

The Gift in Chrétien de Troyes:
Largesse or Obligation?

In the reservoir of topoi found in the 12th century romances of Chrétien de Troyes, largesse is one which piques the curiosity of the modern reader. Inherent in the chivalric mores of the members of the Arthurian community is this concept which Godefroy construes as libéralité, profusion, abondance. These terms, despite their generality and abstraction, denote generosity. There is, as well, a clear implication of that which is above and beyond the requisite, that which is gratuitous. Furthermore, most dictionnaires of the English language will define liberality, even if only as a secondary meaning, as a liberal gift. Hospitality and breadth of mind are also suggested. The gift concept, analyzed here in light of Marcel Mauss's "Essai sur le don," proves to be both complex and elusive. A brief examination of the nuances of the term largesse will serve to focus on the problem.

The words don, guerredon, and occasionally présent are Chrétien's vehicles for conveying what we initially understand to be representations of liberality. The first of these is common enough in the modern French vocabulary. On the other hand, guerredon is virtually no longer used. According to Godefroy, it refers to the reward for a service or a good deed done, or simply a recompense. Guerredon defined as gift is among the less common usages. In any case, it appears that these terms are not completely straightforward, that there is some overlapping between them, and finally, that certain cultural overtones are intrinsic to their meanings.

In the early part of Chrétien's second romance, Alexander moralizes to his namesake in a

farewell message which extolls the virtue of largesse:

Biax filz, fet il, de ce me croi
Que largesce est dame et reine
Qui totes vertuz anlumine,
.....
Einsi la ou largesce avient,
Desor totes vertuz se tient,
Et les bontez que ele trueve
An prodome qui bien se prueve
Fet a .Vc. doubles monter. (Cligés, 188-211)¹

More specifically, largesse is lady and queen of all virtues; it (she) stands above all other laudable knightly qualities, such as hautesce, corteisie, savoir, gentillesce, proesce and chevalerie which Chrétien itemizes in this same passage. Perhaps this most inclusive list of medieval virtues (197 ff.) serves to add emphasis to the idea of a hierarchy of values. Indeed, just as the rose represents the absolute superlative among flowers ("Mes tot ausi come la rose / Est plus que nule autre flors bele," 204-05), so too is largesse the epitome of moral excellence. If a monetary value could be assigned to this regal attribute, its possession would increase a nobleman's worth five hundred times ("Vc. doubles").

We find a similar enumeration of virtues pronounced by Enide when, in the course of the avanture of the first romance, she finds Erec felled by the enemy. In a state of utter despair for her lover, Enide eulogizes his praiseworthy qualities, running the gamut from biautez, proesce, to savoirs (Erec et Enide, 4601 ff.). But again largesse is paramount: "largesce t'avoit coroné. / Cela sanz cui nus n'a grant pris" (4604-05). Note here, too, the allusion to royalty (i.e., the crowning) and the mention of the price, or worth.

Marian P. Whitney examines the sociological implications of these lines from a literary standpoint. She explains that the twelfth and thirteenth centu-

ries were a time when "lavish giving is chiefly a mark of high breeding, a duty a man owes to himself and his position; when the greatest lords receive as well as give and when it is no shame to a knight to ask for a gift."² Probably the most important word in Whitney's statement is "duty." Can there be real generosity where giving is compulsory? If a man "owes" something to "himself and his position," is he not responding in the final analysis to the pressure of socio-cultural demands? Is he not seeking to fulfill a type of social contract to which he is inherently subject by virtue of his nobility? Thus, there seems to be an unwritten but dominant social obligation which overrides the voluntary nature of the gift at the Arthurian court.

In Cligés, the young Alexander takes leave of his father's court and brings great wealth to the Greeks. Before all else, we are told that he is heeding the advice of his father and is grandly displaying his generosity:

Bele vie a son ostel mainne
Et largemant done et despant,
Si com a sa richesce apant
Et si con ses cuers l'en consoille. (406-07)

Largemant, the adverbial form of largesse, modifies giving and spending. In this particular context, then, the word is less abstract. But already the term, largemant, calls for some qualification. Alexander's liberality must reflect the fullness of his purse and the openness of his heart. This is a case where a statement of largesse occurs simply in the amplification of a character description, without reference to a specific occasion for such generosity.

