

GIFTS AND COMMODITIES IN *SIR AMADACE*

BY AD PUTTER

This article defends the artistic coherence of the fourteenth-century chivalric romance *Sir Amadace*, arguing that its story is designed to exemplify the wisdom and the ultimate profitability of reckless spending. To highlight its success in this respect, I refer to medieval analogues of *Amadace*, and I draw on pertinent sociological and anthropological work on gifts and commodities to illuminate the forcefulness of the poet's position that noble people should give unsparingly, be their gifts material goods or human lives. Focusing particularly on the religious beliefs that underpin the poet's faith in all-out *largesse*, and on the power of giving and forgiving to create enduring bonds of gratitude, this article explores the compelling logic that drives the plot of this romance, and at times inspires its poetry.

The romance of *Amadace*, usually dated to the second half of the fourteenth century, is extant in two fifteenth-century manuscripts: the Ireland manuscript, now in the Robert H. Taylor Collection at Princeton, and MS Advocates 19.3.1, now in the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. About the provenance and the primary audience of *Amadace* nothing can be said with certainty, but on the evidence of its dialect and its fifteenth-century readership, the romance may have been intended for the entertainment of a family of provincial gentry in the north-west Midlands.¹

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1 Both surviving manuscripts can be linked with the class of middling landowners who are known to have formed a major constituent of the audience for Middle English popular romances. MS Advocates 19.3.1, which also contains *Sir Gawayne and Sir Lohengrin*, appears to have been owned originally by the Sherbrookes of Oxtun, Nottinghamshire, who appear in 16th-century records as a family of small landowners. See J. Turville-Petre, 'Some Medieval Manuscripts in the North-West Midlands', in D. Pearsall (ed.), *Manuscripts and Readers in Fifteenth-Century England: The Literary Implications of Manuscript Study* (Cambridge, 1983), 125–41. The Ireland manuscript belonged to the Lancashire Ireland family. Besides two further romances (the *Avowing of Arthur* and the *Awkyns of Arthur*), the manuscript contains an assortment of memoranda relating to the Manor of Hale, which was held by the Ireland family. An edition of extracts from these manorial records, with some historical notes on the Ireland family, may be found in *Three Early English Metrical Romances*, ed. J. Robson, Camden Society (London, 1842), pp. xxxvii–xlv. See also B. Dickens, 'The Date of the Ireland Manuscript', *Leeds Studies in English*, 2 (1933), 62–6. *Amadace*'s dialectal area has been localized in or near Lancashire. See M. S. Serjeantson, 'The Dialects of the West Midlands in Middle English', *Review of English Studies*, 3 (1927), 54–67, 186–203, 319–31, 328.

The story which this putative family would have heard or read is that of a spendthrift knight who ultimately thrives by spending. On the verge of bankruptcy, Amadace is advised by his steward to economize, but he prefers to make a final splash: he mortgages his lands to provide a banquet for all and sundry, and then departs with his last forty pounds. Even this small fortune is soon given away after chance leads Amadace to a chapel sheltering the corpse of a prodigal merchant, who has been refused burial by a fellow merchant to whom thirty pounds is still owing. Amadace pays off his debts, throwing in ten pounds for a grand burial, and again departs to wander the woods, disconsolate and penniless. A mysterious White Knight then appears to offer Amadace emotional and financial relief: a shipwreck will yield Amadace all he needs to fight in a tournament, on condition that he shares half of his winnings with the White Knight. Amadace accepts the offer, and wins the tournament and the hand of a rich king's daughter. After a son is born to the couple, the White Knight returns for his share in Amadace's winnings, refusing all other possessions, he demands half of Amadace's wife and half of his son. As Amadace is about to sacrifice his wife, the White Knight reveals he is the merchant whom Amadace helped to bury; he leaves wife and child unharmed and disappears mysteriously, to leave a happy ending.

The most significant analogues to *Amadace* are in French: *Richars li Biaus* from the thirteenth century,² and *Lion de Bourges* from the early fourteenth.³ Gordon Hall Gerould suggested that *Amadace* was derived from the common original of *Richars li Biaus* and *Lion de Bourges*,⁴ but now that we know that the poet of *Lion de Bourges* made direct use of *Richars li Biaus*, the attempt to reconstruct *Amadace's* lost archetype from the French remnants looks hopeless. Even *Richars li Biaus* may be a more distant family member than Gerould imagined,⁵ though it does appear to be the closest relative to have survived. The claim I make for *Richars li Biaus* when I draw some comparisons between this romance and *Amadace* later on is therefore not that the former is a direct or indirect source for the latter, but simply that the two show revealing family resemblances.

Comparative study, however, has not in the past worked to *Amadace's* advantage, and it is only fair to say that the English romance raises obstacles to appreciation that *Richars* and *Lion de Bourges* do not. One such obstacle is that *Amadace*, unlike the French romances, is very pious in tone, and furious spenders are possibly unwise to invoke God and the saints as often as Amadace or the White Knight do. Amidst the celebration of conspicuous consumption,

2 *Richars li Biaus*, *Classiques français du moyen âge*, ed. A. J. Holden (Paris, 1983).

3 *Lion de Bourges*, *Textes littéraires français*, ed. W. Kibler, T. Fenster, and J. L. Picherit (Geneva, 1980).

4 *The Grateful Dead* (London, 1908), 38.

5 As argued in *Sir Amadace and the Arowing of Arthur*, ed. C. Brookhouse, *Anglistica* 15 (Copenhagen, 1968), 109–11.

the poet's pious strain has seemed to critics out of place. Edward Foster, for example, writes 'The problem is that the situation is framed in such wholly economic terms that it is difficult to focus on the spiritual dimensions that the poem's didactic intentions seem to call for.'⁶ A second problem is *Amadace's* curious handling of the motif of the Grateful Dead. In other medieval stories that combine this motif with that of a Spendthrift Knight, the Grateful Dead is a knight who returns to earth to help the knight who has buried his corpse.⁷ *Amadace* is unique not only for turning the unburied corpse into that of a merchant, but also for making the Grateful Dead conclude his business by putting *Amadace* through a gruesome test, involving the division into equal parts of his wife and child.⁸ Comparing this ordeal with the child sacrifice in *Amis and Amiloun*, Maldwyn Mills writes

the burden of suffering seems too one-sided for us to be able to accept the bond that unites the two men [*Amadace* and the White Knight] as genuinely meaningful. The behaviour of the White Knight becomes more than ever curious when he identifies himself as the corpse in the chapel, and thus deeply in the hero's debt. It is not surprising that critics have found this behaviour little short of despicable.⁹

George Kane, who is one of the critics Mills has in mind, calls the whole ordeal 'gratuitous', and thinks gratuitousness is the poet's besetting vice. 'In *Amadas* the principal fault is a dispersal of emphasis which destroys the unity of effect.'¹⁰

In thinking about *Amadace* I have come to a different conclusion: that *Amadace* is in fact remarkable for its grip on the question of why noble people must give. The unifying theme of *Amadace* is the power of the gift, and I think that by enlarging our understanding of gift-giving our dissatisfactions with

6 *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cuzyle, and Sir Amadace*, Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1997), 113.

7 In addition to *Richars li Biaus* and *Lion de Bourges*, these analogues comprise *Dianese* (in Italian), *Rittertriuwe* (in German) and a legend of King Pippin (in Swedish). Gerould's claim (*The Grateful Dead*, 37 n. 3) that the unburied corpse in the Old Swedish legend of Pippin is also a merchant is incorrect. The social status of the unburied man is left vague. A text and translation of the Old Swedish legend may be found in G. Stephens, *Ghost-Thanks or the Grateful Unburied* (Copenhagen, 1860).

