The Ideal of Friendship in *Amis and Amiloun*

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**Abstract:** The Middle English romance *Amis and Amilon* propounds an aspirational message for its audience that being *hend* (noble) and *trew* leads to both an earthly and a heavenly reward: lasting companionship. One must be a true friend and be completely loyal to one’s companion in all circumstances. Friendship is described as a sacred bond in the same terms as marriage, although marriage is shown to be secondary to it: the wife’s role is to support her husband and his sworn brother. Those who oppose this relationship or seek to thwart or supplant it are described in the strongest terms as treacherous, envious, and even evil. True friendship thus becomes an absolute good, and loyalty to it a measure of goodness. This article foregrounds the romance’s negotiation of religious and secular bonds and, in contrast to other critical interpretations of the text, argues that its dynamic may be most appropriately read in the light of contemporary theologies of friendship, particularly those of Aelred of Rievaulx and Richard de Saint-Victor.

**Keywords:** romance, friendship, relationships, sexuality, Aelred, Richard de Saint-Victor

**Introduction**

The story of supremely loyal friendship contained in the Middle English romance *Amis and Amiloun* is one of the most popular in later medieval literature. Over thirty different versions survive in practically every European language, including Old French, Anglo-Norman, Latin, Old Icelandic, Middle Welsh, Middle High Dutch and German, and Medieval Spanish. Its focus (in all versions) is loyalty and devotion between two individuals that is so intense as to subordinate all other ties and duties to itself, whether familial, marital, or, in some versions, even religious. Indeed, the very names of the characters signal the centrality of friendship to the story (cf. OF/AN *ami* ‘friend’). Today such an intense relationship is commonly associated with the tropes of romantic love, which is usually represented as being primarily motivated by desire for, or experience of, sexual union. The *Amis and Amiloun* story, however, builds on concepts of Aristotelian and Platonic love, as these were received (and modified) by the church fathers and

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1 For a comprehensive list of all known versions, see the Appendix of Winst, *Amicus und Amelius*. Winst also provides an exhaustive bibliography.

2 The point is commonplace in criticism; for a discussion of the semantic range of *ami*, see Legros, ‘*Ami et Amile*’, p. 115.
other writers — ideas of the friend as a second self, or of friends as one soul in two bodies, and of friendship as a means to the virtuous life.3

There are four manuscripts of the Middle English text, of which the earliest is the Auchinleck manuscript and which is held in the National Library of Scotland (NLS Adv MS 19.2.1). It is dated to around 1330, but its text may go back to an English redaction from the later thirteenth century. It lacks the start and end of the romance, but these can be supplied from the Egerton manuscript version (British Library MS Egerton 2862).4 Critical discussions of Amis and Amiloun have tended to revolve around a set of issues including genre (whether it is romance or hagiography), religion (the role of God and angels in the plot), morality (the justice of the trial by combat, and leprosy as a punishment or test), gender (the role of the protagonists’ wives), and sexuality and affect (the nature of the bond between the two men). Although this article touches on many of these issues, it concentrates on the text’s attitude to Amis and Amiloun’s relationship.

A close reading of key passages shows that the Middle English romance propounds an aspirational message for its audience that being hend (noble) and trew leads to both an earthly and a heavenly reward: lasting companionship. To be hend and trew, one must be a true friend and be completely loyal to one’s companion in all circumstances. Friendship is described as a sacred bond in the same terms as marriage, although marriage is shown to be secondary to it: the wife’s role is to support her husband and his sworn brother. Those who oppose this relationship or seek to thwart or supplant it are described in the strongest terms as treacherous, envious, and even evil. True friendship thus becomes an absolute good, and loyalty to it a measure of goodness. As such, it is important to assess the romance’s negotiation of religious and secular bonds and it is argued below that it is most appropriate to read the text in the light of contemporary theologies of friendship, particularly those of Aelred of Rievaulx and Richard de Saint-Victor.

Before embarking on the analysis, however, it may be worth briefly summarizing the plot for the benefit of those readers unfamiliar with the romance. Two children are born on the same day to different parents but happen to be identical in appearance and as youths vow to be sworn brothers for life. They are given high-ranking positions in a ducal court, but Amiloun leaves to take over his ancestral lands when his father dies and once there he takes a wife. Before he leaves he has two golden goblets made and gives one to Amis. At court an evil steward tries to persuade Amis to swear friendship to him but Amis remains loyal to Amiloun and rejects the offer, earning him the steward’s enmity. The duke’s daughter, Belisaunt, falls in love with Amis and persuades him to sleep with her. The steward spies on them and betrays Amis to the duke, who sentences him to death unless he can prove his innocence via trial by combat with the steward. Since Amis is of course not innocent he swaps places with Amiloun, who can legitimately claim that he has not slept with Belisaunt and thus wins the combat. Meanwhile Amis poses as Amiloun and runs his household; at night he lays a sword in the bed between him and his friend’s wife, a traditional romance motif which confuses her but impresses Amiloun with his loyalty. The friends swap roles again and Amis gets married to Belisaunt, but Amiloun contracts leprosy and is mistreated and driven out by his wife. Eventually he becomes a beggar with no support except from his nephew, known variously as Oweys, Owain, and Amoraunt, who helps him to travel around the country. As a last resort they go to Amis’s court but Amiloun refuses to burden his friend and conceals his

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3 These concepts are discussed in much of the work on the romance, but for a more general study, see Hyatte, The Arts of Friendship.
4 For extended discussion of the extant manuscripts, see Winst, Amicus und Amelius, and Amis and Amiloun, ed. by Leach.
identity. Fortunately, Amis recognizes the golden goblet and is overjoyed to be reunited with his sworn brother. He and his wife take Amis into their loving care. A year later an angel appears and reveals that Amiloun can be cured if Amis will bathe him in the blood of his two young sons. Amis does so, Amiloun is cured, and the children are miraculously resurrected. Amiloun punishes his estranged wife and Amoraunt replaces her as ruler. The two friends live together from then on and found an abbey where monks are to sing for their souls, and where they die on the same day. They are buried in the same grave and thereafter enjoy the bliss of heaven forever more.

