

Friendship and its logics in *Amis and Amiloun*

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At a critical juncture in the late medieval poem *Amis and Amiloun*, Amis ponders why a beautiful youth would remain devoted to a “foule,” leprous companion. He comes up with three possibilities:

Par aventour, the gode man hath biforn
Holpen him at his nede,
Other the child is of his blod yborn,
Other he hath him othes sworn
His liif with him to lede.¹

Reciprocity for help in the past; a family tie; a sworn relation: in these lines, the poem tells what elsewhere it shows—its most important logics of cooperation. Duke Amis’s second guess about the pair is correct, as it happens—they are uncle and nephew by blood. We also know that the duke himself is sworn brother to the man

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¹ *Amis and Amiloun*, in *Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, ed. Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2007), lines 1968 (“foule”), 1994–98. All references to the poem are to this edition.

in need, though he is yet to identify him. As for the duke's first thought, my contention is that reciprocity is about to move centre-stage and, moreover, that this move makes the story's mix of logics distinctive in the context of medieval narratives of *trouthe* (or commitment) and male friendship. All this can change the way we are accustomed to understand the poem and its possible political affiliations for medieval listeners and readers. In particular, I will argue, the poem's privileging of reciprocity, in an open, indefinite form, aligns with late medieval concerns about confederacy and faction in politics at all levels, from rural bands and city guilds to the royal court.

The story of sworn brothers Amis and Amiloun (or Amelius and Amicus, for example) was a popular one across Europe in the middle ages.² The Middle English version I discuss here as *Amis and Amiloun* survives (at least partially) in four late medieval manuscripts from England, one produced in the early fourteenth century (the celebrated Auchinleck book), another in the decades around 1400 and two more about a century later.³ Two physically indistinguishable youths enter ducal service in Lombardy and, as close in affection as in appearance, swear *trouthe*, "In wele and wo, in wrong and right, / . . . / To hold togider" (lines 149–51). After Amiloun leaves to take up his inheritance, the duke's daughter, Belisaunt, manoeuvres Amis into a secret sexual relationship, which leaves him facing the duke's rage and then a judicial combat with the duke's malevolent steward, who has snitched on the lovers. Afraid to swear falsely at the duel, Amis seeks out his

² *Ami and Amile: A Medieval Tale of Friendship*, trans. Samuel N. Rosenberg and Samuel Danon (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), 1–4.

³ National Library of Scotland, MS Advocates 19.2.1, edited as David Burnley and Alison Wiggins, eds, *The Auchinleck Manuscript* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 2003), <https://auchinleck.nls.uk/>; British Library, MS Egerton 2862; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 326; British Library, MS Harley 2386 (the poem breaks off after 894 lines).

sworn brother, who proposes that the pair swap places so that Amiloun can take on the combat himself, disguised as Amis. Later, a voice from heaven passes on a warning from Christ that Amiloun will be struck with leprosy and ostracized if he pursues his plan. He fights and kills the steward nonetheless. Now Amiloun is brought low, afflicted by leprosy, cast out by his wife, and wandering with only his loyal nephew, Owain (or Amorant) for company and (eventually) transport, while Amis enjoys married lordship with Belisaunt, having succeeded to the dukedom. At length, uncle and nephew come to Duke Amis's lands and beg at his castle. The duke beats the leper nearly to death when he learns that he has in his possession a gold cup from a pair that Amiloun commissioned for himself and Amis as tokens of their first parting. Unresisting, Amiloun is only saved when his nephew reveals his uncle's identity. Belisaunt and Amis care for Amiloun devotedly for a year, at which time both knights dream of an angel who says that the blood of Amis's children will heal Amiloun. Amis kills his young children and administers the grisly cure. Belisaunt approves retrospectively and the children are discovered miraculously restored to life. At the end of the poem, Amis and Amiloun descend with an armed force on the wedding feast of Amiloun's wife and her second husband. Amiloun imprisons his wife until her death, grants Amorant seisen of all his lands, and lives out his days with Amis. The pair found an abbey to take care of their souls, die on the same day, and are buried in the same grave.

This story is now almost universally understood to idealize Amis and Amiloun's friendship and, specifically, their truth to their oath to help each other come what may. The sworn friendship is "an absolute good," the story's "only absolute value," "unassailable."⁴ In the only reading I know that deems the poem

⁴ David Clark, "The Ideal of Friendship in *Amis and Amiloun*," *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 60 (2016): 162; Susan Dannenbaum, "Insular Tradition in the Story of Amis and

critical of the oath-based form of the knights' friendship, Ken Eckert proposes that Amis and Amiloun grow from this "toward a more selfless love patterned on an *imitatio Christi*."⁵ Other readers are left with the headache of deciding how the poem wants its audience to feel or think about the darker consequences of the friends' oath, including child murder and perverting judicial process. These readers fall into two broad camps. Most resolve the tension between the poem's sworn friendship and the damage it brings about in favour of sworn friendship. For these readings, the poem makes sworn male friendship a tie which "supersedes all other bonds and responsibilities," and Amis and Amiloun's appreciation of this is ultimately rewarded (not least with the resurrection of Amis's children).⁶ The stress and suffering go to the point because, in this and other rash promise romances, "oathworthiness is tested by an extreme moral dilemma which only an unwavering adherence to *trouthe* can resolve."⁷ In the smaller, second camp, critics judge the

Amiloun," *Neophilologus* 67.4 (1983): 621; Robert Stretter, "Engendering Obligation: Sworn Brotherhood and Love Rivalry in Medieval English Romance," in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Explorations of a Fundamental Ethical Discourse*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 507.

⁵ Ken Eckert, "Amis and Amiloun: A Spiritual Journey and the Failure of *Treupe*," *Literature and Theology* 27.3 (2013): 293.

⁶ Robert Stretter, "Rewriting Perfect Friendship in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Lydgate's *Fabula duorum mercatorum*," *Chaucer Review* 37.3 (2003): 237. For other discussions in this camp, see Dannenbaum, "Insular Tradition"; Clark, "Ideal of Friendship"; Stretter, "Engendering Obligation," 506–16; Dale Kramer, "Structural Artistry in *Amis and Amiloun*," *Annuaire Mediaevale* 9 (1968): 103–22; Ojars Kratins, "The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*: Chivalric Romance or Secular Hagiography?" *PMLA* 81.5 (1966): 347–54; Jill Mann, "Messianic Chivalry in *Amis and Amiloun*," *New Medieval Literatures* 10 (2008): 137–59; Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 332–34; Corinne Saunders, "Greater love hath no man': Friendship in Medieval English Romance," in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature: The Influence of Derek Brewer*, ed. Charlotte Brewer and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), 130–34.

⁷ Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 334.

tension to be unresolved. For these readers, the poem allows the dark consequences of the oath to retain moral force despite the poem's happy ending. Even so, on the far side of "complications" or a "compromise," unconditional friendship stands unbowed.⁸ In neither camp do critics understand the poem to offer an alternative ethic of friendship. The oath is understood to govern throughout.

My own reading of *Amis and Amiloun*, by contrast, could be called a "reform" reading and starts with the observation that reciprocity supersedes the logic of the oath. This has implications for the poem's part in late medieval political opinion-forming. Especially relevant are concerns, expressed in parliament, poetry and chronicle, about unconditional and exclusive cooperation, sometimes as a function of sworn relations, sometimes in relation to other ties, including ties of family or retinue (though retaining was itself often oath-based).⁹ First, however, the contours of a reform-centred reading and some literary contexts for it should be brought into focus, starting with James Simpson's incisive structural account of the operations of romance literature. According to Simpson, who acknowledges a debt to Kathryn Hume, romances are narratives of "'civilized' order" disrupted and

⁸ Kathryn Hume, "*Amis and Amiloun* and the Aesthetics of Middle English Romance," *Studies in Philology* 70.1 (1973): 19–41 (on the poet's "compromise" between "undigested folklore motifs" and Christian morality; 30); Leah Haught, "In Pursuit of 'Trewth': Ambiguity and Meaning in *Amis and Amiloun*," *JEGP* 114.2 (2015): 240–60 (on "significant complications of the [narrative's] amoral ideology"; 250). Rhiannon Purdie, "Non-Cyclic Romances of Love," in *Medieval Poetry: 1100–1400*, ed. Helen Cooper and Robert R. Edwards, *The Oxford History of Poetry in English*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2023), speaks of "unease" about the knights' "intense bond" but holds that the poem "declines to answer" questions it raises about "passionate human attachments and their place in society" (303).

