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# Reflection, Interrupted: Material Mirror Work in the Confessio Amantis

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## Reflection, Interrupted: Material Mirror Work in the *Confessio Amantis*

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Eve Salisbury for her generous encouragement and insights at every phase of this project, as well as Georgiana Donavin, an anonymous reader, and the panelists (MW Bychowski, Sarah Gillette, and Pamela Yee) and attendees at The Gower Project panel (“Gower and Medicine” at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, MI, in May 2015) for their valuable feedback on successive versions. For her pivotal suggestions at the an earlier version of this essay and, in some cases, seminal stages of this project, as well as her continued support, I thank Marilyn Rosen.

## Reflection, Interrupted: Material Mirror Work in the *Confessio Amantis*

Jenny Boyar

### Working with Mirrors



Your life is a mirror. Your life, the way you are experiencing it, reflects your relationship with yourself: the way you see yourself, your beliefs about yourself, your confidence in yourself — all of this has a huge influence on how you experience your life, your relationships, your work, everything. The mirror is everywhere. It's all around you. Now, this very moment, is a mirror. In fact you could say that your relationship to now is in many ways a mirror to yourself. For many of us, we're so manic and so busy and so hyperactive that we have no time for now. And we have no time for ourselves. We're living in the not-now. We're chasing happiness, we're searching for success, we're looking for love, and all the while we have no time for ourselves and no time for now. Now is a mirror. The more present we are, the more we have a healthy relationship with now, the more we can let go of the past. And also we can create a whole other future— a future that is much more a reflection of our true selves, if you like.<sup>1</sup>

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I would like to thank Eve Salisbury for her generous encouragement and insights at every phase of this project, as well as Georgiana Donavin, an anonymous reader, and the panelists (MW Bychowski, Sarah Gillette, and Pamela Yee) and attendees at The Gower Project panel (“Gower and Medicine” at the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo, MI, in May 2015) for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this essay and, in some cases, successive versions. For her pivotal suggestions at the seminal stages of this project, as well as her continued support, I thank Marilyn Rosen.

The description of the “mirror principle” transcribed above comes from Robert Holden, in a video promotion for “Love Yourself: 21 Days to Improved Self Esteem with Mirror Work.”<sup>2</sup> Holden, a motivational author as well as a self-proclaimed expert on happiness, exudes genuine calm and a reassuring confidence as he stands in front of a sign that reads “LOVE” in huge, sprawling letters. Later on in the video, he brings out a small framed mirror, which he faces to illustrate the twice-daily affirmations by which we come to know our personal truth, the practical counterpart to the mirror principle’s theory. “All you need is a mirror,” he says. “Any mirror will do.” He notes that he is using a larger mirror “so you get to see the whole process . . . crystal clear.”<sup>3</sup>

The practice Holden illustrates, which he refers to as “the most powerful tool on the planet,” is called “Mirror Work” and comes originally from fellow motivational author Louise Hay.<sup>4</sup> Mirror Work is, for Hay, a way to challenge and ultimately overcome the negativity with which many of us feel plagued, and a means by which we achieve “self-love” and come to live a life that is more reflective of our “true” selves. As another promotion concludes, “If you’re struggling in your relationships, in your work or you are experiencing health issues, we encourage you to try these mirror work exercises.”<sup>5</sup> The assumption here is that people who seek

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1. “Video 3: Discover the Art of Loving Yourself,” Video from LouiseHay.com, 17:36, Hay House University, 2015, <http://www.louisehay.com/lovingyourself-video3>.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

Mirror Work experience difficulty looking in the mirror, which speaks to larger challenges of self-acceptance. Holden, for example, instructs us to alter our focus such that “your mirror is your friend.”<sup>6</sup> What is also taken as a more basic assumption is that mirrors are objects that endure daily use; through them, we are aware of human dysfunctions, but we can also, by learning to see ourselves differently in the reflective and “crystal clear” surface, be therapeutically transformed.

Mirror Work is but one example of the mirror’s therapeutic and medicinal deployments. Many schools of psychotherapy operate under a premise of conceptual mirroring — that is, therapy serves as a mirror through which a client can see and come to know and understand a more authentic version of his or her self.<sup>7</sup> Another form of mirror therapy is prescribed for phantom limb pain — in which the presence of an amputated limb remains felt — or other manifestations of non-visible pains. Here, mirror therapy involves a subject looking in the mirror and moving an able limb so as to imagine both able and absent or inefficient limbs to be working together.<sup>8</sup> In all of these cases, mirrors restore something that is lost, or bring something fragmented or incomplete closer to more unified wholeness. Yet they do so non-invasively, drawing on imaginative faculties — they are without, for example, the intrusion or incision of a

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5. This quotation is from a mass e-mail message promoting Mirror Work to Louise Hay’s subscribers. Available online: <http://www.socialmail.com/emails/hay-house/2619972/free-video-power-rewards-self-love>

6. “Video 3,” Louisehay.com.

7. See, for example, Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring people: The New Science of How We Connect with Others* (New York: Picador, 2008). Mirror neuron theory to the extent that it is understood would also not be irrelevant. See: Vittorio Gallese and Alvin Goldman, “Mirror Neurons and the Simulation Theory of Mind-reading,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 2.12 (1998): 493-501.

