

Leprosy, Miracles, and Morality in *Amis and Amiloun*

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I.

Better known to readers of English literature as “Bolingbroke,” thanks to William Shakespeare’s historical play, *Richard II*, Henry IV experienced many hardships—politically and personally. In 1405, immediately after eliminating the archbishop of York, who had long been a political enemy, Henry IV suddenly fell ill. He continued to suffer from a series of diseases until his death in 1413. Heated debates swirled around the nature of his various maladies, in particular the dreadful one that deformed the King’s face and body. It was widely rumored, especially among his enemies, that the English king had been deservedly stricken with leprosy for his wrongdoings, including the usurpation of God’s anointed king and the execution of God’s anointed clergyman.¹⁾ Leprosy was commonly viewed during the Middle Ages as “a

divinely sent disease” (Kratins 352) that could be cured only through God’s grace. However, regarding the significance of the disease, there existed conflicting understandings. On the one hand, as the case of Henry IV illustrates, leprosy was popularly thought of as a divine punishment for sins such as pride and avarice on the basis of the episodes of the Old Testament. In the Second Book of Chronicles, the proud and unfaithful king Uzziah is smitten by leprosy on his forehead because he ignores the laws of God, according to which only priests can burn incense in God’s temple.²⁾ Another Old Testament example of leprosy as God’s punishment can be found in the Second Book of Kings in which Gehazi, the servant of the prophet Elisha, is cursed with leprosy because he tells a lie to extract money from the leprous Syrian commander Naaman whom the prophet healed without asking any reward.

On the other hand, medieval hagiographies present many holy people who, as Carole Rawcliffe notes, “did not simply welcome leprosy as a mark of divine favor, but apparently begged God to inflict upon them” (59). They

1) For more information about Henry IV and his diseases, see Carole Rawcliffe, 44-45; and Douglas Biggs and Gwilym Dodd, 185-202.

2) “But after he [Uzziah] had become strong, he became proud to his own destruction and broke faith with the Lord, his God. He entered the temple of the Lord to make an offering on the altar of incense. But Azariah the priest, and with him eighty other priests...opposed King Uzziah, saying to him: ‘It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who have been consecrated for this purpose’... Uzziah...became angry, but at the moment he showed his anger to the priests, while they were looking at him in the house of the Lord beside the altar of incense, leprosy broke out on his forehead. Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests examined him, and when they saw that his forehead was leprous, they expelled him from the temple... King Uzziah remained a leper to the day of his death. As a leper he dwelt in a segregated house, for he was excluded from the house of the Lord” (II Chronicles 26: 16-21). All references to the Bible including the preceding passage are to *The New American Bible*.

believed that the soul could be purified, as sinners patiently and even gladly bear painful bodily afflictions like leprosy.³⁾ Among them are Finian Lohhar (Finianus Leprosus), who is best known for having miraculously healed a leper child by assuming the child's leprosy himself and enduring the disease patiently (Rawcliffe 59), and a leprous recluse named Ralph, whose leprosy marked him as a blessed man by God because his imploration for leprosy to God was answered. One legendary example that depicts Jesus himself as a leper can be found in Gregory the Great's homily about a monk named Martyrius who

encountered an exhausted leper on the road and carried him on his shoulders to the monastery gate. On their arrival, the poor creature metamorphosed into Christ and ascended to heaven, assuring the astonished monk that his kindness would be repaid in the next life. (Rawcliffe 63)

Namely, for these medieval people, leprosy never meant a punishment, but rather a pronounced blessing from God; the leper was not simply "elect of God," "he *was* God," only in disguise (Rawcliffe 60, italics mine).

In the second half of the fourteenth century Middle English romance, *Amis and Amiloun*, Amiloun, one of the two eponymous characters, contracts leprosy. Considering the opposing medieval attitudes towards leprosy as both punishment and blessing, puzzling is the preponderance of critical interpretations that view Amiloun's leprosy as a divine punishment either for

3) This conviction, according to Rawcliffe, that "illness 'patiently and gladly' endured would purify the soul and facilitate its journey through purgatory" was sustained as a frequent theme of "English devotional writing" until the Reformation (59-60); and also see Tamaki Matsuda, 167-69 and 188.

his false swearing, or for his sinfulness and/or disobedience to God.⁴⁾ Our puzzlement—or even disappointment—at critics who read Amiloun’s disease exclusively as punishment for his misconducts further increases when we consider the romance’s explicit and pronounced Christian moral stance that in many ways reminds readers of medieval legends of saints. Except MacEdward Leach, who peculiarly and rather mistakenly defined this romance as “fundamentally non Christian and non hagiographic” in his 1937 EETS edition of *Amis and Amiloun* (xxv), almost all critics of this romance, notably Sheila Delany (66-67) and Ojars Kratins, have pointed to the text’s permeation of both romantic and hagiographic categories, a quality that fundamentally relates to the “hagiographic consciousness” that runs deep through the romance. Aside from the common hagiographic tropes of the heavenly voice, the angelic visitation in dreams, Amiloun’s miraculous recovery from leprosy, and the restoration of Amis’s murdered children, another element that makes *Amis and Amiloun* particularly comparable to hagiography is “the saintliness of Amiloun’s character” (Kratins 354). Contrary to the insistence of many critics, Amiloun himself accepts leprosy as a gift or blessing—“sond” (l. 1620)⁵⁾—from God, and endures the dreadful affliction patiently and meekly until, as with many holy men and women in medieval legends of saints, God grants him grace and heals him at the end of the poem.

