



**Accessus:**

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

**Accessus**

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Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 1

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## Foreword

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### Recommended Citation

Donavin, Georgiana and Salisbury, Eve () "Foreword," *Accessus*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 1.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol3/iss1/1>

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## Foreword

### **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Madison Jones for help with proofreading this volume.

## Foreword

In volume 3 of *Accessus*, we demonstrate our commitment to publishing new voices articulating new theoretical approaches to premodern literature. Here we offer two articles by emerging scholars in the field of Gower Studies who position their readings of the *Confessio Amantis* at the crossroads of science, materialism, psychoanalysis, and gender studies. We believe that such radical interdisciplinarity, incorporating the latest thinking on health, cognition, gender formation, and social justice leads us to original perceptions of Gower's major Middle English poem and current medical practices. Both articles speak to the productive engagement of past and present: authors from the past coaching present readers in well-being and present readers imbuing characters from the past with contemporary conceptions of wholeness. As a result, we see in these two articles great potential for both a revitalization of Gower Studies and fruitful conversations concerning what contemporary medicine might learn from medieval texts.

Presented originally in a panel on "Gower and Medicine" sponsored by The Gower Project at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in 2015, the two articles in this volume mark a turn toward narrative medicine, cognitive science, and the experience of psychic trauma. In their readings of select tales of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Jenny Boyar and M. Bychowski identify features of the poem that resonate with current diagnostic and therapeutic practices. They show us how motivational speakers advocating psychic healing and authoritative diagnostic manuals speak to Gower's fourteenth-century retellings of the tales of Narcissus and Iphis, stories reconfigured from Ovid's writings in the classical Roman past. Cast within the dialogic framework of confession---a method of "talk therapy" long recognized for its therapeutic effects---such narratives remind us that the processes of diagnosis and healing were as concerning then as they are now. By putting contemporary medical texts and models of

treatment into conversation with Gower's tales, these scholars demonstrate how writings of the past retain the capacity to communicate their concerns to twenty-first century audiences.

Boyar sets the stage for this trans-temporal dialectic with her discussion of the mirror as a material object. Diverging from the commonplace focus on the "speculum" as a mirror in which medieval princes and magistrates view the sources of their authority, Boyar turns to object-oriented ontology and thing theory based upon the work of Kellie Robertson (among others) to reconsider entrenched notions of mirrors as metaphorical abstractions. In Boyar's reading, mirrors are grounded in a real-world material environment rather than in the rarefied realm of neo-Platonic thought. As material objects mirrors were made to reflect the person gazing into them rather than to remind that person of the ideal forms of justice or right rule. Further, because medieval mirrors were made of lead, they were not only less than ideal, but imperfect in both construction and function. Like a pool of water whipped up by the wind, mirrors made of lead produced a murky, imperfect reflection. This is the kind of mirroring effect that provides a substrate for Boyar's reading of the "Tale of Narcissus" and the significance of Gower's divergence from his Ovidian source. While in Ovid's account of the myth, Narcissus sees the image of a young man with whom he falls in love, in Gower's retelling Narcissus sees not a man, but rather a "nymphic woman." For Boyar this marks a subtle deviation that problematizes the most prominent scene of mirroring in the poem. That Gower's Narcissus both is and is *not* the man in the mirror complicates the presumed psychic healing at the end of the *Confessio*: when Venus holds up a mirror to Amans, he sees himself not as the youthful and bright-eyed lover, but rather as the aged and nearly blind John Gower. A blurred reflection from the mirror answers the blurred eyesight of the poet so that a distinct representation of the lover's identity and health is impossible.

