s many medievalists would attest, the nature of gentility was a hotly debated question in the later Middle Ages: is it innate, concomitant with aristocratic blood? Or can it manifest itself in anyone by virtue of their gentle behavior? As Bonnie Mak has recently shown, Buonaccorso da Montemagno’s humanist debate poem about the sources of gentility, the *Controversia de nobilitate*, enjoyed a pan-European circulation. Among vernacular best sellers, the topic was treated by Dante in his *Convivio* and in the *Roman de la rose*. In England, in particular, numerous romances, catechetical literature, courtesy books, and sermons reflected at length on the question of gentility, with romances coming down most often on the side of the feudal aristocracy, suggesting that indeed gentle behavior is a birthright, closed off to the vast majority of the population. By contrast, in what is the most famous


3. For an analysis of the feudal-aristocratic ideology animating most Middle English romances, see Stephen Knight, “The Social Function of the Middle English Romances,” in David Aers, ed., *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986), pp. 99–122. As one particular example, one might cite the fair unknown motif, which posits a dependence of gentle behavior on noble birth, as seen in romances such as, *inter alia*, *Lybeaus Desconus*, Thomas Malory’s “Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney,” *Sir Degaré*, *Sir Percevyll of...
Middle English disquisition on the subject, the old hag in Chaucer’s Wife of Bath’s Tale insists that gentility and birth are not directly related. In his lyric “Gentilesse,” Chaucer himself attempts the uncoupling of virtue and blood when he proclaims, “For unto vertu longeth dignitee / And noght the reverse” (5–6). The source and nature of gentility was thus an open question.

I wish here to explore one hitherto understudied moral exemplum from the period and its intervention into these debates. As I will show, “A Good Matter of the Merchant and His Son” (hereafter, “A Good Matter”), which survives in one copy from the late fifteenth century, registers a pointed and partisan critique of the dominant paradigm from romance, in which gentility was connected to landowning, aristocratic status, instead carving out an alternative cultural space for a specifically mercantile gentility. The moral exemplum to which I here turn adopts one particularly powerful strategy for staking a claim to gentility, attempting to show generosity as innate and reflexive: giving without reckoning the costs and without first pausing to calculate marks one as a gentle person, and such an attitude, the exemplum maintains, is constitutive of mercantile society.

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At the same time, this exemplum does not merely pit its mercantile ideals against landed aristocracy writ large. Instead, its scapegoat is a franklin. Franklins were, by contemporary definition, those who were born free of servile status, and who owned land, but whose possessions were insufficient for them to be counted among the gentry. In short, they occupied the lowest rungs of landed society. By presenting franklins as the foil to mercantile gentility, “A Good Matter” thus targets the lower echelons among late-medieval landowners. As such, this exemplum offers not so much an inflection of class conflict in general as it does a narrow and specific iteration of mercantile anxieties—anxieties registered against their most proximate class competitors from the landed realm. This narrative has no truck with ethical ambiguity and the fuzzy borders of social class, instead leaving us in no doubt: merchants are right and franklins are wrong.

There are three main characters in this narrative: a Franklin; his son, William; and a guild master. The text begins with the Franklin, who enjoys a wealthy lifestyle on his landed estates. He lives by treachery, extorting money from his tenants and neighbors. By contrast, his son, William, refuses to study law and follow in his father’s footsteps as a landowner, instead going to the city to learn a trade and become a merchant. When his father dies, William inherits his lands—and along with them a host of neighbors and tenants pressing claims against the new heir. His father’s spirit, now completely black and in Purgatory, visits William to inform him that he cannot be released from suffering until his debts have been paid. William obligingly sells all his lands, satisfies his franklin-father’s debts, and is visited once again by the ghost. Now, his deceased franklin-father is less black than he was before; but he tells William that he will not turn white until William also pays his tithes. Since William has already sold all his lands, his only recourse is to sell himself

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into lifetime servitude to his guild master in return for money. Having done all this, William now sees his father in heavenly glory. But when his guild master sees William in nothing but his shirt—he even gave away the rest of his clothes to pay off his father’s debts—he takes pity on him, returning all his father’s lands to him, giving him his daughter in marriage, and making him his heir. William’s good will, that is, influences his master, who releases all previous debts. And William’s father is similarly freed from his debts to God, payable in Purgatory. The narrative thus presents a hierarchy of goodwill, in which the merchant is the highest and the franklin the lowest.