Two Knights ‘hend’ and ‘trew’

Amis and Amiloun begins with the lines ‘For goddes love in trinyte | Al þat ben hend herkeniþ to me, | I pray yow, par amoure’ (1‒3). We shall return to this invocation of the Trinity later, since the romance’s ending shows this conventional appeal to have more force than might at first seem to be the case. However, at this point the salient word is ‘hend’, which can mean ‘close at hand’ but is also an adjective with positive meanings in the semantic field of graciousness, courtesy, nobility. To ask that the audience listen, and to flatter them, is of course also conventional in romances. Nevertheless, this is actually the first of over seventy occurrences of this adjective. We are told, for instance, that the protagonists’ fathers were ‘barons hende’ (7, 28, 112), that their mothers were also ‘hend’ (31), and that they themselves as children were ‘good and hend’ (16, 51, 95, 133, 158). It is easy to dismiss repetition in romance as a function of a minstrel’s verbal poverty or of the exigencies of oral extemporization, but the repetition of this and other key terms seems in fact to be insistent and meaningful in this particular romance. The word ‘hend’ and other key terms like ‘frend’ and ‘trew’ or ‘trouþ’ cluster around the beginning and end of the romance, and thereby set up a paradigm which the audience should take as exemplary.

In the second and third stanzas we are told that the protagonists are friends from childhood, ‘how yong þei becom frend’ (17), and that they have good and noble qualities, ‘þey were good and hend’ (16). However, this is immediately put in the context of the court, ‘In cort þere þey were’ (18), and, although critics usually place the emphasis here on their personal bond, ‘how þey were trouþ plyght’ (20), this line is exactly parallel to the information about their social status: they ‘were made knyght’ (19), so their social standing is made of equal importance. In discussing their origins (22‒30), the narrator emphasizes the nobility of their fathers and mothers (both are hend,
28 and 31) and speaks as if the two sets of parents are also interchangeable: ‘Two barouns hend wonyd in lond | And had two ladyes free to fond’.  

The line ‘how þey were trouþ plyght’ has occasioned much comment, given the phrase’s association with the marriage ceremony. Indeed, John Ford calls it ‘a term generally used in reference to a couple’s pledge to marry’, and remarks that the oaths he discusses in both Amis and Amiloun and Athelston ‘approach marriage vows in their complexity and wording’. However, Ford misleadingly attributes precedence to marriage, as though this were historically the primary relationship, and friendship usually secondary except in this romance. In fact the situation is much more complex than this would suggest, and the evidence adduced by scholars such as Alan Bray and Allan Tulchin shows that ‘marriage-like’ same-sex relationships are not modelled on marriage (quite the contrary), nor always or necessarily secondary to it.

In Amis and Amiloun, certainly, the friends’ bond is pre-eminent over all others, including their respective marriages. The end of the second stanza quoted above emphasizes from the very start of the romance that these two brave and noble youths ‘trew weren in al þing’ (34). What is more, it is for this reason (‘þerfore’), that Jesus rewards them. It is not until the end of the romance, however, that it becomes clear what their reward is. Beforehand the body of the romance is concerned with exploring the nature of the knights’ relationship with each other and with wives and rivals. These key relationships in the text unpick further surprising aspects of its model of friendship, which contextualize the beginning and end of the poem.

**Amis and Amiloun’s Relationship**

As we have seen, John Ford consistently sees the relationship central to Amis and Amiloun as being ‘almost’ like a marriage, and, although this essentializes marriage and underestimates the importance and indeed the primacy of same-sex formal bonds in medieval contexts, it is easy to

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8 There is some difficulty in interpreting line 14, where kynd could mean either ‘kindred’ or ‘nature’. In line with the first option, Weston translates ‘how their kinsmen knew them not’, and Kölb ing gives as a possibility ‘von wie unbekannter abkunft sie waren’ (of what unknown origin they were), both of which, however, seem unlikely given the insistence in line 8 that their fathers were ‘Lordinges com of grete kynde’ (Weston cited by Leach, Amis and Amiloun, ed. by Leach, p. 113; Amis and Amiloun, ed. by Kölb ing, p. 231). Kölb ing in fact prefers the second option, translating ‘wie ungewöhnlich sie in ihrem character waren’ (how unusual they were in character) and taking it to refer to their exceptional loyalty and, similarly, Fellows tentatively translates ‘how they were without equal (?)’ (Fellows, Of Love and Chivalry, p. 73). The translation preferred by Leach, following Rickert, is ‘how they were not kin’, although he remarks ‘[the line] seems rather pointless’ (Leach, Amis and Amiloun, p. 113; Amis and Amiloun, trans. by Rickert, p. 2: ‘how they were nought akin’). This judgement seems less than perceptive, however, since part of what is remarkable about the protagonists’ bond is that its strength does not depend on any blood-tie. It may be that the ambiguity of ‘kynd’ is in fact apposite here, since the romance as a whole explores the nature and importance of this non-kin relationship, as we shall see.


10 The mistake is commonly made, along with the equally erroneous assumption that medieval marriages were (like most modern Western ones) usually motivated by love rather than diplomacy or advantage.

11 See Alan Bray, The Friend, and Tulchin, ‘Same-Sex Couples Creating Households in Old Regime France’. It is not possible to summarize the extensive debate on medieval friendship here, but see initially the Introduction to Clark, Between Medieval Men, and Jaeger, Ennobling Love.

