

Debt and the Miracle: On the Economy of Grace and Conversion in Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*

Este artículo lee dos de los Milagros de Nuestra Señora de Gonzalo de Berceo, trazando distintas operaciones económicas que encuentran un vocabulario en palabras y conceptos morales que se abren a la metaforización económica y se vuelven así ambiguos y polisémicos. El análisis propone que tanto el Milagro X "Los dos hermanos" y el Milagro XXIII "La deuda pagada", ambos estructurados en torno a la deuda, presentan una idea particular de la conversión.

Palabras clave: *economía, moral, deuda, Berceo, milagro, conversión, préstamo, gracia*

This article reads two of Gonzalo de Berceo's Miracles of Our Lady, tracing how different economic operations find a vocabulary in moral words and concepts that open up to economic metaphorization and become ambiguous and polysemic. The analysis proposes that Miracle X "The Two Brothers," and Miracle XXIII "The Merchant of Byzantium," both structured on debt, present a particular idea of conversion.

Keywords: *economics, morality, debt, Berceo, miracle, conversion, loan, grace*

The renewed circulation of small coins in the Iberian Christian kingdoms, along with the minting of prestigious gold ones, mediated a number of developments of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries such as the movement of pilgrims along the Road to Santiago, the success of the Cistercian foundations, and the consolidation of noble lineages, all while the territorial expansion to the south tempted many to become part of an increasingly militarized society (Manzano Moreno 391-92). Feudal lords found in the use of money "a much more efficient way of managing their territories and, in general, their patrimony, while it also offered an instrument that allowed them to have easier access to the commercial circuits that were beginning to open up everywhere" (392). Conversely, the precision and abstraction afforded by money thwarted the ability of peasants and vassals in general

to negotiate debts and obligations as contingent on local or temporal conditions. In addition, the multiple royal manipulations of coinage, especially through debasement – the practice of lowering the silver or gold content in a given coin but recirculating it at the same face value – caused vast swaths of the population to find money unreliable, and especially undesirable in the negotiation of obligations within their own communities. All of these contributed to a fluctuating and unstable role of money in medieval Iberian societies to the point that, as Eduardo Manzano Moreno writes,

the diverse types of coinage moved within different social ranks, whose needs gave them different use value, depending on the social environment and the role they played within it. That is why it is inexact to speak in this period of a “monetary economy” ... it is much more precise to think of coinage as *one more element* in social relations, and thus, subjected to its complex configuration. (515-16)

Social relations were indeed changing in the beginning of the thirteenth century, as royal chanceries were consolidated and the role of learned men of the period demanded that they move from monastery to court, adapting their services to a wide variety of audiences all while seeing to their own survival. One of these figures is the thirteenth-century poet Gonzalo de Berceo, who lived in the Rioja Alta region, received a formal education in music and law, and spent his life serving at the monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla. Of his works, which span the devotional and the theological, three hagiographical poems focus on important local figures: Aemilian (San Millán), Dominicus (Santo Domingo), and Aura (Santa Oria). The Latin sources he used in their composition would have been locally available, either at his own monastery, which housed an active scriptorium that had produced manuscripts for royal families at least since the end of the tenth century, or at the nearby Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos. While his are not the “first” extant works of *mester de clerecía* – that primacy would correspond to the slightly earlier *Libro de Alexandre* – he is the first known author, with multiple works to his name, to compose in this learned romance we have later come to label Spanish. It is his collection of Marian miracles that is the best-known, the *Milagros de Nuestra Señora*. One of the many remarkable features of his poetry is its dexterity in moving from the abstract questions of theology or liturgy to everyday scenes peppered with colloquialisms, bringing to life the Virgin Mary or the saints for the audience through vocabulary, dialogue, and turns of phrase in the reworking of sources and construction of tableaux. His capacity for exploiting language, for its matter and for its meaning, between the concrete and the abstract, underlined by a strong didactic impulse makes his work particularly

important in the study of how a new language of economics would be minted in the composition of fiction.

Berceo's translation, adaptation, and amplification of twenty-five miracles from their original Latin adds an allegorical frame in which he portrays the Virgin as a paradisiacal landscape where the faithful as pilgrims can find some rest. While the introduction is entirely of Berceo's invention, the miracles can all be traced in their multiple versions to a number of collections that circulated throughout Europe and can be considered as a whole to be local expressions of a shared tradition.¹ Of these twenty-five miracles, seven explicitly consider economic situations: V "The Charitable Pauper"; VI "The Devout Thief"; X "The Two Brothers"; XI "The Greedy Farmer"; XIII "Jerónimo, the New Bishop of Pavía"; XXIII "The Merchant of Byzantium"; and XXV "The Robbed Church." Berceo, however, experiments with different fiduciary and financial instruments throughout all the miracles, structuring the plots, introducing ambiguous metaphors, and pushing semantic possibilities to the extreme.²

Berceo weaves in numerous terms that play with ambiguities of meaning and flirt with a simultaneity of morality and economics. Terms such as *precio*, *valor*, *pagar(se)*, or *aver/pobreza*, and traits such as generosity, greediness, or avarice move across the collection gathering connotations, accreting meanings that imbricate economics and morality, complicating relations, and resignifying the very terms. I will follow only one of these trajectories in the following pages, focusing on miracles that structure productive entanglements around ideas of debt.