8. V. S. Ramachandran, D. C. Rogers-Ramachandran, and S. Cobb, “Touching the Phantom Limb,” *Nature* 377 (1995): 489–90.

more traditionally conceived medical practice in which surgery is performed or medicine administered.

Most of these therapeutic properties of mirrors would appear to emerge out of present sympathies: attitudes toward the self, therapy, and medicine that are very different from those of the Middle Ages. But these ideas of the fragmented turned whole, as well as the restorative and even therapeutic properties of mirrors, are frequently brought out of John Gower's work in the *Confessio Amantis*. The therapeutic thrust of the *Confessio*'s framework, its movements toward self-examination, has been said to hinge upon mirrors in both metaphor and practice. James Simpson writes that "self-knowledge" is "implicit in the structure of the whole poem,"<sup>9</sup> a structure that Andrea Schutz in her sensitive reflections connects to mirrors themselves: "Genius's stories come from books and are a series of mirrors by means of which Amans must examine himself, and again metaphor is made explicit since Genius controls Amans' interpretations with his own: at one level the *Confessio* is supposed to yield one correct vision."<sup>10</sup> The mirror is perhaps most memorably present in the work's culminating scene, where Venus holds up a mirror to Amans that allows him to see his true self, to penetrate his poetic persona and recognize John Gower the poet. The mirrored ending is seen as revelatory and transformative, a healing counterpoint to the *Confessio*'s sickness and self-questioning that transcends the narrative world of the *Confessio* itself.

My intention in this paper is to modify certain aspects of this narrative of the restorative mirror, including implicit assumptions about the mirror itself. As an alternative to reading the

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9. James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Allan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 204.

10. Andrea Schutz, "Absent and Present Images: Mirrors and Mirroring in John Gower's 'Confessio Amantis,'" *The Chaucer Review* 34 (1999): 107–8.

*Confessio*'s ending as a therapeutic and mimetic capstone, I will be questioning the purpose of mirrors in this particular capacity, to suggest that the mirror might serve more dissociating ends. Mirrors can, in fact, when considered in a more material and object-oriented context, point to ambiguities, or dimmed potentials, in Gower's concept of unity, typically seen as perpetuated by the end of the *Confessio*. In order to conceive of this narrative, my paper is organized around two moments in the poem in which the self is seen and in different ways recognized through a reflective surface: the "Tale of Narcissus," and the concluding moment in which Amans looks into the mirror to see, eventually, John Gower. Both moments have been subject to mimetic readings, though one is seen as an adapted mythological exemplum, the other, a healing reality.<sup>11</sup> But these moments are also, I will suggest, examples in which reflective surfaces operate according to conventional properties of mirroring. My reading of these scenes is informed by the object of the mirror that distinguishes the earlier experience of Narcissus from the concluding gaze of Amans — how the mirror's material uses and availability in the Middle Ages informs what it might signify, or where it might occlude signification, at the *Confessio*'s conclusion.

My focus on the mirror as a material object builds on increasing medievalist attentions to materiality through discourses such as "object-oriented ontology" and "thing theory," which emerge in part from a general omission of the Middle Ages in materialist accounts. This is an absence that Kellie Robertson both draws attention to and works toward resolving in her essay, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto."<sup>12</sup> Robertson brings out the agencies of objects beyond their anthropomorphic relation to humans, in effect reanimating what is typically regarded as

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11. See Schutz's discussion about the "Tale of Narcissus" and her remarks, when she comes to the end of the *Confessio*, that "Here at last, then, is a mirror of self-awareness. Acteon has none, Narcissus has a distorting one, but Amans gets truth." Schutz, "Absent," 119, 121.

12. Kellie Robertson, "Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto" *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 99-118.

inanimate. Though this focus represents more recent attentions — and it should be noted that Robertson is not alone in her efforts — materialism has not been divorced from Gower studies. Simpson, for example, has written of the ways in which Gower gives form to matter in the *Confessio* as Genius informs the substance of his stories.<sup>13</sup> The mirror at the end of the *Confessio* can, in these terms, be interpreted as giving form to the process of self-recognition — a conceptual framing that can even be seen in Holden’s more recent statement that “your life is a mirror,” where the expanse of one’s life can be tangibly understood as operating like a mirror.

Yet closer consideration of where the mirror functions not just as a concept of materiality, but also as a material object, would be particularly fruitful both to a reading of the *Confessio* and emergent object-oriented approaches. Objects themselves have been described as serving as “mirrors” to mankind.<sup>14</sup> This is a narrative that Robertson, for example, considers to be limited; there is rather a “mutually constitutive relation of humans and things” in which the line between object and human is blurred, where objects can hold their own autonomy as more than merely reflective mechanisms for human subjects.<sup>15</sup> The mirror, however, is uniquely purposed as a reflective medium for the human beings who use it. It is therefore in its literal use an object that reflects a human subject. Indeed, Gower’s moment of self-recognition would appear to hinge in the *Confessio*’s narrative upon the performance of a particular mirror and the certainty that the mirror will bear the reflection of the person who gazes into it. The mirror is

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13. Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 3. Also cited in Robertson, “Medieval Materialism,” 112. For other recent approaches to materialism among medievalists, see for example Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed. *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* (Washington, D.C.: Oliphaunt Books, 2012).

14. Kellie Robertson, “Medieval Things: Materiality, Historicism, and the Premodern Object,” *Literature Compass* 5.6 (2008): 1060-80, 1062-3.

