

Fiscal Morality and the State:
Commerce, Law, and Taxation
In Middle English Popular Romance
by
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A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Approved November 2015 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2015

ABSTRACT

As a contribution to what has emerged categorically in medieval scholarship as gentry studies, this dissertation looks at the impact the development of obligatory taxation beyond customary dues and fees had on late medieval English society with particular emphasis given to the emergent view of the medieval subject as a commercial-legal entity. Focusing on Middle English popular romance and drawing on the tenets of practice theory, I demonstrate the merger of commerce and law as a point of identification in the process of meaning and value making for late medieval gentry society. The introductory chapter provides an overview of the historical development of taxation and the emergence of royal authority as an institutionalized form of public welfare, or a state. The second chapter examines the use of contractual language in *Sir Amadace* to highlight the presence of the state as an extra-legal authority able to enforce contractual agreements. The attention paid to the consequences of economic insolvency stage a gentry identity circumscribed by its position in a network of credit and debt that links the individual to neighbor, state, and God. The third chapter explores conservative responses to economic innovation during the period and the failure of the state to protect the proprietary rights of landowners in *Sir Cleges*. Specifically, the chapter examines the strain the gradual re-definition of land as a movable property put on the proprietary rights of landowners and challenged the traditional manorial organization of feudal society by subjecting large estates to morcellation in the commercial market. The fourth chapter examines the socioeconomic foundations of late medieval English sovereignty in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. By dismissing the cultural fantasies of power and authority bound up in the Arthurian narrative, the author reveals the practical economic

mechanisms of exchange that sustain and legitimize sociopolitical authority, resulting in a corporate vision of English society. Collectively, the analyses demonstrate the influence the socioeconomic circumstances of gentry society exerted on the production and consumption of Middle English popular romance and the importance of commerce, law, and taxation in the formation of a sense of self in late medieval England.

DEDICATION

For Kali.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Dissertation would never have been written if not for the patience and constant encouragement of Richard Newhauser to whom I owe a debt of gratitude and the good guidance provided by Robert Sturges and Rosalynn Voaden. Collectively, their insight has been instrumental in the development of both project and person. I want also to thank my many friends and colleagues in the English Department for their feedback on chapter material both in the classroom and at the table; Shelly Batra for her unconditional support; Alex Wulff for his years of friendship and more recently for his attentive reading; Richard Loveland for his moral insight and levity during the completion of this project; my sister and niece, Amanda Bump and Hailey Thornton, for their persistent encouragement; and finally, I want to thank my mother, Sandra Holcomb, whose years of sacrifice for her children have made all of this possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I. Embedded Economies

Recent interest in the everyday experience and materiality of religious practice, particularly as it concerns lay piety, vernacular theology, and even the textual depiction of sensory experience, has gone far to surface a more organic and realistic medieval period from a chiaroscuro of unfounded assumptions. However, the fiscal and juridical context of the everyday medieval world remains an ancillary interest. The individual's relation to land, labor, economic activity, and the fiscal debt owed to secular authority, which are grounds for a reflexive moral, legal, and psychological experience, rarely assume the foundation of literary analysis. But money and institutions erected to regulate its use existed in the Middle Ages—even in the backwater of England.¹ People earned money through their labor and earmarked it for special use.² They purchased food and other necessary (and not so necessary) items with it; took it on loan; paid taxes, rents, dues, fines, amercements at court, and manorial fees with it; they tithed with it; made charity of it; and even left it to heirs when they died. As the Riccardi of Lucca can attest, the political agenda of the English monarch was entirely dependent on it, and the Houses

¹ Tenuous assumptions about the lack of cultural and literary sophistication in England, particularly in contrast to a perceived more sophisticated continental Europe, continue to excuse the dismissal of Middle English culture and literature as essential elements in the 15th and 16th century renaissance in England.

² Viviana A. Zelizer, "The Social Meaning of Money," in *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011); idem, *The Social Meaning of Money* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 89-127.

of Parliament emerged specifically as regulator of it.³ Theologians too wrestled with and spoke about it with regularity, attempting to reconcile its use with the salvific experience of Christ. The pervasive use of money is recorded in the court rolls, wills, and other secular and religious records of financial transaction extant from the late medieval period. Not surprisingly the use of money, particularly its exchange as a means to satisfy interpersonal, commercial, governmental, and religious debts and obligations features prominently in the literature of the period as a necessary component in what could only have been a pressing concern for the majority of late medieval society. That is, to speak euphemistically, the making and eating of bread.

This would seem an unnecessary set of observations to make; however, money and the moral perspective it engenders remains an uncomfortable reality for some medievalists, who in trying to account for its use render money an excrescent growth that signals the end of a feudalism held together by oath and honor and gift exchange. This misconception is furthered by our modern disposition to see the self-interested pursuit of money as a marker of modern capitalism, which is difficult to locate in medieval England, and to see commercial ethics as generally dehumanizing and thus lacking intimacy or moral capacity.⁴ To greater and lesser degree there remains in the background of medieval studies a spectral image of late medieval English society as tethered to theological idealism and pastoral simplicity. As a result, money—the pursuit of it, its

³ Richard Kaeuper, *Bankers to the Crown: The Riccardi of Lucca and Edward I* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1973). See also Pamela Nightingale, “The Bankruptcy of the Scali of Florence in England, 1326-28,” in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England*, ed. Richard Britnell and John Hatcher (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 107-20.

⁴ Christopher Dyer, “Were There Any Capitalists in Fifteenth-Century England?” in *Enterprise and Individuals in Fifteenth-Century England*, ed. Jennifer Kermode (Wolfeboro Falls, NH: Alan Sutton, 1991), 1-24.

possession, and its exchange—is sometimes denied an active, meaningful place in the moral life of late medieval society and as an essential component in the psychological reality of late medieval persons, who, more often than not, are seen as animated by the theological questions of the day.

Our dogged reliance on the theoretical assumptions of neoclassical economics and Marxian materialism, which in both cases have a tendency to employ medieval feudalism as a simple pastoral juxtaposed to the urbane complexity of a modern capitalism, is part of the problem. In the dichotomy created, the medieval world is arrested as a bucolic landscape animated by a ragged populace trucking and bartering cartloads of goods over the English countryside. This scholastic caricature links the medieval world with a primitive mercantilism defined by a nascent if not altogether absent understanding of fiat monies, fiscal debt, and economic trade. Compounding the problem is the search to locate a point of origin for capitalism in the medieval period, which leads many to frustration. There is no proto-capitalist lurking on the edges of the moor to exploit a free labor force; the complicated interplay of economic innovation and the continued dependency on traditional sources of income, namely rents and customary fees and services, prohibits such a discovery. Instead, we are left with categorical terms like “mercantilism,” which attempt to describe a nascent commercial but ultimately incomplete capitalist society, which leads some to conclude that the “economy was not yet constituted as a separate, autonomous moment [...] of human activity.”⁵ The assumption is often that economic practices remained too submerged in the theology of the Church and, so, therefore they

⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 13.

falter as a set of practices by which subjects understood their place in late medieval society. The consequence is that the medieval continues to be excised from the very set of fiscal attitudes and practices that have become indicative of modernity, rendering the medieval synonymous with religious asceticism and Acadian simplicity, an association that furthers the efforts of our Early Modern colleagues (formerly of the Renaissance Department) to (re) associate medieval studies with the “centuries of stony sleep” that serve as the backdrop to Yeats’ prophetic vision.⁶

However, one need go no further than the labors of Mac’s ill-tempered wife in the *Secunda Pastorum* to see the modern in the medieval and to make confluent connection between the two periods by recognizing the complex web of urban industry and rural wage labor in which she participates as she spins English wool at her wheel in exchange for “six pennies.” Nor is it difficult to see such economic practices as deeply informative of the domestic tragedy that forms the backdrop of her husband’s deceit and to recognize in the shepherds’ obsession with the giving and possessing of coin a modern tendency to instrumentalize morality and to mediate the domestic fantasies that shape our sense of self and time and place with the acquisition and exchange of coin. Finally, we need go no further than the fourteenth century *Wynnere and Wastoure* for an early representation of what is distinctly modern about the state as a governing institution, namely its explicit function as an instrument of economic arbitration. While not a capitalist society as we understand it today, late medieval England was certainly a commercial society, and as the growth of institutions able to regulate and profit from commercial activity attests, the commercial language and practices that animated late medieval society constituted a

⁶ W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” *The Collected Poems by W.B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 184-85. Line 19.

significant sphere of human activity that provided a language and a set of practices through which the subject made sense of the world around them.

No doubt the economic and the religious overlapped; however, the embedded nature of the medieval economy should not be grounds to dismiss economic activity as a significant factor in the makeup and expression of late medieval morality nor should the presence of commercial activity be understood as inherently pejorative to late medieval peoples. As the field of economic sociology has demonstrated, the hard line maintained in neoclassical economics between social and economic life readily blurs. From an economic sociological perspective not even the modern economy exists detached from and unaffected by other spheres of human activity but, rather, exists in embodied form in relation to the social context of its practice.⁷ This is the central insight of economic sociologist Viviana Zelizer, who observes that “views of the economy as an autonomous distinct sphere of human activity organized around rationality and efficiency have impeded the serious consideration of morality’s place in economic life.”⁸ As Zelizer suggests, the persistent view of the individual as a rational evaluator predisposed to make choices independent of the social context of their lives “neglects the incremental negotiation of shared understandings and interpersonal relations that lies at the center of alternative, more sociological, analyses of economic processes.”⁹ It is understood from her perspective that economic practices are in fact embedded in social practices. That is,

⁷ Zelizer, “Introduction: The Lives Behind Economic Lives,” in *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), 1-18. Here 6.

⁸ Zelizer, “Ethics in the Economy,” in *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011), 440-57. Here 443.

⁹ Zelizer, “Introduction: The Lives Behind Economic Lives,” 9.

the economic sociologist argues for an embedded view of economic activity that “describes the way that price setting, asset transfers, and other standard economic activities (presumed to operate internally according to the precepts of neoclassical economics) responded to their location within varied social settings.”¹⁰

An embedded view of economic practices is medieval-like and is evident in the moral complaints of the period, including those of both John Gower and Will Langland, who demonstrate a frustrated desire to disentangle commerce from religious and moral thought. However, it is entrenched. In his *Vox Clamantis*, a lament for the current state of English society, Gower condemns what he understands as a transgressive narrative that takes as its point of origin the possession of wealth and property, which portends, as David Aers remarks of Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, the dissolution of the good and just community:¹¹

One's worth is now in his wealth; property confers honors, and abject poverty is an object of utter reproach. When a rich man speaks, then every ear will pay attention, but the words of a poor man are worth nothing. The intelligence of the wise man is as nothing if he is without property; worldly property now outweighs what one says in significance. [...] In their eyes poverty in any man is contemptible even though the man himself were worthy; and in their judgment, a rich man is not wicked, even though he is of an evil nature. Without property there are no attainments, there is no true faith, no gracefulness of speech, no originality of wit, no uprightness. Where there is property there is an abundance of good sense. But no poor man possesses wisdom; even if he were wise, he is still nothing but a poor man. We reject the man whom the world rejects; and may perdition take him when he perishes. But we acclaim them as worthy whom the world's bounty has brought to worldly riches.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid, 6.

¹¹ David Aers, “Justice and Wage Labor After the Black Death: Some Perplexities for William Langland,” in *The Work of Work*. Ed. Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat, (Glasgow: Cruithne Press, 1994), 169-190. Here 182.

¹² John Gower, “The Voice of One Crying,” in *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*, Trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962). Here 118.

The possession of wealth and property is for Gower deleterious to the moral and spiritual resources of late medieval English society; however, it is also clear that he understands the possession of wealth and property as essential in the process of meaning and value making for the wider community. As with Langland and to lesser degree Chaucer, Gower articulates the anxiety of a privileged community aware of its transitional status. As socioeconomic historians have noted, the authority of the aristocracy was attenuated by the socioeconomic aspirations of a rural and urban laboring class, which appropriated the traditional symbols and practices of the dominant order and made its truth function in a different register.¹³

As is evident in the *Vox Clamantis*, the response to the growing economic clout of the “peasantry,” a broad categorical term that elides the expansive set of commercial activities that make up the laboring estate, was to reassert a traditional view of society. Underpinning Gower’s work is a tripartite social order, estates theory, which intends to correct the perceived moral laxity of a community destabilized by the expansion of commerce in late medieval England. Christopher Dyer notes that “As their world seemed to be going wrong, [moralists] advocated a formula which recalled an old and stable system of values.”¹⁴ Paul Freedman links the development of estates theory to the eleventh century, noting that, “mere ternarity (three separate ways of life) yielded to a more powerful idea of mutuality that transcended earlier notions of common

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press), 32.

¹⁴ Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Middle Ages: Social Change in England c. 1200-1520*, (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 17.

subordination to the ruler.”¹⁵ Its re-application by moralists in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century intended to re-orient English society to a singular end, namely, spiritual salvation. As an allegorical model of society, estates theory positions the laboring estate as the source of physical sustenance for secular and religious authority while eliding the practical reality of the socioeconomic relationships that linked commoner to social superior by reducing labor to an act of estate fealty. Langland’s famous ploughman is a fine example. Indeed, there is little in *Piers Plowman* to suggest monetary recompense is owed the laborer as Piers embodies an idealized feudal obligation to uphold truth and duty.

However, estates theory was not merely a literary construct. As Christopher Dyer suggests, estates theory “had a practical consequence, as it guided the thinking of governments when they devised the representative machinery, which gave consent to taxation in the late thirteenth century.”¹⁶ For example, estates theory justified the economic exploitation of the cottar, or nearly landless. The cottar “fulfilled an essential function in the feudal mode of production. Since they had too little land to support a family, they either hired out their labor or starved.”¹⁷ Though the cottar may have held land from a lord, he was subject to exorbitant rents, dues, and economically delimiting seigniorial rights. Indeed, lords often drew as much a 40% of their income from the extraction of *corevéés*, tolls, market rights, fines, the taxation of hunting and fishing grounds, and the charge of seigniorial monopolies, or the obligation of tenants to use the

¹⁵ Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 22.

¹⁶Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 17.

¹⁷ Cathrina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), 3.

processing facilities of their lord. In addition to the manorial obligations of *tallage*, tithes for the Church and the occasional royal tax, the money dues of the *villein* tenant siphoned off about 50% or more of his gross income.¹⁸

By the mid fourteenth and early fifteenth century, however, it was clear that such abstract social models no longer promoted tenable social policies, particular in light of the gentry's emergence as a sociopolitical force in late medieval England. As the profit motive of the market place penetrated the lower strata of society, new social narratives emerged, redefining the reach of peasant and gentry labor in light of the self-advancement attainable through commodity exchange. The creation of an urban working class and a rural manufacturing community increasingly aware of the opportunities afforded the individual to improve living conditions through work in commodity trades challenged the *status quo*. No longer bound to lord and land by subsistence farming, the gentry drew attention to unequal distribution of wealth between estates by their ability to accumulate and hoard wealth for the purchase of land and even luxury items.¹⁹ The proliferation of new social designations—the indeterminate “gentleman,” for example—during the fourteenth century speaks to the influence of an increasingly prosperous merchant class, whose earnings from domestic and international trade extended them an economic clout on a par with the knight, further blurring traditional estate boundaries.²⁰ The transitional nature of late medieval English society is made evident by the attempt to legislate the giving of alms, for example. The advent of discriminatory charity and the

¹⁸ Lis and Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism*, 5.

¹⁹ Dyer, *Standards of Living*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

distaste for the able bodied beggar, those “lorelles that lecherye haunten,”²¹ mark the transition from a feudal to a profit economy wherein the gift awarded for fealty is no longer imagined as voluntary but as waste and lost.²²

Often condemned as *nouveaux riche*, the gentry intruded into spaces traditionally reserved for the aristocracy. Indeed, the encroachment of the laboring estate on aristocratic society was understood as an inversion of the natural order, and Gower links the gentry to traditional conceptualizations of pride in the *Vox Clamantis* by denouncing their economic ambition as an unnatural desire to exceed the prescriptive limits of one’s estate. His complaint centers on the peasantry’s abdication of traditional labor practices: “[Peasants] refused to carry sacks to the city anymore and were unwilling to bend their backs under a heavy load. They did not care for the field grasses on the hillsides, but instead they now wanted greater delicacies.”²³ He is in effect responding to the diverse field of economic activity available to laboring society by circumscribing the reach of the peasant laborer with traditional laboring services. Hoccleve too complains of the conspicuous consumption of the peasantry. He notes that “Ther may no lord take up no neewe gyse / But a knave shal the same up take.”²⁴ However, unlike Gower, his complaint concedes the real, embedded presence of commerce in the process of meaning and value making. Hoccleve acknowledges commerce as both a source and a solution to

²¹ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: A New Annotated Edition of the C-Text*, ed. Derek Pearsall (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008). Here Prologue, line 75.

²² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 27.

²³ Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, 55.

²⁴ Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999). Lines 505-506.

the problem. For example, Hoccleve directs blame at lordship, whose immoderate spending on “neewe gyse,”²⁵ or new styles, motivates the pride of the peasantry, who presume equal status to their social superiors as a result of their commercial access to the same new styles. Hoccleve observes: “And lords mighte helpe al this, if they wolde / the old get take, and it foorth use and holde.”²⁶ For Hoccleve, the late John of Gaunt, whose dress was never “ful wyde,”²⁷ is the paragon of good lordship. A return to Gaunt’s more austere traditional attire would reassert traditional estate boundaries and correct the pride of the peasantry. However, he notes that it would also enable more coin to circulate among the people:

Than mighte silver walke more thikke
Among the peple than that it dooth now.
Ther worlde I fayne that were yset the prikke—
Not more for myself, I shal do wel ynow—
But, sone, for that swiche men as thow,
That with the world wrastlen, mighte han plente
Of coyn, wheras yee han now scarsetee.²⁸

Hoccleve’s censure admits economics as an important social activity to his readers and implies that a return to traditional fashions will make both moral and market correction by addressing the economic scarcity created by the immoderate expenditure of wealth on new fashions.

Implicit in Gower and Hoccleve’s attempt to circumscribe the limits of social activity is a variegated estate defined by its economic interests, namely the gentry.

²⁵ Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, line 505.

²⁶ Ibid, lines 524-25.

²⁷ Ibid, line 519.

²⁸ Ibid, lines 526-32.

Because of their access to the commercial market, the gentry were able to self-fashion the limits of its own ideological boundaries. Simply through the practice and procedure of their everyday lives, the gentry were able to manipulate the knowledge and symbols of a dominant order to fashion for themselves a self-narrative defined by their own ambitions and desires. In the process of living their lives, the gentry eroded the privileged horizon of their social superiors until it merged with their own.²⁹

II. Middle English Popular Romance and Gentry Studies

While *Sir Amadace* does not, the other two Middle English popular romances I assemble for analysis, namely *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, feature what has been labeled the subject-meets-king topos.³⁰ While acknowledged as a recurring literary topos in Middle English romance, the moral and political implications of the subject-meets-king motif have largely been ignored to the detriment of our understanding of how the gentry oriented themselves to the world around them as a socioeconomic and political community in late medieval England. The curiosity of the subject-meets-king topos is the emphasis it places on the intersection of subject and institutional authority—often to comic affect—to draw into question the material and ideological basis of moral and legal authority, or to redefine the conditions of subjective experience in commercial and legal terms. As is the case in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of*

²⁹ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 15-28.

³⁰ Derek Pearsall, "The Development of Middle English Romance," in *Studies in Medieval English Romances*, ed. D. Brewer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1988), 11-35.

Carlisle, a more instrumental view of sociopolitical authority often emerges, which takes as commonplace commercial transactions and legal contract as the basis of moral and political action and evaluation. In examining the moral contours of the subject's relationship to institutional authority I aim to show how fiscal and legal practices serve as a locus for making sense of a subject's economic and even religious identity, a confluent phenomenon, I suggest in my analysis of *Sir Amadace*, in late medieval gentry society.

As the pre-eminent secular genre of the Middle Ages, romance has long been identified with the sociopolitical outlook of the aristocracy, a political and religious constituency of late medieval society that was unquestionably central to the practice of late medieval social and religious life. Susan Crane's *Insular Romance*, for example, situated Middle English romance within a twelfth and thirteenth century Anglo-Norman baronial culture. Her scholarship gave thematic shape to a seemingly protean genre by foregrounding the engagement of romances like *Sir Guy of Warwick* and *Bevis of Hampton* with the anxieties of late medieval secular leadership by demonstrating the interplay of politics and faith. Crane's work with the Middle English romances of the thirteenth century admitted a more organic social body in which the secular bled into the religious and the religious bled into the secular. It also acknowledged a more reflexive use of literary narrative during the period, as her work positioned Middle English romance as an instrument used in serious moral or even spiritual reflection. Ojar Kratin describes several of the Middle English romances as a form of secular hagiography, and he demonstrates effectively the religious tenor of the genre to suggest, as Crane had done

before him, that Middle English romance had varied used in the late medieval society.³¹ Similarly, Nicholas Watson's analysis of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a form of vernacular literature engaged in theological explication, and Derek Pearsall's own understanding of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as a model of aristocratic Christianity demonstrate the use of romance as vehicle for moral debate and reflection by late medieval English authors.³²

However, it has taken longer to recognize the reflexive perspective of the Middle English popular romances because they appear to be lesser works in comparison to their more literary counterparts and because their authorship has remained clouded. As a result of their lack of aesthetic sophistication, Middle English popular romances—once notoriously likened to a “toord”³³—are often dismissed as deficient redactions of their continental predecessors. This has certainly been the critical misfortune of romances like *Sir Percevel of Galles* and *Sir Launfal*, for example, which are texts demonstrably enmeshed in the moral and political discourses of their day but that have nevertheless received tepid critical reception as a result of their lack of aesthetic sophistication. As “popular romances,” a designation that enforces untenable attitudes and assumptions about class and culture, they have languished on the periphery of scholastic inquiry,

³¹ Ojar Kratin, “The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography,” in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 81 (1966): 347-54.

³² Derek Pearsall, “Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment,” in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 351-63; Nicolas Watson, “The Gawain-Poet as Vernacular Theologian,” in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 293-313.

³³ Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Tale of Sir Thopas,” in *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), line 2120.

which has been more attentive to literary exemplars of the genre like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the *Alliterative Mort Darthur*. As Thomas Hahn and Dana M. Symons have noted, the genre's reliance on narrative devices that "encourage the audience to find immediate pleasure in the exaggerations and sensations of the action, to enjoy each episode as it hurtles past, rather than to suspend judgment or worry about interpretation,"³⁴ has been grounds for many to dismiss them as a genre lacking critical reflexivity and to suggest that the pleasurable is incommensurate with the morally or politically incisive.

The more inclusive scholarship of Elizabeth Fowler and D. Vance Smith, for example, has worked to correct this prejudice by drawing attention to the socioeconomic conditions of the primary producers and consumers of the genre, namely, the secular nobility, a differentiating and expanding constituency in the late medieval period.³⁵ Their analyses reflect the predominant interest in modern English departments in delineating the complex network of power and authority captured or reproduced in language. Such thinking has opened popular romance up to reinterpretation, resulting in its refashioning as a genre prone to challenge the values and practices that traditionally define nobility in light of the perceived reality of individual and social behavior.³⁶ The proclivity of Middle

³⁴ Thomas Hahn and Dana M. Symons, "Middle English Romance," in *A Companion to Medieval English Literature and Culture c. 1350-c. 1500*, ed. Peter Brown, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 341-357. Here 345.

³⁵ D. Vance Smith and Elizabeth Fowler link the popular romances with an intellectual elite working in aristocratic households in one instance and at the law colleges in the other—social environments in which legality and jurisprudence would likely be of compelling interest. See Smith, D. Vance, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (University of Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2003); Elizabeth Fowler, "The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in Sir Isumbras," in *The Spirit of Medieval English*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (London, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000). 97-121.

³⁶ Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Romance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 1-52.

English popular romance to subvert social and moral order through the presentation of the obscene, the unorthodox, or even the criminal,³⁷ which are generic conventions traditionally used to denounce romance as morally reprobate, have been reinterpreted as a mark of the genre's cultural reflexivity, prompting scholars like Cory James Rushton to note the complicity of popular romance "in the power struggles of late medieval England."³⁸

Cultural reflexivity has in many respects become the defining characteristic of the English romance tradition. Both Jean Jost and Stephen Knight, for example, politicize Middle English romance by setting violence committed by or against the Round Table as its hallmark.³⁹ Knight specifically describes the internal logic of romance as a form of "competitive assertiveness," a pattern of action that characterizes the way the powerful in feudal society interact with those members of the community that exist on the margins of legitimate power and authority. Employing Althusser's description of culture as "an imaginary in which people produce for themselves an ideological relationship with actual events and forces," Knight embeds Middle English romance in a discourse of threat and resolution "coded to produce a self-concept for the powerful and to present an acceptable

³⁷ Nicola McDonald, "A Polemical Introduction," in *Pulp Fictions of Medieval England*, ed. Nicola McDonald, (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2004), 1-24. Here 3.

³⁸ Cory James Rushton, "Modern and Academic Reception of the Popular Romance," in *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance*, ed. Raluca L. Rădulescu and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2009), 165-179. Here 179.

³⁹ In distinguishing the English from the French tradition, Jean Jost notes that Middle English romance downplays the role of *amor*, which is generally depicted in Middle English romance as a lustful distraction and not as a motivation for narrative action, in favor of violence committed by or acted against the Round Table. See Jean Jost, "The Role of Violence in Aventure: 'The Ballad of King Arthur and the King of Cornwall' and 'The Turk and Gowin,'" in *Arthurian Interpretations 2.2* (1988): 47-57. Here 47.

image of power to those without it.”⁴⁰ Romance, Knight suggests, reproduces an aristocratic normativity for a lesser estate that poses a “range of threats to their tenure of power.”⁴¹

However, often muted or dismissed altogether in the description of dominant ideologies is an account of who or what literate public is posing the challenge to legitimate authority. The logic of Marxian materialism to which Knight’s scholarship indebted is partly to blame as it tends to over privilege the coercive powers of centralized authority. As a result, the complicated interplay of sociopolitical center and margin is enervated to emphasize the perceived oppressive character of modern states. The consequence is often the total ascription of power and authority to abstract entities like the state that appear to dictate and animate the binding, normative features of a given society, an ascription of power that reduces lay subjectivity—the body public in its entirety—to the mere function of this or that (static) social structure.

This oversimplification appears to confirm outdated assumptions about late medieval feudal society and its literatures. First, it appears to suggest that the aristocracy maintained uniform control over access to nodes of power and authority, and, second, that the aristocracy as a social group remained uniform throughout the late medieval period. What emerges from such assumptions is a monovocal description of the social body, which inaccurately excises creative and social efficacy from the “lesser men” of late medieval England by rendering them the mere embodiment of the attitudes and

⁴⁰ Stephen Knight, “The social function of the Middle English romance,” in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton, 1986), 99-122. Here 103.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 101.

practices imposed upon them by a privileged caste of secular and religious actors invested with the power to shape and transform consciousness.⁴² By extension, cultural productions like romance are reduced to mere instruments of aristocratic or orthodox authority, and the genre is rendered as a whole a vehicle for the dissemination of orthodox and centrist opinion. Thereby the claim a “middling” segment of late medieval society could make on literacy or the use of literature as a means of defining normative experience and voicing complaint from the margin is diminished.⁴³

Since the debate over the putative “feudal crisis” that surfaced in the 1980s, it is clear that our traditional notion of late medieval aristocracy has been too undifferentiated, uncritical categorically to account for what was historically a variegated, permeable caste of wealth and authority.⁴⁴ Traditional interpretations of aristocratic society exclude from their purview the very real influence of merchant and urban money, for example, in both late medieval political and religious life, and book production and circulation in late medieval England.⁴⁵ Historically, the gentry assumed a larger role in sociopolitical authority in late medieval England than has been traditionally ascribed to them, and as

⁴² Leszek Nowak, *Power and Civil Society: Toward a Dynamic Theory of Real Socialism*, trans. Krzysztof Sawala (New York: Green Wood Press, 1991). Here 24.

⁴³ Alan Harding uses the term “middling” in reference to lay and ecclesiastical urban specialists, including merchants, craftsmen, shopkeepers, schoolmen, notaries, moneyers, and business men working within for royal authority and local magnates. Generally speaking, he designates them people with little access to government but who bore the brunt of taxation and, thus, had more than passing interest in the politics of the realm. See Alan Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002). Here 230.

⁴⁴ Rodney Hilton’s work serves a good introduction to this debate. See Rodney Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1985).

⁴⁵ Richard H. Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society 1000-1500* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996). See also John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England: 1370-1529*, (New York: Longman, 1983); and Elizabeth A.R. Brown, “Taxation and Morality in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Conscience and Political Power and the Kings of France,” *French Historical Studies* 8.1 (Spring 1973): 1-28.

Ad Putter and others have noted, created the market for vernacular literature in the late medieval period.⁴⁶

In the context of romance studies, the differentiated view of aristocratic authority that emerges in Geraldine Barnes' *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* is an early precursor to what has emerged categorically in medieval scholarship as gentry studies. Gentry studies is a burgeoning field of inquiry that is concerned with the complex layering of late medieval aristocracy and the evident influence the class of knights, gentlemen, esquires, and wealth burgesses that composed the provincial nobility exerted on the culture of late medieval England.⁴⁷ As prominent figures in regional finance, law, and religion, the consumptive practices of the gentry exerted influence on the direction and scope of literary production during the period. Their collective influence is felt directly in the popular romances, which draw attention to the fiscal and legal boundaries of the domestic space while imagining the obligation of the individual to secular and religious authority in terms of financial debt, commercial transaction, and legal definition. That is, the popular romances tend to understand the world through the practices the gentry understood best, rather than a fantasized commitment to military service or feudal oath, or even as religious subjects evaluating human behavior through the prism of religious doctrine.

⁴⁶ Putter and Gilbert take up this issue in the context of Middle English Romance. See Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, ed., *The Spirit of Medieval English Romance* (London, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000).

⁴⁷ Richard Britnell points to the tighter classification of the community by rank and status through the proliferation of peerage titles during this late period as indicative of an interest in controlling membership to an elite political coterie. See Richard, Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society 1000-1500* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996). Here 211.

Barnes linked the production of romance to an active “middle estate,” or what she describes in more detail as a parliamentary class, more concerned with the social and fiscal realities of state jurisprudence than with the martial exploits traditionally associated with the aristocracy. Barnes’ “middle estate” has been given more dynamic description in the recent scholarship of Nicole Rice and Michael Johnston, medieval scholars who persuasively establish the gentry as cultural consumers and producers of vernacular literatures equally invested in “consolidate[ing] their position as men of import” in both the secular and religious community.⁴⁸ Johnston specifically describes the gentry as “thousands of cultural consumers newly aware of themselves as a distinct category within England’s elite,”⁴⁹ and he argues persuasively that several of the Middle English popular romances—*Sir Amadace* and *Sir Cleges* included—respond to the anxieties of the gentry as provincial landowners. He identifies the gentry as a mercantile caste with distinct social rituals and anxieties that set them apart from England’s aristocratic elite.⁵⁰ In regard to this latter observation, his analysis of the genre highlights the preoccupation of the popular romances with the anxieties of provincial land owners and the thematic interest of the genre with social mobility. In particular, Johnston notes the concern the popular romances exhibit for the rise of the gentry subject to aristocratic status,⁵¹ and his

⁴⁸ Nicole Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008), 1-16; and Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 10. See also Raluca Rădulescu, “The Political Mentality of English Gentry at the End of the Fifteenth Century,” in *New Europe College Yearbook* 8 (2000-2001): 355-89.

⁴⁹ Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry*, 5.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

general conclusion is that the popular romances are an appropriated genre redeployed by a literate culture to express and examine the socioeconomic anxieties of gentry society.

Scholarship like Johnston's has begun to shape a critical discourse that generally identifies Middle English popular romance with the domestic concerns of a literate estate composed of the knightly and merchant classes owning lands worth £20 to £40 *per annum*.⁵² As example, Johnston and others observe the compulsive interest of the authors of the popular romances in designating specific sums of money and the special attention paid to how and in what way money is acquired and expended as a marker of status, which is itself almost always in flux. Amadace, as Johnston notes, is identified as a knight by virtue of his possession of £40, and the narrative is pre-eminently concerned with both Amadace's reduction to poverty and his re-ascent to noble status as a result of his committed largesse, a mode of expenditure generally identified with aristocratic society.⁵³ The narratives of *Sir Cleges*, *Sir Isumbras*, and *Sir Launfal* follow a similar pattern of financial loss and re-acquisition.