Franklins were a logical choice for merchants’ competitors at the game of gentility. Merchants, as urban figures without access to the prestige of landed society, would have looked to the lower echelons of landholders as their immediate competitors for cultural prestige. To accomplish this potted experiment in class antagonism, “A Good Matter” carefully maintains the fiction (although it does become unraveled in places, as I show in my conclusion) that the landed economy and the mercantile economy are mutually exclusive. The wicked Franklin is associated with landowning, for “Hors and nete he had grete plenté” and he is said to have been “a grete tenement man, and ryche of londe and lede” (fol. 59rb).9 His neighbors are similarly rural, for he takes advantage of them, should he happen to “fynde hys neȝbu[r]s beste, eyþer in corne or grasse” (fol. 59rb). Moreover, the Franklin encourages William to study law, a profession that could symbolize minor landowning in general, given the litigiousness that marked almost all land ownership and the centrality of the legal profession to the gentry.10 The Franklin is clearly not thinking in grandiose terms about William’s prospects, but rather he envisions his son being a man of influence in a very circumscribed locale, which would match the sphere of influence of the typical franklin: “Thou schalt be an ap[per]sey, my sone, in mylys ij or thre” (fol. 59v).11 In short, the Franklin wants his son to replicate his own social status. But William rejects the Franklin’s career advice, substituting a metonym for urban life in its place: “‘A man of lawe,’ seyde Wyllyam, ‘That w[y]ll y neuyr bee! / I wolde lerne of marchandyse to passe ovr

9. In what follows, I cite directly from the manuscript, preserving the scribe’s orthography. I have silently emended capitalization and word division, and I have added punctuation.


11. *Apersey* is, I take it, a form of Middle English apprise, which the MED defines as “good reputation, renown, eminence, excellence.” See *MED*, s.v. “ap(p)rise” (n.(2)). The MED’s definitions suggest that this word is an abstract noun denoting the reputation itself and not the person who bears the reputation. However, in this case, it clearly refers to a person of eminence.
the see’” (fol. 59v). By juxtaposing these two forms of life, the text reveals the rural and urban economies to be in direct opposition.

As is typical with exempla, readers are not given accurate renderings of social life, replete with psychological depth and explorations of motivation. Instead, short snippets are meant to figure forth larger moral claims, much as individual still frames in a comic represent a series of actions and moral states. In this case, rural property disputes represent the conflict-ridden nature of rural land ownership. For example, as the Franklin nears his death, we learn that none of his neighbors is willing to serve as executor of his will:

He callyd to hym the gentylmen, the beste in that cuntre
He prayed them wyth all hys herte hys executurs for to bee.
When they come in hys presence they seyde hym schortly “Nay,”
For they knewe full wele hys lyfe how he had leuyd many a day.
Then he preyed other gode yomen and hys neyghburs alsoo
They wolde hys executurs byn, and they seyde schortly “Noo,”
For all the cuntrey knewe full wele and hyt wele vndurstode
That wyth false extorcoun he had geten moche of hys gode. (fol. 60r)

Since the Franklin had extorted money from his neighbors, his executors would be saddled with fending off the many claims that would ensue upon his death, and thus the entire enterprise of minor landowning is called into question. To underscore its condemnation of minor landowning in general, “A Good Matter” notes that neither the gentlemen, the lowest-ranking members of the aristocracy, nor the yeomen, those just outside of the aristocracy, are willing to serve as the Franklin’s executor. Between franklins, yeomen, and gentlemen, the text has covered all of the categories of minor landowning status.