12 He is characterized in semi-feudal terms as the ‘heuyn-king’ (35), comparing him with the earthly ruler Amis and Amiloun serve and again setting up a correspondence between earthly and heavenly experience.
see why. We are told early on in the romance that they love each other as youths more than any other: ‘Bitvix hem tvai, of blod and bon, | Trewer loue nas neuer non, | In gest as so we rede’ (142–44). Their true love is then formalized by a solemn oath:

Trewþes to-gider þai gun plight,
While þai might liue and stond
þat boþe bi day and bi night,
In wele and wo, in wrong and right,
þat þai schuld frely fond
To hold to-gider at eueri nede,
In word, in werk, in wille, in dede,
Where þat þai were in lond,
Fro þat day forward neuer mo
Failen oþer for wele no wo:
Per-to þai held vp her hond. (145‒56)

It is an oath that covers every eventuality in terms of time, place, and circumstance, and it is sealed by them holding up their hands, as in any solemn vow. What is more, the oath is reiterated when Amiloun leaves to take possession of his lands after the death of his parents. Amiloun says:

‘Broþer, as we er trewþe-plight
Boþe wiþ word and dede,
Fro þis day forward neuer mo
To faily oþer for wele no wo,
To help him at his nede,
Broþer, be now trewe to me,
and y schal ben as trewe to þe,
Also god me spede!’ (293‒300)

The emphasis is clearly on ‘trewþe’ and the men’s ‘trewþe-plight’, the phrase used of their relationship in both passages (and also later in line 1013). Significantly, however, this phrase is also used of two other (potential) relationships — the one Amis has with Belisaunt, his wife, and the one offered to him by the false steward. The repeated use of this phrase asks us to contrast the primary relationship of the friends with the other two bonds — one secondary but accepted, the other threatening and rejected.

**Amis and Belisaunt’s Relationship**

Belisaunt embodies the trope of the ‘wooing woman’ in this romance; she tells Amis her heart is set on him and she cannot live without him. She then proposes a vow similar to that sworn by the two men:

‘Plight me þi trewþe þou schalt be trewe
and chaunge me for no new,
þat in þis world is born,

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Amis is reluctant to comply at first, saying he is not worthy of his lord’s daughter, being without land and property, and does not want to dishonour him (595–608). However, when Belisaunt insults and threatens him, Amis understands that he has no choice: ‘Better were to graunt hir asking | ṭan his liif for to spille’ (650–51). He promises to ‘graunt [hir] wille’ (660) in a week’s time, but she insists on something more formal:

‘Þi treuþe anon þou schalt me plight,
Astow art trewe gentil knight,
Þou schalt hold þat day’.
He graunted hir hir wil þo,
And plight hem trewþes boþe to,
And seþþen kist þo tvai. (664‒69; cf. 738)

The insistent repetition of ‘treuþe’ and ‘plight’ links and contrasts the relationship between Amis and Amiloun and Amis and Belisaunt: the former is free and unproblematic, the latter is constrained and socially unacceptable at this point. We shall return to it shortly.

**Amis and Steward’s Relationship**

It is not just the male-male, male-female relationships which are contrasted by this means, however. The false steward, too, seeks to form a formal bond with Amis, and this subplot is intertwined with the Amis and Belisaunt subplot.

We are told from the outset of his evil character: ‘euer he proued wiþ niþe and ond | For to haue brought hem boþe to schond | Wip gile and trecherie’ (208‒10). His ascribed motivation is ‘gret envie’ (213) because they were ‘so gode and hende, | and for þe douke was so wele her frende’ (211‒12). The steward’s enmity is all the more stark because of its contrast with the love felt for them by the people at large: ‘Al þat hem seighe wiþ word and þought, | Hem loued mani a man’ (197‒98).

We are reminded of the steward’s evil nature just before he proffers friendship to Amis (344–48).

The treacherous steward is of course a stock character in many romances, but here his treachery takes the form of an attempt to supplant Amiloun in Amis’s affections. He first sympathizes with Amis’s sorrow at his friend’s absence, but then offers himself as a replacement: ‘Y schal þe be a better frende | ṭan euer yete was he’ (359‒60). He goes on:

‘Sir Amis’, he seyd, ‘do bi mi red,
And swere ous boþe broþeredhed

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15 She insults him by implying that, if he does not want her, he is not a knight but a cleric (616‒21), and threatens to get him killed by ripping her clothes and claiming he has raped her (631–36).

16 On the possibility that Belisaunt’s name was chosen so that the three protagonists’ initials would read ‘A, A and B […] same, same, and different’, see Delany, ‘A, A and B’, p. 63.

17 This is very different from the Anglo-Norman version, where others are jealous and envious of them too. For further discussion of the differences, see *Ami and Amile*, trans. by Rosenberg and Danon; Calin, *The Epic Quest*, pp. 59–116; Dannenbaum, ‘Insular Tradition’, pp. 611–22.
And plight we our trewþes to;
Be trewe to me in word and dede,
And y schal, so god me spede,
Be trewe to þe also.’ (361‒66)

The troth-plighting terminology parallels that in both of Amis’s other relationships, and the steward even takes over the phrase ‘in word and dede’, which recalls lines 152 and 294. However, although Amis felt able to take on a relationship with a woman as well as with Amiloun, he refuses the steward’s suggestion utterly:

Sir Amis answerd, ‘Mi treuþe y plight
To sir Amiloun, þe gentil knight,
Pei he be went me fro.
Whiles þat y may gon and speke,
Y no schal never mi treuþe breke,
Noþer for wele no wo.
For bi the treuþe that god me sende,
Ichaue him founde so gode and kende,
Seþþen that y first him knewe,
Where so he in warld wende,
Y schal be to him trewe;
And yif y were now forsworn
And breke mi treuþe, y were forlorn,
Wel sore it schuld me rewe.
Gete me frendes whare y may,
Y no schal neuer bi night no day
Chaunge him for no newe.’

The repeated emphasis here on ‘treuþe’ is again striking, the nominal or adjectival form being employed six times in just a few lines, and it is clear that Amis’s friendship with Amiloun is a permanent and unbreakable relationship. Belisaunt asks a reluctant Amis to ‘chaunge [hir] for no new’ (584), but Amis uses the phrase of Amiloun instead. Whatever other lesser bonds Amis may make in his lifetime, he has only one true friend.