The Perceval prologue contains a well-known prefatory discussion of the religious connotations of the word large. In certain contexts, however, the state of being large is so important as to warrant a short pause in the linear development of the

romance. An example of this is the scene of Erec's coronation at Nantes during which Chrétien interrupts the festivities to account for the liberality of King Arthur. The king, "puissanz et larges," is compared to Alexander, who is the paragon of all great feudal lords excelling in largesse. Then Arthur is paralleled with "Cesar, l'empereres de Rome, / at tuit li roi que l'en vos nome / an diz et an chansons de geste. . ." (Erec et Enide, 6615-17) in order to testify to his exceptional largesse on the day that Erec was crowned. Perhaps King Arthur does not expect anything in return, at least not in the then-foreseeable future, since that "scene" closes Erec et Enide. The act of giving in this instance can be considered selfless, truly generous. From another point of view, however, keeping open house and giving lavishly to all is the duty of anyone who wishes to win the admiration and praise of his fellows. Every wedding, tournament or dubbing of a knight must be accompanied by the giving of gifts; by their number and splendor the liberality of the giver may be judged.³

Grosso modo, Chrétien seems to use the term largesse in either of two ways: in abstract character-portraits where it assumes a certain regal quality by personification and affords its possessor a higher human value; or else Chrétien evinces its function in a concrete gift-giving situation. Is largesse, then, an innate, human quality or is it one that is socially learned and acquired in response to a courtly conduct code? In answer to this question (which is perhaps a rhetorical one at this point), one could contrast largesse with the Christian virtue of charity (caritas)--which Chrétien does in the prologue to the Perceval. Rarely in this literature does a human being give out of pure altruism and brotherly love. The hermit in Le Chevalier au Lion does provide one such example, however. He offers nourishment to the raving Yvain, whom he has never seen before and to whom he certainly owes nothing: "De son pain et de sa porrete /

par charité prist le boens hom. . ." (2840-41). Having perceived probably that this man, nude and savage-like, was not in full possession of his senses (2834-36), the hermit resorts to certain Christian modes of response. And in addition to giving charitably in the way of edibles, he supplements this act by praying to God to protect the needy wanderer's soul (2857-60). Although Arthur's court is visibly Christian, since its members do go to church and there are allusions to God, W.T.H. Jackson points out that all this is merely "lip service. Christianity does not affect Arthurian behavior."⁴ (The symbolic scene in which Yvain demonstrates his charity by saving the lion and slaying the serpent falls in another category, because of the fact that it does not take place in the immediate environs of the court.) Furthermore, Jackson sees a striking contrast between the "amoral, rule-oriented Arthurian court and the world of the Christian religion."⁵

This distinction between a morally governed society and an otherwise secular, rule-governed body is moreover supported by Yvain's reciprocal response to the act of charity:

Puis ne passa huit jorz antiers
tant com il fu an cele rage
que aucune beste salvage
ne li aportast a son huis. (2864-67)

In spite of Yvain's delirium, he is actually quite "normal" in this interaction: he acknowledges a charitable deed. The hermit lives an isolated existence in the forest clearing and is consequently not subject to the "rules" of the court, but the Chevalier au Lion cannot belie learned courtly civilities. His actions reveal his culture. And however unconscious of it he may be, due to his present state, Yvain is making an offering "de guerredon." This incident gives an indication as to the profound ramifications of this underlying social obligation.

