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Difficult gifts: gifts to and from the popes in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how gifts, and stories about gifts, to and from the popes were treated and discussed in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England. The first part explores the intellectual context in which these stories were written, namely scriptural and classical ideas about the gift that circulated in the period, and the practical challenges faced by the papacy. The second part explores how English clerks and aristocrats utilised these gifts and stories about them. The exchange of gifts, the article argues, presented the papacy and its partners with mutually incompatible practical and ideological pressures. Despite the efforts of skilled actors such as Pope Innocent III, these challenges could only be navigated, never resolved.

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In this article I will explore the way gifts to and from the popes were treated and discussed in twelfth- and thirteenth-century England. The focus is not the motives of the popes,¹ but how English actors made use of gifts and stories about gifts to and from the popes,² in other words, how the papacy's interlocutors in turn presented and discussed the gifts they gave to or received from the popes. As we will see, papal gifts presented English actors with opportunities to comment upon and discuss wider issues about the state of the Church and on their own position within it. Papal gifts had been important for the self-presentation of English rulers since at least 1066. William of Poitiers claimed that the Normans had carried a papal banner into battle at Hastings. It was a 'gift' (*munera*) of the pope's generosity (*benignitas*).³ But the English king's elite subjects also made much of exchanges with

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¹ The following abbreviation is used in this paper: PL: *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina*.

On papal gift giving, see Brenda M. Bolton, '*Qui fidelis est in minimo*: The Importance of Innocent III's Gift List', in *Pope Innocent III and His World*, ed. J.C. Moore (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 113–40.

² On gift exchange in England, see, among others, Sybille Schröder, *Materielle Kultur am Hof Heinrichs II. von England* (Husum: Matthiesen, 2004); Benjamin L. Wild, 'Emblems and Enigmas: Revisiting the "Sword" Belt of Fernando de la Cerda', *Journal of Medieval History* 37 (2011): 378–96; Lars Kjær, *The Medieval Gift and the Classical Tradition: Ideals and the Performance of Generosity in Medieval England, 1100–1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³ William of Poitiers, *Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers*, eds. and trans. R.H.C. Davis and Marjorie Chibnall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 152–5. See also David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 220–2; Dan Armstrong, 'The Norman Conquest of England, the Papacy, and the Papal Banner',

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the papacy. Gerald of Wales (d. 1220×3) and Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) produced carefully constructed written accounts of their own exchanges, while chroniclers such as Jocelin of Brakelond (*fl.* 1210) and Matthew Paris (d. 1259) used stories of gift exchange with Rome as central elements in their narratives. On the one hand, papal gifts were desirable as prestigious links to the leader of the Church, on the other they raised uncomfortable questions about moral and religious purity.⁴

To give or receive a gift was to engage in communication. The material objects could, either individually or in aggregate, represent considerable financial value, but the value and artistry involved in their creation also sent messages about power, prestige and favour.⁵ The ways in which gifts were given or received were also held to send important messages about the character of the giver or recipient and about their attitude to the gift and the other parties in the exchange. But as Philippe Buc has remarked

[W]hen those men and women whose opinion mattered did not constitute a face-to-face community but were spatially ... scattered ... reporting (writing and telling) became more important than performance.⁶

That certainly applied to papal gift giving, as well as the papacy's other forms of communication discussed in this special issue. As we will see below, writing, either in the form of letters sent to accompany gifts, or in the form of narratives about such exchanges, was pivotal to the meaning that such exchanges came to hold. Letters were an opportunity for actors, popes as well as their interlocutors across Europe, to shape the meaning of the exchange, to add spiritual significance to the gift or explain the spirit in which the gift was given. But even where actors had carefully sought to fix the meaning of an exchange, it could prove malleable in the hands of later writers.⁷ As the other contributions to this special issue demonstrate, papal communications could have long and complex afterlives.

Biblical and classical ideas of the gift

Medieval historians have drawn much inspiration from the sociologist Marcel Mauss' *Essai sur le don*. Mauss' work on gift giving in so-called 'archaic societies' and in stateless societies, mostly around the Pacific Ocean, showed how gifts could be used to establish

Haskins Society Journal 32 (2020): 47–71. For papal gifts to a young Alfred, see Janet L. Nelson, 'The Problem of King Alfred's Royal Anointing', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 18 (1967): 145–63. For the wider context, see William E. Lunt, *Financial Relations of the Papacy with England to 1327* (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1939).

⁴ Compare Iben Fonnesberg-Schmidt, 'Father and Son, Brother and Friend: The Papal Curia and the Status of the Nordic Ecclesiastical Elite', in *Nordic Elites in Transformation, c. 1050–1250*, vol. 3: *Legitimacy and Glory*, eds. Wojtek Jezierski and others (London: Routledge, 2021), 222–44.

⁵ On the material value of gifts, see B.L. Wild, 'Secrecy, Splendour and Statecraft: The Jewel Accounts of King Henry III of England, 1216–1272', *Historical Research* 83 (2010), 409–30; on the message sent by the material form of gifts, see the essays in Lars Kjær and Gustavs Strenga, eds., *Gift-Giving and Materiality in Europe, 1300–1600* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022).

⁶ Philippe Buc, *Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 249.

⁷ On the malleable meanings of gifts, see Gadi Algazi, Valentin Groebner and Bernhard Jussen, eds., *Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre, eds., *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). In this article I focus on gifts of treasure. Gifts of land raised somewhat different issues; for a classic study of gifts of land to St Peter in a different guise, see Barbara H. Rosenwein, *To be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909–1049* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). On the complex question of transfer of sovereignty, see Benedict Wiedemann, *Papal Overlordship and European Princes, 1000–1270* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), especially 95–118.

and maintain social ties and in struggles for status.⁸ In 2001, however, Philippe Buc warned historians against adopting anthropological models developed for societies that were markedly different from medieval Europe. Here, ritualised action, such as gift giving, was systemically subjected to moral evaluation by a clerical ‘class of specialists in textual interpretation’, anxiously aware that rituals could be abused by hypocritical, worldly actors. In medieval Europe the exchange of gifts therefore presented challenges and opportunities not addressed in Mauss’ work.⁹

