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# The Lack of Interest in the Shipman's Tale: Chaucer and the Social Theory of the Gift

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Is there any interest in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale? I mean this question in several senses but not primarily the most obvious one. In terms of critical attention, the Shipman's Tale has been accruing compound interest. None of the other *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1387–1400) has the reputation for being overdetermined that the Shipman's Tale does. This has often been seen as its point, indeed as its virtue, since it seems to construct precise parallels between complex monetary transactions and human relations. E. T. Donaldson remarks that the "reduction of all human values to commercial ones is accomplished with almost mathematical precision. . . . Sensitivity to other values besides cash has been submitted to appraisal and, having been found nonconvertible, has been thrown away"; Helen Fulton has observed that "the plot of the *Shipman's Tale* rests on a commercialism which is so over-determined that it becomes humorous."<sup>1</sup> As interest in economics in literature has increased in recent years, so has attention to the Shipman's Tale, and as William E. Rogers and Paul Dower suggest, there has been a trend from seeing the tale as a critique of mercantile values to seeing it as an embodiment of those values.<sup>2</sup> Lee Patterson finds that the tale "threatens to coopt its readers to its own sardonic world of self-

This essay has benefited from conversations I have had with a number of anthropologists, particularly David Crawford, Hillary Haldane, and Daniel Bass. I am also grateful for the comments and suggestions of Chaucerians Derek Pearsall, Robert J. Meyer-Lee, and Roger Ladd, and those of my Fairfield University colleagues, including Elizabeth Petrino, Shannon Kelley, Nels Pearson, Beth Boquet, and Peter Bayers.

1. E. Talbot Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York: Ronald Press, 1958), 931–32; Helen Fulton, "Mercantile Ideology in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 36 (2002): 318–19.

2. William E. Rogers and Paul Dower, "Thinking about Money in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale," in *New Readings of Chaucer's Poetry*, ed. Robert G. Benson and Susan J. Ridyard (Cambridge: Brewer, 2003), 132.

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interest."<sup>3</sup> Lianna Farber finds scholastic philosophy establishing the naturalness of exchange value, and she therefore asserts that the Shipman's Tale "works to blur the distinction between a 'natural' world and a 'commodified' one, suggesting that the two work in much the same manner already."<sup>4</sup>

If Chaucer studies has been adopting a vision of a purely mercantile society comprised of atomized agents motivated by individual profit, it is perhaps because contemporary social theory has been moving in this direction as well. In particular, this view of the Shipman's Tale—of individuals in inevitable competition for resources both material and immaterial—resembles, and may reflect the influence of, the theories of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu begins his essay "Is a Disinterested Act Possible?" by asking, "Why is the word interest to a certain point interesting? Why is it important to ask about the interest that agents may have in doing what they do?"<sup>5</sup> His answer is that without specific interests, the actions of individuals would be unintelligible. Interest is interesting because self-interest is the only interest. Bourdieu devised his totalizing "theory of practice" in order to provide a consistent model for human social action in multiple contexts, both economic and noneconomic, and central to this theory is the view that all human choices are rooted in self-interest.

Given that Bourdieu's theory borrows economic terminology to describe individual human calculations and strategies in both economic and noneconomic fields, and that it analogizes the self-interest inherent in economic transactions to all human interactions, it would seem particularly suited to elucidating the Shipman's Tale. The tale begins, "A marchant whilom dwelled at Seint-Denys, / That riche was, for which men helde him wys" (7.1–2), and it is throughout concerned with such interconnections of economic and symbolic capital.<sup>6</sup>

The claim of this essay is that the Shipman's Tale is not as deterministic as it has been taken to be, that instead its characters repeatedly evince motivations not accountable by a purely economic model of human action nor by theories of symbolic action founded on utilitarian principles. These discrepancies reveal insufficiencies in the currently dominant models of value theory, particularly Bourdieu's, and justify the ongoing project of some

3. Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 361.

4. Lianna Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 69. See also Roger A. Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Stanford University Press, 1998), 75. Chapter 4, "Is a Disinterested Act Possible?," is translated by Randal Johnson.

6. All quotations of Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) and are hereafter cited parenthetically.

anthropological and sociological theorists to reinterpret Marcel Mauss's foundational essay *The Gift* in order to redefine interest, self-interest, and disinterestedness in human interaction. Bourdieu provided a theory of practice, based on a logic of action in symbolic as well as material fields, that could be applied transhistorically and transculturally, allowing it to be influential in areas like medieval studies. But neo-Maussians, notably Alain Caillé and David Graeber, criticize Bourdieu's social theory for its generalization of all human motivation as based on individual, competitive self-interest.<sup>7</sup> They offer instead a view of motivation and interest based on mutual indebtedness, communal value, and shared pleasures. These critiques enlighten previously neglected parts of the Shipman's Tale and promise to reshape our understanding of the characters' motivations and the tale's meaning, and therefore such a reading of the Shipman's Tale can help to expose the insufficiency of a purely Bourdieuvian model of cultural logic and to reveal the value of the newer approaches.

#### INTEREST-FREE LOANS

What I am primarily asking in my initial question, therefore, is whether there is any interest charged on the loans that run through the Shipman's Tale. The presence or absence of interest beyond principal is the key factor in distinguishing between a loan and gift. And gift theory, historically and in its recent developments, is at the heart of the greater issue: whether self-interest is the only interest.<sup>8</sup>

The monetary exchanges in the Shipman's Tale begin at the merchant's home in St. Denis. While the merchant is in his countinghouse, his wife and the monk perform their elaborate *pas de deux* in the garden, wherein she ultimately informs him that she is in debt by 100 francs, and he agrees to give her the money, in return for the promise of a sexual assignation. Afterward, the merchant informs the wife that he must travel to Bruges to purchase merchandise. The monk then asks the merchant for a loan of 100

7. See Alain Caillé, *Critique de la raison utilitaire: Manifeste du Mauss* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1989); David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

8. The word "interest" derives from the Latin *inter esse*—that which comes between. See John T. Noonan Jr., *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 104–5. The use of the Latin *interesse* to mean payment on a loan is traceable at least to the Bolognese lawyer Azo in the early thirteenth century. See Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 180. The *OED* cites the first usage of "interest" in English for money paid beyond principal on a loan to 1529. The Middle English equivalent of "interest" is *intress(e)*, meaning both concern and legal claim or right. Chaucer does not use the word in the *Canterbury Tales*, but both the *OED* and the *MED* cite Chaucer's short poem "Fortune" (ca. 1387–88) as the first recorded usage of the word in the legal sense.