Contrasting it with the quarrelsome nature of rural economics, the text valorizes the economic space of the city: when William goes to the guild master and asks that he buy his father’s lands from him, for example, the guild master asks how much he wants for them. William asks for a thousand marks. The guild master’s response runs counter to the stereotype of parsimonious merchants: he offers a thousand pounds—that is, one and a half times what William had asked for the lands, noting explicitly that he is giving more than was asked: “Thou schalt have more þen þyn askyng” (fol. 60v). He gives no reason for this, suggesting that it was solely motivated by generosity. In this text, then, we find what seems to be a straightforward and unabashedly partisan answer to the question of gentilesse: good will only arises in the world of the city, the arena of merchants.
The most striking example of merchants going beyond expectations in giving occurs when William returns to the guild master, having gone through all of the £1,000, plus all of the additional money he borrowed to pay off his father’s outstanding tithes and debts. At first, the master is understandably dubious, charging William with squandering his money “at the dyse, vnthryfty felaws amonge,” and insisting that “Trewly of me thou getyst no more, y holde the worse then wode” (fol. 61r–v). But William is able to assuage his master’s concerns with such remarkable ease that one is left with an image of a guileless urban society, one motivated by unalloyed honesty and generosity:

He tolde hys maystyr all the case for hys fadur how he had done,
The marchand blessyd hym therfore he was a gracyous sone.
“He may blesse the tyme that thou was borne, to hym þou was so kynde,
A man may seke now all Ynglonde or soche a frende he fynde;
Wylyam, y have a doghtyr feyre, and sche schall be thy wyfe,
Y pray to God that ye may bothe wyth yoye lede togedur youre lyfe.
All thy fadyr londys trewly now gyf y the ageyne,
And thou schalt have all myn also, when Y am dedd, certeyne.” (fol. 62v)

Nothing motivates the master overcoming his seemingly sound objections but William’s telling him “all the case for hys fadur how he had done.” Once William has revealed this to him, the master switches instantaneously from skepticism to overflowing generosity. He releases William from his previous contractual obligation of perpetual servitude, going so far as to offer his daughter and to return his father’s lands to him. William’s single act of good will motivates another act of good will, a chain reaction that redounds throughout mercantile society and marks the means of differentiating urban from landed economies.

The manuscript that preserves “A Good Matter” further underscores the partisan and mercantile affiliations of this text: Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.2.38 (hereafter CUL Ff.2.38), which contains the only surviving copy of “A Good Matter” (fols. 59r–63r), was created for an urban readership, one likely to be receptive to the exemplum’s attempts to widen the circle of gentility beyond the landed.12 This codex is well known for preserving num-

12. For a facsimile of the manuscript, see Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38, intro. Frances McSparran and P. R. Robinson (London: Scolar, 1979), which lists the manuscript’s contents on pp. xxi–xxv. On the provenance of CUL Ff.2.38 see, for example, Malcolm Parkes, “The Literacy of the Laity,” in Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation, and Dissemination of Medieval Texts (London: Hambledon, 1991), pp. 292–93, who argues that in this manuscript “we find a range of reading-matter to satisfy most of the practical and intellectual requirements of a 15th-century middle-class family.” Frances McSparran, “Literary and Historical Significance of the Manuscript,” in Cambridge University Library MS Ff.2.38,
ous Middle English romances—nine of them, in fact, making it the second-largest compendium of this genre, behind only the Auchinleck Manuscript. In addition to romances, it contains numerous devotional texts in Middle English, including *Pety Job*; lyrics on the penitential psalms, the seven deadly sins, and the seven sacraments; *vitae* of Mary Magdalene, Margaret, Thomas à Becket, and Katherine; moral exempla; and William Lychfield’s *Complaint of God*, which, as Amy Appleford and Nicholas Watson have recently argued, exemplifies a particularly mercantile-inflected piety.¹³ CUL Ff.2.38 was likely produced for someone in the city of Leicester: *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* locates the scribe’s dialect to the immediate vicinity of this city.¹⁴ Further confirmation of CUL Ff.2.38’s Leicester production and provenance can be found in its connections to Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61. The Ashmole manuscript has several texts that explicitly link it to this city; its scribe’s dialect is likewise localizable to this region; and, as I recently discovered, both CUL Ff.2.38 and Ashmole 61 share a paper stock, suggesting that they were both produced within the same region.¹⁵ Finally, there is good evidence of an active book-production industry in late-medieval Leicester, both commercially and in the surrounding religious houses, thus supporting the possibility that this manuscript was made in Leicester for use in Leicester.¹⁶ As Felicity Riddy rightly notes, “The most obvious assumption is likewise avers that the importance of CUL Ff.2.38 lies in the fact that “the contents as a whole provide a good index to the religious and literary tastes and preoccupations of the bourgeoisie in the late fifteenth century” (p. vii). See also *Moral Love Songs and Laments*, ed. Susanna Fein (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1998); Fein similarly notes that this manuscript was “designed for use in a middle-class household” (p. 303). A seventeenth-century marginal note on fol. 179v, largely damaged and thus illegible, mentions “They burgesys Sone,” suggesting that this codex may have enjoyed urban readership from its inception until its purchase by John Moore in the seventeenth century.