Two major traditions informed the way in which central medieval writers interpreted and evaluated acts of generosity. Firstly, the Bible and early Christian writers provided a store of warnings and advice about the correct way to give and receive presents.¹⁰ Already in Scripture, however, complexities abound: when Saul, king to be of Israel, first approached the prophet Samuel he was anxious about the fact that he had ‘no present to give to the man of God’.¹¹ But for all that gifts were customary when approaching authorities, spiritual as much as worldly, they also represented a threat to the purity expected of a ‘man of God’, and especially one who held the responsibility of a judge. When Samuel made account for his deeds before the people of Israel he declared defiantly: ‘if I have taken a gift at any man’s hand: and I will despise it this day, and will restore it to you.’ The people of Israel recognised that Samuel had indeed received no gifts from his people.¹² These questions had been made more pressing by the polemics over simony in the eleventh century. In Acts 8:20, Simon Magus had been condemned for his belief that he could purchase the ‘gift of God’ (*donum dei*) with cash (*pecunia*). In the sixth century, Gregory the Great interpreted this to cover all sorts of attempts to obtain clerical office or influence the holders of these ‘through the gift of servility, or gift of the hand, or gift of the tongue’.¹³ As Timothy Reuter remarked: ‘What Gregory was objecting to was nothing less than the small change of late antique and medieval social and political life.’¹⁴ This was to have a great, if delayed, effect in the eleventh century when anxieties about simony escalated into what Reuter called a ‘moral panic’ over gifts. Simony became a key theme in struggles over church reform.¹⁵ The debate over simony did not eradicate gift giving, but it left medieval audiences with a potent tool for criticising the gifts of their contemporaries.¹⁶

⁸ Marcel Mauss, ‘Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques’, *L’Année Sociologique* 1 (1923–4): 30–186, trans. J.I. Guyer, *The Gift: Expanded Edition* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016). See A.A. Bijsterveld, *Do ut des: Gift Giving, memoria, and Conflict Management in the Medieval Low Countries* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2007), 17–39.

⁹ Buc, *Dangers of Ritual*, 245–7.

¹⁰ See Bernhard Jussen, ‘Religious Discourses of the Gift in the Middle Ages: Semantic Evidences (Second to Twelfth Centuries)’, in *Negotiating the Gift*, eds. Algazi, Groebner and Jussen, 173–92; Mark W. Hamilton, ‘Bribery at the Boundaries of Gifting in the Hebrew Bible’, *Biblische Notizen* 187 (2020): 39–58.

¹¹ 1 Kings 9:7: ‘sportulam non habemus, ut demus homini Dei’; all translations from the Bible are adapted from the Douay-Rheims version.

¹² 1 Kings 12:3: ‘si de manu cuiusquam munus accipi: et contemnam illud hodie, restituaque vobis.’

¹³ Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in evangelia*, ed. Raymond Etaix (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 31: ‘munus ab obsequio, aliud munus a manu, aliud munus a lingua’.

¹⁴ Timothy Reuter, ‘Gifts and Simony’, in *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context*, eds. Esther Cohen and Mayke B. de Jong (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 157–68, Charles West, ‘The Simony Crisis of the Eleventh Century and the “Letter of Guido”’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 73 (2022): 229–53.

¹⁵ Reuter, ‘Gifts and Simony’, 160; R.I. Moore, ‘Family, Community and Cult on the Eve of the Gregorian Reform’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 30 (1980): 49–69 (66–9).

¹⁶ For twelfth- and thirteenth-century discussions about gifts and alms, see Benedict Wiedemann, ‘The Papacy and Money: “Blessings” at the Curia in the Twelfth Century’, in *Law, Politics and Religion in Medieval Europe, c.1100–c.1350. Papers in Honour of Anne Duggan*, ed. Travis Baker (Turnhout: Brepols, forthcoming); Spencer E. Young,

Besides the Christian tradition, medieval audiences also had access to a second body of traditions on the virtues and pitfalls of gift giving. Classical literature and philosophy, most importantly Cicero's *De officiis* and Seneca the Younger's *De beneficiis*, offered thorough discussions of the morals of gift giving.¹⁷ Both Cicero and Seneca distinguished sharply between gifts given freely and willingly out of a sincere love for the recipient or gratitude for his good deeds, and interested, selfish gifts, given sparingly, hesitantly, in order to solicit return. According to Seneca: 'He who gives gifts (*beneficia*) imitates the gods, he who demands a return, money-lenders.'¹⁸ One should 'give freely, receive freely and return freely' ('libenter dare, libenter accipere, libenter reddere').¹⁹ Between good men gifts would be exchanged *libenter*: happily, voluntarily, freely. One ought to give swiftly and without hesitation – in order to demonstrate one's joy in the act and to bring pleasure to the recipient. Both Cicero and Seneca were sharply critical of the instrumental use of gifts to trap and oblige people, considering it 'a most reprehensible act to give something for any other reason than simply to give'. The intention totally determined the meaning of acts of generosity and gratitude since he who gave while hoping for a return was merely a fisherman 'throwing out his hook' garnished with golden bait.²⁰

The gifts of a good man would be a source of pleasure to the recipient, who would rejoice in thinking of his goodness and happily (and voluntarily) embrace his obligation to reciprocate. But those of a bad, selfish giver were a source of pain and shame. The virtuous man should resist the lure of such gifts, no matter how valuable they might be, because receiving them undermined his freedom to censure the giver's bad behaviour, but also because it was shameful to have let the attraction of worldly goods lure one into compromising higher principles.²¹

From the beginning of the twelfth century onwards, familiarity with classical ideals and language of gift giving spread rapidly across Latin Europe. L. D. Reynolds noted an 'explosion of interest' in *De beneficiis* in the period: only two manuscripts of Seneca's work survive from before 1100, but 89 copies from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²² *Florilegia*, handy collections of classical sayings and advice, spread awareness further. One of the most popular, the *Florilegia angelicum* was intended for the curia. A presentation copy contains a dedication letter addressed to the pope, who remains unnamed, but who has been tentatively identified as Adrian IV (1154–9) by Patricia Stirnemann.²³ The *florilegia* included a substantial selection from *De beneficiis*, focusing on

Scholarly Community at the Early University of Paris: Theologians, Education and Society, 1215–1248 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 131–67.

¹⁷ For the below, see Kjær, *Medieval Gift*.

¹⁸ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, in L. *Annaei Senecae. De beneficiis libri VII. De clementia libri II*, ed. C. Hosius. 2nd edn. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1914), 1–209 (3.15.4): 'Qui dat beneficia, deos imitatur, qui repetit, generatores.'

¹⁹ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, 1.4.3.

²⁰ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, 4.3.1, 4.20.3; Cicero, *De officiis*, in M. *Tulli Ciceronis. De officiis*, ed. M. Winterbottom (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1.44. See also Cicero, *De legibus*, in M. *Tulli Ciceronis. De re publica. De legibus. Cato maior de senectute. Laelius de amicitia*, ed. J.G.F. Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 155–266 (1.48).