4) “Amiloun’s suffering is a penance, inflicted because of his forswearing and because he refused to obey the command of God not to fight in Amis’ stead” (Kramer 114); “We can feel Amiloun’s sufferings as a leper to be adequate atonement for his unjust fight” (Hume 29); “Amiloun ... is punished with leprosy for the imposture” (Delany 65); “[Amiloun’s] leprosy ... as a clear sign of culpability” (Foster 6); and Dieter Mehl also sees Amiloun’s leprosy as a punishment for the “sin” of “forswearing” (108). Only Ojars Kratins and Susan Damenbaum refute this kind of reading.

5) All references to the text are from *Amis and Amiloun in Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace*, edited by Edward E. Foster.

By contextualizing Amiloun's leprosy within the Christian morals that dwell in the romance, one can understand his condition as a divine blessing rather than as a punishment, thus resolving the problem of "moral ambiguity" (Foster 7) or "bizarre morality" (Baldwin 353) that some critics have regarded as "a barrier between the romance and modern readers" (Baldwin 353). Some early critics, like George Kane, have pejoratively branded the supernatural elements of the romance as "absurdities of subject" (qtd. in Kratins 348). However, a reconsideration of the implications of those mysterious elements, especially Amiloun's miraculous recovery and the resurrection of Amis's murdered children, will help us better comprehend the medieval literary moral of the text. In this essay, therefore, I reinterpret the Middle English romance, *Amis and Amiloun* by examining the significance of Amiloun's leprosy and the two miracles within the context of the romance's Christian moral stance.

II.

Before I start my discussion of *Amis and Amiloun*, I would like to provide a summary of the story in hopes to better engage readers into my discussion:

Two boys later named Amis and Amiloun are conceived and born on the same day. They grow up in virtue and beauty, and look like indistinguishable twins, though they are not biologically related. Having been selected by the same duke to serve at the ducal court at the age of twelve, they pledge a life-long, absolute *treuþe* [fidelity or friendship] to each other. As Amiloun has to come back home to assume his inheritance by the death of his parents, he warns Amis of the trick of the duke's evil steward, and reminds the latter of their *treuþe*-pledge to each other. Left behind alone, Amis successfully refuses the steward's offer of

friendship, but he violates his fidelity to the duke by becoming the clandestine lover of the duke's daughter, Belisaunt, when she threatens him with the cry of rape. The steward spies and exposes the fornication of the couple to the duke. In order to escape the charge, Amis proposes a duel to the steward, but he later becomes afraid of "fals swearing [falsely swearing]" before God. Counting on their physical similarities, Amis seeks the help of Amiloun who has been married by now. Amiloun fights in Amis's stead and kills the steward in the combat. Soon after the combat, however, Amiloun contracts leprosy, as he was supernaturally forewarned before the duel. Amiloun's wife drives her leprous husband first out of his house and then out of his country. Protected and guided only by his faithful nephew, Amoraunt, Amiloun finally wanders to the land where Amis, who has married Belisaunt, now rules as the duke. Amis recognizes Amiloun after mistaking him for a thief. On Christmas Eve, one year after Amiloun came to stay in Amis's court, both of the knights learn in their dreams that Amiloun can be cured only through the blood of Amis's children. Though experiencing extreme agony at first, Amis soon kills his children, and Amiloun is healed with the blood. Amis's children are miraculously revived from death, and the two knights live together happily, die on the same day, and are buried together.⁶⁾

As this summary shows, the handsome, healthy, sturdy Amiloun catches leprosy after he kills the steward. Critics, including Kramer, Hume, Delany, and Mehl, have argued that Amiloun is stricken with leprosy because of his "forswearing" at the combat, and because of his disobedience to God who forbids him to impersonate Amis in the combat.⁷⁾ It is therefore necessary first to investigate the nature of Amiloun's oath that is probably sworn at the

6) I have adopted Kratins's summary as a basic story line and then expanded it with more details in the way that will better serve my argument.