15. *Ibid.*, 1065.



considered instrumental precisely because it is believed to possess an integral piece of Amans, to provide an accurate reflection by which Amans can finally see himself as John Gower.

As an object, however, the mirror does not necessarily have temporal unity; that is, its functions and forms are not stable over time or texts. Nor is it, I will suggest, functionally consistent across Gower's *Confessio*. My approach to the mirror might be viewed among object-oriented theorists as a return to a more traditional attempt to situate the mirror-as-object in its historical context,<sup>16</sup> although my hope is to, in keeping with recent scholarship, explore the extent to which the mirror is an object in flux amidst its narrative surroundings, where the mirror does more than merely reflect its human subject. If our idea of matter depends upon an imaginative construction as much as a physical composition, then we might envision that the last scene of the *Confessio*, uniquely derived from a more standard encounter, could be interpreted based on how Gower's readers might have experienced, and accordingly imagined, the mirror as a material object. Unlike the other mirrors in Gower, the ontological status of the final mirror would not appear to be wrought with complexities: it is not miraculously prescient, as Virgil's mirror,<sup>17</sup> nor does its image pose the kinds of dangers Narcissus eventually succumbs to. At this moment in which the narrative attempts to move beyond its allegorical framework, what the mirror signifies — or, in fact, struggles to signify — could depend upon how mirrors, as well as other reflective surfaces, functioned in the worlds and minds of Gower's readers.

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16. See, for example, Robertson's description of the anachronisms at risk in fetishizing the object. She notes especially Douglas Brustler's warning about a potentially emergent "tchotchkie criticism" that provides only the illusion of insight into a historical moment. Robertson, "Medieval Materialisms," 101.

17. Elsewhere in the *Confessio*, in Book V (2031-2272), the "Tale of Virgil's Mirror" presents a truth-telling mirror crafted by Virgil the Mage that must be destroyed through fabricated dreams. All of these elements place Virgil's mirror in a world that is decisively of fantasy and, with reference to the poet Virgil, the mirror operates more explicitly as a literary device.

## Medieval Mirroring

That Gower's work demonstrates a preoccupation with mirrors is an observation that is neither novel nor painstakingly reached. The very title of one of Gower's major works is *Mirour de l'Omme*, later *Speculum Meditantis*, translated as "Mankind's Mirror," and the work itself employs the mirror as a means of moral and religious reflection.<sup>18</sup> Likewise the framework of Gower's *Confessio* has, as mentioned previously, been described as a type of mirror, which is in keeping with a medieval *speculum* genre in which encyclopedic texts were written for readers to find themselves within the expansive contents.<sup>19</sup> And while my paper is organized around two mirrored moments in Gower, mirrors appear at several points throughout the *Confessio*: in Virgil's Mirror and the Ovidian trio of Narcissus, Acteon, and Medusa, as well as in the Trump of Death.<sup>20</sup>

Gower also draws on, and later comes to represent, a rich tradition in which mirrors are a persistent target of philosophical inquiry, with but a few major examples being Plato, Cicero, Seneca, Lacan, and Derrida. M. H. Abrams uses the concept of the mirror as an analogy for the entire body of pre-Romantic criticism, where the more Platonic aims of art were to mirror the world.<sup>21</sup> In the classical and exegetical tradition the scriptures are frequently referenced as a mirror. For the medieval Christian tradition, the mirror serves as a metaphor for God, replicative purity and even the purity of the Virgin Mary herself.<sup>22</sup> Dante contrasted the superior mirror,

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18. See, for example, Siân Echard, ed., *A Companion to Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

19. Schutz, "Absent," 107.

20. A grouping made by Schutz. Schutz, "Absent."

21. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

22. Goldberg, *The Mirror and the Man*, 112, 115.

which illuminated God, with the inferior mirror ascribed to the natural law of reflection.<sup>23</sup> Vision is, as Suzanne Conklin Akbari notes in her study on the optical aspects of allegory, conceived of as a dichotomy between good and evil: “the good mirror which makes visible what could otherwise never be perceived, and the bad mirror which inverts the true image before it.”<sup>24</sup> Though these examples are selectively drawn from distinct lines of thought, they collectively demonstrate the mirror as a means of conceiving or perceiving of the world.

Given that the mirror works theoretically as a tool for understanding, it is no surprise that in the Middle Ages the mirror was intimately connected to reading practices. The *Mirror for Magistrates*, critically influential to the *Confessio*, would be an example of one of the aforementioned specular texts, and is also one of the earliest textual appearances of metaphoric mirroring. Also influential were the “mirrors for princes,” which imparted political theory in the form of advice addressed to a ruler; these texts, as such, are often considered a type of early “self-help” genre.<sup>25</sup> James Wimsatt, in one of the initial studies on allegory and the mirror, puts the mirror in literary context as an encyclopedic manual of ideals, which he contrasts to personified allegory: “Allegories . . . are plots which meaningfully analyze generalized experiences, and mirrors are ordered collections of descriptive materials, characters, or actions which present comprehensive images of experience or knowledge.”<sup>26</sup> Augustine implies that

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23. Ibid., 131.

24. Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 7.

25. Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass: Mirror-imagery in Titles and Texts of the Middle Ages and English Renaissance*, trans. Gordon Collier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 49, 172. Grabes is one of several to make the self-help comparison (36).