²¹ Seneca, *De beneficiis*, 2.18.3, 3.17.3.

²² G. Mazzoli, 'Ricerche sulla tradizione medievale del "De beneficiis" e del "De clementia"'. III. Storia della tradizione manoscritta', *Bollettino dei Classici*, 3rd series, 3a (1982): 165–223; L.D. Reynolds, 'De beneficiis and De clementia', in *Texts and Transmission: A Survey of the Latin Classics*, ed. L.D. Reynolds (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 363–5 (364).

²³ Patricia Stirnemann and Dominique Poirel, 'Nicholas of Montiéramey, Jean de Salisbury et deux florilèges d'auteurs antiques', *Revue d'Histoire des Textes*, new series, 1 (2006): 173–88 (181).

how to give gifts (quickly and freely, without consideration of what can be gained in return) and how to receive them (only from virtuous people, judging the gift by the spirit of the giver rather than its value).²⁴

The overlap between the ongoing debate over simony and the first stirrings of interest in *De beneficiis* is interesting. Reuter suggested that the simony debate was, in part, a way for the Church to renounce the ‘normal gift obligation’ which tied recipient to donor. *De beneficiis* provided an eloquent and intellectually coherent theory about why all good gifts had to be free, which would effectively supplement the Bible’s warnings about sinful and polluting presents.²⁵ This deserves further study. For our purposes, what is most important is that in the twelfth century, the Latin clerical elite, acquired a shared framework, spun from both classical and scriptural threads, about how to give and receive gifts, and how to evaluate and criticise acts of gift giving. Both the members of the curia and their interlocutors across Latin Europe knew that the gift was perilously perched between virtue and hypocrisy.

Gifts and papal finances

The problem was that the financial and political situation of the papacy made it very difficult to follow the advice of the classical philosophers and more ascetic church fathers. As Benedict Wiedemann has shown, the twelfth-century papacy was deeply dependent on ‘discretionary payments’. Both ideologically and practically, the papacy depended on the flow of more or less voluntary subsidies, ‘blessings’ and other forms of support offered by petitioners and other partners across Christendom.²⁶ Even the more regular payment of annual tribute by some monasteries and kingdoms, the *census*, was, in a sense, gift-like. In a letter from 1164, Pope Alexander III (1159–81) explained that ‘the Roman Church has never been accustomed to make demands but has rather to be requested to impose on other churches the duty of paying a *census* to her.’ Therefore, he absolved the abbey of Lagny-sur-Marne from payment of the *census* until and unless the monks would themselves decide to pay it ‘by their own free will and pleasure’.²⁷ In the twelfth century, in particular, papal dependence on this flow of voluntary support was heightened by the increasing costs of the curia and recurring conflicts with German emperors and the city of Rome which cut off access to the papacy’s landed possessions.²⁸ England and English clerks contributed more than any other Christian kingdom to this. The annual payment of Peter’s Pence was collected from churches across the kingdom and forwarded via the archbishops of Canterbury to

²⁴ *Florilegium angelicum*: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Palat. lat. 957, ff. 148r–150v: quotations from *De beneficiis* including: 1.1.3, 1.1.7–8, 1.1.9, 1.1.12, 1.3.1, 1.5.2, 1.5.5, 1.6.1–3, 1.9.1, 2.1.2, 2.2.1–2, 2.5.1–4, 2.18.5, 2.21.5.

²⁵ Reuter, ‘Gifts and Simony’, 164.

²⁶ Benedict Wiedemann, ‘The Character of Papal Finance at the Turn of the Twelfth Century’, *English Historical Review* 133 (2018): 503–32; idem, ‘Papacy and Money’. On this and for an overview of historiography, see Werner Maleczek, ‘Die römische Kurie und das Geld. Von der Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts bis zum frühen 14. Jahrhundert’, in *Die römische Kurie und das Geld. Von der Mitte des 12. Jahrhunderts bis zum frühen 14. Jahrhundert*, ed. Werner Maleczek (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2018), 11–26.

²⁷ J.-P. Migne, ed., *Alexandri III Romani pontificis, Opera omnia, id est epistolae et privilegia*. PL 200 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1855), cols. 333–4: ‘Ecclesia Romana nunquam exigere consuevit, sed potius rogari, ut alias ecclesias sibi faceret censuales ... propria voluntate et beneplacito’; translation based on I.S. Robinson, *The Papacy, 1073–1198* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 262.

²⁸ Robinson, *Papacy*, 244–91.

Rome. The definition of what precisely Peter's Pence was hovered tellingly between an obligatory, even if originally voluntarily incurred, tax (the preferred papal interpretation), and a grant of alms (the position of the English kings).²⁹

This sort of more or less obligatory gift giving would not have been out of place in the societies studied by Marcel Maus, or in early medieval Europe.³⁰ But it ran precisely counter to the ideal of the free gift that the twelfth- and thirteenth-century clergy had encountered in the classical literature and its derivatives. In the criticisms and satires that they penned about the curia, gifts play a starring role. Important in and of themselves, gifts were also a convenient stalking horse for wider ambivalences about papal financial demands. Gift-stories placed the tension between the ideals of voluntary support and practical needs under the sharpest possible light.³¹

English clerks engaging with the papacy faced a daunting challenge: they needed to win friends in the curia, they were proud of the gifts they received and the concrete physical proof they provided of their closeness to the see of St Peter. But they also needed to protect themselves from being tarnished by association, as corrupters or corrupted semi-simonists.³²

Framing gifts

For good and ill, gifts helped explain the unfortunate experiences of the ambitious courtier-clerk Gerald of Wales in Rome. Over the course of several visits to the curia, Gerald sought to uphold his own election as bishop of St Davids and to have the see elevated to an archbishopric. He was successful in neither. According to Gerald, this was all due to the nefarious interference of Hubert Walter, archbishop of Canterbury (1193–1205). Hubert's messengers secured papal support 'it is believed, with beautiful gifts, as the archbishops traditionally send to the pope', tradition here not being venerable but as much in need of reform as the status of the Welsh Church.³³

Gerald, the should-be future archbishop of St Davids, did not behave like the archbishops of Canterbury. In his autobiographical *De rebus a se gestis*, he recounted how when he had first appeared in front of Innocent III, he had presented him with six of his own books, saying 'others offer you pounds (*libras*), but I offer you books (*libros*).' A good and daring joke, if it was ever delivered like that; so good that Gerald, never

²⁹ H. Loyn, 'Peter's Pence', *Lambeth Palace Library Annual Report* (1989): 10–20, reprinted in H. Lyon, *Society and Peoples: Studies in the History of England and Wales, c.600–1200* (London: Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London, 1992), 241–58. For the gift origins of Peter's Pence, see Rory Naismith and Francesca Tinti, 'The Origins of Peter's Pence', *English Historical Review* 134 (2019): 521–52.