Because so many of the popular romances feature narratives of social ascent, there is a reductive tendency to see the gentry as conspicuous consumers, who establish social honor and prestige solely by aping their social superiors. However, implicit in the specific sums of money that litter the popular romances is a broader engagement with late medieval legal culture. As I aim to demonstrate, late medieval English gentry society was also a litigious society that understood the possession and use of wealth and land as constrained by legal right and consequence. To own and keep land in late medieval

⁵² Ibid, 34.

⁵³ Ibid, 58-90.

England required a good deal of legal acumen.⁵⁴ The Middle English popular romances assembled here reflect a tendency to see wealth and status as couched in legal language and backed by the legal machinery of the state, as is the case of *Sir Amadace*, *Sir Cleges*, and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*.

III. The Commercial-Legal Subject

The emergent view of the medieval subject as an economic and legal subject follows from the gradual shift in taxation practices toward moveable properties. Taxation based on moveable properties proved to be more lucrative for the state than the income derived from customary tenure obligations. However, the desire for higher tax yields fundamentally changed the way royal authority administered the realm and articulated its authority to the public body. Richard Kaeuper notes, for example, that the conceptual and geographic augmentation of royal authority beyond the personal holdings of the king and its re-conceptualization as something akin to our notion of a state, which we might define as an inclusive and impersonal body of law concerned with protecting the rights of individual subjects, is causally linked to the development of systematic compulsory taxation. The redefinition of royal authority as a state emerges concurrently with the development of legal institutions and practices that provided wider access to courts of law. The consolidation of legal authority under the crown was punctuated by the progressive wresting away of violence from local magnates and lesser lords, who saw

⁵⁴ Ives provides a general discussion of the necessity of being literate in the law as a property owner in late medieval England. See E.W. Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983).

violent self-help as a legitimate recourse in the resolution of local civil disputes. Rather, the crown channeled the resolution of civil disputes through depersonalized legal machinery administered by the crown and provincial landowners to form a juridical body that at least in theory presented itself as a socially neutral instrument of English common law.⁵⁵

The shift in taxation practices to moveable properties retooled the state as an economic institution increasingly concerned with and ultimately dependent on the profits of domestic and foreign commerce. As a result, the intervention of the state into the domestic and economic lives of subjects was more common place. The justification for intervening in the domestic sphere was tied to “the doctrine of necessity,” which was the theoretical foundation of early tax levies like the Danegeld, for example. As Elizabeth A. R. Brown observes, early tax levies and the suspension of proprietary rights were justified by the presence of an immediate external threat to the community. As Chris Glen-Wilson notes, however, the prolonged war with France enabled the English monarch to present the “external threat” as perpetual, laying the ground work for the transformation of the internal logic of the state itself, which increasingly justified the regular and systematic apportioning of a subject’s goods by invoking its obligation to subsidize the cost of maintaining civil order and justice.⁵⁶ Reinforced by Roman juridical

⁵⁵ This is generally observed in Glen-Wilson, Harding, Kaeuper, and Tierney. See Chris Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. James Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, & W.M. Ormrod (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2000), 85-100; Alan Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002; Richard Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Brian Tierney, “Medieval Canon Law and Western Constitutionalism,” in *The Catholic Historical Review* 52 (1966): 1-17.

⁵⁶ Chris Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. James Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, & W.M. Ormrod (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2000), 85-100.

theory such developments lead to the emergence of a view of royal authority as a *status*, a term with broad use during the period but one used regularly to describe an authority that maintains extra-legal action as a means to defend the community. As a result of such developments, Brian Tierney suggests, royal authority was recast as a form of public welfare inviolate to even the administrators of justice.⁵⁷

While an external threat remained on the periphery, royal authority increasingly turned its gaze inward with the objective of regulating the social body and thereby regulating the income extracted from the citizenry. The state justified the regular, rather than occasional, taxation by claiming responsibility to uphold the “common good,” a claim that assumes a broad legal responsibility for the stability and condition of the realm. The state, in short, presented itself as a neutral social institution concerned with the general welfare of its subjects. For example, the transformation of royal authority into a form of public welfare is demonstrated by the proliferation of legal suits during the period that sought the protection of royal authority from the arbitrary abuse of local magnates. As Christopher Dyer and E.B. Fryde report, court rolls record a variety of legal suits initiated by peasants and local communities aimed at establishing exemption from taxes and raises in fees. These included “pleas of debt” and “pleas of ancient demesne.” Pleas of ancient demesne were often legal maneuvers undertaken by collective communities seeking common law protection from the arbitrary taxation of local

⁵⁷ Brian Tierney, “Medieval Canon Law and Western Constitutionalism,” 13-14.

magnates by claiming that all land once belonged to the king and, so, all lands fell under the jurisdiction of the royal court.⁵⁸

The merger of royal authority and commercial culture engendered a new legal and commercial vocabulary essential to the successful negotiation of social life and in the subject's understanding of his place in relation to his neighbors. In this regard, the assessed tax obligation of the individual subject and in the cases of towns, whole communities, became integral in the process of identity formation. The strict assessment of taxable properties gave new emphasis to the rights and status of the individual while accelerating the commercialization of customary obligations such that the exchange of money readily substituted for traditional labor or military services. Indeed, the commutation of traditional services and obligations through monetary payment became commonplace during the late medieval period, particularly as traditional feudal obligations proved insufficient to meet the fiscal demands of war.⁵⁹ *Scutage* is a prime

⁵⁸ Subsidies were negotiable contracts between the monarch and local communities. The negotiated tax obligation carried over from year to year. Several works cover the historical development of the lay subsidies, including Ingrid Hjertstedt, *Middle English Nicknames in the Lay Subsidy Rolls for Warwickshire* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1987); Keith Williams-Jones, ed., *The Merioneth Lay Subsidy Roll, 1292-3* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1976); J. Ambrose Raftis and Mary Patricia Hogan, *Early Huntingdonshire Subsidy Rolls* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1976); Robin E. Glasscock, *The Lay Subsidy of 1334* (London: Oxford UP, 1975); and Peter Franklin, *The Taxpayers of Medieval Gloucestershire: an Analysis of the 1327 Lay Subsidy Roll* (Dover, NH: A. Sutton, 1993).

⁵⁹ For general discussion of taxation in medieval England see G. L. Harris, *King Parliament, and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Sydney Knox Mitchell, *Taxation in Medieval England*, ed. Sidney Painter (New Haven: Yale UP, 1951). See also Cathrina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979); Rn e Doehaerd, *The Early Middle Ages in the West: Economy and Society*, (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1978), 1-63. N. J. G. Pounds, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe*, 2nd edition (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1994); Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1968. More recently see Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989); idem, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005).

example as it allowed subjects to commute their military service and in essence instrumentalize their civil or political obligation to the king through monetary exchange.

Taxation both in kind and number spoke directly to a subject's legal status in medieval English society as in some cases like that of *tallage*, a head or arbitrary tax, taxation made distinction between free and servile status.⁶⁰ As a result, taxation became a point of contention. For example, there was a concerted effort to coordinate the interests of the state with those of landowners by redefining servile status, or what is generally termed *villeinage*, to include all individuals liable for specific dues, including *merchet* and *tallage*, rather than labor services that would have included the notorious "week work." The redefining of servile status as a condition of fiscal liability, rather than a debt of labor, effectively excluded two thirds of the population from the common law of the royal court, and it denied new tenants the protection of the Magna Carta, which insisted new tenants should pay only a "reasonable relief." Coupled with the Ordinance of Laborers, (1349), the Statute of Laborers (1351), and the Statute of Cambridge (1388), which were legislative acts intended to circumscribe the mobility and earning potential of wage laborers, one can see the coordinated use of law to extend the economic privilege of magnates and smaller landowners whose income was based primarily on land lease. Successive labor ordinances exposed the peasantry to heavier fees and taxes while restricting their recourse of complaint to manorial courts where their legal rights mediated by a system of amercements that extended the fiscal reach of magnates. The

⁶⁰ Wendy Scase observes that judicial and peasant complaints against royal administrators were, in fact, encouraged by Edward I and his successors as a means to assess and curb the systemic corruption that diluted tax yields. See Wendy Scase, *Literature and Complaint in England, 1272-1553* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

same magnates also held unfair advantage in the manorial courts on account of their wealth and their position as lord of the demesne. Similarly, the broad fiscal assessment of the realm that lay behind the sumptuary legislation enacted and repealed in the late fourteenth century reflects the ardent interest of royal authority in linking individual rights and obligations to financial income, rather than mere land tenure.⁶¹

To achieve such ends a more exacting administrative organ was needed to accurately assess the wealth of individuals and communities, particularly in light of the great effort made by lay and religious subjects and communities to underreport wealth as a means of avoiding higher tax obligations.⁶² Thus the period is witness to a depersonalization of royal authority through the proliferation of a paid administrative class, which oversaw the levy of taxes and the administering of justice in an attempt to mitigate the corruption introduced into the system by the self-interest of local magnates and officials seeking personal gain. This paid administrative class was largely drawn from gentry society, laying the ground work for a more intimate understanding and interest in commercial and legal practices. As W. M. Ormrod has noted, after 1348, the year of the Black Death, gentry identity is increasingly associated with service to the state, and generally speaking, gentry society regarded itself as a “natural magistracy” upon which landed society depended for the administration of shire justice and, more intimately, of their estates.⁶³ The gentry can be understood as a managerial caste in light of their role as

⁶¹ Alan Harding, *A Social History of English Law* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1966); idem, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002). Here 30-58.

⁶² D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 25-43.

⁶³ W. M. Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England, 1300-1450* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). Here 123.

provincial lawyers on whom the juridical responsibilities of the state increasingly fell, and as essential household officials and servants that composed the aristocratic *famuli*.⁶⁴ This is certainly true of wealthy burgesses and merchants, who were increasingly able to assert their influence on royal authority through parliamentary statute and as money lenders to the monarch.⁶⁵ As a result of its straddling position, gentry society reflected a mix of cosmopolitan and provincial interests that were expressed through the acquisition of political offices that placed them in position to influence royal policy and practice.⁶⁶

The political life of the medieval merchant is telling. As prominent members of the wool and luxury trades and as royal financiers, merchants played an integral role in the material economy of the aristocracy. The dependency of royal authority on the commercial practices of the populace is reflected in the realignment of taxation policies around revenues and movables. The desire to maintain profit margins by controlling local and state policies that affected trade motivated merchants to seek public office. By the fifteenth century the *cursus honorum* of the politically minded merchant included stints as sheriff and chamberlain as requisites for advancing to more influential positions like alderman, mayor, and members of Parliament. Merchants played a significant role in the civic life of towns and cities as well. Their participation in provincial government and their financing of religious celebrations and public works, including those works essential

⁶⁴ There is debate among historians about the source and reach of the gentry's authority and influence with scholars seeing their influence spreading out along a horizontal or a vertical axis. See Ormrod, 47-51. See also Simon Walker, *Political Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006).

⁶⁵ Rodney Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1985). Here 8.

⁶⁶ Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England*, 49.

to profitable trade like roads and bridges, made them indispensable member of the community. It also gave merchants grounds to claim equal status to the aristocratic gentlemen.⁶⁷ The challenge the merchant class posed to aristocratic authority is attested to by the continual pressure applied on the monarchy by towns seeking political autonomy and by the passing of sumptuary legislation, which intended to “sharpen the definition of social boundaries.”⁶⁸

Coupled with the development of the itinerant court system and the process of legal writ in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries there was, generally speaking, wider access to royal authority, which as Richard Kaeuper and others have noted, extended the language of law and the idea of justice further down the social scale.⁶⁹ Expanded access to royal courts and the codification of legal process provided lay society—not to be understood solely as an agrarian peasant society of shepherds and plowman but to include primarily landowners constituting the lesser gentry, burgesses, and merchants, who would come to fill the houses of Parliament—with both venue and language to air grievances against the arbitrary taxation of local magnates and the abuse of royal administrators.⁷⁰ The result of these new layers of fiscal and legal mediation of the

⁶⁷ Jennifer Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverly, and Hull in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge, UP, 1998). Here 25-69.

⁶⁸ Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism*, 173. Richard Britnell also points to the tighter classification of the community by rank and status through the proliferation of peerage titles during this late period as indicative of an interest in controlling membership to an elite political coterie. See Richard Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society 1000-1500* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996). Here 211.

⁶⁹ For a general discussion of the development of English law see Richard Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). See also Alan Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

⁷⁰ Harding links the development of Parliament to efforts to curb the abuse of royal administrators. See Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 158-162.

subject was, paradoxically perhaps, a more intrusive relationship between the subject and the state on the one hand, and an objectification of royal authority as a constituting force of law concerned with the maintenance and legitimization of legal-social contracts on the other.

In conclusion, the diffusion of legal authority in gentry society through political office and developments in the administrative machinery of royal authority helped engender a popular legal consciousness that merged to greater or lesser degree the self-interest of the lay community with the self-interest of royal authority. The former set of interests are characterized in part by the desire for personal and familial prosperity, the latter by the desire to maximize tax yields by regulating the daily life of subjects, which included the curbing of arbitrary abuses of secular and religious law. However, this “popular legal consciousness” has largely been ignored as the basis of literary analysis while a similar phenomenon in religious thought and practice has received wide critical attention under the guise of lay piety and vernacular theology.⁷¹ While the moral and religious vocabulary of penitential manuals written in the vernacular has been understood as the psychological scaffolding of a late medieval interiority, the same cannot be said for

⁷¹ For example see Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Katherine C. Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Mark Miller, “Displaced Souls, Idle Talk, Spectacular Scenes: Handlyng Synne and the Perspective of Agency,” in *Speculum* 71.3 (Jul., 1996), 606-632; Nancy Parnter, “The Hidden Self: Psychoanalysis and the Textual Unconscious,” in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Parnter (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005. 42-66); Jerry Root, “*Space to Speke*”: *The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997); Jeremy Tambling, *Confession: Sexuality, Sin, the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990); and Nicolas Watson, *The Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicolas Watson, et al. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999).

the fiscal and legal vocabulary that emerges as a mediator of individual subjects, whole communities, and the state.⁷²

Recent emphasis on the decrees issued at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 has created a theoretical framework to assess the moral outlook engendered by money and its more intimate regulation by legal authority. Viewed as a catalyst for broader social reform, Fourth Lateran has engendered a generation of scholarship armed with new insights into the psychological, physiological, and spiritual lives of late medieval humanity. Studies in lay piety and vernacular theology take, for example, the more stringent regulation of the clergy, the codification of the sacraments, and Innocent III's decree that lay people should confess once a year as a point of origin for the discussion of an emergent late medieval subjectivity defined by its more intimate relationship with a religious institutional authority and the language and implements of religious practice. Though scholars generally excise it from the broader changes taking place in late medieval society, Fourth Lateran serves as a religious exemplar of the wider economic, social, and political changes taking place. The more exacting regulation of pastor and penitent that follows the decrees of Fourth Lateran, for example, reflects the more exacting assessment of the civil subject as a fiscal and legal entity by the state, creating a scaffolding of commercial and legal vocabulary and practices accessible to a late medieval subject for use in the process of making sense of one's self and one's neighbor as an economic, legal, and religious entity.

⁷² A couple of exceptions include T.A. Shippey, "The Tale of Gamelyn: Class Warfare and the Embarrassment of Genre," in *The Spirit of Medieval Popular Romance* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 78-96; Richard Kaeuper, "An Historians Reading of the Tale of Gamelyn," in *Medium Ævum* 52, 51-62; Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "Medieval Law in the Tale of Gamelyn," in *Speculum* Vol. 26.3 (Jul, 1951), 458-464; Angela M. Lucas, "Fair Play, Justice and the Law in "The Tale of Gamelyn," in *Maynooth Review / Revieú Mhá Nuad* Vol. 5.2 (Dec, 1979), 45-59.

IV. The Fiscal Morality of Middle English Popular Romance

Following in the footsteps of David Aers, who identifies the aim of literary analysis as an attempt to “relocate [the text] in the web of discourses and social practices within which it was made and determined its horizons,” the analyses that follow aim to link the production and consumption of Middle English popular romance to overlapping commercial and legal discourses circulating in fourteenth and fifteenth-century England.⁷³ Specifically, the analyses that follow foreground the medieval subject’s relationship to wider public authority, or in this case, the state. Each chapter draws attention to the fiscal and legal attitudes and practices that define the contours of that relationship. I refer to the socioeconomic perspective that emerges as the “fiscal morality” of Middle English popular romance.

The phrase “fiscal morality” is borrowed from the scholarship of Elizabeth A.R. Brown, who first coined the term to describe the moral justification provided by medieval theologians for the right of the king to tax his subjects.⁷⁴ While changes in taxation practice during the period form the backdrop of the analyses, there is no attempt to reevaluate Brown’s thesis in the context of Middle English popular romance. Rather, the analyses that follow will broaden the definition of “fiscal morality” to refer to the wide ranging use of language, metaphor, and practice derivative of commercial and legal culture to bring into alignment a subject’s interests and desires with those identified with

⁷³ David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1992). Here 4.

⁷⁴ Elizabeth A.R. Brown, “Taxation and Morality in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Conscience and Political Power and the Kings of France,” in *French Historical Studies* 8.1 (Spring 1973): 1-28.

a broadening landowning society. The Middle English popular romances assembled for analysis here give witness to a reflexive use of literary genera to articulate social disaffection, personal and familial desire, complaint, and moral and spiritual evaluation as a coherent narrative that takes as its starting point the fiscal and legal forces that animate society. In some cases the forces are understood to facilitate society, in other cases to suppress it, but in all cases they are understood as essential in articulating a late medieval sense of time and place, which is linked ostensibly to the general interests of gentry society, namely the desire to get and keep wealth.

The focus of chapter one is *Sir Amadace*, a spendthrift knight romance that employs a technical contractual language derived from late medieval English commercial and legal culture to describe the formal bonds between a debtor and his creditors. Structurally speaking, *Sir Amadace* falls outside of the “subject-meets-king” topos that structures the narrative of *Sir Cleges*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*. However, it shares with these other romances a similar tendency to see the medieval subject in relief of commercial and legal institutions, which operate in the background as constituent forces structuring the moral world of the late medieval subject. In contrast to Johnston’s linkage of the gentry’s consumptive practices to those of the aristocracy, my analysis of *Sir Amadace* seeks to particularize gentry economic practices by observing the gentry as a polylogical entity, or community, that hinges on distinct commercial language, metaphor, and practice. Drawing on the work of Jennifer Bryan and J. Allen Mitchell among others, I argue that the use of literary narrative to explore the commercial, legal, and religious consequences of economic insolvency represents, to paraphrase Bryan, an

active seeking out and scrutiny of discourse based on the interests of the gentry individual.

Chapter two examines conservative responses to economic innovation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in *Sir Cleges*. Specifically, the analysis examines the strain the state's shift to moveable properties as the basis of individual tax obligation placed on the proprietary rights of landowners and traditional patterns of economic exchange between landed society and the monarch. Operating in the background of the romance, I argue, is the disruption to traditional feudal economies posed by the alienation of land for commercial profit, a trend in the land market of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that led to the gradual redefinition of land as a movable property. As the avariciousness ascribed to the royal authority depicted in the romance suggests, the author of the romance understands such developments as problematic because they represent the submergence of legal authority in the commercial market, which puts the state in economic competition with landowning society thus compromising its status as an extra-legal authority. Employing a similar legal language to that found in *Sir Amadace*, the author of *Sir Cleges* decries the transgression of legal compacts, positioning such transgressions as an abdication of the state's responsibility as an extra legal authority to protect the proprietary rights of landowners. Inverse to the use of Arthurian literary motif in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, the subject of analysis in chapter three, the author of *Sir Cleges* uses the image of Arthur as representation of a just society from which the contemporary world has fallen and to which it must return.

Chapter three examines the socioeconomic foundations of sovereignty in late medieval England. I argue that the author of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*

dismisses the cultural fantasies of power and authority bound up in the Arthurian narrative to reveal the practical mechanisms of material and monetary exchange that sustain and legitimize sociopolitical authority. The sophistication of *Carlisle*'s authorship lies in its unwriting of the Arthurian literary motif as an ideological narrative used to make social and political distinction between royal authority and provincial society. At the heart of the romance is a concern for social instability caused by violence directed at provincial property holders. The characterization of the titular antagonist, the Carle, as an adjudicating force able to arrest the violence and self-interest of royal officials indicts royal authority as a negligent and permissible legal authority. By highlighting the dependency of royal authority on the material wealth of provincial society, the author of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* re-roots sociopolitical authority in a practical mechanism of exchange, embracing the just reciprocity assumed to organize commercial exchange as a foundational model for the exercise of legal authority. In doing so, the author of the romance argues for a corporatist vision of sociopolitical authority in which "churlish," or provincial society, is given an effective voice in the exercise of royal authority. In this regard, *Carlisle* mirrors the populist rhetoric of the complaint literature of the period, which aimed to curb the abuses of law by the monarch, royal officials, and local magnates, and to integrate itself into the juridical body.

CHAPTER 2

THE INSOLVENT SUBJECT

I. Narrative Context: Sir Amadace

Lillian Herlands Hornstein identifies *Sir Amadace* as a Northwest Midlands composition, which dates from the late fourteenth century. The romance survives in two late-fifteenth century manuscripts: National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh (Advocates) 19.3.1 (formerly Jac V.7.27), and Taylor MS 9 (Ireland Blackburn), a part of the Robert H. Taylor Collection at the Princeton University Libraries. The analysis that follows is based on the text found in Ireland Blackburn, which is written in twelve line tail rhyme stanzas, rhyming *aabccbddbeeb*. The meter is generally iambic tetrameter with trimeter used in the *b* lines. The plot of the romance is organized into three fits.⁷⁵

The first fit opens with Amadace and his steward in conversation; they are discussing Amadace's finances. Amadace is a profligate, it seems, and as result, he is forced to sell off his lands and lay off his entourage to cover his debts. To mask his shame, he throws a feast for the nobility of the city and doles out money to the poor before setting out on adventure with just £40 left to his name. Now a knight errant, it is not long before he encounters a chapel in a wood outside of the city. There is a light glowing in the window. In the chapel he discovers a disconsolate woman mourning an unburied corpse. The stink of the rotting corpse is nearly unbearable, leading Amadace to inquire about her circumstances and motivations. The mourning woman reveals that the

⁷⁵ Lillian Herlands Horstein, "Miscellaneous Romances," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: CT: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), 145-72. Here 169.

corpse is that of her husband, a former merchant. Her husband lies unburied, she recounts, because he still owes £30 to a merchant of the city, who refuses to allow the interment of the body before the outstanding debt is paid.

The second fit opens with Amadace in search of the offending merchant in hopes of persuading him to allow the debtor proper burial. To this end he pays the dead man's debts at a cost of £30. He then spends his last £10 to throw the dead man a feast and to induce the religious of the city to pray for the insolvent merchant's soul. Penniless and ashamed, Amadace wanders into the wilderness where he encounters a White Knight, who promises to restore Amadace's lost wealth if Amadace agrees to repay him half of his future earnings. Amadace readily agrees to the pact.

The third and final fit opens at the site of a shipwreck to which Amadace has been directed by the White Knight. Because Amadace no longer looks the part of a noble, the White Knight directs Amadace to loot the bodies of the drowned knights to adorn himself in the accoutrements of nobility and thereby gain entrance to a local king's jousting tournament. Amadace enters the tournament, proves to be the best knight on the tourney field, and wins the hand of the king's daughter in marriage. They live prosperously and acquire great wealth, siring a son along the way. When the White Knight returns, however, he demands repayment of his loan. To Amadace's dismay, it is not land or money that he wants but, rather, half of his wife and half of his son, a literal interpretation of the bargain struck in the wood. The scene is made more perverse by the deep gratitude Amadace displays for his former benefactor, who resists Amadace's call for fellowship until the debt has been paid. Though reluctant to murder wife and child, Amadace is encouraged to keep his promise by his own wife, who would rather sacrifice herself and

her son than see her husband renege on a deal to which he has consented. Amadace reluctantly concedes to her argument, and he prepares both wife and child for gruesome partitioning. However, before he can follow through with his intentions, the White Knight calls for Amadace to halt and reveals his identity—he is, in fact, the insolvent merchant on whom Amadace spent his last £40. The White Knight departs, and the romance concludes with Amadace ascending to the throne after the death of his father-in-law.

II. Introduction: Sources of the Self

While the Church cast an indelible shadow over the medieval imagination, the people of late medieval England spent their time much as we do; they labored and toiled in an effort to feed themselves, make money, and to actualize to greater or lesser degree the material goods and conditions that constituted the “good life”—whatever the good life appeared to be, given the horizon engendered by one’s station in life and the examples set before them by one’s peers. And certainly living a virtuous life in accordance with Church doctrine constituted a significant part of the good life for late medieval people; however, as it continues to do today, daily life engenders a lived experience that resists compartmentalization into the binary language that continues to cloy medieval scholarship, namely the religious and the secular. Such bifurcation of late medieval society runs counter to our sense of lived experience, isolating from a more confluent tapestry of ideas and practices nodes of authority that often appear to embody irreconcilable perspectives—one perspective embodied by a religious institution

concerned with the perfection and salvation of the human soul and the other by a set of institutions and practices often associated with the fiscal and military economies of late medieval society.

The effect of such circumscription is to create what de Certeau calls a “visible totality,”⁷⁶ a seemingly self-contained body of ideas and practices abstracted from the immersive reality of everyday life that enable us to lay out in broad strokes the ideological horizon of a people in a given place and time. The “free market” is an example of a discursive “totality” often employed by academic and political pundits to articulate the defining values and practices of western capitalism. However, Carolyn Dinshaw’s sound justification for the use of such totalities aside,⁷⁷ one need not travel too far from home to realize that the self-interested, rational individual promulgated by models and pundits of the “free market” is enervated by the moral obligation, the sense of duty one often feels in the presence of strangers, who for their part embody and put in use the expectations, rules, and values that define a given society. Such encounters often escape accounting by the “algorithm of rationality,” frustrating generalizations about human motivation by placing the self-interest of individuals in a wider context of expectation and desire.

Similar complexities arise when untangling lived experience from the discursive totalities employed during the Middle Ages to organize the social body and to direct human desire toward legitimate ends. Estates theory, for example, is for Chaucer, Gower,

⁷⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Ordinary Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Here xix.

⁷⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, *How soon is now?: Medieval Texts, Amateur Readers, and the Queerness of Time* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1-39.

and Langland a self-contained economic, moral, and spiritual model that symbiotically links human society with a spiritual dispensation that organizes all being into coherent, meaningful expression. However, it, like the free market, is an abstraction employed reflexively (we hope) to simplify the moral and spiritual complexity that characterizes and animates late medieval society and its literatures. In spite of the interdependent set of relationships it posits between divergent social constituents, estates theory ultimately bowdlerizes the complex and often contentious interchange between constituents of late medieval society by artificially partitioning the social body into discrete experiences animated by un-reflexive lay-actors, who for their part are assumed to conform to the set of attitudes and practices delimited by their ontic status.⁷⁸ As Will's wandering in *Piers Plowman* makes clear, however, not even Langland assumed social life to unfold in such stark terms (no matter how much he may have desired it to) nor that such abstract models like estates theory could accurately account for the way ordinary people imagine their lived social experience, or, to borrow a bit of phrasing from Charles Taylor, "how things go on between themselves and their fellows."⁷⁹ In fact, it is the very disjunction between ideal and practical reality that forms the ideological basis of Hilton's "active life," that causes Will such consternation and yearning, and that, for further example, renders Chaucer's pilgrims so endearing to modern readers.⁸⁰ No doubt the varying registers of everyday life—the religious, the fiscal, the familial, etc.—intersected and reinforced one

⁷⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁷⁹ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004), 23. See also idem, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989).

⁸⁰ Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000).

another to engender a polysemous moral perspective that made possible the common practices that sustained medieval culture and society and contributed to the rich debate over morality and spiritual edification that surfaces in the literatures of the late medieval period.

This confluent interchange between economic and religious identities, between an ethics concerned with economic ends and an ethics concerned with spiritual salvation, is evident in *Sir Amadace*, a romance based, like *Sir Cleges*, on the spend-thrift-knight motif. As I hope to demonstrate, *Sir Amadace* gives us insight into the ethical experience, or subjectivity, of late medieval gentry society, a social group in which commercial interests merge with religious devotion in the practice of everyday life. Recent scholarship on medieval subjectivity has turned its attention to the interstices created by overlapping discourses in an effort to create a more dynamic medieval subject capable of discretion and self-governance. Studies by Nicole Rice and Jennifer Bryan, for example, read late medieval piety as a mutual construction by an inward oriented and secular subject responding to a more programmatic institutional authority. Bryan observes that:

Devotional literature was popular not because late medieval English readers were dull and pious, as has often been assumed, but because they were eager to know about what they took to be their deepest, truest, and most important selves. They were looking for ways of thinking and feeling that would help them to live better lives.⁸¹

Undergirding Bryan's analysis is the observation that the medieval subject is not merely called into being by discourse, or ideology, but, rather, the subject is formulated by an active seeking out and scrutiny of discourse in accord with the interests of the individual.

⁸¹ Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Here 3.

For Bryan the act of seeking out discourse culminates in the privatization of religious experience, which confirms Nicolas Watson's observation that "the vernacularization of theology thus did not simply mediate the formal theology of the theologians downward to the people; it reflected the religious and spiritual interests of the people upward as well."⁸² Similarly, Nicole Rice imagines a more dynamic medieval community, which is defined, in part, by the private interests of the gentry, a proto-middle class deeply entrenched in late medieval economic and religious life. In Rice's analysis, the popularity of vernacular piety during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, though I oversimplify, is a response to consumer demand and the identification of theological texts as consumable products. The consumption of religious texts, Rice observes, conferred to the penitent both the means to worship privately and the status of doing so.⁸³

Implicit in such analyses is a subjectivity with more autonomy than has been traditionally ascribed to late medieval people. In the context of Bryan's and Rice's scholarship, for example, subjectivity is not imposed but, rather, provoked by institutional authority. Subjectivity emerges from the complex interchange between subject and ideology, an interplay that, in Lacanian terms, is best described as a mutual operating upon one another.⁸⁴ That is, the subject embodies and operates on discourse in the same way that it is embodied and operated upon by discourse. In his reflection on the

⁸² Jim Rhodes, *Poetry Does Theology* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 23.

⁸³ Nicole Rice, *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature*, 1-16.

⁸⁴ Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr. makes distinction between poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories of discourse. See Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., "The Subject of Discourse: Reading Lacan through (and beyond) Poststructuralist Contexts," in *Lacanian Theory of Discourse: Subject, Structure, and Society*, (New York: New York UP, 1994), 19-45.

role of discourse in Lacanian formulations of the subject, Marshall W. Alcorn, Jr., notes that:

If the subject is conceived (along the lines of Althusser) as a simple effect of ideology, a unified structure ‘called’ into place by the interpellating force of language, then the subject has no resources for resisting ideology. If the subject is to resist the force of ideology (and it must if it wants to direct political change), then it must be something other than a simple effect of ideology.⁸⁵

Imagining a subject able to resist the force of ideology draws into question the passivity traditionally assigned to the medieval subject by calling attention to a subject’s unique ability to deny, dismiss, or deform social directives. Resistance, Alcorn notes, implies agency, an ability to counteract forces that in other contexts would successfully constitute subjects. Indeed, Alcorn argues that it is within the manifest contradictions of competing discourses that the subject finds its identity.⁸⁶ For example, on the surface secular and religious society appear to engender conflicting desires. On the one hand there is the desire to acquire and consume material goods, and on the one hand the desire for religious knowledge. This seeming contradiction is mediated by ecclesiastical authority, which imposes rules and guidelines; however, the translation of Church doctrine into moral praxis is dependent solely on the consent of the individual, who, as I show in *Sir Amadace*, merges religious and secular interests into a confluent moral perspective in which the desire for commercial profit is not understood as mutually exclusive from religious knowledge.