26. James I. Wimsatt, *Allegory and Mirror: Tradition and Structure in Middle English Literature* (New York: Irvington, 1971), 31. Gower, too, comes up in this study, but only insofar as his work is described as failing to mirror.

some allegories too are mirrors by which a reader can access what is not otherwise available through language alone. Yet the mirror of the text can deceive. As Akbari writes, “figurative language may be able to convey meanings that elude literal language, inadequate since the Fall; yet it too suffers from the postlapsarian defect that makes all language able to mislead the reader.”<sup>27</sup> Language, as Akbari goes on to say, strives without success to make transparent subject and object, reader and meaning, which is allegory’s goal.<sup>28</sup> Presumably the visual aspects of allegory, gleaned from its figurative language, are part of what enables it to be regarded as, at least ideally, a more powerful mirror than language alone. In allegory’s highly visual schema, we can develop the skill to see more clearly; allegory’s mirroring, as such, can constitute a medieval method of self-help not entirely removed from the opening, modern example of *Mirror Work*.

When the mirror appears as an object in literary texts, including allegories, it is often used as a type of a conceit, usually as a magical artifact that reveals a certain truth, or blatantly distorts it to impart a moral conclusion. Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale* includes a frequently referenced example of an enchanted mirror, which possesses mind-reading properties in a tale that is itself scattered with magical objects. Gower’s own “*Tale of Virgil’s Mirror*” explores the supernatural prescience of a particular mirror, which also serves the plot with its extraordinary capacities — in this case, toward an end that mirrors wisdom through Crassus’s exemplum. Ovid, who is throughout the *Confessio* one of Gower’s major sources, frequently employs mirrors to highlight points of recognition in metamorphoses. And out of Ovid, of further relevance to medieval readers that certainly included Gower, comes the *Roman de la Rose* and the enchanted crystals through which Narcissus destructively discovers his self-reflection.

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27. Akbari, *Veil*, 10.

28. *Ibid.*, 7.

Yet Gower, even as he in some places follows traditional literary uses of mirrors, elsewhere complicates them. As Schutz points out, the tales of Acteon and Medusa, both Ovidian narratives in the *Confessio*, show Gower removing mirrors from his source.<sup>29</sup> The mirrors that Gower omits serve in Ovid's narrative as points of intervention wrought through magic — whether reflection allows Acteon to recognize his transformation into a stag, or for Perseus to see Medusa. Gower, in choosing not to include these mirrors, limits such scenes of self-realization. What his decisions might further suggest, though, is that Gower prioritizes only a few mirrored scenes, that he uses the revelatory properties of the mirror sparingly, and not always supernaturally. As I will go on to suggest, we might see Gower as holding particular, purposeful interest in the mundane use of the mirror as an object. These interests warrant further investigation into the nature of medieval mirrors as well as their elusive reflections in the *Confessio*.

### **“The like of his visage”: Narcissus and Diffuse Reflections**

While the final scene of the *Confessio* is perhaps its most apparent moment of revelation found ostensibly in reflection, the “Tale of Narcissus” operates, in certain ways, as its mirrored counterpart. The story of Narcissus, which Schutz groups within an Ovidian triad in which Gower deals with sins of sight, is an example in which Gower maintains Ovid's moment of recognition through a reflective surface. It is also, as I consider it, the first major use of a conventionally reflective medium in the poem. Here a mirrored appearance reveals a darker, even counter-therapeutic image, when Narcissus wanders to the edge of the well and is alarmed by the nymph he sees reflected in its surface:

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29. Schutz, “Absent,” 112.

Into the welle and hiede tok,  
 He sih the like of his visage,  
 And wende ther were an ymage  
 Of such a nimphe as tho was faie,  
 Wherof that love his herte assaie  
 Began, as it was after sene,  
 Of his sotie, and made him wene  
 It were a womman that he syh.  
 The more he cam the welle nyh,  
 The nerr cam sche to him agein;  
 So wiste he nevere what to sein;  
 For whanne he wepte, he sih hire wepe,  
 And whanne he cride, he tok good kepe,  
 The same word sche cride also:  
 And thus began the newe wo,  
 That whilom was to him so strange. (I. 2314-29)<sup>30</sup>

The water's reflective properties are especially pronounced: the image Narcissus sees cries and speaks along with him — a mirroring that extends to the poetry itself in the reflective synchysis

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30. All quotations from the *Confessio Amantis* are taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1> <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-2>, and <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confession-amantis-volume-3>. Subsequent quotations will be cited parenthetically by book and line.

of the alliterative lines, “For whanne he wepete, he sih hire wepe, / And whanne he cride, he tok good kepe” (I. 2325-26). Yet Narcissus feels a strange “newe wo” not simply because he sees himself, or feels enamored with himself, but because where he might expect to find his reflection, he finds instead a nymphic woman.

This moment of the *Confessio* is a departure from its Ovidian source, where Narcissus shows more awareness of seeing himself — a change that Schutz attributes to a medieval skepticism toward mirrors. She observes the similarities between Amans and Narcissus, and notes how this tale importantly differs from the other mirror references in the *Confessio* because it is a moment in which Narcissus sees a version of himself, even if it is a vision that troubles him.<sup>31</sup> M. Bychowski offers a provocative reading of the tale as a fragmenting and tragic portrayal of transgendered desire and death.<sup>32</sup> What is emphasized, and aptly, across these readings is this scene’s association with dysphoria and disunity, trauma and tragedy, all augmented by Gower’s version of the story. If the tale has any restorative properties, they are left heavily up to readers to determine; Amans, despite any evident connections to Narcissus, including, as Schutz points out, a fixation on the image of a physically absent woman,<sup>33</sup> takes away from the tale his separation from it. Upon hearing it, he announces, “This vice I thenke for to fle” (I. 2368).