7) Refer to note 4 of this essay as for detailed comments of these critics.

judicial combat. As Amis admits, the steward's accusation of his fornication is correct; therefore, he cannot swear his innocence before God, or he will be "forsworn," and subsequently, as he fears, "liif and soule icham forlorn" (ll. 937-48). However, because Amiloun is innocent of that misconduct, he is free to "swere so God me spede / As icham giltles of that dede, / That he opon the bare" (ll. 1120-22). Amiloun is blameless in God's eyes because it is Amis, not Amiloun, who commits the sin, and whom the steward charges. Medieval literature contains numerous examples of "equivocal oaths in judicial ordeals" that are *not* considered "sinful," and thus not punished. As Susan Dannenbaum notes, "the ordeal tests not the whole human situation but simply the sworn statements made by participants" (620). The ordeal may seem disingenuous, but it is not sinful: it is "not God and Justice who are being tricked, but simply the human onlookers," among which are the evil antagonists (Dannenbaum 620). Amiloun's swearing at the judicial duel should be understood in light of this tradition of medieval literature.

Amiloun hears a warning voice from heaven on his way to the duel, but the voice hints at no link between the disease and Amiloun's imminent swearing at the duel, as the following passage reveals:

As he [Amiloun] prikand out of toun,
 Com a voice fram heven adoun,
 That noman herd bot he,
 And sayd, 'Thou knight, Sir Amiloun,
 God, that suffred passioun,
 Sent the bodi bi me;
 Yif thou this bataile underfong,
 Thou schalt have an eventour strong
 Within this yere be al gon,

And or this thre yere be al gon,
 Fouler mesel nas never non
 In the world, than thou schal be!

Ac for thou art so hende and fre,
 Jhesu sent the bode bi me,
 To warn the anon;
 So foule a wreche thou schalt be,
 With sorwe and care and poverté
 Nas never non wers bigon.
 Over al this world, fer and hende,
 Tho that be thine best frende
 Schal be thi most fon,
 And thi wiif and alle thi kinne
 Schul fle the stede thaow are inne,
 And forsake the ichon.'

The knight gan hove stille so ston
 And herd tho wordes everchon,
 That were so gret and grille.
 He nist what him was best to don,
 To flen, other to fighting gon;
 In hert him liked ille.
 He thought, 'Yif y beknowe mi name,
 Than schal mi brother go to schame,
 With sorwe thai schul him spille.
 Certes,' he seyde, 'for drede of care
 To hold mi treuthe schal y nought spare
 Lete God don alle His wille.'(ll. 1249-84)

Far from relating the disease and the accompanying hardships to Amiloun's oath and/or duel, the voice demands that the knight make a choice: "friendship

or health,” “sacrifice” of himself, or sacrifice of his sworn brother (Kratins 350). Namely, the voice does not threaten Amiloun with punishment of an incurable disease; instead, it “puts Amiloun’s *trewþe* to the test by placing before him a choice” (Kratins 351). In Dannenbaum’s words, the choice is “not between honesty and dishonesty, but between *trewþe*⁸⁾ and self-preservation” (620). That Amiloun feels lost, though momentarily, between fleeing and fighting is a natural human reaction. Yet immediately overcoming his hesitation and dread of the grim consequences warned by the voice, Amiloun chooses to hold his *trewþe* by fighting the duel. Amiloun’s sacrifice of almost everything that he has—his own health, and his familial and social security and ties—in order to spare the life of Belisaunt and her mother in place of his sinful brother is reminiscent of medieval saints like Finian Lohhar (Finianus Leprosus) who miraculously healed lepers by adopting and then patiently enduring the disease out of compassion and mercy. It is thus a mistake to interpret Amiloun’s last words—“Lete God don alle His wille”—as a prideful disobedience or impertinent challenge to God. Inversely, the knight’s last words should be interpreted as his humble and ready submission to God’s providence, in whatever form it may befall him.

If one reads Amiloun’s contraction of leprosy as a divine punishment for his sinful act(s), as many critics of this romance have, then one cannot adequately explain the moral implication of Amiloun’s victory over the steward in the judicial duel. As F. Carl Riedel notes, when it comes to the ethics of combat, medieval romances clearly represent the Christian belief that “the right will be shown by God’s fighting on its side” (qtd. in Kratins 350).

8) Dean R. Baldwin adequately explicates the full meaning of the word *trewþe* as “both fidelity to a vow and the personal integrity and moral courage necessary to fulfill a pledge, implying thereby a general moral uprightness” (355).

Accordingly, if Amiloun were morally wrong, then he could not win the combat; because Amiloun is morally right, God allows him to beat the steward. Though the warning voice brought him a moment of hesitation, Amiloun has never doubted the sacrificial meaning of his act, and his triumph in the duel implicates God's acknowledgment of the righteousness of his sacrificial performance.