The emphasis that medieval texts like *Sir Amadace* place on the role of consent in human activity reflects, as Jerry Root notes, a movement during the fourteenth century

⁸⁵ Alcorn, Jr., “The Subject of Discourse,” 30.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 30.

away from the understanding of the human as inherently sinful and toward a new understanding of a subject's intention as the site of moral and spiritual evaluation. This new focus on intentionality places emphasis on the autonomy and responsibility of the subject in the creation of self-knowledge.⁸⁷ A parallel development is evident in commercial thought during the period. For example, the patristic tradition unambiguously condemned commercial activity as inherently avaricious; however, by the fourteenth century commerce was understood as instrumental to the wellbeing of Church and state. Merchants were judged as sinful based only on their intention to profit through malfeasance, rather than their mere association with commerce.⁸⁸ Jim Rhodes suggests that the socioeconomic and religious developments of late the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries led to the development of a proto-humanistic perspective, which directed medieval scholasticism to questions regarding the state of the individual and the moral complexity of living in the here and now. This, he suggests, accounts for the impulse to humanize God and the world. His argument rests on Heiko Oberman's observation that *via moderna* in the late Middle Ages was rooted in a nominalist anthropology whereby human beings act "as the appointed representatives of God, responsible for their own life, society, and world, within the limits of the covenant stipulated by God."⁸⁹ The consequence, Rhodes argues, is "a vast broadening of the horizon of possibilities for

⁸⁷ Root points to Abelard's *Ethics* as a text influential in redefining sin as a consequence of the intention and consent of the individual. See Jerry Root, "Space to Speke": *The Confessional Subject in Medieval Literature*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

⁸⁸ For a general consideration of changing attitudes toward merchants see Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge, UP, 2002). Here 110-31.

⁸⁹ Rhodes, *Poetry does Theology*, 20.

human beings in the temporal world,”⁹⁰ opening medieval society to economic and social reform. Similarly, Walter Ullmann draws attention to the widening gap between secular and religious society during the late medieval period. He suggests that the secular sphere experienced a new level of autonomy during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries “as did the work and activity human beings conducted in it.”⁹¹

This new autonomy includes an expanded sense of narrative as a self-reflexive genre essential in scrutinizing individual interiority and in delineating the limits of the private and public sphere. J. Allen Mitchell understands this expansion as tropological, or what he describes as a movement toward the interpretative autonomy of the individual. The end result, Mitchell observes, is the redirection of the reader’s attention to praxis and the embodiment of an induced performance of moral activity.⁹² To be intelligible and useful, moral generalities must be given specific content. Mitchell notes that, “Accordingly, what we really require for everyday understanding is examples, specific instances of a rule being followed, embodied forms of life. One acquires knowledge by seeing it put into practice.”⁹³ He places special emphasis on the moral responsibility of the individual (as an entity distinct from the Church) to make what one reads one’s own. Mitchell defines this process as “the projection of oneself and one’s personal condition

⁹⁰ Ibid, 20.

⁹¹ Ullmann observes that the traditional view of society as a consequence of sin gave way to an Aristotelian view of society as the necessary relations and organization of men based on need. See Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1966), 118. See also Rhodes, *Poetry Does Theology*, 20.

⁹² J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004. Here 11.

⁹³ Ibid, 16-17.

onto the text through selective interpretation.”⁹⁴ The conflation of phenomenological and textual subject is problematic as the reader engages in an act of “inventive dislocation and appropriation of texts to new reading contexts.”⁹⁵ Mitchell’s explanation is of interest, and I quote it here at length:

The didacticism of the ethics of exemplarity likewise gestures beyond or operates outside the literal, the conventional, or the merely textual (of the text) to engage substantive parts of an individual’s moral life (*hors-texte*). Thus exemplary texts come to order human action. But tropology simultaneously effects a change in the order of the text. A contingent and highly individualized component of reading, involving the ethical intervention of the reading subject into the subject of the text, as well as the intervention of the text into the reading subject, is implied by the activity of textual “turning.”⁹⁶

The phrase “textual turning” implies for Mitchell the potential of the text to induce a conversion in the reader through the imaginative juxtaposition of the reader’s experiences with those of the fictional subject, or the embodied other through whom the reader formulates a “conscionable response to exemplified moral norms.”⁹⁷

The author of *Sir Amadace* shows a similar interest in employing the genre of romance as means to induce the performance of moral activity by examining the moral complexity of “living in the here and now.” The author shows particular concern for the struggle of the subject to reconcile its sense of autonomy with the moral norms of a commercial environment that is mediated by the legal authority of the state. Drawing on the work of Simon Critchley, a scholar concerned with the foundations of ethical experience, the aim of this chapter is to demonstrate how the author of *Sir Amadace*

⁹⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁹⁵ Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 15.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 15.

constructs a gentry identity by placing the individual's desire for economic and personal autonomy in conflict with the demands placed upon the gentry by the wider commercial and legal community.

Ethics is comprised, Simon Critchley observes, of the way in which a subject binds itself to some concept of "the good," a phrase he uses to describe an object of desire. It is in relation to this good that a subject shapes its subjectivity.⁹⁸ The subject and the good exist in dialectical relationship, and ethical experience begins, Critchley contends, with a demand from the other, or the good, to which the subject gives approval.⁹⁹ In the context of the relationship between the subject and the object of its desire, the demand of the good becomes the foundation of the self and the fundamental principle of its articulation, as the self is organized around a core set of values and commitments related to the good.¹⁰⁰ Paraphrasing Emmanuel Levinas, Critchley observes that subjectivity is defined by its "heter-affectivity," as the subject shapes itself to a demand that it can never meet. The subject is traumatized by the relationship with the other because the unachievable demand of the other sunders and divides the subject.¹⁰¹ Similar to Levinas, Critchley concludes then that the subject is traumatized by its encounter with the other, as the encounter with the other induces the realization that the

⁹⁸ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 10.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 20.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 40.

autonomy of the subject, its freedom, is preceded by an infinite responsibility to meet the demands of the other.¹⁰²

In the context of the model of ethics Critchley outlines, what is “good” in the world *Sir Amadace* reflects is material prosperity and social ascension. Generally speaking, what binds a man of the gentry to the “good” that organizes his social environment is not largesse but, rather, a series of credit relations—a network of commercial and legal obligations that must be managed. The trauma of this relationship is embodied for Amadace by his encounter with an insolvent merchant, who serves as a symbolic pre-figuration of his indebted status and who ultimately leads Amadace to the realization that the unbridled autonomy that undergirds aristocratic largesse is a destructive fantasy for a man of the gentry. Rather, Amadace’s place in late medieval society is defined by the debt he owes to his creditors, to the state, and ultimately to God—a tripartite debt that forms the foundation of his social existence. In terms Jennifer Bryan has used in other contexts, *Sir Amadace* can be said to illustrate “the difficulties and anxieties involved in re-envisioning the relationship between a solitary self and the social world it inhabits.”¹⁰³ Theoretically speaking, the romance depicts what Alain Badiou refers to as a “subject-in-becoming,” or a subjectivity that emerges in response to an event that calls the subject into being. In this instance, Amadace’s encounter with the

¹⁰² Ibid, 56-57. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1981).

¹⁰³ Jennifer Bryan quotes Lee Patterson as observing, “the struggle to reconcile an inner self with external social codes lies at the heart of many of the periods most powerful literary creations” but extends the observation to note that “devotional discourses often highlight the difficulties and anxieties involved in re-envisioning the relationship between a solitary self and the social world it inhabits.” See Jennifer Bryan, *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 4-5.

insolvent merchant and the binding-of-Isaac-like scene at the end of the romance announce the subject as an insolvent debtor. In the final moment, the demand of the White Knight reifies the subject, Amadace, by necessitating a declaration of faith, or an act of fidelity, that confirms the subject's commitment to the demands placed upon it by the wider community.¹⁰⁴ The effect is to reorient Amadace and the reader to the moral norms of gentry society.

III. Analysis: Staging a Gentry Identity

As Ad Putter notes, *Sir Amadace* has long proved an interpretative challenge for critics, who find it difficult to reconcile the romance's ostensible celebration of conspicuous consumption with its "pious tone."¹⁰⁵ Putter quotes Edward Foster, who states the problem succinctly: "The problem is that the situation is framed in such wholly economic terms that it is difficult to focus on the spiritual dimensions that the poem's didactic intention seems to call for."¹⁰⁶ For Foster then *Sir Amadace* operates in a "world of moral ambiguity and tenuous ideals," and he concludes simply that the didacticism of the text is mitigated by the romance's commercialism. The spiritual lesson of the romance, namely that God restores the wealth of persons who live by noble impulse, does

¹⁰⁴ Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 45-49.

¹⁰⁵ Ad Putter, "Gifts and Commodity Exchange in *Sir Amadace*," in *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 51.203 (Aug, 2000), 371-394.

¹⁰⁶ Edward Foster, ed., *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 113.

“not seem to be fully developed or realized in the plot.”¹⁰⁷ But *Sir Amadace* is only morally ambiguous when the point of reference is a religious didacticism understood as incompatible with commercial ethics, and when commercial practices are understood as devoid of inherent moral interest to late medieval readers.

Edward’s tendency to subordinate the commercial to the religious is evident even in Ad Putter’s own careful analysis, which synthesizes competing ethical perspectives, but as a result of its dependency on the sociological work of Marcel Mauss, reduces *Amadace* to a religious narrative that employs gift exchange to create “enduring relationships of indebtedness and gratitude.”¹⁰⁸ For Putter the analysis hinges on the difference between commodity and gift exchange. He explains the difference:

In commodity exchange I swap objects or money that I own for something equivalent that you own, and the transaction is as short as the time it takes for the goods to change hands. In gift exchange the transaction is temporally extended, and in the process I establish not a relationship between equivalent objects, as in commodity exchange, but a relationship of social equality with the recipient. Whereas the commodity is alienable (i.e. ownership is lost or ceded in the exchange), the gift is not alienated in exchange but extends the donor’s sphere of influence; like a loan or an unspoken “you owe me,” it creates relationships of indebtedness between people.¹⁰⁹

While Putter’s final analysis reconciles seemingly discordant elements, demonstrating how the practices of secular society engender spiritual reflection, it is ultimately circumscribed by the limitations of Mauss’ sociology of gift exchange, which inherently reduces cultural practices to primitive ritual. But this is Putter’s stated intention as his aim is to both demonstrate how the economic is ultimately sustained by religious

¹⁰⁷ Foster, *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, 6.

¹⁰⁸ Putter, “Gifts and Commodity Exchange,” 374.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 378.

precepts, and he shows us how “economic disinterest (giving, spending, conspicuously consuming) is always in one’s long-term economic interest,” and “the religious convictions that underlie largesse.” Ultimately, Putter observes that Amadace’s sacrifice “fades into religious ritual” and that the reader has been “watching pure ritual” all along.¹¹⁰

Following Putter’s lead, Michael Johnston distills the argument of *Sir Amadace* to an endorsement of an aristocratic economy that is characterized by an indifference to wealth.¹¹¹ In doing so, he ignores the emphasis the author of the romance places on the punitive consequences—both material and spiritual—of insolvency. As a result, the conclusions he draws regarding a late medieval gentry imaginary are circumscribed by the assumption that the gentry were dominated by an inordinate desire to ape the consumption habits of their social superiors, the aristocracy. However, the largesse depicted in *Sir Amadace* lacks idealization; it is shown rather to be morally and economically problematic, and not surprisingly, largesse functions as both a positive and negative practice in the romance, bringing Amadace prestige while simultaneously reducing him to economic ruin as it does his spendthrift counterparts, Sir Cleges and Sir Launfal. Historically speaking, the economic conduct Amadace engages in was characteristic of the wealthy in late medieval England. As wills from the period attest, wealthier members of the community regularly provided charity for the poor or gave gifts to local monasteries, for example, as a means of cultivating their reputation or to make

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 376; 388; 391; 392.

¹¹¹ Michael Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014). Here 78-79.

restitution for wrongs done, including usurious practices.¹¹² However, such expenditures were unsustainable as an economic practice for a vast majority of gentry society, and, I want to suggest, conspicuous consumption is then less likely to be the sole basis of fantasies of social ascent, particularly in a genre as embedded in moral realism as Middle English romance and for a social group as embedded in late medieval mercantile culture. While Amadace continues to spend liberally throughout the romance—as both Putter and Johnston note—his largesse serves rather to highlight for the reader the wider network of wealth and commercial transaction on which his economic behavior depends. The author posits at the center of *Sir Amadace* a more reflexive view of largesse as an extension of credit arrangements that, if successfully cultivated and maintained, facilitate movement in and out of gentry society.

What emerges in the interplay between Amadace's stated desire to "be owte of dette full clene,"¹¹³ which is ultimately a desire for an autonomy unencumbered by the legal and moral obligations loans create, and the author's mediation of autonomy with the legal obligation to make restitution to creditors, is a gentry subjectivity presented as an entangled entity that exists in a matrix of fiscal and legal responsibility. As Elizabeth Fowler observes, there is a strong connection between Middle English romance and the developing law profession, an industry that drew heavily from the gentry for its membership. The genre's heavy moral overtone reflects, she contends, its deployment as an instrument in the instruction of law students concerned with the complexity of moral

¹¹² Charity provided by wills often masked punitive restitution, particularly for the mercantile class. See Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of London: 1300-1500* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

¹¹³ Foster, Edward, ed. *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*. Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007. Here After *Sir Amadace*, line 36.

and legal action.¹¹⁴ In the context of her work, *Sir Amadace* can be read as an *exemplum* written to illustrate the obligations that bind subjects to creditors and ultimately to the state. Read as an *exemplum*, Amadace's tribulations give particular emphasis to, one, the extramural role of legal authority in facilitating commercial exchange; two, the conceptual basis of legal writs and contracts, which the author of the romance presents as an act of fidelity; and, three, the punitive consequences that follow when the act of fidelity that legitimizes legal and economic transaction lapses or is abandoned altogether.

The focus of *Sir Amadace* on the legal obligation of the subject reflects what E. W. Ives observes as the law mindedness of late medieval society. Ives's scholarship suggests that law was perceived as an arbiter of society. In fact, late medieval English society rested on law administered by local and royal courts, which regulated property rights, the buying and selling of lands and goods, contractual agreements, and liabilities to the monarch—all of which were articulated to the citizen body as obligations of debt.¹¹⁵ In fact, paying off the debt he incurred through the mortgaging of his estate is Amadace's first act upon learning that his wife and child will be spared gruesome partitioning by the White Knight:

Then Sir Amadace send his messingerus,
All the londus ferre and nere,
Unto his awne cuntre.

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Fowler, "The Romance Hypothetical: Lordship and the Saracens in Sir Isumbras," in *The Spirit of Medieval English*, ed. Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert (London, England: Pearson Education Limited, 2000), 97-121. This idea is also inferred in the works of E. W. Ives. See E. W. Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983). For a general discussion of the law profession and its use of literature see also J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 1971); and Anthony Musson, *Medieval Law in Context: The Growth of Legal Consciousness from Magna Carta to the Peasant's Revolt* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2001).

¹¹⁵ Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-reformation England*, 8-9.

Till all that evyr his lond withheld,
Frithe or forest, town or filde,
With tresur owte bought he.¹¹⁶

In the context of the restitution he makes, Amadace's desire to "be owte of dette full clene" reflects the anxieties of the gentry, a class of people whose wealth largely depended on credit arrangements that, as Christopher Dyer notes, "allowed buyers to pay late, so that everyone involved in business was bound into an endless chain of informal debt"¹¹⁷ that extended from the top to the bottom of late medieval society. For example, those able to accumulate money—often wealthier members of the community, including Jews, merchants, and wealthier members of the gentry—served as moneylenders, who lent money to peasants for the purchase of food or animals, to aristocrats looking to complete building projects, or to kings engaged in military expeditions.¹¹⁸ In the fourteenth century mercantile trade depended almost entirely on credit as goods were bought and sold by advancing credit to purchasers, who promised to pay for goods and services when anticipated income from rented lands and business ventures was earned. In this way debts often fell into insolvency as a result of the sale of goods that broke bad because of inclement weather or theft, or through the failure to pay wages, rents, and fees.¹¹⁹

Credit was particularly important to the socioeconomic ambitions of the gentry, a diverse social group that included wealthier knights whose lands yielded upwards of £100

¹¹⁶ *Sir Amadace*, lines 841-46.

¹¹⁷ Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 327-28.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177-78.

per annum to freemen, or smaller landowners, whose lands yielded much more modest gains.¹²⁰ The social mobility of the gentry was predicated on trade, urban-rural industry, and land purchase through which a family extended its earning potential. Collectively the gentry held more land than wealthier magnates, so the efficient management of their estates assumed a larger role in class consciousness as the economic well-being of the gentry had great impact on the wider national economy; however, because manors of the gentry typically lacked servile tenants and customary labor services, the gentry were a volatile socioeconomic group. Their wealth was based on free tenants, who paid fixed monetary rents, rather than owing customary labor services. This exposed the gentry to financial risk when inflation reduced the value of cash or inclement weather had a deleterious effect on crop yields thus impacting the pricing of goods.¹²¹ The majority of the gentry lived on a modest income, and so the prudent management of wealth and property was requisite to both sustaining gentry status and moving up the social ladder.

And the desire to move up the social ladder was a real pressure for late medieval people, particularly in light of the opportunity offered by a relatively fluid land market. The land market of fourteenth-century England was animated by the general tendency during the period toward the morcellation of estates, which enabled families to expand their holdings through the purchase of small properties. However, during the period the land market was largely predicated on debt default as insolvent families readily sold land

¹²⁰ Sometimes referred to as “franklins.” See Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 148.

¹²¹ Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 48.

to pay off debt.¹²² As Dyer observes, land transfer was often initiated by a failure to pay loans, which forced the debtor to sell holdings or to give lands over as outlined in legal recognizances that dictated the obligations owed to a creditor should loans fall into default.¹²³ Dyer notes a broad network of risk:

Small and insecure incomes, the temptation to increase spending, and family loyalties, which persuaded families to provide for non-inherited children from meagre landed resources, all tended to pull gentry families into debt. They could well have developed an optimistic view of their circumstances after a run of good agricultural years, spent too much, and then regretted their commitments when the crops yielded poorly and disease spread among the sheep. They lived on credit at all times, but a minority fell into serious debt, whether to Jewish money-lenders before the expulsion in 1290, or to wealthier aristocrats. “In my urgent need,” as troubled small landowners would explain in their charters, they turned to a wealthy monastery or layman, and this “friend” paid off their debts, but in exchange would take over the land. Families ended their days living on handouts from a monastery, having ruined the future of their family.¹²⁴

While a broader network of risk is at play in the success or failure of gentry families, the author of *Sir Amadace* pays particular attention to the internal pressure to compete with social superiors, which led the gentry collectively to increase their expenditure on luxury goods and services, and generally consume at levels that exceeded their income and thus incur greater debt with creditors.¹²⁵ As is depicted here in *Sir Amadace*, the consequences for gentry families, who neglected to manage their business efficiently, could be catastrophic and included the loss of manorial lands, which were often mortgaged to local monasteries or more successful members of the gentry, who paid off the debts owed but

¹²² Bruce M.S. Campbell, “Population pressure, inheritance and the land market in a fourteenth-century peasant community,” *Land and People in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 87-134.

¹²³ Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 177-78.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 148-49.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 148-149.

assumed ownership of the lands mortgaged. In such cases, families were left without financial means to sustain their gentry status and, in some cases, were left altogether destitute.¹²⁶ It was not uncommon, as Dyer observes, that when a member of the gentry died, “the bulk of his assets consisted of unpaid debts, and his estate was heavily encumbered with commitments to others.”¹²⁷

In linking social mobility to fiscal debt *Sir Amadace* reflects the anxiety of late medieval gentry society, a social group encumbered by the claims of creditors and that was more likely to find itself moving down the social scale than up. By extension Amadace’s income fluctuates widely over the course of the romance in response to the debt he incurs. For example, his initial income of “thre hundrygte powunde of rente,” an aristocratic income according to late medieval tax law, is reduced by the mortgaging of lands to the more gentry-like £40, “He lafte no more in his cofurs to spende, / But evyr forty powunde.”¹²⁸ This revenue is itself reduced when he covers the debt of an insolvent merchant, an investment that fails to culminate in economic growth but, rather, leaves Amadace destitute. While largesse has a part to play in constituting a gentry identity, *Sir Amadace* demonstrates its ancillary status to fiscal debt and the legal contracts that regulate the obligations that bind neighbors in meaningful socioeconomic relation. In fact, the management of one’s fiscal debt—the debt incurred when Amadace mortgages his familial lands, the monies owed between merchants, and the money Amadace will

¹²⁶ Ibid, 150.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 327-28.

¹²⁸ *Sir Amadace*, line 400. Michael Johnston makes the connection between Amadace’s income and his social status. See Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry*, 49. For a more general discussion of romance, the gentry, and income see D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

come to owe the White Knight, for example—supplements largesse as a point of identification and evaluation by which others judge their neighbors.¹²⁹

To this end there is nothing particularly “enduring” about Amadace’s relationship with the White Knight. In fact, the White Knight rejects Amadace’s attempt to relate to him as a brother¹³⁰ as their “friendship” is largely contractual in nature and described by the author repeatedly as motivated by a “forwart,” or a legal contract associated with members of a trade or craft engaged in the buying and selling of goods and services.¹³¹ Rather than an enduring friendship marked by mutuality and gratitude, their relationship is a commercial and legal bond that establishes an asymmetrical relationship between debtor and creditor. In the context of this formal relationship, the White Knight only recognizes Amadace as his “true fere” once Amadace has demonstrated his fidelity to the “forwart” made between them by the concession of wife and child. To confirm the importance of such legal compacts, the White Knight reminds Amadace before he exits to, “lufe this lady as thi lyve, / That thus mekely, withouten stryve, / Thi forwardus wold fulille,”¹³² drawing attention to the importance of honoring the “forwardus” that bind debtors to creditors no matter how perverse the circumstances.

¹²⁹ Richard Newhauser links largesse to justice and sees it as a response to the destructive hoarding activity of the miser. He notes that largesse aims to correct the sinful desire of the avaricious to not share with others, which is an attenuation of the justice that mediates human relationships. The attention paid to social uses of largesse, as is evident here in *Sir Amadace*, is connected, he suggests, to the development of a money economy in which inequalities of wealth distribution are more evident. See Richard Newhauser, “Justice and Liberality,” in *Virtues and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, ed. István P. Bejczy & Richard Newhauser (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2005), 295-316.

¹³⁰ *Sir Amadace*, lines 715-17.

¹³¹ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “forwart”: related to “Forwarden,” a member of a trade or craft who engages in buying and selling, and pays a fee for the privilege of buying and selling.

¹³² *Sir Amadace*, lines 820-22.

While the climax of the narrative—the binding-of-Isaac-like-concluding scene, which promises to be as grotesque as the White Knight’s insolvent and rotting corpse in the chapel—has an obvious religious register, it serves, rather, to stress through the threat of bodily mutilation a debtor’s legal and moral obligation to make restitution to his creditors, a liability that Lars Boerner and Albrecht Ritschl note ultimately extended in the late medieval period beyond the debtor to their immediate family and in extreme cases persons in the debtor’s employ.¹³³ And while Amadace continues to spend money liberally, there is a pejorative reifying of consequence for Amadace that moves from his initial partitioning of lands and property at the start of the romance to the literal partitioning of the body of his wife and child, who will ultimately be held liable for his liberality at its conclusion.

The consequence of Amadace’s fall into insolvency is first exemplified in a chapel occupying a liminal space between the wilderness and the economic center of social life, the city. Inside the chapel Amadace’s knave encounters a woman whose “hondus wringus” and who “evr [...] crius on hevyn kings” because her husband lies “Stingcand upon his bere.”¹³⁴ Curious, Amadace rides to the chapel door himself to confirm what this knave has told him, namely that the putrid smell emanating from the chapel belongs to the woman’s dead husband, who has lain unburied on a bier for sixteen

¹³³ Lars Boerner and Albrecht Ritschl, “The Economic History of Sovereignty: Communal Responsibility, the Extended Family, and the Firm,” in *The Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* (March 2009), 99-112. Here 104. Extending Nietzsche’s observation, Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy discuss the role of the body as a surety against loan default. See Critchley, Simon and Tom McCarthy. “Universal Shylockery: Money and Morality in the Merchant of Venice,” in *Diacritics* 34.1 (Spring 2004), 2-17. Here 11-12.

¹³⁴ *Sir Amadace*, lines 112-20.

weeks because his fiscal debts have not been paid.¹³⁵ A merchant by trade, her husband, like Amadace, “didde as a fole”¹³⁶ and was over generous with his wealth. As a result, he fell into debt with creditors and neighbors, who upon the death of her husband, called in the debt owed:

And thenne come dethe, wo hym be,
And partutt my lord and me,
Lafte me in all the care.
Quen my neghteburs herd telle that he seke lay,
The come to me, as thay best may,
Thair gud achet thai thare.
All that evyrwas his and myne,
Hors and naute, shepe and squwyne,
Away thay drafe and bare.
My dowart to my lyve I sold,
And all the penneys to hom told.
Lord! Yette aghte he welle mare.¹³⁷

However, even after his creditors had taken all of his property, her late husband still owed £30 more to a merchant of the city, who, upon his return from overseas, the debtor’s “corse the erthe forbade” until his debts were paid in full.¹³⁸ The unpaid loan effectively renders the body of the insolvent merchant a commodity used to settle an account, contorting the familial sphere into a commercial one in which the conduct of persons is guided by the rationalistic logic of economic exchange.¹³⁹ Martha C. Howell quotes an Old French adage, *meubles sont sieges des dettes* (movables are the seat of

¹³⁵ Ibid, lines 140-44.

¹³⁶ Ibid, line 157.

¹³⁷ Ibid, lines 169-80.

¹³⁸ Ibid, lines 181-203.

¹³⁹ Vivek Kaul, “Cutting up a debtor's body to SARFAESI: Small borrowers have always got a bad deal,” in *Firstpost* Apr. 22, 2015.

debt), in noting that movable property was often used to service debt. She observes that creditors had legal recourse to seize the goods beyond those covered in the loan:

Although a particular loan might be understood as having been generated, for example, by the purchase of horses, beer, or cloth, it was not the horses, beer, or cloth that was pledged to the lender as security for the loan. Instead, it was the borrower's word alone, his or her own personal pledge to pay. If he or she defaulted, the creditor could begin a legal process to seize the movables of the debtor, not just the horses, beer, and cloth.¹⁴⁰

While a pitiful scene, the author of *Sir Amadace* does not condemn the behavior of the insolvent merchant's creditors, rather the romance takes as a given the legal right of a creditor to do so. As is the case throughout the romance, the fault lies, rather, with the debtor as Amadace himself later engages in the same cannibalizing commercial behavior as a means to further his own economic ambition. For example, Amadace readily pillages the wreckage of a ship he finds "wrekun among the stones,"¹⁴¹ and while no attention is paid to putrescence or mutilation of the bodies, it is not too far a stretch to draw parallel between the unburied body of the insolvent merchant in the chapel and the unburied corpses of the knights strewn upon the beach as further exemplification of the consequences of fiscal imprudence. In the context of the previous scenes, the author describes the bodies of the dead knights as adorned in "menevere,"¹⁴² a luxury fur during the period often associated with ceremonial costume. The costuming of the dead knights

¹⁴⁰ Martha C. Howell, *Commercialism Before Capitalism, 1300-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010). Here 70.

¹⁴¹ *Sir Amadace*, line 520.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, line 521.

suggests that, like Amadace, they identify their prestige with the conspicuous consumption and display of wealth.¹⁴³

And this is the uncomfortable part of the romance for critics: its indebtedness to a commercial ethos that justifies the refusal to bury an insolvent merchant after reducing his family to poverty or the cold pillaging of the dead for personal gain. Commercial practices are understood in the romance as morally tenable and to some degree as instrumentalized Christian doctrine. For example, Amadace's encounter with the merchant of the city highlights the mediation of grace and mercy by monetary exchange, demonstrating a moral perspective that maintains a seamless confluence between economic and religious morality. While Amadace encourages the merchant to think on Christ and the "Grete merit" he may win by forgiving the insolvent merchant's outstanding debt and thus showing "bettur grace then evyr had He," the merchant insists that grace be monetized, invoking Christ as witness for the unpaid debt. He explicitly links his social prestige and Christ's grace to the restitution of the silver yet owed:

Thenne he squire, "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 howundus schall, that I may se,
On filde thayre bonus toгнаue."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Dyer notes, "Those engaged in trade took the risk of losing their cargoes through fire, crime, or shipwreck, or they might find that demand had slumped because of famine or war, or they could be defeated by commercial competition." See Dyer, *Making a Living*, 210.

¹⁴⁴ *Sir Amadace*, lines 253-64.

Without protest, Amadace readily monetizes his “kyndenesse” to satisfy the insolvent debt, an act that brings both the “Religious men” and “riche burias” of the city together in meaningful celebration of the dead.¹⁴⁵ The moral ambiguity critics have noted in the text is resolved when we understand religious and economic activities as inhabiting a more confluent cultural system in which, as Robert Wuthnow observes, the “language supplied by one [...] may become instrumental in the other or in which commitments in one (prayers for the downtrodden, [for example]) prompt small acts of kindness or social responsibility in the other.”¹⁴⁶ In the context of the commercialized world Amadace inhabits, to be economically prudent and to make restitution for debts owed is understood to be pious and to participate in the body of Christ. Likewise to deny an insolvent merchant Christian burial is equally pious, as the failure to make restitution is understood as a violation of the moral and commercial compacts that sustain the body of Christ. Indeed, in the moral tradition the failure to pay what one owes is linked to avarice in the same way that largesse is linked to pride.¹⁴⁷ That is, in the world Amadace inhabits commercial and religious ethics are not separable but, rather, work together to form a consistent view of the world as engendered by commercial exchange.

As Diana Wood observes, late medieval theologians placed, “merchants firmly within the mystical body of society.”¹⁴⁸ Owst points to the sermons of Thomas Brinton to

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, lines 292-94.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Wuthnow, “Religion and Economic Life,” in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*. ed. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1994), 620-645. Here 632.

¹⁴⁷ See Emmaelle Roux, ed., *Two Middle English Translations of Friar Laurent’s Somme le roi: critical edition* (Turnhout, Belgium: Breopolis, 2010). Specifically, lines 170-185 for a view of largesse as a branch of pride; lines 640 for the failure to pay what one owes as a branch of avarice.

¹⁴⁸ Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge, UP, 2002). Here 120.

note the integrated status of the merchant: “Merchants and faithful mechanics are the left hand,” and “citizens and burgesses, more or less in the middle, are its heart.”¹⁴⁹ This view of the merchant stands in stark contrast to the earlier condemnation of merchants as sinners tainted by commercial practices inherently avaricious. As Richard Newhauser notes, the later response to mercantile activity:

began a process by which the merchant himself was freed finally from the opprobrium of the sin of greed simply because of his profit-seeking, and commercial activity was analyzed morally as a necessary component of the welfare of the community.¹⁵⁰

Changing attitudes toward merchants reflect, in part, a new view of commerce as essential in ameliorating the material need created by natural scarcity. They also reflect the emerging prominence of merchants in the national economy as sources of revenue for the state. To some degree the religious community was also dependent on the commerce of the merchant class, as the profits made by merchants were often redistributed as charity for the poor or earmarked for investment in local chantries, churches, and religious celebrations, which prompted theological justification of commercial earnings.¹⁵¹ As Sylvia Thrupp observes, “Every phase of the merchant class had some customary connection with the imagery and beliefs of the Christian faith,” and that by the

¹⁴⁹ qtd. in. Ibid, 120. See also original: G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961). Here 554.

