GENEROSITY AND GENTILLESSE: ECONOMIC EXCHANGE IN
MEDIEVAL ENGLISH ROMANCE

James T. Stewart, B. A.

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APPROVED:

Nicole D. Smith, Major Professor
Robert K. Upchurch, Committee Member
Jacqueline Vanhoutte, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of
English
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the
Toulouse Graduate School
This study explores how three English romances of the late fourteenth century—Geoffrey Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale, Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal, and the anonymous Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—employ economic exchange as a tool to illustrate community ideals. Although gift-giving and commerce are common motifs in medieval romance, these three romances depict acts of generosity and exchange that demonstrate fundamental principles of proper behavior by uniting characters in the poems in spite of social divisions such as gender or social class. Economic imagery in fourteenth-century romances merits particular consideration because of Richard II’s prolific expenditure, which created such turbulence that the peasants revolted in 1381. The court’s openhanded spending led to social unrest, but in romances a character’s largesse strengthens community bonds by showing that all members of a group participate in an idealized gift economy. Positioned within the context of economic tensions, exchange in romances can lead readers to reexamine notions of group identity. Chestre’s Sir Launfal unites its community under secular principles of economic exchange and evaluation. Using similar motifs of exchange, the Gawain-poet makes Christian and chivalric ideals apparent through Gawain’s service and generosity to all those who follow the Christian faith. Further, Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale portrays hospitality as a tool to create pleasure, the ultimate goal of service. Although they present different types of group identity, these romances specify that generosity and commerce can illustrate the ideals of a poem’s community and demonstrate to the audience model forms of behavior.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: THE ROMANCE ECONOMY AND WHY IT MATTERS

Characters in medieval romances rarely tire of giving gifts or services to others. When a traveler arrives at a court distant from his home, the lord of the castle holds a lavish feast in the visitor’s honor. The lady of the house likewise extends her hospitality, often through either socializing or love-making, to the weary traveler. Innumerable servants attend to the newcomer’s every need and ensure his comfort at all times during his stay. And readers cannot overlook the generosity of a man returning to his home after a quest and giving an abundance of gifts to all those around him, both high and low, both religious and secular. Romance writers place great emphasis on the exchange and distribution of goods within a community.

Geoffrey Chaucer, Thomas Chestre, and the Gawain-poet are three poets who illustrate the importance of commerce and exchange through economic imagery and interaction in their romances of the late fourteenth century. Their engagement with the romance motif of limitless generosity serves symbolic purposes for the societies of their romances as well. Their portrayals of economic interaction between characters demonstrate to readers ideal forms of noble behavior by uniting the members of a poem’s community in spite of divisions in social class or estate. The poems also serve a pedagogical purpose, as most medieval poetry does, by displaying what constitutes a noble deed in order to imbue the minds of the audience members with a universal ideal of proper conduct.

This study focuses on economic interaction as a tool for depicting exemplary behavior in fourteenth-century romance. Authors use imagery of commerce to create a sense of social unity in their poems’ societies by illustrating and reinforcing a group’s common ideals. Exchange, gift-giving, and service—all of which I link to economic interaction because of the importance of
goods or work with value changing hands—are central to romance ideals of behavior, as evidenced by the continual praise of openhandedness and largesse that characterize proper knights in romances. Indeed, the narrators of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Launfal*, and the *Franklin’s Tale* all commend their knights for spending freely and giving generously. Many of the chivalric and social ideals in these romances find expression in economic interaction and help to create a sense of unity in the poem’s characters, but these ideals take on particular social meaning when read in light of Richard II’s own economic troubles. The English government’s lavish expenditure drew criticism from many sources, both political and literary, in the late fourteenth century, so poets’ depictions of ideal behavior through economic interactions merit critical attention because of the weight economic imagery carried for audiences of the time.

Examinations of exchange, service, and generosity in fourteenth-century romance require an understanding of social and economic tensions in England under King Richard II. Of primary importance is the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, the clearest manifestation of disunity during Richard’s reign, because of both its uniqueness and its force as a symbolic affirmation of social division. Although England’s economy had been under strain for decades before Richard’s reign, Nigel Saul finds that “[w]hat happened in 1381 was altogether unique” in that the peasants “showed a single-mindedness in their pursuit of objectives.”¹ The rebels’ goals were likewise unique, as Christopher Dyer points out: they “envisaged the removal of the machinery of government.”² Chaucer, Chestre, and the *Gawain*-poet do not present agendas as radical as the complete dismantling of the present social structure, but they do refigure relations between the peasantry and the nobility to ameliorate the problems of which the peasants complain. In addition to drawing criticism from the peasantry, though, Richard II’s generosity attracted

parliament’s scrutiny throughout the late fourteenth century. Echoes of the Revolt and Richard’s economic liberality appear in the literature of the time, though not primarily through specific references to the events of 1381 or any particular tax levied by the king. Rather, romance writers address social tensions in England, such as divisions of class and social status, by imagining idealized communities that, as Patricia J. Eberle argues, do not reflect reality but instead depict a “social (or better, textual) construction of reality.”3 Chaucer, Chestre, and the Gawain-poet all employ economic interactions as tools for portraying an ideal community in romance during a time when social class divisions and economic policy caused severe tension in the English community.

Romance writers also note social divisions based on faith and orthodoxy, which manifest in romances through references to Christianity within social interactions. Religious tensions appeared within England in the form of the Lollard movement of John Wyclif. In the decade before the Peasants’ Revolt, parliament summoned Wyclif several times to speak in favor of disenfranchising the Church.4 His radical arguments against the Church’s place in the economy express a desire to exclude the clergy from full participation in the English community. Chestre and the Gawain-poet in particular remember to include clerics in their poems’ societies through episodes of knightly largesse that posit the clergy’s necessity in the English community. The Papal Schism of 1378 also split Christian Europe along lines of faith and duty by dividing the Church’s authority between Clement VII in Avignon and Urban VI in Rome.5 Such troubles find expression in romances of the fourteenth century through allusions to orthodox Christian

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5 Saul, 83-85. Saul observes that nations based their decision to follow one or the other pope primarily on contemporary political relations between kingdoms, but when Richard needed to justify the burning of Scottish abbeys during military raids, he did so by citing Scotland’s loyalty to Clement.
iconography and the Gregorian calendar, which appear within some community structures and not in others. Several romance poets specify that if groups share religious affiliation, then they are part of the same community; differences of faith form insuperable barriers between groups. An examination of community dynamics in fourteenth-century literature must take account of religious imagery and allusions because nations and communities drew lines of distinction based at least in part on religious differences.

A first way of defining a community is to contrast it to other groups on such bases as nationality or faith, a strategy that Chaucer, Chestre, and the *Gawain*-poet use to show the boundaries of their poems’ social groups. According to Geraldine Heng, a group’s shared symbols help to distinguish it from other groups, presenting a community that occupies “different cultural and symbolic space from [other communities] within transnational groupings such as Western Christendom.”6 Heng notes that medieval notions of the nation appear in text most clearly through an author’s “self-identification by a national grouping, especially in defining one’s national community against large communities of others in oppositional confrontations.”7 Her model directs readers’ attention to Chestre’s tournament scenes, Gawain’s journey across North Wales, and the references to battle in the *Franklin’s Tale* as spaces of conflict where the members of the poems’ communities expresses their common identity most clearly. To be sure, England’s continual wars with Scotland and France over territory in the fourteenth century made it difficult for anyone to determine with certainty a nation’s geographic or political boundaries, so literary depictions of such conflicts point up disparities between the warring groups’ values and shared symbols to illustrate to readers the boundaries of communities within the text.

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7 Heng, 99.
This is by no means the only way to examine communities in literature, though. In addition to marking the outward boundaries of a culture’s identity, critics may explore the interior of a text’s communities—through imagery such as commerce and hospitality in these romances—to see how different social classes and groups compose a larger whole. The characters in *Sir Launfal*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the *Franklin’s Tale* engage in economic interaction within their communities, which the narrators use to illustrate to readers what constitutes the interior of a society. D. Vance Smith and Patricia Clare Ingham, writing on the medieval English communities in romances, find that ideas of a group’s narratives and economy tell readers “how a culture organizes itself, how its social forms are composed, how and why its histories are written.”

Like Heng, Smith and Ingham distinguish between the group’s interior and its exterior, but they also note the importance of looking to the interior to see not how a community distinguishes itself from others at conceptual border zones, but how a culture organizes itself internally by emphasizing common values. It is to this second mode of analysis—looking inward to see how a nation structures itself in narratives—that I will turn in the pages that follow. The three romances I discuss here figure a coherent identity for their central communities through images of trade, gift-giving, and service that involve all the members of a group irrespective of their social status. In bringing together all the members of the poem’s community of characters, the poets engage with contemporary anxieties over economic and social divisions that often threatened to sunder the English community of the late fourteenth century.

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While medieval romances certainly portray their characters as adhering to a “coherent identity” that conforms to ideals of chivalry and love, economic principles also play an important part in the romance genre’s portrayal of perfect communities. Indeed, both Sir Gawain and Sir Launfal embody chivalric ideals largely through their largesse. Their gift-giving elicits continual praise from the narrators of their poems. Chaucer’s Franklin similarly foregrounds generosity in his Tale and even directs his listeners’ attention to noble courtesy when he asks them at the end of his tale to determine which of his characters has acted most generously. These portrayals do not stop there, though. Characters’ and narrators’ perceptions of exchanges also illuminate underlying principles of economy that occur throughout the societies of romances. I locate these principles with the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s spatial theory of the habitus. In particular, Bourdieu’s idea of “a past . . . [that] tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles” appears in romance through such tendencies as a knight’s continual desire to distribute wealth whenever and wherever he acquires it. I argue that focusing on these governing principles of behavior can help readers determine which characters are included in a community and which are excluded: those who belong to a community share the structured practices Bourdieu highlights, while those outside the community will behave differently when under the same circumstances, thus demonstrating that they do not share in the “coherent identity” of the first group. Focusing on economic interaction can help readers of romance reexamine notions of group identity in medieval texts that scholars have already begun to discuss through analyses of love and knighthood.

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9 For discussions of knights and the portrayal of romance ideals, see John Stevens, Medieval Romance: Themes and Approaches (London: Hutchison & Co., Ltd., 1973); Charles Moorman, A Knught There Was: The Evolution of the Knight in Literature (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967); and David Burnley, Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England (New York: Longman, 1998). All three authors present and analyze rich examples of chivalric ideals as portrayed in medieval literature from Western Europe.

My first chapter examines exchange and appraisal in Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*, a fourteenth-century Arthurian romance that focuses explicitly on determining a knight’s value in the English economy. Chestre’s romance reacts to social tensions in Ricardian England, such as those that led to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, by imagining an economy in Arthur’s court that unifies members of the English community regardless of their social status. Rather than separate the English nobility from the peasantry, Chestre draws distinctions between the community of England and those of “Lumbardye” and “Fayrye” to show the boundaries of Arthur’s demesne, and he does so primarily in economic terms. The economy of Arthur’s court in *Sir Launfal* encompasses all members of the English community regardless of their social status. However, Chestre excludes the knights of Lumbardye and the magical society of Fayrye from the English community by placing them, in Bourdieu’s terms, under different principles than those of Arthur’s court. By creating this distinction, Chestre shows his audience members that the English exist within a single community despite divisions of social hierarchy.

However intrinsic ideas of appraisal may be to the concept of a community, such secular principles are certainly not the only tools romance writers use to unify groups of characters. My second chapter considers religious aspects of English identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Although exchange and service certainly play a central role in this romance, the *Gawain*-poet uses Christianity as the foundation of the English community’s standards of behavior, including principles of generosity and exchange. Christian ideals of duty form the focal point of Gawain’s sense of morality and propriety in the poem as demonstrated in the poet’s description of Gawain’s pentangle blazon, his conversations with Bertilak’s wife, and his exchange game with Bertilak in Hautdesert. The terms of the game ignore the monetary value of what the knights give to each other and instead emphasize the act of giving generously. This emphasis on
duty to one’s host and lord coincides with both Christian and chivalric ideals, such as those presented in Geoffroi de Charny’s *Book of Chivalry*. Because both Arthur’s and Bertilak’s courts base their values on a Christian foundation, the *Gawain*-poet defines them as a single community in spite of the geographic distance between the two groups.

I end with an analysis of service and pleasure in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*. Like the two romances discussed above, the *Franklin’s Tale* depicts an ideal community in which the nobility exercises limitless generosity, but the Franklin as narrator urges his listeners to connect gentility not with noble birth but with noble behavior. In a departure from the romance tradition, the *Franklin’s Tale* foregrounds the pleasure hosts and guests take in hospitality as the defining characteristic of a noble act. Dorigen, Arveragus, Aurelius, and the clerk of Orleans all focus on mutual enjoyment as a definitive characteristic of truly gentle behavior. The tale specifies that a clerk can perform a noble deed as well as a squire or a knight can through precisely this focus on shared pleasure. While the other romances I discuss focus primarily on a knight’s generosity as an expression of ideal behavior, the Franklin’s emphasis on the pure pleasure (the “pleyn delit” of his *General Prologue* portrait) of both giver and receiver places his characters on an even plane when determining whether an act is noble or not by allowing the otherwise voiceless Dorigen, for instance, to express her displeasure at Aurelius’ request that she be unfaithful to her husband. By defining nobility in terms of the mutual pleasure of a giver and a receiver, the Franklin permits all the members of his tale’s community both to perform noble deeds and to take part in judging an act as gentle or churlish.
CHAPTER 2
ARTHRURIAN APPRAISAL IN THOMAS CHESTRE’S SIR LAUNFAL

Even a brief summary of Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal, a romance dating from the late fourteenth century, reveals the centrality of economic exchange in its subject matter. The poem opens with Arthur’s wedding to Guenevere, during which the new queen gives gifts to Arthur’s knights but forgets Sir Launfal, the king’s steward and one of the most generous knights in the land. Launfal leaves town after the wedding and spends all of his wealth giving gifts, to the point that he empties his coffers. When he has fallen completely from his high status, a process that includes a physical fall into a muddy puddle, Launfal rides into a forest where he meets the beautiful fairy lady, Dame Tryamour. She offers Launfal her love along with access to her limitless wealth and her magical servant, Gyfre, in return for a promise not to tell anyone about their relationship; Launfal accepts. Launfal returns to town with his magical purse and begins to spend immediately and immoderately. Arthur’s community so values Launfal’s replenished wealth that the lords hold a tournament in his honor, which is followed by another exchange of blows against the giant Lumbard knight Sir Valentyne and the lords of Atalye, all of whom Launfal kills. When Launfal returns to Arthur’s court, Guenevere judges him worthy of her love, but Launfal resists, saying that he loves a lady whose lowest handmaiden is more beautiful and worthy than the queen. The queen accuses Launfal of treason, but Arthur allows other knights to stand surety for Launfal and releases him until the date of the trial. Dame Tryamour appears at the end of the romance and saves Launfal, carrying him off to Fayrye where he ends the tale.