Amis and Amiloun as a matter of fact makes its ethical position very clear with the two villains of the romance: the steward and Amiloun's wife, who rather surprisingly thinks of the steward as innocent, and her husband as guilty. If one reads Amiloun's leprosy as punishment for his "forswearing" and/or sinfulness, then one inevitably privileges the moral stance of the evil characters that the romance denounces. From the very beginning of the romance, even before he plots against Amis and Belisaunt, the steward at the ducal court is identified as a villain filled with envy and indignation—"with nithe and ond" (l. 208)—, and operates "with gile and trecherie" (l. 210) to "don hem [Amis and Amiloun] schame / With wel gret felonie" (ll. 215-16). The steward has always been envious of the strong union of Amis and Amiloun. When Amis rejects his offer of friendship in place of the absent Amiloun, the steward grows nearly mad with wrath—"Almesst for wrethe he wex ner wode (l. 386) —, and proclaims an abiding enmity to Amis, saying: "y schal be thi strong foman / Ever after this day!" (ll. 392-93). Later, the steward spies Belisaunt's ogling of Amis at the dinner table, and decides to destroy the couple "Bothe with tresoun and with gile" (l. 707). At night, he lurks in an adjoining room and watches the couple's lovemaking through a small hole in the wall. What the romance suggests through the steward's sneaky behavior is his "voyeuristic" and "degenerate character" (Delany 69). It is the steward's anger, envy, and antagonism to the couple, more specifically to Amis who has

rejected his friendship, “not his sense of feudal duty” (Kratins 351) or his loyalty to his lord that causes him to disclose the clandestine relationship of Amis and Belisaunt. Charging Amis as treacherous, the steward is correct only according to the sense of “narrow legalism” (Baldwin 363) that the romance repudiates, and he is wrong and condemnable in spirit and motive. The feudal law that the steward advocates or represents is what Dean R. Baldwin calls a “technical” or “false *treuþe*” that is “technically correct but malicious in motive” (361), thus serving only what Kratins calls “a lower justice,” or “the letter of feudal law” (351). And the *treuþe* that Amiloun strives to hold to his death embodies a “genuine” *treuþe*—“fidelity in motive and spirit” (Baldwin 361)—serving “a higher justice” (Kratins 351). In this vein, Amiloun’s killing of the malicious steward serves the higher law, or the “genuine *treuþe*”; the romance and, by implication, God affirm the virtue of the knight’s act in the form of his victory over the steward.

Though the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun* does not tell us of any direct relation of Amiloun’s wife to the steward, she exists morally on the steward’s side and is thus a villain, just like the steward. When she later learns where Amiloun has been and what he has done, she is greatly angered and bitterly criticizes her husband, not because he dueled in Amis’s stead, but because he murdered the steward who she thinks was innocent: “With wrong and michel unright / Thou slough ther a gentil knight; / Ywis, it was ivel ydo” (ll. 1492-94). Unsympathetic to the *treuþe* that Amiloun has defended with his own life, she calls his killing of the steward “ivel” (“evil”). Critics, like Leach, have contended that Amiloun’s wife has no explicit motivation to call her husband’s killing of the steward “evil,” and therefore the romance is flawed at this moment (qtd. in Kratins 351). As other critics, including Kratins (351) and Baldwin (361-62), propose, she can call her husband’s act evil primarily

because she believes in the very feudal law that the steward represents, according to which Amiloun can be wrong. Because she regards her husband guilty of killing the steward who is innocent in her perspective, she interprets Amiloun's subsequent contraction of leprosy as a divine punishment for his wrongdoing:

So wicked and schrewed was his wiif,
 Sche brac his hert ithouten kniff,
 With wordes harde and kene,
 And seyde to him, 'Thou wreche chaitif,
 With wrong the steward les his liif,
 And that is on the sene;
 Therefore, bi Seyn Denis of Fraunce,
 The is bitid this hard chaunce,
 Dathet who the bimene!' (ll. 1561-69)

As the first line of this quotation states, the narrator defines Amiloun's wife as wicked and depraved ("schrewed"), and associates such vicious personality with her cruel and merciless treatment of her leprous husband. Calling her leprous husband "so a foule thing," and angered at spotting him near her in the court, she drives him first out of his own chamber, then from the hall, from his dinner table, and finally from his own castle to a deserted lodge (ll. 1573-1613). Several months later, she cuts off the husband's food supply, announcing that: "Thei his lord for hunger and cold / Dyed ther he lay, / He schuld have neither mete no drink, / No socour of non other thing / For hir after that day" (ll. 1660-1668). As a consequence, the leprous Amiloun and his faithful nephew-assistant, Amourant, have to beg bread from door to door so as not to starve to death (ll. 1693-1704). In the end, she banishes Amiloun,