Even if Amans is unable to see himself in Narcissus’s story, the tale would have likely in its familiarity alone provided mimetic opportunity for Gower’s readers. To people of the Middle

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31. Schutz, “Absent,” 109, 119.

32. M. Bychowski, “Mirrors of Madness: Trans Suicides in Gower’s Narcissus,” *Transliteration: Things Transform*, July 4, 2014, <http://www.thingstransform.com/2014/07/mirrors-of-madness-trans-suicide-in.html>

33. Schutz, “Absent,” 119.

Ages the narrative was well known: through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Roman de la Rose* perhaps, but also in the popularity and widespread fascination with the Narcissus myth. So while these fictional elements as many have noted about *Confessio* as a whole allow readers to maintain some distance as they heed the apparent warnings of Narcissus's story, there would be a certain degree of identification with a tale that is reflected in countless other texts. As J. Allan Mitchell writes with respect to Gower's use of the exemplary narrative, finding resemblance in a poem is a type of Augustinian assurance that, "the world has a sense about it that is produced out of the relations of its contrastic parts . . . exemplary narrative may be read and reread in the continual therapeutic recollection of the self."<sup>34</sup> An exemplary narrative that emerges out of many previous retellings provides continually self-healing properties. And so the harrowing and sinful suicide of Narcissus is rendered with instructive potential because it is a story with which Gower's readers would have been especially acquainted.

What I also suggest, however, is that readers would find further familiarity in the tale's representation of seeing a reflection in water, rendered even closer to experience by Gower. Though Narcissus is very firmly situated in a mythical tradition, the pool of water in which he sees a version of himself represents a reflective reality. Water was a resource for reflection that preexisted the mirror,<sup>35</sup> and it was likely a key reflective surface in the Middle Ages when, as I will soon consider further, mirrors were limited in both function and availability. And water, though it is in rare, still moments capable of the startlingly clear specular reflection of our mirrors today, would otherwise emit a hazier, "diffuse" reflection produced by the uneven

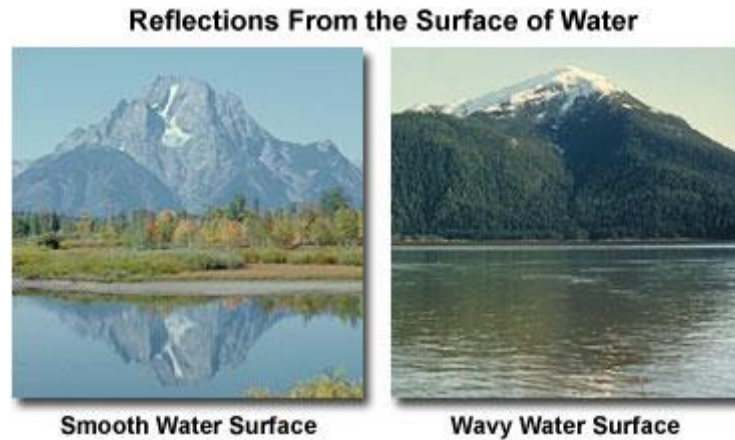
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34. J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 68.

35. See Goldberg, *Mirror and Man*, 3, more anecdotally; for a more scientific explanation, see J. M. Enoch, "History of mirrors dating back 8000 years," *Optometry and Vision Science*, 83.10 (2006): 775-781, 775.



surface of its waves. The diagram below, for example, contrasts the specular clarity of still water with the diffused reflection in moving water:



“Reflections from the Surface of Water / Figure 1,” Molecular Expressions Optical Microscopy Primer: Physics of Light and Color, June 3, 2004. <http://micro.magnet.fsu.edu/primer/lightandcolor/reflectionintro.html>.

And to use an example more local to Gower, the River Thames would on a characteristically overcast day constitute a diffuse surface:<sup>36</sup>



Lebin Yuriy, “View of London.” Digital image. Publicdomainpictures.net. Bobek Ltd., 2007. 11 Mar. 2016. <http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=6518&picture=view-of-london>.

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36. This is of course a highly speculative point; climate as well as the reflective potentials of the Thames when Gower wrote the *Confessio* can only be surmised. Further, this observation is not to suggest that Gower’s Narcissus is gazing into the Thames.

Gower's Narcissus is able to recognize in the water only a figure whose movements match his own. Seen through a wavy water surface, this image would likely appear distorted, even as its movements would be discernible. The fluidity of gender Narcissus is confronted with, as well as his response to it, would of course continue to warrant, as in for example Bychowski's reading, consideration of deeper issues surrounding constructions of gender and the self. But the concept of gazing into water and being surprised by an altered image could be akin to the daily experience of Gower's readers. While Amans finds the Narcissus narrative to be fundamentally separate from his own experience, Gower's readers could conceivably find these points of identification through textual as well as material mirroring.