The treacherous steward is jealous of Amis’ relationship with Amiloun and with Belisaunt (700‒08). However, neither Amiloun nor Belisaunt is ever said to be jealous of the other. What is more, the relationship with Amiloun clearly takes precedence over the marital bond, and Belisaunt fully accepts this. When Amis reveals to her that he has killed their children in order to heal Amiloun’s leprosy, she does not chastise him or question his actions. Instead, she comforts him and dismisses the loss of the children: ‘God may sende ous childer mo, | Of hem haue þou no care!’ (2393‒94), echoing Amis’s own thoughts (2336‒37).18 Furthermore, she sees her own life as secondary to his sworn brother’s: ‘Yif it ware at min hert rote, | For to bring þi broþer bote, | My lyf y wold not spare’ (2395‒96).

18 In its privileging of friendship over other intimate ties, this motif is, of course, reminiscent of Arthur’s comment on the loss of Guenevere in Malory’s Morte Darthur: ‘much more am I sorrier for my good knights’ loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enough, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company’ (Le Morte Darthur, ed. by Cooper XX. 9, p. 481). On the child sacrifice, however, see Clifton, ‘The Function of Childhood in Amis and Amiloun’.
Belisaunt is clearly depicted as following the correct role for a wife, from the narrator’s point of view, in contrast to Amiloun’s wife, who repudiates and exiles her leprous husband and is labelled by the narrator as ‘wicked and schrewed’ (1561) for her actions. Indeed, when Amiloun has his wife locked up to be fed on bread and water until her death, the narrator comments: ‘Who þerof rought, he was a queede [scoundrel]!’ (2483). She is also depicted as hostile to the friendship earlier on when Amiloun reveals that he swapped identities with Amis and slew the steward — her response is to scold him, rather than take his part and support his loyalty to his friend (1489–91). The two wives represent the correct and inappropriate ways for women to respond to their husbands’ friendships, but there is never any question that marriage should interrupt or supersede friendship.

Friendship is Questioned

There is only one occasion where it would at first appear that friendship is not the all-conquering, steadfast bond it has so far proved to be, and that is in the heavenly warning that Amiloun receives before he is struck down with leprosy. Unlike other versions such as the Anglo-Norman one, where the disease is depicted as a consequence of the false marriage he contracts with Belisaunt on Amis’s behalf, here the disease is described as an eventour (adventure) (1256), implying a chance for Amiloun to demonstrate his knightly character in some test or trial. He is informed, however, that he will be deserted by all his former supporters: ‘Þo þat be þine best frende | Schal be þi most fon’ (1268–69).

Amiloun is sensible of the gravity of his situation (1273–78), but is adamant that he will not let his ‘broþer go to schame’ (1280) and that ‘to hold mi treuþe schal y nought spare, | Lete god don alle his wille’ (1283–84). Although Amis benefits from his sworn brother’s prowess, gaining a wife, lands, and children, the narrative soon passes on to the ‘sorwe’ that Amiloun ‘hadde for his treuþe’ (1547) as the prophecy comes to pass:

For al þat were his best frende,  
And nameliche al his riche kende,  
Bicom his most fon […]  
A frendeleser man þan he was  
Men nist no-whar non. (1552–54, 1559–60)

It would seem from this description that Amis might be included in this group of faithless friends, but he is in fact not given the opportunity to forsake his sworn brother, since he does not discover Amiloun’s leprous state until the latter is driven to his last resort and allows his nephew to take him to Amis’s court. When Amis eventually does discover his friend’s situation, through the device of the twin goblets with which they were presented at their baptism, he proves truer than

19 The treatment of wives here clearly fits into the same context as literary narratives such as Chaucer’s Prudence and Constance, and the general patristic tradition in which marriage is permissible but a lesser good than celibacy, and in which wives must be subservient to husbands.


21 Presumably the idea is that Amiloun would not wish to shame his friend by association with him, since he will not allow anyone to know his name.
all of Amiloun’s kin and lesser friends. He laments heavily, swoons, begs him for forgiveness for causing his woe, kisses, and embraces his friend (2115‒36). What is more, when he reveals Amiloun’s identity to his wife, she does the same, and they care for him for a year, sharing everything they have with him, including their bedchamber (2149‒81).

Amiloun’s friends, then, pale into insignificance next to his true friend, and a distinction is thus drawn between quotidian friendship and the rarer bond between sworn brothers, which surpasses any other affiliation, including blood kinship and marriage.

Friendship in Defiance of God?

There is, however, a further question we might ask of the romance, returning to the religious element of the text. If Amis and Amiloun’s relationship transcends any other earthly tie, does it also therefore supersede the bond between God and man? This might in fact seem to be the case from Amiloun’s response to the divine warning about the consequences of fighting in Amis’s stead. He says ‘for drede of care | To hold mi treuþe schal y nought spare, | Lete god don alle his wille’ (1282‒84). One could read this as defiant: ‘Let God do whatever he wants, I am not going to budge’. However, the context of the romance as a whole would suggest a more concessive reading that both asserts Amiloun’s steadfast faithfulness and also submits to God’s will: ‘I will be faithful even if it is God’s will that I suffer for it’. When Amiloun’s wife drives him out from his own court, for instance, we are told ‘To God of heven he made his mon, | And thonked him of al his sond’ (1619‒20). Moreover, the word that most often characterizes the relationship between Amis and Amiloun, *treuþe*, is also seen as something that comes from God, as for instance when Amis swears ‘bi þe treuþe þat God me sende’ (373), and the pair often commend themselves to God, or invoke God or Jesus in their promises of loyalty (300, 321, etc.). The fight against the steward itself, which has seemed morally dubious to some modern readers, is provided with two means of justification. First of all, we are told that everyone (‘yong and old’, 1300) prays to God that Amiloun will win against the steward (1300‒02), and that they thank God when he does (1402‒04). This mitigates any idea that Amiloun is defying God by choosing to fight on Amis’s behalf. Secondly, the other potential criticism of this act, that the steward is strictly speaking in the right, is disarmed by its being placed in the mouth of Amiloun’s wife. She is unambiguously designated as an evil character, so although she criticizes him for killing ‘a gentil knight’ (1493), we dismiss it because she is described as ‘wicked and schrewed’ (1561). Furthermore, the loss of the steward himself is minimized because from the start he is associated with ‘niþ and onde’ (208, 347), ‘gile and trecherie’ (210).