With its many instances of exchange, appraisal, and evaluation, Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal portrays the English community primarily through economic actions. In representing Launfal’s value to Arthur’s community in terms of his all-encompassing generosity, the romance
engages with questions of the internal organization of the community. However, the tournament scenes, as well as Launfal’s interactions with Tryamour at her forest pavilion, also point up spatial divisions in the poem that help define the boundaries of Arthur’s community not as those between the medieval social estates but as differences of national identity. Chestre recasts exchange and generosity as unifying forces in a time when spending and largesse created tension between the commons and the nobility in England. The poem portrays an English community that is united in spite of social stratification as a reaction against social strains in Ricardian England like those that led to the Peasants’ Revolt.

While many discussions of Sir Launfal occur alongside considerations of Marie de France’s Lai de Lanval, more recent critics have found Chestre’s poem to be deserving of examination on its own. Myra Seaman asserts that Chestre deals primarily “with representing character and with guiding his audience’s immediate and sympathetic response to his characters,” but she also acknowledges “an acceptance and appreciation of the material, secular world” in Chestre’s romance. She demonstrates that Sir Launfal differs greatly from its purported source, the Lai de Lanval, in that Marie’s lay idealizes the magical world of Lanval’s lover, a beautiful maiden who provides the knight access to limitless wealth, while Chestre embraces the world of Arthur’s court. Chestre’s decision to dwell on the court space instead of the magical outside world pushes his romance towards more material modes of discourse and representation. Noting Chestre’s obvious concern with economic exchange in Arthur’s court in Sir Launfal, D. Vance Smith points out that the poem divides Arthur’s court, both socially and

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11 For a thorough examination of the two poems together, see A. C. Spearing, “Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 12 (1990): 117-156.


13 Ibid, 110-111. Seaman claims that Chestre’s romance is not in fact based directly on Marie’s lay at all because she sees “no compelling evidence [to suggest] that Chestre even knew Marie’s text,” offering instead Sir Landevale, an intermediate version, as Chestre’s source. Ibid, 107.
physically, into the royal household and the commons.\textsuperscript{14} He argues convincingly that the economy of Arthur’s household requires a steady influx of goods from outside itself, an influx Launfal provides through his liaison with Tryamour. However, both critics ignore other divisions in the romance, such as the one between Arthur’s court and the community at Lumbardye, which creates a site of national conflict in the form of a tournament. These divisions between nations, and not those between different economic classes, display real power to separate groups of characters in the poem. Chestre’s \textit{Sir Launfal} portrays a cohesive English community that displays its unity primarily through economic interactions—that is, exchanges of goods and services—that transcend the separation imposed by social hierarchy, a division that was all too present in England in the aftermath of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Instead of separating groups by economic or social class as the English citizens under Richard II did, Chestre defines different communities’ limits through physical space and national identity to demonstrate the unity of the English people in the poem.

My examination of the English community’s inclusiveness in Chestre’s romance begins by defining what is contained within that community’s boundaries. Chestre’s poem highlights the court’s process of exchange in order to emphasize the dispersal of riches and the circulation of wealth necessary to the ideal economy of Arthur’s court. Launfal returns to town after meeting Tryamour and immediately starts spending immoderately. However, the hero all but disappears from this distribution, leaving a surprisingly complete catalog of the goods, services, and recipients of largess in the English community. Rather than focusing on Launfal’s role in these

\textsuperscript{14} D. Vance Smith, \textit{The Arts of Possession: The Middle English Household Imaginary} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 155. Other critics also examine communities in romances by analyzing what they see as divisions between disparate groups. For instance, see Geraldine Heng, \textit{Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003). It is at points of difference, according to Heng, that a community’s values are most clearly stated in opposition to another group’s ideals.
transactions, Chestre dwells instead on the great quantity of the gifts and purchases, not on the noble qualities of the giver and buyer:

Launfal helde ryche festes.

Fyfty fedde povre gestes . . .

Fyfty boughte stronge stedes;

Fyfty yaf ryche wedes

To knyghtes and squyere.

Fyfty rewarded relygyons;

Fyfty delyverede povere prysouns

And made ham quyty and schere . . .

To many men he dede honours

In countreys fer and nere.15

The variety of gifts reveals the tendency of the English community to evaluate and exchange everything in the realm. Food, horses, and clothing all seem to fit neatly into a gift economy like Arthur’s. However, Chestre also includes abstract services like rewarding, delivering, honoring, and even forgiving in the system of circulation, showing that they too have definite value in an ideal English economy, and that they too must circulate in order to maintain such a system.

Sir Launfal attempts to break down the barriers between estates by imagining a single community of all people from “knyghtes and squyere” to “povere prysouns.” Chestre expresses this unity primarily through the economic interactions in the romance, which involve all people regardless of their social status. His decision to include all three estates (peasants, nobles, and clerics) in this catalog of generosity addresses a particular anxiety present in the late fourteenth

century—how far could the benefits of the gift economy extend in England? Certainly Richard II gave generously to his favorites, perhaps too generously, to the point that his spending habits required extensive support in the form of taxes and loans. Anthony Tuck explains that such lavish expenditure and borrowing brought his court “into a financial, and therefore a political relationship with a wider range of people than any other activity.”

Because of this widening of economic relations, the commons in parliament began to exhibit the “growing climate of resistance to taxation” that culminated in the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The events of the Revolt point up the social division plaguing England in the late fourteenth century. Nigel Saul notes that the peasants did not loot or pillage indiscriminately; they instead “singled out for destruction the property of local office-holders, poll-tax collectors and gentry” involved in Richard II’s court. That the peasants would specifically target the property of members of the upper class indicates that they sensed an insuperable barrier between themselves and the aristocracy. Launfal avoids creating such a division by giving indiscriminately to all the members of Arthur’s community, employing an economic process to indicate social unity.

Chestre’s inclusiveness in this episode of conspicuous spending implies that all citizens of the realm participate in the ideal English economy, giving equal weight to the nobility (“knyghtes and squyere”), the peasantry (“povere prysouns”) and the clergy (“relygyons”). Launfal’s bounty extends to guests as well as to clerics, involving both secular and religious people in the system of exchange, which shows that the gift economy benefits everyone in the realm, including the clergy. This may seem commonplace in a fourteenth-century conception of

17 Ibid, 50.
economic interaction,19 but political events of the 1370s reveal that the Church’s position in England’s economy was becoming more and more tenuous as the royal coffers emptied and resistance to taxation increased. At least twice, parliament heard arguments from John Wyclif, England’s homegrown heretic, against the Church’s right to hold property. In 1371, the commons summoned Wyclif to parliament to speak in favor of disenfranchising the Church and confiscating its wealth to finance wars;20 in 1378, Wyclif contended “that in time of war the king could lay claim to the property of the ‘possessioners’—that is the great landowners of the Church.”21 In addition to making direct attacks on the Church’s property, the Good Parliament of 1371 assaulted the Church’s political power when they tried to remove several members of the clergy from the king’s ministers of state.22 The government’s repeated efforts to revoke the Church’s place in England’s political economy shows a threat of disenfranchisement that Chestre rebukes in his romance by including clerics alongside nobles and peasants in Launfal’s giving.

With the economic status of the Church thus under political scrutiny in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, Launfal’s giving to the clergy takes on new meaning: Chestre’s romance speaks explicitly against royal disenfranchisement of the Church by including clerics as recipients of Launfal’s generosity. However, Richard II’s government was not alone in its efforts to remove the Church from the English economy. The clergy also showed themselves to be unwilling to participate in Richard II’s economy several times during the 1380s. They became furious “[i]n 1380 (when the Commons laid down that the clergy must raise no less than one-third of the poll-tax)” and in December 1384 when the commons stipulated that the Church must

19 Tuck reminds readers that “the lay and ecclesiastical hierarchies were seen as complementary . . . and the king himself made great use of the church as a means of rewarding and financing administrators and other government services.” Richard II and the English Nobility, 20.
21 Saul, 38.
match a grant, which was customary procedure at the time. The conflicts between groups of secular and religious people threatened to fragment the English people into contentious factions that might refuse to cooperate in the English economy. Chestre’s diction in this passage indicates that the clerics in his romance participate willingly in the English economy, though. Launfal “rewarded” the clerics in town, implying that they have already done Launfal a service worthy of compensation. His decision to include clerics as recipients of his generosity signifies that members of the clergy deserve a place in the English community, dispelling any notion of disenfranchisement by defining clerical services as valuable to the people.

Arthur’s court commodifies not only goods and services, but also the bodies of its subjects, further establishing the universal governing principle of exchange and evaluation. Near the end of the romance, Launfal returns from a tournament in Lumbardye and finds that his reputation has improved due to his valiant feats at arms. His status increases to such a degree that Queen Guenever stands to take him for a lover. He refuses her advances, saying that he loves a woman whose lowest handmaiden is more beautiful than the queen (694-699). For this insult Arthur brings Launfal to trial, where both Launfal’s crime and the knight himself are appraised. After the preliminary hearing, Arthur releases Launfal to Sir Percevall and Sir Gawain, who serve as “hys borwes” (815). The Middle English Dictionary defines “borwere” as “one who becomes surety for another.” The verb “borwen,” from which “borwere” derives, has further economic connotations that emphasize a relation to equal exchange: “to obtain (money) by pledging something as security or by finding sureties to guarantee repayment.”

24 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “rewarden,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED37402
“borwe” demonstrates the presence of exchange in court proceedings by referring to the body of the accused as a commodity to be loaned with surety. The court also assigns a particular value to Launfal’s crime and punishes it with action of equal worth. Although the earl of Cornewayle argues that a death sentence is too harsh for such a good knight, he concedes that exile could be an acceptable alternative (840-846). Both proposed punishments remove Launfal bodily from Arthur’s economy and thus from the English community, demonstrating the court’s desire to discard an item no longer valuable for circulation.

For all his inclusiveness of the English people (and the comprehensive scope of goods and services, bodies and crimes exchanged in the court’s economy), Chestre also limits the economic community, though he differentiates between groups based on geographical location rather than social rank. The threat of exile in the trial scene enacts a judgment that Ricardian England seemed to equate with a death sentence. The Merciless Parliament accused two of Richard’s favorites, Michael de la Pole and Robert de Vere, of treason. The two men “were convicted and condemned to death in their absence,” making their return to the country impossible.27 Parliament tried to seize de Vere’s and de la Pole’s estates, along with the estates of various others convicted of treason, after condemning them; that is, the expulsion of their bodies from England left their goods available for others to take.28 Sending an owner outside the bounds of the English community thus negates his ability to act within the English economy. Launfal’s sentence betokens more than a simple relocation, then. His exile would effectively exclude him from participation in the English economy by sending him to a foreign space outside the geographical boundaries of the Arthur’s community.

27 Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility, 121.
28 Ibid, 127.
The threat of exile is not the only element of *Sir Launfal* that calls to mind the poem’s spatial divisions. Launfal’s journey out of town to Tryamour’s pavilion is also a crossing of a geographical border of sorts. Although critics tend to agree that *Sir Launfal* is “a romance whose values are anything but otherworldly,” Chestre’s inclusion of Dame Tryamour, the “otherworldly figure,” helps to define some of the geographical limits of the English community.\(^{29}\) Tryamour’s pavilion contrasts with the space of the court, and this disparity unites those under Arthur’s authority in town by making a distinction between those within and those outside of the court. The difference between the two locations becomes apparent through a description of beauty, a frustrated *effictio* of the fairy woman. As Launfal first gazes on his fairy lover, Dame Tryamour, the narrator tries to describe her beauty through comparison to other beautiful images, including flowers, snow, and gold:

Sche was as whyt as lylye yn May,

Or snow that sneweth yn wynterys day –

He seygh never non so pert.

The rede rose, whan sche ys newe,

Agens her rode nes naught of hewe,

I dar wel say, yn sert.

Her here schon as gold wyre;

May no man rede here atyre,

Nay naught wel thenke yn hert. (292-300)

Launfal attempts to estimate Dame Tryamour’s value by comparing her to familiar objects, but she thwarts these repeated attempts to appraise her beauty, indicating that her pavilion exists outside the space of exchange and appraisal. The first two lines try to equate her whiteness to

\(^{29}\) Seaman, 111.
that of the lily or snow—neither image exactly matches her color, though. The speaker has never seen anything “so pert” as her whiteness, so he admits that it is incomparable. Similarly, her complexion surpasses the rose’s to such an extent that the flower appears to be “naught of hewe” next to Tryamour’s “rode”: the rose pales in comparison. The only part of her body that bears evaluation is her hair, which “schon as gold wyre,” something immeasurably more valuable than normal human hair. These descriptions demonstrate a desire to equate, to appraise in familiar terms, but the final lines admit that such assessment of Tryamour’s value is unthinkable: “May no man rede here atyre / Nay naught wel thenke yn hert.” Spatial theories proposed by Pierre Bourdieu help to elucidate this tacit injunction against exchange at the pavilion, which occurs because, as Bourdieu argues, in certain locations “the most improbable practices are excluded . . . as unthinkable.” The impossibility of appraising Tryamour’s beauty shows that her pavilion falls under a different governing principle than that of Arthur’s court because the structures of Arthur’s court do not obtain at the pavilion. This breakdown of appraisal demonstrates that the pavilion is a separate social space from the court, one where an economy of unstinting giving can exist.

Chestre’s differentiation of these two spaces serves two purposes: to solidify Launfal’s place in Arthur’s community, and to exclude Tryamour from it. Launfal’s failure to evaluate Tryamour at the pavilion indicates that she exists outside the English community, but his continued, and thwarted, attempts to evaluate her demonstrate that he internally retains his membership in Arthur’s court because he possesses what Bourdieu terms “a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices

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structured according to its principles.\textsuperscript{31} Although Launfal has left the court space, he still takes every opportunity he sees to appraise and exchange because the court’s governing principles are ever present in his mind. His continual reversion to the practices of the court further highlights how important an individual’s history is to his or her membership in a community: Launfal can leave the court space but retain his English identity, while Tryamour can enter the court from outside while remaining a member of the community of “Fayrye” (280).

