Accessus:
A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

Accessus

Volume 7
Issue 1 *Hope and Healing in Gower*

Article 3

2022

# Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower's Confessio Amantis

Kara L. McShane
*Ursinus College*, kmcshane@ursinus.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

## Recommended Citation

McShane, Kara L. (2022) "Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower's Confessio Amantis," *Accessus*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol7/iss1/3

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Accessus by the editorial board of the journal and administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

# Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower's Confessio Amantis

## Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Eve Salisbury & Georgiana Donavin for the opportunity to participate in the "Hope and Healing in Gower" symposium in June 2021, as well as to my fellow participants and all those in attendance for thought-provoking and inspiring discussion.

This article is available in Accessus: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol7/iss1/3

**Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower's *Confessio Amantis***

In previous pieces, I've thought about how John Gower uses literature to narrate traumatic events, a first step in seeking social healing after violence reveals the vulnerability of hierarchies and structures of his day (and, indeed, of our own).[1] Storytelling is a first step in articulating social trauma, in making sense of difficult events. In her exploration of narrative medicine as a means to support both healers and patients, Rita Charon describes how narrative helps individuals put words on their experiences, how the telling itself may be therapeutic for the patient: "Without narrative acts, the patient cannot convey to anyone else what he or she is going through. More radically and perhaps equally true, without narrative acts, the patient cannot himself or herself grasp what the events of illness mean."[2] Narration is the only means of describing one's experiences to others: yet, more than this, the process of narrating allows one to make sense and meaning of events for oneself.

This is a function of storytelling that Gower deploys. Within Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, stories not only narrate difficult events: they provide models and frameworks for healing, and in several of the *Confessio*'s narratives, Gower emphasizes the role of the community in obtaining justice.[3] Gower is deeply invested in the welfare of the community, what Russell Peck famously

---

[1] Kara L. McShane, "Social Healing in John Gower's *Visio Angliae*." *South Atlantic Review* 79, no. 3–4 (2015): 76–88.

[2] Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 13.

[3] Citations from Gower's *Confessio Amantis* are from Peck's METS editions; the online version of these editions currently provide the text of Peck's 2006 edition of Volume 1 (the Prologue, Book 1, and Book 8) at https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1; his 2013 edition of Volume 2 (Books 2, 3, and 4) at https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-2, and his 2004 edition of Volume 3 (Books 5, 6, and 7) at https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-3.

calls common profit,[4] and with it, in ideas of right rule and good governance—but beyond these, I suggest, Gower gives us models in which interpersonal violence is a community concern and accountability requires community intervention. My case studies here both deal with sexual assault: I explore the "Tale of Mundus and Paulina" (from Book 1) and Gower's version of the "Tale of Lucrece" (from Book 7).[5] While these two narratives unfold differently, key points of similarity between these two exempla reveal several principles for understanding the intersections between healing, accountability, and community in Gower's *Confessio*. Social healing in both tales begins with believing women and ends with the community's demand for accountability — a model that is still aspirational, not realized, in our own moment.

The first connection between these two narratives is perhaps the most important: women are believed and trusted. It is worth noting the class and marital status of both women in these two narratives may well matter here: as Caroline Dunn has noted, married women did prosecute sexual assault in the later Middle Ages, and some evidence suggests that they had better success in doing so; so too women of higher social class may have been more likely to see justice.[6] In

[4] Russell A. Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

[5] When I set out to explore how communities contribute to accountability and healing, I had not anticipated this focus to the narratives I examine. There is a rich and ever-growing body of work on Gower and gendered violence; see for example Georgiana Donavin, "'When Reson Torneth into Rage': Violence in Book III of the *Confessio Amantis*," in *On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 216–234; Jessica D. Ward, "Avarice, Idolatry, and Fornication: The Connection between Genius's Discussions about Religion and Virginity in Book 5 of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in Philology* 116, no. 3 (2019): 401–422; and Caitlin G. Watt, "The Speaking Wound: Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Ethics of Listening in the #metoo Era," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 11, nos. 2–3 (2020): 272–281.