Amiloun’s leprosy is never explicitly depicted as a punishment from God for disobedience, but rather seems to be a trial of the same order as the biblical tribulations of Job. The Middle English version has an expanded emphasis on Amiloun’s sufferings as compared to the Anglo-Norman version; it devotes several stanzas to his weary wanderings with his nephew, as they traverse the country begging for food and drink until Amiloun can go no further (1681‒1752).

At the end of the romance, however, it becomes still clearer that Amis and Amiloun’s devoted friendship is not at odds with the divine plan. After the dramatic dénouement of the leprosy plot, where Amis slits his children’s throats to provide the blood which will cure his friend and they are restored to life through God’s grace, Amiloun acts equally dramatically to drive out his estranged wife’s new husband and retinue and wall her up in a prison to be fed bread and water until she dies. It is at this point that Amiloun reveals that his intention is not to return to rule his
lands, but rather to place his young kinsman Owain (also known as Oweys and Amoraunt) in
possession of his property in the presence of his peers who, like him, are ‘feire and hende’ (2475). We are made aware that Owain is an appropriate heir, because he is described as ‘trew and kynde’ (2478) and is therefore presumably of the same character as the two friends, and we shall return to his significance later. We have been told how Amiloun’s wife has been dispatched, but we hear no more of Amis’s wife (or children): they simply vanish from the plot. Rather, we are told that the two friends live their lives together joyfully and without strife, as monks in the abbey they have founded sing for their souls and those of their ancestors. As the companions were not separated in life, so they die on the same day and are laid in the same grave, and death is not the end of their union, for, in explicit recognition of their ‘trewþ and her godhede’, they receive the reward of which the start of the romance spoke: namely, they share the ‘blisse of heuyn [...] | That lasteþ euer moo’ (2507‒08). Friendship of this kind therefore appears to be ideal and to have a close connection to the divine, and its exact relation requires further exploration.

**Divine Friendship: Friendship and the Divine**

Many critics have noted the poem’s idealization of friendship, summed up in Susan Dannenbaum’s assertion that both the Anglo-Norman and Middle English romance ‘make of friendship the only absolute value, and require other values to arrange themselves subordinately as best they may’. A smaller number of critics have worried about the all-encompassing nature of Amis and Amiloun’s bond or identified a religious intensity in their friendship, like Ojars Kratins who sees the romance as ‘secular hagiography’. However, it is Jill Mann who has explored the chivalric-religious dimension most fully.

Mann notes ‘the yoking of Christianity and chivalry’ observable in most early versions (except Rodulfus) and views it as ‘the appropriation of religious imagery to enhance the mystique and prestige of the knightly class, rather than as a clumsy attempt to bring an essentially chivalric narrative within the bounds of religion’. It seems that this last clause represents Mann’s rejection of Ojars Kratins’s reading of the Middle English version as a ‘secular legend [which] attempts to interpret the story within a framework of faith’. For Mann, the romance’s images and motifs fuse chivalry and Christianity ‘in a way that makes the romantic/hagiographic distinction meaningless’. Mann demonstrates the use of several of the poem’s central motifs in explicitly religious contexts in the B-text of *Piers Plowman* and in John Bromyard’s *Summa predicantium*: ‘blood brotherhood, the disguised duel, the healing bath of blood’. She sees the motifs as serving a different function in the different texts:

In *Piers Plowman*, we see religious poetry enriched by romance motifs. In *Amis and Amiloun*, we see the obverse: romance is enriched by religious motifs which invest knighthood with a sacral

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22 In some versions of the narrative they are initially separated, but a miracle occurs and they are discovered in the same grave; see ‘Life of the Dear Friends Amicus and Amelius’, trans. by Kuefler.
25 Mann, ‘Messianic Chivalry’, p. 139.
27 Mann, ‘Messianic Chivalry’, p. 145.
28 Mann, ‘Messianic Chivalry’, p. 149.
aura. To put it in its simplest form: in *Piers Plowman*, we see Christ as a knight, while in *Amis and Amiloun* we see the knight as Christ.\textsuperscript{29}

In my reading, however, *Amis and Amiloun* evinces a more radical fusing of chivalry and romance than Mann envisages. Rather than seeing the companions as exemplars of ‘messianic chivalry’, if we place the narrative within the context of contemporary religious discourse on friendship, we can see their relationship as an exemplary image of divine relationality and an anticipation of heavenly joy. Effectively it becomes a sacrament, in the way marriage is often described, then and now, resting on the idea that marriage images the love between Christ and the Church.\textsuperscript{30} Viewed in this way, we need not join Mann in separating the ethics of the romance (‘knightly’) from its imagery (‘religious’).\textsuperscript{31} Rather, the knights’ earthly relationship represents an (imperfect) image of the (perfect) heavenly consummation. The final emphasis in this text is not on the miracles associated with the friends’ bodies in some versions (as in the Anglo-Norman text, lines 1247‒48), but this is not because the Middle English author is only interested in the secular, but rather because something more complex is at work in the Middle English version. As we saw earlier, the text starts with the phrase ‘For goddes loue in trinyte’ and this invocation of the Trinity seems less otiose and conventional when placed into the context of the end of the romance. It emphasizes that God himself is constituted in a loving companionship that is both multiple but also a unity, both self and other. The friends are not merely a cypher for the Trinity, but they both image the Trinity invoked at the start of the text and also anticipate the perfected state of their companionship described at the end of the romance, where neither illness nor tribulation can separate them.