Tryamour’s gift to Launfal bridges the gap between Arthur’s court and the pavilion, between the economy of evaluation and the space of the invaluable. Tryamour gives her lover a magical purse and describes how it works: “As oft thou puttest the hond therinne, / A mark of gold thou schalt wynne / In wat place that thou be” (321-324).\textsuperscript{32} Tryamour’s purse disregards the restrictions of place that structure the economy of \textit{Sir Launfal}. It will produce a “mark of gold” anywhere Launfal chooses, whether in the court’s space of exchange or the domain of the priceless pavilion. The specificity of a “mark of gold,” a particular monetary unit, makes Launfal’s spending incremental, though still limitless since he can apparently “wynne” a gold mark anywhere at any time. The magical purse serves Launfal as a portal between Tryamour’s immeasurable wealth and the particulars of the courtly economy. Rather than allowing immediate access to infinite riches, it translates the inestimable goods into specific quantities to be spent at court—and, as Stephen Guy-Bray points out, a “contemporary unit of currency” that Chestre’s readers and listeners could identify easily.\textsuperscript{33} The translation of an unknown amount of wealth into such a local and intelligible unit further expresses how \textit{Sir Launfal} imagines a unified English community through the economic interactions because it determines its audience as

\textsuperscript{31} Bourdieu, 82.
\textsuperscript{32} The text says she gives him an “alner,” which Laskaya and Salisbury gloss as “purse.”
those who have, in Bourdieu’s terms, a “durably installed” sense of the value of a mark due to their place in the *habitus* of Arthur’s court.\textsuperscript{34}

Arthur’s court thus unites all its inhabitants in two ways: by espousing a universal governing principle of commodification and exchange and by expressing that principle through common symbols and values. If such a governing principle exists, as it does in *Sir Launfal*, then it reaches beyond social and economic stratification, emphasizing the unity of the English people under Arthur’s, and Richard II’s, rule. Smith points out that “the expense, so to speak, of imagining a gift economy is that the poem must ignore the discourse of economic moderation.”\textsuperscript{35} More than ignoring moderation, *Sir Launfal* is an assault on moderate spending. Launfal’s expenditure has fomented a contentious debate among critics, who ask whether such immoderation is a positive or a negative quality in a knight.\textsuperscript{36} Although his initial spending before he meets Tryamour may seem imprudent, his behaviors exemplify those of an ideal knight in the economy of largess because he allows his lover’s wealth to disembogue into the court. He retains nothing for himself, distributing everything he receives, even when this disbursal causes him to lose his own wealth.

If Launfal’s extravagance is a positive quality, then his poverty comes about not because a fault in his character, but because of a malfunction in the economy of Arthur’s court. Guenevere’s failure to give gifts to Launfal cuts off his access to wealth and puts his place in the economy at risk. Royal generosity is as essential to Chestre’s imagined economy as Richard II thought it was to his own. Richard’s more-than-generous spending drew much criticism from parliament, but he defended himself with statements such as the one he made in 1385 in the earl

\textsuperscript{34} Bourdieu, 78.
\textsuperscript{35} Smith, 161.
\textsuperscript{36} Seaman contends that Launfal’s overspending results in his decline, “Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* and the Englishing of Medieval Romance,” 112. Conversely, Smith notes that Chestre’s poem “implicitly equates Launfal’s gross expenditures . . . with exemplary economic management, *Arts of Possession*, 160.
of Suffolk’s patent: “the more we bestow honours on wise and honourable men, the more our crown is adorned with gems and precious stones.” Nonetheless, parliament repeatedly tried to remove Richard II’s councilors during the 1380s, including his apparent favorite, Robert de Vere, to whom Richard gave most generously. De Vere stayed close to Richard at least in part due to financial necessity. As Saul notes, de Vere’s “family was one of the poorest in the titled nobility . . . Access to royal patronage was essential to their well-being.” Had Richard passed de Vere over in a round of gift-giving, as Guenevere does to Launfal, de Vere would likely have fallen into financial trouble and obscurity, and the English crown would have lost one of Richard’s favorite gems. Maintaining the freedom to give so liberally to his courtiers was vital to Richard’s economic policy, as it is vital to the economy of Sir Launfal. By forgetting Launfal, Guenevere robs Arthur’s crown of the jewel of a worthy knight and thus does harm not only to Launfal but also to the English economy as a whole, casting out possibly its most generous member. Thus, the royalty serves an essential function in the economy—not even Arthur’s personal household exists above the bounds of the English economy, and a failure in royal largess can force a knight into poverty and possibly force him out of the communal space altogether.

Indeed, Launfal uses space outside the court both to get gain and to conceal losses in Chestre’s poem, which presents a court where loss is very possible. Launfal finds ways to conceal his financial and social decline in private spaces. After Launfal loses his wealth because of a failure in the economy of largess, he also fears losing prestige in town, in the public eye. The mayor’s daughter invites Launfal to dinner, but he declines her invitation, saying, “Nay myghte y yn the peple thrynge” (203). He cannot present himself in rags at the table—it is unthinkable, in

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37 Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility, 84.
38 Saul, 121.
terms of the *habitus*. Shearle Furnish wants readers to see “a parallel between [this episode] and Launfal’s private meetings . . . with Tryamour,” arguing that Launfal is too proud to eat with the mayor’s daughter;\(^{39}\) however, his meetings with the mayor’s daughter and those with Tryamour occur in different locations, suggesting not a parallel but a disjunction between the two episodes. The visibility of his loss is unthinkable at dinner in town but very much possible at the forest pavilion. The potential for losing social prestige, in this case being seen without “hosyn and schon, / cleny brech and scherte” fills Launfal with anxiety and causes him to decline the invitation (200-201). Launfal fears that others will perceive his economic and social descent if he appears in public, so he makes his loss as unobtrusive as possible by keeping it in private spaces, or relocating it there, where a fall is no longer shameful. While descent is not impossible in the *habitus* of Arthur’s court, Launfal wants to stay on his high horse both financially and socially when in town, so he tries to avoid being seen in a fallen state.

Falling in the public eye seems unacceptable because it shows a diminished value and thus a diminished importance in the economy of largess and the community as a whole. This extends even to physical falls, as when Launfal’s horse slips in town, bearing the rider down “yn the fen, / Wherefore hym scornede many men / Abowte hym fer and wyde” (214-216). After this most material scene of Launfal’s decline, he rides out of town “For to dryve awey lokynge” (218). Launfal must keep his decline from the sight of others so that they will not judge him as less valuable than he was before. He does so by leaving the public space, driving away the onlookers’ gazes. The anxiety over public diminution expressed in *Sir Launfal* draws on real concerns regarding a lord’s public image in the court of Richard II, who found his own authority coming under fire from parliament. His reactions to parliament’s accusations of mismanagement

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\(^{39}\) Shearle Furnish, “Civilization and Savagery in Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*,” *Medieval Perspectives* 3.1 (Spring 1988), 140.
reveal a strong tendency in the court “to dryve awey lokynge,” though by more aggressive means. During the Salisbury Parliament of 1384, the earl of Arundel inveighed against what he saw as Richard’s imprudent government; Richard, the Westminster chronicler reports, “went white with rage. ‘If it is supposed to be my fault that there is misgovernment in the realm,’ he cried, ‘then you lie in your teeth. You can go to the devil.’” Richard’s determination to deflect the blame for misgovernment shows a clear need to retain his own value in the social space by driving the critical gaze elsewhere, a desire Chestre portrays through Launfal’s moves to avoid the public eye. The community space in *Sir Launfal* defines being seen in a state of loss as unthinkable because it would symbolize both diminished personal value and reduced importance to the ideal court economy.

Richard’s outburst in 1384 was not unique, which demonstrates a consistent desire to avoid a deprecatory gaze that also finds a place in *Sir Launfal*, though Launfal escapes the public eye through less aggressive means. Throughout the 1380s, Richard found his social position growing less secure and consistently reacted to this insecurity by redirecting his opponents’ arguments and driving away their looking. When the Wonderful Parliament of 1386 made thinly veiled references to impeaching Chancellor de la Pole, the king “retorted that he would not dismiss so much as a kitchen scullion” at parliament’s request. Richard here tried to divert parliament’s gaze by denying its ability to govern him, taking an opportunity to transform its attack on his governance into an assertion of royal authority. This interest in maintaining a social position through diverting others’ gazes makes itself present in Launfal’s tendency to hide his loss where members of the court will not look, or where the court’s governing principles no longer apply. In a move less hostile than Richard’s, Launfal asks Arthur’s kinsmen not to tell any

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40 Saul, 130.
41 Saul, 157-158.
“man of my poverté, / For the love of God Almyght!” (143-144). Speaking of Launfal’s loss both indicates that the speaker sees the reduction of Launfal’s value and draws others’ attention to the economically diminished Launfal. While Richard deflected accusations by calling parliament’s authority into question, Launfal pre-empts criticism by asking his possible accusers to remain silent. Both use speech to deflect the public gaze away from their losses, though Launfal does so in a way calculated not to damage the court community by asserting his superiority.

Launfal is careful not to assert his authority or superiority too strongly in town, but he still fears being seen in a state of loss when in public. With such a consistent fear of loss present in town in Sir Launfal, it would seem to follow that a tournament, with so many critical gazes focused on the competitors, would elicit an even stronger anxious response. However, this is not the case in Sir Launfal. Rather, the tournament grounds allow a knight to fall without shame, further emphasizing the effect physical situation has on different judgments in the poem. Launfal needs to display his worth in the public space where viewers can appraise him, but if he falls in town, then his value would decrease in the public eye. Launfal jousts with the lords of Karlyoun, members of the English community, who fall from their horses “wythouten othe” on the tournament grounds (454-456). Although this scene involves men being unhorsed and knocked to the ground, these falls bring no shame: the lords of Karlyoun do not even curse their circumstances when unhorsed because they feel no shame for falling in a tournament of English competitors. The domestic tournament grounds redefine the act of falling, removing the tumble’s social stigma because the participants agree to exchange blows. This scene builds on Launfal’s earlier fall in town in that they both depict the same action—falling from a horse—but in two different locations and with two very different consequences.
Despite this shift, shame is certainly not impossible on the tournament grounds. Rather,
disgrace occurs under entirely different circumstances than it does in the town, a difference that
arises both from the space and from the nationality of the knights in the tournament. During the
tournament with Sir Valentyne, Launfal feels shame only when his helm falls off and when Sir
Valentyne laughs at him (575). As in the earlier scene of Launfal’s fall into the mud, his
discomfort arises from Sir Valentyne’s gaze. Launfal cannot bear to be an object of derision.
Smith argues that sight in Launfal “is not so much scopophilia, the perversion of looking, as it is
epi-scopophilia, an interest that there be looking.”42 However, this ignores an important
distinction in Launfal’s interests: Launfal wants others to see him only when he wins, when he is
gaining value by defeating an enemy from outside the English community. The removal of his
helmet renders his face more visible to the tournament’s audience even when he is not winning,
which makes their gaze uncomfortable to him. Thus, within both the court and tournament
spaces, there is a consistent internal drive to avoid being seen while in a state of debasement,
though the places define loss in different ways.

Understanding Chestre’s portrayal of the English community sheds new light on the
events of the tournament between Launfal and the gigantic knight of Lumbardye, Sir Valentyne.
This episode in Sir Launfal has been troublesome to critics because of Launfal’s apparent lack of
chivalric virtue, but I argue that this scene solidifies the English community, illustrating its
boundaries and inclusiveness simultaneously.43 Launfal fights and slays Sir Valentyne, but he
could not do so without his knave, Gyfre:

Gyfre kedde he was good at nede

And lepte upon hys maystrys stede –

42 Smith, 177.
43 Guy-Bray, 41; Seaman, 115; Furnish, 144.
No man ne segh wyth syght;
And er than thay togedere mette,
Hys lorde helm he on sette,
Fayre and wel adyght.
Tho was Launfal glad and blythe,
And thonkede Gyfre many a sythe
For hys dede so mocel of myght. (580-588)

The poem both acknowledges the necessity of Gyfre’s help and praises his work as mighty and worthy of thanks. Chestre dwells further on Gyfre’s service when he retrieves Launfal’s fallen shield (589-594). Both times, the knave aids the knight with an article of defense: the shield protects Launfal’s body from harm; the helm, his reputation. Gyfre’s dutiful performance expands Sir Launfal’s depiction of the role of the peasantry. Earlier in the poem, peasants served only as receivers of largess, but now Gyfre renders essential aid to Launfal, illustrating the active role the lower class can take in an ideal economy. Guy-Bray contends that Gyfre’s assistance devalues Launfal’s fighting by showing his reliance on those he is supposed to protect.44 This line of argument differentiates too strongly between the knight and the knave rather than viewing them as cooperating members of the English community. Far from devaluing the chivalric triumph here, Gyfre’s help illustrates that the English, both lords and commons, are united against their external enemies.

The ideal cooperation Chestre depicts here emphasizes English unity while also demonstrating the necessity of the lower class in an ideal economy. Few English kings elicited as much resentment from their peasants as did Richard II, whose repeated taxes and nearly constant military campaigns exhausted the public, but resistance from the English commons was

44 Guy-Bray, 41.
characteristic of almost the entire fourteenth century. For decades before the Revolt of 1381, English peasants enacted a “widespread withdrawal of services” on their lords’ estates.\(^{45}\) By withdrawing their services from noble estates, they thus posed a threat to their lords’ economic security—though the peasants could not cut off the source of gifts from above, they could restrict the flow of marketable goods and services up into the English economy. If both the peasantry and the nobility have the power to damage the economy, then both parts must perform their roles properly to sustain the well-being of the English community.

Although Launfal obtains no tangible profit from these battles, Chestre maintains that there is something to be gained from battles against national enemies, a belief the commons did not seem to hold during Richard II’s rule. From the beginning of his reign until around 1389, Richard found himself under increasing financial pressure “as high military expenditure on a series of controversial and unproductive military campaigns coupled with the notable reluctance of successive parliaments in the early 1380s to concede direct taxes” drained the government’s funds without sufficient influx to replenish the royal coffers.\(^{46}\) The unpopular foreign campaigns produced little financial gain for England and put a strain on the commons who saw their tax money disappearing into foreign lands on the ships of the English navy. Conversely, the commons acceded in 1379 to a tax for the defense of Yorkshire. The much more immediate benefits of this tax—domestic safety among them—must have appealed strongly to the commons compared to the continuous drain the foreign campaigns put on the English economy.\(^{47}\) However, Chestre shows that not all profits from battle come in the form of material gains. After Launfal kills Sir Valentynne and the lords of Atalye, King Arthur receives “tydyng . . . Of Syr

\(^{45}\) Saul, 60-61.
\(^{47}\) Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility, 44.
Launfales noblesse” (613-615). Killing the foreign lords and knights brings Launfal social
prestige with no negative moral consequences; he even returns “ayen yn to Bretayn / Wyth solas
and wyth plawe,” showing a distinct lack of remorse for his actions, and even exhibiting pleasure
in performing so well in battle (611-612). Chestre redirects his readers’ and listeners’ focus away
from material spoils of war by showing that the entire English community in the poem judges the
honor Launfal wins in battle to be a truly valuable gain.