¹⁵⁰ Newhauser links changes in attitudes regarding avarice and mercantile behavior to the development of a money economy and to what he describes as an “ethics of intentionality” in the twelfth century. See Richard Newhauser, “Justice and Liberality,” in *Virtues and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, ed. István P. Bejczy & Richard Newhauser (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2005), 295-316. Here 311. See also Lianna Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2006); and Frank Kermodé, *Medieval Merchant: York, Beverly, and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

¹⁵¹ Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 110-20.

fourteenth century the merchant had “achieved a very happy justification of his pursuit of wealth as approved by God.”¹⁵² She quotes John Shillingford, a mayor of medieval Exeter, who demonstrates how God and money worked together in defining the good life: “[I] am right mery and fare right well, ever thanking God and myn awne purse.”¹⁵³

This confluence between economic and religious morality is confirmed by the morbid details of the scene in the chapel. The attention paid to the putrescence of the decaying body and the merchant’s interest in seeing the body of both the insolvent merchant and his wife gnawed on by dogs mirror the details that surface in sermons and treatises condemning usurers. In short, the scene at the chapel links the merchant’s insolvency with heresy. Usury demonstrates the collusion between economic and religious morality. Because a usurer’s profit was assumed to stem from the selling of time, a resource that belonged to God, they were regularly condemned as heretics and, so, denied communion and Christian burial. In some instances usurers, who had failed to make restitution either while living or through their wills, had their bodies exhumed, thrown into an empty field, and burned.¹⁵⁴ For example, Diana Wood recounts a story taken from the *Fasciculus morum* of a dying usurer who refused to make restitution. He chose instead to tie thirty marks to his body as an enticement for whoever might bury him when he died. However, when a papal legate got wind of his design, he forced the priest who had buried him to exhume the body. Once they exhumed the body, they discovered

¹⁵² Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). Here 174-176.

¹⁵³ qtd. in Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 174.

¹⁵⁴ Wood reports that a council held in Mainz in 1310 “imposed an interdict on any cemetery where a usurer was buried until such time as the body was removed.” See Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 162.

“in the place where the money had been tied ugly toads that gnawed at his miserable decomposing body and countless worms instead of an armband of money.” The sight prompted the legate to burn the body before “many died of the stench.”¹⁵⁵

Similarly, the merchant’s desire to see the bodies of his debtors gnawed upon by dogs and the association of the body of the insolvent merchant with a “stinke” so strong it forces Amadace’s knave to “stopput his nase with his hude”¹⁵⁶ casts the insolvent debtor as a sinner whose failure to make restitution leaves him with no place in civil and religious society. In this regard, Amadace’s encounter with the rotting corpse intends to reinforce for him both the material and spiritual consequences of renegeing on debts owed by demonstrating the control exerted by the merchant creditor over the body that, like the chapel itself, is an ontological nexus between material and ethereal being in medieval Christianity. And while Amadace makes the connection between himself and the insolvent merchant, noting that, “Yondur mon that lise yondur chapel withinne, / He mughte full wele be of my kynne, / For ryghte so have I wroghte,”¹⁵⁷ the consequence embodied by the corpse is lost upon Amadace, who continues to promote a liberal spending of wealth. He offers, for example, the White Knight at the end of the romance half of his accumulated wealth and lands while insisting that, “Goddess forbote, Sir, thou it spare!”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ qtd. in. Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 162-63.

¹⁵⁶ *Sir Amadace*, line 73.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, lines 206-10.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, line 720.

However, the White Knight's insistence on half of the body of wife and child as repayment for monies lent poses a problem that liberality—Amadace's preferred recourse of action with the merchant of the city and then again the White Knight—cannot fix, and he is forced to confront for the first time his largesse as a form of self-indulgence and ultimately as a crime against his family, as the blood of wife and child will be on his hands.¹⁵⁹ For example, it is made clear from the outset that Amadace is a shameful figure because his spending habits have outstripped his earnings, "The stuard sayd, 'Sir ye awe wele more / Thenne ye may of your londus rere / In faythe this sevyn yere.'"¹⁶⁰ To make up the deficit, the steward encourages Amadace to ask his peers to float him a loan: "Quoso may best, furste ye mun pray, / Abyde yo till anothis day."¹⁶¹ However, we are told that Amadace has, in fact, been less than responsible with the goods and money already loaned to him and, so, he fears being scorned by his creditors:

"And men full fast wold ware me,
That of thayre godus hade in honed.
Or I schuld hold men in awe or threte,
That the myghte noht hor awne gud gete—
Thenne made I a full fowle ende."¹⁶²

To avoid public ridicule, Amadace elects a course of action that will temporarily hide his financial misfortune but culminate in his humiliation as a man, who has "owte of the

¹⁵⁹ David Graeber describes personal debt as "a matter of self-indulgence, a crime against one's loved ones" and the redemption of personal debt as requiring ascetic self-denial. See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011). Here 379.

¹⁶⁰ *Sir Amadace*, lines 4-6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, lines 7-12.

¹⁶² *Ibid*, lines 19-24.

cuntray for povrté fledde.”¹⁶³ Swearing his steward to secrecy, Amadace elects to “wedsette,”¹⁶⁴ or mortgage, his lands for seven years until the debts that he owes, “Be quytte holly bidene,”¹⁶⁵ and he himself sets off on adventure to live off the gold and silver he has left to spend.¹⁶⁶ But in spite of his financial straits, he attempts to appear nobler than his coffers will allow by giving “fulle riche giftus / Bothe to squires and to knyghtis.” Additionally, to poor men he will “dele a dole.”¹⁶⁷ While seemingly charitable, the underlying logic of his actions is less than altruistic; Amadace explains that, “Such men myghte wete that I were wo, / That full fayn wold hit were such toe, / That myghte note bete my bale.”¹⁶⁸ His motivation appears to stem from a self-indulgent desire to avoid reproach, as it is clear that he intends to give gifts to men that might be happy to learn of his financial misfortune and, so, not help him out of spite and jealousy. Amadace is engaged in what is described in the Middle English translation of the *Somme le roi* as a

¹⁶³ Ibid, lines 395.

¹⁶⁴ Johnston discusses the technicality of this term. See Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry*, 78. Dyer notes that mortgaging lands was a privilege of the burgess, who was “allowed to hold a plot of land (usually less than a half-acre) for a fixed money rent without any labour services or servile dues. They were able to sell, sublet or mortgage their land, and could trade in the borough market without paying tolls.” See Dyer, *Making a Living*, 145.

¹⁶⁵ *Sir Amadace*, lines 25-35.

¹⁶⁶ *Sir Amadace*, lines 25-35. Debtors had very little legal protection from creditors, who could impede a debtor’s business dealings, which would force debtors to abandon their families and wander about as idle beggars. Legislative protection for debtors began to emerge in Europe with the Constitutions of Venice in 1457, which created a supraconsul to insure that “honest debtors”—those debtors undone by adverse fortune—could still carry on business. See Israel Trieman, “The Law and the Insolvent Debtor: Writes of Execution in English Law,” in *Washington University Law Review* Vol. 2.3 (1927).

¹⁶⁷ *Sir Amadace*, lines 37-42.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, lines 44-46.

“fool vnd[er]taking of grete dispensys wiche men clepyn prodigalite,” so that he might be
“preised and for þat men holden hym the more large and þe more curteys.”¹⁶⁹

Unfortunately for Amadace, his fear of public censure comes to fruition later in the romance as he passes through the city gate a penniless man, having spent the last of his income to bury an insolvent debtor. He is derided for his profligacy by the “riche burias” of the city:

Quen he was gone on this kin wise,
Thenn iche mon sayd thayre devise,
Quen he wasse passutte the gate.
Sum sayd, “This gud full lighteli he wan,
That thusgate spendutte hit on this man,
So lightely lete hit scape.”
Sum sayd, “In gud tyme were he borne
That hade a peny him biforne,”
That knew full litull his state.
Lo, how thay demun the gentill knyghte,
Quen he hade spendut all that he myghte.
Butte the traathe full litull thay wote.¹⁷⁰

The final line of the passage suggests that the condemnation is unfair, as the town folk are neither privy to Amadace’s circumstances nor his motivations; however, the burgesses ultimately do not see his financial liberality as a virtue when it results in his destitution. While his charity likely makes Amadace a good man, it has not made him a successful man, an evaluation inferred by the emphasis the burghers place on his careless possession of wealth, rather than his ready giving and spending of it. As is the case with

¹⁶⁹ Roux, lines 182-85.

¹⁷⁰ *Sir Amadace*, lines 337-48.

the insolvent merchant, who is described as a “waister,”¹⁷¹ Amadace’s links his destitution to his wasteful expenditure of wealth and property:

“A mon that litul gode hase,
Men sittus ryghte noghte him bye;
For I hade thre hundrythe powunde of rente,
I spendut two in that entente.
Of such forloke was I.
Evyr quyll I suche housold hold,
For grete lord was I tellut,
Much holdun uppe thareby.
Nowe may wise men sitte ate home,
Quen folus may walke full wille wone,
And, Christ wotte, so may hi.”¹⁷²

As the quoted material suggests, social status is commensurate with income and the possession of property, and Amadace’s divestiture of both results in his disorientation as a man, who without property is unable to participate in the exchange of credit and debt that constitutes gentry wealth and status. References to symbolic goods (income and property) and exhibitions of cultural competence (the more prudent economic practices *Sir Amadace* calls for) serve, Paul DiMaggio notes, “as conventional tokens of co-membership in a world in which diffuse social networks have replaced primeval groups as informal building blocks of social structure.”¹⁷³ The problem for Amadace is that he has misidentified the economic habits of his estate, or what the author of *Sir Amadace*

¹⁷¹ Ibid, line 248.

¹⁷² Ibid, lines 397-408.

¹⁷³ Paul DiMaggio observes that, “symbolic goods may also be viewed as resources with which people construct identities and relationships with others who inhabit a similar symbolic universe. “The Ego would collapse and lose its dimensions,” wrote Simmel, “if it were not surrounded by external objects which become the expression of its tendencies, its strengths and its individual manner because they obey, or in other words, belong to it.” See Paul DiMaggio, “Culture and Economy,” in *Socioeconomic Handbook*, ed. Neil J. Smelser & Richard Swedberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1994), 27-57. Here 44.

refers to as “god thewis,”¹⁷⁴ that identify a man of the gentry as reputable and thus enable his social mobility by insuring his access to the credit that will ultimately enable his election as king.

The conclusion to which the White Knight leads Amadace lays emphasis on the equitable business practices that maintain the reputation of an honest and profitable debtor. The White Knight notes, for example, that the man who maintains “god thewis,” whether he is conducting business with a gentleman or a shrew, may recover his lost property because others—God included—will invest in his good reputation:

“For a mon that gevees him to god thewis,
Authir to gentilmen or to schrewis,
On summe side wille hit fall.
A mon that hase all way bynne kynde,
Sum curtas mon yette may he fynde,
That mekille may stoned in stalle;
Repente the noghte that thu has done,
For He that schope bothe sunne and mone,
Full wele may pay for alle.”¹⁷⁵

Though he has run from his creditors at the start of the romance, an act that culminates in his destitution, Amadace has dealt even-handedly with both those in his employ and the strangers he encounters. For example, his liberality has been unconditional, and he readily covers the debt of a stranger, the insolvent merchant, by conducting business with a shrew willing to let the insolvent merchant’s wife die as “wele as he, / That howundus

¹⁷⁴ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “theu”: a way of behaving towards others, deportment, bearing, manners, habitual mode of conduct, habit or practice, proper conduct; a distinctive habit of a class of men, animals; trait; a custom of a people or class of men; protocol; three, moral character, a set of principles; four, power, might.

¹⁷⁵ *Sir Amadace*, lines 460-68.

schall, that I may se, / On filde thayre bonus toгнаue.”¹⁷⁶ He even leaves his household retainers their horses and gear as compensation for their services.¹⁷⁷ Though a profligate, Amadace has been generous and fair in his business dealings, and this seems to be the basis for the White Knight’s investment in Amadace, who exemplifies the kind and generous man that may still find himself in great need: “mekille may stone in stalle.”¹⁷⁸

While his estate has been rendered insolvent, he has established goodwill with the strangers he has encountered and maintained a trustworthy reputation on which future credit will depend. During the late medieval period most business transactions were informal,¹⁷⁹ so the system of credit and debt that moved money and goods between persons and that enabled families to acquire goods and land in pursuit of the good life depended on trust. To be without trust in the community and to lack trust from those who might invest in your estate is to be without credit and, so, to be a bad man or a social pariah without place in civil or religious society.¹⁸⁰ David Graeber observes that a strong relationship between credit and personal reputation exists in medieval and modern communities:

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, lines 262-64.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, lines 373-84. Ultimately Amadace is forced to lay off those in his employ, a mark of his disgraced status within the community. See David Farmer, “The *famuli* in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Progress and problems in medieval England*, ed. Richard Britnell and John Hatcher (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 207-36.

¹⁷⁸ *Sir Amadace*, lines 465.

¹⁷⁹ Dyer notes that, “Much medieval business was not recorded in writing. Bargains were made between the parties directly, and promises to pay were mainly oral. Written accounts were not apparently kept, and were certainly not preserved. The whole system depended on word-of-mouth communication and informal agreements. Traders had reputations which were made by personal recommendation and could be damaged by gossip.” See Dyer, *Making a Living*, 216-217. See also Richard H. Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society 1000-1500* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1996), 148-149.

¹⁸⁰ Critchley and McCarthy, “Universal Shylockery: Money and Morality,” 15.

When people used the word “credit,” they referred above all to a reputation for honesty and integrity; and a man or a woman’s honor, virtue, and respectability, but also reputation for generosity, decency, and good-natured sociability, were at least as important considerations when deciding whether to make a loan as were assessments of net income.¹⁸¹

However, Amadace does not initially understand his reputation in these terms (though he certainly acts the part of a man with integrity, he never explicitly links his reputation to the public trust he garners through his generosity). His sense of place in the world and his spending habits are motivated by a self-indulgent desire for public honor and prestige that depends, he assumes, on the liberal spending of his wealth, rather than a more prudent stewardship of his finances. In this regard, the didactic aim of the text is to break through the cognitive dissonance that characterizes Amadace’s economic behavior, namely the disjunction between his desire to be out of debt and his immoderate generosity, which while propping him up as an honorable knight for his neighbors simultaneously reduces him to abject and indebted poverty. In *Sir Amadace* good credit is commensurate with a Christian piety that enables the family, rather than destroys it.

In both scenes—the encounter with the corpse in the chapel and the sacrifice of wife and child—the putrescence and mutilation of the insolvent body foregrounds its tripartite function in late medieval society as a commercial, legal, and spiritual body, or in more abstract terms, its connectedness “to some ‘circuit of intensity’ with other bodies, other worlds” that escape the confines of an isolated individuality.¹⁸² That is, the insolvent body serves as a point of identification for Amadace to formulate a more

¹⁸¹ Graeber, *Debt*, 328.

¹⁸² Jeffrey J. Cohen’s analysis of bodies in medieval culture draws on Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the rhizomatic body in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. See Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Here xix.

reasonable, more prudent response to the reckless moral and economic behavior the romance exemplifies. The denouement of both scenes aims then to remind Amadace, a fugitive debtor, who has hitherto lamented his condition but not corrected his behavior, to tend to the mortgaged lands he fled at the start of the romance, stressing the importance of honoring the “forwards” one freely consents to (no matter the circumstances). To drive the point home, the author uses a contractual language that oscillates between economic, legal, and religious registers. For example, in response to Amadace’s reluctance to slay his wife, the White Knight implores Amadace to remember the agreement he has made: “Butte thenke on thi covenant that thu made / In the wode, quen thu mestur hade.”¹⁸³

The White Knight refers to the promise made between them as a “covenant,” or covenant, a legal term derived from late medieval English contractual law covering transactions between people involving the sale of goods or the provision of a loan, which transferred property or generated debt. Specifically, a “covenant” was a legally binding promise or agreement designed to address nonfeasance. During the late medieval period, a “covenant” was associated with *praecipe*, or royal writs that gave sheriffs the power to enforce promises made between disputing parties.¹⁸⁴ The legal language of the passage is both technical and exacting, suggesting an authorship familiar with late medieval law. The presence of legal language also suggests an authorship predisposed to see the state as a public authority with an invested interest in mediating the socioeconomic compacts made between peoples engaged in acts of exchange, as implicit in the passage is a public

¹⁸³ *Sir Amadace*, lines 745-46.

¹⁸⁴ J. H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 1971). Here 174-204.

authority with the potential to induce debtors to meet their legal obligations or to compensate non-performance through legal sanction.

While the majority of credit transactions in late medieval society were informal and largely based on oral agreements, commercial loans were regularly legitimized by legal contract by the fourteenth century. The development of written legal contracts can be read as a response to the increasing dependence of English society on credit finance and the efforts of creditors to gain legal surety against loan default. As a result, commercial debtors increasingly found themselves criminalized as the development of statutory legislation extended the rights of creditors in the recovery of debt while providing little protection for debtors. In 1283 the Statute of Acton Burnell gave towns the authority to maintain an archive of debtor contracts. The statute prompted the development and use of more formal written contracts and recognizances, which were used by borough and manorial courts to determine the legal and financial obligation of debtors. This method was standardized and given the backing of the state when in 1285 the Statute of Merchants authorized the arrest and imprisonment of debtors for non-payment of commercial debts.¹⁸⁵

The author's use of "covandus" also overlays the compact between Amadace and the White Knight with a spiritual dimension by invoking the biblical covenant between God and humanity, which reinforces the general view of humanity persistent in the Middle Ages as carrying an existential debt to God, who provides material goods as a

¹⁸⁵ See Dyer, *Making A Living*, 216-217. See Britnell, *The Commercialization of English Society*, 148-149.

“lante lone.”¹⁸⁶ While it conveys a medieval platitude, namely that wealth and material goods are provided by God’s grace, “lante lone” commercializes humanity’s relationship to God, suggesting that human existence is itself a form of debt, a loan taken against death that can only be repaid by our own sacrifice. This kind of commercialization of the moral and spiritual debt humanity owes to God is embedded in the moral tradition. For example, in the description of “wo[d]schippe,” a subsection of pride, the Middle English translation of *Somme le roi* presents God as the creditor of a material debt for which humanity must take account before death:

The secoude vntrowþ þat comeþ out of pride is wo[d]schippe. Men holden a man for wood, þat is, oute of his witt, in whim resoun is turned vpso down. Is nozt þat man riztly clepid a fool? Moche more he auzte be clepid a fool and for wood that wytyngly and hardely dispendiþ þe goodys þat been nozt his but zit be the goodis of his lorde, of whiche he muste streitly zelde acountys, þat is to seye, þe precieuse tyme and the temporal goodis þat he haþ in keypyng the vertues of þe body and þe þouytys and þe assentynges and the willys, and waastid þe soule and dispended it in folies and in outrages byfore his lordys izen no nouzt purueieþ him of his accounte. And wel he wot þat he muste acounte streitly, ne noon woot whanne, neyþer þe day ne þe hour. Such folye is wel cleped woodschipe. Of siche vices, þese grete proude men ben fulle þat vsen shrewidley þe grete goodys that God haþ lent hem.¹⁸⁷

In this case the prideful man is one who has failed to understand his material wealth and goods as a loan, and as a result, has failed to “purueieþ him of his accounte,” or reconcile his debt. Similarly, Amadace’s wife employs “covandus” to implore her husband to sacrifice her as a pledge in honor of the contract to which he has consented and the debt he owes the White Knight:

¹⁸⁶ *Sir Amadace*, lines 454. Thrupp notes the regularity of this phrase in merchant wills during the fourteenth century. See Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 174. The language is echoed in the Middle English translations of the *Somme le roi*. See Emmaelle Roux, ed., *Two Middle English Translations of Friar Laurent’s Somme le roi: critical edition* (Turnhout, Belgium: Breopolis, 2010). Here 4, lines 114.

¹⁸⁷ Roux, 101-114.

Then ladi sayd, “For His luffe thet deut on tre,
Loke youre covandus holden be,
Goddess forbotte ye me spare!”

Thene bespoke that ladi brighte,
Sayd, “Ye schall him hold that ye have highte,
Be God, and Sayn Drightine!
For His lue that deet on tre,
Loke yaure covandus holdun be,
Yore forward was full fine.¹⁸⁸

In her plea she links “covandus” with “forward,” overlaying their relationship with a language used to formalize economic transactions.¹⁸⁹ The effect is to depersonalize a relationship that Amadace understands in familial terms—“Butte lette us leng together here, / Righte as we brethir were”¹⁹⁰—and thereby interrupt the sense of mutual autonomy brotherhood implies. Rather, the author’s use of contractual language calls Amadace forth as an ethical subject whose autonomy is preceded by the responsibility it owes to others by embedding Amadace in a set of ethical relationships that are, from Emmanuel Levinas’s perspective, inherently asymmetrical and heteronymous and that lead Amadace to discover himself “as an object interlocked by the demand of the other.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ *Sir Amadace*, lines 754-62.

¹⁸⁹ Credit relations and forward contracting blossomed in the 12th and 13th century. The enforcement of contractual obligations among merchants was communal. Merchants in each city found themselves members of a liability pool, which meant merchants from a given city risked being arrested and having their goods confiscated when travelling through a jurisdiction where a fellow merchant from their hometown was in arrears on his payment. See Lars Boerner and Albrecht Ritschl, “The Economic History of Sovereignty,” 101-102.

¹⁹⁰ *Sir Amadace*, lines 716.

¹⁹¹ Critchley draws on Levinas: because the subject relates itself to a demand that exceeds its relational capacity, there is “curvature of intersubjective space” in which the relation of subject to other is not equal but, rather, asymmetrical and predicated on an obligation that is infinite. See Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 56-57.

To be a good Christian man in the world Amadace inhabits is to have good credit with one's neighbors and to recognize one's self as owing a debt to the society in which one lives. In the context of this cultural environment, Amadace's initial desire to "be owte of dette full clene" is a morally ambiguous statement until the final scene as it can be read initially as a destructive desire to be unencumbered by the demands of others. In fact, Amadace flees the debt he owes his neighbors and is disenfranchised from his property; however, in the final moment his expressed desire to be out of debt intimates a desire to uphold the compacts that animate Christian society, as his election to sacrifice wife and child—as it was for Abraham—is a declaration of his fidelity to honor the fiscal and spiritual obligations incurred by being a man of the world. As Graeber observes, "to live in debt is to be guilty, incomplete. But completion can only mean annihilation."¹⁹² That is, to be free of debt is to not exist in the world and to be detached perilously from the network of credit and debt—the matrix of fiscal, familial and spiritual obligation—that constitutes human society and calls humanity into being. In this way, the partitioning of wife and child at the end of the romance can be understood as a declaration of faith or fidelity by which Amadace accepts responsibility for the demands society has placed upon him, or from Graeber's perspective, as a kind of interest payment with the life of wife and child "substituting temporarily for what is really owed, which is ourselves—a mere postponement of the inevitable."¹⁹³ For the man of the gentry commerce enables,

¹⁹² Graeber, *Debt*, 56.

¹⁹³ Critchley summarizes Badiou. See Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 46. This reading of the partitioning scene draws on Graeber's description of primordial debt theory. See Graeber, *Debt*, 56-60.

rather than attenuates, Christian morality as the disfranchisement of wealth registers both fiscally and spiritually.

The White Knight encourages Amadace to “be large of feyce, / Tille thu have wonon gode congrece, / And I schall pay ichone,” and in the same breath that he “be fre of wage, / And I schall pay for thi costage, / Ten thowsand gif thu ladde.”¹⁹⁴ However, it is clear that such spending will be covered by a creditor. That is, though Amadace is to spend freely to recover his lost wealth and prestige, he will do so at the expense of the White Knight, who as creditor will “pay ichone” of Amadace’s retinue and his total “costage.” The White Knight embeds Amadace’s honor, prestige, and wealth—his perceived nobility—in a network of credit and debt that depends on trust and equitable business transactions, rather than the superficial expenditure of wealth. Reflecting the fiscal practicality of its authorship, namely a gentry society that operates in a matrix of economic collaboration and exchange, the argument of the romance is perhaps much more prosaic than critics have allowed. That is, the author is simply arguing that while spending liberally may make you look the part of the aristocrat to your peers, paying your debts and making restitution to your creditors insures that you maintain the very credit upon which such wealth and status depends. In this regard, the author of *Sir Amadace* relates good character, godliness even, to economic efficiency, and to lapse into anachronism for a moment, the quality of one’s credit rating. Such an association is exploited to comic effect in Chaucer’s *Shipman’s Tale*, which features a cuckolded merchant, who understands happiness as an extension of his tidy business ledger: “And al

¹⁹⁴ *Sir Amadace*, lines 490-95.

that nyght in myrthe they bisette; / For he was riche and cleerly out of dette.”¹⁹⁵ A moral of this sort reflects the perspective of an estate motivated, as Thoreau once grouched about middle class America, “to get into business and [...] to get out of debt.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, “Shipman’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd Edition, ed. Larry D. Benson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987). Here lines 375-76.

¹⁹⁶ David Thoreau, “Walden, or Life in the Woods,” in *Norton Anthology of American Literature* Vol. B (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012). Here 983.

CHAPTER 3

THE TAXABLE SUBJECT IN SIR CLEGES

I. Narrative Context: Sir Cleges

Sir Cleges is a Breton lay written in twelve-line irregular tail-rhyme stanzas generally rhyming *aabccbddbeeb*; it is found in two manuscripts: National Library of Scotland Edinburgh (Advocates) MS 19.1.11, and Oxford MS Bodleian 6922 (Ashmole 61).¹⁹⁷ The analysis is based on the text found in the later Bodleian manuscript, a late fourteenth century North Midland composition.

The romance opens in the pre-Arthurian world of “Uter and Pendragoun,”¹⁹⁸ Arthur’s legendary father, and the exposition that follows focuses on the pious Sir Cleges and his family. Cleges is an honorable man, whose larder was “redy to every man, / That would come and vyset hym than,”¹⁹⁹ and likewise his wife, Dame Clarys, is charitable and beautiful beyond compare. Indeed, we are told that there was “ne non semblyre in syght.”²⁰⁰ The author describes both Cleges and Clarys as “Grete almusfolke” of whom was said that “no man ought lore” whether they were “ryche ore pore.”²⁰¹ We are told that for the last “ten yere our twelve” Cleges and his wife have thrown a great feast on

¹⁹⁷ Lillian Herlands Horstein, “Miscellaneous Romances,” in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: CT: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967), 145-72. Here 170.

¹⁹⁸ *Sir Cleges*, line 4.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, lines 21-22.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, line 27.

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, lines 34-35.

Christmas for the rich and poor of the country and that they would bestow great gifts to all who attended.²⁰² The problem is that his “gode began to slake” and, so, he began financing his feasts by mortgaging his holdings, “Hys ryche maners to wede he sete,” until “All hys gode was spendyd away,” and he was left with but one manor.²⁰³

With the money gone, his retainers abandoned him, and he is left with just his wife and child. In despair he “wrong hys hondes and wepyd sore,” which prompts his wife, Clarys, to encourage him: “Let sorowe away gon / And thanke God of Hys lone / Of all that He hath sent” because every man should be “mery and glad / With sych godes, as thei had.”²⁰⁴ He yields to her counsel, and they spend the day feasting with just their child. In the morning they attend church services, and on the way home, he sends his wife and child ahead while he stops alone in a garden to pray. He thanks God for allowing him to help those in need, and while reaching for a branch to help him up off of his knees, he notices that the bough bears green leaves and red berries atypical for the Christmas season. He tastes one of the berries before taking the “nowylte” to his wife.²⁰⁵ For Cleghes the unseasonable fruit is an ill omen, signaling further misfortune; however, Clarys insists that it is a “tokenyng / Off mour goodness, that is coming,”²⁰⁶ and she encourages Cleghes to present a basket full of the fruit to Uther. Consenting, he and his eldest son set off for Cardyff on Christmas day.

²⁰² Ibid, lines 37-60.

²⁰³ Ibid, lines 58-68.

²⁰⁴ Ibid, lines 130-37.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, line 217.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, lines 223-24.

His attempt to give the fruit to Uther, however, is impeded first by a porter, then an usher, and finally a steward, who refuse Cleges entry into the Uther's castle unless he agrees to give them a third of the reward he receives from the King. He agrees to the bargain but the arithmetic is not lost on Cleges, who recognizes that should he part his gift "betwyx thre men, / Myseleve schuld haue no thing."²⁰⁷ Without other recourse, he strikes the bargain in all three cases, which enables him to present the berries to Uther, who is so pleased with his gift that he rashly agrees to grant Cleges any request. To Uther's surprise, Cleges does not ask for land or wealth but, rather, for "strokes twelve" with which he intends to pay back his "adversarys in this hall,"²⁰⁸ and in turn, Cleges delivers the strokes to those who waylaid him—the steward, the usher, and the porter. After he delivers the twelve strokes, Cleges returns to Uther and reveals his identity. He is honored by the King, and everybody in the hall agrees that Cleges' request was a "nobull wytte."²⁰⁹ The romance concludes happily as Cleges has his lands restored, his debts canceled, and is given a gold cup for his wife. His son is made a squire and given an income of an hundred pounds. In closing, we are told that Cleges and his family met with great prosperity.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, lines 350-51.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, lines 427-31.

²⁰⁹ Ibid, lines 521.

II. Introduction: Moveable Properties

In *Sir Amadace* there is an operative legal authority that intersects the economic lives of subjects and structures their relationship to the wider social body. The point of contact between subject and law is the contract binding a debtor to his creditor, implying, as Stewart Macaulay observes generally of contracts, “a rationalization of socioeconomic relationships and the existence of a public body able to enforce the terms of the contract.”²¹⁰ The author of *Sir Amadace* takes as a given the essential and positive role legal authority plays as an institution able to regulate the economic behavior of subjects engaged in acts of commercial exchange. Indeed, legal authority looms in the background of the narrative as an institution able to, as Avner Greif observes, “structure human relations, coordinate behavior, and constitute the social and cultural worlds” in which subjects interact.²¹¹ In the context of Greif’s observation, it is the “forward,” or contract, obligating Amadace to the White Knight that instantiates the tripartite reality he inhabits, a reality trisected by commercial, legal, and spiritual obligations. If there is criticism, it falls on the insolvent Amadace, whose contractual breach threatens the coherence of the mercantile world he inhabits. His insolvency necessitates the intervention of legal and

²¹⁰ See Stewart Macaulay, “Non-contractual Relations in Business: A Preliminary Study,” in *The Sociology of Economic Life*, ed. Mark Granovetter & Richard Swedberg (Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press, 1992), 265-83.

²¹¹ Avner Greif, *Institutions and the Path to the Modern Economy: Lessons from Medieval Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006). Here 41.

divine authority to induce him to adhere to what are in essence fiscal norms that sustain the “harmonious arrangement of things and persons in a state of common generality.”²¹²

In *Sir Cleges*, a fourteenth-century Breton lay, the imposition of the state on the domestic and economic lives of subjects is shown to be problematic because the higher principles that legitimize its authority and constraint its action, namely its commitment to the common good of the community, are compromised by the personal desire of its officials. That is, the legal authority embodied by the King, an authority that ideally exists disembodied and detached from private interests, has been attenuated by the avarice of his officials, who exploit the wealth of the commons for personal gain. In this case, the point of contact between subject and legal authority is the movable property of Cleges’ estate, specifically a basket full of cherries. When viewed as a taxable property, the basket of cherries launch, like the contract Amadace enters into with the White Knight, a set of mutual obligations that ideally determine the rights and obligations structuring a subject’s relation to the state, and the state’s relation to the subject. The cherries, in effect, assume a coherent social hierarchy in which subject and king assume definite position in the “economy of inequality” that sustained late medieval English society.²¹³ However, the avarice of Uther’s court impedes the just distribution of wealth within the community and violates the rights that traditionally follow from the exchange of goods between ruler and ruled in feudal society. The result is the erosion of the mutuality inherent in just social relations and the submergence of the social body in

²¹² Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton UP, 2006). Here 36.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 38.

socioeconomic violence.²¹⁴ The consequence of the breakdown in traditional social practices governing the exchange of property is for Cleges the inability to predict and ultimately project his familial wealth into the future through his eldest son.