### **Seeing John Gower, Dimly**

In contrast to Narcissus's tragic ending, the next time we see someone gazing at his own reflected image is at the end of the *Confessio*. If Narcissus is an exemplum of fragmentation and disunity, then the poem's final scene could initially, comparatively appear to be an exemplar of restoration. Indeed Venus offers Amans tools for healing, the mirror as well as ointment "mor cold than eny kei" (VIII. 2816) for his wound. Already such tools pose distinctions to Narcissus's narrative: a reflective medium is bestowed and not sought, and Amans is notably given an actual mirror, as opposed to Narcissus's legendary but lost, solitary wanderings that lead him to a reflective pool of water. Venus's mirror, in contrast, is contextually medicinal, as opposed to damning.

Like Narcissus, though, Amans is surprised by the image he sees in the mirror; he reports that "With elde I myhte se deface, / So riveled and so wo besein" (VIII. 2828-29) and then, "Mi will was tho to se no more" (VIII. 28312). The aged man that Amans confronts is so at odds with his expectations that he wishes to turn away. The narrative is then said to shift, indeed, later

on explicitly shifting in Venus's address, from Amans to Gower himself, from allegorical persona to actual poet. The moment has been said to exist outside the formal structure that has organized Gower's poem; it is Amans who is given the task of making meaning from his experience, as opposed to Genius and his stories. Amans is now, according to Schutz, "a real person."<sup>37</sup> This is the story's resolution into, again in Schutz's words, "one final clear and unarguable image"<sup>38</sup> that she later describes as "the most important mirroring in the work"; it includes a mirror that is, for the truth and self-awareness it reveals, specifically at odds with the experience of Narcissus. With Gower's fictionalization comes a more tangible application of the preceding stories. Amans might be, for the previously cited self-help motives of Holden and Hay, a success story in *Mirror Work*: through the mirror, he has come to see his true self and in turn, more fully understand and make meaning of his world.

Amans's revelations, even with their portrayal of aging, are usually seen as extending to readers themselves. Schutz, for example, notes how Gower shortly after seeing his reflection reports that he has now learned how to make a mirror within himself, exemplifying *kinde* as well as the act of confession. R. F. Yeager writes that while this is but one scene within the larger literary mirror of the *Confessio*, it provides a means of "macrocosmic reflection" in which readers can see themselves in Amans and by extension Gower.

For if the purpose of Book VII is to cause the king (be it Richard II or Henry IV) to 'see' himself better, and thereby help the realm to prosper, so the entire *Confessio* is intended to bring about similar self-reflection on moral and literary levels for its other, several

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37. Schutz, "Absent," 122.

38. *Ibid.*, 109, 122.

audiences. Thus the fictive level of the poem concludes with a ‘wonder Mirour’ handed to the aged Amans/Gower for him to view his hoariness, once the passion has gone by...thus the condition of blindness and metaphors of sight play significant roles throughout Amans’s confession, and in Genius’s exempla of love and poetry; and thus too, by macrocosmic reflection each individual reader may see himself included in Gower’s figure of the good lover, good poet and good government, and trace the vector of a harmonious soul from his breast to the well-married spheres.<sup>39</sup>

The scene proves unifying not only for Amans, but also for readers who can suddenly, by means of the mirror, incorporate themselves into the *Confessio*’s didactic expanses. For Matthew Irvin this scene is not without its dark portrayal of aging, but the narrative allows readers to vicariously experience its rewards, to comprehend prudence without its physical implications: “This is by no means a pleasurable return to fullness of self; it is a painful and humiliating recognition of aging.”<sup>40</sup> But the reader, with memories of the preceding narrative intact, can receive Amans’s morals while evading aging’s repercussions. Reading in this way, Irvin importantly points to the darker aspects of the scene, as well as the extent to which readers would identify with it. The discovery of the self is, in fact, dependent on points of imagined separation from the aged Amans.

My intention is not to dispute any of these readings but to, as Irvin has done, place certain parameters on the means by which readers would come to reflective conclusions. Most interpretations of this scene have logically emphasized what the mirror does metaphorically,

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39. R. F. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 1990), 276.

40. Matthew Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (Rochester: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), 286.

given that mirrors have been well documented as a quintessential metaphoric and philosophical device of the Middle Ages, and also given that they seem to follow many variations of this pattern throughout the *Confessio*. With respect to object-oriented approaches, it might be said that the mirror exerts, as an object, unity on the narrative in the closure and revelation it would appear to provoke. What I am most attuned to at this moment in which the narrative has been said to become “real,” however, is how consideration of the mirror as a material object can inform the way we read this scene. Indeed, notably but also subtly among the many shifts that could be said to describe this final scene is a move toward the material world. What Venus brings are not Genius’s narratives that give form to matter, as in Simpson’s reading, but rather objects themselves that would allegedly be used to heal: the mirror and ointments and later, the black beads she places around Amans’s neck. The removal of Amans’s lovesickness is likewise signified by the physical act of taking the arrow out of his side. All of these “things” heal interactively. With the scene’s narrative transition, then, is a change in what is used to heal, from the thrust of Genius’s stories to the matter of Venus’s healing objects, which culminate in the mirror.

Yet the extent to which such a mirror would have been regularly encountered by Gower’s readers is questionable. To accept that the end of the *Confessio* provides vicarious healing through reflection assumes that gazing into a lucid mirror was customary for Gower’s readers—just as the more modern practice of Mirror Work presumes that a clear mirror is something we have on hand, in that particular case an everyday object that provokes continued discomfort precisely because of its striking clarity. It is worth inquiring not only into how common the practice of mirror-gazing might have been for people of the Middle Ages, but also how commonly mirrors provided clear reflections.