francs—for a week or two, he says, to purchase “certein beestes” (7.272). The merchant agrees and gives the monk the 100 francs, telling him to “Paye it agayn whan it lith in your ese” (7.291). Daun John returns to his abbey in Paris, and the merchant goes to Bruges, where he “byeth and creaucneth” (7.303)—that is, he purchases goods for both cash and credit. Meanwhile, Daun John rides back to St. Denis, gives the wife the 100 francs he had borrowed from her husband, spends the night with her, and returns to Paris. When the merchant returns home, he explains to his wife that to pay for the merchandise in Bruges he had to take a loan of twenty thousand shields and that he now must go to Paris “To borwe of certeine freendes that he hadde / A certeyn frankes” (7.333–34) so that he can repay the debt. When he arrives in Paris, he visits the monk and tells him about his business dealings. Daun John, taking a hint, or pretending to, informs the merchant that he has already repaid the loan of 100 francs to the merchant’s wife. The merchant, after repaying his Bruges debt to “certeyn Lumbardes” (7.367), returns again to St. Denis. He admonishes his wife for not telling him about the monk’s repayment of the 100 francs. She admits having received it and already having spent it on her “array” (7.418) and asserts, famously, that she will pay him back in bed.

The unavoidable impression from this synopsis is that the tale consists of a series of borrowings and repayments. In fact, it is an open series, persisting beyond the end of the tale: the wife is still to pay her debt “Fro day to day” (7.415) in bed, and the merchant presumably must still pay back the parties in Paris from whom he borrowed money to pay off the debt from Bruges.

There are no explicit references to interest in the tale, and this in itself is not surprising. Lending at interest was still illegal in the late Middle Ages under usury laws. But since the arrival of Italian banking houses in Flanders in the thirteenth century, Bruges had developed into one of the commercial and financial centers of Europe, with a wide variety of sophisticated financial instruments available to those seeking commercial or consumer credit.<sup>9</sup> Not all of the credit that Chaucer’s merchant takes is necessarily in the form of loans. Since he is a regular purchaser at the Bruges market, he could simply buy on a line of credit extended to him by a cloth seller; this has always been common practice among vendors on occasion, to facilitate sales. But the debt of twenty thousand shields is explicitly a monetary, commercial loan from an Italian bank. Lending at interest did exist, and in places like Bruges it was not only common but often licensed. Raymond de

9. See Raymond de Roover, *Money, Banking and Credit in Medieval Bruges: Italian Merchant Bankers, Lombards, and Money-Changeers* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1948), 151; Peter Spufford, *Money and Its Uses in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 254.

Roover explains, "An attitude of leniency prevailed in the Low Countries during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and it became customary to grant dispensation to usurers licensed by the secular authorities."<sup>10</sup> Italian bankers, like Jewish moneylenders, could, for a price, secure the (always tenuous) protection of local lords or princes. Alternatively, there were a variety of ways to obscure a bank's profit on the lending of money. Interest could be euphemized as a "fee" on a transaction, or the bank could take its profit as a percentage of the revenue from the venture.<sup>11</sup> The most common form of loan devised to circumvent the usury ban was the "bill of exchange," which involved borrowing in one currency and repaying in another currency.<sup>12</sup> This is what Chaucer's merchant seems to employ, borrowing from an Italian banking house in Bruges in shields, the basic unit of account in Flanders, and paying back another branch of the same firm in Paris in francs. Helen Fulton thinks that the merchant "makes a one-thousand-franc profit on the currency conversion."<sup>13</sup> This is not entirely clear. It would be unusual, though not impossible, for the borrower to make a profit on a currency exchange; the bill of exchange was devised, after all, to make money for the bank, not the borrower, and currency was almost always worth less abroad than at home.<sup>14</sup> And the merchant seems pleased at the end of the Paris transaction not because he has made a profit but because he anticipates making one, perhaps from the retailing of the merchandise:

And hoom he gooth, murie as a papejay,  
For wel he knew he stood in swich array  
That nedes moste he wynne in that viage  
A thousand frankes aboven al his costage.

(7.369–72)

But even if the merchant is the *arbitrageur* that Fulton believes him to be, it is clear that the bank making the loan expects to gain a profit through interest disguised as an exchange rate.

But the merchant repays the Lombards both with cash from his own stores in St. Denis and with money that he borrows in Paris. Why would the

10. De Roover, *Money, Banking*, 151.

11. *Ibid.*, 305.

12. On the development and utilization of the bill of exchange, see Edwin S. Hunt and James M. Murray, *A History of Business in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72; as well as de Roover, *Money, Banking*, 48–67; and Spufford, *Money and Its Use*, 395. On the use of the bill of exchange by the merchant of the Shipman's Tale, see Kenneth S. Cahn, "Chaucer's Merchants and the Foreign Exchange: An Introduction to Medieval Finance," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 88–89.

13. Fulton, "Mercantile Ideology," 318.

14. Cahn, "Chaucer's Merchants," 88.

merchant take out a second loan to pay back the first? And why in the end does he consider himself “cleerly out of dette” (7.376)? (It should be noted that when the merchant refers to his “freendes” in Paris from whom he hopes to borrow, he is almost certainly not thinking of Daun John. The monk’s personal debt to the merchant is too small to be of significant use to the merchant in these large-scale business transactions. Though, obviously, exchange rates fluctuated, 100 francs was in Chaucer’s time the equivalent of only about 150 shields.)<sup>15</sup> It may be that the merchant’s Paris associates are themselves chapmen, rather than bankers, in which case they may be purchasing a share in the merchandise for a portion of the profits. Or it could be that the merchant of St. Denis has a good name among them and is trusted to repay the loan, just as they might need to borrow money from him in a similar situation. As merchants, our protagonist himself notes, “hir moneie is hir plogh” (7.288): they cannot do business without occasionally laying out large amounts of cash on the expectation of future sales, and it might be in their interest to lend to each other rather than to borrow money at interest from bankers.