THE STRUCTURE OF DEBT

Debts are not primarily economic. In fact, not all of them are even economizable, that is, they cannot be subjected to the metaphoric process of economics. Much like gifts, as famously analyzed by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, debts condense practices and relationships that have to do above all with morality, and thus are based on the community that, by knowing each other and depending on each other, sustains such moral obligations.³ Payment of a debt not only does not serve as mirroring counterpart to debt, as it would initially seem to, but can actually disappear completely from the structure that debt articulates. Debt should be understood as a structure in which it is the relation between individuals, and the pressure of the community on each of them, that hold up the theory and practice of debt.⁴ A contrast with the figure of the loan clarifies this social bond, drawing a line between what we feel pertains to money – a detached, precise transaction we call a loan – and what pertains to the obligations owed to each other as part of a community, commutable, which we call debt. As the bond of that community in history, what structures debt

is time: the time spent being indebted, the period during which the sense of obligation persists.

Set against the background of morality, the obligation of debt encodes a flurry of other tensions that go from the physical to the emotional. The most important one, if often set aside or aestheticized, is that of violence, implicit in the very control a community exercises upon its members. This violence is encoded in the spectrum of obligations specified, with examples in the relation between serfs and lord in a feudal economy or in the structure of *prestamientos* and *encomiendas*, in the violence of slavery, codified in the notions and practices of amnesty or repossession, in the processes of debt cancellation, waiver, or debt forgiveness.⁵

In his unconventional *New York Times* bestseller *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), the late anthropologist David Graeber attempted a history of these tensions encoded by debt, in particular, in their relation to money. Some of the interesting tensions Graeber studies are those I have alluded to, namely, between individual and community; between safety and violence; between risk and guarantee; or between publicity and anonymity. In his analysis of the morality underlying these bonds, he suggests a series of connections with implications for fiction; most prominently, in the construction of narrative characters. He observes that “one finds that the majority of human beings hold simultaneously that 1) paying back money one has borrowed is a simple matter of morality, and 2) anyone in the habit of lending money is evil” (9), notions that provide a set of good and evil types in a basic plotline where lenders, and in an extreme version, usurers, are accursed characters similar to executioners, which in turn explains the desire for anonymity in the performance of these very necessary services. Moreover, there is the idea that both lender and debtor share in a certain guilt for having forged this relation, a guilt sustained by the emotions related to owing or being owed something, such as pressure, humiliation, superiority, degradation (13). These emotions, once again, point to a paradox: debts must be publicized so that the community can uphold debt obligations to one another and thus be able to manage violence, and simultaneously, a desire for anonymity when entering such relations. It is here that money as figure – as part of the plot – sneaks in. While, as Graeber argues, the monetization of debt assures that exact calculation of payment is possible, arguably an advantage in the negotiation of debt, the process of monetization reframes and replaces the role of community and enables the transferability of the debt, a de-personalization that takes away control from the community and forces wide open the gates to violence in the enforcement and extraction of payment.

The emotions associated with debt did not disappear with the emergence of money as one more possible mediator of obligations among

people. Language, steeped in these (moral) relations, carried them over into the emerging vocabulary of pre-capitalist economics. The slippages and shifts in meaning provoked by such transfer show up as symptoms – tips of icebergs, really – at the level of vocabulary. In the forging of the language of Spanish fiction in the thirteenth century, we can observe how the long social process of filtering the workings of debt into economic, monetizable precision, along with the violence, the loss of community, and the anonymity this monetization sought, evinces fissures, cracks in new productions of meaning, in the transfer and appropriation of moral dimensions into the newly minted language of economics.

Gary Anderson points out that these intertwined histories of morality and economics through language should not be at all surprising, for he details how it was that the principal metaphors for sin in the first books of the Bible, those most influenced by Aramaic, changed from being primarily metaphors of burden and weight, as evidenced by expressions such as “burdened with guilt,” or metaphors of stains – as in the “immaculate conception” –, to metaphors in which debt becomes the stand-in for sin. In fact, Anderson argues, this is almost a tautological statement, for in Aramaic, the word for sin is the same as the word for debt, so that we could say that when one commits a sin, simultaneously, by virtue of language, one acquires a debt.⁶ And vice versa, entering into debt implies committing a sin. The entry of this vocabulary and metaphorical potential into Hebrew from Aramaic had itself economic reasons tied to Aramaic’s role as a commercial tongue in the Mediterranean in the period of the composition of these books. The metaphoric machine of sin as debt was to have much success in the rhetorical production of the imaginaries of sin, both in rabbinical and Christian thought and discourse.⁷ The rhetorical productivity between sin and debt would be explored with suspicion by medieval fiction, but fiction itself would have an undeniable role in its lasting efficacy, putting forth tropes and forging a new language that wove the terms together.

DEBT AND GRACE

Consider just two examples from Berceo’s collection. Berceo’s *Miracle X* is a deceptively simple miracle about two sinner brothers, Pedro and Esteban, one a cleric and the other a judge, who meet after death.⁸ Esteban, the judge, realizing that what he has earned in life does not result in a good afterlife, states mournfully that “toda nuestra ganancia ixiónos a mal puerto” (“all our profit has brought us to a bad port,” 243d). This profit, it turns out, is the result of Esteban’s illegally taking away properties from religious orders devoted to Saint Lawrence and Saint Agnes who, as Esteban’s soul walks by, grab him first violently by the arm, and then turn their backs to/on him. In light of this lack of support for Esteban’s soul, God sentences him to hell.