[6] Caroline Dunn, *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 59, 61.

both exempla, the victims receive the unequivocal support of those around them, particularly husbands and male family members. When Mundus reveals to Paulina that he has taken advantage of her piety to assault her, she goes to her husband: "And he hire in hise armes faste / Uphield, and ofte swor his oth / That he with hire is nothing wroth."[7] Though Paulina's husband is troubled by what has happened, he is explicit that he is not upset with her. Lucrece is more reluctant to tell those around her what has happened, but when she eventually does so, the response of her male relatives is quite similar. Her husband "Conforteth hire al that he can, / And swor, and ek hire fader bothe, / That thei with hire be noght wrothe."[8] The invocation of anger in both cases is notable: husbands rush to assure their wives that they are not angry. This possibility of the angry husband may result from Gower's implication elsewhere that rape is, effectively, a property crime: in Book V, lines 6106–6118, for example, Gower describes rape as a type of robbery, with the memorable statement that rapists like robbers act as they do because "other mennes good is swete."[9] The potential for anger seems to imply that it is the husbands, not the women themselves, who have been wronged. Yet this response by both Lucrece and Paulina's husbands likewise raises the specter of victim-blaming. It is not the survivors themselves but the men around them who first mention anger as a response to assault, raising the possibility of a damaging, blaming response that victims often encounter even as they seek to reassure Paulina and Lucrece. Neither Paulina nor Lucrece's account of what has happened is questioned by those in whom they confide: instead, the narratives both give attention to attempts to comfort these

---

[7] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 984–986.

[8] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5052–5054.

[9] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* V, line 6118. In his notes, Peck cites Mast, p. 108, on notions of women's sexuality "as a commodity."

women. Paulina's husband embraces her, while Lucrece's does all he can to console her. The repetition of swearing — the oath — emphasizes that those who hear these narratives are taking them seriously and do not blame the survivors. As studies have suggested, this supportive response remains a key indicator of mental health outcomes for survivors.[10] These are necessary first steps as the narratives move from the personal wrong done to both women to the implications of these violations for the larger social fabric around them.

Both Paulina and Lucrece find support not only from their families, but also from communities, who see the injustice done as both a personal and a public wrong. Gower presents personal assaults as larger violations of community trust, and in both cases, the community must be informed — a second pattern. In the language of social healing, the wound needs to be narrated before it can be healed. Paulina's husband seeks the advice of friends on how to best respond to the crime. He not only explains what has happened, but seeks counsel, a trait that Gower frequently attributes to good rulers. When Paulina's husband explains to their friends what has happened, they advise that he should "sette ferst his wif in reste, / And after pleigne to the king / Upon the matiere of this thing."[11] The first concern here is again Paulina's well-being: she must be "sette. . . in reste" before redress can be sought. These friends expand Paulina's support network as they too comfort Paulina, who is cheered "Be alle weies."[12] Healing is presented as a process — a shorter one, perhaps, than might truly be necessary, but nonetheless, Paulina is allowed time to heal and process. She is "somdiel amended" after two days of comfort

---

[10] Bonnie Yuen, Jo Billings, and Nicola Morant, "Talking to Others About Sexual Assault: A Narrative Analysis of Survivors' Journeys," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 36 (2021), DOI: .org/10.1177/0886260519861652, NP9715–NP9716.

[11] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 988–1000.

[12] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, line 1002.

from her community.[13] And indeed, when Paulina and her husband seek redress, they do not go alone: rather, Gower tells us,

> The thridde day sche goth to pleigne
>
> With many a worthi citezeine,
>
> And he with many a citezein.[14]

On the third day, it is Paulina herself who seeks redress from the king, accompanied by her husband and others. The scene Gower sets is a historically plausible one, familiar from his own day; as Carissa M. Harris notes in her public writing, women could and did appeal their own rape cases, and she describes at least one instance from 1269 in which a husband and wife pleaded her case together and won financial compensation.[15] In his edition of the tale, Peck's edition glosses this repeated "citezein(e)" by gender: that is, that Paulina is accompanied by other women, and her husband by other men. The repetition emphasizes the breadth of support, the full participation of Paulina and her husband's community; likewise, the use of "citezein" itself emphasizes public, political involvement.[16] Those petitioning the king are no longer simply friends, but subjects.

One key difference between the tales of Paulina and Lucrece is the matter of who is permitted to narrate the assault: while Paulina controls her narrative, Lucrece controls her story

---

[13] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, line 1003.

[14] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 1005–1007.