Before elaborating on contemporary theologies of friendship, though, we must discuss the fact that, in view of its exclusivity and intensity, a number of critics have noted the queer potential in *Amis and Amiloun’s* relationship. Tison Pugh, Elizabeth Frager, and Sheila Delany have all discussed the romance in the context of same-sex unions, exploring the homoerotic aspects of the companions’ bond. Both Pugh and Frager, however, see the knights’ deaths as negating or containing the queer potential of their union. Pugh argues that

> Queer brotherhood so upsets the ideological force of heterosexuality that it must re-empower itself by destroying not only the text’s villains, but its queer protagonists also. Amis and Amiloun achieve sexual normativity in death, but only when their queer hermaphroditism is stripped as they enter the grave.\textsuperscript{32}

Frager agrees that ‘death is the sole condition which allows for such a union. Only in the extremity of death is the threat of sodomitical sin removed; only in a shared burial can the men lie together in peace’.\textsuperscript{33}

However, in my view, Pugh and Frager unhelpfully delimit the ‘queer’ potential of the union to its sexual aspect.\textsuperscript{34} It may be that it is not so much the homoeroticism of the knights’ bond

\textsuperscript{29} Mann, ‘Messianic Chivalry’, p. 149.

\textsuperscript{30} Ephesians 5. 25‒32; it is notably developed in the thought of Origen and Jerome; cf. §§1604, 1616‒17, 1660 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

\textsuperscript{31} Mann, ‘Messianic Chivalry’, p. 155.

\textsuperscript{32} Pugh, *Sexuality and its Queer Discontents*, p. 119; cf. p. 103.


\textsuperscript{34} Compare Winst, *Amicus und Amelius*, pp. 426‒27. Compare also Virginia Burrus’s point that the word ‘queer’ is as applicable to asceticism as to non-heteronormative sexual acts, thus queerness is not synonymous with homoeroticism; Burrus, ‘Queer Father: Gregory of Nyssa and the Subversion of Identity’, p. 147.
that is subversive, as the fact that their relationship is validated over and against marriage as both exemplary and an appropriate image of the divine relationality inherent in the Trinity. Moreover, its potential is explicitly not contained by death. The orthodox view of marriage is that it ends in the grave, resting on the biblical teaching that in heaven the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage.\textsuperscript{35} However, friendship was thought to continue into the heavenly realm.\textsuperscript{36} This is reflected in earlier medieval lyrics where we find the conviction of Alcuin (c. 735–804) that ‘The blessed hall of heaven never separates friends’,\textsuperscript{37} and the promise of Hrabanus Maurus (776–856) to Abbot Grimold of St Gall:

\begin{quote}
Earth’s self shall go and the swift wheel of heaven
Perish and pass, before our love shall cease.
Do but remember me, as I do thee,
And God, who brought us on this earth together
Bring us together to his house of heaven.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Certainly, the Middle English poem itself is clear that Amis and Amiloun will enjoy life together forever in heaven, and the mention of ‘domesday’ (2501) reminds us of the orthodox Christian belief in the resurrection of the body in the last days and in a continued (albeit transformed) physical existence in heaven.\textsuperscript{39} Viewed from a contemporary religious perspective, then, the men’s union is both eternal and physical. Frager may see the romance’s invocation of the ‘blisse of heuyn’ as ‘a trite formula’ (p. 5), but it would hardly come across as such to a Christian audience which believed that death is not the end. As Amy Hollywood emphasizes in her study of the medieval beguines, ‘religious’ issues like one’s ‘relationship to the divine’ are sometimes dismissed by scholars, but in the Middle Ages these issues, and the language and images used to explore them, were central to many people’s lives.\textsuperscript{40} As we shall see, reading the romance in the light of religious discourse on friendship allows Amis and Amiloun’s unbreakable bond to persist as simultaneously image and reality, secular and divine.

Delany is more interested in the generic and historical context of the poem. Adducing John Boswell’s work on paired male saints, she suggests that the similar narrative elements in Amis and Amiloun ‘may be a way of representing same-sex union in the high Middle Ages’.\textsuperscript{41} She contrasts the ‘heavily ecclesiasticised’ chanson de geste version and argues that ‘the English version, in effacing clerics, minimising marriage, and sanctifying the male couple, magnifies the homosocial and potentially homoerotic dimension’.\textsuperscript{42} Delany finally explores the parallels with Edward II and Piers Gaveston’s relationship and wonders whether ‘distinctive features of their story have been added to a tale which might well already have been modeled on the real relationship of two

\textsuperscript{35} Matthew 22. 30; adduced most notably in Jerome’s Against Jovinian §36.
\textsuperscript{38} Translated in Mediaeval Latin Lyrics, ed. and trans. by Waddell, p. 109 (Latin original on facing-page).
\textsuperscript{39} See the Introduction and articles in Imagining Heaven in the Middle Ages, ed. by Emerson and Feiss, and esp. pp. xiv–xv. Compare Winst, Amicus und Amelius, p. 433.
\textsuperscript{40} Hollywood, ‘Queering the Beguines’, p. 164.
\textsuperscript{41} Delany, ‘A, A and B’, p. 70.
noblemen’.

However, the specific similarities she adduces are not striking given that several of them are found in older versions of the story.

In broader terms, though, the historical context of the decades before the composition of the Auchinleck manuscript in c. 1330 is clearly relevant. Gaveston was executed in 1312, but Edward’s kingship continued to be debated along with his relationship with ‘favourites’, especially Hugh Despenser the Younger, and the king’s death in 1327 had a lasting effect on both politics and culture. This parallel historical and political context contemporary with the Auchinleck manuscript does therefore indicate an environment in which the nature and value of homosocial relationships are of interest to writers and readers. Moreover, the work done by Alan Bray demonstrates several other historical relationships where medieval knights entered into a sworn brotherhood that is described in sacramental terms.