The plot of *Sir Cleges* hinges on what has been termed the “subject-meets-king” topos, a literary motif that depicts the encounter between a commoner—often described as a rustic—and a king. In this case, Cleges, a former knight of the round table, who has been reduced to poverty through his economic liberality, encounters King Arthur’s legendary father, “Uter and Pendragoun,” in his hall. The trademark of the topos is the comic violence enacted upon the king himself as we see in *The Tail of Rauf Coilyear* or the king’s retinue as we see in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* and *Sir Cleges*. As I make evident here, the topos foregrounds a central theme in the economic history of the period, namely the contest over the right of lords to impose demands on tenants and the capacity of tenants to resist them.²¹⁵ In the Middle English romances assembled here, the motif creates a narrative space in which traditional socioeconomic boundaries that distinguish one estate from another, for example an aristocrat from a parvenu of gentry status, are collapsed to demonstrate the mutuality of their interest and desire, and to reevaluate the material conditions on which that mutuality depends. As is evident here in *Sir Cleges* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, the general denouement of the

²¹⁴ Ibid, 37-38.

²¹⁵ Bruce M.S. Campbell, “The Complexity of Manorial Structure in Medieval Norfolk: A Case Study,” in *Land and People in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. 225-261). Here 225. This is also central to the view of medieval England that surfaces in the scholarship of R.H. Hilton and to a lesser degree George Duby. See R.H. Hilton, *Bondmen Made Free*, (New York: Viking Press, 1973); idem, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1985); idem, *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1978); Georges Duby, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1968); idem, *The Three Estates: Feudal Society Imagined*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

subject-meets-king romances is more often than not the reorientation of royal authority to the proprietary rights and interests of the commons, a mercantile class whose world view—as we’ve seen in *Sir Amadace*—hinges on commercial idea, metaphor, and practice.

The nexus between subject and king in *Sir Cleges* is taxable property, and central to the author’s complaint is the neglect of the proprietary rights and obligations taxation conferred on subject and king in fourteenth-century England. In this regard *Sir Cleges* reflects the sociopolitical anxiety of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, an anxiety piqued by the growing power of the state to intervene in the economic lives of subjects on a regular, rather than occasional basis. Innovation in taxation methods provided new entry into the domestic lives of subjects. Taxation based on the assessed wealth of individuals eroded and ultimately displaced customary service as a requisite for holding lands. The growth of taxation beyond the traditional levies of custom and tenure, G.L. Harris notes, was connected to an emergent understanding in England of the king as the head of a unified *communitas*.²¹⁶ The growing sense of England and its people as constituting a “nation” was supported by the rationalization of sociopolitical relations to establish a more regular and intrusive interaction between the state and the common subject. To extend its economic and political agenda, the state increasingly integrated royal bureaucracy into landowning society, which held Parliamentary and local political office.²¹⁷ What emerges then over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is

²¹⁶ G. L. Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Here 17.

²¹⁷ Chris Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” in *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England*, ed. James Bothwell, P.J.P. Goldberg, & W.M. Ormrod (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2000), 85-100. Here 97.

a more integrated sociopolitical body wherein subjects readily identified their interests with those of the monarch, which presented itself as an extralegal institution operating outside of the personal relationships on which feudal society was traditionally based. Rather, royal authority increasingly presented itself as a welfare institution able to uphold the propriety rights of landowners and insure the economic prosperity of the realm.²¹⁸

Traditionally, the monarchy was financed by the customary obligations of tenants and the monies levied on emergent occasions. In this regard, the justification of taxation was based on the threat posed by foreign invaders. The Danegeld is an early example of a tax levy justified by external threats to the realm. However, by the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, customary levies proved to be an insufficient means to meet the escalating costs of prolonged warfare, which increasingly depended on paid combatants. The taxation of revenues and movables—paid by all property holders with the exception of the lower clergy and certain religious houses—proved to be more lucrative as the levies were based on the actual wealth of subjects, rather than just the assessed value of the lands they held in tenure. Chris Glen-Wilson notes that, between “1350 and 1420, the English government succeeded in raising approximately £90,000 a year in taxation,” an exorbitant sum in comparison to traditional levies.²¹⁹

This shift had substantive consequences for the development of central authority in late medieval England, which proliferated in administrative offices and personnel to meet the Herculean task of auditing the wealth of the nation. To assess the property of every man, save the poorest, and to insure the state received the full yield of the tax levy,

²¹⁸ Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance*, 21.

²¹⁹ Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” 94-95.

the development of a more competent and complex system of assessment and collection was necessary. The period is witness to the augmentation and bureaucratization of the state, which increasingly articulated its authority through a paid administrative class drawn from the gentry. Out of the *curia regis*, for example, developed the offices of the Chamber, the Treasury, and the Exchequer, the latter office consisting of the Exchequer of Receipt and the Exchequer of Account. Additionally, landowners, merchants, and burgesses assumed political offices that extended the capacity of royal authority to assess local wealth and enforce legislative decree. At the local level the sheriff and his subordinates were superseded by the *missi* of the king and local courts, a circumstance that placed the common laborer in direct contact with the legal system, which in theory gave them a venue to address their grievances, but in practice gave the monarch and the landowning classes a local instrument to carry out tax levies and to enforce royal decree.²²⁰ The shift to movable properties also changed the way people thought of themselves in relation to their neighbors. In light of the more exacting process of fiscal assessment and collection, status within the social body was increasingly tied to one's tax obligation.

The use of movable property as the basis of tax assessment was accompanied by the general trend in taxation practices away from occasional levies and toward the imposition of regular and perpetual taxation practices. The lay subsidies of the fourteenth and fifteenth century are a prime example. The justification for assessing and commandeering a portion of a subject's goods remained the same: taxation was justified

²²⁰ For a general discussion of taxation in medieval England see G. L. Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), and Sydney Knox Mitchell, *Taxation in Medieval England*, ed. Sidney Painter (New Haven: Yale UP, 1951).

by the threat of emergency. However, the protracted war with France, Chris Glen-Wilson notes, allowed the state to claim that it was “operating in a perpetual state of emergency, and thus assume powers it would otherwise have been difficult to justify.”²²¹ The consequence was that the “ordinary revenues” on which the monarch had traditionally depended became “marginal to the proper functioning of government, while permanent taxation became its bedrock.”²²² The rationale for granting taxation also began to extend beyond “emergent occasion.” Post 1348 the parliamentary commons increasingly granted taxation rights to the king on the pretense that the lay subsidies levied in 1397, 1410, 1411, 1414, and 1415, for example, should “be spent as needs, military or otherwise,” for the common good of the realm.²²³

The diffusion of “emergent need” as justification for taxation is accompanied, Chris Glen-Wilson observes, by a general lessening of resistance to new levies and new attitudes justifying royal taxation practices. This trend reflects the gradual identification of the gentry, a landowning class with an invested interest in protecting proprietary rights and extending control over minor landlords, with the proprietary attitudes of royal authority such that:

Levels of taxation which in the 1290s, or even as late as the early 1340s, had been presented as quite exceptional, and had occasioned political crises as acute as those of 1297 and 1341, had, by the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, come to be regarded as the norm.²²⁴

²²¹ Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” 94.

²²² Ibid, 94-95.

²²³ Ibid, 96.

²²⁴ Ibid, 94-96.

These developments run parallel to the broadening of the tax base. Over the course of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the obligation to give tax relief in times of need was expanded beyond tenants in chief to all free landowners, a development that compelled all freemen to yield their proprietary rights for the common good of the realm and that no doubt accounts for the diminished resistance to new taxation as the wealthier members of landed society were increasingly less responsible for footing the bill.²²⁵ The first “public tax” occurred in 1194, and it was in essence a re-introduction of the Danegeld assessed as a *carucate*.²²⁶ In 1207 Henry III imposed a thirteenth on movable property, a uniform levy that produced a high yield but that went beyond the range of feudal and seigniorial rights and English tradition.²²⁷ These early public taxes served as precursors to the lay subsidies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which would create conflict between the monarchy and the commons under the Edwards and culminate in the unambiguous yoking of taxation to the consent of the realm by proxy of the parliamentary commons.²²⁸

These changes to the institutional structure of English sovereignty worked to calcify the proprietary rights of landowners by imposing new legal constraints on subject and king and extending to the landowning classes a more embedded voice in the bureaucratic machinery used to exercise sociopolitical authority. In the context of such changes, it is historically evident that a broader swath of aristocratic and gentry society played a

²²⁵ Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance*, 44.

²²⁶ A carucate is a traditional unit of measure that lost association with taxation by the thirteenth century. Rosamund Field notes a strong correlation between taxation and the free status of individuals. For an overview of Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman tax assessment see Rosamond Field, *The English Peasantry and the Growth of Lordship* (London & Washington: Leicester UP, 1997), 114-115.

²²⁷ Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance*, 10.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

greater, more coordinated role in the exercise of sociopolitical authority with each estate laying claim to the bureaucratic offices that emerged to control and process “energy surpluses,” including taxes, tributes, rents, forced labor, and material resources, for example. While the institutional machinery that surfaced during the period functioned as “collective mechanism for the allocation of material and energetic resources,” it also played an instrumental role in establishing new institutional norms “such as codes of conduct and enforceable contracts,” which created an ideological gap between traditional and contemporary views of society. As *Sir Amadace* and *Sir Cleges* both attest, legal compacts constrained and liberated economic behavior.²²⁹ Manuel De Landa observes the reciprocal impact of emerging institutions, noting that, “once in place [institutions] also react back on their human components to limit them and control them, or, on the contrary, to set them in motion or accelerate their mutation.”²³⁰ The institutional changes that occurred during the late medieval period “accelerated” a new legal and economic reality in which common subjects expected to play an integral part in the exercise of sociopolitical authority and in which the manipulation of the commercial market was increasingly understood as fundamental to sociopolitical authority.

Essential to understanding the familial crisis depicted in *Sir Cleges* is the legal and moral expectations late medieval people attached to taxation, which in language and rhetoric preserved traditional social bonds as the basis of evaluating legal authority and market behavior. Explicit in the granting of taxation rights to the king was the “reciprocal

²²⁹ Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Swerve, 2000). Here 31.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

obligation of the ruler to defend the realm and of the people to support its defense.”²³¹ However, taxation beyond what was customary, G.L. Harris observes, contravened the private rights of subjects, and, so, required consent.²³² To impose levies without the consent of the realm by proxy implied an authority directed by an arbitrary will. As Richard II’s abdication attests, such acts of arbitrary will were a touchstone for public outcry and debate throughout the period.²³³ The debate over taxation rights is in many respects the foundational impetus for the Houses of Parliament, which grew in size and influence in response to the increasing demands of the Edward I and his sons for more funds to support their political agenda overseas; and it was through the parliamentary commons that a ruler’s authority was thought to be “checked by the adjudication by the realm as being for the common profit.”²³⁴

Nevertheless, as the pessimism that pervades *Sir Cleges* attests, abuse was rampant. The case can be made that the contravening of law and the manipulation of the commercial market for fiscal gains formed the foundation of royal economic policy during the period. As one might expect, popular complaint centered on burdensome taxation practices. For example, the Parish Tax of 1371 and the poll taxes of 1377-80 were particularly hard on the poor and are generally understood as the series of “crushing taxes” that ignited the Peasants’ Uprising in 1381.²³⁵ The occasional parliamentary inquiry regularly made connection between the poverty of the realm and the taxation

²³¹ Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance*, 9.

²³² *Ibid*, 48

²³³ *Ibid*, 20.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, 46.

²³⁵ Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” 95-96.

practices of the royal court. The Monstrances of 1297, for example, drew attention to the abuse that accompanied royal purveyance, concluding that the common folk had been forced below subsistence levels by the demands of the royal court. Royal purveyors were regularly accused of fraud and brutality and of extorting locals by selling purveyed goods back to their owners at higher prices than those originally paid. Similarly, in 1341 the “inquisition of the ninth,” a parliamentary inquiry into an unpopular tax imposed by Edward III, linked royal taxation policy with the abandoned land and the widespread poverty of the realm.²³⁶ Local and foreign wool merchants also had reason to complain. As the continuation of the wool subsidy during the 1360s attests, royal wool mongering and indirect taxation were the corner stone of royal finance. Despite widespread complaint, the English monarchy consistently manipulated export duties on raw wool, or confiscated and resold wool from English and foreign merchants to meet the fiscal demands of war. In 1275 Edward I imposed a sales tax on wool, for example, which was generally referred to as the *maltote*, or “bad tax.”²³⁷ Additionally, the monarchy enacted export bans that favored royal licenses and privileged Italian money lenders on whom the English monarch were dependent.²³⁸ As a result, the practical exercise of royal authority often fell short of the high ideals that grounded its legitimacy and was perceived as a destabilizing force in the moral and material economy of the domestic sphere.

In the context of its expressed consternation over inheritance, Sir *Cleges* can be read as a conservative, anxious response to the “unpredictability of the new knowledge,

²³⁶ Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order*, 112.

²³⁷ Glen-Wilson, “Labour in Context of English Government,” 96; Richard Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Here 37.

²³⁸ Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order*, 37-48; 55-58; 69-75; 81-95.

the new techniques, and the new political givens” that follow the rupture and restructuring of traditional feudal economies by the incursion of the state into the domestic lives of subjects.²³⁹ To some degree the underlying logic of *Cleges* reflects that of the late fourteenth century *Wynnere and Wastoure*, a text that pits seemingly incongruous economic policies in debate before an admonishing king. Generally speaking, medieval theologians thought of the economy as an organic whole comprised of a series of balanced and interrelated transactions that moved money and resources in a circular flow of exchange. To this end the economic model the author of *Sir Cleges* appears to support reflects the observation that Diana Wood makes regarding the internal logic of *Wynnere and Wastoure*, which hinges, she suggests, on the following passage: “Who so wele schal wyn, a wastoure moste he fynde.” Her point is that winning and wasting are interdependent economic behaviors: what the wyunner acquires, the wastoure consumes. As a result of the circular flow of wealth between the two, the wider community flourishes.²⁴⁰ Integral to the economic logic of *Wynnere and Wastoure* is, we should note, the positioning of the king outside of economic relations where he functions as an adjudicating force of law able to insure that one set of economic practices does not supersede the other.

However, the royal authority depicted in *Sir Cleges* is embedded in the internal economy of the domestic sphere, problematically so as it competes with subjects for wealth and goods, rather than standing outside of socioeconomic relations as an

²³⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). Here 14.

²⁴⁰ See Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 121-22. Christopher Dyer links these ideas to the emergence of the gentry, who he describes as practicing prudent economic policies in contrast to the largesse exercised by the aristocracy. See Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later*, 91.

adjudicating force concerned with the integrity of their exchange. Central to the logic of the romance is what D. Vance Smith refers to as “ethics of possession,” which he links to the economic and libidinal economies of the late medieval household.²⁴¹ The household, Smith notes, functions as an organizing metaphor for a late medieval socio-cultural imagination as a result of its repositioning as the basis of English taxation practices.²⁴² In the context of Smith’s scholarship, the author of *Sir Cleges* can be said to present Cleges’ familial manor as an extramural metaphor for the wider social body and the libidinal and material economies that animate it. In particular the author is concerned with the destabilization of the household, its reduction to poverty even, by the interruption of its internal economy by the avarice of the state, which should stand as a legal surety for the familial bonds that organize the wider community, rather than a disruption of them. In the juxtaposition of Cleges’ manor to the royal household, we witness the juxtaposition of competing economic identities, one based on the finite need of the household and characterized by a circulation of wealth that begins and ends with the familial manor; and the other based on the desire for money for money’s sake, which ruptures the closed system of the household, opening it to the unrestricted economy of desire where by “money circulates and wealth accumulates or is squandered.”²⁴³

²⁴¹ D. Vance Smith, *Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xv-xviii.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 1-43.

²⁴³ Aristotle distinguishes between the *oikonomia*, which he associates with the natural economy of the household, and the *techne chrematisike*, which identifies with the desire for making money. See Lianna Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell UP, 2006). Here 20-22. See also Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy, “Universal Shylockery: Money and Morality in the Merchant of Venice,” *Diacritics* 34.1 (Spring 2004), 2-17. Here 7-8. See also Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Here 6-7.

III. Analysis: The Arthurian Specter

Looming in the background of *Sir Cleges* is the impending coming of King Arthur, the symbol of an idealized community defined by its justness, its familiarity, its fraternity, and its conviviality.²⁴⁴ His presence, however, is disembodied and liminal, hovering on the edges of the narrative as a “someone other,”²⁴⁵ who looks at the present state of things “according to a complete anteriority” to cast doubt on the present rule of his father, “Uter and Pendragoun,” who himself serves as a point of origin in a patrilineal line of succession that portends the coming of a period of peace and prosperity, or what Jean-Luc Nancy might call an “immanent unity.”²⁴⁶ Uther is, in effect, the progenitor of an original error, an avaricious desire in this case, that resonates across time to impose on the next generation the obligation to “put it back right, to turn it back over to the law,” and thereby correct the injustice that has rendered the present, as Hamlet remarks of Denmark, “out of joint.”²⁴⁷ Uther is the counter point to his son, Arthur, who paradoxically precedes and follows the contemporaneity of his father as the idealization of a communal bond from which we have fallen and to which we must return. Author haunts the narrative present by naming “a future-to-come”²⁴⁸ and his disembodied presence on the margins of the narrative begs the question: what will my son inherit?

²⁴⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et. al. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). Here 9-10.

²⁴⁵ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 6-7.

²⁴⁶ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 10.

²⁴⁷ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 23.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 19 and 26.

And in the context of the world the author describes, it is a pertinent question to ask. The world of “Uter and Pendragoun” (from here on just Uther) is an anonymous society marked by strife and selfishness. It is by medieval standards a dystopian society unsettled by coercive violence and royal corruption. While the author of *Sir Cleges* describes him as a man of “grete renoune,”²⁴⁹ Uther governs a land overrun by squires, who travel about the realm in pursuit of material succor because they have fallen into “poverté bare” as a result of war.²⁵⁰ There is, in fact, a general deterministic despair pervading the land—combated only by Cleges wife, Dame Clarys— that engenders a moral ambiguity that allows the miracles of God to be understood as signs that “mour grevans is ny.”²⁵¹ In this regard the unseasonable fruit Cleges discovers in his garden is for him a moment of crisis:

Low, dame, here is a nowylte;
In ouer garthyn upon a tre
Y found it sykerly.
Y ame aferd, it is tokenyng
Be cause of ouer grete plenyng,
Off mour grevans is ny.”²⁵²

God’s mercy is alien to the world Cleges inhabits, and though his wife corrects his pessimism, Cleges’ instinctively assumes that his complaining against the economic hardship he has endured has induced God’s wrath, rather than his mercy. His pessimism is such that he understands socioeconomic abuse and corruption as inevitable. For

²⁴⁹ *Sir Cleges*, line 5.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, lines 16-18.

²⁵¹ *Ibid*, line 222.

²⁵² *Ibid*, lines 217-22.

example, in his attempt to give Uther the cherries he has found in his garden, he is waylaid by a porter, an usher, and the steward of the King. All three men want a third of his presumed reward, namely money or lands. Cleges instinctively sees “none other bote,”²⁵³ or recourse, and so accepts with “sore sygheng”²⁵⁴ the exploitive bargain Uther’s porter, usher, and steward offer him as the unavoidable way of the world. As a result, Cleges and his family are left with nothing with which to reclaim the future of their eldest son, who walks with his father and bears the basket of cherries—the fruit of his father’s labor and thus his inheritance—upon his back.²⁵⁵

Indeed, the exploitation of Uther’s retinue will reduce Cleges and his family to subsistence living as his labor manifest in a basket of cherries will culminate only in a “melys mete”:

Syre Cleges stode and bethought hym than:
And I shuld parte betwyx thre men,
Myselve schuld haue no thyng.
For my traveyll schall I not gete,
Bot if it be a melys mete.²⁵⁶

Cleges moment of clarity checks Clarys’ optimistic hope that the cherries portend a coming of great plenty by foregrounding the fiscal reality of living and owning land in late medieval England, as the profits garnered through production and sale of agricultural goods will be stripped away altogether by a coercive state.

²⁵³ Ibid, line 361.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, line 355.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, lines 241-46.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, lines 349-53.

But this is not how things should go for a man of free status. The author of *Sir Cleges* self-consciously notes the legal status of persons populating the romance, eschewing evaluations of status based on the assessed income of a character's estate, as we see in *Sir Amadace*, for a more traditional model of assessment based on tenure. Though Cleges' son receives "a hundryth pownd of rente"²⁵⁷ as reward from Uther at the end of the romance, legal status in *Sir Cleges* is generally associated with land tenure. The author notes, for example, that Cleges fed neighbors that were both "fre and bond,"²⁵⁸ referring to the legal status derived from the conditions of their tenure. This is not out of the ordinary *per se*; all land was tenured in late medieval England, and, so, the nature of one's tenure continued to serve as marker of social identity. Allodial lands were rare as property ownership was not a complete transfer of property rights between persons but, rather, a semi-contractual agreement that allowed tenants to "hold," or enjoy the use of the lands of a superior landlord so long as they met the customary services and fees attached to the land.²⁵⁹ To be a "bonded" person meant you were a *villein*, or a man of servile status, and, so, subject to the arbitrary taxation and unfixed services of a superior landlord; however, to be "free born" meant that the socage of one's tenure was fixed. Landowners of free status were protected by the rights of *seisin*, which implied their *de facto* possession of the land and its profits.²⁶⁰ Cleges self-identifies as a man "fre

²⁵⁷ Ibid, line 555.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, line 114.

²⁵⁹ Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 1971). Here 122.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 120-21.

borne,”²⁶¹ and historically speaking, the bargain imposed upon him by Uther’s retinue is deeply problematic, particularly if we recognize the third Uther’s retinue demands as an arbitrary tax on movable property, which violates the proprietary rights of free born subjects and prohibits Cleges as testator from leaving two-thirds of his wealth to his heirs, a provision of late medieval English law.²⁶²

Equally problematic in Uther’s kingdom is the use of coercive violence to back the economic exploitation of the realm. The bargain offered Cleges is not much of a bargain, as it is accompanied by the threat of violence that aims to “breke [his] hede smertly.” Such violence de-humanizes Cleges as an impoverished churl better fit for “begers route”:

As Sir Cleges wold in go,
In pore clothing was he tho,
In symple aray.
The porter seyde full spytously:
“Thow schall withdraw the smertly,
I rede, withoute deley,

Else, be God and Seynt Mary,
I schall breke thi hede smertly,
Go stond in begers route.²⁶³

This scene is played out three times over between Cleges and the porter, the usher, and the steward in turn, with each encounter reinforcing attitudes that Thomas Hoccleve identifies with the failure of secular lordship to provide moral example and guidance for the commons. Indeed, Cleges’ encounter with Uther’s retinue follows the logic of

²⁶¹ *Sir Cleges*, line 408.

²⁶² Harris, *King, Parliament, and Public Finance*, 17-21; 48. See also, Martha C. Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism, 1300-1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010). Here 82.

²⁶³ *Sir Cleges*, lines 259-67.

Hoccleve's observation that a "wight vertuous but narwe clothid / To lordes courtes now adayes go, / His conpaignie is unto folkes lothid."²⁶⁴

Cleges centripetal journey into Uther's hall culminates in the steward's impetuous question, "Herlot, has thou no tong?" And though he speaks to give consent to the hard bargain each official offers, ironically the answer is, no, Cleges has no voice in Uther's hall. As a churlish commoner and impoverished knight of the Round Table, he is alienated from the authority and protection of the King. Indeed, Uther does not even recognize Cleges, a former member of the Round Table, who he once "lovyd paramour."²⁶⁵ Uther assumed, rather, that Cleges was long "dede,"²⁶⁶ suggesting that the high ideals associated with the Round Table have also perished. Because he does not recognize Cleges, Uther is left to ask an itinerant troop of minstrels to confirm the identity of the man who has abused his retinue.²⁶⁷ Not surprisingly, the minstrels know Cleges as a "man of hye stature" because they are familiar with his household. Reflecting the general trademark of the Breton lay, the author makes a point of locating minstrels in both Cleges' household where they received great gifts and in Uther's hall where they play for his amusement. Their mobility—their ability to traverse and inhabit diverse socioeconomic spaces—draws attention to the stationary, detached placement of Uther

²⁶⁴ Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999). Here lines 540-542.

²⁶⁵ *Sir Cleges*, line 501.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid*, line 500.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, lines 481-98.

and the justice he embodies in his castle in Cardiff, where he is singularly “sett in hys parlere, / Myrth and revel forto here.”²⁶⁸

As we will see again in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, the author of *Sir Cleges* portrays royal authority as alienated from the land and the people it governs. Rather, Uther’s authority is isolated and made diffuse by the officials charged with the administration and exercise of royal authority, rendering Uther the representative of an arbitrary authority unchecked by the need and will of the commons. It is against the backdrop of Uther’s negligent rule that the domestic tragedy of *Sir Cleges* plays out as it is a material scarcity caused by war and economic exploitation that necessitate Cleges’ fiscal liberality. In contrast to Amadace, whose largesse is motivated by a prideful need to appear noble in the eyes of his neighbors, Cleges’ largesse is motivated by real compassion for the indigent, and he is described as a genuinely good Christian man committed to his role as a superior lord to his tenants. We are told, for example, that his “tenantes feyre he wold rehet; / No man he wold buske ne bête,” and that his “mete was redy to every man, that wold com and vyset hym than.”²⁶⁹

Where Uther’s retinue is concerned foremost with profiting from the strangers they encounter, Cleges’ economic practices are grounded in compassion and are inclusive, enveloping both “ryche ore pore,” “gentyll men and comenere,” and “fre and bond.”²⁷⁰ That is, the model of charity Cleges and his wife deploy within the community is inclusive, extending from the top to the bottom of English society, and it is said of

²⁶⁸ Ibid, lines 481-82.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, lines 19-23.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, lines 35; 66; 114.

them that “no man ought lore.”²⁷¹ And this detail is essential because it stands in contrast to Uther, under whose stewardship all men lose in the pursuit of personal profit. It is no stretch then to see Cleges’ charity as an attempt to fill the void created by the lack of social welfare provided by royal authority, and serving, as Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury observe, as “a kind of medieval social welfare system, or a locus of distribution, that takes care of those who meet with hard times.”²⁷² In fact, the author tells us that his feasts were, “As ryall in all thyng /As he hade ben a kynge.” The observation is a subtle indictment of Uther whose negligence necessitates that Cleges assume the legal duties of the royal office.²⁷³

There is, however, a practical economic reality undergirding the romance, and in spite of his good intentions, Cleges’ cannot sustain his liberality in a society in which the need of one’s neighbors outstrips the rent from one’s lands. Cleges, like Amadace, is forced to mortgage his lands to pay off the debt he has incurred, “Hys ryche maners to wede he sete; / He thought hymselfe oute to quyte.”²⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the desire to be charitable overrides rational budgeting, and he continues to spend imprudently, hoping “God wold hym quyte.”²⁷⁵ He continues to “forderyd,” or fritter, away his wealth until he is left with but a single manor:

Hys ryalty he forderyd ay,

²⁷¹ Ibid, line 34.

²⁷² Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, “Sir Cleges: Introduction,” in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 367-74. Here 369.

²⁷³ *Sir Cleges*, lines 41-42.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, lines 62-63.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, line 72.

To hys maners wer sold away,
That hym was left bot one,
And that was of lytell valew,
That he and hys wife so trew
Oneth myght lyfe therone.²⁷⁶

It is difficult not to read the dissolution of Cleges' estate against historical trends in the land market post-1350, which resulted in the proliferation of smaller estates, and to see the failure of his fiscal liberality as a consequence of the encroachment of commercial ethics on the traditional social bonds and economic practices of landed society.

As Christopher Dyer notes, the "exploitation of resources was left entirely to the tenant,"²⁷⁷ so tenants could subinfeudate their lands to raise money, making the buyer the subtenant, or alienate the land by substitution by requesting the lord accept the buyer as new tenant, which transferred customary services, obligations, and rents to the buyer.²⁷⁸ Other pressures on families to erode their lands included endowments for the monastic community and rewards for deserving followers, including children with no formal inheritance (e.g. daughters acquired through marriage or younger sons, who were often made subtenants), and the temptation to increase the breadth of one's estate through the purchase of lands from indebted families.²⁷⁹ The increasing availability of income through employment and trade also shifted the land market toward smaller holdings, as land was no longer a requisite for marriage. A family could prosper, Dyer notes, on small

²⁷⁶ Ibid, lines 73-78.

²⁷⁷ Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 109.

²⁷⁸ Concerns over the loss of customary services and rents resulted in the prohibition of the outright selling of tenured lands in 1290. New emphasis was given to the alienation of lands through substitution such that the obligations of tenure were taken over by the new holder. See Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 109.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 112-13.

lands by pasturing on the common grounds as a means of supplementing their family income, profit off the local market, or as noted, sublet lands for agricultural development.²⁸⁰ Head lordships, or those lords in possession of a demesne exceeding two-hundred acres of land, were rare in late fourteenth-century England, particularly in the east of England where the manorial system was largely fractured and incoherent. In connection with the growth of gentry influence during the period, the manorial norm was increasingly the proliferation of smaller lords in possession of fewer acres of land, increasing the complexity of the manorial structure organizing the tenantry while attenuating the moral and legal authority larger manors traditionally imposed on local communities.²⁸¹

Not surprisingly the dissolution of larger estates provoked moral concern because the circulation of land in the commercial market in essence redefined land as a movable property, destabilizing the productive assets of medieval communities. Traditionally, land was understood as immovable, a status backed by the assumption that it had social utility and a perpetual life, “yielding fruit or income from one generation to the next.”²⁸² Movables on the other hand were chattels, which could be freely bought, sold, alienated, and encumbered as subjects chose. The proliferation of smaller estates was understood as a diffusion of moral authority at the local level. Campbell notes that those areas of England where the manorial system was less established, for example the heavily commercialized East Anglia, were more likely to be sites of relatively rapid social

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 159.

²⁸¹ Bruce M.S. Campbell, “The Complexity of Manorial Structure in Medieval Norfolk: A Case Study,” in *Land and People in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 225-261.

²⁸² Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism*, 50.

change. He notes that larger lordships persisted longer in the North and West of England, resulting in a more firmly established manorial system. This may account for the more conservative attitudes of the North where the manor system continued to play a fundamental role in the economic and social life of the people. Campbell notes that:

The manorial system lay at the very core of medieval agrarian life: it was fundamental to all aspects of land tenure, to law and local administration, and to the organization and conduct of agriculture. Indeed, there are few aspects of economic and social life upon which it did not in some way impinge. It was also an essential component of that wider and more complex body of social and economic relations known as the feudal system. Individual manors represented the lowest common denominator of feudal lordship and thereby provided the single most direct instrument for the exaction of that range of services, obligations, and payments in cash and kind which collectively comprised 'feudal rent.'²⁸³

In the context of *Sir Cleges*, the reduction of Cleges' estate to a single manor is coterminous with the diminution of his economic influence within the wider community. As a result, the reach of his charity is also reduced, and in effect, the smaller his land holding, the less effective he is at fulfilling his social role as a lord, a constituent of late medieval society that understood themselves as a "protector and defender of the whole community."²⁸⁴ Rather, the loss of his lands means his compassion and goodwill, and the material resources he wields will be withdrawn from the community and allowed to circulate only within his immediate family.

There is then a closing off of economic and moral practices that assume, as in *Sir Amadace*, that material goods are given on "lone" from God, and, so, establish

²⁸³ Bruce M.S. Campbell, "The Complexity of Manorial Structure in Medieval Norfolk: A Case Study," in *Land and People in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 225-261. Here 225.

²⁸⁴ Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages*, 110-11.

socioeconomic relations characterized by a moral and fiscal obligation to make restitution as a condition of one's participation in the community.²⁸⁵ Rather, in the absence of an institutional authority able or willing to take account of the material possessions of the realm and then redistribute them justly for its defense, a responsibility Henry II's treasurer, Richard FitzNeal, once ascribed to the state,²⁸⁶ the partitioning of wealth is driven by the relative valuation of goods and persons in a commercial market and the possessive desire to own for one's self and for the benefit of one's immediate dependents at the cost of the need of the wider community. This circumscription of possession is reflected in Dam Clarys' response to the familial crisis. While she is attempting to console her husband, who laments his losses, Clarys' uses the possessive "ouer" throughout her exhortation, in effect, to circumscribe their familial wealth in a way that contrasts with their earlier liberality, which made their wealth accessible to all:

“Now every man schuld be mery and glad
With sych godes, as thei had;
Be ye so, I you pray.
Go we to ouer mete believe
And make us both mery and blythe,
As wele as ever we may.
I hold it for the best, trewly;
I have made owre mete treuly,
I hope, unto your pay.”²⁸⁷

Her ostensible rationale, namely that one should be content with what one has been given, reconciles Cleges to his delimited financial circumstances but proves problematic

²⁸⁵ *Sir Cleges*, lines 131.