In this thoroughly monetized and mercantile environment, the loans may entail explicit or euphemized payments of interest, but even in the absence of interest obligations, all the parties to all the loans engage in the transactions with some expectations of gain, whether in the form of future business, a share of profits, a potential source of future revenue, or the value of having a good name as a debtor. What is less clear is that this is also true regarding personal loans among the characters of the tale. In their colloquy in the garden, the wife initially propositions the monk with a request for a loan, with the promise of sexual favors functioning apparently as interest:

Daun John, I seye, lene me thise hundred frankes . . .  
 For at a certeyn day I wol yow paye,  
 And doon to yow what plesance and service  
 That I may doon, right as yow list devise.

(7.187, 190–92)

Eventually, however, they agree that the transaction is not a loan but a payment for services:

This faire wyf acorded with daun John  
 That for thise hundred frankes he sholde al nyght  
 Have hire in his armes bolt upright.

(7.314–16)

15. See J. A. Burrow and V. J. Scattergood’s explanatory notes to the Shipman’s Tale in *Riverside Chaucer*, 910–13; see also Cahn, “Chaucer’s Merchants,” 85.

The 100 francs the merchant gives to the monk, on the other hand, is explicitly a loan, ostensibly to fund another transaction. But while the monk proposes to pay the merchant back in “a wyke or tweye” (7.271), the merchant sets no time limit on the loan and expects no repayment beyond the initial amount: “Paye it agayn whan it lith in youre ese” (7.291). The monk later tells the merchant that he has settled the account with the merchant’s wife by giving her “the same gold ageyn” (7.357), and the merchant repeats to the wife that the monk “hadde an hundred frankes payed / By redy token” (7.389–90).

In the literary, historical, and theoretical contexts of the tale, interest in some form was conceivable and feasible.<sup>16</sup> Even the earliest scholastic writers on economics granted that payment beyond principal could be allowed in certain situations, such as a penalty when lateness has caused specific loss to the lender. Scholars consistently distinguished between a commercial purchase or a loan and a “free gift,” which, being given without expectation of restitution or profit, was morally blameless.<sup>17</sup> Some analysts added that payment to a creditor beyond the principal of a loan could be allowable if it is not contractually obligated but a voluntary gift.<sup>18</sup> The notion of a debtor voluntarily making additional payment to one of his creditors is an ethical fantasy, of course. It is not surprising that such distinctions would eventually allow some payments of interest to be euphemized as gifts.<sup>19</sup> Most schoolmen seem to have understood that in the context of business and commerce, no one does anything without a profit motive. And yet Chaucer’s merchant grants the monk a loan and unilaterally asserts that he will charge no interest and set no date for repayment. What is his motivation—his interest—in doing so?

16. Mary Braswell claims that “a loan does not appear in any of the analogues to the story—these are concerned with *gifts* instead” (*Chaucer’s “Legal Fiction”: Reading the Records* [Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2001], 85). This is true insofar as in some of the analogues an object is exchanged rather than money. But the closest analogues to the Shipman’s Tale—Boccaccio’s *Decameron* 8.1 (1348–53) and Sercambi’s *Novelliero* 19 (ca. 1399)—include monetary loans, and Sercambi refers explicitly to the charging of interest. The suitor Bernardo asks the husband Pircosso for 200 florins to complete a transaction, adding, “And when I have my first pay, I will return them to you with whatever interest you say” (con quello merito mi dirai). When Pircosso says that he is going out of town on business, Bernardo slyly says, “If what has been promised me should not be fulfilled, do you wish me to return these florins [*questi fiorini*] to your wife?” Pircosso answers, “Yes, return this money” (*questi dinari*) (Sercambi, *Novelliero*, quoted in [and ed. and trans.] Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson, *The Literary Context of Chaucer’s Fabliaux* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971], 314–15). Sercambi’s emphasis on “these florins” seems to indicate that Bernardo will repay only the principal if his anticipated transaction falls through while Pircosso is out of town.

17. See Odd Langholm, *Economics in the Medieval Schools: Wealth, Exchange, Value, Money and Usury according to the Paris Theological Tradition, 1200–1350* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 306, 408.

18. *Ibid.*, 337.

19. Noonan, *Scholastic Analysis*, 104–5.

Then as now, one would grant such a loan only to a friend or relative; it is a kind of gift—the species of exchange that stands apart from commercial transaction. This is not to say that it is motiveless, or even necessarily “free.” Marcel Mauss defined the gift as “the present generously given even when, in the gesture accompanying the transaction, there is only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit, and when really there is obligation and self-interestedness.”<sup>20</sup> Mauss’s objective in his seminal study was to explain why people are motivated to give and exchange gifts, and most contributions to gift theory over the last century have essentially been glosses on Mauss’s *The Gift*.<sup>21</sup> One of the most influential of these has been Bourdieu’s.

Bourdieu explains that one of the signal features of his contribution to gift theory is that “it relates gift exchange to a quite specific logic, that of the economy of symbolic goods and the specific belief [*illusio*] that underlies it.”<sup>22</sup> Among Bourdieu’s chief concerns is that in comparison to the fully elaborated system of self-interest and motivation offered by economic analysis, the actions of individuals within a system not governed by the exchange systems of capitalism could seem illogical and even unintelligible. Much of his work, therefore, focuses on what he calls “anti-economic sub-universes” that seem to reverse or reject the economic field: the Berber village, the Roman Catholic Church, the nineteenth-century Parisian avant-garde, twentieth-century academia, and so forth. These realms are governed by economies of symbolic goods, just as regular and predictable as the economies of material goods in any market culture. Bourdieu emends and extends Mauss’s definition of the gift to claim that all gifts and, in fact, all human actions are self-interested and strategic efforts to gain advantage in one or another of multiple possible fields of competition.

20. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990), 3.

21. For the theoretical and historical contexts of Mauss’s development of his views on the gift, see Beate Wagner-Hasel, “Egoistic Exchange and Altruistic Gift: On the Roots of Marcel Mauss’s Theory of the Gift,” in *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-modern Figurations of Exchange*, ed. Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner, and Bernhard Jussen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 141–71. For a review of applications of gift theory to medieval history, see Arnoud-Jan A. Bijsterveld, “The Medieval Gift as Agent of Social Bonding and Political Power: A Comparative Approach,” in *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context*, ed. Esther Cohen and Mayke B. de Jong (Brill: Leiden, 2001), 123–56. And for a consideration of recent developments in gift theory and their relevance to the study of late medieval culture, see Martha C. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300–1600* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. chap. 3, “Gift Work,” 145–207. Two interdisciplinary anthologies collecting excerpts from influential gift theorists are also particularly useful: *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Aafke E. Komter (Amsterdam University Press, 1996); *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. Alan D. Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997).