Most historical sources about mirrors seem to draw a distinct transition, from a medieval more “figurative” mirror to the actual and industrialized dissemination of the material mirror in the Renaissance. Any evidence of glass mirrors in the Middle Ages generally emphasizes the mirror as a rare item of luxury. Rayna Kalas describes the mirror as being both an inventive rhetorical trope and a “fancy article or trifle”<sup>41</sup> while Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet, at the opening of her study, labels the mirror as “small, rare, expensive, valuable” and “a symbol of aristocratic luxury.”<sup>42</sup> Itinerant glass-making guilds can be traced all across medieval Europe; however, mirror manufacturing was difficult and expensive.<sup>43</sup> Breaking of the glass was more common than not in mirror production.<sup>44</sup> And due to a range of impurities medieval European glass would have likely been light green or brown, as opposed to clear.<sup>45</sup> The glass mirror, then, rarely performed with crystal clarity. The very use of any glass mirror was likely limited to a privileged few — as even a work like *Mirror for Magistrates* or the mirror for princes genre would heavily

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41. Rayna Kalas, “The Technology of Reflection: Renaissance Mirrors of Steel and Glass,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 32.3 (2002): 519-42. Quotation on p.153.

42. Sabine Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History* (New York: Psychology Press, 2001), xiii.

43. On itinerant guilds see Kalas, “The Technology of Reflection,” 530.

44. Melchoir-Bonnet describes a particular incident, even later in the eighteenth century in Italy, where out of seventy-two sheets of glass imported, only twelve survived intact, and notes the rarity of flawless glass in the seventeenth century as well. Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, 60-61.

45. “Glassmaking,” in *Medieval Science, Technology, and Medicine: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Thomas F. Glick, Steven Livesey, Faith Wallis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 200. Melchoir-Bonnet also lists the many affronts to clear glass as: “marbling, clouds, grease, rust, rusty or lead-darkened fibers, veins, ‘teardrops,’ and muck...” Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, 60.

suggest in title alone.<sup>46</sup> Gower's final mirror, then, might appear as an object that for many was characterized primarily by its fragility and exclusion, which would be in keeping with the aspects of the *Confessio* that concern themselves with kingly conduct.

Most mirrors, if they were in possession, would have been composed out of metal or lead,<sup>47</sup> a surface that is dark, rough, and less inherently reflective, producing an image markedly different from that of a glass mirror. A glass mirror — provided, as was often the case in Gower's time, it had not become cracked or impure in its assembly — produces a clear, conventionally specular mirror reflection. In a lead mirror reflection would be, if not diffuse, then less specular; that is, the light would become scattered in all directions due to the uneven molecules of the mirror's surface.<sup>48</sup> The result is a hazy image. In fact the lead mirror would in its reflective potentials speak more to the wavy surface I have imagined Narcissus gazing into than it would the glass mirror. If Amans were to be seen as looking into a leaden mirror at the conclusion of the *Confessio*, he might be viewing an image as altered as that of Narcissus, marked less by clarity than distortion. Here, unlike the medieval skepticism toward mirrors, the ambiguity lies in the surface of the mirror, as opposed to deeper moral or optic deceptions.<sup>49</sup>

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46. Also acknowledged by Grabes, who observes not only that these are limited to an elite group but also that “A glimpse in the mirror of exemplary princes or monarchs can, however, be the privilege of smaller groups of people as well...” (149).

47. Goldberg, *Mirror and Man*, 110.

48. Scott M. Judd, *Photoelectric Sensors and Controls: Selection and Application* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 1988), 29. It seems unlikely that a lead mirror would be entirely diffuse, though its specular properties would be undoubtedly compromised, especially if it were unpolished.

49. Plato, for example, distinguishes between true forms and illusory images, which informed ideas about mirrors as only supplying poor imitations, as opposed to accurate reflections (see Goldberg, *Mirror and Man*, 114). My reading emphasizes the ways in which these perceptions have, in the Middle Ages, material cause in the mirror itself.

Though there is no definitive evidence of the mirror Amans is using, we can see in Gower's language potential reference to the darker image that would be associated with a lead mirror, or a mirror of impure glass:

A wonder mirour for to holde,  
In which sche bad me to beholde  
And taken hiede of that I syhe;  
Wherinne anon myn hertes yhe  
I caste, and sih my colour fade,  
Myn yhen dymme and al unglade,  
Mi chiekes thinne, and al my face  
With elde I myhte se deface,  
So riveled and so wo besein,  
That ther was nothing full ne plein,  
I syh also myn heres hore.  
Mi will was tho to se no more (VIII. 2821-32)

The phrase "for to holde" emphasizes the mirror as an object, perhaps a small hand mirror, something to be physically touched as opposed to cerebrally apprehended. While Amans's report that he sees his color fade, his eyes dim, and his hair "hore" can be read with logical ease as the physical signs of aging, his observations also describe the experience of looking into a dark-hued mirror. Here, according to the properties of diffuse reflection where color follows the reflective



medium, a reflection would be as in Amans's description dimmed, cast in an "unglade" light.<sup>50</sup> If any signs of aging were evident in Amans's appearance, they would presumably be exacerbated by a darker mirror. What the mirror at this moment would enable, then, is more obscured recognition than epiphany. To use a relatively more recent analogy, it is not necessarily that Amans in a *Wizard of Oz*-style narrative realizes he had the interpretive power the whole time, but that he has come to recognize himself as the old man behind the curtain or, in this case, the mirror, both mirror and the image it produces working to keep Gower himself as mysteriously at a distance as the looming projection of Oz, the terrifyingly great and powerful. And Gower's readers, if they were accustomed to gazing into darker mirrors, could conceivably, jointly experience this type of remove. To elaborate with yet another reference from popular culture: one would not be able to, as Michael Jackson implores in his balladic anthem "Man in the Mirror," pursue personal and social change by "starting with the man in the mirror"<sup>51</sup> if the mirror itself is a dim harbinger of disconnect.