Launfal’s “solas” and “plawe” may seem callous to readers because they arise from the
killing of other people, but Chestre’s romance glorifies this violence by clearly marking the slain
foes as foreign knights. The battlefield exists as an area in the poem where killing a foreign
opponent is not only possible but valorous and enjoyable. A knight gains honor as a result of
success in battle against foreign opponents, and it is this prestige that Chestre defines as one of
the most valuable profits to be gained from battle. Juliet R. V. Barker reminds readers that during
tournaments in the Middle Ages, “if the opponent was killed . . . his death was regrettable from
the point of view of the loss of a good knight, but of little importance since he was a national
enemy.”48 Launfal’s brutal slaying of Sir Valentyne and the lords of Atalye brings Launfal no
dishonor because he has killed only persons alien to the court. Furnish argues that these scenes of
violence show “that Launfal has less discretion with which to govern his inexhaustible power
than he has to test it,” but the poem celebrates this scene as a triumph of the English over their
national enemies.49 The English knight is able to return home not with spoils and booty from
raids, but with pride, prestige, and tidings of his nobility to which Chestre attaches social, if not
monetary, value to show his readers and listeners that foreign wars can produce a very real
though abstract form of profit.

49 Furnish, 144.
When Chestre refigures the spoils of war in this way—not as money taken from foreign enemies but as praise gained through valiant performance—he instructs his audience in a new way of conceiving of appraisal. This new economic ideal becomes apparent throughout the poem as a tool for producing social unity within Arthur’s court. As antagonism mounted between the commons and the nobility during the late fourteenth century, Chestre portrays a community united by generosity and commerce, by principles of economic exchange. The inclusiveness of Arthur’s economy in *Sir Launfal* brings together members of the three estates under one national identity and sets them unified against national enemies rather than against each other. In the aftermath of the Peasants’ Revolt, Launfal’s generosity voices a desire to bring the English people together under unifying economic ideals that contribute to the audience’s sense of common identity.
CHAPTER 3
SIR GAWAIN’S CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP AND THE LIMITS OF CHIVALRIC DUTY

In July of 1382, King Richard II roundly dismissed Lord Chancellor Scrope after a heated debate over the prudence of Richard’s bounteous generosity. The dispute stemmed from the management of Edmund Mortimer’s estate, which had escheated to the crown in late 1381. After Mortimer’s death, there followed a series of requests from ambitious courtiers who desired the manors and lordships pertaining to the Mortimer estate. While Richard quickly acceded to these requests, Scrope advocated keeping the lands, “saying that the king was impoverishing himself by such profligacy.”50 The seeds of his advice fell among thorns, and Richard sent him away for refusing to carry out the royal will. The king could not tolerate such an apparent attempt to subvert the English government’s hierarchy, in which the king occupied the highest position both in status and in ability to judge. Richard’s conflict with Scrope creates an image of, among other things, a king deeply concerned with issues of proper giving and duty, topics immanent as well to writers of the late fourteenth century.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, widely agreed to be the most aesthetically appealing romance of the Ricardian period, offers weighty commentary on what constitutes proper duty within the English community in forms of both the obligations of the nobility and the responsibilities of servants and guests. The English people of the poem—Arthur’s subjects in Camelot and Bertilak’s household at Hautdesert—adhere to Christian and chivalric values in all that they do, and the poet represents these ideals strongly through imagery of economic exchange and giving in the poem. Rather than illustrate purely secular standards through exchange as Thomas Chestre does in Sir Launfal, the Gawain-poet employs commerce as an indicator of fundamental Christian principles in his poem. Members of the English community in Sir Gawain

and the Green Knight show their common identity through references to generosity and chivalric duty that stem from a Christian foundation. The poet bases group identity on religious faith in order to show that geographically distant communities can form parts of a larger community united by faith.

Critics have long read Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a poem with political and social interests, although scholars argue over what exactly its politics are.51 Ever since Larry D. Benson asserted that the poem’s allusions “invite the audience to share the narrator’s omniscience”—creating a sense of national community between the listeners through reference to England’s history—the poem’s social implications have elicited much discussion.52 David Aers and A. C. Spearing agree that the poem places significant pressures on a constellation of social values, including orthodox Christianity, in order to examine how these ideals respond to unfamiliar tensions—to see where slippage occurs in the language of knightly ideals faced with new challenges.53 Their arguments draw on the metaphor of Gawain’s pentangle, the image of chivalric perfection in the poem, in order to show how unstable the values of Arthur’s court can be when questioned by an alien foe like the Green Knight. However, the Gawain-poet invests considerable time drawing parallels between Camelot and Hautdesert, as Patricia Clare Ingham and Sarah Stanbury have noted.54 The courts’ similarities seem to make differences fade from memory, bringing the courts together into a single, though heterogeneous, English community.

51 Ann W. Astell sees Gawain as an allegorical representation of Robert de Vere, one of Richard II’s favorites, and argues that the rest of the poem also serves as a Ricardian allegory, Political Allegory in Late Medieval England (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); John M. Bowers links Pearl, which appears alongside Sir Gawain and the Green Knight in its only extant manuscript, to political poetry of the late fourteenth century in The Politics of Pearl: Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).
Amid such fruitful debate, though, the social and political implications of proper duty and exchange in the poem have gone largely unnoticed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter *SGGK*) portrays a model of service that resists social divisions and external pressures in order to maintain the traditional hierarchical relationships present in the community. This ideal exists to unify the English people in spite of geographical divisions like the physical space between Camelot and Hautdesert, as well as disunity arising from differences in economic and social status, all of which posed real threats to Ricardian England. Instances of exchange and gift-giving in the two courts emphasize the Christian foundation that the characters share which unites them as one English people.

The poet takes the first step toward establishing a clearly defined set of social ideals with a description of Gawain’s pentangle blazon in Fitt II of *SGGK*, which coincides with a catalog of chivalric virtues. The knight’s qualities help to illustrate the secular and religious ideals of the English community largely through reference to his function in the English economy. Gawain’s generosity unifies the English community by showing that all English citizens, regardless of estate or economic status, participate in an ideal economy. The poem’s pentangle image has inspired rich critical discussion both for its Christian and chivalric implications.  

Nonetheless, few have examined this blazon’s meaning with regard to the poem’s economy even though the poet links Gawain’s chivalry and Christian faith directly to commerce. The fifth of the five points symbolizes Gawain’s unfailing “fraunchyse and felæschyp forbe al þyng,” his “clannes

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and his cortaysye,” and finally his compassion.\textsuperscript{56} The \textit{Middle English Dictionary} defines “cortaysye” as “chivalrous conduct, good will, and a gracious reward,” linking knightly, Christian, and economic ideals in one term that describes Gawain.\textsuperscript{57} This, paired with Gawain’s “fraunchyse and felaȝschyp” [generosity and brotherly love], emphasizes the connection between religious and commercial ideals—largesse and brotherly love both appear in acts of generous giving.\textsuperscript{58} A proper lord in Ricardian England, Tuck argues, “was expected to obtain favours at court” for his subordinates in the forms of wealth and political influence.\textsuperscript{59} However, Gawain’s generosity and goodwill reach not only his own servants but “al þyng,” or at least all those within the community who accept his “felaȝschyp.” The unity presented in this passage works against social tensions between the English peasants and the nobility during the fourteenth century. Due to heavy taxation, the peasantry began to see itself as distinct from the lords to the extent that, when demanding the heads of two nobles at the Tower of London, the rebellious peasants called the lords “despoilers of the commons.”\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{Gawain}-poet addresses this sort of resentment and separation by imagining an English community in which nobles extend Christian fellowship to everyone, including the peasants. Gawain expresses his own admirable traits largely through his generosity, which comprises both secular and religious ideals.

The pentangle passage thus complicates entirely worldly models of chivalry in romances like Thomas Chestre’s \textit{Sir Launfal} by referencing both religious and secular ideals, which helps the \textit{Gawain}-poet use economic imagery similar to Chestre’s to portray a very different group


\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Middle English Dictionary}, s. v. “courteisie,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED10060.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, s. v. “fraunchise,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED17597; ibid, s. v. “felaȝship,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED15504.


identity. The pentangle’s description of Gawain’s virtues serves a purpose akin to Launfal’s giving of various “fyftys” in Chestre’s Sir Launfal in that both passages demonstrate the respective hero’s value while also describing the breadth of the English community in economic terms. Both poets also foreground the knights’ ideal participation in Arthur’s economy, which points to a general concern in fourteenth-century English romance with the obligation to give generously. Despite these similarities, though, SGGK’s England is not exactly Sir Launfal’s.

Chestre centers his descriptions on Launfal’s economic virtues, but the Gawain-poet expresses his hero’s value to the community in both economic and moral terms. The dissimilar focus on ideals sets different limits on the community: Launfal’s English nation constitutes itself primarily through economic interactions, but Gawain’s requires more than merely ideal behavior in the marketplace. While Gawain’s willingness to give is certainly fundamental to his persona, his Christian faith plays an important part in his identity as an ideal knight, a fact indicated by references to Christ and Mary in the third and fourth points of the pentangle:

And alle his afyaunce vpon folde watz in þe fyue woundez
Þat Cryst kaȝt on þe croys, as þe Crede tellez.

An queresoeuer þys mon in melly watz stad,
His þro þoȝt watz in þat, þurȝ alle oþer þyngez
Þat alle his forsnes he fong at þe fyue joyez
Þat þe hende Heuen Quene had of hir Chylde. (642-647)

[And his faith was well founded in the five awful wounds / That our Christ on the cross, as the Creed says, received. / Whenever in war Gawain worthily fought, / On this thought, through all things, he was thoroughly fixed: / That his fortitude from the Five Joys was derived, / Which the high Queen of Heaven had had from her Child . . .]
Gawain, in all he does, keeps Christ’s five wounds and Mary’s five joys in his mind as should the poem’s listeners and readers. Even his “forsnes” [courage, fortitude] in battle derives from his devotion to Christian principles. The knight’s ability to fight seems to exemplify a worldly virtue, but Gawain’s fighting serves Christian purposes because he draws his valor from a religious source—Mary’s joys in Christ. Lynn Staley Johnson argues that in referencing Christian imagery so explicitly, the poet engages with his “audience’s common religious experiences and expectations.” Gawain conforms to the audience’s religious experiences by following the Creed and dedicating himself to religious imagery, both of which the Christian audience members know well. The religious references in the pentangle illustrate a fundamental aspect of the English community that expands on Sir Launfal’s governing principle to encompass both religious and secular ideals of behavior.

If Chestre’s use of economic evaluation helps readers to differentiate between groups in his poem, then the Gawain-poet’s reliance on religious imagery defines communities in his text through characters’ adherence to the Christian faith. The Gawain-poet’s strongly orthodox views on iconography, as a useful tool in Gawain’s religious devotion to Mary, emphasize the importance of religious orthodoxy to the English community while also subtly warning the audience against the socially deleterious effects of heresy. Gawain’s fidelity to Mary derives in large part from the presence of her image on the inside of his shield, an icon he can look at whenever he needs to remind himself of his role as a servant of the divine:

At þis cause þe knyȝt comlyche hade

In þe inore half of his schelde hir ymage depaynted,

Þat quen he blusched þerto his belde neuer payred. (648-650)

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61 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “force,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED16697
Mary’s visible presence in Gawain’s shield gives him unfailing courage by prompting him to reflect on a reality beyond his worldly works. In battle, Gawain’s thoughts rest on Mary and her five joys largely because of this visual reminder that his labor serves Christian purpose. The Gawain-poet’s references to Christian symbols, especially Gawain’s attachment to Mary’s image and the five wounds of Christ, take on additional significance to the Christian community in light of tensions in the Church in the late fourteenth century. In particular, John Wyclif’s heretical views gained political strength throughout the 1370s as parliament tried to disenfranchise the Church and reduce religious influence on politics.63 Hardman notes that the rejection of religious imagery came to be a distinguishing characteristic of Lollardy, “and readiness to venerate images [became] the corresponding proof of orthodoxy.”64 By espousing a traditional view of iconography in SGGK, the Gawain-poet excludes heretics from his audience and uses his listeners’ and readers’ orthodoxy to unite them in a Christian community.

In addition to denying the legitimacy of heterodox Christian beliefs, the Gawain-poet also rejects the society of those who follow other creeds to show the importance of proper religious devotion in the English community. Gawain’s journey between Camelot and Hautdesert takes him briefly out of the English community into a land replete with monstrous foes. Everywhere he goes Gawain finds an enemy before him, but all of the foes seem to be beasts: “wormez,” “wolues,” “bullez,” “berez,” “borez,” and “etaynez” [dragons, wolves, bulls, bears, boars, and giants] (715-723). Lynn Arner contends that Gawain “does not engage in knightly

63 Saul, 38.
64 Hardman, 261.
contests with other men [because] there are none in sight.” However, she ignores the land of the Wirral in Cheshire, a region where Gawain sees men who refuse to follow the Christian covenant (701-702). Although Gawain’s fellowship apparently extends to “al þyng” in the pentangle passage, here the poet makes it clear that neither the knight nor God can love the men of the Wirral, indicating that they exist both outside the realm of Arthur’s court and outside the Christian community. Gawain notices a boundary between himself and the men of the Wirral when they refuse to offer him help on his quest, but the narrator unmistakably excludes the men of the Wirral from the English community based primarily on their denial of God’s covenant (703-707). If both heretics and heathens are excluded from the English nation, then proper adherence to the Christian faith plays a fundamental role in English identity and unity.