that the manuscript was commissioned for urban domestic use from a local professional.”

This manuscript certainly bears the mark of an urban readership, perhaps one we could label proto-bourgeois. Such readers were likely to be receptive to this moral exemplum, one in which gentility is transferred away from landed society and onto the world of merchants. CUL Ff.2.38 provides a title for this moral exemplum that offers a further clue to its urban-mercantile provenance: “here foloweth a gode mater of the marchand and hys sone” (fol. 59r). This is a misnomer, for the father in this tale is a franklin, not a merchant—the father even explicitly resists his son becoming a merchant. Why, then, does the title call the father a merchant? Perhaps the scribe, on creating this volume for a family of urban readers, was more intent on appealing to his patrons than on representing the text accurately. Or perhaps the title suggests that the hero’s real father—the one from whom he learns about liberality and the one whose goods and social identity he ultimately inherits—was indeed the Merchant, and not the wicked Franklin, with the title thereby embracing the narrative’s supersessionary logic.

Contextualizing Franklins in Middle English Literature

As Jill Mann puts it, “Franklins as a class do not figure in estates literature.” Since this is a relatively obscure social station, and since franklins are the primary antithesis to mercantile gentility in “A Good Matter,” a brief pause to consider the role of franklins in late-medieval literary culture is in order. In short, although franklins are extremely rare figures in Middle English literature, when they are invoked they represent the outer margins of gentility—specifically, gentility grounded in the ownership of land. This is, as I have outlined above, precisely how “A Good Matter” classes franklins. In all these cases, then, we see that franklins were useful figures for literary thought experiments exploring the boundaries of gentility.

Chaucer’s Franklin is the most famous, and most complex, representative of this social station. As is well known, the Franklin’s Tale participates in contemporary debates about gentility: both Aurelius and the philosopher of

Orléans operate on the belief that gentility can be performed, and both argue that their own social station belongs within the fold of the gentle.\textsuperscript{19} When Aurelius releases Dorigen from her bonds, for example, he insists that others read his acts as consonant with his status: “Thus kan a squier doon a gentil dede / As wel as kan a knight, withouten drede” (V[F] 1543–44). The philosopher likewise uses the notion of generous behavior to lay claim to gentility for those of his social station:

This philosophre answere, “Leeve brother, Everich of yow dide gentilly til oother. Thou art a squier, and he is a knyght; But God forbede, for his blisful myght, But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede As wel as any of yow, it is no drede! Sire, I releesse thee thy thousand pound, As thou right now were cropen out of the ground, Ne neveere er now ne haddest knowne me.” (V[F] 1607–15)

By comparing his actions to those of Aurelius, the philosopher shows that he is playing the same social game of claiming gentle status, one that is explicitly tied into markers of social station. Thus, in the conclusion of the Franklin’s Tale, we can see Aurelius and the philosopher attempting to outperform each other in terms of generosity, each trying to secure for himself the social capital that Arveragus, the knight, has from the very beginning.