⁹ For retaining and oaths, see Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 19–20, 28–29, 46, 340; Michael Hicks, *English Political Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2002), 149–50.

restored which are characterized by a “reformist conservatism.”¹⁰ They “trace a movement from propriety to impropriety and back,” but the return involves adjustment and accommodation.¹¹ Simpson sees reform operating at a level “deeper than ethics,” especially in changes to “social ecologies” and the membership of a story’s prestigious home group.¹² For some romances, at least, I would include ethics in the scope of reform. To take a famous example, Chrétien de Troyes’s Yvain’s social repositioning in relation to a narrowly homosocial court (a Simpsonian reform) goes hand-in-hand with prosocial reform of his ethic of glory-seeking adventuring; and *Amis and Amiloun* similarly entangles social-structural and ethical reform. Static idealizing accounts of the knights’ friendship generally find, or at least do not dispute, that the home group ejects those intolerant of the extravagances entailed by their paramount bond (principally Amiloun’s wife, but even the duke who is duped and then dies off) and promotes loyalists who accommodate the sacrifices the bond requires (especially the long-suffering nephew Amorant and the newly subordinate Belisaunt). Sworn brotherhood starts on the edge but ends up at the centre of the home group. But such structural social adjustments need not be the last word on reform in the poem. In a wider reform reading, they are enabled by altered ethical emphases. Amorant and Belisaunt do not simply subscribe to sworn brotherhood: they join in renovating its cooperative logic. Amorant, indeed, introduces the language of reciprocity with which Amis will reform his tie to Amiloun.

¹⁰ James Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, *The Oxford English Literary History*, vol. 2: 1350–1547 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 264–83, quotations at 273, 275. See also James Simpson, “Derek Brewer’s Romance,” in *Traditions and Innovations*, ed. Brewer and Wendeatt, 154–72. Simpson cites Kathryn Hume: “The Formal Nature of Middle English Romance,” *Philological Quarterly* 53.2 (1974): 158–80.

¹¹ Simpson, “Derek Brewer’s Romance,” 168.

¹² Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 272–75, quotations at 272.

Ethical reform does not reject sworn brotherhood wholesale, for the poem never stops calling Amis and Amiloun each other's "brother." *Amis and Amiloun* does not propose to revolutionize knighthood. Reform is circumscribed by conservatism. Its political sensibility is acute on the proper operations of social power amongst the landed elite; but the poem is not polemical. Simpson explains that this is exactly what we should expect, for romance's "subtle account of the civilized order emerges only structurally" and deals with "shameful secrets." It follows that "romances tend not to be characterized by explicit and ethical narratorial comment, since the meanings are structural, and better left unspoken."¹³ In *Amis and Amiloun*, neither the narrator nor the knights notice that the logic of the brothers' friendship changes. The intensity of youthful attachment and a totalizing oath have deleterious effects, are secretly shameful and need adjustment, but they are not to be cauterized from the more mature friendship that succeeds unconditional cooperation.

The contours of reform are revealed by elements that might have made an audience doubt the initial condition of the friendship ("push" factors for reform), by a crisis (a point of rupture suggesting change or susceptibility to change) and then by new elements, emergent at or since the crisis ("pull" factors of reform itself). An audience anxious about political in-groups and inward-looking social clusters of whatever size might have been especially prone to respond to these elements in this poem of stark bonding—total yet superficial—succeeded by reciprocity in a relationship deepened by experience.

¹³ Simpson, *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, 273–74.

Golden cups: friendship unreformed

Sworn brotherhood is compromised in *Amis and Amiloun*, and not just by the chain of suffering that it sets in motion. Long before it proposes reciprocity as a superior logic for friendship, the poem plants hints that the sworn form of the knights' relationship is less than they hope. Comparison with other versions of the story throws these hints into relief and even suggests that our poem's attitude to the brothers' tie explains many of the main differences between *Amis and Amiloun* and analogues in Latin and French, including (and especially) a closely related Anglo-French version of the story.¹⁴ Our poet makes the oath a much more developed part of the narrative than it is in other versions of the story (where some kind of vow is usually just mentioned in passing) and then, on my reading, has it superseded. In tandem with the oath's prominence in the Middle English, the friendship has shallower psychological roots. The pair's sameness is purely physical and their sworn brotherhood is born of a youthfulness that can be read as immaturity. The brothers' gold cups are good tokens of these qualities since they are an inanimate matching pair and belong to the friends' youth. At first, at least, the cups could also easily stand for the importance and permanence of the

¹⁴ For the Latin story, see *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Eugen Kölbing, Altenglische Bibliothek 2 (Heilbronn, 1884) and the translation *Life of the Dear Friends Amicus and Amelius*, trans. Mathew Kuefler, in *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology*, ed. Thomas Head (New York: Garland, 2000). The French poem is in *Ami et Amile, chanson de geste*, ed. Peter F. Dembowski (Paris: Champion, 1969) translated in *Ami and Amile*, trans. Rosenberg and Danon. For the Anglo-French poem, see *Anglo-Norman Amys e Amilioun*, ed. John Ford (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2011) and the translation in *The Birth of Romance in England: Four Twelfth-Century Romances in the French of England*, trans. Judith Weiss (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2009). For its relationship to the Middle English poem, see Ford's appendix 7; Dannenbaum, "Insular Tradition."

relationship (as counterparts in the French and Latin securely do), but, tellingly, our poem discards them in a drastic scene that brings one of the knights to the brink of death while clearing the way for the narrative's reformatory turn to reciprocity.

From some angles, Amis and Amiloun's friendship looks like an ideal male friendship of a kind that was expansively theorized and celebrated in classical and medieval culture. Writers presented such friends as soulmates or as each other's second self; a narrow-focus expression of the "dividual"—the person understood as composite across multiple bodies and the relations between them (or the single body involving multiple persons).¹⁵ For Cicero in *Laelius de amicitia* (commonly *De amicitia*), true friends see each other "as another self" ("est tamquam alter idem"), while Augustine remembers feeling that a beloved friend was "my 'other self'" ("ille alter eram"; literally "I was another he") and that their souls "were 'one soul in two bodies.'"¹⁶ Shared burials evoked the same feeling of, or urge towards, union. Sir William Neville's body joined Sir John Clanvowe's in burial beneath a tombstone on which the coats of arms of these sworn brothers are impaled (combined in one

¹⁵ Antje Linkenbach and Martin Mulso, "Introduction: The Dividual Self," in *Religious Individualisation: Historical Dimensions and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Martin Fuchs, Antje Linkenbach, Martin Mulso, Bernd-Christian Otto, Rahul Bjørn Parson, and Jörg Rüpke (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), describing dividualization as taking on "different forms again and again in different epochs and in different cultures" (339). For a similar approach, exploring "coinherence" to conceptualize "a person-in-relation" while "sidestepping what is now widely seen as an overemphasis on the autonomous individual in Western modernity," see Barbara Newman, *The Permeable Self: Five Medieval Relationships* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), quotations at 7–8.

¹⁶ Cicero, *How to be a Friend*, ed. and trans. Philip Freeman (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018), ch. 23; Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. James J. O'Donnell, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), vol. 1, 4.6; Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 59.

device) as for a married couple.¹⁷ This is more or less where Amis and Amiloun end up. Besides sharing a grave, their deaths “on oo day” are a statement of togetherness, as though a single soul has departed separate bodies (line 2503). (There is also, perhaps, some trace of the deaths shared by oath-bound friends or blood brothers in warrior fellowships across Eurasian cultures—extending to northern Europe—who committed suicide on the death of their lord.¹⁸) Other versions of the story, however, commit to soul-deep connection from the beginning. As infants in a Latin version from the early twelfth century, Amicus and Amelius have “an ineffable companionship” and “a oneness of will between both” (“ineffabilem societatem . . . et utriusque voluntatis idemtitatem”), and they struggle to sleep if they are not together.¹⁹ In the French version from around 1200, Ami and Amile grow up separately (after a joint baptism) but know how close they will be based on reputation, itself seeded by divine prediction. After searching for seven years, they greet each other as old, dear friends. Such attraction prior to presence is a trope of ideal friendship (and Lydgate makes much of it in his story of soulmates, *Fabula duorum mercatorum*, which we will encounter later). It privileges character or interiority over physicality (which is absent due to separation), and it conveys a sense of halves of a whole drawn together regardless of circumstance. The French poem then repeatedly refreshes our sense of the friends’ natural connectedness through a pattern of partings and passionate reunions.