8 As noted in E. Williams, 'The White Knight, the Ungrateful Dead and a Pair of Jacks: Further Adventures of a Folktale Motif', *Leeds Studies in English*, 29 (1998), 411–26, none of the earlier analogues of *Amadace* contain this finale, which finds its closest equivalent in the 15th-cent. French *Olivier de Castille*. The Grateful Dead usually demands either the wife or the hero's possessions, and relinquishes his claim when the hero offers the kingdom. *Lion de Bourges* contains the germ of the idea developed in *Amadace*. Before signing up to the agreement to divide everything equally, the hero specifically excepts the lady whose hand he may win in the tournament (ll. 6568–70): 'La belle Florantine dehors part metterait, | Mais a tous l'autre avoir partir je vous larai | A moittiet droitement, ja ne m'en desdirait' ('I leave out the fair Florantine, but all other things I shall let you divide exactly by half, there will be no gainsaying it'). *Lion* forearms himself against the kind of eventuality that occurs in *Amadace*.

9 *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. M. Mills (London, 1973, repr. 1988), p. xxi.

10 *Middle English Literature: A Critical Study of the Romances, the Religious Lyrics, and Piers Plowman* (London, 1951), 19.

Amadace may disappear. At the risk of anticipating my conclusions, I shall sketch the three stages of my argument, which are keyed to the narrative progression of the poem.

- 1 The gift creates enduring relationships of indebtedness and gratitude. In *Amadace* giving turns Amadace and the merchant into blood-brothers (This meets Mills's objection.)
- 2 The poet's celebration of generosity is predicated on the religious belief that we do not own goods (This meets Foster's objection.)
- 3 God-given goods include life as well as matter, and the gifts that may be asked in return therefore comprise both human beings and material things. The gift economy is a *total* economy (i.e. exchange is not restricted to commodities), and Amadace's so-called 'gratuitous' ordeal consists in being held to its logic (This meets Kane's objection.)

I want to start my apology for *Amadace* by considering the bond between the White Knight and Amadace, because the poet, unlike his critics, so plainly did expect us to find this bond 'genuinely meaningful'. Evidence for this comes from their affectionate forms of address for each other. When the White Knight returns to claim his half of Amadace's goods, Amadace refers to him as 'myn owun true fere' (l. 661), and the compliment is returned when the White Knight takes his final leave from Amadace: "'Farewele now", he sayd, "myne awne true fere!"' (l. 793). The coincidence that their expressions of friendship should both contain the phrase 'myn owne true fere' instantly transforms them into signals of a deeper harmony, as if their liking for each other sprang, more fundamentally, from a likeness between them. The question remains, of course, whether the presentation of Amadace and the White Knight as 'feres' has enough textual backing to carry conviction. Mills finds it too 'one-sided', no doubt because it looks as if in this relationship Amadace does most of the giving and his companion most of the taking. Unburied, the merchant received the benefit of Amadace's last money, and now the Ungrateful Dead has come back for more. But the bond between the White Knight and Amadace has, from the start, been more complex than that, and we must go back to their dramatic first encounter to see the irreducible double-sidedness of their relationship.

The story of the extravagant merchant whose corpse is left to rot because of his outstanding debts seems at first sight symptomatic of *Amadace*'s 'dispersal of emphasis', for in a poem about the wisdom of *largesse*, the merchant's ruination appears to be sending the opposite message. As Mills writes: 'from one point of view this corpse is clearly a last warning to him, if he persists in his ways, he can expect no better end.'¹¹ Although I think that this point of view is not finally endorsed by the poet, Mills's observation helps us to appreciate just how carefully the poet has integrated the motif of the Grateful

¹¹ *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills, p. xv.

Dead into his main story. On the level of narrative syntax, or what Roman Jakobson termed the 'metonymic axis',¹² the poet has done everything possible to avoid a connection. Amadace makes a habit of wandering around aimlessly, and only stumbles across the merchant's corpse by accident. But in the best tradition of romance, in which *aventure* is always redescribed as fate, the syntagmatic connections have been left indeterminate to foreground an overdetermination on the metaphoric axis, which again confronts us with a striking likeness between the two men that fortune brings together. Both are extravagant givers, and both are up to their ears in debt. When the widow answers Amadace's question 'Quat man is he?', it becomes clear that this chance encounter has somehow been Amadace's destiny, that this corpse has been waiting all along for Amadace to ride past.

'Sir, a marchand of this cite,
Hade riche rentus to rere
 And everiche yere thre hundrythe pownde
Of redy monay and of rownde,
And for dette yette lise he here'
Thenne Sir Amadace sayd, 'For the rode,
On quat maner spendutte he his gud,
 That thusgate is away?'
'Sir, on gentilmen and officers
On grete lordus that was his perus
 Wold giffe hom giftus gay
Riche festus wold he make,
And pore men, for Goddus sake,
 He fed hom evveriche day'

Thenne sir Amadace on his palfray lepe,
Unnethe he myghte forgoe to wepe,
 For his dedus him sore forthoghte,
Sayd, 'Yondur mon that lise yondur chapell withinne
He myght full welc be of my kynne
 For ryght so have I wroghte'

(ll 140–53, 205–10)¹³

The merchant's history is a fine example of a 'specular narrative', a story within a story that reflects some important truth about it.¹⁴ In *Amadace* the focus of this specularity is the close similarity between the hero of the main story and that of the embedded story. Amadace's crisis, too, is due to his eagerness to 'gif full ryche giftus | Bothe to squiers and to knyghtes, | To pore

12 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', in R. Jakobson and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956), 76–82.

13 All quotations are from *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Mills (based on the Ireland MS, now Princeton, Robert H. Taylor Collection).

14 I borrow the term 'specular narrative' from D. Maddox, 'Specular Stories, Family Romance, and the Fictions of Courtly Culture', *Exemplaria*, 3 (1991), 299–366.

men dele a dole' (ll 40–2) But the most uncanny, and I think as yet unnoticed, coincidence is that the merchant and knight possess the same income—three hundred pounds a year in rent—a coincidence that emerges some hundred lines later, when Amadace declares the sum of his wasted fortune 'For I had thre hundrythe pownnde of rente' (l 388) Amadace and the merchant have truly found each other, and this realization triggers a poignant moment of recognition in Amadace 'He myght full wele be of my kynne' The hero's identification with the dead debtor is of course all the more startling because the poet has turned the corpse from a knight into a merchant The social divide that normally separates their orders is precisely what makes Amadace's recognition of kinship momentous For *Amadace* is, as far as I am aware, the only chivalric romance to suggest that a merchant and a knight might be kindred spirits

Contrary to received opinion, however, I believe that the purpose of this specular narrative of mercantile extravagance is not so much to warn Amadace about the consequences of reckless spending as to make further spending mandatory Amadace must persist in his generosity to settle the merchant's debts, so that his corpse can be laid to rest And by doing this, Amadace fulfils the Christian duty to bury the dead, a duty no doubt familiar to a medieval audience as the seventh work of mercy¹⁵ Amadace's *largesse* thus acquires an unquestionable religious remit Yet, as Amadace's intuition of kinship suggests, his feelings towards the merchant as a fellow Christian are less prominent than his sense that the merchant's gifts to 'gentilmen and officers grete lordus' have somehow made him his kinsman, and so oblige him to reciprocate The poet's wording as Amadace reaches for his purse again makes that kinship manifest 'Of kyndenes that knyghte con lithe' (l 267) The merchant's earlier generosity to knights calls forth the knight's generosity to the merchant, and this cycle of giving and receiving between kindred spirits reveals Amadace's generosity to be not one-sided but reciprocal His gift is not a unilateral act of charity but a gift in recognition of the merchant's giving It is a counter-gift