There is no clear resolution in Amans / John Gower's seeming transformation, but rather an indication of an ongoing dysphoria. By turning to the material world---both in refractions of water and in the distorted reflections of medieval mirrors---Boyar's "experimental investigation" challenges traditional readings of the healing power of the mirror taken for granted in the final scene of the *Confessio*: Gower's "Tale of Narcissus" does not provide a resolution for the divided Self as so frequently presumed, but rather invites its readers to come to their own conclusions. As Boyar suggests, the *Confessio* can be read as a reflection on "dimmer visions" that contribute to a more complex and nuanced comprehension of "the full reaches of narrative possibility and, *perhaps*, healing" (emphasis added). Imperfect reflections and the absence of a definitive resolution for the tale prompt further consideration of the need for a conventional ending. Is narrative resolution really necessary? As readers, we are invited to take up the tools of diagnosis and explicate this tale for ourselves.

M. Bychowski's reading of dysphoric youths in the *Confessio* turns our attention to the "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe" and what she calls "the medicalization of madness." Drawing upon the work of Judith Butler ("Undiagnosing Gender"), Diane Watt (*Amoral Gower*), and others, Bychowski identifies parallels between diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (fifth edition) and its prefiguration in Gower's poem. While in the *DSM-V* the condition is located in the individual without consideration of the complicity of the larger community, in Gower dysphoria is not exclusively an individual matter but rather a symptom of "discord between the body and agency caused by social divisions." That Gower's notion of "divisioun" and present-day assumptions about gender dysphoria have something in common becomes clear when Bychowski turns to diagnoses made by medical authorities (and others) at the expense of an individual's (typically a young person's)

perspective and experience. In these cases, “divisioun” exists between transsexual youths and their parents or doctors and ultimately inside the body and psyche of the young person suffering from unwelcome professional labels and interventions. That narratives constructed by presumptuous authoritarian adults have a silencing effect on the trans-child’s voice demonstrates the flaws in a system predicated upon an oath to heal rather than harm.

Gower’s poem provides an avenue into a more comprehensive understanding of present-day health care not only by the tales he tells but also by his demonstration that a religious system reliant upon seven deadly sins affects perceptions of bodies, behaviors, and illnesses. Bychowski’s discussion of gender dysphoria in relation to Gower’s discourses on sloth (“acedia”) exposes the defects in modern diagnostic protocols and the medical theories driving them. In the *Confessio*’s Book IV, the poet does not privilege the diagnostic voice pronouncing a lover’s “acedia,” but instead separates it linguistically by defining “acedia” in Latin and sometimes spatially, since this commentary takes place in the margins of some manuscripts. When Genius identifies the sins and sicknesses of love in Middle English, he does so in dialogue with the lover and tempers advice according to the lover’s response. Unlike the modern medical authorities who overtake the diagnostic process at the expense of the “ailing” individual as noted above, Gower provides neither an individualized diagnosis nor a subsequent treatment plan. Rather, the text offers the ability to consider the medical definition and control of medieval “trans” bodies under the auspices of sin by presenting Iphis’s problem and cure as socially constructed. By bringing Gower’s tales into conversation with current practices, Bychowski urges readers to “create alternative structures that invite the silenced and depressed back into community discourse. . . [R]ather than having one authority speak for another, our listening and waiting allow dysphoric youths to express their needs in their own voices.”

In their complex, trans-disciplinary, trans-temporal readings of these tales in the *Confessio Amantis*, Boyar and Bychowski hold up a mirror to modern systems of health care in ways that disrupt presumptions about its status in relation to the past. Perhaps the recognition of critical biases of authorities in the disciplines implicated in these readings says something about the arrogance of modernity and an all-too-willing acceptance of the premise of evolution that human societies advance from a primitive state and progress over time. As Boyar and Bychowski show us, sometimes progress can be identified in innovative and prescient observations of human behaviors that disrupt conventional modes of thinking whenever they occur. Cast within a dialogic framework marked as “medieval,” Gower’s interpolations of classical poetry encourage us to consider the causes of human suffering and the recurrence of such suffering over time. As Boyar and Bychowski recognize in their distinctive individual readings, Gower offers neither a definitive diagnosis of *all* human illness nor a treatment plan for addressing the dis-ease of social orders imperfectly construed. Rather, he provides us with a collection of tales that allow us to communicate across time and space, speak in our own voices, and shape our own futures.

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