What follows from this scene also constitutes an arguably mixed and opaque message as Gower transitions from inner mirror to a more sublime procession of the seasons, diffracted<sup>52</sup> and diffused, transcending both body and sight. With the phrase "I made a liknesse of miselve / Unto the sondri monthes twelve" (VIII. 2837-38), the singular image of Amans / Gower looking

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50. Pat Hanrahan and Wolfgang Kruger, "Reflection from Layered Surfaces due to Subsurface Scattering," *SIGGRAPH '93 Proceedings of the 20th annual Conference on Computer Graphics and Interactive Technique* (New York: Association for Computing Machinery, 1993): 165-74.

51. Michael Jackson, "Man in the Mirror," Youtube video, 5:01, posted by "michaeljacksonVEVO," October 2, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PivWY9wn5ps>. Jackson's song and video would be yet another example in which mirrored self-reflection serves as a metaphor for individual, but also – with particular relevance to Gower – social healing.

52. Refraction might also be metaphorically appropriate as this principle too refers to a wave met by a boundary in its medium of transmission. Yet diffusion in particular references the expansion of a wave.

in the mirror dissolves into a display of the seasons that, while it includes the visual imagery, “Of gras, of lef, of flour, of fruit, / Of corn and of the wyny grape” (VIII. 2848), otherwise covers the less grounded span of an entire year in twenty lines. The images, while they advance the idea of unity and peace that Gower is here said to be creating, represent a movement from self-realization into dissociation.<sup>53</sup> In place of the mirror’s materiality is a display of harmony whose massive scope lacks visual and indeed material consolidation in all that it encompasses. The poetic imagery might here be described as forming an uneven surface that resists reflection or produces a diffuse poetics. Even as it purports to illuminate this scene occludes vision, providing yet another frame in which we might find difficulty seeing ourselves — or difficulty seeing anything at all. Or if we do see ourselves, we do so dimly, not with glassy lucidity but with a more lead-like obscurity of image. Readers might have found most resonance with a medium wherein image is dimmed and less intelligibly accessible.

### **Final Reflections**

I have suggested ways in which the mirror that closes the *Confessio* might complicate, rather than enable, epiphany in reflection. Gower’s mirror of revelation presents a moment in which the scope of identification might have evaded many more than it reached. For readers beyond a fairly select few, the lucid mirror could have been — as it is for those who seek out *Mirror Work*, albeit for different reasons — more barrier than point of access, a sign not of vision but the matter that can occlude visualization. And, of course, the constitutive properties of

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53. These are changes in the narrative that Yeager especially writes about with great eloquence, on Book VII; he describes how the concluding multiplicities serve to “marry the individual to a holy infinitude.” Gower’s faith is in these eloquent terms characterized by its multiplicity (Yeager, *Gower’s Poetic*, 278). Simpson writes of the ways in which the ending focuses on “marriage as the basis of the body politic,” its emphasis on reconciliation through imagination. (Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 225).

the mirror could even have eluded Gower himself, who, if he had a clear glass mirror would likely not have had, more and more, the vision with which to look into it.<sup>54</sup> Approaching the mirror as a material object allows us to understand the literal parameters of what is permitted by seeing in the final moments of the *Confessio*. Many have pointed to the imaginative freedoms that the *Confessio*'s multifaceted final visions present. I have suggested that for readers, the most profound moment of identification, or impetus for imagination, might not hinge upon the epiphanies bestowed by clear seeing, or even by transcending seeing itself. There is instead the potential for a joint recognition of seeing through a complicated medium.

The points and perspectives I have considered in this essay are not intended to offer a definitive reading of the *Confessio*, nor have I presented a conclusive portrait of the mirror as material object in the Middle Ages, in lived practice or in the literature that aimed to inform it. I have instead taken a more experimental investigation into how an understanding of the mirror as a material object can change how we read the *Confessio*, as well as how we go on to consider the mirror in medieval literature. The mirror that modern therapies take for granted, in fact, depend upon as lucid would not have been so clearly imagined in the Middle Ages. This does not mean that the *Confessio* should, in turn, be read through a dark mirror; rather, we can continue to consider where, in its dimmer visions, we might find opportunity to understand the full reaches of narrative possibility and, perhaps, healing.

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54. For readings on Gower's blindness see two articles recently featured in *Accessus*: Jonathan Hsy, "Blind Advocacy: Blind Readers, Disability Theory, and Accessing John Gower," *Accessus* 1.1 (2013): Article 2 and Tory V. Pearman, "Blindness, Confession, and Remembering in Gower's *Confessio*," *Accessus* 1.1 (2013): Article 3.

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