Chaucer complicates matters as we move out into the frame, for the Franklin, as narrator, studiously sidesteps the gentility debate raised in the tale in his speech to his fellow pilgrims. It is fitting that the Franklin, whose own gentility is ambiguous, should refuse to interpret the gentility of the characters in his tale.\textsuperscript{20} As narrator of this tale, the Franklin has the chance to guide the


audience through an interpretation of his tale’s conclusion or even to offer a personal statement on gentility. Instead, however, he leaves the question open for debate. Whereas the characters in his tale each make a case for their own gentility, as narrator he refuses hermeneutic mastery:

Lordynges, this question, thanne, wol I aske now,
Which was the mooste fre, as thyneweth yow?
Now telleth me, er thate ye ferther wende.
I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende. (V[F] 1621–24)

The Franklin’s eschewing of overt class commitments here contrasts sharply with the characters of his tale. Even the tone intended for the Franklin’s closing words is ambiguous: “Now telleth me,” he says—is he here encouraging the pilgrims to debate the question, or is he genuinely flummoxed, using the plural imperative to underline his desire for others to help him find the answer to this question? And the tone of his final line here, “I kan namoore,” is similarly unclear. Is he merely expressing that he has reached the conclusion, or is he indicating some exhaustion, having resigned himself to his failure to determine who is the mooste fre?

The Franklin thus ends on an indeterminate note vis-à-vis social class: he asks an unanswerable question, one on which the tale had given no guidance. Aurelius was *fre* when he released Dorigen from her contract. The philosopher was *fre* when he released Aurelius from his debt. Thus both the squire and the philosopher have a seemingly equal claim to being the “moost fre.”

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21. This refusal to answer the final question is a Chaucerian innovation, for in Boccaccio’s *Il Filocolo*, we learn that the Arveragus figure, because he gave his wife freely, is the noblest. See Nicholas Havely, ed. and trans., *Chaucer’s Boccaccio: Sources of “Troilus” and the “Knight’s”*
So whereas Aurelius and the philosopher of Orléans each try to arrest the slippery meanings of gentility so that it encompasses their own particular station, the Franklin highlights its ambiguity and merely walks away.

But perhaps the final question Chaucer gives to his Franklin, “Which was the moost fre, as thynketh yow?” (V[F] 1622), could never offer any firm resolution to the gentility debate, for the very term fre could be pressed into either side’s service: it could, that is, denote the state of one’s birth, with fre-dom representing high birth, underscoring the connection between gentility and noble blood. But fre could simultaneously denote virtuous behavior: generosity, liberality, and kindness, thus pointing to gentility as manifested in nurture, not nature. 

Thus, the Franklin’s parting question, by employing a term whose meaning could be used either to reinforce the connection between gentility and blood or to sever that very connection, leaves us with a frustrating opacity, refusing to answer the question raised by the tale’s ending: is gentility innate, or is it learnable and acquirable by those not born into the right caste? Chaucer never answers this question for us, as the Franklin’s parting words mark the end of Fragment V. Creating a minor landowner as a narrator who fails to weigh in on the very gentility debate at the center of his own tale shows us that Chaucer was attuned to the ambiguous class associations of franklins.

For William Langland, on the other hand, franklins stabilize class boundaries, even if they are located no less at the margins of gentility. Langland mentions franklins several times in Piers Plowman, and in these cases they represent for him the farthest reaches of respectable society. In the famous authorial apologia from the C-Text, Langland contends that clerks should only be drawn from those with the means to support themselves:

> For sholde no clerke be crouned but yf he come were Of frankeleynes and fre men and of folke ywedded. Bondemen and bastardus and beggares children, Thyse bylongeth to labory, and lordeys kyn to serue.

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*OED*, s.v. “free” (adj.), (n.), and (adv.); and *MED*, s.v. “frē” (adj.), defs. 1a, 2a, and 2b.

22. *OED*, s.v. “free” (adj.), (n.), and (adv.); and *MED*, s.v. “frē” (adj.), defs. 1a, 2a, and 2b.

In Langland’s ethnography, society is divided into laborers and freemen/franklins, with the latter eligible for clerkly roles and the former made for working the land.