22. Pierre Bourdieu, “Marginalia—Some Additional Notes on the Gift,” in Schrift, *Logic of the Gift*, 231.

This hallmark feature of Bourdieu's theory of the gift, in which all exchanges, transculturally and transhistorically, are fundamentally agonistic and motivated by individual profit, has come under critique by a number of theorists. In particular, the economic anthropologist David Graeber has criticized Bourdieu's "theory of practice" as an example of "formalism"—that branch of social theory that seeks to explain human values and motivations in economic terms.<sup>23</sup>

Bourdieu would vehemently deny this charge and, in fact, did so; in *The Logic of Practice* he states, "Economism recognizes no other form of interest than that which capitalism has produced. . . . It can therefore find no place in its analyses, still less in its calculations, for any form of 'non-economic' interest."<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu's concept of multiple "fields" is specifically intended to expand the explanation of human agency beyond the purely commercial and economic. He insists, furthermore, on the autonomy of individual fields, and he claims that this puts his theories "light years beyond economism, which consists of applying to all universes the *nomos* characteristic of the economic field."<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, Bourdieu uses the language of economics to describe non-economic fields. His terminology borrows directly and intentionally from economics—symbolic capital, symbolic profit, symbolic interest—and he insists that noneconomic fields operate according to an "economy of symbolic goods." Bourdieu is not unaware of this paradox, and in some instances he justifies this decision by noting that economics is the one social science most advanced in its descriptions of human motivation. But, for Graeber, that is precisely the problem. Despite Bourdieu's insistence that the economic field is only one among a number of overlapping but autonomous fields, within any one of these fields, as Graeber points out, action "is a matter of self-interested calculation, making rational decisions about the allocation of scarce resources with the aim of getting as much as possible for oneself."<sup>26</sup> In the "theory of practice," Graeber sees only the war of all against all—and that is why Graeber characterizes Bourdieu not merely as a formalist but also as a "neo-liberal," a proponent of free-market principles and global capitalism.

Such a charge directed at a prominent Marxist is, to say the least, surprising. But Graeber's point is that while Bourdieu attacks the social relations inherent to capitalism, Bourdieu insists that the calculations of individual profit and competitive advantage associated with capitalism and market

23. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory*, 28.

24. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 1980), 112–13.

25. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 84.

26. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory*, 28.

society are the governing principles of all human practice. Bourdieu is extending to pre-, non-, or anti-economic contexts the rational intentionality that economists identify in the marketplace. The commodities being sought and contested may be symbolic rather than material, but the mentality is always competitive and individualistic—the self-maximization that economists invariably assume as the motivation of individual agents within a market system. Any other motivations, as perceived by an observer or by the agents themselves, are *illusio*, the false criteria that mask the true.

The world of the Shipman's Tale is indeed a commercial culture, but it is also a gift culture.<sup>27</sup> Whereas historians have commonly characterized the late medieval period as a transitional time when traditional gift-based cultures and relationships were supplanted by the commercial culture of nascent capitalism, Martha C. Howell has shown that the bourgeois of England, France, and the Low Countries “exchanged gifts even more exuberantly, in greater volume, and in more social arenas at the end of the Middle Ages than ever before.”<sup>28</sup> The question, then, is the ontological status of the gift in the conception of Chaucer's merchant of St. Denis and his cohort. Howell acknowledges that the gift “did different work” in this period than it had previously and that among the most conspicuous changes was that the gift became monetized.<sup>29</sup> But she insists that the monetized gift is still a gift, largely because she adopts Bourdieu's view that gift giving is fundamentally a strategic act motivated by self-interest and individual profit. Howell quotes Bourdieu's remark that gifts possess a “structural ambivalence which predisposes them to fulfill a political function of domination.”<sup>30</sup> With its detailed attention to competitive self-interest and individual profit as motives for human interaction, the Shipman's Tale would seem to dramatize just the kind of confluence of gift and commodity practices and mentalities that Howell catalogs and describes in Bourdieuvian terms. Yet in light of Graeber's critique, we can see that many of the most

27. Many theorists maintain that no culture is based exclusively on gift relationships or exclusively on commodity exchange, claiming instead that these two systems coexist. See, notably, Christopher A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London: Academic, 1982).

28. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism*, 149. See also Gadi Algazi, “Introduction: Doing Things with Gifts,” in Algazi, Groebner, and Jussen, *Negotiating the Gift*, 9–27.

29. Howell, *Commerce before Capitalism*, 157, 159–71.

30. *Ibid.*, 153; Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977), 14. Does this mean, then, that the gift changed and became essentially agonistic at this point, influenced by and in imitation of the commercial transactions within which it was embedded? Or, as Bourdieu would have it, was the gift always everywhere motivated by competitive self-interest and the desire for profit and domination? Howell chooses not to decide: “My study takes the pragmatic approach. . . . It does not ask whether the *dons*, *prosenten*, *gifte*, and the like that people then distributed were ‘really’ gifts according to some abstract model” (*Commerce before Capitalism*, 157).

important actions in the Shipman's Tale resist and even refute the ostensible motivations ascribed to them by Bourdieu's model of interpretation.

The merchant has no economic interest in lending the 100 francs to the monk. In fact, he is at pains to point out to Daun John that parting with ready money can put him in economic jeopardy. He is overstating the peril; the size of the loan the monk is requesting is, as I have noted, pocket change in comparison to the amounts involved in the merchant's business dealings. The merchant was undeniably reluctant to cough up the money. It would be natural to assume, then, that when the merchant visits the monk when he is in Paris, he does so in order to collect the 100 francs or, in the case that the monk would be unable to repay him, to "capitalize" on the debt—to benefit from a symbolic profit. In this scenario, the merchant would not demand repayment directly; rather, he would pretend that the visit was purely social and had nothing to do with collecting a debt. This would be a perfect example of the "euphemization" of a monetary transaction.