²⁸⁶ From Richard FitzNeal's *Dialogus de Scaccario*, an administrative manual, which was written ca. 1170. See Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 140-141.

²⁸⁷ *Sir Cleges*, lines 136-44.

when contextualized by the wider need of the community, which will also need to be content with what it has even if what it has is nothing. In this way the pessimism that is overt in Cleges works covertly in Clarys to bring them both to the same fatalistic conclusion, namely that circumstances are what they are and so they should abide patiently as there is no escaping them.

Given the patient suffering typical of Christian worship and the Job narrative to which the “spend-thrift knight” motif bears resemblance, her argument sounds reasonable enough, and the dialogue between husband and wife occasions a homily description of a mirthful family at play.²⁸⁸ The initial impression is that Cleges' has been reoriented to a deterministic view of the world in which it is understood that wealth is partitioned by Providence, so he should be contented with his present circumstances. However, the scene—just one stanza—has the transitional force of an aubade as their domestic bliss is interrupted by the ringing of morning matins, which literally wakes the family and calls them back to the service of the Church: “The sclepyd to it rong at the chyrche, / Godes servys forto wyrche, / As it was skylle and right.”²⁸⁹ And it is on his return from matins that Cleges articulates clearly for the first time what has been lost, primarily his role as an intercessor in the suffering of his neighbors. His realization repositions the manor as an essential social institution in the exercise of sociopolitical authority as it is the hub where the welfare proffered by the state is given praxis. Kneeling in a garden to pray, he gives thanks to God for having provided him the opportunity to serve the needy:

He knelyd adoun in that tyde

²⁸⁸ Ibid, lines 157-62.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, lines 163-68.

And prayd to God verament.
He thankyd God with all hys hert
Of all desesynd in poverté,
That ever to hym He sente.²⁹⁰

It is clear the Cleges identifies his charity in the context of a wider spiritual economy in which his material wealth is earmarked for the preservation of those that “desesynd,” or suffer, in poverty. It is at this moment that the unseasonable fruit—the cherries— appears to Cleges, and the narrative shifts suddenly away from the scene of domestic mirth to place Cleges and his family once again in crisis by putting the family in direct relation to royal authority, an institution that exposes the familial bonds of the domestic sphere to the unrestricted desire of the market. From Cleges’ perspective, the giving of the cherries will reify the reciprocal relationship evident in his prayer. That is, the cherries will instantiate the conditions of reciprocation that should obligate humanity to God and God to humanity. Simultaneously, as an object “double coded” to suspend sacred and secular interests, the cherries represent a taxable property, which should invoke a set of parallel legal obligations that structure the relationship between subject and state.²⁹¹

As C. Grant Loomis pointed out long ago, the folk motif of the “unseasonable growth” finds expression in medieval hagiography, and cherries discovered mid-winter find general exemplification throughout medieval literature as a marker of Christ’s

²⁹⁰ Ibid, lines 188-92.

²⁹¹ The notion of “double coded” images in medieval cultures comes from the work of Sarah Kaye, who refers to the logic of medieval aesthetics as a “both/and” paradigm, rather than an exclusionary “either/or.” See Sarah Kaye, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001). Barbara Newman extends Kaye’s work. See Barbara Newman, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular against the Sacred* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

mercy.²⁹² For example, an extant Old English ballad narrates a shared moment between Mary and Joseph, who are walking in a cherry orchard. Mary asked Joseph to help her reach a bob of cherries. When Joseph callously replies that Mary should ask who ever left her with child for help, Christ speaks to the cherry trees, which lower their branches for Mary.²⁹³ Cherries picked mid-winter appear as a gift for royalty in the *Secunda Pastorum* as well. In the Wakefield Master's pageant they serve as a gift for the Christ child, who is adorned in poverty.²⁹⁴ In the context of the both pageant and *Sir Cleges*, cherries picked mid-winter symbolize rebirth amid death as the red fruit and white blossom finds its symbolic parallel in the blood and body of Christ, rendering the cherry and its blossom a symbol of the Eucharist. As if to confirm the allegorical interpretation, Cleges' first thought is to "tayst [a cherry], yff he couthe / One of them he put in hys mouthe; / Spare would he nought."²⁹⁵

Read allegorically, Clarys' request that Cleges take a "panyere,"²⁹⁶ or basket, of the cherries to Uther is a request then to bring Christ's mercy to the very heart of sociopolitical authority so that Uther can do as Cleges has just done, namely taste the mercy proffered by the body of Christ and act accordingly. However, the symbolic importance of the cherries is given dual register in the romance as they are shown to be

²⁹² C. Grant Loomis, "Sir Cleges and Unseasonable Growth in Hagiology," *Modern Language Notes* 53 (1938), 591-94.

²⁹³ Gordon Hall Garould, ed., *Old English and Medieval Literature* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1929), 377-78.

²⁹⁴ David Bevington, ed., "Second Shepherds' Pageant," in *Medieval Drama* (Atlanta: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 383-408. Here line 718.

²⁹⁵ *Sir Cleges*, lines 208-210.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, line 229.

mere property circulating within a specific social and political context defined by a set of fiscal relations that erode the distinct limits traditional feudal economies placed on the use and exchange of property.²⁹⁷ In this regard, the miracle they embody is pulled from allegorical abstraction when they are quantified by Uther's officials, who measure their value at a third of the reward Cleges will receive for them. From the perspective of the state, which is represented in the romance by the porter, the usher, and the steward, the cherries are quite literally movable or taxable properties. Because they symbolize the fruit of agricultural production, they are subordinate to claims the state can make on the property of its subjects. In the context of their commoditization, the moral and spiritual value Cleges attaches to the cherries will not manifest a coherent and self-sufficient world in which the exchange of the goods implies perdurable and predictable social bonds; rather, as an object of desire over which subjects compete, the cherries express the unsatisfied desires of the domestic sphere, which in yielding to the desires of the state is dispossessed of the reward property should yield, namely material prosperity and a voice in the exercise of sociopolitical authority.²⁹⁸

As an object of desire over which social actors compete, the cherries serve as the foundation of interpersonal relations between Cleges and Uther, instantiating an institutional identity at odds with the material and libidinal economy of the household. The evaluation of the cherries as an object worth a third of a king's reward in land and money implies that the basket of cherries circulates in a commercial market that assigns relative value to property and persons while uniting subjects through the "intermediacy of

²⁹⁷ Fred Block, "The Roles of the State in the Economy," in *The Handbook of Economic Sociology*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1994), 691-710. Here 698-699.

²⁹⁸ Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 44-49.

rare goods offered to the appetites of all.”²⁹⁹ The expectation that Cleges should receive a reward from Uther regardless of his threadbare appearance suggests, Lianna Farber observes of late medieval economic thought, that the commercial market ideally established proportionate reciprocity between subjects committed to acts of exchange. Undergirding such assumptions is the Aristotelian distinction between distributive and rectificatory justice. On the one hand distributive justice justifies the unequal distribution of rights and resources by the status or ability of the individual subject, acknowledging the intrinsic difference between social constituents in the assessment and correction of inequality or injustice. Rectificatory justice on the other hand ignores the intrinsic status and ability of the individual, assessing value and inequality by creating proportionate equivalence between subjects engaged in acts of exchange. In short, rectificatory justice seeks to rectify injustice or inequality created by action or choice, or by the unequal distribution of resources in the natural world. These notions are foundational to the civil ethics of the period, which emphasized bilateral agreement and exchange, rather than coercion and unilateral action by drawing distinction between relative and absolute value.³⁰⁰ In the context of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Jill Mann understands these attitudes as informing the “just exchange” typical of Middle English romance, noting that the “just exchange maintains proportionate equivalence between non-identical things”

²⁹⁹ Ibid, 44-45.

³⁰⁰ Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing*: 19-24. See also the primary text: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub Co. 1999).

and identifies need (also understood as the common good in her analysis) as the primary determinate in establishing relative value between social constituents.³⁰¹

However, the just exchange Cleges seeks hinges on the preservation of the intrinsic worth of the state as an institution able to maintain the integrity of socioeconomic exchange. The relative evaluation of persons and goods in the market place erodes traditional nodes of power and authority, which depend on the evaluation of individuals and offices of authority as having an inviolable intrinsic worth. Economic historian M.M. Postan linked economic innovation to the population growth of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, a span of time Joel Kaye characterizes as a “period of rapid monetization.”³⁰² For Kaye, the monetization of English society created a dynamic and market oriented agrarian economy that eroded traditional nodes of power and authority by fostering economic differentiation among the upper strata of feudal society. Social and economic differentiation in agriculture and industrial petty commodity production during the period provided new means for the landed aristocracy and wealthy burgesses and “merchant capitalists” in control of important trade centers like York, for example, to extract peasant surplus through rights of jurisdiction. Economic competition played out in the political realm as well. Empowered urban and provincial elites, for example, institutionalized their burgeoning economic influence through the acquisition of political office, which was a direct assault on the rituals and

³⁰¹ Jill Mann, “Price and Value in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,” in *Essays in Criticism* 36.4 (Oct. 1986): 294-318.

³⁰² Joel Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1998). Here 16.

practices of the authority traditionally wielded by landed potentates.³⁰³ The consequence for late medieval society was, as Joel Kaye notes, a “new image of the world: from a static world of points and perfections to a world of lines in constant expansion and contraction.”³⁰⁴

The sympathetic portrayal of domestic life in the romance, which links pleasure and desire with the succor of children, suggests a conservative response to such changes. In contrast to the unhinged and fluid world Kaye describes, the author of *Sir Cleges* aims to re-establish a more fixed sociopolitical environment. In asserting a more traditional model of feudal society, the author of the romance imagines social bonds as familial bonds, which structure the domestic space hierarchically and generationally, rendering “each man a father to his subordinates and a son to his superiors.”³⁰⁵ The hierarchical organization of society is also implied by the presence of the same medieval economic common place we encountered in *Sir Amadace*, namely the understanding of material goods—the very basis of human society—as a “lone” from God,³⁰⁶ which organizes the social body hierarchically in terms of credit and debt. In this regard, the inclusiveness of Cleges’ charity suggests that all subjects belong to the same household, which is presided over by a paternal authority that stands at the head of a chain of relational dependence from which “persons derive the authority they exercise on others.”³⁰⁷ By extension, Uther

³⁰³ Rodney Hilton, “Feudalism in Europe,” in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (New York: Verso, 1990), 1-11. Here 7-8.

³⁰⁴ Kaye, *Economy and Nature*, 158.

³⁰⁵ Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 90.

³⁰⁶ *Sir Cleges*, lines 131. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 9-10.

³⁰⁷ Boltanski and Thévenot, *On Justification*, 91.

symbolizes the paternal authority that governs the household, paradoxically functioning as the point of origin of a familial tradition that links in intimate bond one generation to the next while standing outside of it to insure its continuation.³⁰⁸

However, the paternal authority he embodies is attenuated by his immersion in a socioeconomic environment animated by commercial ethics and the desire to possess for oneself as a means of making distinction between socioeconomic actors. As a result, his intrinsic value as the paternal authority is eroded by his displacement in a network of depersonalized interpersonal relationships, a network of anonymity, in which subordinates can claim the same rights to the property of subjects as the king himself. As Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot note, commercial markets depersonalize social bonds by “extending the network of persons they bring into contact” and by “denunciating the domestic bonds between master and worker.”³⁰⁹ The author of *Sir Cleges* voices a deeply conservative response to market innovation, suggesting that market ethics pose a threat to the system of generational inheritance on which feudal society depended by breaking down the community attachments that obligate one subject to another.³¹⁰ As with the insolvent debtor who destabilizes socioeconomic relations by failing to return monies owed, an act of nonfeasance that threatens to destabilize the whole chain of credit and debt sustaining the late medieval economy, the avariciousness of Uther’s royal officials impoverishes the wider community by interrupting the flow of money and goods between provincial society and the state. There is, in short, a

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 165.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 47.

³¹⁰ Ibid, 94.

breakdown of traditional economic relations that unite subject and king through the immediacy of goods, like the cherries, which ideally suspend interpersonal relations in overlapping material and spiritual economies.³¹¹ Consequently, the cherries will neither manifest Christ's mercy nor solve hunger in the wider community as the social and political relations that constrain their use remove them from common circulation.

Distilled to the moral language of the period, the root problem is avarice. The bargain offered by the porter, the usher, and the steward is avaricious in nature because, as Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury note, it "opposes charity and social welfare" while impeding "the distribution of wealth among the King's subjects by undermining a system dependent upon individual adherence to chivalric ethics and codes of behavior."³¹²

Richard Newhauser understands the breakdown of social relations as an inherent component of the sin of avarice, which ultimately denies the lowest of society "their portion of the commonality."³¹³ He defines avarice as a bipartite desire to both possess more wealth than one already possess and to "amass riches that both withdraws possessions from economic circulation and withholds them to the disadvantage, in particular, of the have-nots."³¹⁴ In effect, avarice is the obverse of the mercy and justice mobilized by largesse, which in redistributing wealth in the form of charity, Newhauser suggests, corrects the malfeasance of the greedy:

³¹¹ Ibid, 44.

³¹² Anna Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, 372.

³¹³ Richard Newhauser, "Justice and Liberality," *Virtues and Ethics in the Twelfth Century*, ed. István P. Bejczy & Richard Newhauser (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2005), 295-316. Here 297-303.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 295.

Among these opponents of avarice, justice and liberality (*largesse*) were seen to respond with particular specificity to the two common poles of avaricious behavior: the desire to attain more possessions than what in the history of avarice was generally left vaguely defined as “enough” was considered an affront to justice, measured on both a mythic and, especially, a social scale; and on the other hand, appeals to the virtue of liberality were deemed efficacious above all in correcting the desire not to share with others, in particular in the form of alms, from what one already possesses.³¹⁵

In avariciously taking what “justly belongs to another,”³¹⁶ Uther’s retinue deny Cleges the proprietary rights conferred on him as a freeman to “use a given resource and to enjoy the benefits that may be derived from it,” and, so, jeopardize the well-being of the wider community by disrupting what Manuel De Landa describes as “mutually stabilizing institutional norms, a nexus of contracts and routines constituting an apparatus of collective action.”³¹⁷

Similarly, the author of the romance encourages the reader to see the *largesse* of Cleges’ manor and the avarice of the state in concatenate relation to demonstrate Cleges’ liberality as a corrective measure intended to offset the damage caused by the avarice of royal authority, rather than a marker of his pride. Theoretically speaking, Uther is “the unjust that enables the just to be announced,”³¹⁸ and the foreboding moment of correction promised by Arthur’s becoming-specter at the start of the romance, is incorporated into law by Cleges’ request for “strokes twelve”³¹⁹ at the end. Cleges’ appropriation of

³¹⁵ Newhauser links these ideas to the development of an emerging money economy, which drew more attention to the inequality of wealth distribution. *Largesse*, he suggests, is part of the gift economy of the aristocrat, who served as model for merchants. See *Ibid*, 296.

³¹⁶ *Ibid*, 303.

³¹⁷ De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History*, 35.

³¹⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 19.

³¹⁹ *Sir Cleges*, lines 428.

violence reasserts the right of the commons to adjudicate the fiscal practices of the monarch. In effect, Uther's granting of Cleges' request turns violence back over to the law as an instrument of correction essential in the process of putting back to right a social body that has been attenuated by avarice. In fact, Cleges' just application of violence effectively disentangles royal authority from the economy of desire material wealth engenders and reorients Uther and the legal authority he embodies to the fiduciary responsibilities assumed by the state as a protector of the proprietary rights of subjects, who are his beneficiaries.

At the end of the romance it is as if Uther is able to see correctly for the first time. He recognizes, for example, the poverty and need that besets the community, cautioning Cleges to take gold and property, rather than the strokes he requests: "He seyde: "Be Hym that made me and the, / Thou had be better take gold our fe, / Mour need therto thou hade."³²⁰ No doubt Uther's expressed consternation also suggests an unwillingness to concede the right to violence to Cleges; however, his commentary suggests that, unlike his retinue, Uther is able to link the moral and legal authority of his office with the need and common good of the realm. After conceding to Cleges' request, Uther works for the first time to create a just exchange between king and commons. Cleges' anonymity within Uther's hall also falls away, dispelled by the return of the intimacy that used to link Cleges to his king. In spite of the poverty that has befallen him, for example, Uther recognizes the inherent nobility that set Cleges apart from his knightly peers, a nobility lost on Uther's retinue, who evaluate Cleges solely based on this threadbare appearance:

³²⁰ Ibid, lines 436-38.

“Arte thou my knyght, that servyd me, / That was so gentyll and so fre, both strong,
herdy and wyght?”³²¹

In effect, the “strokes twelve” affect a depersonalization of the state, or a correction and distancing of legal authority from the desire to possess. Uther’s transformation is predicated on the appropriation of Arthur’s objective gaze, which is given paradoxical incorporation as “a body without nature, in an a-physical body that could be called [...] a technical or an institutional body.”³²² That is, the objectivity of Arthur’s becoming-specter is embedded in the institutional authority embodied by Uther, who stands paradoxically at the foundation of the sociopolitical community and outside of it as a force of law able to maintain just socioeconomic relations. The merger of Arthurian objectivity and institutional body results in a widening of Uther’s perspective, which is marked by his recognition that his word carries the force of law. Though he regrets his rash decision to grant Cleges the rights to an adjudicating violence, Uther understands the agreement between them to be backed by legal “covenant,” a deployment of the same legal language in *Sir Amadace*, to suggest that socioeconomic exchanges are presided over by an objective legal authority: “He seyde: “I repent my grantyng, / The covenant, that I made.”³²³ Cleges too thinks of their agreement in these terms, reminding Uther that, “Lord, it is your awne graunteyng; / I may not be deleyed,” drawing attention to the inviolable authority of Uther’s royal office. By the end of the romance, the sore grieving that first accompanied Uther’s rash boon fades as well, and he

³²¹ Ibid, lines 535-37.

³²² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 158.

³²³ *Sir Cleges*, lines 434-35.

playfully chides his beaten steward, reminding him that “he grante the any reward / Askyth it be the law.”³²⁴

The re-founding of royal authority on law enables a re-organization, a re-imagining really, of the social body after the familial bonds that organize Cleges’ manor. In effect, Cleges acceding to legal authority sets back to right what Jean-Luc Nancy refers to as the “lost or broken community” by re-establishing familial bonds marked by brotherhood and harmony, and sustained by self-affirming institutions, rituals, and symbols that manifest an “immanent unity, intimacy and autonomy.”³²⁵ The gifts Cleges receives at the end of the romance re-establish him as a knight of the realm and position him and the ethos he embodies at the heart of sociopolitical authority to create a more intimate bond between subject and king. For example, Cleges is given “all that longes to a knyght, / To aray hys body with,” the castle of Cardyff to “hold with pes and grythe,” and he is made steward of the realm. His election as steward draws Uther’s legal authority out of its previous isolation in his hall where it functioned as an exclusionary force and into a set of communal relations in which it is experienced as an inclusive, itinerant justice that is “gentyll” and that “All men [it] knew, yong and old, / In lond wer that [it] wente.”³²⁶ Additionally, Dam Clarys is given a “cowpe of gold” as a “Tokenyng of joy and myrthe,” and her son is given a title and income, extending to him the prestige of wearing the livery of the royal household: “The Kyng made hys son squyere / And

³²⁴ Ibid, lines 524-25.

³²⁵ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 9.

³²⁶ *Sir Cleges*, lines 565-67.

gafe hym a colere forte were / With a hyndryth pownd of rente.³²⁷ Properties recovered, Cleges, like Amadace, pays off his creditors, “Upon the dettys that they hyght, / They payd als fast as they myght, / To every man wer content,”³²⁸ insuring that his son will inherit his property free of debt.³²⁹

In effect, the gifts given to Cleges and his family reestablish a set of traditional feudal economic relations by which the exchange of a basket of cherries is understood to establish an intimate, generational bond between subject and king. Indeed, the gifts reproduce traditional expectations associated with land tenure, which is to say that the gifts link the legal right to possess and profit from manorial lands to the demesne and authority of the King, who stands as a surety of the customary rights attached to tenure. There is, in conclusion, implicit in the exchange of gifts at the end of the romance a communal desire for a closed and undivided social identity that is protected from the socioeconomic innovation encapsulating late medieval society by a royal authority that holds to traditional patterns and rituals of exchange.

³²⁷ Ibid, lines 541-55.

³²⁸ Ibid, lines 562-64.

³²⁹ Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism*, 73.

CHAPTER 4

THE SOVEREIGN SUBJECT IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE CARLE OF CARLISLE

I. Narrative Context: Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle

Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle is a tail-rhyme romance that exists in a single manuscript: National Library Wales, Porkington MS (also known as Harlech MS 10 and Brogyntyn MS). Thomas Hahn dates the manuscript as mid-fifteenth century. It is a true miscellany of prose and verse, containing sundry texts ranging from treatises on astrology, medicine, and the weather to saints' lives and religious pieces like "Erthe Upon Erthe" to ribaldry in the vein of "A talk of Ten Wives on their Husbands Wares" to drinking songs and carols. A shortened version of the same romance, a "minstrel piece" written in rhyming couplets and known simply as *Carle of Carlisle*, can be found in the Percy Folio, British Library Additional Manuscript 27879. Helaine Newstead dates *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*'s composition to 1400; she links its dialect to the Shropshire area.³³⁰

As is typical of the genre, *Carlisle* opens with a hunt following Mass. The narrator notes that it is "grece-tyme of the yeer" and that "baruns bolde schulde hont the der."³³¹ While in pursuit of a "raynder," Gawain, Kay, and Beschope Baudewyn become

³³⁰ Helaine Newstead, "Arthurian Legends," in *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English, 1050-1500*, ed. J. Burke Severs (New Haven: CT: The Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1967). 38-79. Here 59-60.

³³¹ Thomas Hahn, ed. "Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 81-113. Here lines 31-32.

separated from the main party.³³² Though they can hear Arthur's horn signaling the end of the chase, the onset of evening and the appearance of a sudden “myst” impede their return. Faced with bedding down in the evening cold, a solution not opposed by Gawain, Baudewyn recalls the close proximity of a carle's castle; however, his recollection of the Carle's hospitality is less than encouraging: “That ever mycht gaystyn in his holde / But evyll harbrowe he fonde.”³³³ Baudewyn's apprehension suggests that the lodging the Carle offers is fraught with peril; however, Kay's unwillingness to “byde in this woode all nyght”³³⁴ necessitates that the lost party search out the presumptive antagonist of the romance, the Carle.

Once they arrive at the Carle's stead, the chivalric virtue of Gawain, Kay, and Baudewyn is put to the test by being asked to humbly genuflect to the Carle's rule. As we might expect, Kay and Baudewyn fail miserably; their bellicose sense of entitlement earns the both of them a stiff buffet from the Carle. Only our titular hero effectively passes the tests, displaying his humility by genuflecting to both the porter and the Carle; his compassion in tending to the rain soaked foal; his courage and martial skill in his unflinching willingness to hurl a spear at the head of his monstrous host; and restraint when given the opportunity to kiss the Carle's wife (though Gawain is, we are told, over eager in this instance as he “wolde have doun the prevey far”).³³⁵ Upon completion of the tests, Gawain wins the Carle's approval only to discover that the Carle has been quietly

³³² *Carlisle*, line 117.

³³³ *Ibid*, lines 145-46.

³³⁴ *Ibid*, line 134.

³³⁵ *Ibid*, line 467.

piling up the bodies of his fellow knights in a storage shed. Harmony is restored when the Carle invites Arthur to dinner and then gives the three adventurers the emblematic tools of their social trade: a crucifix, a mitre, and a ring for Baudewyn; a blood red steed for Kay; and a bag of gold and the Carle's daughter to wed for Gawain. In exchange, the Carle is made a knight of the Round Table by Arthur and given the "contré of Carelyle,"³³⁶ the traditional seat of Arthur's authority in the North.

II. Introduction: Populist Rhetoric and Middle English Romance

As the complaint literature of the late medieval period attests, populist politics of the period often mobilized violence in literature and in real protest as a means to acquire communal rights and dismantle coercive and corrupt instruments of sociopolitical authority. In short, the complaint literature of the period aimed at inclusive representation within the body of the state, rather than its overthrow. Popular protests mobilized a wide swath of the medieval community, drawing its vitriol from a diverse set of interests, which ranged from those of the dispossessed cottar to the lesser gentry. Rodney Hilton observes, for example, that the uprising in 1381, a revolt that unfolded in the densely populated centers of cloth production around London and in East Anglia, was backed by a pronounced urban element opportunistically looking to exploit the frustration of the heavily taxed laborer to their own advantage as a means to gain elementary urban

³³⁶ Ibid, line 629.

rights.³³⁷ Because of their closer proximity to literate culture, a more affluent and literate social elite was in a better position to channel social disaffection into a coherent counter narrative that articulated the frustration of a wealthy social constituency through the figure of the common laborer. While plowmen or shepherds, as the case may be, often served as the mouth of discontent, the complaints they articulated did not necessarily speak to the immediate interests of the common laborer, whose interests were tied to the liberation of the peasantry as one might imagine.³³⁸ And because the same social elite maintained a moneyed interest in the feudal organization of society, the counter narratives that emerged from such protests rarely challenged the organization of feudal dominance but, rather, sought inclusion in it.

A regular pattern of popular resistance movements is the appropriation and redeployment of practices and ideologies that intend popular oppression and control. In effect, they exert control over the forces that suppress them, turning inimical policies to their own use. In the context of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, this tendency is reflected in the effort to define a counter ideology that takes as its point of reference the legal and fiscal forces employed to suppress and control the churlish, or servile estate. In *Carlisle* the presumptive antagonist, the Carle, takes explicit control of the fiscal mechanism used to maintain his subjugation by wedding his compliance to an institutionalized guarantee that he will have authority over the investiture of secular and

³³⁷ Hilton, "Popular Movements in England," in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: Verso, 1990), 79-91.

³³⁸ Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 158. See also, Kahoachiro Takahashi, "A Contribution to the Discussion," in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1980), 68-97.

religious authority, an authority reified by the series of exchanges that conclude the romance.³³⁹ Similarly, the author of *Carlisle*'s reflexive dismissal of literary motifs traditionally associated with Arthurian romance as vain exhibition and the intentional destabilization of the pejorative connotations of the term "carle," a term commonly used in Middle English romance to inscribe a particular cultural geography in which the churlish estate is set negatively against the supposed grace of the landed aristocrat, establishes a counter-narrative that fashions a corporate, rather than exclusive, image of sociopolitical authority. *Carlisle* (and we can apply this observation to Middle English romance generally) functions as a "sort of theatre where various political and ideological causes engage one another."³⁴⁰ As a result, it allows us to see late medieval literate practices circulating in a more complicated civic environment and to see the use of romance during the period as both a means of inscribing one social group, or class, with the fictions and values of another and as a means of resistance to such domination, a way of articulating oppositional points of view to those in dominance.³⁴¹

The overlooked sophistication of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* lies in the entrenched topical, legal consciousness that characterizes its depiction of intra-class conflict. Beneath the surface of Arthur's contestation with the homely authority of a carle is the general assumption that center and margin of sociopolitical authority, namely provincial and royal authority, exist in reciprocal, dependent relation to one another. The

³³⁹ Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967).

³⁴⁰ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993). Here xiii.

³⁴¹ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, "The Politics of Culture," in *Literary Theory*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 1233-34.

underlying assumption is that late medieval political culture is (or should be) an integrated, bilateral entity linked by a set of shared juridical values and by a practical model of fiscal exchange that establishes and reproduces reciprocal social relationships. In its reflexive un-writing of the Manichean logic that typically informs the language of cultural hegemony, particularly as it is encoded in the generic conventions of romance to celebrate and substantiate the values and practices of a military aristocracy,³⁴² *Carlisle* acknowledges the domestic agenda of a literate and influential constituency of late medieval sociopolitical culture less chivalric in its outlook and composed, to paraphrase Geraldine Barnes, of men of public affairs concerned with the exercise and regulation of power and authority.³⁴³

Ostensibly the author of *Carlisle* is concerned with the sociopolitical instability created by *transgressio contra pacem domini regis*, or “trespasses of the king’s peace.” In this particular instance the trespass is the legitimate, or lawful, use of violence by royal officials to exploit the wealth of lesser subjects and, in turn, the redeployment of violence by the lay community to both protect itself from such abuse and as a means to seek justice. In this context, the proliferation of illegitimate violence in the romance between a “sanctioned authority” prefigured in Gawain, Kay, and Beschope Baudewyn and a subject represented by the Carle indicts royal authority as an ineffectual juridical institution incapable of maintaining the stability and peace of the realm by protecting the

³⁴² This idea is generally observed by Stephen Knight. See Knight, “The social function of the Middle English romance,” 99-122.

³⁴³ For Barnes the “middle ground” of late medieval culture is occupied by an estate of public servants well versed in law, parliamentary process, and commerce—three points of interest that define the ethos of Middle English romance. See Geraldine Barnes, *Counsel and Strategy in Middle English Romance* (Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1993). Here 1-28.

proprietary rights of lay lords from the casual violence of royal officials. In this regard, *Carlisle* is topical in content and focus, linking its authorship (and Middle English romance generally) with the sociopolitical consternation and complaint induced by the systemic abuse of lay society by royal officials and those “second kings of the shire,” who escaped legal repercussion through the protection proffered by magnate affinity.³⁴⁴

The exploitation and abuse the author describes allows the author of *Carlisle* to explore the ideological and material nexus between legitimate authority and the wider social body, echoing in tone and rhetoric the populist tenor of the complaint literature of the period. The author of *Carlisle* outlines a corporatist vision of English society that ultimately challenges “self-concepts,” to borrow Stephen Knight’s phrasing, predicated on hierarchical social models that isolate English sovereignty from the very community that sustains its sociopolitical legitimacy, an isolation that serves in this instance, as it does in *Sir Cleges*, to justify the ideological and material debasement of a lay “other.” By foregrounding the practical mechanisms of exchange that sustain social compacts and that legitimize sociopolitical authority, the author calls for churlish society to be (re)integrated into the rituals and practices of sociopolitical authority on the grounds that it is in fact the ideological and fiscal basis of sociopolitical authority. In effect, the author

³⁴⁴ Historically the abuse by royal officials was a consistent complaint voiced by the Commons of the English Parliament, perhaps most notably during the Merciless Parliament of 1388 when representatives of Commons took issue with the lawlessness of the nobility and attacked the “the second kings of the shire,” or royal officials and the stewards of magnates, for their petty abuse of the common folk. The Merciless Parliament is most well-known for the constriction of office imposed on Richard II by the Lords Appellant, a group that included Henry Bolingbroke, son of John of Gaunt and future usurper King Henry IV. Simon Walker links the complaint with a wider context of abuse of authority stemming from the protection afforded by magnate affinities. See Simon Walker, *Political Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006). Here 37.

of *Carlisle* disrupts the “magical barrier” that renders legitimate culture a separate universe and exposing English sovereignty to alteration and redefinition.³⁴⁵

III. Analysis: The Limits of Arthurian Sovereignty

Analyses of *Carlisle* typically extend Lee C. Ramsey’s conclusions that the romance is overtly political and that the resolution of the plot hinges on a formal bargain.³⁴⁶ Taco Brandsen, for example, suggests that the harmony established between carle and court at the close of the romance is predicated upon the completion of a political bargain between an aristocracy asserting its claim for complete sovereignty and a “churlish class” willing to give its loyalty for “supremacy within their own sphere.”³⁴⁷ He contends that the accord established at the end of the romance is “brought about not by the insistence on the part of the underling, but by the grace of the superior.”³⁴⁸ In spite of the evident interest the author of *Carlisle* shows in collapsing prescriptive social boundaries between aristocratic and churlish society, Brandsen’s reading of *Carlisle* maintains a misleading chiaroscuro of medieval society in which churlish society assumes a negative (and passive) binary to the supposed sophistication of a religious and secular nobility. In doing so, he delimits “grace” as a marker of a particular chivalric

³⁴⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1984). Here 100. Michael Johnston’s analysis of *Carlisle* comes to similar conclusion. See Johnston, *Romance and the Gentry*, 64-66.