whose leprosy is more advanced by now, from his native country by lending him a mere ass on condition that: “Now ye schul out of lond fare, / God leve you never to come here mare, / And graunt that it be so” (ll. 1786-87). One might justify the wife’s harsh action towards Amiloun because medieval civil law identified lepers as social outcasts by excluding them from all social and communal sites and gatherings, as the angelic voice warned Amiloun, and also because ecclesiastical law banned lepers from churches and other religious places (Kratins 352; Baldwin 362). However, the poet of *Amis and Amiloun* shows no sympathy with the wife’s abuse of her afflicted husband, but instead explicitly denounces her as “wicked and schrewed,” as quoted above. Namely, her mistreatments of her leprous husband are textually condemned as evil, and work as ample manifestations of her vicious nature that “lacks any redeeming spiritual virtue, such as mercy and compassion” (Kratins 351). Interestingly enough, Jean E. Jost relates the wife’s childless state to her cruel and inhumane personality that is “unfit to birth or nurture children” (125). Jost’s case is compelling because Belisaunt, Amis’s wife and the mother of two children, treats the leprous Amiloun with great tenderness and sympathy, and accommodates him with the finest hospitality, whereby the text emphasizes Amiloun’s wife’s cruelty and wickedness even more strikingly:

The levedi fel aswon to grounde
 And wepe and seyd, “Alla that stounde!”
 Wel sore wrengand hir hond.

As foule a lazer as he was,
 The levedi kist him in that plas,
 For nothing wold sche spare,

. . .

Into hir chaumber she gan him lede
 And kest of all his pover wede
 And bathed his bodi al bare,
 And to a bedde swithe him brought;
 With clothes riche and wele ywrought;
 Ful blithe of him thai ware. (ll. 2170-84)

Belisaunt's gentle treatment and warm acceptance of the leprous Amiloun contrasts with the disgust that Amiloun's wife exhibits. By portraying opposite reactions to the leprous Amiloun, the romance illumines the wives' contrasting ethical positions. The poem endorses Belisaunt's compassionate and merciful embrace of the leper over Amiloun's wife's cruel and merciless exclusion of him. While Belisaunt's compassion and kindness to the abject man is rewarded with the miraculous restoration of her children at the end of the romance, Amiloun punishes his wife's wickedness and depravity, which is highlighted by her immoral and illicit attempt to marry another man while Amiloun suffers, by confining her to a hut made of mortar and stone with the provisions of only bread and water for the rest of her life (ll. 2476-84). Considering the thread of morality which is sewn through the romance, Amiloun's wife's indictment of Amiloun and her identification of his leprosy as punishment are at odds with what the Middle English poet probably wanted to articulate with the knight's affliction of leprosy.

III.

Now, I would like to investigate the way that Amiloun himself reacts to his contraction of leprosy and the implication of his patient endurance of the

disease. As briefly noted earlier, his physical suffering is accompanied by familial and social ostracization. As the heavenly voice warns, “his best frende, / And nameliche al his riche kende [kin] / Bicom his most fon [enemy]” (ll.1552-54). However, it is his wife who has made him suffer the most: “his wife, for sothe to say, / Wrought him wers bothe night and day / Than thai dede everichon” (ll. 1555-58). She strips everything from him: his room, court, food, his own country, not to mention his social status and dignity as the ruler of the country that he inherited from his parents.⁹⁾ Yet to our amazement, the leprous knight accepts all these inflictions that his wife commits to him with “exemplary meekness,” as Kratins points out (353), and quietly—“stille” (l. 1603)—goes to live in a hut that is prepared in order to segregate him. When he walks out of his own house, he leaves behind all those possessions that implicitly include his worldly status as a knight and lord of the country, except the golden cup, the token of his absolute treuþe to Amis. The following lines tell us of how he acts when he is left alone in the hut:

When he was in his loge alon,
 To God of heven he made his mon
 And thonked Him of al His *sond*. (ll. 1618-20, italics mine)

As these lines state, instead of complaining or blaming to God for conferring on him such harrowing pains, Amiloun thanks God for everything that has befallen to him, undoubtedly including leprosy. The word “sond” in the passage means “grace” or “a gift from God” (*MED* 1 (d)). Thus, it can be implicated through this word that, like many medieval holy people in legends

9) Medieval law would have approved her action to her leprous husband (Wackernagel, qtd. in Kratins 352).

of saints, Amiloun regards leprosy and the entailing hardships as blessings. Just as saints choose inflictions as blessings, because their suffering can make them grow in holiness and virtue for their faith, so Amiloun, “reduced to a mere nothing” (Kratins 353), accepts his leprosy as a blessing, immediately because the disease and all the entailing hardships can contribute to strengthening his *troupe* to Amis, but ultimately because the dreadful disease makes not only Amiloun himself who suffers directly from the disease but also Amis and Belisaunt who indirectly suffer from the sacrifice of their children realize God’s grace as their final, most reliable recourse.