Religious affiliation was in fact a decisive force of differentiation in fourteenth-century conflicts, so the Gawain-poet refers to religious adherence in order to show the limits of Gawain’s community. Richard II’s military policy exhibits the tendency to distinguish between groups based on religious affiliation, especially after the Papal Schism of 1378, which placed Pope Clement VII in Avignon while Pope Urban VI ruled in Rome. The English supported Urban, but their foes in Scotland and France followed Clement. An English military force marched into Scotland in 1385, and the English soldiers raided and burned several Scottish

66 The original lines in Middle English read, “Wonde þer bot lyte / Þat auþer God oþer gome wyth goud hert louied.” The grammar of this clause poses a particular dilemma for critics because of the ambiguity of the subject and object of “louied.” Arner translates this passage as “little dwelt there that either God or a man with a good heart could love” (85); however, Finch translates the same lines as “where few men lived / Who cared for a covenant with Christ or man” (701-702), and Borroff gives “few men were within / That had great good will toward God or man” (701-702). Ingham reads these lines as “few lived there / that either God or the man with good heart loved,” Sovereign Fantasies, 117. The lines following state that Gawain asks questions of several “frekez þat he met,” at least suggesting the presence of other English-speakers, if not humans, so I agree with Ingham, Finch, and Borroff that there are indeed people in the Wirral (703-705).
abbeyss “on the ground that their monks were of the Clementist obedience.”67 England translated
this national conflict into religious terms and justified the violence using religious difference. If
Richard could thus use distinctions of faith to justify his attacks on Scotland as a foreign nation,
then religious identity clearly played a central role in constituting national identity. The *Gawain-
poet* deploys the same tactic when he says that the men of the Wirral do not follow the Christian
creed and thus excludes them from Gawain’s fellowship on religious grounds.

Basing English identity on Christian principles allows the *Gawain*-poet to recast other
forms of difference, such as geographical distance, as unimportant to a group’s identity. When
the *Gawain*-poet minimizes these other forms of difference, he engages with anxieties in the
fourteenth century over the boundaries of England that threatened to separate the kingdom’s
western regions from its central regions. Michael J. Bennett finds that during the late fourteenth
century, the regions around Cheshire developed “a reputation, as befitted a frontier, for
turbulence,” with the Wirral having the worst “reputation for lawlessness.”68 Although Richard’s
subjects in central England saw their western neighbors as lawless, SGGK does not exclude the
men of the Wirral from the English based on their location in a turbulent area. Rather, the
*Gawain*-poet bars the men of the Wirral from the English community at Arthur’s court because
of differences in faith between the two. But, by basing Englishness in his poem on Christianity,
he also allows other western courts to affirm their English identity through adherence to
Christian principles. To connect Arthur’s and Bertilak’s courts into one community, the *Gawain-
poet* focuses on their common faith as a foundation for group identity.

Joining the two courts at Camelot and Hautdesert into one homogeneous congregation of
orthodox Englishmen overlooks both the physical distance between the two and the many

67 Saul, 145.
68 Michael J. Bennett, “The Historical Background,” in *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and
countercurrents running through the poem’s discourses on chivalry and obligation. Bertilak’s wife and Gawain, in particular, express different ideals of chivalric service during the bedroom scenes of Fitt III. When characters’ views on proper duty conflict, the Gawain-poet redirects his audience’s attention toward the Christian foundation the two courts have in common. Bertilak’s wife suggests that she would take Gawain as her husband (and implicitly her lord), so he responds to her by asserting both chivalric and Christian ideals that hold the two courts together:

\[ \text{Iwysse, worhy . . . 3e haf waled wel better;} \]
\[ \text{Bot I am proude of ȝe prys ȝat 3e put on me} \]
\[ \text{And, soberly your seruaunt, my souerayn I holde yow} \]
\[ \text{And yowre knyȝt I becom, and Kryst yow forȝelde. (1276-1279)} \]

[But you’re bound to a bolder, a far better, man; / Though I’m proud of the praise you have put to me here. / As your servant, I say you’re my sovereign, in truth. / Starting now I’m your knight, in the name of Christ.]

Rather than evoking the language of love, the lady’s request for amorous play elicits a response filled with terms of social hierarchy and ends with a reference to Christian principles. When Gawain says that the lady has “waled wel better,” his words suggest that the present hierarchy is proper because Bertilak is more worthy than Gawain to be her husband. Gawain insists that Bertilak, the lord and host, should remain in the superior position, and that the lady holds a similar status above Gawain, who is both knight and guest and so below the two of them. Gawain’s desire to maintain the lord’s and lady’s social positions reflects chivalric ideals present in fourteenth-century Europe. Geoffroi de Charny’s *Book of Chivalry*, a French treatise on knightly behavior written around 1352, exhorts knights to behave around ladies “as honorably as is possible and fitting, while maintaining in word and deed and in all places their honor and
status.”

If Gawain were to put himself above the lady, in either a social or a sexual position, then Gawain would place his own honor above that of Bertilak’s wife and would thus offer an improper form of service. Gawain’s insistence on propriety draws focus away from the secular “prys” [nobility, high rank] Bertilak’s wife puts on him and instead recalls her to the Christian and chivalric ideals Gawain embodies.

In voicing such conventional views of correct service, the poet shows a desire to preserve the social hierarchy present in the late fourteenth century, a social hierarchy that found itself under severe scrutiny. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 certainly marked a unique height of social and economic conflict, but the rebels’ goals also reveal a disparity between what the peasants saw as proper service to the king and what Richard’s court thought appropriate. On 11 June, 1381, the king and his intimates sought safety in the Tower of London and sent an envoy to discover the rebels’ purpose. The leaders of the revolt replied that they meant “to save the king and to destroy the traitors to him and the kingdom.” Although their goal thus stated appears to offer service to the monarch, the rebels’ demand for the heads of the “traitors” showed an obvious inversion of the traditional power structure. The peasants presumed to have both the right to judge their superiors and the authority to order the lords’ executions. The Gawain-poet warns against such willful disregard for traditional social hierarchy by portraying Gawain upholding the value of customary roles and hinting at the destructive potential of conflicts over the hierarchy.

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70 *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “pris,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED34677

71 Saul, 63.
To deal decisively with such disagreements over a knight’s proper duty to his hosts, Gawain refers to the Christian faith as a common grounding point between himself and Bertilak’s wife, which implies that a shared duty to Christ overrides other disparities between members of a community. Gawain and the Lady both agree that a knight should serve his lord and lady, though their ideas differ as to what proper service entails. When the Lady asks Gawain to love her, he upholds ideals like Charny’s and ends his response with a reference to the Christian foundation of chivalry: “Kryst yow førelde” and “God yow førelde!” [God reward you] (1279; 1535). Although Bertilak’s wife asks Gawain for love, his references to God’s rewards satisfy the lady. The word “førelde” [reward, recompense] plays an important part in linking Christianity to more worldly ideals of chivalry because it expresses God’s blessings in economic terms. This link between Gawain’s Christian values and the lady’s secular principles allows Gawain to defend his virtue “so fayr þat no faut semed / Ne non euel on nawþer halue” [But with graciousness Gawain still guarded himself / Without fault. Both felt not unfriendly at all . . .] (1551-1552). Both the Lady and Gawain recognize the value of God’s rewards, which shows that even otherwise secular activities like love-making draw on Christian principles. In *SGGK*, as Laura Ashe points out, “Christianity is the constant, unchanging moral test” administered by an omniscient judge. Variations in characters’ interpretations of chivalric duty thus become inconsequential in the poem because they are shown to meet on the point of Christian virtue. This convergence unites Gawain, and implicitly Arthur’s community, to the population of Hautdesert by placing them under a single governing principle of devotion to God.

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72 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “foryelden,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED17364
Orthodox Christian values provide a strong common base for the community of the two courts, so although differences still exist between Camelot and Hautdesert, the poet renders these differences inconsequential to emphasize to his audience that geographical disparities are insignificant as compared to religious ones. To be sure, grounding English identity on Christianity does not do away with differences within the English nation, but SGK portrays an England where such differences can exist without producing social disharmony.74 Wendy Clein argues that Gawain’s and the Lady’s different views on chivalric ideals arise from “different texts within the courtly tradition,” specifically the French romance tradition of clandestine love and the English tradition of the knight as moral paragon.75 The poet personifies these two traditions through Bertilak’s wife and Gawain and shows that these traditions can coexist even alongside the more violent forms of chivalry represented by Bertilak and his men during the hunting scenes. Although Gawain’s words with the Lady exemplify the different textual traditions present in the poem, their disparate views branch from a common foundation on duty to Christ. According to David Aers, the Gawain-poet offers “not the slightest hint of forms of Christianity outside the court church.”76 The poet presents a society in which different interpretations of worldly ideals can coexist as long as those interpretations converge on orthodox Christian values. Although differences may exist between characters in the poem, the Gawain-poet imagines that these differences are not sufficient to sunder the English society because they express devotion to a common Christian faith.

74 Ingham finds that “relations of cultural heterogeneity that have often been forgotten in readings of [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight], are in fact embedded in it. Gawain itself seems invested in producing such forgetfulness,” Sovereign Fantasies, 109.
The poet further diminishes cultural differences between the two courts making Camelot and Hautdesert appear physically alike, showing that physically distant groups can still share a sense of common identity through fundamental principles. This further connects the two courts as an English community because they conform to the same set of ideals in both behavior and appearance. The *Gawain*-poet employs similar terms to describe the two castles and even decks the walls of the two courts with the same Toulousian and Tharsian tapestries (77-78; 858). The central secular values of Arthur’s court thus appear to be at work in Hautdesert despite its geographic remove from Camelot. On his arrival at Hautdesert, Gawain meets a host whose appearance is, as Sarah Stanbury argues, “entirely consistent with the rank [Gawain] wishes to assign him.”77 That is, the physical signs of Bertilak’s nobility conform to those Gawain has already experienced in Camelot, indicating that the two castles follow a similar, if not the same, set of principles. Proper behavior and visible signs of nobility translate almost perfectly from Camelot to Hautdesert. The poet unites Bertilak’s court and Arthur’s as parts of the English community through the commonalities in these descriptions. This interest in physical signs of nobility is certainly not confined to the realm of poetry, either. Richard II’s ostensible favorite, Robert de Vere, likely profited the most from the king’s largesse, which gained him land, titles, and women throughout his career at court. Other nobles thought de Vere undeserving of such generosity from the crown because the de Vere family had been among the poorest in the nobility.78 However, Richard’s generosity to his favorites gave them the appearance—and wealth—of the rest of the nobility in an attempt to legitimize their claims to higher economic status. Richard and the *Gawain*-poet both emphasize physical likeness to indicate more abstract similarities between communities.

77 Stanbury, 103.
78 Saul, 121.
These similar descriptions may seem incidental—praising the beauty and wealth of the nobility in superlative terms is a tradition of medieval romance—but they are in fact subtle elisions of difference between the two courts that strengthen the tenuous bonds between Arthur’s court and the inhabitants of Wales. The *Gawain*-poet includes the Welsh inhabitants of Hautdesert in the English community despite the tense relations between the English court and the Welsh people in the late fourteenth century. Arner reminds readers that the English saw Wales as an entry point for Scotch and French invasion forces, and “after the resumption of the Hundred Years War in 1367, [England placed] garrisons at most Welsh castles in the late 1370s.” The fortification of Welsh castles emblematizes the English attitude towards Wales during Richard II’s reign: the king repeatedly assigned his English nobles to positions in Welsh government, and he frequently looked to Wales for military support. Wales saw itself as a place apart from, or below, its English neighbors. The *Gawain*-poet, however, portrays the Welsh court as quite similar to the English court in that both are Christian courts united under the same set of ideals. And Gawain is able to integrate seamlessly into Hautdesert’s community because it is imagined as a companion piece to Arthur’s.

Of course, not every knight can make so smooth a transition from one castle to another. The odd appearance of the Green Knight at first sets him apart from members of Camelot’s court, but the poet is quick to explain that even one so alien as a gigantic green man can take part in the shared English identity if he is a Christian. The Green Knight’s entrance disrupts the Christmas celebration at Arthur’s court because of both his strange request and his stranger appearance. Arthur’s initial reaction is to offer the Green Knight a battle: “If thou craue batayl...

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79 Clein notes Hautdesert’s description and likens it to Camelot’s: “The orderliness and beauty of the castle recall the civilized world of Arthur’s court, and, like Camelot, Hautdesert evokes superlative terms,” *Concepts of Chivalry*, 95.
80 Arner, 82.
bare, / Here faylez þou not to fyght” [If combat’s what you crave, / We’ll find for you a fight] (277-278). However, as the Green Knight addresses the court at the feast, he makes it clear that he and his audience are part of the same community by saying that he desires “in þys court a Crystemas gomen” [I come to this court for a Christmastide game] (283). He avers his Christian faith through references to Christ and the Christian calendar, which would be familiar to the audience and to Arthur’s community. Many critics have noted the importance of the time structure of SGGK’s narrative, saying that although it is “clearly a secular romance, [it] nonetheless is built around a calendar of liturgical time.”82 The Green Knight’s references to Christ also play a part in the court’s decision to accept the terms of the game because his speech places him within the Christian community. When the Green Knight thus positions himself as a member of the English nation, his request for a game ceases to threaten Arthur’s court so strongly, for Arthur no longer offers the Green Knight a fight after the Knight’s references to the Christian calendar. Although the Knight still physically appears to be an outsider, the residents of Camelot begin to recognize his Englishness, which is founded on his apparent Christian faith. The Gawain-poet here implies that the English community can include even people as alien as the Green Knight as long as they are loyal to the same religious creed.

From the poem’s network of references to orthodox faith and chivalric obligation, there emerges an image of an English community united primarily by ideals of duty, both spiritual and secular, rather than solely by customs of exchange. Like his contemporary romance writer, Thomas Chestre, the Gawain-poet uses economic trades between characters to indicate the bounds of the English community, although the economies in Chestre’s Sir Launfal and SGGK

are not at all identical. While Sir Launfal’s economy depends largely on appraisal, the gift economy of SGGK resists attempts to evaluate the goods exchanged in order to make the exchanges less about the commodities themselves and more about the act of giving. This resistance to evaluation becomes most apparent in the terms of Bertilak’s agreement with Gawain to exchange their winnings. At the end of Fitt II, Bertilak proposes the start of the game of exchange: “Quatsoeuer I wynne in þe wod hit worþez to yourez / And quat chek so þe acheue chaunge me þerforne” [What I win in the woods or the wilds will be yours; / What you gain you will give, bad or good, in exchange] (1106-1107). When they make the agreement to exchange their winnings, neither knight can reasonably determine the value of what he will give or what he will receive the following evening. Although the poem suggests that Bertilak’s venison and Gawain’s kiss may both be exchanged as winnings on the first night of the game, their exchange takes no account of determinate market value. Indeed, when Bertilak asks Gawain about where he “wan þis ilk wele” [won this gift], Gawain quickly recites to Bertilak the terms of their agreement, which takes no account of where the goods were won (1394-1396). Bertilak’s wish to know the origin of the kiss reveals his desire to determine the value of the gift, but Gawain reminds his host that in a gift economy, participants should evaluate neither what they receive from their lords nor what they give to their lords—they should, in Charny’s terms, try to maintain their honor and status without trying to perceive who has come out ahead in the bargain. Yet such idealism did not prevail in the poem’s historical context. The commons during Richard II’s reign repeatedly evaluated what they received from the government, which the Gawain-poet saw as a threat to the sense of English community. They felt the king spent their taxes ineffectively on unprofitable military campaigns, which fostered the growing resistance to taxation that led to the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, a clear statement of social division based
largely on economic status. By proscribing appraisal in exchanges, the Gawain-poet imagines an economy in which such resentment is impossible as long as the act of giving occurs.