From there – the spatial organization of this afterlife is unclear, but very suggestive –, Esteban sees his brother Pedro, the miser cleric, in Purgatory, where, Berceo tells us, he has been justly placed. Esteban asks his brother about his punishment and, in a show of kindness or empathy, offers his help. Pedro responds by equating his sins to debts which must be paid, “qui tal faze tal prenda, fuero es e justicia” (“as one works, so let one be paid, that is law and justice,” 250d). Exhibiting the parallels between canon and civil law on these matters, the characters, as presented by Berceo, judge their life, their sins, as debts. It is literally a credit economy that rules on morality and the afterlife, where one can see that Berceo fuses economics, morality, and justice. Aware that the system in which sin is synonymous with debt allows for the accumulation of its opposite, that is, of virtue as credit, the characters also instrumentalize the double meaning of sin as debt and virtue and credit in their favor. Since virtuous behavior *on behalf* of the cleric could earn him credit on his debt and, thus, better his station in Purgatory, Pedro, reminded of this possibility by his brother’s offer to help, wonders aloud: “Mas si el apostóligo con la su clerecía / cantasse por mí missa solamiente un día, / fío en la Gloriosa, Madre Sancta María, / que me darié Dios luego alguna mejoría” (“But, if the Pope and his clergy / said mass for me for just one day, / I, trusting in the Glorious One, Holy Mother Mary, / know that God, straightway, would improve my lot,” 251).

Esteban, the greedy judge, finds himself in a different moral economy. He has a litany of bad deeds, except for his devotion in alms and homage to Saint Projectus, a martyr like Agnes and Lawrence. This good deed, however, does not draw the attention of Saint Projectus when Esteban dies. Saint Projectus, in fact, seems to be taking a nap as Esteban is condemned, and it is up to the aggrieved saints, Agnes and Lawrence, to point out the injustice in Esteban’s devotion thus going to waste, a service without the expected reward: “Proyecto,” Saint Agnes and Saint Lawrence admonish him, “non seas adormido, / piensa del tu Estevan, que anda escarnido, / réndili gualardón, ca óvote servido” (“Projectus, do not be caught napping. / Think about your Estevan who is being scorned, / give him a reward for having served you!” 255bcd). Awakened, Saint Projectus secures the Virgin’s support and, with her help, negotiates on Esteban’s behalf using his service to the Saint as collateral. God reconsiders, assesses the new information, and grants the return of Esteban’s soul to his body for a fixed number of days. Esteban’s return to life is conditional on his praying a specific psalm advised by the Virgin and on righting wrongs, which will make sure that he can skip the torments when he (again) dies. Esteban is granted thirty days for a second chance, a sort of do-over in a credit default situation, with what we would call a grace period. Upon resurrection, Esteban tells everyone about the miracle, asks the Pope to sing a Mass for his brother’s soul in Purgatory,

and as guarantee of his words – literally, as *credit* – announces his own death within a month: “Por ferlis bien creencia, por ser bien creído...” (“So that they might believe and he might be believed,” 266a).

I emphasize that Esteban’s prediction of his own death is a form of obtaining credit because of the words that Berceo uses in this verse. The translation of “creer” as “belief” here obscures the connection. The Spanish *creer* is derived from the Latin *credere*, which also gives us *crédito*, which to this day retains its double sense of belief or faith and an economic sense, as in expressions such as “no dar crédito” (“to give no credit”).⁹ The exchangeability of sins and virtue, debt and credit in the economy of salvation is succinctly established in this miracle without disclosing any concern for the effects of such accounting at the level of theology, highlighting Berceo’s whole-hearted embrace of economics – at least in this miracle – as a structuring element in the troping of faith within fiction.

Anderson dwells on the effects of the deployment of this rhetorical machine, emphasizing how this correlation between sin as debt, and virtue as credit, gave new prestige to the practice of helping the poor, and renewed the theological debate around the role and limits of human agency in its own salvation confronted with the gift of God’s grace (13-14). The debate centered – and one might see this as an ongoing debate – on whether an emphasis on human agency contradicts grace as a divine gift or at least lessens or impoverishes it in some way. That is, the effects of this rhetorical operation themselves turned into an economic debate, one at the heart of how fiction, in this case Marian miracles, negotiated – interpreted, translated – the language of theology into one of morality, from Latin into romance, from the language of gift-giving into the language of a profit economy in which the people – as sinners, as romance speakers, as patrons – found meaning.

But what exactly is the miracle in relation to the debt? The miracle, one might have noticed, is not the payment. It is not the forgiveness or the cancellation of the debt, as Berceo underlines time and again. In Berceo’s Miracle X, Saint Projectus wakes from his slumber and pleads to the Virgin for her help, and then both Saint and Virgin plead with God for Esteban’s soul, which was being kicked around like a ball, “fue ante Dios con ella, / rogó por esta alma que trayén com a pella, / que non fuesse judgada secundo la querella” (“he moved her with great pleading and went before God with Her. / He prayed for this soul that they were carrying like ball / that it might not be judged according to the complaint,” 256bcd). They seek a suspension of judgement, a pause or a longer term. God responds to this plea by declaring that he will grant grace by *re-turning* Esteban’s soul to its body and giving it a fixed period of thirty days: “Faré tanta de graçia por el vuestro amor: / torne aún al cuerpo la alma pecador, / desend cual mereciere recibrá tal onor. / Aya tanto de plazo hasta los treinta días, / que pueda