³⁰ See George Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy: Warriors and Peasants from the Seventh to the Twelfth Century*, trans. H.B. Clarke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), 51, 56; Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Property Transfers and the Church, Eight to Eleventh Centuries: An Overview', in *Les transferts patrimoniaux en Europe occidentale, VIIIe–Xe siècle (I): Actes de la table ronde de Rome, 6 et 7 mai 1999*, ed. F. Bougard (Rome: École française de Rome, 1999), 563–75 (571).

³¹ See John A. Yunk, 'Economic Conservatism, Papal Finance, and the Medieval Satires on Rome', *Mediaeval Studies* 23 (1961): 334–51. For a study emphasising the literary nature of satires and their debt to classical Roman literature, see Thomas Wetzstein, 'Roma carpit marcas, bursas exhaurit et arcas. Die Gier des Papstes und der Groll der Christenheit', in *Die römische Kurie und das Geld*, ed. Maleczek, 337–72, especially 347–8.

³² Compare the dealings of Diego Gelmírez, bishop of Santiago de Compostela, with the curia: Wiedemann, 'Papacy and Money'.

³³ Gerald of Wales, *De jure et statu Menevensis ecclesiae*, in *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, eds. J.S. Brewer, G.F. Warner and J.F. Dimock. Rolls Series 21. 8 vols. (London: Longman, 1861–91), 3: 176: 'cum xeniis pulchris, ut creditor, ab archiepiscopo more solito papae transmittis'.

one to hide his light under a bushel, could not resist including it in the chapter title. Books were, of course, also materially valuable, but here Gerald presented them as spiritual gifts in opposition to crassly material gifts of money. Innocent, we are assured, loved the books, showed and gave them to cardinals, except for his favourite, the *Gemma ecclesiastica*, which he kept for himself.³⁴

The book within the book, the *Gemma ecclesiastica* in the narrative of *De rebus a se gestis*, deepens the meaning of Gerald's exchange with the pope. The *Gemma ecclesiastica* has much to say on how to behave around gifts. It warns the reader that these days people who seek preferment in the Church offer 'not just licit gifts but even illicit' ones.³⁵ Gerald's gift of books evidently belonged among the former, eminently licit, even beneficial. *Gemma ecclesiastica* offered much needed warnings to the papal court. Drawing on Jerome, Gerald warned that the leaders of the Church should not perform their duties for money, but that they are not prohibited from receiving the gifts that 'because of their office they ought to accept, to provide for necessities, but not for luxury'. Gerald's books are the definition of acceptable gifts, necessary indeed for the reform of the papal court.³⁶ Presented against the corrupt background of the papal court, Gerald's gift of books becomes still more precious. He may have failed to become bishop and failed to reform Rome, but he had shown himself worthy of the honour and struggled to bring light to the shady halls of the curia. The exchanges that Gerald of Wales had himself had (and those he suspected the archbishop of having) with the pope were thereby reworked to form a central plank in his narrative on the wider ills of the papal curia and the Church in general.

The rhetorical device of using curial corruption to contrast the special splendour of the hero was widely used. In his life of St Thomas Becket, Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence (*fl.* 1172–4) lamented the weakness and corruption of the bishops who failed to support Becket. Guernes compared them to Simon Magus 'who seduced the whole world with his words and with his gifts'.³⁷ The effects of this were felt in the Rome of his day, which had become a 'thieves' den'.³⁸ Becket, however, shone out against this corrupt background. After his ordination Becket demonstrably abandoned the use of gifts that had characterised his worldly career. He offered no presents to the papal court, but obtained the pallium 'without gifts and without sin'.³⁹ Arriving at Alexander III's court, the exiled archbishop did not offer the customary gifts of gold and silver, but instead rolled out a copy of the hated Constitutions of Clarendon, in which Henry II (1154–89) had sought to strengthen his control over the English Church, in front of

³⁴ Gerald of Wales, *De rebus a se gestis*, in *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, eds. Brewer, Warner and Dimock, 1: 119: 'Praesentant vobis alii libras, sed nos libros.' On this and the importance of humour in Gerald's account more generally, see Iben Fønnesberg-Schmidt and William Kynan-Wilson, 'Smiling, Laughing and Joking in Papal Rome: Thomas of Marlborough and Gerald of Wales at the Court of Innocent III (1198–1216)', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 86 (2018): 1–29. On money as gifts to popes, see Rory Naismith, 'The Forum Hoard and Beyond: Money, Gift, and Religion in the Early Middle Ages', *Viator* 47 (2016): 35–55.

³⁵ Gerald of Wales, *Gemma ecclesiastica*, in *Giraldus Cambrensis Opera*, eds. Brewer, Warner and Dimock, 2: 130: 'Nunc autem ordinandi no auferunt sibi naturalia sed licita et illicita afferent ut ordinentur.'

³⁶ Gerald of Wales, *Gemma ecclesiastica*, 2: 134: 'Non debent ministri ecclesiae propter pecuniam officialia sua administrare; nec tamen prohibentur quod ex officio debetur accipere, ad necessitatem non ad luxuriam'; see also Gerald of Wales, *Gemma ecclesiastica*, 2: 304–15.

³⁷ Guernes de Point-Sainte-Maxence, *La vie de Saint Thomas de Canterbury*, ed. J.T.E. Thomas. 2 vols. (Paris: Peeters, 2002), 1: 96 (ll. 1231–2).

³⁸ Guernes, *Vie de Saint Thomas*, 1: 96 (l. 1233).