The Gawain-poet’s emphasis on the obligation to trade gifts unites the two courts in the text by demonstrating the overarching principles of exchange they share. Gawain’s words to his host on the second night of the exchange game emphasize the act of swapping gifts more than the value of the goods, indicating that proper service is more important than giving gifts of equal price: “Now ar we euen . . . in þis euentide, / Of alle couenauntes þat we knyt syþen I com hider, / Bi lawe” [Now the score’s even, sir; and the slate is wiped clean. / For the covenant we came to is kept as of this / Good date.] (1641-1643). The concept of debt is certainly present in this exchange since Gawain declares that he and his host are even after the trade, but it is the act of giving—and not the value of the goods exchanged—that puts one knight in debt to the other. The debt arises not from the value of the goods, but from the obligation to give. The gift exchanges in SGGK willfully ignore the price of goods because, as Ralph Hannah argues, “getting a bad deal is undone by the fun of playing the game.” And more than the fun of the game, the players discharge their duties to each other, strengthening the community by giving according to custom rather than setting definite value on goods and services. The English nobility exercised just such a reliance on customary giving during the late fourteenth century. J. M. W. Bean notes that members of noble households took it “as a matter of course that much [in determining indentures and wages] should be left to usage and custom as well as the mutual respect and loyalty” inherent in the relationships between lords and their men. The confidence in custom apparent in this relation supersedes the importance of a determinate wage. The members of this system

83 Tuck, Richard II and the English Nobility, 44.
84 Hannah, 154.
shun exact evaluation in favor of participating in the act of giving. Just as the payment of wages arises from an English tradition, the debt incurred in Bertilak’s game of exchange arises not from the value of the chattel, but from the mutual obligation to give generously without considering the price of the gift itself. The mutual impulse to give without considering value demonstrates that Gawain and Bertilak adhere to similar principles, indicating that they are members of the same community despite the geographical distance between Hautdesert and Camelot.

Understanding the religious and economic foundations of the English community in *SGGK* can lead critics to a new interpretation of the green girdle and Gawain’s failure in taking his hostess’ gift: he falls short of both his religious and chivalric duties through an act of exchange. Gawain takes the girdle not out of obligation but because he knows its value. Such an appraisal of a gift appears to be a sin against both God and chivalry in the eyes of the *Gawain*-poet. A knight’s openhandedness helps him participate in the English community, so evaluating the girdle indicates a degree of self-concern in Gawain that is unacceptable in the ideal English economy because it serves not the community but the knight himself. On hearing of the girdle’s power, Gawain thinks to himself that it is “a juel for þe jopardé þat hym jugged were . . . Myȝt he haf slypped to be vnslayn þe sleȝt were noble” [For his great, grueling task, a godsend indeed. Could he value his vow and survive nonetheless, / Take his thrust and yet thrive, it would thoroughly please!] (1856-1858). Although many critics have analyzed Gawain’s decision to conceal the Lady’s green girdle, few have discussed the importance of this choice in the context of the gift economy, a tool the *Gawain*-poet uses often to symbolize the ideals of the community in *SGGK*.86 Gawain fears that the stroke of the Green Knight’s axe may be too generous for his

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neck to bear, so he accepts the girdle to protect himself. Charny cautions against succumbing to such fear when he directs knights never to admit the possibility of defeat in battle: “be strong in heart, firm, and confident, always expecting victory, not defeat, whether or not you are on top, for whatever the situation, you will always do well because of the good hopes that you have.”\(^{87}\)

According to Charny, a knight’s duty is to act bravely in battle, not to consider first how a fight may end. Gawain’s fear manifests in his decision to accept the girdle as a protective talisman rather than rely on his own courage and fortitude.

Further, when Gawain makes this self-seeking choice, he also forgets his devotion to Mary and Christ, the source of the pentangle knight’s “forsnes.” Gawain’s decision to keep the green girdle for his own protection goes against both the chivalric ideals he is supposed to represent and the religious devotion he should show to Mary in this time of need. The pentangle specifies that Gawain gets his courage from his devotion to Mary, so this failure of fortitude indicates that he is no longer looking to Mary, no longer serving in her honor. Taking the girdle symbolizes Gawain’s doubt in Mary’s ability to defend him from the Green Knight’s axe, a doubt that runs counter to proper Christian devotion. However, such a failure is not a slip in the poem’s chivalric ideals due to external pressures, as Aers and Spearing see it. Accepting the gift is instead a personal transgression against chivalry and faith for which Gawain must atone to regain his place in the English community.

The poet illustrates this transgression with the same tool he used to show Gawain’s fellowship: acts of exchange. Commerce in \textit{Sir Gawain and the Green Knight} directs the audience’s attention not to the gifts given or the goods purchased but to the sense of duty—

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\(^{87}\) Charny, 23.63-66. The original text reads, “aiez les cuers fors et fermes et / sceurs et touzjours en bonne esperance de vaincre et non mie estre vaincus, / soit au dessous ou au dessus, que comment qu’il soit, ferez vous toujous / bien pour la bonne esperance que vous avrez . . .”
\end{quote}
arising from a Christian foundation—that drives characters to serve each other. While Richard II had to resort to verbal violence to defend the hierarchy of his court from Scrope’s presumptuous advice, the *Gawain*-poet needs only a prayer or a friendly trade of gifts to uphold the Christian ideals central to his poem’s community. For Thomas Chestre largesse indicates economic ideals that unify the characters of his poem, but the *Gawain*-poet depicts generosity and commerce to illustrate Christian principles of fellowship that help create a sense of common identity between his characters. From the description of Gawain’s pentangle to his conversations with his hosts at Hautdesert, the *Gawain*-poet employs imagery of commerce to illustrate his poem’s Christian foundation. Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*, also a romance of the late fourteenth century, uses exchange to express fundamental principles of his poem’s community as Chestre and the *Gawain*-poet have, although Chaucer’s poem focuses neither on appraisal nor on Christian values. Instead, Chaucer’s romance expands on depictions of economic exchange in medieval romance by deploying hospitality and gift-giving as vehicles for creating pleasure in both giver and receiver, emphasizing “pleyn delit” [pure pleasure] as the ultimate goal of service.
It is a truth universally acknowledged that a knight in possession of nobility and worth must be in want of a lady or a quest—at least in the genre of medieval romance. But when the knight marries the lady in the first thirty lines of the poem and his chivalric achievements are collapsed into a single heroic couplet, the subject matter of the romance tradition seems rather to form a background for the expression of concerns different from those of conventional romances. Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*, unlike other romances, specifies that nobility is achieved not through birth, but through proper behavior. From the *Tale*’s beginning—with Arveragus’ worthy courtship of Dorigen—to its concluding statement that a clerk can perform a noble deed as well as a knight or a squire can, correct service takes center stage rather than a traditional romance topic such as the knight’s quest in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or the love of a magical lady in *Sir Launfal*. Rather than regale his listeners with a story of knightly combat or games of love, the Franklin relates a romance in which hospitality and pleasure occupy the thematic foreground. Frequent mentions of pleasure through terms like “pleyn delit,” “plesaunce,” “pley,” “lust,” and “deyntee” all direct readers’ attention beyond the visible materials of hospitality, such as food and drink, to the delight characters derive from good food and service. Through his focus on pleasure, specifically the mutual pleasure hosts and guests feel when giving generously, the Franklin reimagines romance ideals to allow all of his characters to do a gentle deed, provided that the deed pleases others. The Franklin even redefines the traditional images of romance—feasts, decorations, love tokens—as tools for reaching enjoyment in his *Tale* to direct his listeners toward a new model of gentle behavior that places the giver and receiver of hospitality on an even plane in judging the nobility of an act. The emphasis on pleasure in determining
nobility allows socially disenfranchised characters like Dorigen and the tale-teller Franklin, who are denied a voice by gender and social class respectively, to exercise agency through expressions of displeasure or delight that are ignored in other romances.

Critics have for some time noted and debated the importance of service in the *Franklin’s Tale* and the Franklin’s redefinition of *gentillesse* as status based on noble works. 

Lynn Staley comments that, when describing the Franklin, Chaucer “places in the foreground what might well be background (the Franklin’s style of living)” while bracketing any specifics about the Franklin’s location in England’s social and political hierarchies. This very foregrounding of the Franklin’s hospitality shows how essential service is in his conception of noble deeds. Further emphasizing the importance of generous acts in the *Tale*, Andrea Rossi-Reder finds gender to be a determining factor in hospitality: “Generosity is deemed an active choice performed only by physically active men.” She specifically highlights the way Aurelius’ sickness makes him unable to perform gentle deeds by confining him to bed just as Dorigen is largely confined to the house in Arveragus’ absence. While the role of service in the *Franklin’s Tale* has certainly not gone unnoticed, critics tend to overlook the pleasure that comes with generosity and hospitality in the Franklin’s portrait and *Tale*. The images of hospitality in the *Franklin’s Tale* complicate traditional romance ideals of service (which primarily highlight a character’s openhandedness in dealing with both lords and peasants) by underscoring first the actor’s noble generosity and then

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88 For example, Steele Nowlin argues that the *Franklin’s Tale* “is able to articulate the conception of alternative possibility” in the framework of nobility through changes in the *Tale*’s landscape, “Between Precedent and Possibility: Liminality, Historicity, and Narrative in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 103.1 (2006): 47-67; Cathy Hume also notes the tension between modes of masculine dominance and nobility in the *Franklin’s Tale* when she contends that Arveragus’ “concern with reputation will lead him to pay lip service to an ideal of male dominance that he does not espouse in private,” “‘The Name of Soveraynte’: The Private and Public Faces of Marriage in Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 105.3 (2008): 284-303.


the mutual pleasure the giver and receiver experience as a result of noble deeds. Rather than uphold the rigid social hierarchy presented in such romances as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal*, the Franklin’s *General Prologue* portrait and his *Tale* focus on lavish displays of hospitality—which I will call domestic *gentillesse*—to refigure notions of ideal service and behavior in the English community. The pleasure the Franklin and other characters take in domestic *gentillesse* acts as an indicator of what constitutes both proper service and noble actions.

The Franklin’s focus on pleasure arises from the nature of a franklin’s position as an auditor of sorts in fourteenth-century England. The ambiguous social position of England’s minor gentry, of which the Franklin is a part, has prompted much discussion among both historians and literary critics, many of whom note that “franklin” resists a clear definition in part because of shifting views on nobility in the fourteenth century. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines “frankelin” as a “landowner and member of the gentry ranking immediately below the nobility.”

However, this simplistic definition fixes the franklin’s position in the system of estates (the three-estate model divided into the clergy, nobility, and peasantry) without accounting for the history of the term. Gerald Harriss turns to records of taxation to determine the social position of franklins: “In the 1379 poll tax ‘franklins’ were rated as lesser esquires, and by 1400 the line separating them from the *valettus*, or ‘yeomen,’ was coming to be that which defined gentility.” Harriss’ observation points out the instability of the term “franklin” with regard to the medieval estates, especially during the years 1380-1400 when Chaucer was writing. The franklins existed somewhere between the nobles and the peasantry, but their exact status shifted continually. Indeed, the English gentry often sustained the ambiguous definition of

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nobility by declining to take the honor of knighthood. Derek Brewer notes a consistent “reluctance to be knighted among the English gentry” during and before Chaucer’s time.93 By deciding to remain outside the estate of the bellatores, the nobility and men-at-arms, these wealthy landholders suggested that noble status obtained through combat was not as desirable as the knights and nobles thought it was.

Chaucer’s Franklin focuses on aspects of nobility in his Tale primarily through emphasizing noble behavior rather than titles or social status. Although the franklins were not securely defined as members of the nobility, they were often considered “gentle” in a sense relating to social standing. Describing the English social order of the late fourteenth century, Harriss writes that “[t]o the extent that the greater and lesser gentry tended to inhabit different landscapes as well as different social worlds, their gentility was of a different order and kind.”94 The franklins occupy a space separated from that of the knights and the nobility, a liminal space between the gentry and the peasantry. Noting the marginality of franklins in English society, Susan Crane draws a parallel between Chaucer’s Franklin and Dorigen, the heroine of the Franklin’s Tale, arguing that the tale “comments on romance’s literary authority and on the power of its hierarchies to disenfranchise by measures of gender and class.”95 Because both the Franklin and Dorigen occupy unstable positions in their societies, Crane argues that the Franklin’s Tale attempts to renovate the current system to give both characters a sense of autonomy; she also sees the Tale as failing in its task since both characters eventually capitulate to oppressive traditions of class and gender hierarchy.96 However, Chaucer’s Franklin leaves open the possibility that domestic gentillesses can serve the same role as the chivalric prowess of

94 Harriss, 139.
96 Ibid.
men-at-arms in attesting to a person’s nobility. The prospect of performing *gentillesse* works against the disenfranchising power of class Crane sees in the *Tale* by allowing any person, regardless of social rank, to do a noble deed.