This fine poetic justice exposes the error of thinking that the merchant's fortunes should be a 'last warning' to Amadace, which misses the crucial point that the merchant's specular story is not over yet, but awaits completion by a knight who returns his gifts *with added interest* For, significantly, Amadace not only settles the merchant's debt of thirty pounds but adds a bonus of ten pounds to pay for the funeral and a banquet The gratuity represents the surplus that givers earn, and points to the paradox that, along with the poet, we should maintain economic disinterest (giving, spending, conspicuously consuming) is always in one's long-term economic interest

The merchant accordingly leaves the world in glory, his gift-giving

15 The seventh work of mercy, the burial of the dead, was given scriptural authority by the apocryphal book of Tobit See S B Meech, 'John Drury and his English Writings', *Speculum*, 9 (1934), 76–9

vindicated not only in the eyes of God, but also in the public eye. The description of the splendid funeral makes this quite plain:

Howe erly quen the day con spring,
Then holl! all the bellus con ring
That in the cité was
Religius men everichon
Towards this dede cors are thay gone,
With mony a riche burias

(ll 289–94)

The ringing of all the bells in the city sounds a loud and costly note of personal triumph, which the merchant's competitors, the 'riche burias', must have found it hard to ignore. Just how expensive bell-ringing was is revealed by a surviving entry in the *Coventry Leet Book*, which specifies the cost of a full peal of bells from a single Coventry church (in 1479) as '2s and 20d' plus four pence for the bellringers—a price set prohibitively high to discourage an escalation of bell-ringing among families vying for civic and religious prestige.¹⁶ The competitive element in funeral arrangements also explains why many medieval testators opted out of bell-ringing altogether. Thus the will of John Coote from Bury St Edmunds (d. 1502) stipulates 'I will neyther ryngyng nor belman goynge, bute thys to be don in secrete maner'. The last mark left by him on the world was to consist instead of various subsidized dinners in his honour.¹⁷ Thanks to Amadace's sponsorship, the merchant goes one better still, with all-out bell-ringing as well as a banquet for the local dignitaries. Make no mistake: the merchant goes out with a bang, with all the extravagant waste that marked him while alive. As the poet again emphasizes at the end of the romance, when the ghost thanks Amadace for saving 'mi wurschip in londe' (l. 792), the merchant has made good on earth as well as in heaven.

The merchant's gift-giving to 'grete lordus that was his perus' also seems to make him an honorary member of the nobility, or *generosi*, to use the revealing medieval Latin equivalent. Gift-giving creates relationships between peers, and I do not think the merchant's posthumous promotion to a White Knight can be dismissed as an artistic blunder. 'He myght full wele be of my kynne', Amadace had said, and the merchant's reincarnation as knight literalizes Amadace's astute intuition. Moreover, the White Knight's initial status as merchant also allows the poet to sharpen the contrast with the stingy merchant who obstructs the burial until he has had his money back. The generous merchant becomes Amadace's peer by participating in 'gift exchange', while

¹⁶ Quoted and discussed in G. Salusbury-Jones, *Street Life in Medieval England* (Hassocks, 1939, repr. 1975), 185.

¹⁷ *Wills and Inventories from Registers of the Commissary of Bury St Edmund's*, ed. S. Tymms, Camden Society 49 (London, 1850), 92.

the niggard excommunicates himself from God and all noblemen by clinging to the tit for tat of 'commodity exchange'

As I shall be relying on the distinction between 'gift exchange' and 'commodity exchange' at a later stage, I should clarify these sociological terms, which distinguish between two different kinds of economies that *Amadace* sets in competition with each other¹⁸ In commodity exchange I swap objects or money that I own for something equivalent that you own, and the transaction is as short as the time it takes for the goods to change hands In gift exchange the transaction is temporally extended, and in the process I establish not a relationship between equivalent objects, as in commodity exchange, but a relationship of social equality with the recipient Whereas the commodity is alienable (i.e. ownership is lost or ceded in exchange), the gift is not alienated in exchange but extends the donor's sphere of influence, like a loan or an unspoken 'you owe me', it creates relationships of indebtedness between people In Chris Gregory's formula 'commodities are *alienable* objects transacted by aliens, gifts are *inalienable* objects transacted by non-aliens' The etymology of the word 'community' is a useful aid to memory add *con* ('shared') to *munus* (which originally meant 'gift'),¹⁹ and what results is *community*, the semantic and social field of which is circumscribed by the exclusive circle of mutual gift-givers

Giving in *Amadace* has precisely this effect of putting people in communion with each other, of turning merchants and knights into brothers, while, conversely, commodity fetishism condemns the mean-minded merchant to remain forever an 'alien' After the merchant has branded his bankrupt colleague as a wastrel, *Amadace* attempts in vain to persuade him to release the dead man from his debts

'Ye,' the marchand sayd, 'God gif hem a sore grace,
And all such waisters as he wasse,
For he sittus me nowe sare,
For he lise there with my thritti powndde
Of redy monay and of rownde,
Of hitte gete I nevyr more'

Thenne sir Amadace sayd, 'Take the till a bettur rede,
Thenke that Gode forgave his dede
Grette merit thou may have'
Thenne he squire, 'Be Jesu, Maré sun,
That body shall nevyr in the erthe come,
My sylver tille that I have'

(ll 247–59)

18 The paragraph that follows is based on C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (Cambridge, 1982) Sarah Kay's *The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford, 1995) convinced me of the usefulness of the theoretical distinction between gifts and commodities, although I develop this in ways that run counter to Kay's argument that, in contrast to *chansons de geste*, romances exemplify a 'poetics of the commodity' (p. 207)

19 E. Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. E. Palmer (London, 1973), 79

The loaded reference to big spenders as 'waisters' situates the two speakers on opposing sides of a topical struggle between two rival ideologies: on the one hand, the mercantile ideology of thrift, or 'winning', and, on the other hand, the aristocratic ideology of excess, or 'wasting'.²⁰ The spokesman for the former—who is caricatured so grotesquely as to present no serious threat to the other side—is the penny-pinching merchant, who scorns all departures from the principle of accumulation as wasteful, charity included. The spokesman for the latter is Amadace, who contends that what the merchant perceives as the evaporation of economic values is really a way of distilling these into something more valuable still: 'Grette merit thou may have'. In Amadace's reasoning, the gift is not to be understood as a loss but as a conversion of real capital into 'gret merit', an entitlement to gratitude and future reward that binds one to other bearers of this 'symbolic capital'.²¹ By refusing to invest in 'merit', the merchant excludes himself from the community of givers, a community whose founding member is of course God himself.²²

I have managed so far to avoid bringing God into this discussion, but any reader of *Amadace* must face God's formidable presence in this poem sooner or later. In his chapter in praise of *largesse* in his *Livre de Chevalerie* (c. 1360) Geoffroi de Charny interestingly describes God as the greatest gift-giver, whom all knights must imitate by giving generously in turn.