³⁹ Guernes, *Vie de Saint Thomas*, 1: 66 (l. 638); trans. Janet Shirley, *Garnier's Becket* (London: Phillimore, 1975), 18.

the pope. This archbishop did not purchase support but won it through his virtuous upholding of the rights of the Church.⁴⁰ Becket's avoidance of gifts contrasted with Henry II who swayed Becket's allies in the Church and among the aristocracy away from his side through the agency of 'his two dear friends Redgold and Sir Silver'.⁴¹

Yet for all the glory of an example like Becket's, bishops still needed to engage with the papacy and to show the expected honours. The letter collection of Robert Grosseteste, bishop of Lincoln, offers interesting examples of how gift exchanges were framed to anticipate and dissuade criticism. Grosseteste's letter collection is a highly polished piece of work and may have been put together by the bishop himself for circulation. These are not, then, fragments of private conversation but, in Giles Constable's words, 'self-conscious, quasi-public literary documents'.⁴² The letter collection contains a series of letters sent to Pope Gregory IX (1227–41) and other members of the papal court in 1236, shortly after Grosseteste's consecration as bishop of Lincoln. Along with the letters Grosseteste had sent gifts, but he took great care to explain that these were not the rich, corrupt presents, which unscrupulous men would use to buy influence with the papacy. Both Grosseteste and (he confidently declared) the recipients considered the gifts to be mere demonstrations of love and obedience. To the papal notary Ranfred de Benevento, Grosseteste wrote:

Because the love that burns inside me cannot but burst forth to display itself externally, as a kind of demonstration (*in aliquam exteriorem ostensionem*) of the love that I have for you, I am sending you for your kindness a very small gift (*munusculum parvum*). It is my hope that you will be so kind as to accept this, because the virtue that is the source of your strength does not appraise a gift by its size but by the affection of the giver.⁴³

The value of the gift was, conventionally, disparaged, but Grosseteste also seized the opportunity to flatter the papal notary by imputing to him the wisdom to look at the *giver* and not what had been *given*. In a letter to Gregory IX, Grosseteste similarly excused himself for sending

a glaringly modest little gift (*munusculum videlicet modicum*), knowing for a fact that your holiness, whose charity is of surpassing eminence, does not appraise a gift by its large size but by the sincerity and devotion of the giver.⁴⁴

The purpose of the gift was merely to serve, as Grosseteste wrote in the letter to Ranfred de Benevento, as a 'demonstration' of the giver's love.

Remembered gifts

Giving gifts to popes and cardinals was a fraught but necessary business. Conversely, few gifts came with a more prestigious biography than those granted by the heirs of St Peter.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Guernes, *Vie de Saint Thomas*, 1: 152 (ll. 2341–5).

⁴¹ Guernes, *Vie de Saint Thomas*, 1: 148 (ll. 2284–5), 226 (ll. 3811–13); trans. Shirley, *Garnier's Becket*, 61.

⁴² Giles Constable, *Letters and Letter-Collections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1976), 11. See the discussion in F.A.C. Mantello and J. Goering, trans., *The Letters of Robert Grosseteste, Bishop of Lincoln* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 5.

⁴³ Robert Grosseteste, *Roberti Grosseteste episcopi quondam Lincolniensis Epistolae*, ed. H.R. Luard, Rolls Series 25 (London: Longman, 1861), 131; Mantello and Goering, trans., *Letters of Robert Grosseteste*, 158.

⁴⁴ Grosseteste, *Epistolae*, 125, adapted from Mantello and Goering's translation in *Letters of Robert Grosseteste*, 152.

⁴⁵ Bolton, 'Innocent III's Gift List', 137. On the 'biography' of objects, see A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. A. Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3–63 (5); Philippe Buc, 'Conversion of Objects', *Viator* 28 (1997): 99–143.

John of Salisbury delighted in a belt and ring he had been given by Adrian IV as tokens of future preferment.⁴⁶ But even where such half-promises and expectations were absent, papal gifts carried a special cachet. In several cases we find gifts from popes celebrated not just by the recipients but also those who received them in turn, second-hand. In 1252, the English monastic chronicler Matthew Paris of St Albans gave a detailed description of a cross that had been bequeathed to St Albans by a Richard of Wendover, canon of St Paul's and one-time physician to Pope Gregory IX.

We have thought it right to make special mention of him [Richard of Wendover] in this book, because he bequeathed and bestowed with sincere devotion a certain cross to the church of St Albans. In this cross there are contained several relics, as is also conveyed by the inscriptions on the same. The figure on the cross is made of ivory, and the stem and arms of the cross have a coating of ivory ... This crucifix had once belonged to Pope Gregory, and it was most dear (*carissima*) to him. Since the above-mentioned Master Richard had been physician to the pope, when the pope was dying he bestowed what had been most dear to him to his most beloved (*carissimum sibi carissimo*), namely, the same cross to Master Richard.⁴⁷

The story of Richard of Wendover's bequest mattered to Matthew Paris. He drew attention to it with a sketched cross in the margin,⁴⁸ and repeated the story in his *Historia Anglorum*, an abbreviated version of the *Chronica majora*.⁴⁹ Matthew was clearly fascinated by the association of the cross with the pope, but it also provided a moral lesson. Matthew placed the story of Richard's death right after the story of the bad death of Robert Passelewe, a *bête noire* of Matthew's, who had died earlier the same year.⁵⁰ Robert Passelewe had, according to Matthew, been an unscrupulous and possibly corrupt royal servant.⁵¹ Richard of Wendover provided a contrast to Passelew, not just in his good death but in his emotive relationship with his master, Gregory IX. This brings us to the third and, I think, most important way in which the story mattered to Matthew. The emotive account of how Gregory gave the beloved cross, to his beloved Richard, parallels Matthews' account of how Richard in turn gave it to St Albans with sincere devotion. This, then, was not one of the sordid gifts that the classical authorities warned against, but a demonstration of affection and veneration. Through Richard's gift, St Albans was part of a chain of love that stretched to the pope himself.

Lay aristocrats also appreciated the glory of papal gifts. Isabel Marshal (d. 1240), daughter of William Marshal, earl of Pembroke, sometime countess of Hertford and Gloucester, later countess of Cornwall, would have been familiar with jokes about

⁴⁶ John of Salisbury, *The Letters of John of Salisbury*, vol. 1: *The Early Letters (1153–1161)*, eds. W.J. Millor and H.E. Butler, rev. C.N.L. Brooke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 256 (no. 52).

⁴⁷ 'De quo in hoc libro specialem facere ducimus mentionem, quia ecclesiae Sancti Albani quondam crucem legavit et spontanea contulit devotio, in qua plures reliquiae, sicut tituli protestantur earundem, inclusae continentur. Huius crucis imago eburnea est, et cooperimento eburneo redimitur stipes crucis cum brachiis, qui stipes cum brachiis patibulum appellatur. Haec crux quandoque fuerat Papae Gregorii, et eidem carissima. Et cum memoratus magister R[icardus] phisicus ipsius Papae extitisset, Papa moriturus contulit quod ei fuerat carissimum sibi carissimo; videlicet ipsam crucem magistro Richardo.' Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, ed. H.R. Luard. Rolls Series 57. 7 vols. (London: Longmans, 1872–84), 5: 299.

⁴⁸ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 16, f. 261r.

⁴⁹ Matthew Paris, *Historia Anglorum*, ed. F. Madden. Rolls Series 44. 3 vols. (London: Longmans, 1866–9), 3: 120. See Björn Weiler, 'Matthew Paris on the Writing of History', *Journal of Medieval History* 35 (2009): 254–78.