Finally _Mum and the Sothsegger_, an alliterative poem written in a Langlandian idiom, has a quite extensive engagement with this social category. The narrator is seeking a resolution to the contesting claims of Sothsegger, who advocates the unveiling of hypocrisy and loudly proclaims the need for social justice, and Mum, who prefers the easier path of keeping quiet. The text initially places franklins as but one station within the variegated English social landscape:

Thenne ferkid I to fre men and frankeleyns mony,
To bonde-men and bourgois and many other barnes,
To knightz and to comunes and craftz-men eke,
To citezeyns and souurayns and to many grete sires,
To bachilliers, to baneretts, to barons and erles,
To princes and peris and alle maniere estatz;
But in euery court there I came or cumpaigny outhir
I fonde mo mvmmers atte moneth-ende
Than of sothe-sigge[z] by seuene score thousand.24

This list covers almost every medieval secular estate, and none, including “frankeleyns mony,” are able to provide moral guidance. But the narrator’s first glimmer of an answer to his quest finally comes from a franklin, who provides a long, and unequivocal, diatribe demonstrating that Mum is the *radix omnium malorum*: “Thenne lepte I forth lightly and lokid a-boute, / And I beheulde a faire hovs with halles and chambres, / A frankeleyn-is fre-holde al fresshe newe” (944–46). The text does not dwell on his identity as a franklin, but surely it is a significant choice by the author: as a franklin, this character is sufficiently marginalized and removed from the power structures of the aristocracy to achieve an independent perspective on the deleterious effects of Mum. At the same time, as a “fre-holde[r],” he has an elevated enough social position to speak with authority. A franklin, for the _Mum_-author, is a figure of local, but limited, authority, one who is free to speak the truth.

In all these cases, the franklins’ position at the margins of landed society meant that they formed the most obvious, because most proximate, target for mercantile social anxieties. In the late feudal imaginary, urban protocapital-

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ism had little class prestige and little representation in textual culture. Overt espousals of mercantile prerogatives, like that found in “A Good Matter,” looked to the lowest ranks of the landed as their collective aristocratic bêtes noires.\textsuperscript{25}

\section*{Conclusion}

Ultimately, “A Good Matter” could not maintain the fiction of separate spheres for the franklin and the merchant: the text’s invocation and conclusion mire themselves in social ambiguity. The opening refers to its auditors as “ye godely gentylmen” (fol. 59r), while the closing asks “Lythe and lystenyth, gentylmen, þat have herde thys songe to ende” (fol. 63r), flattering the imagined audience by painting them as members of the landed elite—the primary denotation of \textit{gentleman} by the mid-fifteenth century, when “A Good Matter” was composed.\textsuperscript{26} But such flattery sits uncomfortably within a text that questions the morality of a landed economy, the very basis upon which the elite rested. Moreover, as noted above, gentlemen in “A Good Matter” were explicitly part of the conflict-ridden world of medieval land ownership, and one of the estates whose members refused to serve as the Franklin’s executor. Although positioning the audience as gentlemen is common in medieval literary texts, in the context of “A Good Matter,” \textit{gentlemen} is hardly an unproblematic term of approbation.

“A Good Matter” recognizes, if obliquely, the interpenetration of rural and urban spheres, for of the Franklin it is said that “yf any man boght of hys

\textsuperscript{25} See also “The Tale of Gamelyn,” in \textit{Robin Hood and Other Outlaw Tales}, ed. Stephen Knight and Thomas Ohlgren (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2000), pp. 184–226, lines 191–286, where Gamelyn defeats a giant in a wrestling match, thereby freeing a franklin’s two sons. The franklin in this tale is clearly a wealthy figure, but is also inferior to the gentlemen who dictate the start and stop of the wrestling match. On “Gamelyn,” Chaucer, and the ideology of minor landowners, see T. A. Shippey, “\textit{The Tale of Gamelyn}: Class Warfare and the Embarrassments of Genre,” in Putter and Gilbert, eds., \textit{The Spirit of Medieval English Popular Romance}, pp. 78–96.

chaffere, yn case he had nede to borowe, / he schulde pay the derrer for the loone, thus dydd he moche sorowe” (fol. 59v). The word chaffare in Middle English denoted trade in goods or bartering—more properly the world of William and his master than of the rural Franklin. Moreover, by the tale’s end, when the master nears his death, he bequeaths to William “all thy fadur londys” and “all myn also.” William, that is, by regaining his patrilineal lands, will once again be a participant in the rural landed economy. But we also learn here that the master had lands of his own all along, and he turns these over to William as well. Urban and rural economies thus largely collapse together by the end of the poem.