Death day and burial aside, the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun* gives us physical sameness without dividuality. Even though they are conceived and born in synchrony (lines 40–41) and nobody can tell them apart to look at, except by their

¹⁷ Alan Bray, *The Friend* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 13–19, 36–37.

¹⁸ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 12–25.

¹⁹ *Life*, trans. Kuefler, 445; *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Kölbing, p. xcvi.

clothes, Amis and Amiloun are not psychological mirrors of each other. Though it is inspired, to be sure, by love “trewer” than any (line 143), their oath does not attest (as in analogues) but rather *prescribes* a total consonance of “wille” (line 152). As insightful discussions have made plain, our young heroes look the same but behave differently. Hume shows that Amiloun starts off active, decisive and direct (one to “stint at no ston”; line 1225) before succumbing to disease (and perhaps despair) after the judicial combat, while Amis is “quintessentially passive,” daunted by Belisaunt and the duke, before becoming forceful as duke himself.²⁰ From this chiasmus, both knights end the story in forceful mood when they raid Amiloun’s home, but only after their physical resemblance has been disrupted by leprosy and the oath’s dividuating logic has been sidelined. In the absence of physical resemblance, Amis cannot recognize his brother and their connection fails almost fatally. In the French and Latin stories, leprosy impedes recognition only momentarily and the brothers’ matching cups prompt identification rather than dangerous misrecognition.²¹ Where physical sameness is a sign of psychic

²⁰ Hume, “*Amis and Amiloun*,” 32–33. For a similar but simpler contrast, in which Amiloun appears masculine, Amis feminine throughout the poem, see John C. Ford, “Contrasting the Identical: Differentiation of the ‘Indistinguishable’ Characters of *Amis and Amiloun*,” *Neophilologus* 86.2 (2002): 311–23. Dannenbaum argues that the Anglo-French poem differentiates the youths “strongly . . . in very general terms” (“Insular Tradition,” 613), but these terms depend on social situations much more than personality, starting with the expansion of Amiloun’s social world after he leaves Amis in the count’s service and becomes a lord. The poem earlier describes the pair as “of one nature” (“de une nature”), in one of the early surviving manuscripts, or having the same features or perhaps make-up or manner (“d’une faiture”), in the other (*Anglo-Norman Amys e Amilioun*, ed. Ford, text from London, British Library, MS Royal 12 C XII, line 30, cf. line 15; *Amis e Amilun* in *Amis and Amiloun*, ed. Kölbing, line 30).

²¹ *Ami and Amile*, trans. Rosenberg and Danon, chs 138–40; *Ami et Amile*, ed. Dembowski, lines 2714–45; *Life*, trans. Kuefler, 452.

alignment in other versions of the story, in *Amis and Amiloun* sameness is only skin-deep.²²

In keeping with this decoupling of physical mirroring and soulmateship, the poem makes nothing of physical sameness when the friendship achieves its (reformed) apogee. The French *Ami e Amile* brings sameness back in force when Ami is healed of his leprosy. The pair dress the same and cause a great stir because, to onlookers, “it was as if the two counts had been a single man.”²³ There is similar amazement in the Latin *Amicus et Amelius*.²⁴ *Amis and Amiloun*, by contrast, is done with physical indistinguishability as a symbolic device after Amiloun is afflicted by leprosy. It makes no mention of sameness when Amiloun is healed. The scar on his shoulder from his combat with the steward is a particular point of interest here because Amorant singles it out to identify his leprous companion to Amis—and we will come back to this as precursive of reform—and because it is presumably not part of the “fowlehed” banished by the leprosy’s cure (line 2408). The brothers’ physical pairing is disrupted after the combat and some of this change is permanent.

Physical sameness thus has reduced moral impetus in the Middle English version of our story. It is not a sign of twinned-self ideal friendship, or “*amicitia perfecta*,” and it has zero salience in the poem’s happy ending. This potentially destabilizes a listener’s or reader’s moral sense of Amis and Amiloun’s sworn brotherhood. Physical sameness maps neatly onto the unconditional cooperation or oneness of will prescribed by the oath but lacks legitimating idealization in the

²² For an account that sees the poem building on traditions of second-self friendship, see Clark, “Ideal of Friendship.”

²³ *Ami and Amile*, trans. Rosenberg and Danon, ch. 164; *Ami et Amile*, ed. Dembowski, lines 3122–35 (“Tant sont li conte yngal et d’un samblant”; line 3125).

²⁴ *Life*, trans. Kuefler, 454.

form of the twinned self. Just as it is difficult to see the difference between Amiloun and Amis in the early days, so the oath makes no distinction between the parties' interests or contributions to their relationship. It is reciprocal in the sense that it is undertaken mutually, but it does not legislate for reciprocal acts. If one brother needs all the help, then the other is sworn to give it regardless of whether or not he should ever need help in return.²⁵ The brothers will help each other as though fused into one individual, holding together "In word, in werk, *in wille*, in dede" (line 152; emphasis added). The oath commits the brothers to imitating twinned-self friendship but is erected on foundations of sand when it comes to any existing psychological synergy.

There is also a hint of cosseted immaturity in the early friendship of *Amis and Amiloun* compared to other versions of the story, not least in an unusual emphasis on youth when the friends swear their oath. Cicero—no sceptic about ideal friendship—argues that it is generally unwise to commit to deep friendships "until we've reached an age when our character and way of living are established and confirmed."²⁶ The friends' counterparts in Latin and French are consistently more worldly for their years. Before their story's main troubles begin, Ami and Amile separately travel far and wide (including across the Alps in winter) and then bond in battle and in surviving the early treachery of steward Hardret. In *Amicus et*

²⁵ This resembles Marshall Sahlins's much-cited category "generalized reciprocity," which includes help given on the understanding that the beneficiary might never be in a position to help in return. But such help nonetheless generates a "counter-obligation," however "diffuse." Help given under the knights' oath creates an obligation to reciprocate (as Amis will discover), but does so independently of the oath, which makes no provision for reciprocity. See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2017), 175–76, quotations at 176.

²⁶ Cicero, *How to be a Friend*, ed. and trans. Freeman, ch. 74 ("Omnino amicitiae corroboratis iam confirmatisque et ingeniis et aetatibus iudicandae sunt").

Amelius, Amicus has been driven from his home and has married, and he and Amelius are in their thirties before the pair swear fidelity to one another and join Charlemagne's court together as officers of his household. In contrast, there is no struggle and little sense of maturation or even exertion in the build-up to Amis and Amiloun's oath (and they are neither battle- nor intrigue-hardened before the crisis over Belisaunt). It is not simply (as in the Anglo-French) that the youths' early relationship is sparsely treated. Cosily, the children "mylde" and "faire" (lines 54, 60) grow up at home in Lombardy surrounded by family (line 53) and are taken into service, aged twelve, at the local ducal court, where they eat "frely" and the horizon of their worldly experience is, picturesquely, "To ride an hunting under riis" (line 136)—one of the activities, as it happens, that Cicero mentions as no reliable guide in youth to adult friendships. The verses that culminate in the oath-taking depict sheltered, uneventful childhoods in a tone of pristine youth and are thick with forms of the noun *child* (eight occurrences in twenty-one lines; lines 125–45). In presenting the oath, the poet primes us with thoughts of immaturity or childishness.

The clearest signal that the early form of the brothers' relationship is flawed is arguably the leprosy that afflicts Amiloun in the wake of his deceitful judicial combat, undertaken to spare his guilty sworn brother. After all, "a voice fram heven" (line 1250) declares itself sent by God "To warn" him (line 1263) that he will suffer terribly if he takes on the duel. Our poem is unique among surviving versions of the story in this regard. (Where a loosely similar voice figures in other versions, it speaks as the disguised brother bigamously marries his brother's

beloved.²⁷) As the voice has predicted, Amiloun's leprosy steadily cuts him off from all society except his nephew—an apposite penance for a sin of exclusively privileging a single social tie. Yet the leprosy is commonly read as a trial that doubles down on the combat (itself a trial of Amiloun's loyalty) rather than as a punishment caused by it. Many of these readings are rooted in the premise that the brothers' relationship is firmly idealized.²⁸ A sense that the relationship does not change from inception to happy ending is a major impediment to interpreting Amiloun's leprosy as a punishment for privileging it. What good is a penance that does not touch the fault that provokes it? No such impediment arises in a reform-based reading—reform follows penance—which leaves us to consider more concrete apologies for the leprosy.