20 I allude of course to the roughly contemporary poem *Wynnere and Wastoure*, ed. S. Trigg, EE1 S 297 (Oxford, 1990), which stages a debate between the advocates of accumulation and the exponents of conspicuous consumption. Knights and squires, Winner complains, would sooner mortgage their lands than tighten their belts (ll. 283–5). Waster claims divine approval for carefree spending (l. 297), and, although merchants are grouped under the banner of Winner, Waster puts in a good word for 'prowde marchandes of pris' who pass for 'lordes' by living extravagantly (ll. 377–8). The relationship between *Sir Amadace* and its historical climate—to which *Wynnere and Wastoure* is a prime witness—deserves more attention than I can give it in this discussion, which is literary rather than historical in orientation.

21 The term 'symbolic capital' is Pierre Bourdieu's. In Bourdieu's writings it refers to social advantages (e.g. academic qualifications, honour, 'good taste'), which, although they do not declare themselves as economic values, nevertheless function as their equivalents and are always convertible into real capital. The term thus works against a 'restricted definition of economic interest', which, in its explicit form, is the historical product of capitalism: the constitution of relatively autonomous areas of practice is accompanied by a process through which symbolic interests (often described as "spiritual" or "cultural") come to be set up in opposition to strictly economic interests. *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge, 1977), 177. Modern views of medieval charity and *largesse* as 'giving for its own sake' rest upon an uncritical acceptance of this 'restricted definition of economic interest'. By contrast, the poet of *Amadace*, like so many of his contemporaries, accepts *largesse* and charity as gainful activities. If Bourdieu is right, the common charge that an 'underlying materialism' makes romances such as *Amadace* 'middle-class' or 'bourgeois' backfires: the bourgeois mentality betrays itself not in pervasive materialism, but in the expectation that economic interests and non-economic interests should be separable.

22 It may be significant that the merchant's debt consists of thirty silver pounds. Foster suggests that 'perhaps a loose analogue to Judas's selling of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver lurks in the background here'. See *Amis and Amiloun*, 143.

Et ou pourroit l'on trouver nul qui tant de biens, de graces, de misericordes, d'onnours, de toutes perfeccions, de touz biens peut faire ne face touz les jours, come fait et peut faire cilz tres glorieux Sires qui est lasus et sa tres glorieuse Virge Mere ?

(And where could one find anyone who can and does always bestow so many benefits, favors, mercies, honors, and every kind of perfection and good other than that very glorious Lord who is up above and his glorious Virgin Mother?)²³

Geoffroi de Charny points to God's supreme place in the scheme of gift-giving. But, to the *Amadace*-poet's credit, we are not strictly dependent on outside help to make the connection. For *Amadace*'s suppressed simile in his words to the merchant—God forgave us his death, so you should forgive your fellow—has already suggested the pertinence of these pieties to the actions of the poem: giving or for-giving is an *imitatio Dei*. The redemption can in fact be used as a dramatic illustration of the logic that distinguishes gift exchange from commodity exchange. 'The gift transactor's motivation', Chris Gregory writes, 'is precisely the opposite to the capitalist's: whereas the latter maximises net incomings, the former maximises net outgoings. The aim of the capitalist is to accumulate profit while the aim of the "big-man" gift transactors is to acquire a large following of people (gift-debtors) who are obligated to him.'²⁴ God is, so to speak, the 'big-man gift transactor' *par excellence*, maximizing expenditure by sacrificing his son, and turning everybody into gift-debtors by waiving, for-giving, his right to the equivalent return. Christ's gift of 'precious blode', as *Amadace* puts it, 'wins' the world.

He sayd, 'Jesu, as thou deet on the rode
And for me shed thi precious blode,
And all this world thou wanne'

(ll 397-9)

God's *largesse* with 'precious' blood sets the pattern for other acts of *largesse* in this romance, including the act of forgiveness which *Amadace* commends to the merchant.

It is finally not the miserly merchant but *Amadace* who is persuaded to defy the logic of commodities and common sense, by recklessly giving the dead man his last forty pounds. But the wonder of the gift is that it always compensates for the forgone *quid pro quo* by establishing a *quis pro quo*—a lasting bond between giver and receiver. The disappearance in *Spendthrift Knight* romances of people who are paid is therefore as inevitable as the reappearance of those who give or receive. A brief comparison with *Richars li Biaus* may help to justify this generalization and to dispel the belief that the poet of *Amadace* botched the original story. For while *Richars* casts a knight in the role of the deceased debtor, it also contains a pointed contrast between two bourgeois characters, in this case not two merchants but two town provosts: one provost

23 *The Book of Chivalry of Geoffroi de Charny*, ed. and trans. R. W. Kaeuper and E. Kennedy (Philadelphia, Pa., 1996), 187.

24 Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities*, 51.

who gives and thereby becomes Richard's social equal, the other who insists on being paid and consequently stays in the story for the short duration of his commercial transaction with the hero

Like Amadace, Richard is reduced to poverty by his generosity. As a last resort his father offers to pawn his estate to a provost so as to raise the sum of three thousand *livres* that Richard needs for a desperate last gamble in the tournament of Montorgueil. But the provost will not hear of any surety, and gives Richard a strong horse to boot

'Chiertes, sire, jes presterrai,
que ja gage n'en averai,
car je sai ben c'est por vo fil
—or le giete Dieus de peril—
car s'il est bons jes ravrai bien,
se n'i pierderay, ce cuich, rien
Et s'a en ma marescaucie
un tel destrier qu'en Mangorie
n'a tel en tout cest pays,
de courre n'est pas alentis,
ne voy si toz voler oisiel
Cestui doins je mon damoisiel
a bonne estrine d'aventure,
que Dieus doinst qu'il ait de lui cure '

(ll 4301–14)

('Certainly, sir, I will lend these to you, and I will have no pledge for them, because I know well it is for your son—may God guard him from danger. For if he is good I will have them back and so I shall lose nothing, I think. And in my stable there is a horse that has no equal in the whole land of Mangorie. He is not slow to run, and moves more swiftly than a bird. This I give to my young master as a hansom of good luck. May God deign to look after him.')

On the way to Montorgueil, Richard parts with his money and the horse to repay the debts of an unburied knight. The ghost returns in the shape of a White Knight to assist Richard in the tournament, arranging lodging at the house of a different provost, who incurs huge expenses to keep Richard in the lavish style to which he is accustomed. Unlike the first provost, however, the second is consumed by worries that he is not going to see his money back. Further alarmed when Richard refuses to cash in on the many prisoners he captures in the tournament, he can hide his distress no longer

Dist li prevoz 'Miervelliez voy!
Qui payera dont vos despens?
Tout payeray, si con je pens!'

(ll 5060–2)

(The provost said 'I am seeing the incredible! Who will pay for your expenses? I shall end up paying for everything, I think!')

In the meantime, however, the king's daughter Rose has become so impressed by Richard's financial imprudence that she falls in love with him and offers to settle the bill with the provost. After dispatching the latter to the money-changer, Rose discreetly returns to her quarters

'Alés ent toz sans plus atendre,
tout erraument serés paies '
—'Damoiselle, grant bien aies,
fait li prevost, or sui plus aise '
Atant li prevost se rapaise,
vient au cange, *son avoir prent*
Et la puchielle *congie prent*,
arrier en vait en son repaire

(ll 5076–83)

('Go there without waiting further, and you will be paid on the spot.' 'You are very kind, lady, says the provost, now I am more at ease.' Promptly the provost calms down, goes to the changing house, and takes his due. And the damsel takes her leave, and returns to her dwelling.)