³⁴⁶ Lee C. Ramsey, *Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983), 189-208.

³⁴⁷Taco Brandsen, “Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle” in *Neophilologus* 81 (1997): 299-307.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 305.

caste, ignoring its register in the romance as a collective disposition and civil virtue necessary in maintaining a peaceful accord in a community marked by difference and inequality.

Such assumptions appear to be justified given the Carle's imposing disposition and proclivity for violence. We are told, for example, that the Carle has collected, "ten fodir of dede men bonys" and "many a bloody serke [of] dyvers marke" and left them hanging ominously in a "wilsome wonys."³⁴⁹ And this association between the Carl and murderous violence appears to justify the ascription of grace to the representatives of the Arthurian court. However, such logic quickly breaks down when we contextual the violence that underscores Gawain's encounter with the Carle. Though Gawain is characteristically courteous and gracious, his companions—Sir Kay and Beschope Baudewyn—are not. In fact, their lack of grace is synonymous in the romance with a use of violence that aims to dominate the wealth of the Carle's household. Prior to their meeting Kay boasts that he will both beat and rob the Carle of his chattel:

Be the Carle never so bold,
I count hym not worth an har.
And yeyf he be never so stoute,
We woll hym bete all abowt
And make his beggyng bar.³⁵⁰

From Stephen Knight's perspective, Kay's gasconade establishes a "self-concept" that renders the Carle a subjugated figure upon which the dynastic fantasies of the aristocracy can be played out.³⁵¹ In this instance the dynastic fantasy assumes as an inherent right to

³⁴⁹ *Carlisle*, lines 529-37.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid*, lines 155-59.

³⁵¹ Knight, "The social function of the Middle English romance," 103.

exploit the accumulated wealth of a lesser estate. However, the Carle is not a passive subject, rather he actively resists the ideological and material debasement Kay intends (and that Beschope Baudewyn later implies in his unwillingness to allow his palfrey to stable next to the Carle's foal). His appropriation of violence as a means to stave off Kay's aggression resists such inscription, engendering an oppositional point of view that draws into question the claims and limits of Arthurian sovereignty as "the threshold on which violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence."³⁵²

Kay intends to distraint,³⁵³ in effect, the Carl's personal property. The violent assault on the property and person of the Carle would demonstrate the legitimacy of Arthurian sovereignty, while affirming the Carle's servile status by eroding the proprietary rights and conditions that formed the basis of free status in late medieval England. Though he sees such violent acts as a privilege of his status, which I define here as a subject's socioeconomic and legal standing within the community, Kay is a *perturbator pacis*, or a disturber of the king's peace, and we are encourage to condemn him as a criminal because his violence stands to further the homicidal violence that we later learn the Carle has committed. The moral denouncement of Kay as criminal is confirmed by the admonishment and penalty Kay, Baudewyn, and even Gawain receive while lodged in the Carle's home. The restorative acts that conclude the romance also suggest that we are to understand the violence committed by Kay and the Carle in a legal

³⁵² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stand for UP, 1995), 32.

³⁵³ Distraint is defined by the seizing of a tenant's personal property as a means to enforce the paying of rents or of non-fiscal manorial services. See J.G. Bellamy, *Bastard Feudalism and the Law* (London: Routledge, 1989). Here 34-57. See also Smith, *Arts of Possession*, 25-36; and Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundation of the State*, 52.

context in which both parties will face penalty. In fact, the theft and assault Kay threatens were well established acts of illegal trespass against the king's peace in medieval English law, though they were common enough practices among the wealthy of late medieval England to warrant topical commentary and judicial review.³⁵⁴

While contemporary society is prone to link physical violence with disenfranchised and reprobate elements of society, the violence depicted in *Carlisle*—both the violence Kay threatens and the violence the Carle is revealed to have committed—was a traditional and, in some cases, legal right of the wealthy in late medieval England.³⁵⁵ The granting of customary rights, which are generally understood as the right to impose monetary taxes, fees, and fines on tenants, to lords and lesser gentry by the crown inferred a right to violent enforcement of such privileges. The right to violence was confirmed by seigniorial developments in the twelfth century as local magnates were granted rights of *bannum* and *districtus*, or the authority to enforce juridical order by punishing offenders of the public peace and by distraining the goods of offenders respectively.³⁵⁶ Though originally given as a means to strengthen the rule of law, the granting of such rights proved problematic to royal authority as the violent self-help afforded magnates by customary privilege and legal statute was readily redeployed as a means to extend personal landholdings and, in turn, as a defense against the theft of personal property. Because land played a significant part in the status and wealth of the individual, the seizing and suing for it was a common practice among the wealthy of late

³⁵⁴ Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order*, 285.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 181.

³⁵⁶ Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 48-52.

medieval society. As a result, internecine conflict over property was commonplace. In cases of forcible entry and riot—acts of illegal trespass and the destruction of personal property respectively—individuals were often motivated by the desire to intimidate tenants or lesser lords in land title disputes.

Proprietary law in late medieval England provided little remedy and, in fact, encouraged such violent self-help as a result of its ambiguity. By law individuals had a right to claim “entry.” That is, they had the right to assert a claim on another’s property if they believed they had a legitimate right to it, though legitimate right was not necessarily a motivating or deciding factor. Entry simply required the litigant to occupy the land as a means to establish *seisin*, a legal standard often achieved by seizing and holding the manor court, selling and burning woodlands, taking fealty, and, in the fourteenth century at least, freeing unfree tenants.³⁵⁷ Such land disputes were often encouraged by the use of entails, uses, and jointures to define legal possession of inherited property,³⁵⁸ which often resulted in a good deal of legal ambiguity, creating opportunity for ambitious nobles to seize and take control of another’s property. Though legislation passed in 1381 insisted that entry only be made where it was allowed by law and without force, forcible entry continued as a practice as the outcome of armed conflict was often determined by the wealth of the entering party. Local judicial proceedings, should it come to that, were likewise easily influenced by wealthy litigants.³⁵⁹ In response, violent self-help in the

³⁵⁷ Bellamy, *Bastard Feudalism and the Law*, 43.

³⁵⁸ Entails, uses, and jointures largely concerned inherited property. Generally speaking, entails restricted future ownership to particular descendants; uses provided rights of usufruct; and jointures set aside property to be used to support a wife after the death of her husband. See J.H. Baker, *An Introduction to English Legal History* (London: Butterworths, 1971), 121-71.

³⁵⁹ Bellamy lists this act as The Act, 5 Ric. II st. 1 c. 7. See Bellamy, *Bastard Feudalism*, 49.

defense of one's chattel was codified in law under Edward III, as was the illegality of seizing personal property by entering parties. In the context of English law, the Carle appears well within his rights to commit violence against those that threaten his proprietary rights.³⁶⁰

The legal and literary record suggests that such acts of trespass were widely understood as counterproductive to the socioeconomic and moral well-being of the community. The theft and transfer of one person's property to another was not only economically unproductive but also demonstrated the permissibility of royal authority by undermining the very basis of individual legal status within the realm. The unlawful seizure of another's property threatened the whole system of feudal tenure because the enfranchisement of lands and customary rights ultimately derived surety from the authority of the crown. As a result, the status of individual subjects and the peace and stability of the realm was thought to be protected by the benevolent puissance of the crown, as the legitimacy of royal authority was based in part on its identification as the supreme authority on all matters pertaining to rights of custom and tenure. The monarch's own self-identification as an institution of law and justice reinforced such attitudes, and, so, the control of retributive violence between local families and magnates was a central concern of royal authority, particularly as royal authority positioned itself as a constituted force of law within the realm. The Statute of Treasons in 1352, for example, established a wide range of threats to the order and dignity of the realm as acts of "enormous trespass," linking the felonious violation of the king's peace with treason.³⁶¹

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 49-50.

³⁶¹ Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 247.

The intersection of royal authority and domestic subject in *Carlisle* draws into question the claims of royal authority to be an objective institution of law; it opens up for reconsideration the foundation and limits of English sovereignty. As the resolution of the romance will attest, the author of *Carlisle* understands the nexus between subject and royal authority to be grounded in legal and economic precedent, rather than any personal obligation secured through the swearing and keeping of oaths, a pact typical of the chivalric culture that populates Arthurian romance. The significance placed on economic and legal machinery in the formation and maintenance of sociopolitical compacts makes it clear that the author also understands sociopolitical relations to be based on rational processes that create interdependent and reciprocal relationships. The Carle's complaint that no one would "do as he "hym bad,"³⁶² for example, draws attention to a general silencing of the churlish voice in the exercise of sociopolitical authority. It also assumes that churlish society has a voice able to command the political will of the realm, suggesting that the author understands royal authority to exist in dialectical relation to its subjects. In this regard, *Carlisle* tacitly acknowledges the pervasive influence of Parliament on the political culture of late medieval England, particularly as a nascent English constitutionalism helped shape the political turmoil at the end of the fourteenth century.

At the outset of the romance, the author of *Carlisle* outlines in broad strokes the geographic boundaries of the Arthurian realm, which he refers to as "Bretten":

His name was Syr Gawene:
Moche worschepe in Bretten he wan,
And hardy he was and wyghte.

³⁶² *Carlisle*, line 522.

The Yle of Brettayn icleppyde ys
Betwyn Skotlond and Ynglonde iwys,
In story iwryte aryghte.
Wally sys an agull of that yle;
And Cardyfe sojornde the Kynge a whylle
Wytt mony a gentyll knyghte
That wolde to Ynglonde to honte,
As grete lordys dothe and be wonte,
Wytt hardy lordys and wygghte.³⁶³

Both the title of the poem and the localization of character and event in the romance draw attention to the Northwest regions of England. Particularly attention is paid to the region between Cardiff near Wales, where Arthur has sojourned to hunt, and Carlisle in Cumberland, where the central conflict of the romance takes place. The author identifies the area in the romance as the “Yle of Brettayn.” The geographic orientation is north-south, and though far from a kaleidoscopic panorama, the generalized description suggests fragmentary regions that exist in geometric relation but not as a cohesive entity. Carlisle itself only emerges from the mist as an identifiable locality when the hunting party seeks lodging, and its emergence in the romance serves to contrast a luxuriating South with a discordant North, which exists only tangentially until it is brought under the official purview of Arthurian rule by Arthur’s investiture of the Carle as Lord of Carlisle.

Carlisle figures prominently in Arthurian Legend as the reported seat of Arthur’s authority in the North of England; however, historically it was also an important border town, which was reduced to garrison status as a result of prolonged conflict with France and Scotland. In 1158 Henry II recaptured Cumbria from the Scots and granted Carlisle its first charter, enabling the city to host a weekly market and the annual Carlisle Fair,

³⁶³ Ibid, lines 13-24.

which drew people dealing in wool and leather goods to the town.³⁶⁴ Although the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw Carlisle develop as a trade center in the North, the outbreak of war with France under Edward I drew attention to its strategic position along the Scottish border. Though the occasional French raid on port towns like Plymouth or Rye occurred, the majority of the fighting took place on French soil, isolating the South of England from the violence of war. However, Carlisle's geographic location invited continual destruction and death on the peasantry as a result of border skirmishes and raids undertaken by Scottish and English forces alike. Such acts of aggression continued up through the sixteenth century by border reivers, or clan alliances, operating on both sides of the border. They raided Carlisle and other like border towns with notable violence and cruelty. By the late fourteenth century Carlisle had been reduced to a collection of hovels inhabited by people with little interest in investing in more permanent, prestigious buildings for fear that they would be destroyed by raiders. The 1597 Treaty of Carlisle sought to end the border skirmishes that plagued the northern regions, in part, because of the great poverty that had been visited upon the people of Carlisle.³⁶⁵ Given the historical context, it is fitting that Baudewyn should recollect Carlisle apprehensively.

Apart from the title, which locates churlishness geographically, very little textual or manuscript evidence suggests that *Carlisle* or its author has direct affiliation with the City of Carlisle, or that the complaint that unfolds is regionally based. The juxtaposition

³⁶⁴ See Bruce M.S. Campbell, "North-South dichotomies, 1066-1550," in *Land and People in Late Medieval England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 145-174. For more general considerations of the topic see Simon Walker, *Political Culture in Late Medieval England*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2006); Richard Britnell, *Markets, Trade and Economic Development in England and Europe, 1050-1550* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2009); idem & John Hatcher, eds., *Problems and Progress in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996).

³⁶⁵ See Simon Walker, "Rumour, sedition and popular protest," in *Political Culture in later medieval England*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2006), 154-83. Here 157.

of geographic setting and literary genre suggests, rather, a sophisticated, politically minded authorship able to reflexively deploy the literary conventions of Arthurian romance in the examination of topical political interests. In this regard, the geographic setting of *Carlisle* instantiates the sense of political disenfranchisement associated with Northern England, a disenfranchisement implied by the Carle's complaint that no one would "do as he "hym bad." The Hundred Years War with France (1338-1453) had severe social and political consequences for the people of Northern England, who experienced wartime violence first hand as a result of Scotland's allegiance to the French crown. The consequence was mass emigration from the border area and the fragmentation of political allegiance, as the politics of those who stayed behind became particularly localized. Inhabitants increasingly gave their loyalties to local baronial families like the Percys and the Nevilles, who were better positioned to offer security against raiders than the monarchy stationed in the South. As a result, Northern England became a hot bed of domestic unrest, complaint, and dissent. This is attested to by its association with the Ricardian rumor, which was political propaganda that claimed Richard II had escaped captivity, fled to the Scottish court, and was planning an armed return to England with Scottish forces to usurp the illegitimate rule of Henry IV. The North of England was also the setting of the Scrope rebellion, which aimed, in part, to refocus royal authority on the tenets of just rule.³⁶⁶

In similar fashion the ongoing antagonism between the Arthurian and the churlish court in *Carlisle* draws attention to the absence of a mediating force, an institution of law,

³⁶⁶ See Simon Walker, "Rumour, sedition and popular protest," in *Political Culture in later medieval England*, ed. Michael J. Braddick (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 2006), 154-83. Here 157.

for example, able to restrain the self-interest of subjects and bring combatants to agreement through negotiated juridical order. Though he is guilty of promulgating murderous violence, an act of trespass no less damning than Kay's, the Carle's adjudicating presence at the dinner table and in the bedroom speaks to his more complex characterization in the romance as an impersonal (and looming) authority invested in the peaceful resolution of internecine conflict. In contrast to Kay, whose gasconade assumes unilateral right to commit violence with impunity, the Carle, a monstrous but principled figure, assumes the juridical function of a body of law. He stands *Dangiers*-like³⁶⁷ between Kay and the fulfillment of his violent desire to enforce consequence on those that transgress the law, and he serves to bring combatants to the dinner table where the conditions of sociopolitical accord are (re)negotiated. We might note in this regard that his activity in the romance is generally characterized by the admonishment he gives each member of the Arthurian hunting party for their failure to maintain the rule of his house, or what he calls "carllus corttessy," an extramural and homely metaphor for English common law. Even the amenable Gawain, the immediate intercessor in the wider conflict and the figure through whom sociopolitical accord is ultimately achieved, is exposed and admonished when he transgresses the bounds of the immediate rule imposed on him.

That Kay is a member of the Arthurian court and a knight of the realm is deeply problematic, as it speaks to the failure of royal authority to exercise good lordship in the domestic sphere as an institution of law and justice. His dereliction of duty to preserve the peace, which was not only a traditional obligation derived from his status as knight

³⁶⁷ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994).

but a sociopolitical obligation conferred on the knightly class as jurors and administrators of local assize courts, identifies royal authority with the willful corruption and abuse of law. Though we need to be mindful of his traditional characterization within Arthurian romance as pugnacious and rash, the target of Kay's violence, namely the Carle's property, makes clear that the author intends to link Kay's characterization to the impunity of royal officials and the liveried men of local magnates that surface in the complaint literature and court rolls of the period as abusers and exploiters of the common folk. The common denominator of such complaint was the contravening of law and legal court by royal administrators to further parochial (often fiscal) agendas at the expense of subjects, who were simply coerced into compliance.³⁶⁸

For the author of *Carlisle* such abuse is systemic to a juridical body attenuated by the vanity of the royal household. In this case, the conflation of royal authority with chivalric literary culture promulgates a vanity that assumes unilateral privilege over churlish society.³⁶⁹ In separating the hunting party from Arthur, the mist isolates Gawain, Kay, and Baudewyn in a legally circumscribed space, the wood, that highlights the legal privilege afforded members of the royal court. As royal hunting grounds, woods were exempt from adjudication under common law. The king's forests were, rather, adjudicated under a corpus of law referred to as Forest Law, which allowed royal authority to impinge on the proprietary rights of subjects enfranchised by the king and therefore traditionally protected under common law.³⁷⁰ As the Old English "Rime of

³⁶⁸ Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 265.

³⁶⁹ Edward III's establishment of the Order of the Garter (1351) gives example of how the aristocracy employed chivalric culture in the construction of a sociopolitical identity.

³⁷⁰ Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 141.

King William” attests, the sequestering of forest lands was a source of conflict from the beginning of Norman rule in England as Forest Law extended the economic rights and privileges of royal authority while delimiting the profitable use of tenured lands for legal holders.³⁷¹ The granting of *agistment* rights, which were generally understood as privileges to pasture and harvest on forest lands, to wealthy locals was a source of royal revenue as was the imposition of fees against offenders.³⁷² In effect, Forest Law created another layer of fine and taxation while institutionalizing the impunity of action assumed by Kay and Baudewyn as members of the royal court.

It is significant that the party becomes separated from Arthur by a mist because the perceptual obfuscation suggested by the miasma reflects the hunting party’s detachment from the high ideals of authority and good lordship traditionally associated with Arthur. In this regard, the wilderness in which the Arthurian party becomes lost gives shape to a spatial triptych through which the characters pass as they transfer from Arthurian to churlish court. Their passage from one court to the other ultimately facilitates a reordering of the juridical order as the forest marks a liminal space wherein the claims of English sovereignty come to contradiction. Specifically, the claim of royal authority to be an institution of law is shown to be attenuated by the vanity of a privileged caste able to direct the licit violence of the state to accord with the parochial self-interests of the aristocracy, rather than the collective will of the sociopolitical community.

³⁷¹ The Old English, “Rime of King William,” *Peterborough Chronicle 1070-1154*, ed. Cecily Clark (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1958), xi-xxi.

³⁷² Forest was a term akin to our National Park. Forests included all lands able to support deer and game and not simply wooded areas. For a general discussion of Forest Law in late medieval England see, Raymond Grant, *The Royal Forests of England* (Wolfeboro, NH: Alan Sutton, 1991).

From the outset Gawain is given more instrumental characterization than his counterparts, and his activity throughout the narrative generally serves to contrast a legal authority that intends, as Gawain himself proclaims, “To make the larde of full fayn / In his oun castell”³⁷³ with a legal authority that services the self-interest and chivalric vanity of its administrators. For example, his identification as “Stewarde of the halle,”³⁷⁴ not an uncommon designation for Gawain in Middle English romance but one that registers as significant in the context of *Carlisle*’s interest in English jurisprudence, links Gawain with the obligation and authority of political office. His designation as “Steward of the halle” serves to highlight the corrosive attitudes and practices Kay and Baudewyn animate and the relative uselessness of a figure like Sir Ironside, who is given lengthy description by the author but who functions within the romance solely as a progenitor of chivalric fantasy. The idle Ironside embodies the antagonism self-interest poses to collective models of civil and religious authority, as do Kay and Baudeweyn in their own right. For example, in his lengthy biography Ironside is described as the sire that “Gat the Knyght of Armus Grene / On a lady brygght,” and a slayer of dragons who with “Gyanttus [...] wer ever at were / And allway at the debate,” and “coude mor of venery and of wer”³⁷⁵ than any other knight. Ironside’s celebrated skill set, a skill set comprised almost entirely of coercive, violent practices that engender a state of perpetual conflict, would certainly be of use to an Arthurian party first lost in a wilderness and then menaced by a giant carle; however, Ironside is set aside for the more instrumental

³⁷³ *Carlisle*, lines 167-68.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, line 46.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, lines 68-69; 77-78; 85.

humility of Gawain, an intercessory figure who ultimately shifts the conflict away from the retributive violence threatening the stability of the realm and toward an adjudicated trial of character that allows for a negotiated accord.

However, while in the wood the instrumental authority Gawain embodies is shown to be permissible. Gawain suggests, for example, that the hunting party give up their horses for the evening and merely abide their time under a tree. However, Kay tempestuously insists that they continue to ride until they find lodging, calling attention to the right his social position and horsed puissance affords him:

“Hende, herkon to me.
I reede that we of our hors alight,
And byde in this woode all nyght,
And loge undur this tree”
“Ryde we hens,” quod Keye anon;
“We schall have harbrowe or we gon.
Dar no man wern hit me.”³⁷⁶

Though Gawain cautions him to leave off his “bostfull fare; / Thow gost about to warke care” (169-170), the authority that he embodies as “Stewarde of the halle” is ultimately shown to be permissible as Kay’s insubordination demonstrates the impotent authority that lies behind his office.

In contrast to Gawain, Kay and Baudewyn manifest the violent exploitation enabled when self-interest is allowed to operate unchecked by an objective legal, moral, or religious code of conduct that insists individuals make accommodation for the collective interests of the wider community. Similar to the idle Ironside, they animate a set of attitudes and practices identifiable with the chivalric culture often associated with

³⁷⁶ Ibid, lines 132-38.

Arthurian romance and indicative of a privileged caste that sees itself through the prism of a cultural and literary fantasy in which the real foundation of their privilege, namely the commercial, legal, and social contracts that structure the dependent relations between the dominant and the dominated within a society, is displaced by the supposition that such privilege is intrinsic to the socio-sacral status of the individual. The juridical reordering the author of *Carlisle* calls for starts with the erosion of the rituals and practices that substantiate such cultural and literary fantasies in order to re-root sociopolitical authority in the practical mechanisms of exchange that maintain order in civil society. For example, in the wood the rituals and practices that announce the hunting party's cultural and legal privilege are evacuated of symbolic meaning. The hunt for the "reyneder" that "wolde not dwelle,"³⁷⁷ an activity that echoes Arthur's pursuit of the Questing Beast, is emblematic of aristocratic privilege and a leitmotif of a genre that often celebrates the heroic exploits of the individual. However, the author of *Carlisle* quickly evacuates the pursuits' symbolic importance. Gawain himself notes that hunting the deer that would not dwell "ys in vayne, / For certen, trowe hit me,"³⁷⁸ suggesting that the party has reached the margins of a symbolic and juridical order able to articulate the privilege the hunting party derives from Arthurian affinity.

Given the emphasis on the Virgin Mary as a symbol of the civil accord established at the end of *Carlisle*, it is likely not without irony that a member of the church, Baudewyn, a figure who as head of Christ's body should be familiar with the

³⁷⁷ Ibid, lines 124.

³⁷⁸ *Carlisle*, lines 128-29. The scene invokes Arthur's pursuit of the questing beast. See also Thomas Malory, *Complete Works*. 2nd Edition, ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford: UP, 1971), 1.19.15-16.

communalism that undergirds Christian ethics,³⁷⁹ is the member of the party that channels Kay's bellicosity toward a space, the Carle's lodging, in which Kay's violent intention will be tempered by a collective, egalitarian model of authority predicated on just reciprocity. However, the communalism advocated by Christ and ultimately called for by the Carle appears lost on Baudewyn, who is quick to make social distinction between himself and the Carle by calling attention to his privileged status within the Arthurian community. Prior to their meeting he recalls the Carle as a menacing figure in whose lodging even a high ranking member of the church will be menaced:

Then sayd the Beschope: "I know it well—
A Carle her in a castell
A lyttyll he ner honed.
The Karl of Carlyll ys his nam:
He may us herborow, be Sent Jame,
As I undurstonde.
Was ther nevyr barn so bolde
That ever might gaystyn in his holde
But evyll harbrowe he fonde.
He schall be bette, as I harde say,
And yefe he go wytt lyfe away
Hit wer but Goddus sonde."³⁸⁰

Baudwyn's apprehension is seemingly affirmed by the foreboding admonition of the Carle's porter, who upon their arrival openly laments, "Me rewyth sor ye came this waye, / And ar ye go, so woll ye say,"³⁸¹ and by the narrator's description of the Carle's prodigious size: "Nine taylloris yerdus he was hyghtht/ And thereto leggus longe and

³⁷⁹ Brian Tierney, "Medieval Canon Law and Western Constitutionalism," in *The Catholic Historical Review* 52 (1966): 1-17.

³⁸⁰ *Carlisle*, lines 139-50.

³⁸¹ *Ibid*, lines 241-46.

wyghtht.”³⁸² His disposition is made all the more imposing by the agitated clamoring of beasts—a bull, a boar, a bear, and lion—lying at his feet, a pack only brought to heel by the Carle’s fearsome bellowing, ““Ly style! Hard yn!”” In this instance, the author of *Carlisle* foreshadows the civil accord the Carle will command by imposing a rule that restrains the natural appetite to quell the domestic violence that threatens the stability and peace of the realm.³⁸³

The Carle’s description is typical of the giants that inhabit medieval romance, echoing Chretien’s description of the giant Yvain encounters at the magic fountain in *le Chevalier au Lion*. Chretien’s giant is similarly described as a carle-like and made the husbandman of wild beasts, an association with the animal world alien to the chivalrous knight, who fails to recognize the giant as a man despite the giant’s explicit declaration that he is indeed so.³⁸⁴ Similar to Yvain, Kay and Baudewyn fail to recognize the Carle and the communal ethics he embodies as a part of the world they inhabit. They imagine him as an alien other, a giant carle fit for the wilderness but not the court from which they derive status and prestige. Specifically, during the late medieval period “carle” referred generally to members of the community of servile status, namely serfs, servants, freedman, and peasants, or those members of the community subject to arbitrary labor

³⁸² Ibid, lines 259-60.

³⁸³ The Carle functions similarly to *Dangiers*, or Rebuff, who guards the rose from the possessive desire of the dreamer in the Garden of Pleasure. See Guiliam de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Romance of the Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 44-61.

³⁸⁴ Yvain asks ““Come, let me know whether thou art a creature of good or not.’ And he replied: ‘I am a man.’” See Chrétien, “The Knight of the Lion (Yvain),” in *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler. New York: Penguin 1991.295-380. Here 298-99.

services and taxation.³⁸⁵ In labeling him a “carle,” Baudewyn imposes a cultural geography that positions the Carle on the margins of sociopolitical authority and, as is often the case with language that makes social distinction, implies a condition of material or moral coarseness.

In his study of the depiction of the *villein* in medieval romance, Douglas Moffat notes that servile members of the community are typically made to exhibit behaviors unbecoming for a man of the court. The *villein* is depicted as uncouth and generally lacking in good manners, generosity, and civility.³⁸⁶ To be labeled a “carle” in Middle English romance results in similar identification with moral and material coarseness, an identification that excuses the violence often done unto their person by privileged members of the community as we see here in *Carlisle* and in *Sir Cleges*. For example, Malory’s Lancelot cleaves the head of “passyng foule carle” to the “pappys” for insolently denying him passage across a bridge.³⁸⁷ Similarly, the author of the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* designates the “grete giaunt of Gene,” who is described as roasting and devouring baptized children, a “carle” before Arthur defeats him in battle.³⁸⁸ In both instances a “carle” is associated with moral depravity and unprincipled violence. The latter association is reified by the graceless weapon both figures wield in combat, a “club

³⁸⁵ *The Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “carl”: a serf, a servant, a freedman, or a peasant. It is also used derisively to designate one a “rustic” or a “contemptuous fellow.” Malory frequently used the term in this way. The Middle English “carl” derives from ON “karl,” meaning “man” or “man of the common people.” See Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Diction of Old Icelandic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), s.v. “karl.”

³⁸⁶ Douglas Moffat, “Fearful Villainy,” in *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994): 119-136. Here 119.

³⁸⁷ For example see Malory, 6.11.12-23.

³⁸⁸ “Carl” is used to describe the giant at line 1063 and then again at line 1107. See Larry D. Benson & Edward E Foster, eds., “Alliterative Morte Arthure,” in *King Arthur’s Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur & Alliterative Morte Arthure* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1974).

shodde with iron.” “Carle” is given more specific reference in the fourteenth century as a derogatory term to denounce the sociopolitical ambition of the merchant class. Jenny Kermode reports, for example, the ire provoked by John Metcalfe, a merchant and alderman of York, who was publicly denounced as a “carle [...] comen lightly up and of smale substance”³⁸⁹ for his presumptuous claim to aristocratic status. In this instance “carle” derisively circumscribes Metcalfe as a parvenu overstepping the bounds of his social caste.

Moffat also observes that in medieval romance *villeins* are often depicted as giant-like, an “othered figure” that upholds the Manichean logic employed to make distinction between the center and margin of sociopolitical legitimacy. Their physical augmentation, he suggests, reflects the anxiety they induce as an economically necessary member of society utterly excluded from the network of material and symbolic capital they work to sustain.³⁹⁰ His analysis finds parallel in Jeffrey J. Cohen’s work on the monstrous. The giant, according to Cohen, exemplifies a state of “external intimacy,” a phrase he borrows from Lacanian psychoanalysis to describe the dual symbolism of the monstrous as the external other upon which the limits of civilization are inscribed and simultaneously the intimate foundation upon which it rests. The defeat of the monstrous in battle or the abuse of the monstrous figure at the hands of authority figures (as Kay and Baudewyn intend) aims to engender a cultural narrative, a “self-concept,” that legitimates their authority.³⁹¹

³⁸⁹ Jenny Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverly, and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). Here 38.

³⁹⁰ Douglas Moffat, “Fearful Villainy,” in *Essays in Medieval Studies* 11 (1994): 119-136.

³⁹¹ The giant has a long history of alterity, particularly in English society, where in it functions as a subjugated figure upon which the dynastic fantasies of the court are played out. See Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Of*

The author of *Carlisle* appears singularly aware of the cultural and legal significance of labeling one a “carle,” and he takes pains to disabuse the Carle of the binary logic employed to exclude him from sociopolitical discourse. For example, at their first meeting the Carl refuses to allow Gawain to subjugate himself by kneeling, insisting rather that in his domicile there be “no courtesy.”³⁹² His prohibition implies the absence of a courtly or chivalric ritual that (re)creates binary, hierarchical distinction between social constituents. Likewise the author of *Carlisle* associates the Carle explicitly with the material and symbolic capital of late medieval nobility, blurring the lines between provincial brutishness and royal sophistication. The walls of his lodging were said to “glemyd as any glasse; / Wyth dyapir colour wroughte hit was— / Of golde, asure, and byse,”³⁹³ and he readily offers to his guests an abundant feast of “Swannys, fesauntys, and cranys”³⁹⁴ among other delicacies typically associated with the aristocratic dinner table. Additionally, his “wyfe so full of pryde” reflects the grandeur of his serving wear, which is described as “gold so der; / Anon [wyn] cam in coppus cler— / As anny sonn hit schonn,”³⁹⁵ and at the start of dinner the Carle reprimands his daughter for coming to the table without her harp, “Then seyde the Carle to that bryght of ble, / Wher ys thi harpe

Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Here 29-61.

³⁹² *Carlisle*, lines 278.

³⁹³ *Ibid*, lines 607-10.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid*, line 616.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid*, lines 362; 280-282.

thou schouldist have broght wytt the?”³⁹⁶ His remonstrance appears to suggest that he identifies himself with a disposition sensitive to the musical arts, a cultivated taste that sets him apart from the material coarseness that typically cloys to a man of low estate.

As Martha C. Howell notes, it is characteristic of the medieval period to employ objects of luxury, including dress, jewels, and armor, for example, to constitute social status and political power.³⁹⁷ Howell notes that sumptuary laws enacted in 1336, 1337, and 1363 aimed to protect the interests of the aristocracy by delineating a dress code for the various estates, thereby maintaining traditional idioms of honor and authority by suppressing their vulgarization in the commercial market. Sumptuary legislation was largely ineffective, however. Commercial access to the material symbols that distinguished the aristocrat from his social inferiors rendered clothing and other luxury goods an unreliable signifier of social status. The ineffectiveness of such legislation is attested to by the degree to which changes in aristocratic fashion were motivated by its popularization and the increasingly complex definition of nobility proffered by moral pundits and promulgated in the romances of the period. In short, nobility based on heroism, martial exploit, and family lineage gave way to nobility defined by high sentiment, display, and the ability to choose well.

