.

Robin adds the last piece to the perfect chivalric figure, a yeoman to serve the knight loyally. “‘It were greate shame,’ sayde Robyn, / ’A knight alone to ryde, / Without squyre, yoman, or page, / To walke by his side” [“It would be a great shame,”
said Robin, “for a knight to ride without a squire, yeoman, or page at his side”] (ll. 317-320). Again, as in Sir Amadace, the idea of shame is connected to the performance of identity. Robin’s suggestion that Sir Richard needs a man, as well as all of the other objects of knighthood, is connected to the desire to avoid shame—that devastating rupture of identity—and present a seamless performance of one’s class role.

That this performance ultimately succeeds is clear when Sir Richard returns a year later to repay Robin’s generous loan. In place of the disheveled knight falling from the saddle, Richard arrives in splendor, with a rich array, a coffer full of money, one hundred men to accompany him, and a hundred bows and arrows burnished with silver to offer Robin as a gift. While the episode with Sir Richard suggests some provocative connections between identity and economics, as well as exposing the constructedness of knightly identity, this episode is markedly different from Robin’s own performances. Sir Richard is, in fact, a knight, one with a hundred years of precedence, when he performs his role. He is, in an important sense, “becoming” what he is. When Robin takes on different identities, however, he is very decidedly becoming something that he is not, a fact exacerbated by his own amorphous position as a yeoman. This is why I must disagree with Claire Sponsler when she asserts that Robin “has draped himself with the cross-dresser’s liminal powers” (Sponsler 31). I think that the power comes not just from the act of cross-dressing itself but from who is doing the cross-dressing.

The text makes this clear when Robin gives his own knightly performance. The beginning of A Gest of Robyn Hode works very hard to set up Robin in a gentlemanly fashion, and he performs a wide variety of appropriately chivalric behaviors. In the opening description of Robin, we are told:
Robyn was a prude outlaw,  
Whyles he walked on grounde:  
So curteyse an outlawe as he was one  
Was neveer non founde. (ll. 5-8)

[Robin was a proud outlaw when he walked on the earth. As courteous an outlaw as he was never found]

Robin’s courtesy, a familiar aspect of the aristocratic romance hero, is the first thing mentioned by the author. As Stephen Knight argues, “the words “prude” and “curteyse” seem to construct Robin as a more lordly figure than the usual yeoman” (A Mythic Biography 27). His courtesy is augmented by other behaviors more typical to the knightly classes. Like Arthur, that chivalric figure par excellence, he insists that he will not eat a bite until he has seen “som bolde baron, / Or som uncouth gest” [some bold baron or some uncouth guest] (ll. 27-28). His feast, when he deigns to eat is one that could grace the best of aristocratic houses with bread, wine, deer, swans, pheasants, and every type of delicacy (ll. 127-132).33 Robin also insists on other gentle behaviors, such as washing before dinner (ll. 125-126). As with the other ballads, all of the elements are in place for Robin to offer the perfect performance and pass as a knight.

However, Robin is far from the perfect storybook knight, specifically when it comes down to economic concerns, here his display of chivalric largesse. After Robin’s elaborate dinner, Sir Richard responds in typical knightly fashion to his gracious host:

    Gramarcy, sir, sayde he,  
    Such a dinere had I nat  
    Of all these wekys thre.  
    If I come ageyne, Robyn,  
    Here by thys contré

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33 Here, again, we might usefully think back to Sir Amadace’s feast as a performance of identity. However, Robin’s feast does have a criminal aspect because of the presence of venison, indicating the specter of his illegal poaching of the king’s deer.
As gode a dyner I shall the make  
As that thou haest made to me. (ll. 134-140)

[Thank you, sir, he said. I have not had such a dinner in three weeks. If I come by this country again, Robin, I will offer as good a dinner as you have given me]

Richard views the dinner as a gift, and he offers the possibility of a future dinner as a return gift to Robin. By offering this present to Robin, Sir Richard accepts him as an equal, assuming a shared status and sense of value. It is at this moment, however, that Robin’s chivalric performance is abruptly ruptured by his aggressive resumption of his yeoman identity. Rejecting Sir Richard’s suggestion, Robin changes the terms of the offer:

pay or ye wende, sayde Robyn;  
Me thynketh it is gode right;  
It was never the maner, by dere worthi God,  
A yoman to pay for a knight. (ll. 141-148)