[15] Carissa M. Harris, "800 Years of Rape Culture", *Aeon*, n.p. https://aeon.co/essays/the-hypocrisies-of-rape-culture-have-medieval-roots. Harris's account of this case, in which William de Hadestock and his wife Joan successfully won compensation, is one of several she describes of medieval women seeking justice after a sexual assault.

[16] *MED* "citisein" n. and "citeseine" n.

only briefly, and her death precludes the same kind of restitution that Paulina eventually receives. Lucrece, due to her death and despite the support of relatives, does not see the political change her actions inspire: instead, her death is part of the trauma that the men in her life experience. Those closest to her, her husband and father, have space to respond affectively to the loss of Lucrece: "Hire housebonde, hire fader eke / Aswoune upon the bodi felle."[17] It is certainly reasonable to find her death an unsatifying and indeed troubling outcome, in which the social violation displaces Lucrece's interpersonal one and Brutus, along with the men of her family, control her narrative. If narrating one's trauma is key to healing, then Lucrece's own resolution is, at best, only partial. In some ways, this may reflect the complexity of responses to sexual assault, especially when taken with other narratives, like Paulina's, throughout the *Confessio*. Indeed, Suzanne Edwards notes that Middle English literature presents a variety of afterlives, or survivor responses to sexual assault, which may but do not necessarily include an appeal for justice.[18] While I focus throughout this piece on similarities in Lucrece and Paulina's narratives — on their assault and their communities' supportive responses — their quite different fates emphasize that healing is not necessarily linear and that survivors may experience a range of emotional responses even with similar support structures in place. Though patterns certainly exist, each narrative is nonetheless unique.

One particular moment seems to mark the narrative's shift in focus from the personal wrong done to Lucrece to the social and political harm. When Brutus sees Lucrece dying, he takes on the task of narrating her story: he is the one who removes the sword from her body

[17] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5078–5079.

[18] Suzanne Edwards, *The Afterlives of Rape in Middle English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11.

"And swor the goddes al aboute / That he therof schal do vengance."[19] Lucrece's reply to this is only a look, and Gower's narrator suggests that she has authorized Brutus's promise of vengeance at this moment: "sche tho made a contienance, / Hire dedlich yhe and ate laste / In thonkinge as it were up caste."[20] Isabelle Mast reads this expression as Lucrece's awareness of the political implications of her death, and the shift in the narrative after this point can certainly be read as Brutus co-opting Lucrece's trauma for political ends, reinscribing patriarchal power, especially as Lucrece's body becomes a public display (as I will discuss further momentarily).[21] Indeed, the attention given earlier to the suffering of her husband and father at her death seem to reinforce this reading: the feelings that matter are those of men, not Lucrece's own. I would suggest nonetheless that other readings might coexist with this one: that is, even as Brutus brings Lucrece's trauma into the political sphere and it comes to be one abuse of power among many, this very process means that he must advocate for her as one who hears her narrative, believes it, and acts on that belief.[22] Thus, Brutus's appropriation of Lucrece's narrative also demonstrates

---

[19] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5086–5087.

[20] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5088–5090.

[21] Isabelle Mast, "Rape in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Other Related Works," in *Young Medieval Women*, ed. Katherine J. Lewis, Noël James Menuge, and Kim M. Phillips (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 103–32 (120).

[22] See Amy L. Henninger, Michiko Iwasaki, Marianna E. Carlucci, and Jeffrey M. Lating, "Reporting Sexual Assault: Survivors' Satisfaction with Sexual Assault Response Personnel." *Violence Against Women* vol. 26 (11), 2020, 1362–1382, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077801219857831. As Henninger et al. note, the stakes of believing survivors is particularly complicated in the case of legal redress, as studies suggest that sexual assault survivors who mistrust the criminal justice system anticipate that they will not be believed but that they will instead be blamed by police and prosecutors, which likely contributes to continued underreporting of sexual assault (1363). Indeed, their study suggests that survivors are only satisfied with sexual assault response personnel roughly 66% of the time, even including advocates and forensic nurses in that group of personnel (1373–74).

one way of navigating trauma, one in which others advocate on behalf of survivors and victims. This is admittedly less survivor-centered than Paulina's petition for her own redress, and yet it is a familiar power dynamic, in which survivors' perceived credibility continues to influence arrest rates of perpetrators.[23] And this pivot may indeed be part of the point, uncomfortable as it is: Suzanne Edwards suggests that the reader is meant to see Lucrece's suicide as excessive, a kind of self-punishment, since the point of the exemplum is its lessons about tyranny.[24] As she writes, "In Lucrecia's story, the political aftermath of rape proves incompatible with the victim's survival. But surviving sexual violence could have political effects as well."[25] Lucrece's response to the experience of assault is, in effect, outweighed by the political circumstances in this particular narrative.