It has been noted, for instance, that Amiloun does not perjure himself when he swears that he has never kissed Belisaunt.²⁹ But it remains that he perverts judicial process, getting his friend off a true charge on a false pretence, and heaven might be expected to frown on this even if Mary is not being asked to back an explicitly false oath (lines 1294–96). A less technical defence of the brothers' trickery adduces their accuser's obvious villainy.³⁰ The vindictive steward, resentful of a glamorous rival who overleaps him in his own household, plays to chivalric romance type. Nonetheless, the betrayal of which he accurately accuses Amis concerns most intensely the duke, who is no villain. He is not, for instance, the

²⁷ *Anglo-Norman Amys e Amiloun*, ed. Ford, text from MS Royal 12 C XII, lines 710–24; *Birth of Romance*, trans. Weiss, 181; *Ami and Amile*, trans. Rosenberg and Danon, chs 89–91.

²⁸ See, for example, Kratins, “Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*”; Dannenbaum, “Insular Tradition,” 619–20; Hume, “*Amis and Amiloun*,” 28–30.

²⁹ Dannenbaum, “Insular Tradition,” 619.

³⁰ For example, Kratins, “Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*,” 351; Clark, “Ideal of Friendship,” 168–69.

possessive, incestuous or quasi-incestuous father who stubbornly blocks marriage in numerous romances, but is the brothers' honoured lord and major benefactor. Otherwise, classifications of Amiloun's leprosy as a trial sometimes appeal to the example of Job, his loyalty tried without need of offence.³¹ The preliminaries of suffering, however, differ significantly in these cases. Where Job endures in ignorance sufferings designed by God to answer the doubts of his "Satan" or "Accuser," his agent of justice, Amiloun is forewarned of suffering consequent on a specific course of action. Finally, but importantly, attitudes to leprosy varied profoundly in the late middle ages. Medical writers mostly avoided moralizing. In more religious contexts, the disease could be associated with saintliness, *imitatio Christi*, and patience in the face of worldly frailty, pain and corruption, and even explained as protection against worldly temptations (especially by separation from them). It was also, however, more straightforwardly understood as a divinely imposed mark of, and punishment for, sin (or, more positively, a head start on purgatory).³² Regardless, the poem's pointed coupling of leprosy and trickery makes it easy to light on a penitential understanding of Amiloun's disease. The story's

³¹ Clark, "Ideal of Friendship," 172. The Latin *Amicus and Amelius* explicitly likens Amicus to Job (*Life*, trans. Kuefler, 452).

³² See Julie Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 59–61, 137–40 (on a story of straightforward "exemplary illness" caused by a concealed offence; 139), 182–214 (on a much more complicated literary example, Robert Henryson's *Cresseid*, contrasted at one point with leprosy's treatment "as a straightforward index of wrongdoing" in *Amis and Amiloun*; 207); Elma Brenner, "Recent Perspectives on Leprosy in Medieval Western Europe," *History Compass* 8.5 (2010): 388–406; Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2006), 48–64, 85–88, 110–14, 128–42 (esp. 141–42). R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe 950–1250*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 44–61 modified at 152–53, 180–83, argues that stigmatization became entrenched (but not total) in western Europe from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries.

complexities mean less reprobative perspectives should not be dismissed, but I assume that, as connection-sensing, indeed apophenic, creatures, listeners and readers would have been likely to link warning, combat, and leprosy in a simple sequence of moral causation.³³

A reform-based, penitential account is most emphatically encouraged by the recognition scene that is also a brooding and violent *misrecognition* scene. This is the crisis element mentioned earlier that might cause an audience decisively to lose confidence in the brothers' initial bond. When Amiloun comes to Duke Amis's castle with Amorant, is mistaken for a thief of his own golden cup and permits himself to be terribly assaulted before he is recognized after all, he reaches his lowest ebb, the brothers are more drastically differentiated than ever, and the poem, pushing its emotional barometer from one extreme to the other, evokes unmistakable strains of liminality, transition and renewal. The golden cups play their most prominent role in this episode and, strikingly, they trigger its destructive, purgative energies but have no part in its turn to recognition and renewal. A troubled identity is denied, committed to the mud in which Amiloun nearly dies; and he is newly recognized under a different sign of his past. The episode has an equivalent only in the Anglo-French story—recognition is easy in the French and Latin versions—and Amiloun's break with the past is amplified in the Middle English compared to this. Nevertheless, the episode is much less

³³ Apophenia “occurs regularly throughout the general population” and “can include any instance in which a pattern is falsely detected or labeled as meaningful when it is actually absent or attributable to chance”: Scott D. Blain and others, “Apophenia as the Disposition to False Positives: A Unifying Framework for Openness and Psychoticism,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 129.3 (2020): 280. Cf. David Spiegelhalter, *The Art of Statistics: Learning from Data* (London: Penguin, 2019), 96–97, 257; and your intuitive grasp of the saying “everybody who confuses correlation with causation will die.”

discussed by critics than the leprosy or the murder of the children.³⁴ The action and imagery that stress division and liminality en route to reunion and renewal make the episode about much more than a simple recovery of a dormant bond and suggest instead some kind of revelation or anagnorisis and correction. Similar reformatory patterns of physical degradation, social effacement and eventual renewal occur in romances from Chrétien de Troyes's *Yvain* to *Sir Orfeo* and are expressly penitential in such tales as *Sir Gowther* and *Robert of Cisyle* (where mud also features).

Amiloun returns to the site of the brothers' youthful oath (assuming that Duke Amis's castle and his predecessor's are one and the same) having gained much harsh experience. When Amis's squire offers him wine in the duke's golden cup, he pours half into his own cup. I agree with Jill Mann that "the two identical cups, filled with an identical amount of wine, become a visual surrogate for the identical bodily appearance of the two friends and the ties of blood brotherhood that unite them."³⁵ While Mann sees continuity affirmed by this Eucharistic imagery, however, the direct result of Amiloun's gesture is rupture. The cups—burnished tokens of a prelapsarian past—are vexed, vexing signs for the present. Now foils to divergence, they provoke brief but profound confusion and violence between the brothers. Amis attacks the leper because he expects the cup's owner to be, like the cups, unchanging. He is delusionally anchored in the past and ignorant of the sworn brotherhood's most severe consequence to date (next to the steward's death). Indeed, Amis himself has changed almost beyond recognition since we last

³⁴ Dannenbaum judges the recognition scene's importance to be "attenuated" compared to the Anglo-French version ("Insular Tradition," 617). Mann, "Messianic Chivalry" puts the cups and the recognition scene at the centre of the poem's religious register but without a reformatory impetus.

³⁵ Mann, "Messianic Chivalry," 151.

saw the cups. No longer the brother left behind, anxious, at the patron's court, he is now a powerful nobleman and, raging against Amiloun, resembles that patron when he raged against Amis himself years ago. (Both dukes, on hearing a report, take a weapon and, as though "wode," rush through the same hall amidst upset bystanders, intent on killing a "traitour" with their own hands; lines 805–28; 2065–79.) Amis's unyielding rage is akin to Gawain's against Lancelot at the end of Malory's *Arthuriad* and we could conjecture in both cases that the angry knight is displacing feelings of guilt for the loss of a brother or two. This is already a sign that Amis is now out of step with the story (just as the old duke was). The cups have ceased to represent the brothers truly, which wretched Amiloun has intuited before domineering Amis will.

For, even as Amis leaps furiously to the wrong conclusion, tethered to the past, Amiloun leans into a quasi-penitential death wish, seemingly overwhelmed by the depths into which his friendship has led him. He separates himself from his own (past) identity, using the third person to say that the cup "was his [Amiloun's] in his cuntray" (line 2084) but is now "mine" (lines 2087). (Asking for death in the Anglo-French, Amillioun is not so mysteriously pointed about his past and seems at least half-motivated by exhaustion ["I have lived too long and only too well deserve death!"].³⁶) Surprisingly few critics stop to ask what we should make of Amiloun's self-destructive refusal to identify himself as his cup's original owner. Mann argues perceptively that the violence he permits realizes in "direct and brutal form" the "suffering that Amis has—unknowingly and indirectly—been inflicting on Amiloun." Allowing only "some strange necessity" for suffering before "recognition

³⁶ *Birth of Romance*, trans. Weiss, 186; *Anglo-Norman Amys e Amilioun*, ed. Ford, text from MS Royal 12 C XII, lines 1018–19.

and healing,” however, she does not detect a reformatory or penitential logic.³⁷ Yet Amiloun as well as Amis had a choice in the matter of suffering, and self-punishment is an enticing interpretation of his (in)action. He says of the cup that he “bought it dere” (line 2087), acknowledging that his suffering with leprosy is the price he has (knowingly) paid for the sworn relation that the cup commemorates; and by sharing out the wine until the cups match again he symbolically claims Amis for this calculus as well. Through divorcing himself from the “he” who originally owned his cup and through welcoming potentially lethal violence, Amiloun courts a symbolic and a literal death that would finish leprosy’s work. A confessor would surely diagnose despair, the dangerous cousin of contrition, but, in the nick of time and thanks to Amorant, the poem returns Amiloun’s suffering (his punishment) to a survivable and reformatory, that is, fully penitential, course.³⁸

Recovery begins with rebirth for Amiloun. Imagery of thresholds and effacement (castle gate; *slough*—mire—or ditch; dying) connects liminality to a sense of transition out of one identity and (potentially) into another.³⁹ And Amorant does not merely reveal who Amiloun is but reidentifies him, recasting the knights’ relationship and excluding something of the past. Amorant selects certain aspects of Amiloun’s story by which to identify him and is corroborated by the scar on Amiloun’s shoulder received during the combat against the steward. Before coming to the substance of this reidentification and the path it prepares for the end of the poem, I want to stress that the golden cups play no part in these matters.