The merchant takes the cash and Rose takes her leave, without uttering a word to Richard about money. The parallelism highlights the temperamental differences between the aristocrat and the bourgeois, which in turn determine their different futures with Richard. In the case of the provost, payment cancels the IOU and so terminates his relationship with the hero. In Rose's case, the gift initiates a relationship with Richard, which is based on Rose's implicit entitlement to a counter-gift. The narrative consequences are equally drastic: commodity exchange disqualifies the provost from further participation in the story, while the sublimation of an immediate *quid pro quo* gives rise to a lasting *quid pro quo*, concluded by Richard and Rose's marriage. By the same token, the 'gentil' provost who gave Richard his money and a horse on trust is bound to reappear in the narrative to receive his counter-gift from Richard, who enfeoffs the provost with the earldom of Mangorie.

'Prevost, fait il, vous me prestatés
trois mil livres, si me donnastez
le bon destrier que j'en menay
quant je a ce tournoy alay,
tenes, je vous doins en baillie
la contree de Mangorie,
celi que mes peres tenoit '

(ll 5383–9)

('Provost, he says, you lent me three thousand *livres* and gave me the good horse that I took with me to the tournament. I now give you lordship of the land of Mangorie, which my father held.')

The etymology of 'community' is again wholly predictive: by giving, one provost joins the community of honour and becomes Richard's social equal, by not giving, the other provost excommunicates himself from the nobility and

the narrative alike. The pair of merchants in *Amadace* repeat this paradigm: the bourgeois who is paid is put paid to, while the bourgeois who gives receives with interest. If a story like *Richars* provided the inspiration for the *Amadace*-poet, he may have had a keener understanding of its narrative logic than he is usually given credit for.²⁵

Although, in the cycle of gift-giving in *Amadace*, the merchant also reappears as nobleman, he does so not to receive, but to honour Amadace's gift with a counter-gift. In *Amadace*'s reassuring universe, gifts are always returned, even if people have to rise from the dead to do it. Reincarnated as a mysterious White Knight, the former debtor finds Amadace wandering in the woods, comforts him, and conjures up a shipwreck that provides Amadace with all he needs to win tournament, wife, and kingdom. It is Gordon Gerould who bequeathed to us the label that is now attached to this theme in *Amadace*—the Grateful Dead—along with his worry about what such a figure should be doing in a story about a spendthrift knight.²⁶ But perhaps the adjective 'grateful', with its close connections with gifts, can nudge us towards an answer. The sociologist Georg Simmel aptly described gratitude as 'mankind's moral memory', our way of acknowledging the 'living-on of a relation and the act of giving and receiving'.²⁷ In the receiver's continued mindfulness of the giver, the fleeting moment of giving can be prolonged. And the disappointment we feel when this 'moral memory' fails—as when the person to whom we have sent a present fails even to mention it—gives some idea of what figures like the White Knight are there to rescue us from. In *Amadace* and its analogues, the Grateful Dead minister to our hope that gifts will not be forgotten, by showing us that the relationship between giver and receiver does indeed 'live on'—even after death.

I hope now to have made some progress with my first two contentions: that *Amadace*'s pieties are not simply distractions, and that the relationship between Amadace and the merchant/White Knight is meaningful enough to make any talk of one-sided giving or taking itself one-sided. For not a single

25 The narrative logic may also reflect historical conditions. The upward mobility of the wealthy merchant in *Amadace* is paralleled by the careers of wealthy merchants in the later 14th cent., many of whom were knighted by Edward III and Richard II for advancing the necessary sums of money needed to finance the Hundred Years War. The risks and expenses involved in the speculative business of war could throw the richest nobleman into dependence on the benevolence of merchants and moneylenders. See K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), 29. A contemporary sermon by John Bromyard sheds interesting light on Amadace's curious alliance with an extravagant merchant: 'Merchants and moneyed men reckon themselves "ennobled" and on the road to enrichment, when they are seen to have friendships with the nobility, when they can wear their robes and are summoned to their banquets, and when they can go a-hunting with them. But the end of all these things is that, when they ask for the money back, they will be friends no longer.' Quoted in S. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300-1500* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1949), 259. In the world observed by John Bromyard, as in that of *Amadace*, the gentleman's favourite merchant is obviously not one who wants his money back but one who dispenses it freely.

26 Gerould, *The Grateful Dead*, 158.

27 *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, ed. K. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill., 1950), 389.

gift passes between these men which is not at the same time a counter-gift. Amadace's gift to the merchant reciprocates the merchant's earlier gifts to knights, the White Knight's gift of shipwrecked riches reciprocates Amadace's gift to the merchant, and Amadace's willingness to give half his wife and child acknowledges his indebtedness to the White Knight's earlier gift to him. This gruesome ordeal brings me to my final contention: that *Amadace's* unusual dénouement crowns the poet's work.

To avoid misunderstanding, I should say that, in defending *Amadace's* ending from Kane's accusation of gratuitousness, I am obviously not suggesting that anyone could reasonably be expected to slice his family in two. But then again, if it were reasonable, it would cease to be an ordeal altogether. One problem with Kane's complaint that Amadace's ordeal is gratuitous is that without gratuitousness there can be no ordeal. Consider some famous literary precedents: the tribulations of Griselda and Job, both gratuitous but all the more poignant because of it. The pointlessness of ordeals is their point. Kane's charge does not therefore oblige me to argue the impossible, that Amadace's ordeal is *realistically* justified. It is refuted if I can demonstrate that the ordeal is *conceptually* justified, and this I intend to do by arguing that it is nothing less than the ultimate test of the hero's willingness to give.

Now let it be clear that the White Knight would hardly have been considered 'despicable' if he had come to claim, not, as he demands, half of two humans, but his promised share in Amadace's possessions. Here the ease with which we reach for words like 'possessions' to distinguish between things we own (commodities) and things we do not (people) betrays our entanglement in the logic of commodity exchange, which *Amadace* sets itself aggressively against. Marcel Mauss in his famous book on the gift described the gift economy as a system of 'total prestations', a system in which offerings take any number of forms: 'courtesies, entertainments, ritual, hospitality, military assistance, *women, children, dances and feasts*' (italics mine).²⁸ Mauss's cleverly constructed catalogue, in which women and children are dispersed among gifts of food or shelter, is itself governed by the cultural condition it seeks to describe. Innocent of our notion of ownership, gift cultures (like Mauss's list) make no distinction between 'thing-gifts' and 'person-gifts'.²⁹ For giving signifies, not primarily an alteration in the quantitative distribution of material possessions, but a change in the qualitative relations between people.

Amadace, too, is about to be held to a system of total prestations, and to do the poet justice we must observe how carefully he prepares us for it. Penniless, Amadace is about to lose hope in the fairness of the gift economy—'For kyndenes of my gud wille, | I am in poynte myself to spille' (ll. 412–13)—

28 M. Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. I. Cunnison (London, 1925, repr. 1954), 3.

29 The term 'person-gifts' conceals an important gender imbalance which is also operative in *Amadace*. While women and children circulate in exchange, men do not. On the issue of gender in relation to the gift, which is not my concern here, see M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, Calif., 1988).

when a mysterious rider arrives from nowhere to say he has overheard Amadace's lament. Applying Ockham's razor to the problem of who this stranger might be, readers will be quicker than Amadace to realize that this must be the beatified dead merchant, especially since the whiteness of his garb and his horse (ll 427–9) suggests heavenly provenance.³⁰ God-sent, he begins his missionary work by restoring Amadace's confidence in the wisdom of giving