[pay before you go, said Robin. It seems right to me. It was never the custom, by dear worthy God, for a yeoman to pay for a knight]

Robin suggests that the transaction be a purely financial one, where the knight makes immediate cash payment for the dinner—not a future equal gift exchange. As in Sir Amadace, this demand places the gift economy at risk, as “at the moment of giving the giver cannot demand an explicit quid pro quo if he or she does not wish to endanger the efficacy of the entire transaction” (Groebner 1). However, putting the transaction in danger is exactly what Robin wants to do, drawing attention to the ways in which these financial gestures create and sustain interpersonal relationships.

Robin bases his recourse to the payment on his social ideas, where it would be inappropriate for him, as a yeoman, to be the host of the knight in some type of equal relationship. He rejects Sir Richard’s assumption that they share a status or notion of
value and aggressively asserts his difference. That this difference is a question of identity seems clear both from Robin’s insistence on identifying himself as a “yeoman,” as opposed to Sir Richard’s “knight,” and by his determined misinterpretation of what Richard is offering. Specifically, Richard tries to place their relationship on the terrain of gift exchange with an undefined waiting period until he will be able to offer a return “gift” dinner. Robin, however, purposefully misunderstands Richard. “‘Gramarcy, knyght,’ sayde Robyn, / ’My dyner whan that I it have; / I was never so gredy, bi dere worthy God, / My dyner for to crave’” [Thank you, knight, for my dinner when I have it; I was never so greedy, by dear worthy God, as to crave my dinner] (ll. 141-144). Here, Robin purposefully misinterprets the graciousness of the knight’s offer. He, instead, insists that he will only offer thanks when he actually receives something and suggests that his anticipation of a future dinner would indicate avarice rather than the positive fellowship Richard extends. Robin is actively asserting his difference, suggesting that he shares neither a language nor a mindset with Richard.

One way to read this would be to simply see mercantile values as infecting largesse, perhaps offering a critique of the chivalric class and its ruse of sustaining a gift economy. However, this is complicated by the fact that Robin quickly resumes his previous role as soon as he realizes the knight has no money. Now, Robin is determined to aid the knight with a much needed loan. Once again adopting a quasi-royal persona, Robin says,

Come nowe furth, Litell Johnn.
And go to my tresouré,
And bringe me foure hundred pound,
And loke well tolde it be. (ll. 265-268)
[Come forth now Little John and go to my treasury and bring me four hundred pounds and make sure it is counted well]

Before we can become too comfortable with this resumption of royal airs, however, the performance is again undermined by Robin’s anxious waiting for repayment and his insistence on the contractual nature of the transaction. No gift, this is a business loan complete with terms of payment and guarantors.34

At the end of this episode, Robin quickly moves back to chivalric generosity and allows Richard to keep his £400 loan because he insists that he has already received payment, given that he has stolen from the very abbey holding Sir Richard’s mortgage. If this is not sufficient largesse, Robin then gives him an additional £400 as a gift. However, once again, Robin’s actions do not wholly conform to chivalric norms. As stolen goods, the money is never, in effect, his to give. Additionally, he offers the second sum immediately after Sir Richard offers him the bows and arrows as a gift, a violation, albeit it a small one, of the waiting period usually involved in gift transactions as opposed to commercial transactions.

And so the poem goes on, constantly constructing and undermining categories of identity, playing with Robin’s various performances, never seeming to definitively rest in one area. This incessant and insistent play seems to suggest even more than the other ballads that we have seen that neither mercantile nor chivalric values is the sole target but rather the ways in which Robin’s performance of “knighthood” is consistently ruptured by economic failure, as his largesse is tainted by contract and his gifts by payments,

34 Interestingly, given all of the complex religious critique in this particular text, the guarantor for this loan is Robin’s beloved Virgin Mary.
showcasing the spectacular instability of identity positions supposedly fixed in and by financial gestures.

V.