But in fact, when the merchant arrives, the monk acts as if he knows that the merchant is there to collect the money. He does this only because he is actually seeking an opportunity to tell the merchant that he paid his wife, but in rushing his friend out the door, the monk successfully makes the merchant think that the merchant is the one responsible for exposing the euphemism and threatening the friendship. Indeed, when the merchant later admonishes his wife, it is not because she failed to give him the money but rather because, in not telling him about the repayment, it made it seem as if he had gone to see his friend in order to get repaid—an unacceptable violation of the rules of the game:

Ye sholde han warned me, er I had gon,  
That he yow hadde an hundred frankes payed  
By redy token; and heeld hym yvele apayed,  
For that I to hym spak of chevysaunce;  
Me semed so, as by his contenaunce.

(7.388–92)

One sometimes finds even the closest readers of this tale asserting that the merchant really does go to the monk to collect the debt,<sup>31</sup> but Chaucer goes out of his way to tell us that he does not:

And whan that he was come into the toun,  
For greet chiertee and greet affeccoun,  
Unto daun John he first gooth hym to pleye;  
Nat for to axe or borwe of hym moneye,  
But for to wite and seen of his welfare,

31. See, e.g., Rogers and Dower, "Thinking about Money," 135.

And for to tellen hym of his chaffare,  
As freendes doon when they been met yfeere.

(7.335–41)

Chaucer is as explicit as he can be about the merchant's motivations: he goes to see his friend to see how he is doing, to enjoy his company, and to tell him of his business affairs—because that is what friends do. This motivation can be dismissed as insufficient only if we proceed from an a priori assumption that human motivation is explicable only by competitive, individual self-maximization.

True, Bourdieu is always at pains to emphasize that conscious motivation is irrelevant. If people are generous or kind or altruistic, it is because they have been conditioned to be so, or because they unconsciously recognize, through what he typically calls their “sense of the game,” that there is a profit to be gained through being so. To Bourdieu, then, friendship would in this transaction be the *illusio* that masks the true intentions. But there is an inescapable circularity to this reasoning. As Graeber remarks, “On some level, what Bourdieu is saying is undeniably true. There is no area of human life, anywhere, where one cannot find self-interested calculation. But neither is there anywhere one cannot find kindness or adherence to idealistic principles: the point is why one, and not the other, is posed as ‘objective’ reality.”<sup>32</sup> The merchant lives in a world where interest, if never explicit, is always expected, and money is a tool for competitive transactions and individual advancement. And yet he extends the monk an open-ended, interest-free loan and would never even consider asking him to pay it back. One could say that he does all this to gain a symbolic profit in the field of friendship. Or one could say, as Chaucer explicitly does, that he does it because they are friends. The former formulation is more reasonable only if one assumes that profit is the purpose of friendship.

In contradistinction to such interpretations of the gift as essentially strategic, competitive, and individualistic, Graeber offers Mauss's concept of “total prestation.” This is one of the more contested terms in *The Gift*, but to Graeber it describes those exchanges which “created permanent relationships between individuals and groups, relations that were permanent precisely because there was no way to cancel them out by repayment. The demands one side could make on the other were open ended because they were permanent.”<sup>33</sup> Whereas Bourdieu assumes that the purpose of any

32. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory*, 29.

33. *Ibid.*, 218. On Mauss's concept of *prestation totale*, see also Patrick J. Geary, “Gift Exchange and Social Science Modeling: The Limitations of a Construct,” in Algazi, Groebner, and Jussen, *Negotiating the Gift*, 129–40.

social transaction is to generate a material or symbolic profit for one participant over the other, anthropologists like Graeber maintain that gifts are exchanged in order to establish and maintain alliances that extend beyond the transaction and that are, in their elementary form, essentially noncompetitive, because the participants recognize such relationships to be, in a greater scheme, in their collective interest.

Economic anthropologists like Graeber emphasize the distinctions between gift exchange and market transactions. In a market context, the relationship between the participants ends with the completion of the transaction. The relationship is based on the debt and is canceled when the debt is paid. That is why accounts need to be kept. In contrast, Graeber says of gift-based relationships, "No accounts need to be kept because the relationship is not treated as if it will ever end."<sup>34</sup>

The merchant of the Shipman's Tale might seem to act in greater accord with Bourdieu's model than with Graeber's. The merchant is a great keeper of accounts. It is clear that, even when he lends a relatively small amount to a friend, he is not likely to forget the expense, and he makes Daun John acutely aware of it as well. There may be, in fact, an element of agonistic exchange in the way the loan places an onus of obligation on the monk. Nonetheless, there is a real distinction between the types of relationships the merchant maintains. When the merchant pays off his Bruges debt in Paris, his relationship with the Lombard bankers is concluded; he has no further obligation to them, nor they to him, and unless he chooses, for business purposes, to transact with them again in the future, he need never have anything to do with them again. They are not friends or kinsmen, merely business associates. But the merchant's relationship with the monk is not based on a market exchange or a contract. He would only extend an open-ended, interest-free loan—a gift—to a friend. In Bourdieu's social model, "friendship" is the *illusio* that facilitates the exchange, the purpose of which is to generate profit. From Graeber's neo-Maussian perspective, this gets it precisely backward: the exchanges, and the obligations they entail, exist to perpetuate the relationship. The granting of the loan, with no set date of repayment, has the effect of sustaining the friendship and extending it indefinitely into the future. The merchant does not ask Daun John for payment when he visits John in Paris. In part, this may be because the merchant does not want to expose the euphemism at the heart of their transaction or because the continuation of the obligation of the repayment grants him ongoing symbolic profit. But it also may be that he requires no interest and sets no time limit because the loan's purpose is not profit but the continuation of a relationship. Such a motivation is no less logical or nat-

34. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory*, 218.

ural than seeking individual profit. As Graeber says of such relationships based on “total prestation,” “most of us treat our closest friends this way.”<sup>35</sup>