A fixation on occupations in the *Franklin’s Tale* and portrait raises further questions regarding noble work in the English community. The Franklin defines the social roles of his male characters clearly: the knight, Arveragus; the squire, Aurelius; and the anonymous clerk of Orleans. In contrast to these clear delineations, the Franklin has held a number of roles in his community, including those of sheriff, auditor, parliamentary representative, and vavasour. However, he does not hold all of these positions at once. “Ful ofte tyme” the Franklin serves in some of these capacities, while he had been in the past a “shirreve . . . and a contour,” but presumably does not work as either any longer (I.356; I.359). His position in his community, then, is much less stable than those of the men in his *Tale*, each of whom holds only one place in the estate system. The last of the Franklin’s titles has drawn particular attention from critics for its significance both to history and the romance tradition—“vavasour” was archaic even to Chaucer’s readers. Laura F. Hodges finds “the Franklin’s dignity and hospitality, signified by his white beard and gipser” to be consistent with vavasours in other romances. Her reading connects Chaucer’s Franklin to the French romance tradition primarily through his clothing and personality; other critics focus more centrally on the work involved in his official capacities by referencing historical records of vavasours’ duties. According to Cara Hersh, the Franklin’s work as a vavasour would involve “analyzing his neighbors’ possessions for the king, and he would

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simultaneously be forced to have his own possessions analyzed by the king.”99 This medial
position of at once assessing and being assessed would seem to frustrate the Franklin’s possible
claims to gentle social status by placing him always beneath those who appraise him, but through
his tale he imagines a community in which all are assessed based on the quality of their work,
regardless of social standing. He does his own noble acts in the form of his magnificent
hospitality and allows others similar avenues to perform gentle deeds.

Chaucer’s descriptions of the Franklin often associate pleasure with satisfactory service,
especially with reference to food’s use in domestic gentilnesse. Scholars who focus on the food
imagery in the Franklin’s portrait typically read it as evidence of Chaucer’s engagement with the
genre of medieval estates satire.100 While the description of fish and flesh “so plenteous / It
snewed in his hous of mete and drynke” may resemble the falling of manna from heaven or the
overabundance of food on a glutton’s table, this image also expands on the “sop in wyn” the
Franklin “wel love[s]” (I.344-345; I.334). To be sure, the Franklin’s unique foodstuffs play a
large part in his hospitality (“His breed, his ale, was alweys after oon; / A bettre envyned man
was nowher noon”), but Chaucer uses food imagery as a way to demonstrate the satisfaction the
Franklin’s guests feel at his home (I.341-342). The Franklin’s portrait contains many references
to the pleasure he takes in hospitality, so his “delit,” as well as the pleasure of other characters,
forms an essential part of gentle behavior as depicted in his portrait and his Tale (I.337).101

99 Cara Hersh, “Knowledge of the Files: Subverting Bureaucratic Legibility in the Franklin’s Tale,” The Chaucer
Review 43.4 (2009), 435.
100 Jill Mann sees the Franklin’s portrait as a poetic refiguring of “a diseased and queasy glutton” into “a fresh-
complexioned man with an excellent stomach,” Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social
Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 156.
Mann’s reading points up the similarities between the Franklin’s portrait and depictions of gluttons in other
medieval texts and emphasizes Chaucer’s engagement with Christian imagery of bounty. See also Frederick B.
Jonassen, “Carnival Food Imagery in Chaucer’s Description of the Franklin,” Studies in the Age of Chaucer 16
The Franklin’s words at the end of the *Squire’s Tale* highlight the centrality of pleasure in the Franklin’s idea of *gentillessse* by persistently expressing anxiety over the sufficiency of his work. While the Franklin’s hospitality conforms to notions of gentility that involve giving freely, he also encourages those he serves to evaluate his service so that he can judge whether he has done well enough, whether he has pleased the other pilgrims and done a gentle deed. When the host asks the Franklin to tell his tale, the Franklin answers that he will tell a tale to the best of his ability—“As fer as that my wittes wol suffyse” (V.705). But before he begins his tale, he prays “that it may plesen [his listeners]; / Thanne woot [he] wel that it is good ynow” (V.707-708). The phrase “good ynow” implies that there is no clear division between a good story and a bad one. Instead, the Franklin emphasizes that a speaker may satisfy his listeners by telling a tale that is good enough. If the other pilgrims can derive pleasure from his narrative, he will judge it not as wholly good, but as sufficient. The Franklin’s concern for the adequacy of his tale extends as well to his hospitality at home, indicating a more general anxiety over satisfactory service: “Wo was his cook but if his sauce were / Poynaunt and sharp, and redy al his geere” (I.351-352). The Franklin’s cook, like his employer, fears delivering inadequate service whether by making bland food or being unprepared to do his work. When Crane argues that the Franklin advocates a form of “*gentillessse* [that] can be learned and deliberately practiced,” she overlooks domestic *gentillessse*’s dual dependence on freely providing service and on the receiver’s judgment of that service.102 The cook’s work is not noble because he gives food to the hungry or the needy, but because the diners judge his sauces “[p]oynaunt and sharp”; likewise, if the Franklin is to tell a tale that is “good ynow,” it is not enough that he speak it freely or completely. The story’s qualities and the Franklin’s eloquence must please his listeners if he is to judge his service as adequate.

102 Crane, “The Franklin as Dorigen,” 238.
Chaucer, too, avers the importance of enjoyment to the sort of nobility the Franklin advocates, calling attention to pleasure in a larger context of performing noble acts. Pleasure dominates the idea of gentillesse in the Franklin’s portrait: he holds the “opinioun that pleyn delit / Was verray felicitee parfit” (I.337-338). In this view, any act that produces “pleyn delit” can also lead to happiness, which subsequently defines that act as a noble deed. Although food is a central vehicle of pleasure in the Franklin’s portrait and to some degree in his Tale, Chaucer places emphasis not on the food itself but on the “pleyn delit” [pure pleasure] of the diners.103 Noting Chaucer’s use of pleasure throughout his poetry, George Kane observes that “in the scale of philosophical values self-gratification takes a lower place than any activity that benefits others.”104 The Franklin’s ideal of pure pleasure, though, involves gratification of both others and oneself—“pleyn delit” is diluted by neither the host’s nor the guest’s displeasure. An element of self-gratification thus must be present for any act to produce the “pleyn delit” the Franklin seeks because both parties must derive enjoyment from it. Chaucer’s contemporaries placed the same dual stress on the pleasure of the giver and the receiver. Richard II’s gift-giving practices in particular show a desire to gratify both himself and the recipient of a gift. Anthony Tuck directs readers to Richard’s patents such as the earl of Suffolk’s in 1385, in which Richard states that giving gifts to worthy men adorns the English “crown . . . with gems and precious stones.”105 His words imply that his largesse pleases both the new earl and the king by decorating them each with the signs of generosity and nobility. Just as Richard sees generous giving as an act of nobility because it produces mutual pleasure, so does the Franklin emphasize that lavish hospitality makes a host gentle by pleasing his guests.

104 George Kane, Chaucer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 111.
This is not to say that the *Franklin’s Tale* ignores knights’ acts of nobility. Chaucer balances the Franklin’s hospitality with references to chivalric virtue in the *Franklin’s Tale* to show that knights earn their place in the estate system by performing noble deeds that bring honor to the community and pleasure to the knight. The Franklin notes the value of men-at-arms when Arveragus leaves Brittany to fight in England. Knights, in the Franklin’s view, obtain and preserve their value through work as soldiers:

[Arveragus] Shoop hym to goon and dwelle a yeer or tweyne

In Engelond, that cleped was eek Briteyne,

To seke in armes worshipe and honour—

For al his lust he sette in swich labour . . . (V.809-812)

The Franklin here defines a knight’s work as seeking renown in combat in foreign lands. While a franklin’s work takes place primarily in his own home, Arveragus must journey out of his home country of Brittany to seek his “labour,” and this work in arms can bring him “worshipe and honour.” But the profits of his quests do not identify Arveragus’ combat as a noble deed; rather, the “lust” he sets in winning praise establishes his *gentillesse*. As the Franklin loves his sop in wine in the morning, the knight in his *Tale* sets his lust in chivalric exploits. The noun form of “lust,” according to the *MED*, denotes both “a feeling of pleasure” and “something causing pleasure,” so Arveragus’ fighting is noble largely because it pleases him to win renown.106

Chaucer’s readers likely did not share the idea that worship and honor are valuable profits of wars, though, as evidenced by the commons’ unfavorable reactions when Richard requested taxes to fund expensive military actions abroad. W. M. Ormrod notes that throughout the 1380s,

106 *Middle English Dictionary*, s. v. “lust,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED26376. Although lust often connotes sexual desire and pleasure in Middle English, it does so primarily in the context of “fleshy lust.” The Franklin as narrator does not specify that Arveragus’ lust here is sexual or fleshy, though, implying that Arveragus derives a sort of pleasure independent of sexual gratification from the labor of chivalric *gentillesse*. 
Richard II spent large sums of money on several unpopular and unproductive campaigns in France and Scotland.\textsuperscript{107} The commons, with memories of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 likely still fresh in their minds, were reluctant to support such apparently unprofitable wars. However, the \textit{Franklin’s Tale} indicates that foreign wars can produce another sort of profit—“worshipe and honour.” Chaucer’s Franklin thus engages with contemporary anxiety over the value of knightly labor by pointing out that combat against national enemies produces intangible gains which have a value of their own.

Honor and respect had been figured as immaterial spoils of war for some time before Chaucer wrote the \textit{Franklin’s Tale}, and romances roughly contemporary to Chaucer’s express a similar desire to position praise as a valid form of profit from war, but Chaucer’s text differs in its emphasis on the labor of the knight rather than the profit he receives from his work. The Franklin’s ideas on knightly duty echo medieval treatises on chivalry such as Geoffroi de Charny’s \textit{Book of Chivalry}, a French text dated circa 1352 which outlines various aspects of proper chivalric behavior.\textsuperscript{108} Although Charny directs his readers to consider the value of different types of spoils and booty, he strongly favors the rewards of honor and prestige:

\begin{quote}
And one ought instead to be wary of the booty which results in the loss of honor, life, and possessions. In this vocation one should therefore set one’s heart and mind on winning honor, which endures forever, rather than on winning profit and booty, which one can lose within one single hour.\textsuperscript{109}
\end{quote}


Indeed, Charny disparages those who lust too strongly for temporary rewards like money and goods. He prefers honor for its enduring quality and advises his readers to seek these permanent rewards in favor of worldly wealth. Thomas Chestre, a contemporary of Chaucer, similarly figures prestige as the profit of combat in Sir Launfal: after Sir Launfal slaughters the lords of Lumbardye in a tournament, King Arthur hears “tydyng . . . Of Syr Launfales noblesse,” and Guinevere sees such improvement in Launfal’s standing that she deems him worthy of seduction.110 Arveragus appears to fit well into a textual tradition of knights who seek prestige by performing feats in arms. However, he sets his sights not simply on winning honor; instead, “al his lust he sette in swich labour” as will bring him honor and worship. Arveragus’ pleasure in the labors of knighthood can be considered an indicator of the narrator’s motives in this Tale. The Franklin emphasizes both the prestige a knight can win and the process by which the knight gains praise to show his audience that a knight’s nobility derives not from his innate characteristics, but from labor he performs. This helps the Franklin redefine gentillesse as the product of noble work, work either chivalric or domestic.

Many critics have discussed the Franklin’s fixation on noble acts in his Tale, but not all readers of the Franklin’s Tale note the importance of knightly activities in particular. J. A. Burrow is startled to “hear the chief business of so many romances—seeking honor in arms—thus dismissed” in such short order.111 He finds the Franklin’s real concern far away from the battlefield: Burrow, along with many other critics, sees the tale centering instead on Dorigen’s

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To be sure, the brevity of this passage makes it appear as if Arveragus’ actions as a knight are unimportant, and the lack of specificity (“swich labour”) points to a narrator unfamiliar or unconcerned with the work of the bellatores. Yet the Franklin does spend significant time elsewhere in his Tale describing knightly activities such as hunting and “seeking honor in arms,” which indicates that the value of chivalric pursuits is also of central importance in the Franklin’s Tale.

At the same time as Chaucer’s Franklin depicts chivalric honor as real and valuable, he also advocates using domestic gentillesse to demonstrate gentility to guests and observers. Images of hospitality take the foreground in the Franklin’s Tale, especially when Aurelius and his brother visit the clerk of Orleans at his home. In a passage that has gone unnoticed by many scholars, the clerk receives his guests warmly and displays, through his magical powers of illusion, a generosity surpassing anything Aurelius has ever experienced:

And with this magicien forth is [Aurelius] gon

Hoom to his hous, and maden hem wel at ese.

Hem lakked no vitaille that myght hem plese.

So wel arrayed hous as ther was oon

Aurelius in his lyf saugh never noon. (V.1884-1888)

The singularity of the clerk’s house appears primarily through the work that maintains its extravagance. The clerk, presumably in addition to his servants, “maden” the guests “at ese” through actively extending hospitality. Their efforts to “plese” [satisfy, gratify] Aurelius and his

brother become visible through food, but as he did in the Franklin’s portrait, Chaucer moves the reader’s focus from the abundance of the “vitaille” to the pleasure the food can produce for both host and guest. Furthermore, domestic gentillesse becomes visible through the house’s decorations, but even the physical signs of opulence come from the work of the host and his servants. Aurelius sees that the house is better “arrayed” than any he has ever seen before. The MED defines “arraien” (the infinitive form of “arrayed”) as “to put (things) in order, to adorn, to provide.” The clerk’s house appears noble due in large part to the work its inhabitants put into decorating and arranging the rooms. Their labor thus helps to display and create the clerk’s gentillesse in the eyes of his guests and the narrator.

In the General Prologue, Chaucer uses similar, though less magical, strategies to show that the Franklin’s wealth becomes perceptible through noble work. As the array of the clerk’s home asserts the reality of his gentillesse, the Franklin’s affluence appears through the labor of his household: “His table dormant in his halle always / Stood redy covered al the longe day” (I.353-354). The table lies still while the servants cover and dress it for meals. No other furniture besides the table appears in the Franklin’s portrait, which shows that for the Franklin, material adornments have little signifying power compared to gracious service. Gone are the richly embroidered tent flaps of Tryamour’s pavilion in Sir Launfal and the Toulousian tapestries of Arthur’s and Bertilak’s courts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight—these inactive indicators of nobility fall into the background of the Franklin’s Tale. Indeed, the narrator gives no details of the array of the Franklin’s or the clerk’s house besides to say that the work of decoration is well done. Even the food at the Franklin’s home bears witness to the host’s good work. He exercises beneficial control over the diet of his household by changing his meals “[a]fter the sondry sesons

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113 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “plesen,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED33713
114 Middle English Dictionary, s.v. “arraien,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED2316
of the yeer” (I.347-348). The labor of hospitality ultimately defines gentillesse in this Tale as a performative act in that the host’s nobility manifests through forms of work.