³⁷ Mann, “Messianic Chivalry,” 157. For Mann, Amiloun’s leprosy betokens “self-sacrifice” and not “divine disapproval” (154).

³⁸ On penance, contrition and despair, see Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London: Routledge, 1991), 374–84.

³⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1969), 94–107, 166–72.

They signify the brothers' union but, unlike mementoes of kinship in other romances, they do not successfully bridge past and present.⁴⁰ The matching cups evoke not only the knights' erstwhile physical similarity but the cooperative logic of their oath, that each brother should regard the other as a second self. And so, when these early, expensively "wrought" (line 249) symbols of an unchanging bond drive careering deathliness and then drop out of the narrative completely before its emergency swerve to safety, we might wonder whether the oath's cooperative logic is similarly contestable. The cups are replaced by a sign much more organically incorporated in the developing history of the brothers' relationship.

Scar: friendship reformed

Golden cups yield to a scar, and unconditional cooperation yields to reciprocity. When he identifies Amiloun to Amis, Amorant thinks of the friendship as an elaborating, articulated sequence—a story—not a recurrence of the oath. History understood as a causal progression (rather than discrete repetitions of one, sworn cause) is essential scaffolding for an ethic of reciprocity, and Amorant deploys it thus to haul Amis away from impulsive rage and his fixation on the cups. He has him consider, in their place, a scar; a memory-firing mark akin to more famous ones received by Christ from his executioners, Odysseus from a boar and Sir Gawain from the Green Knight. It produces a small poetic net of repetition, of foreshadowing and remembering, that gathers up three key moments in the poem and brings Amiloun's unselfish act to bear on Amis's decision to help him in turn.

⁴⁰ See Green, *Crisis of Truth*, 270–72 (citing Amiloun's cup as an identification token; 270).

When Amiloun takes a “gret wounde” from the steward’s “grimly” weapon (lines 1352–53), the narrator anticipates a time when he will be recognized “thurch that wounde” (line 1354). This comes at the castle gate, of course, when Amis gazes on the “grimly wounde” (line 2132). Finally, the net closes after Amis, approaching his sleeping children, knife in hand, arrives at a crisis and retreats weeping. He finds resolve by thinking on the scar:

Mi brother was so kinde and gode,
With grimly wounde he schad his blod
For mi love opon a day;
Whi schuld y than mi childer spare,
To bring mi brother out of care?

(lines 2296–300)

Blood will answer blood; and the “grimly wounde” ensures that Amis’s decision is vividly anchored in a particular strand of the friends’ shared history.

This history means reciprocity. Amis’s thoughts match his earlier theorizing that Amorant might be helping a leper because that man “hath biforn / Holpen him at his nede” (lines 1994–95). While we might demur at his now drawing two young lives into the equation, that he is thinking in terms of reciprocation is undeniable. When it comes to the crunch, this passage determining that Amis will cut his children’s throats construes their murder as a response to—an act obliged by—Amiloun’s earlier act of friendship. (As critics have noticed, in the death of innocents, determined by a parent, there are also notes of Christ’s sacrifice to

redeem sin, even or especially at Christmas;⁴¹ but this redemptive resonance overlays the reciprocity newly at work between the brothers. Christ did not owe humans the Crucifixion, even if humans might be said to owe Christ *for* the Crucifixion, as Amis owes Amiloun, scarred for another's sin.) Meanwhile, Amorant has already rearranged the poem's shop window of social logics by placing reciprocity front and centre when he stops Amis's assault. With no little sense of theatre, he identifies his uncle by appealing to events: Amis is attacking a man who "toke . . . wounde / To save thi liif in fight" (lines 2111–12). Amorant further insists on the logic of reciprocity—Amis "Well evell aquitest" Amiloun's past help (line 2123)—and Amis, enlightened, echoes him in self-recrimination: "For he saved mi liif biforn, / Ichave him yolden with wo and sorn" (lines 2140–41). There is nothing to match this even in the Anglo-French. Though Amis recognizes there that Amillioun has "done everything for him," recollection of the judicial combat has no role in revealing identity nor prompting the children's deaths.⁴² The Middle English recognition scene at the castle gate replaces the oath's logic of unconditional cooperation with the logic of reciprocity, and the brothers' heavenly visions later show what Amis can do fulsomely to reciprocate Amiloun's life-saving help. Amis's deciding reasoning, as we have seen, then fulfils the poem's final-phase emphasis on reciprocity.

All the while, the unconditional claims of the oath are silenced, at most recalled but not pressed by descriptions of the knights as brothers. In the French *Ami et Amile*, reciprocity becomes salient, but it goes hand-in-hand with a sustained emphasis on second-self friendship (which has not been called into

⁴¹ Kratins, "Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*," 353; Dannenbaum, "Insular Tradition," 621 (both adding Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac to the mix).

⁴² *Birth of Romance*, trans. Weiss, 186; *Anglo-Norman Amys e Amilioun*, ed. Ford, text from MS Royal 12 C XII, line 1045.

question) and, for this reason, it is difficult to read reciprocity as a corrective to that mode. In halting Amis's violence in the Middle English poem, on the other hand, Amorant makes no claim about an oath or the golden cups, even though he has known about at least one cup before (line 1810). Neither does Amis reflect on his oath as he pursues heaven's plan for Amiloun's recovery. In the equivalent crisis years earlier, the oath decided Amiloun to press ahead after hearing the angel's warning of great suffering ("To hold mi treuthe schal y nought spare"; line 1283). One authoritative plot summary explains the decision to murder the children in the same way, by stating "Amis remembers his oath of loyalty," but this is not what the poem says.⁴³ Now, it is neither oath nor cups, but the "grimly wounde" and the history it represents that determine the event.

It is worth stressing that Amis and Amiloun's relationship does not become transactional. It is made clear that Amis owes Amiloun but not that he should be thinking in terms of neatly clearing a debt. Reciprocal cooperation or exchange is transactional when calculated values or plain agreement enable exchanges and counter-exchanges to be equalized. Reciprocity is always at least proximate to equalizing exchange, but the social sciences have identified reflexes and strategies by which non-transactional reciprocity keeps equalization at bay and reciprocity indefinite, diffused, subtilized and, thereby, "misrecognized."⁴⁴ Some of these are in evidence in *Amis and Amiloun*. The brothers do not discuss reciprocity together, not even when they speak of Amiloun's suffering or the murder of Amis's children.

⁴³ "Amis and Amiloun," Database of Middle English Romance, University of York, <https://www.middleenglishromance.org.uk/mer/5>.

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 105–7, 112–14; Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 174–78; Chris Wickham, conclusion to *The Languages of the Gift in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), esp. 254–61.

