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Book Review: Savage Economy: The Returns of Middle English Romance by Walter Wadiak

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BOOK REVIEW

Savage Economy: The Returns of Middle English Romance. *Walter Wadiak*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 195.

Walter Wadiak's *Savage Economy* is an exemplary first book, applying a valuable and underutilized critical approach to material that has long been perceived as problematic and obscure, thereby revealing its richness and literary-historical significance. The material is the Middle English romance, including the Knight's Tale and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but with extensive attention to much less familiar texts, from the thirteenth-century *Floris and Blancheflower* to late fifteenth-century outlaw tales. To critical perception, many of these anonymous romances have seemed belated, decadent, and inferior contributions to the romance tradition, all of these shortcomings being particularly evident in their inordinate violence. Wadiak intends to show that Middle English romances contain essential and defining elements inherent to romance even in its classical iterations, and to account for the persistence of romance when even the genre itself seems to have become aware of its own historical displacement and anachronism. These are some of the many meanings of his subtitle, *The Returns of Middle English Romance*.

The critical apparatus that Wadiak uses to crack open this literary tradition is gift theory. The category of the gift has been emerging as a tool of particular value in understanding medieval romance, as in work by Ad Putter and Britton Harwood, among others, but Wadiak's study is the most sustained and systematic so far. In chapter after chapter he applies the concept of the gift to different texts and subgenres in ways that are consistently persuasive and revealing and often dazzling.

The gift theory that Wadiak employs is essentially that of Pierre Bourdieu, who maintains that the "noble gift" is a quintessential act of symbolic

violence—supposedly supplanting violence but in fact enacting domination in another form. Wadiak shows that Middle English romances are informed by deep anxieties, primarily about the passing of the chivalric culture that originally fostered and sustained the genre of romance, and that this anxiety is greatest when the tales inevitably become implicated in the valuations and exchanges of commercial culture. Over and again, Wadiak shows that the noble heroes in these texts perform both startling violence (and these texts really do merit their reputation for extreme violence) and ostentatious gift giving. The gifts seem to displace the violence, but in fact simply extend violent domination into the symbolic and cultural realm. The gift also, as Marcel Mauss explained in his foundational study, demands a return, which means that the romances dramatize a “savage economy” of exchange that reacts to but duplicates the commercial economy that is the source of the texts’ anxiety. And because of this generative cycle, the Middle English romance, long after its courtly and chivalric context would seem to be relevant, persistently “returns.”

Individual chapters focus on “spendthrift romances” like *Sir Cleges*, *Sir Launfal*, and *Sir Amadace*; on Chaucer’s romances, particularly the Knight’s Tale; on tales of Gawain, including *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and also *Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*; and on late medieval tales of Robin Hood and other outlaws. The analysis seems to me especially successful in relation to the spendthrift romances and also the Gawain tales. Wadiak makes sense of all the carnage without diminishing it. His reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is revelatory; he shows that the green girdle, which both “stands for and wards off violence” (104), is simultaneously the paradigmatic gift and the embodiment of romance itself.

This book will undoubtedly be influential to the study of romance in general, and will inspire greater attention to gift theory in medieval literary studies generally. As this influence takes shape, it is to be hoped that subsequent critics will address a couple of lacunae in Wadiak’s incisive study. First, for an analysis of exchange in chivalric romance, *Savage Economy* has surprisingly little to say about the exchange of women. Wadiak does note at one point, in reference to Emily in the Knight’s Tale, that the woman is an “anthropologically exemplary gift” (76). But the “traffic in women” is so elemental to anthropological gift theory as well as to romance that it calls for greater attention in relation to the themes here explored. In fact, Sarah Kay in *The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (1995) employed gift theory to present a rich argument about the exchange of women in romance. (She argued that women are exchanged as gifts in *chansons de geste*, but as commodities in romance.) There is room, then, to consider the implications of Wadiak’s argument for gender in romance.

The second area that, I believe, calls for additional critical attention is the diversity of contemporary gift theory. Wadiak refers frequently to what “modern anthropology” tells us about the gift, but by that he means primarily Bourdieu’s interpretation of Mauss. This he augments in parts with the theories of Bataille, Girard, and Derrida—but none of this is really “modern anthropology.” As it happens, there is an influential school of neo-Maussian economic anthropology, which since the 1980s has developed a gift theory that is significantly different from Bourdieu’s and Derrida’s. The theorists contributing to this trend would include, in the Anglo-American branch, such figures as Christopher Gregory, Marilyn Strathern, and David Graeber, and in the francophone realm Alain Caillé and the members of the MAUSS collective. (Sarah Kay employed Strathern’s theories.) This revisionist theoretical movement has made the case for the gift as substantively distinct from commodity and as only potentially rather than essentially agonistic. That is, it contradicts Bourdieu’s central tenet that the gift is inevitably and fundamentally an act of symbolic violence, as well as Derrida’s thesis that the gift is an impossibility because of its inevitable imbrication in exchange. For most of his discussion, Wadiak is careful to specify that the romances he is studying enact the “noble gift,” and in that context Bourdieu’s model of symbolic violence is perfectly applicable and critically fruitful. In other parts, however—notably, in reference to Chaucer—he generalizes more broadly about the violence and domination that inhere in the gift, and he characterizes the conspicuously communal gift giving of some outlaw tales as “utopian” (120). It need not be, if one avoids the assumption that the gift is defined by antagonism. But that said, for its advancement of gift theory in study of medieval literature and for its ingenious and enlightening reading of Middle English romance that it affords, this book is an important contribution to the critical literature.

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