Retaining Bad Servants

Finally, I would like to take a look at two examples of “bad servants” from Robin Hood and the Monk and from A Gest of Robyn Hode, both of which offer more explicit commentary on the yeoman status claimed by Robin and his men. As suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the term “yeoman” had a complex set of associations for a late medieval audience. It could variously refer to a rank of service (valet), a stage in the career of a young man on his way to becoming a squire, a social category between husbandmen and gentlemen, countrymen akin to the same status as artisans and tradesmen in urban life, freedom of blood and tenure, those of questionable birth and tenant status, and a burgeoning class in the 15th century created by both upward and downward social mobility (Almond and Pollard 52-53). From this dizzying list, I want to focus on just two differing ideas of yeomanry present in these two ballads, yeoman as servant and yeoman as class status.

In “Robin Hood and the Monk,” Little John is forced to take on the role of the king’s yeoman in order to rescue Robin Hood from prison. By performing as the king’s

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35 MS CUL ff. 5.48 (c. 1450). “This book is an interesting miscellany, which contains religious and didactic matter (directions to parish priests, lamentations of the Virgin Mary, etc.) as well as a series of secular poems, which include King Edward and the Shepherd, a comic story of a king (probably Edward III) disguised as a merchant, who meets a very independent shepherd, who (it turns out) has been driven to poaching because of the depredations of the king’s men, the burlesque Tournament of Tottenham, and The Tale of the Basyn, a bawdy and fantastic story of an enchanted basin” (Gray 14).
yeoman, John places himself in an ambiguous position which tests loyalties, questions the basis for service relationships, and complicates the category of yeoman. From the king’s point of view, John is a yeoman in the strict sense of his own paid servant. He emphasizes these formal economic links, saying “I made hem yemen of the crowne, / And gaf hem fee with my hond” [I made him a yeoman of the crown and gave him money with my hand] (ll. 339-340). For him, this monetary exchange should cement John’s status as his servant and guarantee loyalty. It seems clear that both here and in the “Little John and the Sheriff” episode from the Gest (discussed later in this chapter) that there is a critique of one of the key characteristics of bastard feudalism, the often more temporary “fee for service” relationship between a lord and his retainers rather than the earlier and more long-lasting bonds of land. In this scheme, John highlights the tenuous nature of such bonds by treating his relationship to the king as purely functional. After the king is no longer useful, Little John throws off his role as king’s yeoman in favor of the less formal but more tenacious bond he has to Robin, highlighting the emptiness of the purely monetary connection.

This scene is made more powerful given the fact that Robin has alienated John at the beginning of the tale by treating him poorly and trying to cheat him out of money won in a bet. His choice to return to Robin’s band and his explicit desire to have Robin as his master circumvents key notions of late medieval paid service, while it affirms the

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37 Of course, this is not to say that bastard feudalism was a purely monetary connection, but I believe that this quality is being exaggerated for effect in the financial logic of the ballads.
bonds between the two men as fellow yeomen. Similar to the sheriff’s reaction to Guy in
“Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne,” the king notes in almost disbelief:

He is trew to his maister, seid oure kyng;
I sey, be swete Saynt John,
He lovys better Robyn Hode
Then he dose us ychon. (ll. 347-350)

[He is true to his master, said our king; I say, by sweet St. John, he loves Robin
Hood better than he does each of us]

John’s love for Robin, contrary to logical self-interest, stymies the king, but it suggests to
the reader the existence of enduring and meaningful connections in the outlaw realm, a
realm that does not depend on the cash nexus for bonds.

This difficulty in comprehension is made clear as he continues with the theme,
trying to explain away John’s actions. He notes the obligation of Robin to John:

Robyn Hode is ever bond to hym,
Bothe in strete and stalle;
Speke no more of this matter, seid oure kyng,
But John has begyled us alle. (ll. 351-354)

[Robin is bound to him forever both in street and stable. Speak no more of this matter,
said our king, but John has beguiled us all]