⁵⁰ Paris, *Chronica majora*, 5: 299; *Historia Anglorum*, 3: 120, R.C. Stacey, 'Robert Passelewe', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, eds. Colin Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), at <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21507>.

⁵¹ Paris, *Chronica majora*, 3: 94, 240, 289, 293, 295–6; 4: 400–1; 5: 199, 299.

papal venality from the stories that were told when the Marshal siblings gathered for family celebrations. In the *History of William Marshal*, King Phillip II Augustus (1180–1223) secured papal support against the English thanks to:

the relic which is indispensable in Rome.
 for successfully concluding business,
 for it is always necessary to grease
 palms at the court of Rome;
 there is no need to sing any other litanies.
 The relics of St Gold and St Silver,
 worthy martyrs in the eyes of Rome,
 are held in great esteem there.
 Without these, whatever laws or lawyers say,
 is not worth a fig.⁵²

But the *History* also told of how her father, after the civil war, had collaborated with the papal legate Guala Bicchieri (d. 1227) to secure peace and order in England and how her brother William Marshal the Younger had, at the old Marshal's order, made sure that the young King Henry III was securely handed over to the legate. Guala was also appointed as co-executor of the Marshal's will.⁵³

Isabel, however, managed to create a still closer link to the papacy than her father, a link she cherished for all that she might have laughed alongside her siblings about curial greed. After Isabel's death in 1240, the annals of the monastery of Tewkesbury recorded the rich bequests bestowed on the abbey by Isabel. These included, besides precious cloths and vases, 'a phial sent to her by the lord pope' ('i phialam, quam dominus Papa misit ei'). The phial contained numerous relics belonging to Pope St Cornelius; hairs of St Elizabeth the virgin; 'of the three boys' (*de tribus pueris*); of Sts Mark and Marcellin; the linen of St Agnes; the martyrs Olympius, Theodore, Simpronius, Superbia and Lucilla; St Pantaleon the martyr; Pope St Damasus; St Basil the Confessor; and the 40 Martyrs. The Tewkesbury chronicler was ignorant of the identity of the pope who had sent the relic-laden container, presumably either Honorius III (1216–27) or Gregory IX, but Isabel Marshal had clearly made a point of remembering, and passing the knowledge on to the community of Tewkesbury that she had received it from 'the lord pope'. The decision to commit this to the monastery of Tewkesbury was an emotionally important one: Isabel Marshal's first marriage (1217–30) to Gilbert Clare, earl of Hertford and Gloucester, had been celebrated in Tewkesbury in 1217. Isabel had insisted on being buried in that community beside her first husband, but her new husband, Richard of Cornwall, only agreed to letting her heart be buried in Tewkesbury, while her body was buried at Beaulieu. The pope's gift, however, followed Isabel's heart back to Tewkesbury.⁵⁴ For all that the Marshal family could joke about curial corruption,

⁵² A.J. Holden, S. Gregory and D. Crouch, eds. and trans., *History of William Marshal*. Anglo-Norman Text Society 4–6. 3 vols. (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2002–6), 2: 68–69 (ll. 11355–72). See David Crouch, 'Writing a Biography in the Thirteenth Century: The Construction and Composition of the *History of William Marshal*', in *Writing Medieval Biography, 750–1250: Essays in Honour of Professor Frank Barlow*, eds. David Bates, Julia Crick and Sarah Hamilton (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 221–35.

⁵³ Holden, Gregory and Crouch, eds., *History of William Marshal*, 2: 268, 404–8, 418 (ll. 15329–32, 18093–118, 18335).

⁵⁴ *Annales de Theokesberia*, in *Annales monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard. Rolls Series 36. 5 vols (London: Longman, 1864–9), 1: 113–14. See Linda E. Mitchell, 'The Most Perfect Knight's Countess: Isabella de Clare, Her Daughters, and Women's Exercise of Power and Influence, 1190–ca.1250', in *Medieval Elite Women and the Exercise of Power*,

Isabel's dedication to the gift she had received from the pope shows how valuable these tokens of papal favour remained.

Another gift to a lay recipient offers a particularly rich example of the various roles and meanings that papal gifts could come to employ: the four rings sent by Innocent III to Richard I of England in May 1198. Innocent had become pope in January of that year and the gift was probably intended to get their relationship off to a good start. It consisted of four golden rings each set with a different kind of jewel. In the accompanying letter, Innocent III explained the spiritual meaning of the gift: the roundness of the rings signified eternity and was a lesson to look from temporal to eternal things; the number four indicated the four main virtues, justice, courage, prudence and temperance. The jewels too were full of meaning: the emerald stood for faith, the sapphire hope, the garnet charity and the topaz good works.⁵⁵ The letter was an essential part of the papal message. It demonstrated that the pope was not just another prince winning favour with treasure, but a source of spiritual guidance – even where that guidance was delivered in the form of golden rings and jewels.

Thanks to an account from the chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond, monk of Bury St Edmunds, we also know about how this gift was, in turn, used (or received) by Richard I and that monastery. In his chronicle, Jocelin gave a detailed account of how the abbot of Bury St Edmunds, Samson, had resisted the unlawful demands of Richard I and preserved the rights of the saint. At last, the king was won over by the abbot's righteousness – and the many presents that the abbot had sent to him:

In the presence of his earls and barons he publicly praised the courage and loyalty of the abbot in high terms, and as a token of his friendship and love sent him by his messengers a valuable ring, which the Lord Pope, Innocent III, had given to him out of his great affection, it being the first gift offered him after his coronation as king.⁵⁶

The king's gift was a token of his newfound friendship with the abbot, still more glorious for its prestigious biography. It was a biography that Jocelin had silently improved: since Innocent III had assumed the papacy in January 1198 it is unlikely that he had sent a separate, earlier gift of rings to Richard I before 29 May that year and we must therefore assume that the ring was one of the four mentioned in the letter above. These, however, cannot have been the first gifts Richard received after his coronation.⁵⁷ Richard had first been crowned in September 1189; he was recrowned on 17 April 1194 following the humiliation of his captivity after the Third Crusade. Whichever of the two events Jocelin was referring to, Innocent III's rings came too late to be the first gifts received by the king. Why the change? Firstly, it is likely enough that Richard may have misremembered or exaggerated this in order to emphasise the

1100–1400: *Moving Beyond the Exceptionalist Debate*, ed. Heather J. Tanner (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 45–65.