Religious and Secular Love: The Theology of Friendship

Rather than seeing a conflict between religious and secular, then, in the way that some critics do in the romance, it is argued here that we should see one as a reflex of the other. The start of the romance actually draws attention to the possibility of slippage between the two by using in quick succession after the invocation of ‘goddes loue’ the phrase ‘par amoure’ (3). Here we have juxtaposed English and French terms, divine and human, religious and secular love. By the end of the romance it might seem that the latter has displaced the former, but the distinction seems rather to fall away if we contextualize it within contemporary theologies of friendship.

There is, of course, an extensive commentary on friendship and its subdivisions within the patristic tradition, most notably in the works of Augustine and Ambrose, but perhaps the most striking exploration is found within the writings of Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–67).

Aelred’s Theology of Friendship

Aelred of Rievaulx is known by the name of the abbey in Yorkshire over which he was abbot from 1147 until his death twenty years later. He wrote many works of history and devotion, but is now best known for his *Speculum caritatis* (Mirror of Charity), written at the request of Bernard of Clairvaux and in memory of two intimate friends, and *De spirituali amicitia* (On Spiritual Love).

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45 For recent discussions of Edward and his reign, see Dodd, ‘Parliament and Political Legitimacy in the Reign of Edward II’. On Marlowe’s *Edward II*, see initially my ‘Marlowe and Queer Theory’.
46 Bray, *Friend*, passim.
47 For detailed discussion of Aelred’s biography and works, see the Introduction to *Aelred of Rievaulx: Spiritual Friendship*, trans. by Braceland, ed. by Dutton; and *Spiritual Friendship*, trans. by Carmichael, chap. 3.
Friendship). Both these works concern the dangers and rewards of friendship, fusing classical and biblical ideas of friendship, recommending Christian caritas but also recognizing the importance of cherishing soulmates. At the end of the Speculum, for instance, Aelred includes an extended comment on the solatium ‘solace’ brought in life by having ‘quem tibi affectu quodam intimo ac sacratissimi amoris unire possis amplexu’ (someone whom you can unite to yourself with intimate affection), and he emphasizes Christ’s legitimation of such bonds via his relationship with ‘discipulus ille, quem amabat Iesus’ (the disciple whom Jesus loved).

De spirituali amicitia is a later and much more systematic exploration of this topic in the form of a Ciceronian dialogue, and Aelred’s persona and his interlocutor Ivo define and intensively examine spiritual friendship, its origins, and its characteristics. At the end of the text, Aelred famously considers the startling proposal that ‘Deus amicitia est’ (God is friendship). In its rewording of the Johannine pronouncement that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4.16), this is one of the most striking formulations of the patristic exploration of friendship’s potential to inculcate virtue and provide spiritual edification. Aelred shies away from stating it as incontrovertible fact, placing the phrase in the mouth of his character, Ivo. However, although Aelred’s persona within the text warns that the phrase lacks the authority of Scripture, this is most likely to represent caution in tampering with the words of the Bible so as not to risk censure for heterodoxy. Certainly, many modern scholars treat the ‘God is friendship’ comment as Aelredian, and medieval readers may well have done the same. Indeed, even Aelred’s persona (revising the words of 1 John 4:16) continues: ‘Quod tamen sequitur de caritate, amicitiae profecto dare non dubito, quoniam: Qui manet in amicitia, in Deo manet, et Deus in eo’ (But still what is true of caritas, I surely do not hesitate to grant to friendship […] whoever abides in friendship, abides in God, and God in them).

Much more could be said on other aspects of Aelred’s work, but we can see an even closer context in the work of Richard de Saint-Victor (d. 1173), who goes even further than Aelred’s statement in the Speculum caritatis that the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, constitutes their mutual love.

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49 For a summary of critical discussions of the Speculum caritatis (as well as a reading of the work as a model for the disruption of heteronormativity in small inclusive communities), see Córdova Quero, ‘Friendship with Benefits’. For a nuanced discussion of the question of Aelred’s sexuality, see Brian Patrick McGuire, Brother and Lover, pp. 149–58.

50 Aelred of Rievaulx, Speculum caritatis, ed. by Hoste and Talbot, III. 109 and 110; translations from Spiritual Friendship, trans. by Carmichael, pp. 78 and 79 respectively.

51 Aelred of Rievaulx, De spiritali amicitia, ed. by Hoste and Talbot, p. 69.

52 For discussion of the ‘God is Friendship’ question, see Braceland and Dutton, Aelred of Rievaulx, pp. 43–45.

53 Aelred of Rievaulx, De spiritali amicitia, t. 70, ed. by Hoste and Talbot, p. 301; Aelred of Rievaulx, Spiritual Friendship, trans. by Carmichael, p. 85.

Richard de Saint-Victor on Trinitarian Friendship

Richard de Saint-Victor bears the name of the Parisian abbey of which he was prior from 1162 until his death. Perhaps his most influential work is *De Trinitate*, an original and scholarly rationalization of the doctrine of the Trinity in which, like Aelred, he is heavily influenced by Ciceronian thought. Marilyn McCord Adams has read the work of both Aelred and Richard in order to ‘counterexample [the] presumption that the theological tradition is homogeneous’ on the subject of same-sex unions. She argues that Richard, particularly, ‘represented the Holy Trinity as a paradigm “same-sex” friendship’.

She follows closely Richard’s arguments that God the Father and God the Son represent equals in a loving relationship, and that ‘Divine Goodness does not consummate charity unless the two produce a third, a common love-object, so that they can share in loving the very same thing’. As Adams notes, although Richard accepts the designations of the Father and the Son, he considers calling the third person of the Trinity the ‘Grandson’, but rejects it because the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son equally: ‘Sed si non est Filii filius, nec Pater Filii erit ipsius avus, nec ipse nepos illius’ (However, if he is not the Son’s son, the Son’s Father will not be his grandfather, and he will not be his grandson). Instead, the term ‘Breath’, ‘Breathing’, or ‘Spirit’ of God is preferred (vi. 9) for this object of their common love (vi. 6), because he emanates from them both like a shared breath (vi. 10). Richard defines the Holy Spirit, therefore, as ‘igitur amor qui communis est amobus’ (this love [...] which both of them share).