Critics who translate Amiloun’s leprosy as a sign of his sinfulness seem to believe that *Amis and Amiloun* operates according to the rule of causality: unless the knight is guilty, he would not be smitten with the heavenly affliction. The romance indeed sees leprosy as a disease pertinent to the providence of God because the angelic voice suggests so, and also because Amiloun is healed through divine intervention at the end of the poem. However, that does not necessarily mean that Amiloun himself is sinful or deserves to fall ill with the supernatural disease, like the biblical precedents Uzziah and Gehazi. Aside from the steward and Amiloun’s wife, the pronounced villains of the romance, only Amis and Belisaunt may be guilty, but not Amiloun. Critics, including Hume (34) and Baldwin (359), compare “Potiphar’s evil wife” of the Old Testament with the seductive Belisaunt¹⁰)

10) Readers can witness a dramatic transformation between what I call “old” Belisaunt at the beginning of the romance who was a lustful, selfish, and aggressive temptress who threatened Amis to be her secret lover and the “new” Belisaunt at the end of the romance who is a gentle, compassionate, and noble wife who heartily welcomes her husband’s leprous friend to her house and willingly, though woefully, accepts her husband’s sacrifice of their children to heal the sick guest and even comforts the husband who expresses his deep, paternal sorrow for the dead children. Critics, including Baldwin (353) and Jost (121), indicate this willingness

who blackmails the unwilling Amis with the cry of rape—“Mi kerchef and mi clothes anon / Y shcal torende doun ichon / And say with michel wrong, / With strengthe tho hast me todrawe” (ll. 631-34). Of course, unlike Potiphar’s wife in the book of Genesis, Belisaunt is not someone’s wife. Nonetheless, Belisaunt’s actions early in the poem are villainous: in her cupidity, which ignores decorum, she forces Amis first to betray his liege, then to fabricate publicly their innocence to escape the steward’s daunting charge of fornication, and finally to accept the judicial duel that the steward throws to Amis. Thus, critics, like Hume, argue that “in the chain of actions, it is she who is responsible for Amiloun’s becoming a leper” (34). Read in this context, Belisaunt’s maternal woe, which is caused by her husband’s sacrifice of their two children in order to cure Amiloun from leprosy, can be justified as an apt atonement for her selfish and irresponsible past. If Belisaunt is analogous to Potiphar’s wife, then Amis naturally becomes Joseph. However, unlike the biblical Joseph who resists the seduction of his lord’s wife, and thus remains innocent and faithful to his lord, Amis submits to Belisaunt’s threat and becomes her secret lover; as a consequence, he is condemned as a “traitor” by his lord, and has to fraudulently swear his innocence. His “expedient” (Baldwin 359) decisions might be “understandable” but morally “wrong” (Hume 36).

of Belisaunt to sacrifice their children in compliance to her husband as an epitome of the “bizarre” morality of the romance, particularly calling the mother “transgressive” of motherhood. The romance does not provide any explicit explanations regarding this metamorphosis of Belisaunt. However, critics, including Hume, reason that: “Since her selfish lust brought about their troubles, she must prove that her love has become less self-centered... Because Amiloun once saved her from being burnt at the stake, she recognizes his claim to anything that she and Amis can offer, even her own life... By placing the cure and restoration..., the author lets Belisaunt pay her debt to Amiloun, and also show that her love for her husband is not just selfish lust” (34-36).

Amis's "failure," as Baldwin points out, is his "inability to trust in his rightness of his actions regardless of accusations that may be laid against him" (359). Unlike Amis and Belisaunt who are morally problematic, Amiloun remains morally clean, innocent and loyal to his sworn brother, his (former) liege, and even to his undeserved wife. Thus, the innocent Amiloun's self-sacrifice for the sinful couple reminds readers immediately of the sacrifice of medieval saints who voluntarily assume the afflictions of the poor and the sick, and, more fundamentally, of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who out of love offers himself as a sacrifice to save the world from sin and death. Probably, medieval readers, who lived in the world of Christianity, holy men and women, and miracles, were more readily recognizant of an affinity between Amiloun and their trustworthy saints in reality or history, and Amiloun and the Paschal Lamb of God.¹¹⁾ Namely, if Jesus bears his cross for the sake of all humanity, and many holy people, for the sake of their faith to God, then Amiloun bears his leprosy for the sake of his *treuþe* to Amis. Nonetheless, regarding the ultimate virtue that one has to pursue, in the denouement of the romance, the Middle English poet calls into question the value of *treuþe* itself that Amiloun strives to keep even at the cost of his own life, and instead deploys God's grace substantiated in the form of miracles as the ultimate way to solve problems otherwise impossible to solve—Amiloun's leprosy and Amis's killing of his children—, which *treuþe*, however worthy it may be, cannot solve. Despite its acknowledgement of the meaning of *treuþe*, in other words, *Amis and Amiloun* makes clear that no human virtue can work in place of God's

11) According to Kratins, in fact, the Anglo-Norman C version, which has been thought of as the most similar to the Middle English *Amis and Amiloun* "in spirit," demonstrates that Amiloun's sacrifice reminds medieval people of "Christ's sacrifice for the love of man" (350).

grace and one's faith in the providence of God. In the remainder of this essay, I want to look at the Christian moral stance of the romance that is emphasized through the miracles whose imports I will also think about.