Marcel Mauss, in his "Essai sur le don," outlines the fundamental rules of gift-giving as documented by anthropological data from several primitive societies. There are basically three obligations to be considered: giving gifts, receiving gifts and returning gifts received. The more information he amassed, the more evident it became that the "gift" is not simply a gift but an entrance into a contractual relationship of sorts. In his epigraph, Mauss cites an old Scandanavian poem which deals with this gift concept. These are a few of the poem's most telling verses: "les cadeaux rendus doivent être semblables aux cadeaux reçus," "un cadeau donné attend toujours un cadeau en retour," and "ceux qui se rendent mutuellement les cadeaux / sont le plus longtemps amis."⁶ Ultimately, the three obligations meld into one single phenomenon; that is, you can't have one without the others. Chrétien de Troyes' vavator offers Enide as a gift ("Tenez, fet il, je la vos doing," Erec et Enide, 678). Enide's cousin, her first gift refused, offers three palfreys instead (un autre don li voel doner," 1364). In this regard, Mauss makes reference to archaic forms of contracts in Polynesian society: ". . . ces prestation et contre-prestations s'engagent sous une forme plutôt volontaire, par des présents, des cadeaux, bien qu'elles soient au fond rigoureusement obligatoires, à peine de guerre privée ou publique."⁷ The situation is very similar in Chrétien although the retribution for breach of contract may not be as clear-cut or ominous. Having accepted the vavator's daughter as a gift, Erec, in the first romance, promises to repay his host:

Biax amis, biax ostes, biax sire,
 vos m'avez grant enor portee,
 mes bien vos iert guerredonee. . . .

(1306-08)

In return, Erec offers two of his father's most valu-

able castles, Roadan and Montrevel. The vavator has paid great homage to Erec; it must be appropriately reciprocated "si com a sa richesce apant. . ." (Cligés, 406). Likewise, Erec's refusal of the cousin's dress for Enide must be compensated for. In keeping with the obligation to receive presents ("que honte fust de l'escondire," Le Chevalier au Lion, 264), Erec is more or less bound to accept the second offer.

Quite frequently in these contracts specific mention is made of "servise et enor," values basic to the feudal system. Sometimes they serve as justification in the request of a favor; other times they are the very "objects" of exchange. For example, Alexander stresses his desire for honor and fame when asking leave from his father's kingdom:

Biau pere, por enor aprendre
Et por conquerre pris et los,
Un don, fet il, querre vos os,
Ne ja vuel que vos me doigniez;
Ne ja ne le me porloigniez,
Se otroier le me devez. (Cligés, 84-86)

First, Alexander must explain his motivation, his intentions (84-85); secondly, he makes his demand using, rather ironically, the word don (86); lastly, with devez, he plays on the ideas of immediacy and duty (89). In fact, Emperor Alexander willingly and spontaneously grants this boon without any knowledge of the form it will assume. This case exemplifies the occasion in which a gift is actually less a gift than the necessary fulfillment of an obligation. The request at issue here is manifold. It consists not only of a congé but also of gold and silver, furs, horses, silks and a following of worthy companions. In view of the Emperor's response, his son's demand is hardly thought to be undue or presumptuous. Indeed, the vocabulary seems to indicate the contrary:

Si con recevoir les devez,
Les seiremanz et les homages.
Qui se refuse il n'est pas sages.
(Cligés, 130-32)

And although the possibility of such a refusal need not even be discussed, it is still important in our sociological context to point out that "the gift of a king is not lightly disdained."⁸

Consider, in contrast, the initial encounter between Yvain and Lunete at Laudine's castle. Lunete, recalling a past experience, seizes the present opportunity to recompense a favor. She addresses Yvain:

Et sachiez bien, se je pooie,
servise et enor vos feroie,
car vos la feïstes ja moi.
Une foiz, a la cort, le roi
m'envoia ma dame an message;
.
de l'enor que vos m'i feïstes
vos randrai ja le guerredon.
(Le Chevalier au Lion, 1001-15)

The little ring she places on his finger (along with a measure of magic) will protect his life. "Rendre le guerredon" involves a more complex series of social interactions in this case, since Yvain is later obliged to return the ring once he is out of danger. Also, Lunete continues to render service to Yvain throughout the romance by serving as intermediary between the two lovers.