#### GRATUITOUS SEX

The most overdetermined element of the Shipman’s Tale is its monetization of married sex. This entails, unavoidably, a commodification of the wife’s body. Feminist readings of the tale, however, have sought to demonstrate that the wife engages actively and deliberately in the tale’s economy. Thus Cathy Hume argues that though the wife’s power is “severely restricted” outside the home, at home with her husband she is “allowed to get away with paying him back in bed” though she is “pushing at the limits of her social boundaries, to secure even this.”<sup>36</sup> And Holly Crocker finds that “the wife herself becomes an active player” and “a trader in the economy of this tale.”<sup>37</sup>

Certainly, the wife is a player in the game, and to some extent the tale and her role in it exemplify Bourdieuvian principles. The source of the wife’s notoriety, the thing that makes her scandalous even to this day, is her brazen violation of what Bourdieu calls “the taboo of calculation”: “Housewives, who have no material utility or price (the taboo of calculation and credit), are excluded from market circulation (exclusivity) and are objects and subjects of feeling; in contrast, so-called venal women (prostitutes) have an explicit market price, based on money and calculation, are neither object nor subject of feeling and sell their body as an object. . . . The logic of the prevailing economic universe introduces, within the family, the rot of calculation, which undermines sentiments.”<sup>38</sup> The gimlet-eyed Shipman’s Tale exposes sentiment as the *illusio* of marriage and reveals the calculation of both material and cultural profit that underlies the bourgeois household.

But while an individualistic and competitive model of social exchange can afford the wife agency, it also, as with her husband, simultaneously lim-

35. *Ibid.*

36. Cathy Hume, “Domestic Opportunities: The Social Comedy of the *Shipman’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 156–57.

37. Holly Crocker, “Wifely Eye for the Manly Guy: Trading the Masculine Image in the *Shipman’s Tale*,” in *Seyd in Forme and Reverence: Essays on Chaucer and Chaucerians in Memory of Emerson Brown, Jr.*, ed. T. L. Burton and John F. Plummer (Provo, UT: Chaucer Studio Press, 2005), 60. See also William F. Woods, “A Professional Thyng: The Wife as Merchant’s Apprentice in the *Shipman’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 24 (1989): 139–49.

38. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 106. On gift theory and marriage, see also Jane Fair Bestor, “Marriage Transactions in Renaissance Italy and Mauss’s *Essay on the Gift*,” *Past and Present*, no. 164 (1999): 6–46.

its her agency by severely restricting the range of motivations for social action. Like the merchant, the wife actually demonstrates a variety of drives and intentions. For while the wife plays to win, she also plays for fun, and, as critics like Graeber point out, pleasure does not calculate the way profit does nor the way that Bourdieu maintains it does.<sup>39</sup>

The Shipman's Tale is a fabliau, and even if its understated wit and precise attention to codes of behavior shade closer to comedy of manners, we should not be surprised that appetite and carnality animate it. Male sexual desire is at the heart of the Shipman's Tale; its female counterpart is primarily depicted as women's desire for fine "array," which the wife as well as the narrator justify as an extension of men's property and status. As far as we know, the wife does not desire sex with Daun John; she wants to clear her debts. Daun John is hardly a brazen and experienced lothario like Nicholas in the Miller's Tale; he may want sex less than he wants to score some sort of social point by sleeping with the merchant's wife.<sup>40</sup> The merchant and his wife, moreover, unlike the typical married couple of fabliau, have an active sex life, although critics have been reluctant to allow them this free expression of conjugal desire; some suggest, for instance, that their sex is an expression of their fetishizing of profit: they are sexually aroused when they are out of debt.<sup>41</sup>

But the relationship between the merchant and his wife, like the relationship between the merchant and the monk, seems to contain, in addition to elements of economics and competition, an irreducible element of attraction and, in fact, affection that neither is fully converted into monetary value nor parallels economic competition in a separate but analogous field of symbolic competition.<sup>42</sup>

When, during their conversation in the garden, the monk makes a gently bawdy allusion to the dalliances of married people, the wife replies, "In al the reawme of France is ther no wyf / That lasse lust hath to that sory pleye" (7.116–17). She goes on to declare, "Myn housbonde is to me the worste man / That evere was sith that the world bigan" (7.161–62), and finally confessing that she has spent 100 francs "For his honour, myself for to arraye" (7.179), she claims,

39. Elizabeth Edwards has argued that the economics of fabliau in general are unable to subsume female sexuality and pleasure. See "The Economics of Justice in Chaucer's Miller's and Reeve's Tales," *Dalhousie Review* 82 (2002): 91–112.

40. Thus Crocker concludes that when the wife engages in the economy of the tale, "the currency is masculinity itself" ("Wifely Eye," 60).

41. See Thomas Hahn, "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in the *Shipman's Tale*," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse University Press, 1986), 243.

42. This impression has been voiced by previous readers, notably Derek Pearsall, in *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 217.

And if myn housbonde eek it myghte espye,  
 I nere but lost; and therfore I yow preye,  
 Lene me this somme, or ellis moot I deye.

(7.184–86)

In all of this, the wife paints her marriage as loveless and sexless and her husband as avaricious and cruel— the stereotypical *senex amans* of fabliau tradition.

But there is little indication elsewhere in the text that any of these insinuations are true. The merchant takes pleasure in a great many things: feasting his friends, dealing in business, and sex with his wife. He can hardly be accused of watching his wife too jealously, and he does not deny her money but, as she admits, gives her an allowance (which she considers insufficient.) In her characterization of her husband, the wife is playing on the expectations of the monk—and of the reader—and on the conventional, jaundiced view of marriage as an arena of material and emotional competition. It is such—the merchant holds the purse strings and condescends to his wife’s needs and desires, while she uses sex and guile to try to gain equal control—but it is not exclusively so. Chaucer easily could have made the merchant the ogre the wife claims him to be, someone combining the worst characteristics of his other fabliau husbands—John of the Miller’s Tale, Symkin of the Reeve’s Tale, or January of the Merchant’s Tale. Instead, Chaucer gives us multiple occasions to see the couple share what seems to be true affection and physical pleasure. When the merchant returns from Bruges, for instance, “with his wyf he maketh feeste and cheere” (7.327).

Even more notable are their relations in the final scene. When the merchant arrives home from Paris, he and his wife retire to the bedroom, “And al that nyght in myrthe they bisette” (7.375). In the morning, the merchant wakes up and once again approaches his wife amorously:

Whan it was day, this marchant gan embrace  
 His wyf al newe, and kiste hire on hir face,  
 And up he gooth and maketh it ful tough.  
 “Namooore,” quod she, “by God, ye have ynough!”