When reciprocity is in the air, calculation is avoided and, were we to press on against the grain of the text, it would be impeded by dealing with multiple, uncertainly arranged forms of exchange and counter-exchange. It is unclear whether Amis owes Amiloun for the helpful combat chiefly (his focus at the threshold of murder) or in combination with its leprous costs (included in Amorant's account at the castle gate). Moreover, Amis responds to Amiloun's sacrifice not just with his children's healing blood but, in tandem with Belisaunt, with a year of loving care and shelter before that. And such evaluation as might aid calculation asserts a mismatch between sacrifices rather than parity (most notably when Belisaunt reassures her husband that "God may sende ous childer mo"; line 2393).⁴⁵ To return from the mechanics of equalization to the principle of reciprocity, even Cicero, discussing pure friendship, allows that friendship could be economic without becoming transactional. *De amicitia* speaks of the returning or repaying of kindness ("remuneracione benevolentiae") as the most joyous experience for friends, untainted by transactionalism.⁴⁶ Crucial to the way that *De amicitia* keeps the economics of friendship and transactionalism apart is a distinction between, on the one hand, (transactionally) seeking to create obligation through a benefit and, on the other, acknowledging your own obligation from benefits received (but not

⁴⁵ Leah Haught notices "reciprocity" but, regarding sworn truth to be the poem's favoured social logic, dismisses this under the auspices of a minimalist model of equalizing exchange: Amis and Belisaunt owe Amiloun "their marriage and their lives," not their children's lives ("In Pursuit of 'Trewth,'" 240, 258). There are, however, other ways of construing what Amiloun gave (as costly help, for example) and, regardless, equalization can be achieved where a counter-exchange of *any* kind is valued as equal to the debt incurred.

⁴⁶ Cicero, *How to be a Friend*, ed. and trans. Freeman, ch. 49; cf. chs 26, 32.

calculating it).⁴⁷ The non-transactional side of this split fits Amis's kindness to Amiloun rather neatly.

Unconditional cooperation, for its part, is not scrapped by the poem's reformative phase. Rather, its zone of legitimacy is restricted. Receding from the brothers' sworn kinship, it is sequestered in a less fictive family tie: that between Amiloun and Amorant, who is his "soster sone" (line 1628), a special kind of blood relationship because of its imperviousness to doubts around paternity. (Here is a passing similarity with the values of the late fourteenth-century romance *Athelston*, which pits sworn brotherhood against the kinship of spouses and offspring—sister's sons.) Amorant and his counterpart in the Anglo-French story expand the role of Ami's son in the French version to annex that of two serfs loyal but unrelated to Ami (who has the Middle English Amiloun's role). "Trewē and of [Amiloun's] kende" (line 1627), Amorant helps his uncle in his desperate need without hesitation, prescribed limit, or expectation of reward. He tells Amiloun that "he no schuld never wond [*hesitate*] / To serven hem fot to hond, / While he olives ware" (lines 1630–32) and, over the penultimate fifth of the poem, he proves himself as good as his word, with all its echoes of Amis and Amiloun's oath of unconditional aid (but no explicit reference to help "in wrong and right"). The poem's habit of referring to Amorant as "child" also echoes the oath-taking passage, and perhaps more securely sequesters his unconditional cooperation; but here the connotations are of innocence pure and uncorruptible rather than immature.

Amorant's simplicity and the simplicity of his tie to his uncle help to sequester his unconditional cooperation. At its turning point, the poem draws an especially vivid distinction between sister's son Amorant, "Ful trewe . . . and kinde of blod" (line 1846), and the sworn brother Amis. Amorant carries Amiloun on his

⁴⁷ For example, Cicero, *How to be a Friend*, ed. and trans. Freeman, chs 32, 51, 67.

back and “togider” in this way they repeatedly fall “in the clay,” their forms almost merging, as it were dividually (lines 1844–45). There is a glaring contrast in Amis, a “bold baroun” sweeping back into his castle “with gamen and play / . . . / As lord and prince with pride,” oblivious to poor men in the mud, who draw back at his retinue’s approach (lines 1888–95). The sworn brothers are never more sharply separated. At the same time, the image of Amiloun and Amorant caked in clay anticipates Amiloun’s beating in the castle ditch and their near-merging is also an effacement of socially legible identity, a reduction to elemental being. Kindness to *kinde* remains, and Amorant continues to serve his uncle “with mild mode” (line 1847) whereas Amis, whom Amiloun describes with the same phrase (line 1870), proves anything but mild in his stronghold. Amorant is a simple part of the romance’s patterns. It habitually calls him “child”, with connotations of innocence pure and uncorruptible (where the term’s context around the oath-taking passage suggests immaturity). He endures and keeps helping. All other supporters reject Amiloun or fall away, compromised by circumstance (especially the economic distress of dearth) until only Amorant remains, unperturbed by his uncle’s leprosy. Like the dearth and the winter, he is “strong” (lines 1828, 2104; cf. lines 1822, 1840). As Amis attacks Amiloun in a frenzy, Amorant is still and silent and then simply lifts the duke up (line 2106) before making him see the situation clearly. The brothers’ relationship is a complex, occasionally fraught relationship that develops significantly where uncle and nephew persist in a deeply and simply natural bond. Ultimately, Amorant receives his uncle’s lands, implicitly a reward for his devotion, but this elicits a reminder that Amorant is “trew and kynde,” not an invocation of reciprocity (line 2490). Amorant’s unconditional cooperation, framed by a biological tie, is validated. Unlike the cooperation constructed by the sworn tie and rejected by the poem, it is not explicitly indiscriminate of “wrong and right,” even as he aids his uncle after a crime. The knot of cooperative premises upon which Amis muses as

the three men converge for the first time—sworn relation, reciprocity, and blood tie—is untangled in the sworn brothers’ mature move to reciprocity and the nephew’s constant devotion.

Oaths and reciprocities

The reformatory mood of *Amis and Amiloun*, I have argued, is tacit and in keeping with Simpson’s remarks on the “reformist conservatism” and “shameful secrets” of romance. For a fuller sense of how a medieval audience might have registered a recalibration of social logic within such a subtle reformism, we can turn to similar stories in which there is no turn to reciprocity (often because it is already invoked by oath). Such stories were well known when *Amis and Amiloun* was popular and might have created expectations against which our poem’s progression from total cooperation to reciprocity would have been thrown into relief. Stories as various as *Sir Amadace*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Chaucer’s “Franklin’s Tale” and *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesley* lodge the keeping of one’s word at the ethical heart of their narratives (though “The Franklin’s Tale” leaves plenty of room to question whether positivist interpretations of that word should be allowed to rule).

Importantly, several of these stories involve a limited oath, designating exchange and reciprocation, not a general vow of total cooperation. This is the so-called “rash promise” model, in which promises are explicitly reciprocal and firmly delimited, even if the exchanges derived within the limits turn out to be extraordinary. *Amadace*, for example, promises exactly to give up half his winnings at a royal tournament in return for his expenses for the event (and his winnings turn out to include a wife and child, whom he is prepared physically to divide in two

before his benefactor accepts that his *trouthe* to their covenant is proven and, as God to Abraham, grants a reprieve). Gawain promises to accept an axe-blow in return for an axe-blow and, separately, to swap daily winnings at Hautdesert (which sees him using kisses to equalize varied prey of the hunt until he leaves out an extra item on the ledger on the third day). The promise in “The Franklin’s Tale” is completely defined (no terms are left for derivation as in the *Amadace-* and *Gawain-*poets’ initially unpopulated category of winnings), but Dorigen imagines that the condition requiring reciprocation can never be met. In such stories, virtuous characters honour their oaths and this determines their happy endings (with significant complication for Gawain and Dorigen); but none of these oaths prescribes unbounded cooperation. When nasty surprises arise, as with Amadace’s winnings, the authoritative partner steps in to separate the verification of *trouthe* from any insistence on the performance of unforeseen obligation. Amis and Amiloun’s oath, by contrast, is radically unfocused—the sole condition it voices for the brothers’ total mutual cooperation is that it should hold “While thai might live and stond” (line 147)—and when extreme ethical conflict duly arises, nobody steps in to grant Amiloun respite from his sworn obligation. (Amis later enjoys a retroactive version of Amadace’s reprieve, with the resurrection of his children, but has primarily been motivated by reciprocity, not his vow.)

In a widely retold story of idealized friendship that has some resonant structural similarities with *Amis and Amiloun*, unconditional, uncircumscribed cooperation wins the day without relying on sworn obligation, albeit certain versions of the story introduce it. A man gives a woman in marriage to his friend and is later saved from poverty and the executioner by that friend. Early in its European textual life, the story featured in the twelfth-century *Disciplina clericalis* of Pedro Alfonso alongside a tale frowning on friends who refuse to help a friend “in wrong.” A summary telling appears adjacent to a variation of the wrongful friend

scenario (inversely moralized) and a short version of the Amicus and Amelius narrative in an enormous exemplum collection, *Alphabetum narrationum*. In retellings by Boccaccio, in *The Decameron*, and Lydgate, as *Fabula duorum mercatorum*, there are passing references to sworn bonds, but these come amidst greatly expanded idealization of deep friendship.⁴⁸ Reciprocity colours the friendship with more or less strength from version to version—it is quite clear-cut in *Disciplina clericalis* but Lydgate’s poem holds off reciprocity-driven interpretation of the grand kindnesses that his merchant protagonists bestow on each other, suppressing verbal and narrative links between them. Indeed, Lisa Cooper argues persuasively that Lydgate’s shared-soul treatment of the friendship is a function of the poem’s allergic resistance to the transactional reciprocities of commerce and the mercantile world.⁴⁹ Even where reciprocity emerges in versions of this story, however, there is no sense in which unconditional cooperation within the central friendship is repudiated.