There is certainly no dearth of illustrations in Chrétien of the guerredon concept based on service and honor. At the end of the Yvain story, the Chevalier au Lion says to his newly regained lady that he knows not how to repay her "enor et servise" (6688). And Laudine, emphasizing the mutuality of their obligations, remarks that

"N'encor ne cuit que je vos aie / randu ce que ja vos devoie" (6699 ff.). Or, in Cligés, Arthur praises Alexander for having captured four traitorous men ("Amis, dist il, molt vos vi hier / Bel assaillir et bel desfandre: / Le guerredon vos an doi randre," 1436-38) and rewards him appropriately. Alexander's first great chivalric deed brings honor to Arthur's court and thus requires recompense. It is significant that so often the verbs devoir and rendre accompany the word guerredon. Or yet another instance is the adventure of Cadoc de Cabruel and the two giants in Erec et Enide. The much relieved damsel, friend of Cadoc, expresses her gratitude for Erec's courteous and heroic act:

Sire, bien nos devez avoir
andeus conquis et moi et lui;
vostre devons estre anbedui
por vos servir et enorer.
Mes qui porroit guerredoner
ceste desserte nes demie? (4526-31)

But Erec asks only that the damsel go with Cadoc to the Arthurian court to furnish the king with an account of Erec's valor. This request is made in the hope that it will improve his favor vis-à-vis Arthur and his knights and obliterate his reputation of recreantise.

Rarely (perhaps never) does the "gift" returned take the same form as the "gift" given. One may be in the form of material goods whereas the other is a type of favor, intangible but equally valuable. To return to the idea of largesse, it seems reasonable to conclude that this great medieval virtue is more easily applicable to the don than the guerredon. A gift that is expected can reflect the giver's largesse only in its excessiveness, while an unexpected gift demonstrates largesse d'esprit, a true generosity in its mere of-

fering and not evaluated solely by its magnitude. But Mauss's arguments convince us that there is no pure and simple don; the gift represents an element in a system of exchange.

Mauss provides us with a very appealing explanation of this phenomenon of obligation in gift-giving. He says that the thing transmitted has a soul, is from the soul. Therefore, presenting something to someone is, in essence, presenting something of oneself:

Dans ce système d'idées, il faut rendre: à autrui ce qui est en réalité parcelle de sa nature et substance; car, accepter quelque chose de quelqu'un, c'est accepter quelque chose de son essence spirituelle, de son âme; la conservation de cette chose serait dangereuse et mortelle et cela non pas simplement parce qu'elle serait illicite, mais aussi parce que cette chose qui vient de la personne, non seulement moralement, mais physiquement et spirituellement, cette essence, cette nourriture, etc., donne prise magique et religieuse sur vous. Enfin, cette chose donnée n'est pas chose inerte.⁹

The structural relations of gift-giving which lie, latent, in the texts of Chrétien de Troyes offer further evidence of Mauss's principles. These structures found to be inherent in early societies seem to function similarly in this twelfth-century diegetic world. We can surely appreciate the cogency of this ideological system and value its applicability to Chrétien's don-guerredon patterns briefly reviewed here.

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NOTES

¹ Chrétien de Troyes, Cligés, ed. Alexandre Micha, Classiques Français du Moyen Age, Vol. 84 (Paris: Champion, 1970). All subsequent quotations from the romances of Chrétien de Troyes refer to the editions of CFMA.

² Marian P. Whitney, "Queen of Medieval Virtues: Largesse," in Vassar Medieval Studies, ed. Christabel F. Fiske (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), p. 190.

³ Whitney, p. 194.

⁴ W.T.H. Jackson, "The nature of Romance," Yale French Studies, 51 (September 1974), 18.

⁵ Jackson, p. 24.

⁶ Marcel Mauss, Sociologie et anthropologie (Paris: PUF, 1973), pp. 146-47.

⁷ Mauss, p. 151.

⁸ Peter Haidu, Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes (Geneva: Droz, 1968), p. 69.

⁹ Mauss, p. 161.