mejorar todas sus malfetrías" ("I will grant such a favor because of your love; / let the sinful soul return to the body, / henceforth, it will receive whatever honor it deserves. / Let there be a time limit of thirty days, so that he may correct all his errors," 257bcd). Grace here is the fabrication of time, the making (of) time. Moreover, God insists that it is by means of his words that the possibility for the settling of those debts as sins, for debt remission, is possible: "mas bien gelo afirmo, par las palavras mías, / 'y serán rematadas todas sus maestrías" ("and indeed I affirm to him by My words, that all his misdeeds will end," 258d). The miracle – the narrative counterpart of grace – is the conversion from one sort of debt into another, from the economic to the moral, in the possibility of expanding the mortal life into an afterlife. This transfer, this turning of meaning, this currency conversion from the bodily into the spiritual, the earthly into the heavenly, is one facilitated or made possible by language and its figures. For this is, of course, the very process of metaphor, the carrying over and above – the meta in *metaphorein* –, the transport from the here and now to the eternal. The economy of salvation should not be understood simply as an exchange between this life and the next, in a transaction at the limit of mor(t)ality akin to reaching the cashier to then exit through either the automatic doors to heaven or hell or the revolving one of purgatory. It is conversion, the transformation within a life into the possibility of salvation that is perhaps the most mysterious of miracles in itself; as an effect of the miraculous, or as the embodiment of grace, one negotiated through words as currency.

DEBT AND CONVERSION

A different miracle towards the end of the collection explicitly presents debt at the core of the plot. "The Merchant of Byzantium," also known as "The Merchant on Credit" or "The Paid Debt," tells the story of a merchant who finds himself in need of a loan after having given away all of his money.¹⁰ Securing one from a rich Jew, he uses a statue of Christ and Mary as guarantors, and leaves Constantinople for business in Flanders and France, where he finds himself when the loan comes due. Unable to travel back, he sends the money over the ocean in a container, praying to God to bring it to the creditor. The moneylender indeed finds it, floating on the waves, but fails to recognize it as the payment for the debt. After some time, the merchant returns to Constantinople and finds that the lender believes he is still owed the money. Disagreeing on whether the payment has been made, they ask the statue to confirm the truth of the matter, which miraculously then tells the story of the arrival and location of the payment. They all convert to Christianity and a general celebration ensues.

The word "debt" in this miracle is explicitly used in an economic sense, even if the context is moral. As the merchant thanks the Lord for helping him

secure the loan, he contrasts his debt-filled past with his present state of abundance: “Señor, andava eri pobre e adebdado, / só oÿ por tu gracia rico e abondado” (“Lord, yesterday I was poor and in debt, / today, because of Your Grace, I am rich and in abundance,” 656ab). Berceo rhymes debt with abundance, a term which in Spanish can be literalized as “full of good(s),” furthering the moral/economic imbrication. The debt is mentioned again in stanza 685d: “ca nada no'l devié de lo que demandava” (“for nothing of what he was claiming did he owe him”). While debt as obligation is only mentioned explicitly twice in the miracle, it structures the plot and the lesson from within. Since the plot relies on a loan where a Jew is presented as the moneylender and a Christian as the borrower, the miracle has garnered much attention with regard to Berceo’s views on Jews, and many scholars have pointed out that while Berceo’s antisemitism is salient in other miracles, in this one Jewish characters are treated with a moderate amount of respect, pointing out that the Jew is seen positively in the first part of the miracle – implying that his profession as moneylender generates no acrimony from Berceo –, but that in the second part, the poet’s characterization becomes increasingly negative. Given that the moneylender’s religion is so important in the story, Julian Weiss, nuancing arguments made previously by Martha Diz, has argued that the miracle verges on the conflict between economy and religion (209-25).¹¹

Slightly shifting this basic structure of the conflict between economics and religion, I want to suggest that instead of a conflict, the miracle stages yet again the imbrication of the two in order to present conversion as a miracle that implicates *both* economics and religion. I would argue that this miracle is not so much, or not only, one promoting an economy of salvation (somewhat predicated on antisemitism), but one oriented towards incarnation or embodiment as an argument for conversion.¹² To reorient the interpretation, one must retrace the different steps in the buildup of economic transactions that the miracle sets up for the conversion to take place.

In the first stanza, Berceo tells us that after reading/hearing the miracle, the pleasure obtained will allow us to appreciate it, “preçiarlo edes” (“you will prize it,” 625d). The merchant, we are told, spends his great estate or fortune, “fazienda granada” (“of great estate,” 626d) in the pursuit of fame, reputation, or greater appreciation, a sort of social price: “por sobir en grand precio” (“in order to increase his fame,” 627b), an idea reiterated in 628a, “Por exaltar su fama, el su precio crecer” (“to enhance his reputation, to increase his esteem”), and yet again in the second hemistich of 628c: “aún por más valer” (“to gain still greater fame”).¹³

While some scholars have argued that the way in which the rich merchant disposes of his fortune is a model of generosity or charity, I, like