(7.377–80)

The wife here employs the language of sufficiency that her husband had used against her in denying her more spending money. She claims now to have paid her debt, and in a few lines she will explain precisely the mercantile arrangement that ostensibly determines their relations.

But in the next line Chaucer writes, “And wantownly agayn with hym she pleyde” (7.381). The word “agayn” in Middle English usually means “in return” or “in response,” and that is how this instance is glossed by the Riverside editors. (Chaucer uses it in this sense in the Shipman’s Tale at 7.37,

134, and 357.) But it could also mean, as in modern usage, “one more time.” (The *MED* cites a line from Chaucer’s *Astrolabe* as an early instance of its use in this sense.) “Wantownly,” meanwhile, clearly means “lasciviously,” and “pleye” can mean many things, including to amuse yourself or others, to joke or jest, to use playful language, but also to have sex. The wife has already referred to sex as “that sory pley” (7.117), and in the Merchant’s Tale January says to May, “It is no fors how longe that we pleye . . . / For we han leve to pleye us by the lawe” (4.1835, 41).

So what action is indicated by the line, “And wantownly agayn with hym she pleyde”? I think that the wife has sex with her husband again, having just said that she was not obligated to do so. It is also possible that she engages in foreplay, or merely teases him in a flirtatious manner, or some permutation of the three. But whatever kind of playfulness or amatory pleasure it is, the wife is not marking it in her accounts of her sexual obligations to her husband.

Bourdieu’s answer to the question “Is a Disinterested Act Possible?” is, emphatically, no. By way of explanation, he introduces the term he understands as the opposite of “interested”:

The word “gratuitous” refers, on the one hand, to the idea of unmotivated, arbitrary: a gratuitous act is one which cannot be explained . . . , a foolish, absurd act—it matters little—about which social science has nothing to say and in the face of which it can only resign. This first sense conceals another, more common meaning: that which is gratuitous is that which is for nothing, is not profitable, costs nothing, is not lucrative. Telescoping these two meanings, the search for the *raison d’être* of a behavior is identified with the explanation of that behavior as the pursuit of economic ends.<sup>43</sup>

That which is gratuitous is both free and pointless; it is without interest, and therefore it is meaningless and unintelligible.

But in this final scene of the Shipman’s Tale, the wife, having evoked the overdetermined analogy of sex to money, immediately undermines the analogy by having sex that provides her with no economic advantage—monetary or symbolic. The sex is, in Bourdieu’s own terms, “gratuitous.”

What has Bourdieu done, really, but exclude from intelligibility any motivations other than competitive, individual self-interest? There is in fact an intelligible way of reading the wife’s actions: she likes her husband, and she likes having sex with him. Despite her claims that their marriage is a businesslike arrangement of sex for money, it seems that they have a personal connection that is sometimes expressed sexually.

43. Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 76.

Bourdieu freely admits the validity of libido as an explanation of action. In fact, he suggests that desire is the core of human motivation, which he figures, using an appropriately monastic image, as fundamentally competitive:

*Libido* would also be entirely pertinent for saying what I have called *illusio*, or investment. . . . If I had to summarize in an image all that I have just said about the notion of the field, and about *illusio* which is at the same time the condition and the product of the field's functioning, I would recall a sculpture found at the Auch cathedral, in the Gers, which represents two monks struggling over the prior's staff. In a world which, like the religious universe, and above all the monastic universe, is the site par excellence of *Ausserweltlich*, of the extrawordly of disinterestedness in the naive sense of the term, one finds people who struggle over a staff, whose value exists only for those who are in the game, caught up in the game.<sup>44</sup>

This image of two ostensibly pious men struggling to control a symbol of power and authority says much about Bourdieu's conception of desire, but one must ask how well this image represents libido in the carnal sense. If these two monks were seeking physical gratification, would not their struggle be of a very different nature? (When, in the Merchant's Tale, May claims to "struggle with a man upon a tree" [4.2374], we know what kind of struggle she means.) Only one of the monks can get the staff. Is this true of sexual pleasure?

Elsewhere, Bourdieu calls on social science "to extend economic calculation to *all* goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation—which may be 'fair words' or smiles, handshakes or shrugs, compliments or attention, gossip or scientific information, distinction or distinctions, etc."<sup>45</sup> One can see that individuals in a given social formation might be motivated to seek smiles or handshakes, but does it really make sense to imagine a "profit of smiles"? Similarly, we are familiar with a fabliau world in which individuals compete for advantage in everything, including sexual gratification. But can even such "nakedly" self-interested motivations be translated into economic terms? We could say that the wife in the Shipman's Tale seeks to maximize her own pleasure. But when she "plays" with her husband, she sets her own physical pleasure in opposition to the economic metaphor that she playfully invokes.

The fact is that neither smiles nor shrugs, nor foreplay, nor orgasms, are apportioned through society in the same way that economic resources are. They can, of course, be found in abundance where material wealth is not, but more important, they are not zero-sum and do not follow the laws of economics that pertain to money or material resources. I can give someone

44. *Ibid.*, 78.

45. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 178.

a smile without suffering a commensurate loss of smile of my own—and I invite the reader to extend this analogy to the sexual interactions heretofore delineated. Pleasure can be gained when it is given. So what reason is there to describe it in economic terms at all?

#### THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

As his invocation of the image of the monks and the staff suggests, Bourdieu admits libido as an operative term for core motivations precisely because he sees all desire as individualistic and competitive. This would not seem to allow the possibility that pleasures could be increased when they are shared or social. Bourdieu's is a conception of pleasure, therefore, that conforms to a market model of desire and negotiation. This is the root of Graeber's objection to contemporary sociological value theory: "When market theorists think about a pleasurable, rewarding experience, the root image they have in mind seems to be eating food ('consumption')—and not in the context of a public or private feast, either, but apparently, food eaten by oneself. . . . One need only imagine how different the theory might look . . . if it [were] set off from almost any other kind of enjoyable experience: say, from making love, or from being at a concert, or even from playing a game."<sup>46</sup> Not incidentally, when Chaucer's merchant emerges from his countinghouse, he takes pleasure in dining with friends: "And richely this monk the chapman fedde" (7.254). A comprehensive theory of value must account for this kind of pleasure.