Drawing focus toward service rather than status adapts the system that disenfranchises the Franklin without calling for its complete destruction. Rather, the Franklin wants to validate both chivalric and domestic gentillesse, which he combines in his Tale at the clerk’s house. The clerk of Orleans does not restrict himself simply to domestic shows of hospitality. More chivalric expressions of nobility occur alongside the domestic displays of gentillesse at the clerk’s home. Before taking his guests to eat, the clerk shows them “Forestes, parkes ful of wilde deer” and scenes of hunting with hounds and hawks (V.1189-1197). A transition follows which demonstrates the proximity of the two modes of noble behavior, separating them by the door between the clerk’s grounds and his home’s entryway:

Tho saugh he knyghtes justyng in a playn;
And after this he dide hym swich plesaunce
That he hym shewed his lady on a daunce,
On which hymself he daunced, as hym thoughte. (V.1198-1201)

If franklins and knights truly occupied different landscapes, as Gerald Harriss argues, then this passage reimagines the division of their demesnes by placing the two forms of gentility—military and domestic—on literally the same estate, though in different parts of it. The Franklin places the knights’ jousting outside on the plain while the dancing takes place within the home, showing two forms of ritualized and recreational movement that play a part in the two types of gentillesse. These apparently disparate forms of gentillesse thus play complementary roles in nobility. The Franklin here is not attempting to break down the current social order, nor does he demand “the division of lordship among all men,” as Christopher Dyer says the rebellious
peasants did at Smithfield in 1381 when they spoke with the king.115 Rather, the Franklin asks his listeners to consider an expansion of prevalent chivalric modes of gentillesse to include those which franklins can perform in the domestic sphere.

The Franklin’s juxtaposition of different modes of noble behavior does prompt interpretative questions over the narrator’s preference, though. Closer examination of diction reveals that the Franklin’s representations of domestic and chivalric gentillesse are far from equitable—the repetition of pleasure within the house is balanced by an equal emphasis on suffering outside on the tournament and hunting grounds. This contrast clearly places the Franklin’s domestic gentillesse in a position preferable to chivalric pursuits. While Aurelius can view knights jousting in the field, he cannot take part in the chivalric contest. In contrast, the clerk does Aurelius “swich plesaunce” as to let him dance with the lady of the house. Domestic pleasures are thus much more immediate than those of chivalry because anyone can participate in a dance, while only trained knights may joust pleasurably. Furthermore, the majestic hunt inflicts pain on the deer, which Aurelius sees either being “slayn with houndes” or bleeding “from bittre woundes” (V.1193-1194). Red blood spills from the deer’s bitter wounds on the hunting grounds while, in the Franklin’s own home, sops of bread drink in sweet red wine each morning to provide comfort and pleasure to those at the table. The forest’s “voyded” [emptied or purged] deer take the place of the clerk’s and Franklin’s tables, which are replete with food that can please and fill the guests (V.1195).116 The superior form of gentillesse, the narrator implies, is one that gives pleasure to all without causing apparent suffering—one that produces “pleyn delit” without images of pain and emptiness.

Although the knights’ games exclude the observers at the clerk’s estate, a host and his guests can all derive pleasure from hospitality, which suggests that domestic gentillesse brings together different groups more effectively than chivalry does. Throughout the romance tradition and fourteenth-century English politics, hospitality operates as a tool for social unification. Thomas Chestre’s Sir Launfal shows generosity to men of all estates—clerics, knights, and even prisoners—to demonstrate that hospitality touches all parts of the English community.117 Likewise, in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Gawain’s fellowship extends to “al þyng” in the realm.118 These knights appear as paragons of chivalric behavior in large part due to their generosity. Nigel Saul explains that, in the age of Richard II, “hospitality [offered to ambassadors] had to be lavish enough to attest the wealth and magnificence of the ruler offering it. There was little room for economy in the battle to sway opinion by appearances.”119 During and after the negotiations for Richard’s marriage to Anne of Bohemia, the English crown incurred vast expenses from hosting the more senior members of the Bohemian party long after the wedding ceremony.120 The spectacle of generosity occupied the minds of romance writers and nobles alike for its ability to show disparate communities joining together. Chaucer, too, takes up the idea of hospitality in his poetry, but his Franklin exhibits an even stronger concern for the value of domestic gentillesse than Chaucer’s contemporaries do. The Franklin understands displays of generosity not as demonstrations of enormous wealth, but as performances that create the host’s nobility. The clerk of Orleans states this most directly at the end of the Franklin’s Tale when he declares to Aurelius that “if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede / As wel as any of yow [a squire and a knight], it is no drede!” (V.1611-1612). Here, it is not the

117 Chestre, ll. 421-432.
120 Ibid, 92-93.
actor who is “gentil,” but the deed itself which creates gentillesse. Despite the division of estates which excludes laboratores from nobility, members of any estate can perform a “gentil dede” of hospitality or generosity by pleasing their guests and themselves.

It is precisely this focus on mutual pleasure in service that impels Aurelius to release Dorigen from her rash promise at the end of the Tale. When, early in the Franklin’s Tale, Aurelius attempts to woo Dorigen, she refuses on the grounds that she is married: “Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf / In word ne werk” (V.984-985). While this instance reinforces Dorigen’s submission to masculine authority (in her desire to remain in the subordinate gendered position of wife), it also emphasizes the role of proper speech and work in maintaining truth. Dorigen must continually and adequately perform the role of a true wife through her words and actions if she wants to retain her honor. She also reminds Aurelius that he should take no “deyntee” [delight, pleasure] in loving another man’s wife (V.1003-1005). Extramarital love cannot produce “pleyn delit” in the Franklin’s Tale because Dorigen refuses to derive pleasure from being untrue to her husband at the same time as she discourages others from forcing untruth upon her in the form of adultery. She asks Aurelius to consider carefully the implications of his request for her love by reminding him that she could lose her position if she were to love Aurelius. Such reflection on possible costs and losses of status also characterizes franklins during the late fourteenth century. Harriss argues that the medieval gentry kept “a strict account . . . of daily, weekly, and monthly expenditure . . . [in order] to maintain a lifestyle appropriate to their station and avoid debt.” A franklin’s wealth is made to appear consistent and inexhaustible through careful budgeting of gains and expenses. His concern with economic stability corresponds to Dorigen’s desire to maintain her social position of faithful wife in that both seek

121 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “deinte,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED10899
122 Harriss, 151-152.
to avoid loss. Dorigen perceives a potential for loss of social status in the idea of loving Aurelius, so she tries to emphasize this possibility, along with her displeasure, to him in order to deter his efforts.

Dorigen fails to assess adequately her own expenses in the form of the promise she makes to Aurelius, which leads to the Tale’s central conflict that she must resolve by further expressing her displeasure at his wooing. Immediately after rejecting Aurelius’ advances, she says “in pley” [merriment, pleasure, playful or gentle words] that if Aurelius can remove the rocks from Brittany’s coast, then she will love him “best of any man” (V.988-998).123 Aurelius laments the fact that Dorigen asks him to perform an impossible task, but he also takes the words she said “in pley” as indicating her pleasure rather than her insincerity. Critics tend to find that Dorigen’s gender—and not her intention—determines the meaning of her words to Aurelius. Many scholars have noted that in this instance “Dorigen finds herself ventriloquizing encouragement” while trying to resist Aurelius’ advances, which indicates to Crane “that there is no vocabulary of refusal in [the] generic context” of romance.124 She finds their interaction important because it perpetuates romance conventions despite Dorigen’s apparent resistance. Critics note the importance of gender in Dorigen’s and Aurelius’ actions, but they overlook the force that Dorigen’s displeasure carries when she finally meets Aurelius in the town gardens.

Despite the lack of a verbal “vocabulary of refusal,” Dorigen can still demonstrate her reluctance by letting Aurelius know that she will take no delight in loving him, closing the possibility that his love will produce “pleyn delit.” She goes “[u]nto the gardyn, as [her]

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123 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “pleie,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED33653
housbonde bad,” crying “allas, allas!” (V.1512-1513). Dorigen omits from this speech any possible indication that she has come willingly, and her cries of “allas” audibly and unambiguously express her grief. Having learned from her earlier mistake, Dorigen here offers Aurelius no language spoken “in pley” that may accidentally connote her pleasure, nor does she ventriloquize acceptance by turning him away in temporary terms. Aurelius finally realizes that his demands are at odds with gentillesse because Dorigen would not enjoy loving him. Aurelius’ enforcement of her rash promise would thus be a deed of “cherlyssh wrecchednesse / Agayns franchise and alle gentillesse” because it would serve only Aurelius’ own desires (V.1523-1524). The Franklin juxtaposes two important terms in these lines—“cherlyssh” and “franchise”—to draw attention to the way actions define one’s gentillesse. The MED defines “fraunchise” as “freedom (as opposed to servitude), magnanimity, [and] generosity,” all characteristics the Franklin associates with gentillesse and nobility.125 “Cherlish” also denotes social status, though of a very different sort: “characteristic of a serf or a peasant, unlearned, simple-minded.”126 If the clerk’s “gentil dede” elevates him to a position of gentility, then an act of “cherlyssh wrecchednesse” will debase Aurelius’ standing. The idea of serfdom, implicit in “cherlyssh,” carried powerful connotations of inferiority in Ricardian England, to the extent that the rebels in 1381, after demanding the heads of several powerful magnates and nobles, “asked for the abolition of serfdom.”127 Also inherent in serfdom is the idea of enforced captivity—serfs were neither free to move from the land they worked nor could they dispose of their own property freely.128 Acting in a “cherlyssh” way, then, would place Aurelius in an inferior and possibly

125 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “fraunchise,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED17597
126 Middle English Dictionary, s. v. “cherlish,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED7468
127 Saul, 68.
inactive position by making him a serf. As gentillesse is elsewhere shown to be performable, this passage emphasizes that Aurelius can likewise prove himself ignoble by serving only his own desires without considering others’ enjoyment. He abandons his claim to Dorigen’s truth and pardons her promise because he sees that forcing her to act without pleasure would be a churlish deed. Aurelius releases Dorigen from her oath in a superlative act of gentillesse that solidifies the essential connection the Franklin imagines between “pleyn delit” and noble behavior.

Chaucer’s Franklin’s Tale transforms the concept of nobility, so common in romances, from an exclusive indicator of social status into a set of behaviors to be acted out. Through repeated emphasis on “pleyn delit,” the Franklin’s characters, as well as the Franklin himself, demonstrate both how a clerk can be noble and how a squire might become a churl. Furthermore, the Franklin shows that food and adornments, no matter how rich or costly, serve neither as indicators of wealth nor as paths to gluttony. Rather, richly arrayed halls and tables emblematize the labors of domestic gentillesse, which the Franklin sees as the quickest roads to “pleyn delit” because they provide pleasure unadulterated by suffering or servitude. By positioning the mutual enjoyment of host and guest (or giver and receiver) as the ultimate end of service, the Franklin provides those like Dorigen, who are disenfranchised by rigid traditions, a way to express refusal and reluctance not present in other romance texts. To that end, the Franklin’s Tale contributes to a more nuanced conception of medieval service and hospitality as a set of performative acts that create, rather than indicate, noble character. Seeking “pleyn delit” in all actions allows the Franklin’s characters and listeners a way to pursue their own gentillesse.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: “EVERICH OF YOW DIDE GENTILLY TIL OOTHER”

While these three romances construct their communities in different ways—Sir Launfal through principles of appraisal, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight through Christianity, and the Franklin’s Tale through a focus on pleasurable service—they all portray a community’s ideals through economic exchanges and acts of generosity. Further, displays of largesse unite the givers and receivers of gifts by showing that they live under the same governing principles of economic behavior. These romances demonstrate the importance of examining economic exchange in medieval literature for its power to illustrate a community’s shared ideals.

Many critics have already noted the importance of gender, social class, and religion in romances’ depictions of communities and the beginnings of national identity. In addition to these important principles of a community’s sense of itself, scholars focusing on the construction of group identity in medieval romances may look to images of exchange and service to find how a community of characters structures itself and creates a sense of common identity. The economic ideals presented in romances take on further importance in the context of the late fourteenth century, when the Peasants’ Revolt and repeated references to the king’s economic mismanagement raised questions regarding the viability of traditional social and economic principles like the system of estates and lordship. If Richard II’s largesse could be called profligacy, and if magnates and landlords could be called traitors and despoilers, then the nobility and the peasantry obviously held different ideals of economic behavior. These differences could, and did, lead to violence within the English community, creating a climate of

divisiveness and contention which derived primarily from resentment over royal gifts and taxation.

In *Sir Launfal* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, generosity signals neither the uncontrollable spending parliament feared nor a desire to despoil the commons. Rather, largesse exemplifies noble behavior in these romances while also joining the nobility to the commons in economic terms. By recasting largesse as a mechanism for uniting a community, romance writers of the late fourteenth century deploy lavish spending and motifs of economic exchange in their works to engage with contemporary anxieties over proper economic behavior. Sir Launfal’s largesse brings all the residents of Arthur’s court into relations of exchange with each other to show that they share a common set of values that unites them as the English people. Likewise, the *Gawain*-poet portrays a knight whose Christian virtues exemplify ideals both at Camelot and in Hautdesert, showing that the two courts share a common identity despite the geographical distance between them. The connection between the courts’ principles appears in economic terms as well in that Gawain’s religious devotion to Mary mirrors his dutiful service to secular lords. In linking Camelot to Hautdesert through Christianity, the *Gawain*-poet rebukes those who view Wales and other western regions as lawless wastes, showing his readers that Hautdesert and Camelot share a Christian foundation and thus comprise a single community. These two romances deal with divisions within Ricardian England by directing their readers’ attention to the unifying power of exchange and generosity.

Chaucer’s *Franklin’s Tale* offers a more nuanced view of gentility and noble behavior than the other two romances, a view that uses service both to illustrate the inclusivity of the community and to give all members of that community a way to express their voices through judgments of pleasure or dissatisfaction with service. Chaucer expands the motif of economic
exchange by basing it on the principle that an act of generosity becomes noble when it produces mutual enjoyment for the giver and the receiver. Although a knight’s generosity can still generate nobility in this model by pleasing the community, those whom the knight serves help to define his act as a gentle or a churlish deed based on their satisfaction. With this newfound authority derived from expressing pleasure and displeasure, Dorigen can flatly and finally refuse Aurelius’ advances by telling him that adulterous love can produce no pleasure at all and is thus an ignoble deed. Chaucer’s focus on pleasure likewise allows the socially disenfranchised lower class to express displeasure with the actions of the nobility in order to enact change within their community. Economic exchange and gift-giving as such obtain symbolic weight when read not simply as basic motifs of medieval romance but as expressions of a group’s ideals and common identity.