Jesús Montoya Martínez, find that Berceo's insistence on the intention of this spending does not support its assessment as a virtuous performance (Montoya Martínez, "El burgués de Bizancio" 146-8). Instead, I believe it to be a spectacle of negative spending or waste, of squandering as a negative version of *liberalitas*, commented upon in several contemporary texts, from Lucas de Tuy to Jiménez de Rada to the *Libro del cavallero Çifar* as a trait of bad administrators, which is to say, bad lords.¹⁴ The merchant's attempted potlatch is indeed called out by the poet several times.¹⁵ When the character is introduced, the narrator says that he "espendié sos averes, dávalos en baldón" ("he spent his fortune, he gave it freely," 627c), and the idea is intensified with the repeated mention of spilling, or pouring out as in "derramava sin duelo," "Derramava lo suyo largamente sin tiento" ("shared without regret; spent his wealth generously and without prudence," 628b, 629a). To this spilling corresponds a decrease of his fortune, an impoverishment: "menguava lo suyo" and "menguavan los averes" ("his own dwindled"; "his riches grew smaller," 628c, 629b).¹⁶ The poet further emphasizes this squandering by saying that people could always be found in his house, at times twenty, sometimes thirty, even a hundred; but these numbers, this indiscriminate use of his estate without care, is not to be confused with hospitality, is not the generosity of the lord, nor the charity of the Christian, it is the squandering of the crazy, the sinner, the unrestrained. The merchant comes to a point when his estate is ruined and he must ask for loans to continue this spectacle, always in the pursuit of increasing his *price*: "si'l menguava lo suyo, aún por más valer, / prendrié de sus vecinos mudado volenter" ("if his own dwindled, to gain still greater fame, / he willingly borrowed from his neighbors," 628). Running counter to his moral intent of increasing his social esteem through this spending, the merchant loses his economic reputation, that is, he loses his credit: "Como fazié gran gasto, espensa sin mesura / falleció la pecunia, paróse en ardura; / non trovava mudado nin fallava usura / ni entre los estraños ni entre su natura" ("Since he made great expenditures, spending without moderation, / his money gave out, and he found himself in great need; / he did not find a loan, nor did he find usury, / either among strangers or among his acquaintances," 630).

While the merchant's actions could be dismissed as a miscalculation, or the exaggeration of what was initially a good, moral idea, what I propose is that we see in his lack of judgement the incapacity to read the ambiguities in the term *priz/ce*.¹⁷ To the modern reader – or speaker (or listener), really, for how much does one really read about this – the idea of price is identical to that of value. Price is the cipher – whether we consider it fair and transparent, or arbitrary and commodifying – that punctuates the process of valuation by placing something or someone on the market. It is the

enabler of circulation, what stamps something as accessible for possession or consumption, even if only in theory. Price is the cost of something, and what one sees in this price is that something (or someone) is expensive or not. All of these words: price, value, cost, cheap, market, exist in medieval texts creating a moral structure of meaning that ties them together; but perhaps even more profoundly, they remit to an affective system that speaks at the less morally (in the religious sense) charged registers of merit and love that properly belong to an ethical structure more than to anything else. The alternating terms *prez* and *preçio* appear early on in Iberian romance languages; *prez*, from Occitan *pretz*, is itself, like *preçio*, derived from Latin *pretium*, meaning reward, our English neatly separating the moral from the economic in *prize* and *price*. The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* tells us that, in addition to our contemporary understanding of the terms, though in almost complete disuse today, the term connotes “honor, esteem, consideration acquired or won through glorious action.” In a wider context, *prez* is usually defined as a synonym for fame or reputation, very often appearing as a double or emphatic next to these terms, as in “fama & buen prez” (“fame and good prez”) or “buena prez & buena nonbradía” (“good prez and good reputation”), and *preçio* is taken to be but a variant, alternating without any effect with *prez*.

Berceo does not distinguish between these imbricated meanings by using different words, other than offering minimal variants. *Precio* (and *preciar*, and *despreciar*) are used to denote both the economic value of things and people, or the internal, moral value and reputation of individuals, places, and objects. It is in this lack of graphic/aural distinctiveness that we can place the merchant’s lack of judgement: he cannot tell when *precio* means one thing, or when it means another; faced with this slippage of meaning, his misinterpretation backfires. In stanza 633b and c, his spending is referred to explicitly as a sin when the merchant asks God to be his guide: “só ya por mis pecados en falliment caído / el precio que avia todo lo é perdido” (“now, due to my sins, I have fallen in need”). The sin is the waste, the squandering that results in a loss of credit, an ambiguous term that the merchant will flip on its head as he offers his absolute faith in Jesus Christ – and will be rewarded for it.

The idea to seek a loan from the rich Jew, the poem tells us, comes to the burgher from God himself as a form of grace:¹⁸ “Demientre que orava, quísolí Dios prestar, / ovo un buen consejo el burgés a asmar; / non vino por su seso, mas quísoló guiar / el que el mundo todo ave de govarnar” (“While he was praying, God wished to help him. / The burgher thought of a good recourse; / it did not come from his own head, rather / the One Who rules the world wished to guide him,” 635). As the merchant meets with the rich moneylender, he presents his situation as the result of generosity: “Cuando

Dios lo querí que yo algo valía / – sávenlo mis vecinos – yo a todos valía, / las puertas de mi casa aviertas las tenía, / cuanto que Dios me dava con todos lo partía” (“When God willed me to have wealth, / as my neighbors know, I helped everyone / I had the doors of my house open, / whatever God gave me, I shared with all,” 639).

The two meanings of *valer* – wealth and aid, in this case –, placed at the end of the first verses, serve as reminders of the semantic ambiguities of the terms being used. The Jew agrees to lend him money, but asks for a guarantor, a “fiador que sea segurado” (“but give me a guarantor so that I may be certain,” 641c). Once again lost in translation, the Spanish term for guarantor is built on the Latin *fidāre*, a changed conjugation of *fidēre*, meaning to trust – to believe. Finding himself lacking in credit among his (Christian) peers, the merchant offers Christ as guarantor to the lender. The Jew says that even though he believes Christ to have been a true prophet, he does not believe he is God, using the term *creer*, which will be contrasted in the next stanza with *faith* in both a devotional and an economic sense: “Si él te enfiare, yo por el su amor / acreer’t é lo mío sin otro fiador; / mas seméjame cosa esquivá, sin color, / e seméjame hascas omne escarnidor” (“If he will be your surety, I, for His love, / will give you a loan without any other guarantor, / but it seems to me a despicable, vain thing, / and you seem to me almost a mocking man,” 644).