To address the limitations of purely utilitarian models of social action, some social theorists have been seeking to develop alternative theories of value. This project has been the particular focus of the scholars associated with *La Revue du MAUSS*, founded by Alain Caillé.<sup>47</sup> Caillé and Jacques Godbout have taken up Bourdieu's interest in the words "interest" and "gratuitous." They note that in addition to meaning "free" and "meaningless," "gratuitous" (*gratuit*) "still harbors a hint of grace, of what is gracious, of what makes it possible for something unexpected to appear out of nowhere, something generous, associated with birth, with begetting."<sup>48</sup> For Caillé and Godbout, the gratuitousness of the gift distinguishes it from a commodity and differentiates gift giving from market exchange. The sale of a commodity seeks equivalence and hence the end of a relationship, whereas the superfluity of the gift makes equivalence impossible and hence preserves relationships.

46. Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory*, 260.

47. MAUSS is an acronym for the Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales and also, of course, an homage to the author of *The Gift*.

48. Jacques T. Godbout, in collaboration with Alain Caillé, *The World of the Gift*, trans. Donald Winkler (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 176.

Significantly, the value of the gift is for Caillé and Godbout tied to pleasure: “The deeper meaning of the word disinterested (*gratuit* in French) has been misunderstood by mercantile logic. There is an equivalence in the gift precisely because of its disinterestedness: a disinterested gift *gratifies* the one who gives it as much as the one who receives it.”<sup>49</sup> And fittingly, they look for an illustration to marriage: “A couple that seeks equality, that seeks to balance the books in its exchanges, is a couple whose dynamic leads to permanent rivalry, towards the establishment of a mercantile relationship, and towards rupture.”<sup>50</sup> But this, they insist, is not the normal state of married relations. Ideally, marriage is “a gift relationship . . . a relationship that cannot be understood in terms of a mercantile or state egalitarian schema because such a dynamic of indebtedness is not based on things and services in circulation but operates directly between people in a bond that is nourished by the things that circulate.”<sup>51</sup>

Caillé and Godbout’s theories allow the conclusion of the Shipman’s Tale to take on an entirely different cast from how it is conventionally understood. The merchant brings up his concerns about the monk to his wife only reluctantly—“although it be me looth” (7.385)—and he does not demand the money from her but only asks her—“I preye thee” (7.395)—to tell him, in the future, if money is returned to her, to avoid possible embarrassment with debtors. She responds with her famous commodification of the wife’s body:

Ye han mo slakkere dettours than am I!  
 For I wol paye yow wel and redily  
 Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,  
 I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,  
 And I shal paye as soone as ever I may.

(7.413–17)

But when that is—the due date for repayment of this marital debt—is not specified. Instead, after noting that she spent the money for his “honour” (7.421), she says,

As be nat wrooth, but let us laughe and pleye,  
 Ye shal my joly body have to wedde;  
 By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde!  
 Forgyve it me, myn owene spouse deere;  
 Turne hiderward, and maketh bettre cheere.

(7.422–26)

49. *Ibid.*, 184.

50. *Ibid.*, 180.

51. *Ibid.*

The merchant, seeing that there is “no remedie” (7.427), forgives her and asks only that in the future she be not so “large” and “Keep bet thy good” (7.432–33).

This is comical, of course. The wife has cheated on the merchant, and she has avoided being caught in that particular indiscretion. But all the same, the tale ends with laughter, amicability, and sex—with “pleye.” It does not end with a precise equivalency of sex and money. Neither party is actually calculating the franc value of marital sex nor are they setting real terms on when the debt shall be repaid. The wife speaks of “paye” in jest, and the merchant, with a sigh, gives up and takes what is offered. This concluding scene is almost always treated as the quintessential commodification of sex and subordination of marriage to the calculations of the marketplace. But the relationship depicted here reflects not the conclusive equivalence of the market transaction but rather the perpetual “dynamic of indebtedness” that Caillé and Godbout see in gift exchange. Money and sex will always be exchanged in this relationship, but there is no expectation of ever settling accounts, and each will always be in debt to the other. In Caillé and Godbout’s terms, marital sex in the Shipman’s Tale is not a commodity at all. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

The problem with using the language of the market economy to describe all human relations is that, in addition to being superfluous, it has the effect of naturalizing commercial relationships, of making the economic transaction the elementary form of exchange. Just as Graeber sees this as a problem in contemporary value theory, it also seems to have been a feature of recent literary criticism. Perhaps the (presumably unconscious) effect of market theorists is responsible for the trend, observed by Rogers and Dower, of contemporary critics seeing the Shipman’s Tale not as a critique of market values but as an illustration of the naturalness and inevitability of those values.<sup>52</sup> “Put bluntly,” Lee Patterson writes, “the *Shipman’s Tale* argues that the correspondence between business and marriage, however dismaying, is an inevitable part of being human.”<sup>53</sup> But this is precisely what the Shipman’s Tale does not do. On the contrary, the tale shows that whatever the effects of capitalism and the money economy on society and human relations, it is not inevitable, original, or natural to the human condition.

As Graeber acknowledges, there is no area of human interaction where one cannot find individual self-interest at work, and I know of no sociological model more effective than Bourdieu’s in describing its operation. The world of the Shipman’s Tale is one of pervasive commercial mentality, which clearly influences the personal relationships. I would hardly wish to sentimentalize the kinds of friends and spouses we encounter in this story.

52. Rogers and Dower, “Thinking about Money,” 123.

53. Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 352.

And yet, in this most thoroughly economic and monetary tale, the characters themselves still have access to other measures of social worth and other modes of human interaction. To reduce all motivations in the tale to economic-minded competition is to obscure Chaucer's achievement as well as his intentions, and also to place philosophically unnecessary and politically undesirable limitations on the range of human motivations and interactions. There is something ultimately irreducible in the human connections in this tale—in the affection and attraction between merchant and wife, in the fondness of the merchant for friendship, and the pleasure he takes from companionship and generosity. These are rare enough in fabliau—to say nothing of the real world—that we should not seek to erase them when they are actually present. This may make the characters and the tale harder to fit into an overarching theory of practice, but it also increases their interest.

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