As the narrative shifts from focusing on Lucrece's experience of sexual assault to broader abuses of power, Brutus makes her story known in public gathering space, supported by those close to Lucrece. Accompanied by her husband and father, Brutus has her body placed on a bier and then goes out "into the marketplace" with her corpse, "and in litel space / Thurgh cry the cité was assembled."[26] This public display reflects the means by which rape was legally prosecuted in Gower's moment (and, indeed, to this day). Women's bodies were themselves used as evidence, and survivors seeking redress had to demonstrate that violence had been done to them, a unique condition for prosecuting sexual assault: as Dunn notes, "the woman was required to document the event by showing any wounds and her torn and bloodstained clothes to the local

---

[23] Henninger et al., "Reporting Sexual Assault," 1363.

[24] Edwards, *Afterlives of Rape*, 115–116.

[25] Edwards, *Afterlives of Rape*, 107.

[26] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5101–5103.

bailiff, sergeant, or coroner."[27] Brutus's narrative contextualizes and frames Lucrece's corpse, and making both public, in the marketplace, is the first step in confronting both Arrons's violation and Tarquin's authority and power. As in Paulina's case, the involvement of the city at large is essential, and a gathering of people is a first step toward creating accountability. Brutus's narrative leads the community to take counsel together: "And therupon the conseil was / Take of the grete and of the smale, / And Brutus tolde hem al the tale."[28] The narrative Brutus shares, and the site of Lucrece on her bier, shake everyone, and the advice of both the "gret and of the smale" is relevant here, with advice from across class distinctions. Authority in Lucrece's case rests not with the ruler, but with this public community gathering: Brutus's sharing of her narrative inspires resistance to Tarquin's rule, highlighting its injustices.

The community's ability to make sense of what has occurred is key to social healing after trauma, and within the "Tale of Lucrece," Gower provides retellings through which this might occur. The tale emphasizes the narration and renarration of Lucrece's assault and death: Brutus puts out a cry in the marketplace, and then the people tremble when they hear the case, and then again, a short few lines later, the narrator emphasizes that Brutus is telling the entire tale. Multiple retellings not only allow word of Arrons's actions to spread; they provide multiple opportunities for making sense of these events by narrating them, a crucial part of social healing. As Lawrence J. Kirmayer notes, narration may provide symbolic closure, but also puts suffering

[27] Dunn, *Stolen Women*, 68.

[28] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5106–5108.

in "socially understandable and valorized terms."[29] Narration and renarration, then, increases the likelihood of expressing one's suffering in ways that are comprehensible to one's community.

Perhaps the most important parallel between these two exempla is their outcomes: in both cases, the community demands accountability, and that accountability involves structural change. This change takes different forms in each case, however. In Lucrece's story, Gower follows his exemplar: the crime against her leads to public outcry against the leadership of Rome. "So that the comun clamour tolde / The newe schame of sennes olde."[30] Peck notes that the "newe shame of sennes olde" is a proverbial phrase;[31] yet its use here points to ongoing "sennes," injustices in leadership that lead from the "comun clamour" to regime change. When those in authority are themselves responsible for social rupture, Gower suggests, structural change is necessary.

In contrast, Paulina's case suggests that structural change can happen under good leadership. When she and her husband appeal with the community to the king, all those involved in her assault face consequences, from Mundus, to the priests, to the statues of the temple. Mundus is exiled, while the priests who enabled Paulina's assault are executed. After the priests are killed, the community goes to the temple to purge it of this crime:

> . . . and thilke ymage,
>
> Whos cause was the pelrinage,
>
> Thei drowen out and als so faste

[29] See Lawrence Kirmayer, "Toward a Medicine of the Imagination," *New Literary History* 37 (Summer 2006): 583–605 (595).

[30] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VII, lines 5092–5093.