The moneylender, while acknowledging God’s love, suspects a con on the burgher’s part. Wondering how God, not of this world, would be able to help the merchant, he recommends the merchant find another solution. The merchant responds: “Entiendo que me tienes por loco e sendío / ... mas ál verás tras esto, secundo que yo fío” (“I understand that you consider me mad and foolish, / ... but I trust after this you will see otherwise,” 646bd). That is, the impression of madness is understandable because of the lack of faith of the Jew, which is expressed in his view that the burgher’s conviction is not only a form of madness but a form of fiction, or fabulous lies, a faith the merchant reasserts he does indeed possess: “yo fío” (“I trust”).¹⁹

The merchant takes the Jew to the church, where he shows him a statue of the Virgin with Christ in her arms. Addressing the moneylender as leader of the Jewish community, who are also present at the scene, the merchant offers the wooden figures of the baby Christ and his mother as guarantors for the loan of capital – the term in the poem is “cabdal” (651b). The ritual of guaranteeing the loan, called *manlevator*, is carried out in stanza 653. The due date is set, and the sum is given to the merchant. It is the faith of the merchant that secures the grace of God via Mary and her son made flesh; materialized in the image, as guarantors of faith, that will enable the loan.²⁰ The merchant offers a five-stanza prayer, thanking God for this grace and further asks that if he is unable to return himself to make the payment in

person, that offering it to God it is He who should ensure the payment is made:

Señor, yo non querría de mi vierbo fallir,
lo que ante Ti pusi bien lo querré complir;
pero si non podiero yo al plazo venir,
el aver ante Ti lo querré aducir.

Señor, si por ventura fuero yo alongado,
que non pueda venir al término tajado,
porrélo ante Ti, que me as enfiado,
e Tú como que quiere feslo a él pagado.

Lord, I would not want my word to fail;
what I propose to You I want to fulfill it,
but if I cannot come on the appointed day,
I will send the money to You.

Lord, if by chance I am far away,
so I cannot come at the time agreed,
I will put before You, what You have guaranteed for me,
and You, however You wish, pay him in full. (657-58)

With the prayer, the burgher seals the deal and sets off on his commercial travels. Far away, having forgotten that the term for payment is coming to an end, the merchant turns to God once again to ask that the money be rendered to the moneylender, explicitly saying that both Christ and Mary are part of the deal and as such, must do their part: “Ambos, tú e tu Fijo, fuerdes en el mercado” (“Both You and Your Son were in the agreement,” 670a).²¹

The merchant is, of course, a debtor, but since he in fact pays his debt through his guarantors, the sinner protagonist of the miracle is not really the merchant, but the Jew, whose sin is misrecognition due to a lack of faith, one which will be remitted through conversion. Especially when compared to Miracle X, it is hard to see this miracle as hinging on a straightforward economy of salvation. Instead, turning to an economy of incarnation allows us to see the role played by the very material details that organize the plot, such as the role of the image/statue, or the semantic potential of *fiador*, or guarantor, in relation to *creer* as faith and as credit. The central part of the miracle consists in having the statue speak, that is, in the materialization of the word, placing an emphasis on incarnation through the statue itself of Christ as infant with Mary as mother, that is, underlining his incarnation

through Mary, and enabling Christ to have a material role, through his Word, in the performance of the main miracle of this story. In addition, we should remember that the miracle here presents two sides of faith itself: while it is faith that ensures the loan and the payment of the original transaction – faith is what characterizes the relationship between the merchant and his guarantors, and what channels the payment the merchant owes to the Jew, ensuring remission of the debt –, it is also faith that is the result of the miracle, as the Jew “profits” from his new faith as convert and thus obtains new forms of credit.

That the merchant does not ask God but Christ to pay the debt, is but one more detail that points to incarnation as intrinsic to this economy of salvation: “Tornó en Jesu Cristo con grand devoción, / plorando gravemiente fizo su oración: / ‘Señor’ – disso – , ‘Tú saves toda esta razón, / ca Tú eres fiança de nuestra condición” (“He turned to Jesus Christ with great devotion / crying hard he said his prayer, / ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘You know this whole matter, / because You are the Guarantor of our agreement,” 667)

The verse is unclear as of which agreement Jesus acts as guarantor. We can, of course, interpret that *condición* refers to the agreement, but the use of *nuestra*, I argue, also points to the common condition of humanity, that is, to mortality. Since Jesus remits humanity’s original debt – original sin – he is a proven guarantor. It is Jesus who guarantees the faith of Christians, and that is why the payment of original debt gives us access to the funds of eternal life. To insist again: this stanza explicitly shows a shift in emphasis from a conversion predicated on an economy of salvation to one hinging on an economy of incarnation.

To the moneylender, the text presents two sides of faith: credit and devotion. The moneylender insists that the trust or faith in Christ was misplaced, for he fails to recognize the money found in the container as payment of the debt: “Fié en el tu Cristo, un grand galeador, / e en so madreziella, que fo poco mejor; / levaré tal derecho cual prisi fiador, / qui más en vós crediere tal prenda o peor” (“I trusted in your Christ, a great trickster, / and in His Little Mother Who was scarcely better. / I will get such satisfaction as the guarantor I took; / whoever so trusts you, may he receive the same,” 687). The merchant insists he knows the Jew has received payment, and promises a better deal, “fer’t é mayor mercado” (“I will make you a better offer,” 689c), saying the guarantors will affirm it. The original oath required the materialized hand of the guarantor, made flesh in the statue. This time, the confirmation of the payment will be materialized in the voice itself of the guarantor, as the image miraculously speaks, eventually bringing about the miracle of conversion. The image confirms that the payment has indeed arrived in a container, now in the possession of the moneylender, under whose bed it is found; the story is disseminated,

and the people all convert: “murió [el judío] enna fe buena, de la mala tollido” (“he died in the good faith, wrested from sin,” 696d), a credit given to the moneylender who has been converted into the Christian faith.