'Thowe schild noghte mowrne no such wise,
 For God may bothe mon falle and rise,
 For his helpe is eyvrmore nere
 For gud his butte a lante lone,
 Sumtyme men have it, sumtyme none
 Thou hast full mony a pere
 Now thenke on him that deut on rode,
 That for us shed his precius blode,
 For the and monkynd alle
 For a mon that geves him to gode thewis,
 Authir to gentilmen or to schrewis,
 On summe side wille hit falle,
 A mon that hase allway byne kynde,
 Some curtas mon yette may he fynde,
 That mekill may stonde in stalle,
 Repente the noghte that thou hase done,
 For he that schope bothe sunne and mone,
 Full wele may pay for alle '

(ll 439–56)

It is the way of consolations to place individual suffering in a wider perspective with commonplaces such as 'you are not the only one'. The White Knight's 'thou hast full mony a pere' offers this kind of consolation, which nevertheless avoids triteness since it comes from someone who speaks from personal experience. Like the hero, the merchant gave, ruined himself, but finally found in Amadace a 'curtas mon' to return the gift. This specular narrative, whose happy ending is of Amadace's making, is now to be repeated with roles reversed: the White Knight will be as courteous to Amadace as Amadace was to him. The bourgeois moral of frugality, which some critics read into the story,³¹ is beautifully dismissed as the counsel of despair: 'repente the noght that thou hase done'. When still a merchant, the White Knight had scorned his wife's caution.

30 Bede usefully gives chapter and verse for this motif in his *Vita Sancti Cuthberti*, in *Two Lives of St Cuthbert*, ed. and trans. B. Colgrave (Cambridge, 1940), 159–61: 'He suddenly saw a horseman riding from afar, dressed in white robes and honourable of countenance, and the horse, too, on which he sat was of incomparable grace. And if it should seem incredible to anyone that an angel appeared on horseback, let him read the history of the Maccabees in which angels on horseback are said to have appeared to defend Judas Maccabaeus and the temple itself.' The reference is to 2 Macc. 11.8.

31 Cf. *Sir Amadace*, ed. Brookhouse, 22.

'Giffe I sayd he did noghte wele,
He sayd God send hit everyche dele,
And sette my wurdus atte lichte'

(ll 163–5)

Now a resident in heaven, and blessed with divine illumination, his ideas on the subject have not changed a bit. His advice to Amadace is to stick to generosity, for in the end all gifts will be returned.

Gifts, as Chris Gregory noted, are not alienable from us because they are not owned by either the recipient or the giver. *Amadace* gives this idea a religious twist. God gives and takes away, and since everything we have is his there is no point in trying to hold on to it. 'For gud his butte a lante lone.' The conviction that everything we have is given to us on loan—or, as the merchant put it earlier, that 'God send hit everyche dele'—may be conventional, but it has important implications for the poet's case for *largesse*. Whereas this *largesse* earlier rested on a sense of *noblesse oblige* (i.e. gentlemen return gifts), it is now enriched by a metaphysical dimension: any gift is a priori a counter-gift, for God, who 'pay[s] for alle', gave us the goods that we give away in the first place. This defence of *largesse* is again not unlike Geoffroi de Charny's treatment of gifts in his *Livre de Chevalerie*, where he writes

Et pour ce que c'est le souverain Seigneur en qui sont touz les biens et dont tout les biens viennent pour ce est il que nul ne doit tenir en soy que biens qu'il leur soit faiz d'autrui, ne honnours qui leur viegne d'autrui, ne services qu'il aient eu d'autrui, ne proffiz qu'il aient en d'autrui, veingne tant seulement d'iceulz mais de la grace de Dieu a qui il plaist ainsi qu'il soit fait, que l'on doit savoir que nulz n'a rien qui sien soit, fors seulement comme il plaist a Dieu qui tout preste et tout peut reprendre comme drois sires souverains qu'il en est et tout sa volente par son prest et par sa volente a baillie les biens et les graces a ceulz qui les font a autrui, car il n'ont rien en tels graces ne en telz biens fors tant comme Dieu leur laisse et preste de sa grace et non plus.

(It is indeed the Sovereign Lord in whom all that is good is to be found and from whom all that is good comes. Therefore, no one should consider that the good done them by others, or honors bestowed on them by others, or service done them by others, or any profit deriving from others, that any of these come only from other people. These benefits come rather from the grace of God whom it pleases that these things should be done, for it should be known that no one has anything in the world which is certainly his except in so far as it pleases God, who lends everything and can take back everything as the true Sovereign Lord that He is, with everything dependent on his will. For those who pass on to others these benefits and favors have themselves been granted them by God as a loan and dependent on His will they have nothing of these favors and benefits except what God allows them and lends them of His grace, and they have nothing more.)¹²

Human gifts are always already gifts from God to man, the vertical economy between God and man encompasses all horizontal economies between people. By doing away with the notion of human possession, this outlook also instantly

32. *The Book of Chivalry*, 186–7.

abolishes the distinctions between commodities and people who acquire them. Collapsed in that category of 'goods on loan' is the whole of creation: objects, women, children, happiness, and life itself.

This use of the word 'good' to include humans as well as things is crucial, and we must bear it in mind when the White Knight formulates his agreement with Amadace to share the winnings evenly:

'Butte a forwart make I with the or that thou goe,
That evyn to part betwene us toe
The *godus* thou hase wonun and spedde'

(ll 490–2)

This is the letter of the agreement. Amadace must give the White Knight half the goods he has won, and this category of winnings and goods includes humans as well as things.

The kind of test which the poet is building up to is thus underpinned by a religious understanding of 'goods on loan' that banishes concepts like 'commodities' or 'owners', and so places us in something like Mauss's 'system of total prestations'. *The Avowing of Arthur*, Amadace's companion-piece in the Ireland manuscript, provides an illuminating analogue to Amadace's total economy.³³ The liberal hero Baldwin makes three vows in this romance: never to fear death, never to refuse hospitality, and never to be jealous of his own wife. After entertaining Arthur and his court unsparingly, Baldwin explains his liberality as follows:

'Sir, God has a gud plughe!
He may send us all enughe
Qwy schuld we spare?'

(ll 778–80)

As John Burrow has observed, Baldwin's generous habits also have their source in a philosophy of life that takes God's bounty as a licence for generous giving.³⁴ In the case of Baldwin, too, this *largesse* includes non-material goods: in the first vow it extends to Baldwin's life, in the second to his provisions, and in the third to his wife. Food, life, and wife: all must be treated with the same insouciance. Finding his spouse in bed with another knight in a make-believe jealousy test, Baldwin shrugs his shoulders and says:

'Forthi jelus shall I never be
For no sighte that I see,

³³ For a fuller discussion of the connections between the three romances in the Ireland manuscript, see P. Hardman, 'The Unity of the Ireland Manuscript', *Reading Medieval Studies*, 2 (1976), 45–62.

³⁴ J. A. Burrow, 'The Avowing of King Arthur', in M. Stokes and F. L. Burton (edd.), *Medieval Literature and Antiquities: Studies in Honour of Basil Cottle* (Cambridge, 1987), 99–109.

Ne no biurdes brighte of ble,
Iche ertheli thinke hase ende '

(ll 985–8)³⁵

Like the word 'godus' in *Amadace*, 'erthely thinke' refers indiscriminately to things and humans. Because nothing is owned, nothing should be spared, but equally, because people who receive gifts do not own them either, gifts are never ceded but rebound with net profit. Because Baldwin puts all at risk—life, goods, and wife—he keeps all, while increasing his quota of honour. As Arthur shrewdly points out 'Thine avowes arne profetabull' (l 1130).