⁵⁵ Othmar Hageneder and Anton Haidacher, eds., *Die Register Innocenz III. 1. Pontifikatsjahr, 1198/99* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994), 295–7; trans. in C.R. Cheney and W.H. Semple, eds., *Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III concerning England (1198–1216)* (London: Nelson, 1953), 1–2. See also Bolton, 'Innocent III's Gift List', 137–8.

⁵⁶ Jocelin of Brakelond, *The Chronicle of Jocelin of Brakelond: Concerning the Acts of Samson Abbot of the Monastery of St Edmund*, ed. and trans. H.E. Butler (London: Nelson, 1949), 98–9.

⁵⁷ For a glimpse of the constant stream of gifts that entered the hands of English kings, see the register edited and discussed in Benjamin L. Wild, 'A Gift Inventory from the Reign of Henry III', *English Historical Review* 125 (2010): 529–69; Nicholas Vincent, 'An Inventory of Gifts to King Henry III, 1234–5', in *The Growth of Royal Government under Henry III*, eds. David Crook and Louise J. Wilkinson (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), 121–48.

importance of the gift to Abbot Samson. But we cannot rule out that it was Jocelin himself who introduced, or strengthened, the connection between the ring and the coronation.

By establishing this connection, Jocelin connected Samson's heroic stand and the king's recognition of the same with the sacred mystery of the coronation, where the king had solemnly promised to show reverence to God and the Church, deliver justice to all and eliminate evil customs, as well as with his links to the pope, the ultimate guarantor of ecclesiastical liberty.⁵⁸ Richard's ring was a tangible reminder of a moment in which the kingdom and the Church had worked in harmony, and kings rewarded principled defenders of the Church (at least once the churchmen had won them over by steadfastness and courtly cunning). It must have felt all the more valuable at the time when Jocelin was writing, at the beginning of King John's reign, when, as Jocelin presents it, this order had come under threat.⁵⁹

Corrupting gifts

Gifts could be used as tangible reminders of the right order of the world, but they could also be interpreted as attempts to pervert the same order. The problems went beyond simply a question of Roman clerks being too eager to receive. For those raised on the classical tradition of generosity, both the receiving and giving of gifts raised potentially difficult moral questions.

The popes were aware of the dangers and took steps to avoid them. Innocent III was familiar with both classical and biblical writings on the gift and drew on both in his didactic writings. In his *De miseria humane conditionis* he warned about the shame and sin that clung to reluctance in giving and greed in receiving: 'The avaricious man is quick to demand, slow to give ... he gives in order to get, but does not get in order to give.'⁶⁰ In his *Liber de elemosyna*, Innocent III urged readers to remember 2 Corinthians' injunctions to give joyously and happily, but also incorporated one of the most popular phrases attributed to Seneca: 'He gives twice who gives fast.'⁶¹

As pope, Innocent III handled gifts carefully. In his letter to Richard I from 1198 he emphasised that the four rings were merely tokens of affection, symbols to be filled with holy meaning: 'Among the earthly valuables which the human eye covets, it desires, as specially precious, refined gold and precious stones.' Innocent recognised this before pre-empting materialistic interpretations by noting that Richard already 'abounds in

⁵⁸ Roger of Howden, *Gesta regis Henrici secundi*, ed. William Stubbs. Rolls Series 49. 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1867), 2: 81–2. See also Andrew Spencer, 'The Coronation Oath in English Politics, 1272–1399', in *Political Society in Later Medieval England: A Festschrift for Christine Carpenter*, eds. Benjamin Thompson and John Watts (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015), 38–54.

⁵⁹ See Jocelin of Brakelond, *Chronicle*, 116–17, 135.

⁶⁰ Lotario dei Segni, *De miseria condicionis humane*, ed. and trans. R.E. Lewis (Athens, GA, University of Georgia Press, 1978), 236–53, 162–5.

⁶¹ 'Libellus de Elemosyna', in *Innocentii III, Romani pontificis, Opera omnia*, vol. 5, ed. J.-P. Migne. PL 217 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1855), cols. 752–62 (750–1, 754): 'bis dat qui cito dat.' The phrase actually originated in the earlier work of Publilius Syrus; see A. Erler, 'Zur Geschichte des Spruches *Bis dat, qui cito dat*', *Philologus*, 130 (1986): 210–20. On the text, see Brenda Bolton, 'Hearts not Purses? Pope Innocent III's Attitude to Social Welfare', in *Through the Eye of a Needle: Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare*, eds. Emily A. Hanawalt and Carter Lindberg (Missouri, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1994), 123–45.

these and other treasures'. The pope's rings were only 'a token of our love and favour (*signum tamen dilectionis et gratie*)'.⁶²

The *Gesta Innocentii III* offers an account of Innocent's careful handling of a difficult gift. The penitent bishop, Conrad of Querfurt (d. 1202), had sent a number of particularly beautiful silver vases to the pope. Before accepting them, Innocent hesitated: on the one hand, Innocent did not want to refuse the gifts 'so that the bishop would not despair completely of his favour', but on the other, he feared accepting them because it might lead people to think he could be bought with precious gifts. His solution was to reciprocate with a still more precious gift: a valuable golden cup. This was an elegant solution, that demonstrated papal approachability, while indicating that it was not the matter of the gift that mattered to the pope; but it was obviously not a solution that could be endlessly repeated in more strained financial circumstances.⁶³

Yet Innocent III's mastery of the art of generosity did not save him from creative and aggressive interpretations by clerical commentators.⁶⁴ A striking example of this is found in another story of a gift by Innocent III to a king of England. When Matthew Paris copied the work of his predecessor, Roger of Wendover, into his *Chronica majora* he added a number of episodes to the account of the reign of King John. The effect of these stories, sometimes almost absurd in their aggressiveness, was to give a still more negative portrayal of the king. Among Paris' additions, under the year 1207, is a letter from Innocent III to John identical to the one sent by Innocent III to Richard in 1198 discussed above. Two possible explanations have been put forward: either Matthew had access to an imperfect copy of the letter to Richard that he misdated to John's reign, or Innocent III had sent two almost identical letters and gifts to the succeeding kings.⁶⁵ The editors of Innocent III's register consider both possibilities plausible.⁶⁶ A third possibility is that Matthew deliberately adapted the letter to suit his own agenda.⁶⁷ In telling the sordid story of John's reign, Matthew's version of the letter makes the same points about the four rings, their jewels and the point that this should not be taken as mere material treasure but as a sort of spiritual guide in the form of rings. But Matthew prefaced the letter with the comment that Innocent was eager to have John's allegiance and sent the gifts because he knew that 'John was a greedy man and a diligent collector of precious gems'.⁶⁸ According to Matthew, the dignified symbolism of the letter was a sham, a cover for an appeal to sordid materialism.