Berceo’s dexterity in manipulating the semantic potential of terms such as debt, value, faith, conversion, and grace is possible because the conceptual possibilities of the imbrication of economy and morality are available in the very language he is putting together as a learned poetic vehicle. He effectively uses language through his works to invite donations to the monastery of San Millán. But the exploitation of the porosity of this vocabulary also allows Berceo to make his theological content accessible to his audience, simultaneously opening up the theological to colonization by economic processes that find a home in these concepts and in this language.

The changing role of grace, its slipperiness in the process of the fictionalization of economics is indeed at the core of these miracles. Grace is the production of a time during which one gets a second chance at salvation, but grace can also come as financial advice, or as surety; it may facilitate conversion and, as a manifestation of the Word, or as a turn of words, grace is, itself, conversion. In the final instance, grace is what is promised in the promotion of the cult of Mary through Berceo’s miracles. It is but figuration, what poets make and what words do, for grace, ultimately, is in these fictions, the virtue of language.

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NOTES

- 1 I will cite by stanza, using Fernando Baños’s edition of Berceo’s *Milagros*, and Richard Terry Mount and Annette Grant Cash’s translation. All added emphases will be mine. On sources and manuscripts, see Baños’s introduction, xlii-vi. I would like to thank the two anonymous readers who generously provided comments and suggestions to better my English and clarify my arguments.
- 2 Among these are buying and selling, loaning, hoarding, theft, gifts, spending, and bribes. Later in the article I will closely rely on Julian Weiss, Jesús Montoya Martínez, and Martha Diz’s reading of Miracle XXIII. Running parallel to their readings, my own seeks to amplify the interpretation in light of an economic impulse I see driving the composition in the vernacular of the entire collection and as a feature of Berceo’s language, one that goes beyond subject-matter and that hinges on a structure of meaning in which the moral and the economic are inextricably bound. In this sense, my reading diverges precisely on the insistence that Berceo attempts to bring together or reconcile economics and religion; my argument rests on the premise that economics and religion are,

from the beginning, at the level of language and its operations, imbricated, working with and for each other.

- 3 In this sense, debts are always already moral and not, as Maurizio Lazzarato claims, producers of a morality. Lazzarato claims that “[d]ebt produces a specific ‘morality,’ at once different from and complementary to that of ‘labor.’ The couple ‘effort-reward’ of the ideology of work is doubled by the morality of the promise (to honor one’s debt) and the fault (of having entered into it)” (30). Lazzarato’s use of quotations betrays some sort of skepticism at naming these operations, however, this same structure is pervasive in many different genres of medieval literature and social practices, such as the courtly service offered in the promise of a *galardón*, or the devotional service offered in Berceo’s collection in return for the favor of honoring both body and soul. Further on Lazzarato looks at neoliberalism as having produced a society in which people are born into debt and says that “we are henceforth indebted to the ‘god’ Capital,” using quotation marks again (32 and ss); a situation that repeats the Christian debt to Jesus as guarantor. See my *The Task of the Cleric* (2016) for an analysis of gift-giving and profit in medieval literature, with a focus on *Poem of the Cid*, *Poema de Fernán González*, *Libro de Apolonio*, and *Libro de Alexandre* in chapter 4.
- 4 Graeber says that what distinguishes debt specifically from an obligation, any obligation, is money, as in payment. I want, however, to dwell on the idea of debt as separate from payment, especially in the form of money. The texts studied here elaborate other options for historical and ideological reasons, precisely as a monetary economy begins to take hold of the imagination and older metaphors and possibilities are narrowed down.
- 5 While I will not remark on the violence that structures the stories in the miracles, the many punishments with which unbelievers are threatened or that are enacted upon them, or from which the faithful are saved, serve as catalysts to the formation of the community of Marian believers.
- 6 Elettra Stimilli writes eloquently on the coincidence in meaning of debt and guilt through the German “Schuld,” however, for our purposes and working with Romance languages that elaborate on translations of the Bible for these terms, Anderson’s analysis seems more consequential.
- 7 In the third century, Tertullian, for instance, would write in his *De Resurrectione Carnis*, on the use of the flesh as payment for the debt of salvation to Christ. Consider just this fragment: “Yea, most blessed it is and most glorious, when it is able in the presence of Christ the Lord to meet so great a debt, so as to owe him naught but what it has ceased to owe him, so much the more bound as having been set free” (27). Some of these elaborations are analyzed in detail in Anderson’s book.