[31] See the note to line 5116, in which Peck directs readers to Bartlett Jere Whiting's reference work, *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases from English Writings Mainly Before 1500*, specifically entry S338. Peck also notes the appearance of similar turns of phrase elsewhere in the *Confessio* and in Gower's *Vox Clamantis*.

Fer into Tibre thei it caste,

Wher the rivere it hath defied.[32]

The statues themselves, who caused Paulina to visit the temple and who witnessed the wrong done to her, are removed and cast into the Tiber, as a means of purifying the space itself of complicity in "thilke horrible sinne."[33] Gower provides a powerful approach for handling injustices concealed, enacted, and endorsed by religious authorities. In Lucrece's case, the injury must be brought into public space; for Paulina, however, public space has been witness to this injustice, and so it must be purified.[34] This movement outward, from seemingly isolated acts of violence to large-scale social reform, emphasizes the extent to which all interpersonal wrongs are also breaches of community trust.

At the start of this piece, I noted that these principles remain aspirational for us now — exempla in the modern world as in the medieval, speaking to the power of Gower's insights to continue offering social critique. When I teach the *Confessio*, students often comment that the injustices in Gower's poetry — abuse of power, poverty and inequity — are still with us. One might reasonably conclude that these narratives demonstrate society's imperfectability, that people's flaws persist in the face of all attempts at reform. Is healing possible, when we continue to face similar wrongs? But in engaging Gower's models of how communities respond to social ruptures and wrongs, perhaps we, like Amans, can continue to take both counsel and comfort

---

[32] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 1039–1043.

[33] Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, line 1045.

[34] For me, the purification of Paulina's public space raises an important question: what might Gower make of monuments that do harm, those that the common voice has in recent years torn down? Might these decisions be a key part of purifying public spaces and beginning healing processes?

from Gower's stories — even as our societies, like Gower's, fail to fully get it right. Gower does not deny or erase human suffering, but instead offers flashes of healing possibility in narrative and other potential ways of being in community.

**Bibliography**

Charon, Rita. *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Donavin, Georgiana. " 'When Reson Torneth into Rage': Violence in Book III of the *Confessio Amantis*." In *On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium*. Ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), 216–234.

Dunn, Caroline. *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Edwards, Suzanne M. *The Afterlives of Rape in Medieval English Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Harris, Carissa M. "800 Years of Rape Culture." *Aeon*, 24 May 2021, n.p. https://aeon.co/essays/the-hypocrisies-of-rape-culture-have-medieval-roots

Henninger, Amy L., Michiko Iwasaki, Marianna E. Carlucci, and Jeffrey M. Lating. "Reporting Sexual Assault: Survivors' Satisfaction with Sexual Assault Response Personnel." *Violence Against Women* 26, no. 11 (2020): 1362–1382. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1077801219857831.

Kirmayer, Lawrence J. "Toward a Medicine of the Imagination." *New Literary History* 37 (Summer 2006): 583–605.

Mast, Isabelle. "Rape in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Other Related Works." In *Young Medieval Women*. Ed. Katherine J. Lewis, Noël James Menuge, and Kim M. Phillips (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 103–32.

McShane, Kara L. "Social Healing in John Gower's *Visio Angliae*." *South Atlantic Review* 79, no. 3–4 (2015): 76–88.

*Middle English Dictionary*. Ed.Robert E. Lewis, et al. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952–2001. Online edition in Middle English Compendium. Ed. Frances McSparran, et al.. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 2000–2018. http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary

Peck, Russell A., ed. *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*. Vol. 1. Second edition. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006. https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1 n.p.a.

Peck, Russell A., ed. *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*. Vol. 2. Second edition. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013. https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-2 n.p.a.

Peck, Russell A., ed. *John Gower: Confessio Amantis*. Vol. 3. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004. https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-3 n.p.a.

Peck, Russell A. *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

Ward, Jessica D. "Avarice, Idolatry, and Fornication: The Connection between Genius's Discussions about Religion and Virginity in Book 5 of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*." *Studies in Philology* 116, no. 3 (2019): 401–422.

Watt, Caitlin G. "The Speaking Wound: Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Ethics of Listening in the #metoo Era." *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 11, no. 2–3 (2020): 272–281.

Kara L. McShane
Ursinus College

kmcshane@ursinus.edu