As it does in *Carlisle*, the conspicuous consumption and display of luxury goods in the form of an elaborate feast, an act Howard Kaminsky refers to as the “exhibition of

³⁹⁶ *Carlisle*, lines 427-429. Bourdieu’s sees musical competence as a marker of class. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1984). Here 18-19.

³⁹⁷ Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism*, 5.

estate,”³⁹⁸ serves to announce the Carle’s participation in the cultural and material economy of the powerful of late medieval society. Such associations collapse the cultural geography between court and carle to demonstrate a shared moral and political outlook.³⁹⁹ The leveling of perspective that takes place in the romance extends to the churlish estate a moral and political capacity typically denied them. In this regard, the Carle’s sudden (and altogether unannounced) transformation into a man of normal proportions at the close of the romance, a physical transformation coterminous with his formal inclusion in the Arthurian court as Lord of Carlisle,⁴⁰⁰ signals the disruption of the “magical barrier” that separates Arthurian and churlish court and reveals the Carle to be the ideological and material foundation of the juridical order.

This realization is facilitated by the hunting party’s transfer from the wood to the churlish court where sociopolitical authority is reestablished as an impersonal, egalitarian model of justice. Similar to the rules of late medieval hospitality, which aim to enforce a just exchange between strangers that acknowledges the rights and dignity of both host and guest, “carllus corttessy”⁴⁰¹ aims to establish horizontal sociopolitical relationships that are based on social compacts that animate attitudes and practices characterized by a shared sense of mutual obligation. The Carle asserts that “carllus corttessy” applies to all

³⁹⁸ Howard Kaminsky, “Estate, Nobility, and the Exhibition of Estate in the Later Middle Ages,” in *Speculum* 68.3 (July, 1993): 684-709. Here 703.

³⁹⁹ For extended discussion of the meaning of moral behavior and the good life see Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Modern Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1989). Caroline Walker Bynum also discusses the politics of the dinner table, emphasizing the shared moral outlook of guest and host. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁴⁰⁰ *Carlisle*, lines 625-30.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid*, line 278.

folk, “whedir he were lorde or lad,”⁴⁰² drawing attention to the binary logic he intends to disrupt, and he angrily responds to the *voluntas* of Kay and Baudewyn by upbraiding their obstinacy, “Yett cannyst thou noght of corttessyghe, / I swer, so mott I trye!”⁴⁰³ The effect of his declaration is to cancel out hierarchical differentiation between host and guest by embedding social relationships in a model of exchange that ignores (or at least momentarily suspends) the ontic status given to social function in medieval thought to facilitate a just exchange that often culminates in the mutual benefit of both host and guest. Distinct from the ineffectual authority embodied by Gawain in the wilderness, the Carle enforces “carllus corttessy” by employing violence instrumentally, invoking John Ball’s rhetorical inversion of the slogan “might makes right,” rather than a vicious and personal use of violence aimed at the abuse and exploitation of the wider community.⁴⁰⁴ For example, Kay and Beschope Baudewyn only receive a “boffett” when they fail to act with the humility called for by rule of his house, or claim exemption as Baudewyn does on the grounds that, “[he is] a clarke of ordors hyghe.”⁴⁰⁵

As we see here in *Carlisle* and other Middle English romances, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the less well travelled *Jeaste of Sir Gawain*, transgressions of the just exchange facilitated by the rules of hospitality are a source of significant interpersonal and moral conflict in Middle English romance. Where the failure of Gawain to uphold his end of the bargain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* leads to

⁴⁰² Ibid, line 525.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, lines 314-15.

⁴⁰⁴ Ann Astell discusses the rhetoric of “right versus might” in context of the political sermons of John Ball. See Ann W. Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999), 44-72.

⁴⁰⁵ *Carlisle*, line 313.

moral insight for the reader (and we suspect for Gawain and the Arthurian court), a similar transgression in *Jeaste* leads to familial tragedy. Gawain's transgression of Sir Gylbert's prohibition not to bed his daughter while lodging under his roof leads to a violent contestation between Gawain and several generations of Gylberts's male heirs. The conflict culminates in a reluctant truce with the youngest of the host's bellicose sons and the familial beating and shaming of the daughter, who is ostracized from the family.⁴⁰⁶ A similar logic pervades *Carlisle*'s depiction of churlish society as an abused and ostracized member of the community. The shaming of Gylbert's daughter is worth noting here as an example of the tragic consequence of the very same chivalric violence that is creating strife and disunity between Arthurian and churlish court. That is, the act of ostracizing her from the family, like the Carle's own exclusion from the Arthurian Round Table, serves to remind us of the retarding of familial and sovereign ambition that follows the transgression of the compacts that hold host and guest in peaceful accord.

In the case of *Carlisle*, the just exchange is predicated solely on the willingness of the Carle's guests to abide by "carllus corttessy" and, in doing so, fulfill what the Carle has been waiting some twenty years for, namely for someone to do as he "hym bad."⁴⁰⁷ Kay and Baudewyn's error is to assume that their social status as ranking members of the community precludes them from abiding by the rules of the house. Kay and Baudewyn's presumption manifests, for example, in their rejection of the Carle's foal. After sharing a drink with the Carle, Kay and Baudewyn leave the table one at a time to see that their horses have been well stabled. Though their horses are well fed (the narrator notes that

⁴⁰⁶ Thomas Hahn, ed., "Jeaste of Sir Gawain," in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales* (Kalamazoo Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 393-418.

⁴⁰⁷ *Carlisle*, line 522.

“Come and hey thei had reydy”), Baudewyn takes offense that his “palfray” should be stabled next to the Carle’s “foal.”⁴⁰⁸ He forces the foal away from his saddle horse and out into the rain, declaring, “Thow schalt not be fello wytt my palfray / Whyll I am beschope in lond.”⁴⁰⁹ As with Kay, Baudewyn is guilty of neglecting the obligations of his office as bishop to provide shelter for his flock. Baudewyn’s professed special status makes derogatory distinction between a “foal” and a “palfrey,”⁴¹⁰ suggesting that the Carle assumes a similarly servile position in relation to the bishop. In response to Baudewyn’s transgression, the Carle strikes him, a use of violence that upholds the rule of his house by quite literally leveling the playing field: “Therfor a boffett thou schalt have, / I swer, so God me save, / And it schall be sett, wytterly.”⁴¹¹ Kay is similarly rebuffed after he drives the foal away from his saddle horse with a “clout” to its backside, an act that prompts the Carle to declare his intention to teach “Evyll-taught knyghttus [...] Sum of my corttessye.”⁴¹² In contrast to Kay’s deployment of violence as a means to affirm the socio-sacral state of the individual, the Carle’s use of violence in this instance is disinterested, engaged only in response to the trespass of established law.

What the Carle aims to teach Gawain and company is the material and ideological basis of their sovereignty over churlish society on the one hand and the obligation of their

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, lines 298-303.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, lines 305-306.

⁴¹⁰ *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “foal”: generally refers to a young animal but also finds more general use as a description for a riding horse used in war, hunting, or plowing. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Palfray”: given specific definition as a riding horse, appearing often in contexts in which Christ is said to be riding. The latter use is in keeping with Baudewyn’s professional status and, so, here in *Carlisle* the contrast appears to be derogatory.

⁴¹¹ *Carlisle*, lines 310-12.

⁴¹² Ibid, lines 328-30.

offices on the other. The mediating figure here is the instrumental Gawain, who embodies the sense of mutual obligation that characterizes social relations that are interdependent and that is owed all social constituents voluntarily committed to a particular form of association. Gawain's grace, to return briefly to Brandsen's analysis of *Carlisle*, stems from a courtliness that traverses the idiosyncratic and chivalric virtue of the individual. Rather, Gawain's grace is defined in this instance as a deliberate act of consent to be bound by a set of impersonal principles and codes of conduct that organize the wider community. Gawain's grace is, in effect, a voluntary act of accommodation whereby his self-interests are subordinated to those of the wider community. In contrast to Kay and Baudewyn's failure, Gawain's success extends almost exclusively from his self-identification with the communal ethics that informs "carllus corttessy" and his willingness to suspend whatever self-interest he has "To make the larde of full fayn / In his oun castell."⁴¹³

When faced with the Carle's foal, for example, Gawain directs the foal out of the rain and back into the stable, declaring: "Stond upe, fooll, and eette thy mette; / We spend her that thy master dothe gett, Whyll that we her byne."⁴¹⁴ Gawain's response acknowledges the economic reality of hospitality and foregrounds the dialectical and dependent position of the aristocracy, who like a guest may eat only what the host provides. The dependence of the hunting party on the resources and consent of the Carle's house confers definite economic, legal, and moral authority upon the Carle, rendering churlish society and not the royal court the threshold between order and chaos,

⁴¹³ Ibid, lines 167-68.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid, lines 349-51.

between civil society and the arbitrary rule of the wilderness, and sets up the Carle, to paraphrase Agamben, as the sovereign able to create the grounds of its own justification as a constituting force that is both internal and external to the economic, legal, and ultimately moral compacts that legitimize sociopolitical authority.⁴¹⁵ This re-orienting of authority is reified by the Carle's appropriation and re-gifting of the symbolic instruments of secular and religious office at the close of the romance, for example, "A cros, myter, and a rynge / A clothe of golde," for Baudewyn and a "blode rede stede" for Kay.⁴¹⁶

The Carle's supremacy is acknowledged by the deference Gawain shows him. While Kay and Baudewyn take a seat at the dining table next to the Carle's beautiful wife unbidden, Gawain waits patiently to be invited to the table, setting up a series of exchanges that demonstrate just how closely knit the action of a royal official should be to the rule of churlish law. In this regard, the narrator takes pains to draw attention to Gawain's deference, which is characterized by his unwillingness to act without the animating force of the Carle's command. The narrator notes, for example, Gawain's deliberate wait for the Carle's permission to sit at the table: "I do yow all well to wette / Ther was noo man bade Gawen sitte / But in the halle flor gann he stond."⁴¹⁷ Before he will allow Gawain to the dinner table, however, the Carle insists that his "byddyng be well idoun,"⁴¹⁸ so he commands Gawain to hurl a spear at his monstrous head as a test of Gawain's commitment to the rule of his house:

⁴¹⁵ This general idea comes from Agamben. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998).

⁴¹⁶ *Carlisle*, lines 560-67.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid*, lines 379-81.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid*, lines 384-87.

Go take a sper in thy honed
And at the bottredor goo take thy passe
And hit me evyn in the face;
Do as I the commande.
And yeyfe thou ber me agenst the wall
Thow shalt not hort me wyttalle,
Whyll I am gyaunt in londe.”⁴¹⁹

Of interest is the ironic parallel the author establishes here between the Carle’s boast, “Whyll I am gyaunt in londe,” and Baudewyn’s earlier condescension, “Whyll I am beschope in lond.” While Baudewyn’s declaration implies that an exclusionary politic will characterize the rule of his office, the Carle’s suggests that the kinetic violence Gawain embodies as knight of the realm can do no harm to churlish society because (we assume) it will be guided by the instrumental and impartial authority of “carllus corttesy.” Just as Gawain’s care of the Carle’s rain soaked foal sounds the depth of his compassion, the act of hurling a spear sounds Gawain’s willingness to accede to the moral and political obligation assigned to his office as a Virgin Mary-like intercessor between churlish society and unlawful and malicious governance.⁴²⁰

However, even Gawain is fallible and his seduction by the courtly allure of the Carle’s wife is the climax of *Carlisle*. No real explanation is given as to why the Carle gives Gawain permission to kiss the Carle’s wife, though Gawain and Kay both

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, lines 379-91.

⁴²⁰ This reading is in keeping with traditional views of political violence in medieval England. Maurice Keen reports, for example, the rationale provided by dissident magnates, who in response to the unlawful license taken by Edward II invoked the oath taken by liege subjects of the king to guide his office with reason. Reason failing, magnates were to take up arms and guide the office of the king with violence should the king’s policies prove deleterious to the English people. See Maurice Keen, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: 1348-1500* (New York: Allen Lane Penguin Press, 1990), here 193. See also Claire Valente, *The Theory and Practice of Revolt in England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 1988); and Phillippa C. Maddern, *Violence and Social Order: East Anglia 1422-1442* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

acknowledge her beauty, implying their desire for her; however, it is clear that the move to the bedroom extends the test begun at the dinner table by placing Gawain in a set of prurient circumstances that often serve as a litmus test of his virtue in the Gawain romances. The description the author gives of the Carle's wife echoes the idealization of the feminine typical of the genre:

Her roode was reede, her chekus rounde,
a feyrror myght not goo on grounde,
Ne lovelyur of syghte.
Sche was so gloryis and so gay:
I can not rekon her araye,
She was so gayly dyghte.⁴²¹

Her beauty is ineffable, escaping earthly comparison; however, her fetishized description obscures the socio-legal compacts that legitimize her status as the Carle's wife and that animate the sense of mutual obligation that has hitherto characterized Gawain's interaction with the Carle. The chivalric fantasy she embodies, the sexual desire she engenders, prompts Gawain to forget that grace and modesty should guide a subject's actions in negotiating sociopolitical relationships, and so he traverses the limits of action circumscribed by the Carle's command, as Gawain is given permission to kiss but not copulate with his wife. The narrator confirms Gawain's overzealousness, noting that he "wolde have doun the prevey far" had not the Carle been looming nearby to remind Gawain of his pre-eminent right to the lady:

"Gawen, comfort the,
For synn ys swete, and that I se.
Serten, I the hete,
Sche ys myn thou woldyst wer thynn."⁴²²

⁴²¹ *Carlisle*, lines 367-72.

⁴²² *Ibid*, lines 409-12.

Caught unawares by the Carle's admonishment, Gawain is predictably, "aschemmyde in his thowght."⁴²³ His libidinal desire, as with Kay's threatened violence and Baudewyn's claim of exemption, threatens to destabilize the operative ethics of the Carle's household, a set of attitudes and practices facilitated by the grace of individuals committed to living peaceably together, and imagined in the romance as the basis of moral and legal action.

Gawain's momentary lapse in judgment draws attention to the complex interplay of human desire and the legal, moral, and religious codes of conduct that regulate human behavior. Reflecting on how honor codes imperfectly regulate aggressive impulses in modern economic exchange, Vern Baxter and A.V. Margavio note that:

The universal experience of pride, honor, and dignity that makes us human beings is acquired in the ritual organization of everyday social encounters and the stability of those encounters requires that actors make some accommodation with established rules.⁴²⁴

They invoke Bakhtin's sense of the carnival in imagining social order as a set of "clashing ideas and conventions that coexist in a struggle to simultaneously keep things together and blow them apart."⁴²⁵ The difficulty, Baxter and Margavio contend, is that society is constituted by multiple, potentially contradictory codes of honor. Conflict arises when the codes of honor that social groups and individuals attach themselves to

⁴²³ Ibid, line 415.

⁴²⁴ Vern Baxter and A.V. Margavio, "Honor, Status, and Aggression in Economic Exchange," in *Sociological Theory* 18.3 (Nov. 2000): 399-416. Here 400.

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 403.

and internalize fail to reinforce “conventional patterns of veneration and blame and the conduct that follows from them.”⁴²⁶

Gawain’s experience of shame indicates that the conduct that serves as a basis for veneration and blame in *Carlisle* lies outside of the chivalric conduct and fantasy the Carle’s wife engenders.⁴²⁷ As an ethical model, chivalry links honor with the physical (often sexual) prowess of the individual and celebrates the violent self-help that Kay turns to instinctively in the wilderness and that characterizes the skill set of the idle Sir Ironside. Julian Pitt-Rivers observes that rather than moderating violence as is often claimed, chivalry encourages the proliferation of violence as chivalric culture establishes physical violence as the ultimate vindication of honor.⁴²⁸ In this instance Gawain’s sexual aggression threatens to instantiate a set of coercive, destabilizing attitudes and practices justified by the sacral-social status of the individual, which will again position chivalric fantasy as the foundation of sociopolitical society.⁴²⁹

The author of *Carlisle* links veneration and blame to the maintenance and transgression of conduct and compacts that bring about just reciprocity, reconciling

⁴²⁶ Ibid, 403.

⁴²⁷ Pearsall’s use of Erving Goffman’s work on social behavior to illuminate Gawain’s moment of shame in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* proves useful here as well. Pearsall quotes Goffman directly: “By showing embarrassment the individual demonstrates that while he cannot present a sustainable and coherent self on this occasion, he is at least disturbed by that fact and may prove worthy in the future.” See Derek Pearsall, “Courtesy and Chivalry in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: The Order of Shame and the Invention of Embarrassment,” in *A Companion to the Gawain Poet* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 393-427.

⁴²⁸ See Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. Peristancy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). Here 29.

⁴²⁹ Richard Kaeuper observes that chivalry constitutes a cult of violent self-help that runs counter to the development of the state as a public authority vested in the king. He notes that romance assumes the absence of strong central government and that chivalry as a model of behavior developed during a period of weak kingship in France. He also notes the relative absence of chivalric romance in England, which had a strong central authority at the helm. See Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order*, 184-268.

Gawain's transgression by sublimating his libidinal desire in the language of economic exchange. Following his transgression, for example, the Carle offers Gawain his daughter first as sexual partner and then as bride.⁴³⁰ In contrast to her mother's idealized beauty the Carle's daughter is described with the language of commerce:

The Carllus doughtter for the was brought,
That was so feyr and bryght.
As gold wyre schunyde her here.
Hit cost a thousand pound and mar,
Her aparell pertly pyghte.⁴³¹

The narrative focus on her attire, which is said to cost a "thousand pound and mar,"⁴³² renders her a quantifiable, fungible thing like the packhorse laden with gold she is coupled with as a gift for Gawain. In spite of the perversity of the disaffected paternal bond that contextualizes the offering of wife and daughter as sexual tender, the commoditization and exchange of the Carle's daughter has positive moral value, as it arrests the coercive interplay of honor and desire by embedding the conduct of both parties in the reciprocal logic of economic exchange. The move to commercial quantification provides both a quantitative, philosophic language with which to describe sociopolitical relations and a material and ideological dispensation that both grounds the self-interest of individuals in a collective vision of society and provides a socioeconomic framework that acknowledges the practical necessity of men in the process of meaning

⁴³⁰ *Carlisle*, lines 469-80.

⁴³¹ *Ibid*, lines 416-25.

⁴³² Based on the delineation of consumable goods by estate as determined by sumptuary legislation, a garment of such value places the Carle among the wealthiest estates of late medieval society. Specifically, he ranks among the wealthier burgesses, merchants, artificers, and "people of handicraft," and more traditionally, knights, clergy, and nobles. See Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 230-32.

and value making. Indeed, the author's merging of "carllus corttessy" with the language and logic of the market place acknowledges a similar merger in late medieval legal thought of broad ethical models like the "common good" with what Joel Kaye has identified as an evolving notion of the economy as a "supra-personal process, functioning as a mechanism of equalization."⁴³³

The author of *Carlisle* similarly employs commercial exchange as a mechanism of equalization. Where the earlier application of force sought to bring Kay and Baudewyn back into alignment with the tenets of "carllus corttessy," the exchange of the Carle's daughter creates an opportunity to (re)establish a durable and obligated equivalence between social constituents that have been momentarily revealed to be different and unequal either by nature or by acts of social categorization and discrimination. Aristotle's observation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that commercial exchange facilitates equivalency by establishing proportionate reciprocity between social constituents based on their relative need was picked up by late medieval theologians looking to accommodate the increasing prevalence of fiscal practices condemned by the early Church Fathers as an abominable sin.⁴³⁴ Richard of Middleton, for example, understood commercial exchange as a process that balances inequality. His rather sophisticated account of value making in economic trade links value and meaning to the market forces of supply and demand and to the relative need and circumstance of the individual, attenuating a sense of value and meaning as an intrinsic property of the person or commodity or thing.⁴³⁵

⁴³³Kaye, *Economy and Nature*, 153.

⁴³⁴Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade*, 19-24.

⁴³⁵Ibid, 27.

Because commerce takes as a given the unequal distribution of resources, which was often understood by medieval theologians as preordained by God and inherent in Nature, it presupposes a state of mutual dependence between peoples that encourages processes of bilateral agreement, which in theory aim for the mutual benefit of both parties.⁴³⁶ This kind of “need based” valuation of goods and services is, as Jill Mann has noted, an embedded logic of the just exchange that structures host-guest relations in Middle English romances like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for example. A similar logic is clearly evident here in *Carlisle* as the basis of evaluation and is embodied by the Carle, who functions as an administrator of rectificatory justice.⁴³⁷ In a similar vein of analysis French philosopher and theologian Nicholas Oresme identified money as the measure of sociopolitical need. He understands monetary exchange as essential machinery in maintaining equilibrium between the crown and the wider community, such that to deface the value of the coin of the realm was to impinge directly on the credibility of royal authority and induce sociopolitical instability.⁴³⁸ Similarly, monetary exchange is used to maintain equilibrium between Arthurian court and churlish society in *Carlisle*. The Carle’s need, for example, is defined by his desire to be heard and included in sociopolitical discourse; Gawain’s need, registering as libidinal desire in the bedroom, is

⁴³⁶ Lianna Farber identifies proportionate reciprocity as a foundational idea to late medieval civil ethics. She makes distinction between relative and absolute value and places emphasis on bilateral agreement and exchange, rather than coercion and unilateral action. Proportionate reciprocity stems from commercial practices prevalent in late medieval society and is derivative of Aristotelian ethics. See Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade*, 19-24.

⁴³⁷ Jill Mann notes that the “just exchange maintains proportionate equivalence between non-identical things,” and identifies need (also understood as the common good in her analysis) as the primary determinate in establishing relative value between social constituents. See Jill Mann, “Price and Value in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” in *Essay in Criticism* 36.4 (Oct. 1986): 294-318.

⁴³⁸ Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade*, 32. See also Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, 89-109.

contextualized by the dependency of royal authority on the material and monetary resources of the Carle's household. The explicit monetary valuation of the daughter's wares and the bag of gold with which she is associated serve as the measure of the relative value of their need, and in essence her exchange facilitates "the getting" of what each individual lacks such that the author can conclude that Gawain and the Carle have been well "payde."⁴³⁹

Implicit in the Carle's gesture is the merger of Christian communalism in late medieval ethical and legal thought, which, as Bryan Tierney notes, is predisposed to see the Christian community as a corporate body and therefore more likely to emphasize the binding power of public consensus.⁴⁴⁰ Implicit in *Carlisle's* conclusion is an understanding of late medieval society as a matrix of economic collaboration and exchange, which places ruler and ruled in dialectical, relative relation to one another. In this regard, *Carlisle* demonstrates what Richard Newhauser has described as the "inescapable influence of mercantile behavior on moral perceptions."⁴⁴¹ Contextualizing the political struggle in *Carlisle* is an evolving view of the world that pre-supposes a sociopolitical environment structured by processes of meaning and value making that recognizes the contingent, performative nature of meaning and value. In such a social environment wealth and authority are not coterminous with birthright and are therefore unstable and contingent on the performance of the individual subject. For example, the justification of sumptuary legislation enacted in 1336, 1337, and again in 1363 as measures to limit and control the consumption of resources essential to the war effort

⁴³⁹ *Carlisle*, lines 481.

⁴⁴⁰ Tierney, "Medieval Canon Law and Western Constitutionalism," 1-17.

⁴⁴¹ Newhauser, "Justice and Liberality," 308.

belies the real consternation induced by the erosion and unsettling of traditional nodes of power and authority by market forces exceeding the control of the aristocracy. Changes in aristocratic fashion during this late period were often motivated by their popularization as commercial access to the material symbols that traditionally distinguished the aristocrat from his social inferiors rendered clothing and other like luxury goods unreliable signifiers of social status. Sumptuary legislation ultimately aimed to restrict access to traditional idioms of honor and authority by suppressing their vulgarization in the commercial market. Martha Howell paraphrases Pierre Bourdieu in noting that:

When culture can be bought and sold and made available to anyone, taste or the ability to choose ‘well’ becomes an essential social skill. Taste implies competition, differentiation, and rankings; it necessarily pits individuals and groups against one another in contests of aesthetic judgment.⁴⁴²

The heavy emphasis on the performative nature of Gawain’s grace in *Carlisle* reflects the relocation of nobility outside of the material accoutrements of estate—though the material accoutrements of estate continued to play a significant role in the display of status and authority during the period. As Gawain’s characterization in *Carlisle* attests, the idea of nobility as based on heroism, martial exploit, and family lineage gave way to the idea of nobility as defined by high sentiment, display, and the ability to choose well. That is, nobility was increasingly linked with the inner disposition and public performance of the individual subject, whose status or authority is contextualized by doubt, rather than the intrinsic sanction conferred by traditional social markers of birth and wealth. It is then particularly medieval to see meaning and value, or even one’s status within the community, as reflecting not a “static world of points and perfections” but

⁴⁴² Howell, *Commerce Before Capitalism*, 233.

increasingly a “world of lines in constant expansion and contraction.”⁴⁴³ As a consequence, the sociopolitical relationships that legitimize authority, or those relationships that define and regulate status within a community, must be continually renewed by the performance of individuals like Gawain and institutions like the Arthurian court through which authority is exercised. In this context, the exchange of the Carle’s daughter—in effect, the series of exchanges that conclude the romance—can be read as an investment strategy, to quote Bourdieu, “aimed at establishing and reproducing social relationships [...] that are at once necessary and elective,” and that imply “durable obligations subjectively felt or institutionally guaranteed.”⁴⁴⁴ The Carle’s turn to commercial exchange as a mechanism of equalization and as the fundamental logic of jurisprudence acknowledges the authority of churlish society to self-determine and to self-regulate as economically necessary members of the sociopolitical community.

Not coincidentally Arthur’s re-emergence in the narrative comes at the Carle’s request. In essence, Gawain calls Arthur to parliament in relaying the Carle’s request that Arthur should join him for dinner: “The Carle prayed you, for His love that yn Bedlem was borne, / That ye wolde dyne with hym tomorne.”⁴⁴⁵ The invocation of Christ’s nativity is significant here as it speaks (in similar fashion to the author’s invocation of the Virgin Mary) to the broader intercessory role of political office as a surety against human malevolence and corruption, and the promise of a just dominion under law after a period of arbitrary exploitation and abuse. In the context of the foreshadowing of Christ’s rule,

⁴⁴³ Kaye, *Economy and Nature*, 158.

⁴⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-58. Here 249-50.

⁴⁴⁵ *Carlisle*, lines 589-90.

the description of Arthur's entrance to the Carle's domicile lists toward the ceremonial and symbolic, echoing to greater or lesser degree the musical accouterment associated with Christ's return and the heraldry of the state:

Trompettis mette hem at the gate,
Clarios of silver reddy therate,
Serteyne wythoutyn lette—
Harpe, fedylle, and sawtry,
Lute, geteron, and mystrelcy.
Into the halle knyghtis hem fett.⁴⁴⁶

In spite of the pomp and ceremony that accompanies his arrival, however, it is important to note that Arthur plays no significant role in determining the exchanges that settle the Carle's grievance. In fact, the exchanges have already been settled prior to Arthur's arrival. That is, his presence at the close of the romance is largely symbolic, extra-legal in the sense that he stands outside of the sociopolitical process to sanction the exchanges the Carle himself has facilitated. He acknowledges the Carle's right to have done so by dubbing him "Karlyle" and enfranchising him as the lord of "the contré of Carelyle,"⁴⁴⁷ acts that render his name synonymous with the land he governs and that mark the entrance of churlish society into the sociopolitical authority embodied by the Round Table.

The Carle's turn to commercial exchange also implies the voluntary, rather than coercive, foundation of the sociopolitical community. The author of *Carlisle* consistently condemns the coercion Kay and Baudewyn interject into sociopolitical discourse and neither he nor Gawain are coerced to act as they do. Rather, their virtue is that they

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, lines 595-600.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, line 633.

choose to act justly, even when opportunity exists for them to act otherwise. However, while we can argue that Gawain acts free of coercion, we cannot argue that he is entirely free of constraint. To remove the element of constraint that colors his interaction with the Carle is to ignore the esteem Gawain receives for his voluntary commitment to the rule of the Carle's house. Doing so also ignores the attention the romance pays to the material and economic conditions that structure the relationship between subject and state. To do so also creates opportunity to misread Gawain's grace (as our clichéd, unreflexive understanding of feudal society wants us too) as intrinsic to Gawain's person or his estate, and thereby continue to promote the misconception that late medieval society lacked a sophisticated conception of sovereignty and state by denying "grace" broader register as a social disposition fundamental to late medieval jurisprudence.

Gawain's dialectical relation to the Carle presupposes a similar relationship between civil subject and sociopolitical authority, which is given positive moral function as a regulatory body with a right to violent action in the preservation of sociopolitical compacts that bind subjects in a particular form of voluntary association. Though it is clear that Gawain is predisposed to act gracefully, it is also clear that the author of *Carlisle* understands that not all members of the community are predisposed to do so and that even the honorable Gawain himself may fail in spite of his intentions. The just, Christian society depends on something more than the willful accommodation of subjects. In this regard, the Carle and "carllus corttesy" is a surrogate and model for an institutional authority concerned primarily with the more prosaic maintenance and care of civil society, which is demonstrated by the associative links the author of *Carlisle* makes between the authority the Carle wields and the obligations typical of a welfare state,

which ideally provides aid and comfort (e.g. the rejection/acceptance of the foal), brokers and protects legal contracts (e.g. Gawain's marriage to the Carle's daughter), secures political office and the rights of land ownership (e.g. the enfranchising of the Carle as Lord of Carlisle), and mediates its relationship to civil society through negotiated fiscal exchange (e.g. the new wife and bag of gold Gawain carries back to the Arthurian court), rather than the violent coercion that characterizes Arthurian sovereignty at the start of the romance.

Richard Kaeuper observes that medieval romance assumes the absence of a public authority able to control the violent self-help typically celebrated in the genre.⁴⁴⁸ His observations are reinforced in *Carlisle*, as in a similar vein of reasoning, the author of *Carlisle* uses the literary conventions of the genre to indict royal authority as vain, ineffective, and largely absent in the active governance of the realm. In this case, royal authority is so distracted by chivalric fantasy that it is deaf to the complaints of churlish society. As Edward III's establishment of the Order of the Garter suggests, the military aristocracy of late medieval England continued to articulate itself as a chivalric culture and to link its political function with military conquest. This is an alien ethic to the parliamentary men of gentry status, who, in their concern for the exercise and regulation of power and authority, privileged a more practical authority concerned primarily with the prosaic but necessary acts of governance that maintain order and justice in the domestic sphere and less with chivalric achievement. The concern the author of *Carlisle* has for the state of the realm is reflected in the emphasis the author places on the Virgin Mary at the end of the romance. For example, after he has been made Lord of Carlisle,

⁴⁴⁸ Kaeuper, *War, Justice, and Public Order*, 195.

the Carle (voluntarily) promises to build a chantry, “A chauntery here wul I lete make, / [With] Ten prestis syngynge til domysday.”⁴⁴⁹ The author later links the Carle’s act of restitution explicitly to the worship of the Holy Virgin: “A ryche abbey the Carle gan make / To syng and rede for Goddis sake/ In wurschip of Oure Lady.”⁴⁵⁰ In light of the Bernadine conceptualization of Mary as a domestic, homely intercessor in the suffering of humanity, her invocation at the close of the romance is fitting for an environment organized by the homely ethic of “carrluss corttessy.” She serves in this instance as a model for a royal authority similarly imagined as a compassionate intercessor in the domestic lives of subjects. However, her presence also draws attention to the great need for the religious community to pray for the health of the realm, casting doubt on the monarch’s ability to fulfill the promise on which its legitimacy is based.⁴⁵¹

⁴⁴⁹ *Carlisle*, lines 548-49.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid*, lines 649-51. The Carle’s acts of retribution mirror the punishment given to Enguerreand de Coucy. See Alan Harding, *Medieval Law and the Foundations of the State*, 162.

⁴⁵¹ Andrea Hopkins links the individualism of romance to Bernadine spirituality, which she describes as an intimate, personal view of the individual’s relationship to God; she links the emphasis on trial and constancy in romance to the Bernadine elevation of hardship and suffering as an honorable condition. See Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990). Here 10.

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