We can also find evidence contesting the separation of mercantile and landed identities in the very same manuscript that contains “A Good Matter”: here, we also find a copy of Northern Octavian, a romance that includes a memorably humorous send-up of those engaged in urban economic exchange (fols. 90r–101v). By depicting the aristocrat as the one who naturally gives generously, and the urban figure as the one who cannot comprehend such gestures of largesse, this moment directly inverts the claims to mercantile gentility found in “A Good Matter,” a mere thirty-one folios before Octavian. The cohabitation of these two narratives within CUL Ff.2.38 leaves an unresolved clash of ideologies, with two contradictory visions about which class best exemplifies largesse, thereby undercutting the attempts in “A Good Matter” to keep mercantile identity neatly insulated from the landed economy.

Octavian tells the story of the Emperor of Rome and his family, exemplifying a typical romance pattern of a family separated and then reunited. While separated, the Emperor’s son is adopted by a guildsman in Paris, and he grows up unaware of his aristocratic blood. On an errand one day, he encounters a man selling a horse. Without any exploration of his motivations, the text merely relates that the child wanted the horse—leaving the reader to conclude

27. MED, s.v. “chaffāre” (n.), defs. 1–3. Chaucer’s Parson makes this connection between chaffare and urban economics most explicitly in his discussion of luxuria: “And right as a marchant deliteth hym moost in chaffare that he hath moost avantage of, right so deliteth the fend in this orudence” (X[I].850).

that the child is naturally drawn to an animal representing the aristocracy. When the horse-seller asks for £30, the child insists on paying £40, an offer gladly accepted.29 This moment replicates the unmotivated generosity of the master in “A Good Matter,” only now it is the landed aristocrat who has the natural inclination to give more than was asked—reflecting the traditional class commitments of romance. By offering more than the asking price, the child unwittingly reveals his true nature, for in romance’s imaginary, those with gentle blood cannot but help display largesse. On the other hand, the horse-seller, a figure from the urban economy, is only too happy to accept more than he had hoped for, motivated as he is by the desire for profit. As I have argued elsewhere, the amount the child pays for the horse precisely equates to the income level at which distraint for knighthood was set. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the English crown demanded that anyone with lands worth £40 or more per annum be knighted, a marker of one’s aristocratic credentials.30 This aristocratic child, mislocated to an urban space, unwittingly reveals his true origins by insisting on precisely £40, revealing his membership among the landed elite. At the same time, by offering more than the asking price, he shows that an aristocrat cannot grasp the mercantile act of selling and haggling. In such a formulation, the aristocrat is the one for whom generosity trumps financial calculation, while the urban figure takes the money and runs.

The erosion of barriers separating rural and urban economic spheres within these literary texts, found as much in the inability of “A Good Matter” to keep the mercantile and rural worlds separated from one another as in the contradictory claims of “A Good Matter” and Octavian about who most naturally enacts largesse, points to the ongoing interpenetration of the landed and urban spheres in late-medieval England. The urban patriciate developed a social nomenclature mirroring that of the landowning gentry, leading one historian to label them the “urban gentry.”31 Merchants owned rural property and the landed aristocracy engaged in and depended upon trade.32 But CUL


Ff.2.38 suggests that literature did not simply mirror the socioeconomic realities of late-medieval life, with its blending of economic realms. By positioning itself against the economic and moral world of its nearest landed counterparts, the franklins, and proudly participating in the debate about gentility, “A Good Matter” marks an incipient attempt to carve out a place for urban socioeconomics within literary culture. But its false steps and its inclusion alongside Octavian remind us that this was a premature effort. The bourgeoisie’s time had not yet come.

**Note**

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