Such cooperation is very seldom governed by a sworn tie while also staying the course of the narrative—even in *Amis and Amiloun* analogues twinned-self friendship is far more important than the friends’ vow—but two examples are a

⁴⁸ For the textual history, see John Lydgate, *Fabula duorum mercatorum and Guy of Warwyk*, ed. Pamela Farvolden (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2016), 8–9 (but note that the story is number 8 on day 10 in *The Decameron*); also, Arnoldi Leodiensis, *Alphabetum narrationum*, ed. Elisa Brillì (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), chs 56–8; *Jacob’s Well*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, part 1, EETS os 115 (London: Kegan Paul, 1900), 88–89 (as an exemplum of “trewe loue”). For the oath in Lydgate, see lines 186 (and n.), 369. Boccaccio’s scene in which an impoverished Gisippus is not recognized at his friend’s house and so decides to bring about his own death for a wrongly attributed crime is (especially) strongly reminiscent of Amiloun/Amillioun’s brush with death at Amis’s hands in *Amis and Amiloun* and its Anglo-French stablemate.

⁴⁹ Lisa H. Cooper, “‘His guttys wer out shake’: Illness and Indigence in Lydgate’s *Letter to Gloucester* and *Fabula duorum mercatorum*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 30 (2008): 303–34, esp. 315–16.

story in the moralized tale collection *Gesta Romanorum* and *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesley*, an outlaw tale from the end of the fifteenth century or the start of the sixteenth (around the time of the two later surviving manuscripts of *Amis and Amiloun*).⁵⁰ The *Gesta* exemplum apparently adapts the story of Damon and Phintias to give us thieving sworn friends, one of whom takes the place of the other in prison and is about to be hanged when his friend returns. Impressed by this show of loyalty, the judge calls off the execution altogether and takes both men into service. The story's oath to help at need, relied upon in a criminal context, and the substitution of confederate for confederate chime with *Amis and Amiloun*, the reprieve from execution with the tale from *Disciplina clericalis*. Similarly, in *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesley*, the three protagonists, who swear brotherhood in response to being outlawed, help each other at need on the principle of solidarity rather than any more developed concept of justice, much as Amis and Amiloun bind themselves to do "in wrong and right." To save Cloudesley from lethal justice and through other criminal activity, the brothers kill some three hundred crown officers and other citizens. Eventually, the king recruits them as royal retainers and they promise a pilgrimage to Rome to be absolved of their sins by the Pope himself. The main social adjustment of both *Adam* and the *Gesta* tale sees the criminal confederates incorporated into the state but their sworn solidarity is undiminished and there is no reciprocity (as distinct from mutuality) on show in their bond.

Medieval stories of oaths and intense friendships, on this evidence, harbour a variegated ecosystem of cooperative logics. The Middle English *Amis and Amiloun*

⁵⁰ *Gesta Romanorum: A New Translation*, ed. and trans. Christopher Stace (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2016), no. 108; *Adam Bell, Clim of the Clough and William of Cloudesley*, in *Robin Hood*, ed. Knight and Ohlgren.

is unusual in this environment in separating oath and reciprocity, and certainly in progressing from one to the other. It is not, however, a lone voice pitted against a uniform orthodoxy of *trouthe* and loyalty; nor is it an outlier in steering sworn relationships away from open-ended unconditional cooperation. The stories in which *trouthe* to an oath is most imperative commonly feature stark but limited oaths, often initiated by a stranger to test the protagonist's integrity. Elsewhere, unlimited cooperation is rooted in idealized friendship approximating or exemplifying the shared-soul or second-self model. *Amis and Amiloun* bears resemblances to all these stories, but its oath is virtually unlimited and undirected to the testing of *trouthe*; its central friendship is partially idealized yet mimics shared-soul friendship only superficially; and, while reserving a legitimate space for unconditional cooperation within close family, it delegitimizes it for sworn brotherhood.

Confederacy in late medieval England

Late medieval representations of sworn brotherhood, on the one hand, and confederacy, on the other, suggest that many readers and listeners would have taken *Amis and Amiloun* to be suspicious of the brothers' unreformed relationship—suspicious not of sworn brotherhood per se but of our knights' variation of it and, in particular, the unconditional cooperation it initially organizes. Sworn brotherhood, especially between a pair of aristocrats, was widely viewed as respectable, even prized; but occasionally in England it got caught up in broad and persistent anxiety about confederacy, social disorder and perversions of legal justice. "Confederacy" was a category of cooperation that was presented as justice-defying and dangerous to wider society. (Other labels were available and a 1305

law, for example, defined “conspiratours” as meddlers with legal processes.⁵¹) With their commitment to help each other “in wrong and right” and their interference in judicial process, Amis and Amiloun stray into this territory.

Sworn brotherhood, very broadly speaking, was well-regarded and was sometimes firmly supported by the Church. It is extremely difficult to estimate how many people took oaths of brotherhood, but their portrayal is typically favourable except when they are shown to be betrayed.⁵² Oaths arranged to put an end to enmity were especially susceptible, as demonstrated by promises sworn by the duke of Burgundy and the duke of Orléans in 1407, three days before Orléans was assassinated on Burgundy’s orders.⁵³ Thus, the most common critique of sworn brotherhood in medieval texts is in fact that it is not strong enough: insufficient, especially, to hold adversaries together in a bond of peace. Given a more auspicious starting point, forged between friends, the bond of fictive or spiritual brotherhood was more secure. In any case, its covenants could create obligations recognized at law when it came, for instance, to the sharing or inheritance of military gains.⁵⁴ Even in the case of fragile, possibly disingenuous peacemaking, sworn brotherhood was deployed in the name of public order.

It was more severely besmirched when it brushed up against unconditional cooperation or the distortion of legal process, as it does in *Amis and Amiloun*. Literary sworn brothers do not normally envisage testing their oath against a clear conflict of interests or a call to help their brother “in wrong.” Where such a

⁵¹ Chris Given-Wilson and others, eds, *PROME: The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, 1275–1504* (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2005), Edward I, *Vetus codex*, 1305, mms 118v–19.

⁵² Elizabeth A. R. Brown, “Ritual Brotherhood in Western Medieval Europe,” *Traditio* 52 (1997): 357–81.

⁵³ Brown, “Ritual Brotherhood,” 364–65.

⁵⁴ Maurice Keen, “Brotherhood in Arms,” *History* 159 (1962): 2–3.

question arises, Cicero recognizes ethical limits to pure friendship (“Never ask a friend to do anything shameful, and don’t do anything shameful if asked”) and in *Perceforest*, unusually, Lucidés makes it explicit that he and Salfar, “near neighbours and companions in arms from our beginning,” will each help the other “jusques a la mort, *saulf son honneur*” (“to the death, *saving his honour*”).⁵⁵ In life, sworn brothers conventionally limited their commitment by reserving an opt-out for compromising situations. When the lords Hastings and Mountjoy swore loving cousinhood to one another in 1480, Mountjoy reserved “mine allegiance” and Hastings specified that he would support Mountjoy “in any matter . . . as may stand with reason.”⁵⁶ But sworn brotherhood was not completely insulated from unconditional cooperation and its stigmatization when set against the rule of law. A petition to parliament from 1283 alleges that the undersheriff of Somerset falsely found in favour of the petitioner’s opponent “because they are sworn brothers [*freres jures*].”⁵⁷ Edward II evidently swore brotherhood with Piers Gaveston and was, perhaps relatedly, accused of wishing “to support Piers against all people in all matters.”⁵⁸ Here, sworn brotherhood passes fully into the ambit of widespread complaint about confederacy and degradation of public order, which typically involved larger groups of confederates than a sworn pair. Fear of confederacy, faction or criminal band is at root a fear of radical groupishness, of the group that

⁵⁵ Cicero, *How to be a Friend*, ed. and trans. Freeman, chs 35–44, quotation at ch. 40; *Perceforest, sixième partie*, ed. Gilles Roussineau (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2015), 438 (6.542), emphasis added. It is not definite that Lucidés and Salfar’s is a sworn tie.