This relationship between Robin and John certainly seems like the yeoman/lord
relationship the king believed he had obtained with his payment to John. However, the
reader sees that it is a more complex mixture not completely reducible to either the
servant role or shared class status and one adamantly not tied to cash payment. Again,
ironically, the poor performance, here as the king’s yeoman, serves to highlight the
complexity of identity categories, as Little John outdoes the expectations for servant
loyalty by being a bad servant to the king.
Similar themes about servant loyalty and the cash nexus also appear in the episode in the *Gest* commonly known as “Little John and the Sheriff.” Here, Little John becomes the sheriff’s yeoman, once again emphasizing the sense of yeoman as a servant. When the sheriff comes upon Little John in the woods, he is at once struck by his prowess and soon offers him “twenty marks to thy fee” if he will become his man (l. 600). To further cement the official (and material) nature of this relationship, the sheriff also gives Little John a good horse, and they even go through all of the official motions of asking the permission of John’s current master, Sir Richard.

Little John very clearly sets out with the intention of performing badly and offers the only overt statement about these bad performances in any of the ballads. He says, “‘I shall be the worst servaunt to hym / That ever yet had he’” (ll. 615-616). Little John does not have to wait long for opportunity to present itself. One day, having overslept and been left behind by the sheriff and his other men, John wakes up hungry and demands food. A combination of his laxity in arriving so late and his belligerent attitude make the keeper of the pantry reluctant to indulge him. Little John then beats the man viciously, grabs the keys, and helps himself to the contents of the pantry.

The cook observes this behavior and notes, “‘Thou arte a shrewde hynde/In ani hous for to dwel, / For to aske thus to dyne’” [“You are a cursed servant to dwell in any house to ask to eat in that way’”] (ll. 654-656). He very clearly connects what John has done to being outside of the acceptable behavior for a servant. John has violated the rules governing the master/servant relationship. Rather than stopping John, however, this merely gives John an opening to further his insurrection by trying to lure the cook away from the sheriff’s service into Robin’s band. Importantly, when Little John tells the cook...
the terms of Robin’s service, they are very similar to those of the sheriff: livery twice yearly and twenty marks (ll. 679-682). This similarity suggests that it is something beyond economics which ultimately motivates the men. Abandoning their master, the two renegade servants rob the sheriff of all of his goods and more than £300 in cash and run off to rejoin Robin and his men.

Given the grotesque nature of Little John’s badness, we can certainly see how this scene has been interpreted by Pollard as:

a parody of the Book of Nurture, in which a masterless young man is instructed in all the arts of service and finer points of etiquette so that he can enter and prosper in household service. Little John, masquerading as a masterless man, turns the sheriff’s household upside down. Where the conventional book of courtesy celebrates service, this rejects it. (Imagining Robin Hood 172)

However, rather than service in general (remember, they are eager to enter Robin’s service), it seems that a different point is being made, one which interrogates the role of money in the retention of servants and, more broadly, the use of money to construct social roles and bonds.

As with the episode in “Robin Hood and the Monk,” the clear point being made is that money does not make the master. John and the cook, by preferring Robin’s service, are using criteria other than monetary, criteria which fall out of the understanding of the dominant view of service. A later episode in the Gest further illustrates this difference. After Little John is injured, he begs to be killed rather than captured. However, Robin rejects this. “‘I wolde not that,’ sayd Robyn, / ’Johan, that thou were slawe, / For all the golde in mery Englonde, / Though it lay now on a rawe’” [“John,” said Robin, “I would not want you slain for all the gold in merry England even if it were laid out in a row”] (ll. 1221-1224). Robin, too, rejects money in favor of their shared bond.
This episode of “Little John and the Sheriff” offers another one of the small performative moments in the ballads. After arriving in the woods with all of the sheriff’s stolen goods and his cook, Little John decides to push the game even further. He seeks the sheriff out where he is hunting and invites him to chase after a bigger prize, a “ryghte fayre hart.” Pollard suggests that this scene is a “mockery of aristocratic hunting ‘par force’ (chase by mounted huntsmen)” (Imagining Robin Hood 50-51). I would agree, and I would also suggest that, given the important economic and self-definition issues tied to hunting for aristocratic or gentle subjects, this fake hunt highlights the ways Robin and his band co-opt and thus oppose these identities, exposing their constructedness.