IV.

Lillian Herlands Hornstein groups *Amis and Amiloun* with other romances that have what she calls "didactic intent" (167). Yet some of the scholarship of the poem has expressed discomfort with the moral stance of this romance. Early critics, including A. B. Taylor and George Kane, for example, condemned this romance as "a bad romance," because, they thought, the poem exaggerates one ideal after another, thus preventing people from gaining "a well-balanced view of life," or because the text's didactic nature generates flaws in the structure, among other reasons (Kratins 348). Though later critics, such as Foster, have shown more benevolent attitudes towards the moral issues of the romance, calling it "moral ambiguity," modern scholars remain more or less uncomfortable with some textual elements that the Middle English poet deploys in the process of establishing the romance's Christian moral stance or didactic intent. Before examining the imports of the two miracles that most prominently contribute to the Christian morality of *Amis and Amiloun*, therefore, I feel compelled to say a few words on behalf of this romance in particular, and medieval literature in general. Modern readers, as Baldwin wisely comments, have no obligation to "approve the morality of those who lived in the Middle Ages," just as they are not "bound to imitate their literary conventions" (353). Nonetheless, if we, especially professional critics, want to pay "critical due" (Hume 41) to those literary works of far remote times, we

ought to strive to comprehend “literary conventions no longer in vogue, including those involving moral issues” (Baldwin 353-54). At the least, we must not measure medieval literature with our own “literary, intellectual, and moral assumptions” (Hume 41), which too readily consider it “anachronistic” (Hume 41), absurd, or primitive. For example, medieval romances seem “disappointingly simple” to modern readers who are accustomed to “novelistic standards”; yet such simplicity served necessary purposes that modern readers no longer have to consider in appreciating literature, like oral performance or circulation (Hume 41). Likewise, miracles in medieval romances, like those in *Amis and Amiloun*, may sound “unpalatable” (Hume 41) to a contemporary audience drawn more to science than to religion or faith. Supernatural interventions that exist and seem “absurd” to us, as George Kane complained, in *Amis and Amiloun*, must have rung naturally or realistically to medieval readers who lived in the age of Christian faith, an age when saintly people were often believed to obtain heavenly miracles because of their extraordinary piety or faith. If one bears in mind this particular temporal context while appreciating the miracles of *Amis and Amiloun*, then one will be able to avoid the same mistake that Kane made by reading the divine interventions as “absurdities” rather than possibilities peculiar to the Middle Ages (qtd. in Kratins 348).

The indisputable two miracles that the poet of *Amis and Amiloun* employs in the denouement—the healing of Amiloun’s leprosy through the blood of Amis’s children and the restoration of the two killed children—are clear manifestations of the poem’s Christian morality. Twelve months after Alimoun comes to dwell in Amis’s household, an angel appears in Amis’s dream and announces that the blood of his children, through God’s grace, can heal Amiloun from leprosy:

In slepe thought as he lay,
 An angel com fram heven bright
 And stode biforn his bed ful right
 And to him thus gan say:
 Yif he wald rise on Cristes morn,
 . . .
 And slen his children tuay,
 And alien his borther with the blode,
 Thurch Godes grace, that is so gode,
 His wo schuld wende oway. (ll. 2199-2208)

The same angel appears in Amiloun's dream that very night with the same message (ll. 2221-26). Though Amis is momentarily hesitant to value his *treuwe* to Amiloun over the lives of his children, he soon sacrifices his children, and, as the angel foretells, Amiloun is mysteriously cured through the children's blood (l. 2408). Unlike the warning voice that only Amiloun could hear, God this time makes his intention or intervention known to both Amis and Amiloun. One might say that Amis's sacrifice of his children appropriately reciprocates Amiloun's sacrifice, but I propose that the morality of the poem operates on the Christian rule of willingness and charity rather than on the measure of reciprocity and remorse. Just as Amiloun makes a free choice to jeopardize all that he possesses against self-preservation for the sake of his sworn brother, without expectation that Amis will pay him back, so Amis voluntarily chooses to sacrifice his children out of love for his sick friend—"Whi shuld y than mi childer spare, / To bring mi brother out of care?" (ll. 2229-2300)—, without knowing that Amiloun's leprosy is linked to the knight's impersonation of him in the combat. If one pits the folklore motif of the child sacrifice¹²⁾ against Amis's charity, and condemns this episode simply as repugnant and savage, then one is sidetracked from important messages in

the romance, and is also prejudiced against, or perhaps ignorant of, the moral of medieval literature.