On the topic of gift-giving, the *Avowing of Arthur* and *Amadace* have much in common. Both reveal the economic interest that accrues from economic disinterest, the totality of prestations, and the religious convictions that underpin *largesse*. But *Sir Amadace* is the more focused of the two romances, not only because the poet deliberately uses key words and formulas to adumbrate his larger philosophy of giving, but also because the nature of Amadace's test, a sacrifice of child and wife, instantly evokes Christian precedents such as Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac and God's sacrifice of Christ. As a consequence the religious beliefs that are enlisted to justify *largesse* harmonize better with the testing of Amadace than with Baldwin's tests in the *Avowing*.

But above all it is the shocking literalness of the White Knight's demand, his grim insistence that the child and wife must be, not merely killed, but divided into equal halves, that brings home to us exactly what is involved in treating humans as 'goods on loan'. When Amadace offers to make him co-regent, the White Knight springs his nasty surprise.

He sayd, 'Broke wele thi londus brode,
Thi castels hee, thi townus made,
Of hom kepe I righte none,
Also thi wuddus, thi waturs clere,
Thi frithis, thi forestus, fer and nere,
Thi ringus with riche stone
Allso thi silvyr, thi gold rede,
For hit may stonde me in no stidde,
I squire, bi sayn John!
But be my faythe, withowtun stryve,
Half thi child and halfe thi wyve,
And thay schall with me gone.'

'Alas', sayd sir Amadace than,
'That evyr I this woman wan,
Or any wordes gode
For his lufe that deet on tre,
Quatsever ve will, do with me,
For him that deet on rode

35 *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. T. Hahn, Consortium for the Teaching of the Middle Ages (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995).

Ye, take all that evyr I have,
 Wythe thi that ve hur life save'
 Thenne the knyghte wel undurstode,
 And squire, 'Be God, that me dere boghte,
 Othir of thi thinge then kepe I noghte,
 Of all thi wordes gode'

(ll 697–720)

I am easy to please, says the White Knight I will not have half of your lands, your rings, your silver, your gold, all I want is half your wife and child. It has been said, with some justification, that this joke is in bad taste, but we do need to think about how it works. Its essence is a play on the difference between possessions (castles, towns, woods, lakes, forests, etc.) that are legally owned and transferable in whole or in part,³⁶ and human beings, who are neither owned nor divisible: halve them and they die. By suspending these distinctions between owners and commodities, the joke mobilizes the point that the White Knight had made to Amadace on their first encounter: 'gud his butte a lante lone, | Sumtyme men [have] it, sumtyme none' (ll 442–3). This simple proposition, that everything is given and so everything can be taken away—about which the critics have not complained—is now to be put into operation. Quite apart from the formulas alluding to the crucifixion, to which I shall return later, it is the repetition of such ominous words as 'wordes gode' ('worldly good') and 'won' that signal that the joke here is as serious as it is sick.

No, the problem with Amadace's ordeal is not its gratuitousness but the strictness of its logic: half his 'goods' have been promised, 'goods' include people as well as things, and so the line cannot be drawn at commodities. Amadace's wife, who promptly volunteers herself for self-division, cuts to the heart of the matter with impressive composure:

Then the lady undurstode anon
 The wurd that was betwene hom,
 And grevyt hur nevyr the more
 Then sayd, 'For his luffe that deut on tre,
 Loke yore covandus holdun be
 Goddes forbotte ye me spare!'

36 The catalogue of Amadace's possessions—'londus castels townus wuddus waters frithis', etc.—has parallels in other romances, cf. *Harleik*, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford, 1987), 1443–5: 'Ilk of you shal haue castles ten | And þe lond þat þor-til longes— | Borwes, tunes, wodes, and wonges'. The catalogue is modelled on a standard medieval formula used for property conveyance. In his editorial notes, Smithers quotes a grant of land by King Stephen to one John de Chesney: 'Precipio quod idem Johannes et heredes sui teneant et habeant predictum manerium de me in bosco, in plano, in pratis et pasturis, aquis et mariscis, in molendinis et stangis'. The immediate purpose of the legal language in *Amadace* is to summon our sense of the category of things that are routinely subject to changes of ownership, and so to increase our shock when the White Knight claims possession of 'things' (a wife, a child) that are not.

Sithun Crist will that hit be so,
 Take and parte me evun in toe,
 Thou wan me and I am thine '

(ll 727-41)

Instead of protesting that Amadace's agreement to divide winnings cannot logically extend to woman and child, she accepts the force of the White Knight's reasoning, and consents to be dispensed with freely, as if she were indeed a 'good' divisible ('parte me evun in toe'), acquired ('Thou wan me and I am thine') and thus expendable. And readers wishing to enter a protest on her behalf would do well to consider the strength of the poet's position, which is shored up by the wife's simple but decisive exclamation 'Goddess forbote ye me spare!' 'God forbid' makes her self-objectification sound like the fulfilment of a sacred duty, while the clause that follows resonates with all the previous 'would not spare' formulas that capture the spirit of *largesse* in this poem. Think of Amadace's contemptuous 'I myght long spare' (l 13), the merchant's liberality 'For his mete he wold not spare' (l 160), the White Knight's advice to Amadace 'loke thou spare right none' (l 474), and especially Amadace's welcoming words to the White Knight, which the Wife echoes

'Butte atte thi wil, sir, all schall bee
Goddess forbote, sir, thou hit spare!'

(ll 695-6)

It is to be hoped that after these examples the wife's commandment does sound repetitive, for this, surely, is what the poet intended. 'Not sparing' spells out the connections between Amadace's final ordeal and the adventures that precede it, and it is the wife who makes the connection by slotting herself into the object position of the poet's favourite syntactical frame 'Goddess forbote ye *me* spare!' Amadace has not spared anything so far. He is not to begin now.

The final test thus turns out to be a test of *largesse*, in which the goods to be given are alive. The poet manages to put that message across with a few well-chosen words when the White Knight speaks to Amadace who has blindfolded his family and stretched them out on the table. It is the climax of the poem.

Thenne the quite knyghte 'I will do the no unskille
 Thou shalt dele hit atte thi wille,
 The *godus* that here now is '
 Thenne speke sir Amadace so fre,
 Sayd, 'At your wille, lord, all schalle be—
 And so I hope hit is '
 Then sir Amadace a sward uppe hente,
 To strike the lady was his entente,

And thenne the quite knyghte bede, 'Sese!'
 He toke uppe the lady and the litulle knave,
 And to sir Amadace ther he hom gave,
 And sayd, 'Now is tyme of pees!'

(ll 769–80)

The possibility that Amadace's ordeal might strike us as gratuitous evidently occurred to the poet as well as his critics, but the objection is dismissed 'I will do the no unskille' And the jarring reference to Amadace's wife and child as 'godus' calls attention to the logical space within which the White Knight's demands are indeed wholly reasonable For the blanket application of 'goods' signals that our normal language game, in which some words apply to things and others to owners, is not here operational In the different language game that 'Amadace so fre' is asked to play, 'godus' are God's gifts, and thus designate humans as well as objects And as the category of goods extends, so must our understanding of what it means to be 'fre' with them generosity here involves the readiness to commute any gift from God into a counter-gift