Robin, while usually enjoying the position of master, also gets his turn at performing service at the end of the Gest. After he goes to the king’s court, the emphasis shifts to his spending money as a man of the king. According to the poem, he spent more than one hundred pounds in a little over a year, and “in every place where Robyn came/Ever more he layde downe, / Both for knyghtes and for squyres, / To get hym grete renowne” [in every place that Robin came, he paid out more and more both for knights and squires to get great renown for himself] (ll. 1733-1736). We learn here that Robin’s renown is now connected to his ability to spend, a not uncommon occurrence in court life. However, as this is Robin Hood and not a typical courtier, he quickly grows discontented.

His discontent importantly climaxes one day as he sees young men shooting and despairs. He says, “‘Alas!’ than sayd good Robyn, / ’My welthe is went away’” (ll. 1743-1744). However, rather than lamenting money, the next line makes it clear that his “wealth” is something else, yet another move to reject definition by economic values and
reclaim other status markers. He says, “‘Somtyme I was an archere good, / A styffe and eke a stronge; / I was comted the best archere / That was in mery Englonde’” [Once I was a good archer, a stiff and a strong one; I was reckoned the best archer in merry England] (ll. 1745-1748). Here he rejects money as the basis for gaining “renowne,” and thus identity within the world of the court, and returns to his woodland roots, where he was defined for his skill as an archer.

He rejects a court logic that says “that the very essence of being is having; that if one has nothing, one is nothing” (Fromm qtd. in Presdee 57). As Robin lies and escapes the king’s service, he is playing on the same identity points as the other “service” episodes studied here, but he is also making a bigger statement about the overall project we have seen throughout all of these bad performances, the constant interrogation and exposure of the economic processes and gestures constructing available subject positions in late medieval England.

VI.
Robin Hood Performances and “Economic Trouble”

I would like to conclude with a comparison of two Robin Hood “performances,” one medieval and the other early modern, which return our attention to what I defined as the distinctive characteristics of the medieval figure at the outset of this chapter. In a legal record from the King’s Bench Rolls of 1441, a riotous outbreak is recorded, in

38 Legal records yield several other interesting anecdotes about medieval Robin Hood “performances,” such as: “At Tutbury, Staffordshire, in 1439 the court records complain that one Piers Venables, of Aston, gentleman, gadered and assembled unto hym many misdoers…and, in maner of insurrection, wente into the wodes in that contre, like as it hadde be Robyn Hode and his meyne” (A Mythic Biography 6) or in 1497 Roger Marshall from Westbury in Staffordshire (not far from Piers Venables’s Tutbury) was hauled before the powerful Star Chamber on charges of leading a “riotous assembly” to the town of Willenhall under the name of Robin Hood” (A Mythic Biography 8).
which a group of yeomen and labourers “in Norfolk blocked the highway, threatening to murder Sir Geoffrey Harsyk and fiercely singing “We arn Robynhodesmen, war, war, war”” (Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography 8).\(^{39}\) In this record, the yeomen dissidents are said to actively seize the outlaw identity and directly link it to both violence, through their cries of beware, and revolt, because of their threats to a member of the gentry and their waylaying of passersby. Merely seventy years later, we find an account of a very different performance of Robin Hood. In the chronicle of Edward Hall, we find a description of an aristocratic game involving King Henry VIII and his men:

> His grace, therles of Essex, Wilshire, and other noble menne, to the nombre of twelve, came Sodainly in a morning, into the Quenes Chambere, al appareled in shorte cotes, of Kentshe Kendal, with hodes on their heddes and hosen of the same, every one of them, his bowes and Arowes, and a sword and a buckler, like out lawes, or Robyn Hodes men, whereof the Quene, The Ladies, and al other there, were abashed aswell for the straunge sight, and also for their Sodain coming, and after certain daunces and pastime made, thei departed. (Robin Hood: A Mythic Biography 46)

Here we see the adoption of Robin Hood’s persona as part of an erotic courtly pastime, where the outlaw disguise simply adds spice to routine aristocratic behaviors.