Next, how are we supposed to interpret the miraculous revival of the murdered children? Previously, the romance and God justify Amiloun's act of killing the evil steward by enabling the knight to win the combat. However, when it comes to the sacrificing of innocent children, the romance does not confront the moral dilemma inherent in the motif, but instead deflects the discussion of it by focusing on the resurrection of the children rather than the murder of them. If we attempt to interpret the miracle as a consequence directly relevant to Amis's act of killing his children, we cannot move away from the moral impasse. Thus, I want us to turn our attention to one seemingly passing, yet important, scene that, as Baldwin points out, has not been properly

12) Because, as I say in the following passage, *Amis and Amiloun* slides away from discussing directly the moral problem of the child sacrifice, it goes beyond the focus of this essay to explore the implications of the motif of the child sacrifice in full sense; discussion of the child sacrifice motif in relation to leprosy in medieval context can be a topic for a separate essay. Nonetheless, with the sacrifice of Amis's two children being mentioned, I feel obliged to look over in brief the location of child sacrifice in medieval European culture and in the Bible, and the medieval church's reaction to it. It is hard to trace where and how the motif of child sacrifice originated. Pre-Christian medieval Gauls, Celts, and Irish are said to have sacrificed their children to worship their pagan deities (Dorson 351), and in the Genesis of the Old Testament Abraham is about to slaughter his only son Issac as a sacrifice to God. However, it has been polemic among Jewish and Christian theologians how to interpret Abraham's attempt to sacrifice Issac, mostly because God himself elsewhere in the Bible abominates the Israelite's child sacrifice to worship heathen idols (Jeremiah 32: 35), and asks a sinner to act justly and to follow God faithfully, instead of providing his firstborn son as a sacrifice (Micah 6: 7-8). The Christian Roman emperors, including Constantine I and Valentinian I, and the early Christian church continuously condemned infanticide, which was still practiced in some parts of Europe such as Spain, as homicide (Radbill 173-79).

recognized in discussions of this romance but may explain the mysterious restoration of the children.

And in to his chapel he went anon,

 And for his childer, that he hadde slon,
 To God of heven he made him mom
 And preyd with rewely chere
 Schuld save him fram schame that day,
 And Mari, his moder, that best may,
 That was him leve and dere;
 And Jhesu Crist, in that stede
 Ful wele He herd that knightes bede
 And graunt him his praiere. (ll. 2354-64)

In the moment after slaying his children, Amis's agony becomes so intense that he seeks out God's comfort. In his home chapel, the knight mourns for his murdered children, and prays desperately that God may grant him mercy or peace—"praiere" (l. 2364). After this prayer, he meets his wife in the hall. They stop to witness the two miracles, first Amiloun's recovery from leprosy, and then the resurrection of their dead children. Considering the sequence of events, it is appropriate to suggest that, if not Amiloun's healing, then "the resurrection of the children is effected in [God's] answer to Amis's prayer" (Baldwin 364).

The poet of *Amis and Amiloun* proposes with these two miracles that God's grace can give us the ultimate happy ending. As noted earlier, the romance devalues any narrowly legalistic interpretation of morality that the vicious steward and Amiloun's wife represent, and also criticizes "the folly" of any "absolute loyalty to any earthly creature or virtue," including *treuþe*, that Amis

and Amiloun represent (Bladwin 364). Amiloun's leprosy can be translated as a blessing, not a punishment, because, by suffering the disease and the entailing hardships, the knight and other characters learn to acknowledge God as their final recourse. *Amis and Amiloun* persistently evokes this didactic intention throughout the story. We modern readers do not have to approve or adopt this morality; nevertheless, we ought not to depreciate this romance and its didactic purpose simply because they do not correspond with our own preconceptions about "good" literature, or with our own "modern" standards for novels.

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Leprosy, Miracles, and Morality in *Amis and Amiloun*

Abstract

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Scholarship of the fourteenth-century Middle English romance *Amis and Amiloun* has been divided in its interpretations of the implications of Amiloun's leprosy and the supernatural elements, including the two miracles—Amiloun's healing from leprosy and the resurrection of Amis's children—that are employed at the end of the romance as solutions to problems that no human or human virtue can solve. Some modern critics have expressed discomfort with the pronounced Christian didactic intent that the romance articulates. In this paper, I reinterpret the romance by examining the significance of Amiloun's leprosy and the two miracles in the context of the romance's Christian moral stance. I introduce two contrasting medieval attitudes towards leprosy—leprosy as punishment and leprosy as a blessing. Unlike many critics of the romance who understand Amiloun's leprosy as a divine punishment for his false swearing in the combat and his impertinence against God, I read his disease as a blessing in disguise: the disease makes the leprous Amiloun and other characters, including Amis and Belisaunt, acknowledge God's grace and mercy as their ultimate resort. I interpret the two miracles as instruments employed to emphasize this Christian morality of the romance.

Key Words

Amis and Amiloun, Amiloun, Amis, Belisaunt, leprosy, blessing, punishment, miracles, morality, Christianity

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