John's manifest greed, and his willingness to sell his favour for material gain, were, according to Matthew, mirrored by Innocent's own. When recording the events surrounding the baronial rebellion of 1215, Matthew Paris noted that John knew that the

⁶² Cheney and Semple, eds., *Selected Letters of Pope Innocent III*, 1. Compare the symbolic interpretation given of the banner sent to King Kalojan of Bulgaria, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Gesta Innocentii III Romani pontificis*, in *Innocentii III, Romani pontificis, Opera omnis*, vol. 1, ed. J.-P. Migne. PL 214 (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1855), cols. cxxvii–cxxviii (LXXIV).

⁶³ Migne, ed., *Gesta Innocentii*. PL 214: cols. lxxxvii–lxxxviii, trans. James M. Powell, *The Deeds of Pope Innocent III by an Anonymous Author* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 60; Bolton, 'Innocent III's Gift List', 138–9.

⁶⁴ Bolton, 'Hearts not Purses', 142–3.

⁶⁵ Cheney and Semple, eds., *Selected letters of Pope Innocent III*, 1; Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, 2: 512, n. 1; Bolton, 'Gift List', 138.

⁶⁶ Hageneder and Haidacher, eds., *Register Innocenz III 1. Pontifikatsjahr, 1198/99*, 295–6.

⁶⁷ I owe this suggestion to William Kynan-Wilson.

⁶⁸ Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, 2: 512: '... Johannem cupidum esse et diligentem inquisitorem et adquisitorem gemmarum pretiosarum ...'. On John's interest in jewellery, see Hugh M. Thomas, *Power and Pleasure: Court Life under King John, 1199–1216* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 60–2.

pope 'had an insatiable thirst for money and was readily and easily moved to all kinds of sins, by the giving or promise of rewards'.⁶⁹ By sending the pope a great part of his treasury, and promising more, John gained Innocent's support against the barons and bishops who opposed him. John and Innocent's relationship was a twisted mirror of the classical ideal of friendship: it was knowledge of each other's sins, not virtues, that formed its basis, and the presents they sent to each other were nothing more than bribes, given only to further their own vain schemes.

As we have seen above, Matthew was not indifferent to the glory that stemmed from a papal gift given out of sincere love and affection. But he was constantly on guard for signs that the popes and their representatives abused the conventions of generosity, and their offices, whether to extort precious gifts from the English,⁷⁰ or by handing out gifts to buy support for vain worldly schemes. On one such occasion, Matthew remarked with a familiar motif from classical writings on the gift, that the pope's generosity was only bait for his 'curved hook'.⁷¹

Conclusions

The reception and distribution of gifts played a vital part in papal communication with the dispersed elites of Latin Europe, sending important messages about favour and acceptance. But gifts were difficult tools too, their meanings being open to creative reinterpretation, not least in the written works in which some of the papacy's partners presented their interactions. Despite the efforts of able givers and receivers like Innocent III, it was easy for writers like Gerald of Wales and Matthew Paris to use the idea of papal corruption, either to explain their own failures as litigants or to add poignancy to a more general disappointment with the state of Christendom and the Church.

The papacy's difficult position exemplified a much deeper difficulty surrounding the exchange of gifts. It can be seen already in the example from the Book of Kings discussed above: it is right for Saul to offer presents to Samuel; but Samuel's hands must be kept free of sordid *munera*. In his mirror for princes, *De principis instructione*, Gerald of Wales included an extract from Jerome reflecting on the problem. Spiritual men and women inevitably find themselves beset by those who wish to give them gifts, but 'even the man who begs that he may offer something, thinks less of you when you accept; and, wonderful to say, if you reject him, he will esteem you all the more.'⁷² The ascetic's choice: to reject all gifts, however, was not feasible for the papacy. Gifts and other voluntary grants were essential to the economic needs of the curia. Political needs and responsibilities also made it impossible for the papacy to abstain from the exchange of gifts: they

⁶⁹Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora* 2: 565: '... pecuniaeque sitior insatiabilis, et ad omnia scelera pro praemiis datis vel promissis cereus et proclivus'.

⁷⁰Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora* 3: 395–6, 412; 4: 160, 376, 379, 394, 414; 5: 199. On Matthew's complex attitude to the papacy, see, Weiler, 'Matthew Paris and the Writing of History', 270, n. 169.

⁷¹Matthew Paris, *Chronica majora*, 5: 347: 'Tali igitur edulio hamum recurvum fecit concupiscibilem, quo credit eum citius inescare'; compare Seneca, *De beneficiis*, 4.20.3, Horace, *Epistles*, in *Q. Horati Flacci. Opera*, ed. E.C. Wickham, rev. H.W. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 1.7.74; Martial, *Epigrams*, ed. and trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey. 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Library, 1993), 5.18, 6.63; on Matthew's interest in classical advice on the gift, see Kjær, *Medieval Gift*, 85–97.

⁷²Jerome, *Epistulae*, in *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi Epistulae*, ed. Isidor Hilberg. 3 vols. (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1910–18), 1: 439 (52.16); Gerald of Wales, *De principis instructione*, ed. and trans. Robert Bartlett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2018), 98–109 (106–7).

could not, as the *Gesta Innocenti III* had it, allow the potentates of Europe to despair of hope of their favour. John of Salisbury claimed to have asked Pope Adrian IV to intervene against the rampant corruption in Rome, Adrian had replied with a reference to the ancient story of the Rebellion of the Members: the curia was like the stomach of the commonwealth, which needed to accept gifts to have the strength to provide for others. Even a critic like John of Salisbury, who was elsewhere quick to condemn the illicit use of gifts, had to recognise that there were no easy solutions to the curia's problems.⁷³

Exchanges of gifts with the papacy epitomised the fundamental problem of how to reconcile absolute ethical and spiritual demands with the pragmatic requirements of political power.⁷⁴ Both gifts and popes provoked reflections on this problem on their own; when brought together they represented difficulties that could only be navigated, never resolved.

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Note on contributor

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⁷³ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, in *Ioannis Saresberiensis episcopi Carnotensis Policratici sive De nugis curialium et vetigiis philosophorum libri VIII*, ed. C.C.J. Webb. 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 2: 66–73 (6.24). See also Wetzstein, 'Die Gier des Papstes', 357; Kjær, *Medieval Gift*, 67–74.

⁷⁴ For wider perspectives on the problem, see Jonathan Parry, 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"', *Man* 21 (1986): 453–73, especially 459–60.