Precisely this kind of theological context may explain why the role of Amiloun’s nephew Amoraunt is expanded by the Middle English writer, with a detailed description of their relationship and Amoraunt’s devoted care and refusal to desert Amiloun, summed up best in the lines ‘Ful trewe he was and kinde of blod, | And served his lord with mild mode, | Wald he nought wende oway’ (1846‒48).

Amoraunt serves Amiloun as a sort of surrogate son, indeed Amiloun calls him ‘leve sone’ (1873), and it has been suggested that he represents the fruit of Amis and Amiloun’s love. This certainly seems true in a figurative sense, since the same set of terms that are insistently repeated in association with Amis and Amiloun are also repeatedly applied to him. He is described as ‘trewe’ and ‘kinde of blod’ (1846), which repeats the information we are given when he is first introduced (1627). At this earlier juncture he is also termed ‘Wel curteys, hende and gode’ (1638), and, later, Amiloun also describes him as ‘hende and fre’ (1875). At the end of the romance, Amoraunt is again labelled as ‘trew and kynde’ (2478), and there are several other instances of him being called ‘trew’ (2000, 2003).

Moreover, the name he is most often given, Amoraunt, is obviously closely related to the Latin term for love (amor). Amoraunt is in the end awarded Amiloun’s lands and thus will continue the life and character modelled for him by his uncle, as befits someone of so similar a name. However, there is also a spiritual dimension to this character, since he is regularly associated with Christ and his love (1652–23, 1940–44) and with St John, the ‘disciple whom Jesus loved’ (1918, 1936). He may represent the love (amor) between Amis and Amiloun, then, but within the context of divine love explored above in Richard de Saint-Victor’s De Trinitate, thus strengthening the case for a Trinitarian dynamic in the romance. Amoraunt also reminds us that friendship, like marriage, can be productive and generative; that bonds of blood, marriage, and friendship are not mutually exclusive, irrespective of which one chooses to prioritize.

Both Aelred and Richard were of course being read during the thirteenth century, when the English version of the romance is most likely to have been composed, and thus may have provided a direct or indirect influence on the text, but since both were writing in Latin direct influence is impossible to demonstrate. However, seen in such a context, Amis and Amiloun in their ‘trew loue’ for one another, constitute a picture of God’s relationship with man, in the same way as marriage is seen as its reflection in Christian doctrine. However, we can go further than this, since (as Richard emphasizes) the triune God represents love in relationship, and therefore, in Aelredian terms, God is (the perfection of) friendship. Amis and Amiloun (and Amoraunt who is left behind on earth like the Holy Spirit) therefore also constitute an earthly image of the divine state.

To apply this approach to Amis and Amiloun, however, is not to recommend some Robertsonian vision of medieval literature, where the apparently secular turns out to embody religious doctrine if only the right key is applied, the more obscure the better. That implies a one-way hermeneutic, where the text’s surface and secular meaning gives way to its real and religious significance. On the contrary, in this text the secular and religious are fused — the religious implications of the men’s love do not cancel out its human dimension, but grant it extra significance. Amis and Amiloun’s relationship is an example of exceptional human friendship, noble and true, and also a model of God’s love for its audience to emulate. For Aelred and Richard, earthly friendship is superseded by the divine love it emulates and models, but in Amis and Amiloun, the friends’ bond is neither superseded by God nor contained by death. A romance is not, of course, a treatise, and the author does not expand on the implications of this textual dynamic: Amis and Amiloun’s primary aim is to entertain its audience with a gripping and eventful narrative, but its achievement is to combine that with a thoroughgoing exploration of friendship, secular and divine.

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62 He appears to have been named ‘Owain’ or ‘Oweys’ at birth, but to have been known as Amoraunt from the age of twelve, perhaps because of his close connection with his uncle (line 1637).

63 The proposed stemma of the extant English manuscripts in Amis and Amiloun, ed. by Leach, postulates an ultimate source in what Leach labels as Z, the ‘English redaction’ of a French original. Since Auchinleck is dated to c. 1330, and the closely related Anglo-Norman version (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, CCCC MS 50) is dated to c. 1200, this gives ample scope for the English version to have been written some time during the thirteenth century; cf. The Auchinleck Manuscript, ed. by Pearsall and Cunningham, p. vii, who date it to the late thirteenth century.
Coda

*Amis and Amiloun* has something in common with contemporary philosophers’ exploration of the subversive potential of friendship, particularly the later writings of Foucault where ‘friendship as a way of life’ promises to overcome the limitations of identitarian politics based on rigid sexual categories and to facilitate self-transformational processes. However, in most theoretical writing on friendship, from Foucault, Blanchot, and Derrida, to Agamben, Andrew Sullivan, and Bennett Helm, friendship is predicated on death and loss. *Amis and Amiloun*, however, looks beyond death to imagine a continued existence in which friendship is foundational (not so much even the Aelredian ‘God is Friendship’, perhaps, as ‘Friendship is Heaven’ and ‘Heaven is Friendship’). Unlike modern friendship discourse, the medieval romance puts forward an unabashedly utopian view of friendship, one which imbues it with a transcendent significance, but at the same time refuses to reduce it to a mere model of the divine relationality inherent in the Trinity. Importantly, it reminds us that devoted friendship should not just be seen as an alternative to religiously institutionalized unions that are somehow monolithic and prior. Rather, friendship has a long and complex history of representation as a dominant and primary bond that is in many ways foundational to our cultural understanding of interpersonal relations.

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64 Foucault, ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’.
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