Much of the difference between these two descriptions is related to a shift in the depiction of the outlaw figure from the medieval period to the early modern period, where most of our modern notions of the outlaw originate. In our modern milieu, the name of Robin Hood is synonymous with a certain brand of justice, particularly an economic justice based on a redistributive model favoring the poor of society at the expense of the wealthy. We acknowledge that Robin engages in rather unorthodox

\(^{39}\) Perhaps not unimportantly, Knight identifies these men as laborers, but A.J. Pollard, in discussing the same record, clearly identifies them as yeomen and labourers (Imagining Robin Hood 109-110). This is significant because Robin and his men are insistently identified with the term yeoman in the medieval ballads, and many scholars, including me, locate an important interpretive crux in the usage and meaning of yeoman.
financial behavior as a thief, but this potentially threatening behavior is ameliorated by the fact that his ultimate interests are not in pocketing the wealth but in achieving a more humane social balance. In addition, his gentrification opens him up to rapprochement with dominant interests, as can be seen in the courtly games above.

Of course, the Robin to whom these facts apply is a modern creation, and if we return to the origins of the criminal hero in the medieval textual evidence, a very different picture emerges. I think the ways in which the medieval Robin Hood we have seen in these pages could lend himself to expressions of rebellion and discontent like that of the Norfolk rioters has been made abundantly clear. Like these yeomen, Robin implicitly chants “war, war, war” as he flouts convention and questions established economic practices. In contrast, the Robin of Henry VIII, coming after Robin Hood has been recuperated as a dispossessed noble, could never elicit such discomfiting sensations. A dispossessed thirteenth-century aristocrat fighting for justice is in many ways a less socially radical figure than a yeoman who is more concerned with destabilizing the system rather than righting it. To the extent that we let only the “medievalized” modern view of Robin Hood dominate our cultural memory, we risk losing the radical socioeconomic work of these texts and the figure of the outlaw himself.

Indeed, Robin Hood is an important figure in light of this dissertation as a whole, as his cultural work is to show up the problems and anxieties generated by new economic systems of thought that threatened to reduce identity to purely financial terms. This cultural work echoes that of many of the earlier texts in this analysis, texts deeply interested in the determination of value, the concept of class status, and the connections between wealth and identity. For example, Sir Amadace, a text which fails to make sense
as a chivalric text under traditional models because of its overt and insistent economic emphases, takes on new importance when seen as an exploration of gentry fears about the inter-relationships of class status, inborn distinction, and economic solvency. The Octavian romances, too, rather than being a hodgepodge set of romances, mark the struggles surrounding the creation of what we today understand as mercantile identity. The various versions of the Alexius legend in Middle English grapple with the centrality of poverty to religious identity, an increasing concern in a period that had to deal with the harsh realities of increasing real poverty as well as the deployment of the language of poverty in attacks on the wealthy medieval Church.

The medieval Robin Hood ballads, then, can be viewed not simply as comic or parodic texts, but as a series of social commentaries that can talk back to these other texts in important and provocative ways. Robin’s various class cross-dressings or performances interrogate the interpellation of knights, merchants, and yeomen as economic subjects. When he takes on the figure of the courtly gentleman and refuses to maintain the appropriate façade of financial disinterest, we need to think back to the romances of Sir Amadace and Northern Octavian, which articulate the straight version of this scenario, suggesting that this behavior is innate to nobility. Robin’s queering of this scenario has the potential to respond to these texts, showing up not only the constructedness of these identities, but also their severe limitations. Likewise, when Robin takes on the role of the potter, we should remember Clement, both in his turn as vilified bourgeois and in his socially mobile fantasy of butcher to knight. Again, Robin’s refusal to play the economic game and to answer the call of his own economic interpellation points to the emptiness of both scenarios for Clement. In effect, these
Robin Hood tales cause trouble, in Judith Butler’s sense, and a particularly important kind because they refuse to stand still and allow for easy assumptions about identity to take hold. Instead, they constantly throw fixed categories into doubt and offer complex mixes of behavior which gesture to the ways in which medieval subjects were attempting to negotiate new subject positions in the transitional era of the late medieval period.

40 It is this insistence on the idea of troubling identities rather than inverting them that keeps me from following the various Bakhtin influenced critiques, such as Douglas Gray, “The Robin Hood Poems,” in Robin Hood: An Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism, ed. Stephen Knight (Cambridge: Brewer, 1999).
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