The play on 'goods' thus reminds us of the total economy of gifts between God and man that frames the give-and-take between people The poet's purpose is gradually to reveal the contours of this divine economy behind those of the human economy, until the two merge to such an extent that questions about which economy we are in have become practically unanswerable Who, for example, demands the 'goods' from Amadace? If it is the White Knight, then why does the Wife insist that Christ 'will[s] that hit be so' (l 739)? Is the White Knight actually God's representative? He certainly acts the part well His cry of 'now is tyme of pees' sounds, to quote Mills, 'almost divine in its total authority'³⁷ But perhaps it is Amadace's words that are the most purposefully ambiguous, poised as they are between prayer and speech 'At your wille, lord, all schalle be' To whom are these words spoken? Amadace has said this earlier to the White Knight—'atte thi wil, sir, all shall bee' (l 695), not suspecting the terrible irony latent in that innocent-looking word *all* Since Amadace takes his cue from the White Knight, the context, too, might suggest that Amadace is responding to the White Knight But does not 'let your will be done' also call to mind the Lord's prayer, or Christ's words to God before the crucifixion 'Not my will but thine be done' (Luke 22:42)? The sacrifice thus shades into a religious ritual, as though it were a timeless re-enactment of other sacrifices, of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, and especially God's sacrifice of Christ, which the poet invokes with a concentrated volley of crucifixion formulas (ll 705, 736–8, 742, 754, 760) Arguing against the assumption that such religious formulas are merely line-fillers, Roger Dalrymple has recently defended their use in a range of romances, including *Amadace*, where the poetic justification for the crucifixion tags lies

37 *Six Middle English Romances*, ed Mills, p. xvi

in the climactic 'life-and-death situation',³⁸ the resolution of which here depends, moreover, on Amadace's willingness to surrender his own family as God surrendered his. I have already suggested that God figures in the gift-equation as the 'big-man gift transactor' who, in the White Knight's words, 'pays for all', and paid never more handsomely than when he shed his 'precious' blood, forgave our debt, and turned us all into gift-debtors. God's sacrifice fits into this poem as the finest example of *largesse*, which, as we can now see, carries through the logic of 'total prestations'. The poet Schiller once remarked that 'the noble person pays with what he is rather than what he does'. That aphorism glosses the thought in *Amadace* and many other medieval works that God is a true gentleman because he paid with himself and forgave us the debt.³⁹

Amadace's ordeal, too, ends with an act of for-giveness as the White Knight waives his claim to half of Amadace's goods. I have been abusing the hyphen to resurrect the etymological connections between giving and forgiving. The poet of *Amadace* had subtler means at his disposal, fusing giving and forgiving in the White Knight's gesture as he picks up the wife and child and gives them back again. 'He toke uppe the ladi and the litulle knave, | And to sir Amadace ther he hom gave.' Ask what this gesture accomplishes, and the answer confirms that we have been watching a pure ritual. Amadace has not given away wife and child, and because the White Knight has not expropriated them, he might as well have left them lying on the table. But while nothing has happened 'really', everything has happened symbolically. Ritually, Amadace has given away his family to the White Knight, but the celebrant of this sacrifice forgives and so gives them back again.

The parallelism between the two knights has now reached its consummation. As Amadace freed the merchant from his debts, so the White Knight releases Amadace from his debt to him. Even Amadace's emotional turmoil finds a parallel in his companion's past, as the White Knight proceeds to compare Amadace's relief with his own.

He sayd, 'I con not wite the gif thou were woe,
 Suche a ladi forto slo,
 Thi wurschup thus wold save
 Yette I was largely as gladde
 Quen thou gafe all that evyr thou hade,
 My bones forto grave
 In a chapulle quere I lay to hownndus mete,
 Thou pavut furst thritty pownd be grete,
 Sethun all that thou myghtus have'

(ll 781-9)

38 'The Literary Use of Religious Formulae in Certain Middle English Romances', *Medium Ævum*, 64 (1995), 250-63, 254.

39 Cf. *Pearl*, l. 605 'For þe gentyl Cheuentayn is no chychy' (ed. E. V. Gordon (Oxford, 1953, repr. 1974)).

Amadace's brief moment of anguish is given retrospective meaning as a measure of the merchant's relief on being released from *his* ordeal. The grammatical correlation—'I was largely *as* gladde'—invites us to imagine the unburied corpse as fully sentient, immensely grateful for Amadace's philanthropy because it delivers him from the gruesome fate of being eaten alive (or at least 'undead') by scavenging dogs. To imagine the merchant's anxious wait for deliverance is to see that the burden of suffering, too, is more evenly distributed than might at first appear. Amongst the earlier trials of *largesse* which Amadace's ordeal commemorates, we are not to forget the ordeal of the unburied merchant.

The ritual over, the White Knight disappears as dew under the sun

He glode away as dewe on downe
 And thay abode ther stille
 Thay knelutte downe opon thayre kne
 And thonket God and Mary fre,
 And so thay hade gud skille

(ll 800–804)⁴⁰

Perhaps Chaucer had lines like these in mind when he penned the parodic lines in *Sir Thopas*: 'And forth upon his wey he glood | As sparcle out of the bronde' (VII 904–5).⁴¹ *Glood*, a poeticism for 'went', is uselessly bombastic, as inept as the conventional simile comparing Sir Thopas with (of all things) a spark. But if *Sir Thopas* often makes us see the awfulness of Middle English romance, the comparison here throws into relief the undemonstrative art of *Amadace*. 'He glode away as dewe on downe' is right for a creature from heaven. 'Gliding' has that sense of effortless movement that recommended the verb to better-known poets as they tried to describe God walking or mists wafting.⁴² The subsequent simile 'as dewe on downe' adds the association of dew with heaven. The Middle English lyric 'I syng of a mayden' famously uses the image of dew to convey the mystery of the incarnation:

He cam, also styлле
 ther his moder was,
 As dew in Aprylle
 that fallyth on the gras

(ll 5–8)⁴³

40 I have adopted Mills's suggested emendation of MS *towne* (which repeats the rhyme-word *towne* from the previous line) to *downe*. The Advocates MS reading *in son* produces an inexact rhyme. The established alliterative collocation of *dew* and *down* supports Mills's emendation. Cf. 'Lenten ys come with love to toun' (l. 44) 'dewes donken on the dounes' *Medieval English Lyrics 1200–1400*, ed. T. G. Duncan (Harmondsworth, 1995), 23.

41 *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L. D. Benson (Boston, Mass., 1987).

42 Cf. *Cleanness*, l. 677 'then glydes that God' (ed. J. J. Anderson (Manchester, 1977)), and Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, V 393 'The vapour with that fro the erthe glod'.

43 *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. Duncan, 111.

And again 'dew' is right, not only because it was once thought to be moisture from heaven, but also because dew does fall inaudibly ('style') and imperceptibly. The simile works similar wonders for the White Knight's return to heaven in *Amadace*, a vanishing that is as mysterious as the evaporation of heavenly dew, and that gains still more from the contrast with the transfixed witnesses who remain behind 'style', moved but unmoving

He glode away as dewe on downe,
And they abode ther stille

And thematically, too, this is a fitting conclusion to the romance, keeping our minds on the divine precedents for liberality in 'God and Mary *fre*', and our eyes on Amadace and his wife, who kneel to commemorate the act of giving and receiving by thanking God. The unique power of giving and forgiving is that it can inspire gratitude in a way that the *quid pro quo* of commodity exchange never does. For we are thankful for receiving something only if we do not or cannot match it with an equivalent return, and repaying the kindness later does not cancel the gratitude but only engages the giver's gratitude in return. That, in a nutshell, is the story of *Amadace*. Amadace forgives the merchant's debts and so prompts his gratitude, the Grateful Dead forgives Amadace's debt and so elicits his gratitude. And since, in the poet's final analysis, all gifts are heaven-sent, the poem ends with thanksgiving to God, who gives and forgives so that Amadace and the White Knight may give and forgive each other, and both be better off for it.

University of Bristol