⁵⁶ William Huse Dunham Jr, *Lord Hastings’ Indentured Retainers, 1461–1483* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), appendix A, 134, quoted in Keen, “Brotherhood in Arms,” 16. The seventeenth-century copy has “reason and convenience,” which Dunham sensibly queries as a possible mistranscription of “reason and conscience.”

⁵⁷ Given-Wilson and others, eds, *PROME*, Edward I, C49 File 2, appendix, item 32 i.

⁵⁸ Brown, “Ritual Brotherhood,” 360, citing Pierre Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston: Edward II’s Adoptive Brother* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), 11–13, 20.

will pursue its own interests regardless of the cost to others.⁵⁹ Such a group can easily seem closed-off and primed for hostility towards the rest of society. Exactly this fear of confederacy comes to the surface in diverse late medieval texts—poems, petitions, pamphlets—that complain of political disorder and the ineffectuality or corruption of royal justice.

The spectre of confederacy was feared for several reasons in the late middle ages. Flexibility was part of the picture. Complaint imagines confederates making expedient ties out of nowhere and with scant regard for the social status of partners by, for instance, retaining supporters with the help of cheap and easily distributed liveries. Unconditional solidarity or cooperation “in wrong and right,” however, was arguably the most important ingredient. This concern sometimes comes very plainly to the surface in the long history of parliamentary outrage over maintenance (or support outside due process in legal disputes) in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In 1377, for instance, the commons complained that minor landholders were building liveried retinues specifically for support in “querel resonable, et noun resonable, a graunde meschief du people” (“dispute reasonable and unreasonable, to the great injury of the people”). Nearly thirty years later, and still worried about the connection between livery and maintenance, the commons (in a more comprehensive and more legally specific petition) alleged that mid-range and lesser aristocrats were retaining, sometimes in huge numbers, “en susteignance de lour extorcenouses querelles” (“in support of their wrongful

⁵⁹ There is a huge literature on human groupishness, “tribalism” or homophily. See, for a beginning, Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (London: Atlantic, 2014), 48–55, 293–98; Robert Sapolsky, *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (London: Vintage, 2017), 387–424.

quarrels”).⁶⁰ Elsewhere, opponents of confederacy decried it at the highest levels of government, not least in Richard II’s retaining and oath-taking to secure himself against heightened political opposition in the late 1380s. More broadly, texts such as Thomas Fovent’s pamphlet on the so-called Merciless Parliament of 1388 and the troubled politics of the time, and a London council proclamation (1383–84) against “confederacies” and similar ties “forto susteyne eny quedeles in lyuyngge and deyengge to gidre” fuelled fear of factions as groups that, in Clementine Oliver’s words, “answered to no one and would stop at nothing.”⁶¹

One of the most intriguing records of fourteenth-century confederacy sees confederates themselves accusing elites of confederacy and presenting their own principled factionalism as a justifiable strategy in a world blighted by less honourable solidarity. An indictment in the court of King’s Bench from 1393 (with royal pardons) alleges that some eighty associates from several Yorkshire villages near Hull went about for six years in a shared livery “per falsam alliganciam et confederacionem” (“by corrupt allegiance and confederacy”), maintaining each other “in omnibus querelis veris vel falsis” (“in all disputes, true or false”) and interfering with the work of royal officials.⁶² The court record also copies out a vernacular poem which the group had apparently taken to reciting in public and which sets

⁶⁰ Given-Wilson and others, eds, *PROME*, Richard II, 1377 October, mem. 12 (translation modified); Henry IV, 1406 March, part 1, mem. 3.

⁶¹ Clementine Oliver, *Parliament and Political Pamphleteering in Fourteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell, 2010), 101–2, 133–39, quotation at 135; Letter Book H, London Metropolitan Archives, COL/AD/01/008, 332 (fol. 172), [https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/350639509?get&file=\[www_lma\]digital-documents.html](https://search.lma.gov.uk/scripts/mwimain.dll/350639509?get&file=[www_lma]digital-documents.html), printed in R. W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, eds, *A Book of London English, 1384–1425* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1931), 31.

⁶² G. O. Sayles, ed. and trans., *Select Cases in the Court of King’s Bench under Richard II, Henry IV and Henry V* (London: Quaritch, 1971), 83–85, quotations at 84 (translation modified).

out a philosophy of robust camaraderie in the shadow of elite corruption. The group, the poem declares, will “Meynteyn owre negheboure / With al oure myghte,” will suffer scorn (“hethyng”) from nobody, “what man he be,” and will treat a wrong against any of the band as a wrong against all.⁶³ As Paul Strohm observes, the poem embraces “what everyone already knows about maintainers”—or factions.⁶⁴ At the same time, the poem differentiates this posture of answering to no one and stopping at nothing from confederacy “in wrong and right.” The posture is defensive, spurred jointly by threatening outsiders aiming to stitch things up (to “bake” matters) and by corrupt local religious orders who, just like Amis and Amiloun, “wil ilkan hel vp [*protect or cover up for*] other / And meynteyn him als his brother / Bothe in wronge and righte.” The outsider “schrewes” were possibly King’s Bench and other officials who had travelled north when the king moved his court to York in the summer of 1392.⁶⁵ The indicted group mirrors the friars in having each other’s back regardless of the law or its officers, but they distinguish themselves as well-motivated, according to their own standard. They react only to scorn and other wrongs where the religious groups (and our knights) close ranks “in wronge and righte” alike. For these maintainers, deeply solidary but rightful cooperation is different from unconditional cooperation (even if group identity itself very significantly shapes the perception of justice).

There is even a loose parallel between Amorant’s role and late medieval efforts to regulate livery. Somewhat as our poem reserves close family by blood as a

⁶³ Sayles, ed. and trans., *Select Cases*, 84–85. All quotations from the poem are from the text printed here.

⁶⁴ Paul Strohm, *Hochon’s Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), 182.

⁶⁵ Andrew Prescott, “The Yorkshire Partisans and the Literature of Popular Discontent,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature in English*, ed. Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), 329.

zone of undisruptive, hallowed or sentimentalized help, so parliamentary petitions and related laws reserve particular social configurations as a zone of legitimate livery-giving, with the aristocratic household reliably at the centre of this zone (including households of the gentry, who were well represented in the commons). In 1390, for example, petitions called for livery badges to be banned outside household membership or permanent retaining and for livery of cloth to be similarly but not as tightly restricted, and a royal ordinance implemented a version of the petition on badges. A later law, of 1399, made illegal all badges except the king's and it restricted livery of cloth to the giver's household and estate council.⁶⁶ Generally speaking, legislative efforts were markedly more exercised over highly flexible, inexpensive forms of livery such as badges and hoods than the more traditional and resource-intensive livery of cloth. They were also, and relatedly, more suspicious of non-aristocratic than aristocratic distributors of livery.⁶⁷ *Amis and Amiloun* and the legislative texts alike assume that the form of cooperation that preoccupies them (be it absolute commitment in the poem or material signs of association in the legislation) is safer when it is carried by relationships (of blood or household) that are not easily or spontaneously contrived.

Insofar as late medieval listeners and readers registered *Amis and Amiloun* as confederates "in wrong and right," they would have brought them into some kind of proximity to political factions and maintainers against the law. Prevailing sentiment regarding such confederates was pitched somewhere between

⁶⁶ Given-Wilson and others, eds, *PROME*, Richard II, 1390 January, mem. 7; Alexander Luders and others, eds, *The Statutes of the Realm*, 11 vols (London: Record Commission, 1810–28), 2:75 (cf. 84), 113–14.

⁶⁷ See Nigel Saul, "The Commons and the Abolition of Badges," *Parliamentary History* 9.2 (1990): 302–15; Elliot Kendall, *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 188–93.

condemnation and panic. An idealizing, non-reformative reading of *Amis and Amiloun* excludes such sentiment, while a reform-centred reading sees the poem first entangle sworn brotherhood in such sentiment then disentangle it. Compared to analogues, the poem initially makes its central friendship more about the oath and less about twinned-self friendship, and then it sidelines the oath. On this view, when Amis and Amiloun grow up, they grow up a long way. Their friendship and fictive brotherhood leave behind unreflective solidarity tied to an abstracting, totalizing founding provision and attain an inexact practice of reciprocity. The brothers exchange associations with confederacy for a form of friendship much less contentious for most medieval audiences—a relationship fed by and responding to its own history of good services.