- 8 I have analyzed this miracle, if briefly, along these lines in pages 130-31 of "For Love of Money."
- 9 These two connotations also work in English, of course, though a very informal survey of students suggests that a strong economic component, especially overdetermined by video games, overshadows the original meaning. Sebastián de Covarrubias, in his *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española*, offers the following definition: "CREDITO. La credulidad que damos a lo que se nos dice. Crédito, buena opinión y reputación. Crédito, entre mercaderes, abono de caudal y correspondencia con los demás. Acreditar a uno abonarle. Acreditar, cobrar crédito. Acreditado, abonado. Desacreditar. Desacreditarse" ("Credit, the credulity we grant to what is said to us. Credit, good opinion and reputation. Credit among merchants, payment of capital and correspondence with others. To credit one to pay. To obtain credit, to demand credit. Credited, paid. Discredit, discredit oneself," s.v. CREDITO, my translation). The word defined immediately after it is "CREER."
- 10 There are multiple Latin versions of this miracle. As Montoya Martínez points out, the differences lie mostly in the source of the voice that is heard confirming the payment and explaining where the money is ("El burgués de Bizancio" 141, and fn. 11 to the same page). Weiss lists the analogues in Gautier de Coinci and Alfonso X and points out other similar stories in which the Virgin protects merchants (210, fn. 46).
- 11 Montoya Martínez, for his part, argues that it is not a question of religion but one of different attitudes towards money (142). His argument relies on the characterization of the merchant as a burgher more than anything else, with a connotation that is closer to the idea of bourgeoisie than it is to a simple "inhabitant of a town." To drive his point home, *burgés*, argues Montoya Martínez, is used twelve times to characterize the merchant, to the four times he is called a Christian (145-46).
- 12 Of course, any text aiming at the conversion of the other can be said to discriminate against that other religion. However, I find this miracle to be very vague about Jewishness as such: the Jew is here simply as an unbeliever, it is his lack of faith in Christ (and the Virgin) that is in question, and not some other form of religious devotion, an animosity that is indeed present in other miracles in the collection. The loss of wealth/credit within a character's own community - the loss of faith in these characters - is mirrored between the two protagonists: while no one in his own community wants to lend money to the profligate Christian merchant, explaining why he must seek a loan from the Jewish moneylender, the moneylender finds himself questioned by his own community for having accepted such a ridiculous form of guarantee for the loan, thus losing his fortune.

- 13 The translation sidesteps the terms Berceo uses for these assessments of worth: *precio* and *valor*, missing the semantic possibilities I argue the poet is exploiting.
- 14 In this sense, this is not Bataille's notion of waste as production; waste here is the negative twin to spending, which in Spanish is rendered by the same word, *gasto*, if in medieval Iberian texts it is sometimes differentiated through *espende*. For more on this in medieval Spanish literature, see my "Uno por otro: Economías de la sustitución."
- 15 The term potlatch, as is well known, was put forth in 1954 by Mauss in *The Gift* as a form of extreme spending that increases reputation. For an analysis of the figure in other Iberian texts of the period, see my *Task of the Cleric*, chapter 4.
- 16 "Dar en baldón," where *baldón* is translated as *freely* might give the modern reader a false impression of a positive characterization similar to generosity. However, thirteenth-century works do not see this as a form of generosity but as one of lunacy: the *Vida de Santa María Egipcíaca* characterizes the protagonist prostituting herself in the first part of the poem as "a todos se baldonava," (vv. 95-96) an expression where the absence of an obligation, or a reciprocity, qualifies it as a form of insult.
- 17 Weiss sees Berceo as working within the gap between the social and the moral. He argues that while we cannot confuse the merchant's expenditures as forms of charity - which is what Diz seems to argue -, Berceo is splitting the difference between generosity as a moral and as a social value. However, he does not see any condemnation on Berceo's part of the merchant's spending habits (215-18).
- 18 Weiss reads this differently, pointing out that in the next stanza, in the second hemistich of stanza 636c, the poet remarks that this idea or judgment, *asmar*, comes from the merchant himself, *asmó de ir a elli entre su voluntad*. This, however, relies on dismissing the mention of God's help in stanza 635a as unclear or lacking in specificity, which Weiss uses to highlight the historical tensions between Christian and Jewish communities, and in particular, around economic questions such as usury (213-14). Diz similarly highlights these tensions, even reading the familiarity and warmth between Christian merchant borrower and Jewish moneylender - details added by Berceo - as duplicity on the Jew's part. While these tensions certainly existed, and their economic dimensions were the most direct cause of the violence that would take over many Iberian communities especially from the fourteenth century onward, moneylending was generally and continuously practiced in medieval Iberia across communities, making this sort of situation one that would have been all too familiar to the audience and expected of the characters in the miracle. The different versions and condemnations of usury - which cannot be confused with moneylending, which was subjected to many revisions and

- redefinitions within the different religions, if within Islam and Judaism much earlier than in Christian thought – allowed Jews to lend to Christians without fear of breaking any serious rules, with authorities such as Maimonides backing such loans (see Margaret Grice Hutchinson, especially chapter 1, 3-59).
- 19 The moneylender calls the burgher's faith "pastrijas," (647d), which Baños explains as derived from shepherd's tales, meaning tall tales or fibs. The term, along with the Jew's lack of faith in "mere words," ties the miracle's plot lines more tightly and determines the poet's modification of how he names the moneylender, as from here on he will call him "trufán," that is, a swindler or trickster. See Weiss for a different assessment of this change of address.
- 20 On the ritual of *manlevator* see Montoya Martínez, *El libro de los Milagros*. Baños points out that in the Latin text it is only Christ – and not the Virgin – who serves as guarantor (in parallel with the miracle related to the Christ Antiphonetes icon; however, it is curious to note that the icon was housed at least from the ninth century onward at the Church of the Virgin in Chalkoprateia, tying the two figures together early on as guarantors).
- 21 The fact that the payment is from the beginning in the hands of God, makes me think that this is the minor miracle of the plot; to doubt that Christ would in fact render the payment would mean that one lacks faith, much like the moneylender, or even worse, for he has in fact extended credit to the burgher in these circumstances.

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