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## Writing Into Hope: Laughter, Sadness and Healing in John Gower's Confessio Amantis

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Writing into Hope: Laughter, Sadness, and Healing in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

In 2010, Jennifer Vaught rather prophetically writes that “[t]he palpable anxieties among medieval and early modern writers, readers, and audience members in response to their global awareness of the vulnerabilities of the body to numerous ailments mirror contemporary fears of continuing threats of pandemic illnesses such as AIDS, the Avian or Asian flu, and H1N1 or swine flu.”<sup>1</sup> In the wake of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, it seems natural to me to turn to poetry to form a healing narrative community, as well as to witness the formation of such communities in the past. And one may find many examples of bodily injury and disease, as well as the performance of grief through medieval literature. Yet the models of grief and healing provided in many medieval texts can be inaccessible, for, as Megan Moore notes, “elite desire is described as grief and imagined as both distorting and performing elite community beyond the boundaries of emotional practice available to everyday people, an emotional exceptionalism entwined with the questions of whose emotions matter most.”<sup>2</sup>

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* might seem an odd place to find such healing beyond the barriers of a closed, elite circle, given Gower's infamous reputation as somber and humorless, particularly in comparison to the figure of Geoffrey Chaucer.<sup>3</sup> Even when there are moments of levity in the poem, they are tinged with the bitterness of satire. Such satire embues the conversations between Amans and Genius who, it seems to me, struggles mightily not just to

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Vaught, *Rhetorics of Bodily Disease and Health in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Surrey and Burlington, VT Ashgate, 2010), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Megan Moore, “Medieval Emotions and Posthuman Subjectivities: Cyborgs and Desire,” *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures*, 10, no. 1 (Spring 2021), 42.

<sup>3</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* in *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macauley (Oxford University Press, 1901), vols. 1–2.

hear the lover's confession, but to instruct him about the state of his soul as well as the nature of erotic love. This is no small task, as his pupil is not terribly apt, especially after Book I. Even at the beginning of the poem, Amans presents himself as a comically inept lover. His responses to Genius's explication of the nature of pride consistently reveal that he has nothing in particular to be proud of, as he's not had the slightest success with his lady, so little in fact that the first of her commands that he admits to breaking is her request that he keep his mouth shut and stop trying to speak to her about love. But while this sort of thing can cause *laughter*, it is peripheral to creating a context for *happiness*, particularly amidst the presence of suffering and the reality of death. Yet I contend that the *Confessio* does indeed create a space for narrative healing within the acknowledgement of mortality.

That mortality—aging and death—is a persistent theme in the *Confessio* is indisputable. Will Rogers sums up the potent atmosphere of mortality that permeates Gower's works and their interpretation by noting that "Gower's old age has consumed readings of his works, in part because he seems consumed by his own old age, which is expressed across his works, in Latin, Middle English, and French."<sup>4</sup> While Rogers asserts that this age is not one of weakness, but of strength and wisdom, the kind of wisdom necessary for true governance, it is nevertheless true that aging brings with it the reminder of death, and even those ancient and medieval writers who most strongly advocated for the power of the voice of an elder acknowledged the physical limitations that could undermine that voice's articulation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Will Rogers, "One Voice, Ancient and Resigned," *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media*, 5, no. 2 (2019), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Rogers, "One Voice, Ancient and Resigned," 9–11.

Nevertheless, in the *Confessio* Gower's aged narrator uses his voice to articulate both the pain of youthful passions and their inevitable loss in a grand, encyclopedic narrative that is also a personal confession of the most private heart. In a series of studies over past fifteen years, Dan P. McAdams of Northwestern University has explored the ways in which individuals create stories about themselves, beginning in adolescence and continuing throughout their lives, to form a narrative identity of the self. McAdams has used this paradigm to examine topics as disparate as stories to help students through their undergraduate years, to the relationship between narrative identity and the image of the American dream. While his work concentrates on contemporary Americans, he does note more than once that "[a]cross the life course, narrative identity is told and made in culture, and different cultures have different stories to tell."<sup>6</sup> The *Confessio*, as a whole, distinguishes itself from Gower's other works exactly because the interpolated tales which make up the bulk of the poem are an integration of medieval knowledge in the form of stories into the personal story of the lover's confession: Amans constructs himself through the narratives of his world, groping for a solution to his pain, making McAdams's work specifically applicable to Gower's poem.

Other scholars, interested in the power of storytelling, have applied McAdams's work to both broader and more specific topics. Kate C. McLean, for example, has argued in "The Creation of Stories: For the Person or for the Group?" that

the person is not the sole agent in constructing and telling the story. There is a shared, distributed agency with close others who develop and tell, and retell, stories about that person. Further, cultures at large provide the narrative templates for self-construction that

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<sup>6</sup> Dan P. McAdams, "The Redemptive Self: Generativity and the Stories Americans Live By," *Research in Human Development*, 3, nos. 2–3 (2006), 97. Other works by McAdams applying his research to varied periods in the human lifespan include *The Art and Science of Personality Development* (New York: Guilford Press, 2016) and, with Jennifer Guo, "How Shall I Live? Constructing a Life Story in the College Years," *New Directions for Higher Education*, 166 (Summer 2014): 15–23.

exert considerable force on how that story is used and shared [and that] the idea of coauthoring is consistent with the notion of narrative as fundamentally about the group,<sup>7</sup> positing a sort of double vision: the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are not just for us, as individuals, to make meaning of our lives, but for the groups to which we belong as well, and those individual narratives contribute to larger, cultural narratives which are at least equally powerful in forming identity.

Rossella Certini, on the other hand, applies McLean's theory more specifically to the struggle to make meaning out of suffering. In "Illness, Narration and Healing: Women's Perspectives," she writes: "Every form of consolation is weakened in the face of pain because through this pain the individual is violently hurled into his or her finitude...In narrating the illness, in accepting the change and through rendering this experience problematic, spaces and practices are created, which are simultaneously quite similar and dissimilar for each of us."<sup>8</sup> She goes on to show the ways in which narratives of pain and illness are particularly significant for women in patriarchal cultures where their pain is given little space and they themselves less agency over it.

What, one might ask, does any of this have to do with Gower? Gower—specifically, the character of Amans in the *Confessio Amantis* who is revealed to be a person named John Gower—is, I have argued elsewhere, dour, or, at the very least, quiet and sad, and it is easy to conclude that the whole of the *Confessio* leads naturally to the solemn mood that closes the

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<sup>7</sup> Kate C. McLean, "The Creation of Stories: For the Person or for the Group?" *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture*, 3, no. 1 (Spring 2019), 66.

<sup>8</sup> Rossella Certini, "Illness, Narration and Healing: Women's Perspectives," *Studi sulla Formazione*, 22, no. 2 (Dec. 2019), 147.

poem.<sup>9</sup> There are, I would argue, two distinct concepts of the comic, one of which offers little to the reader in search of narrative healing in Gower's poem. This is, as noted above, the comic mode that produces laughter, that is: humor, wit, irony and the like. Albrecht Classen notes that "[d]espite countless references in all of medieval literature, scholars have often thought that the discovery and critical discussion of laughter as an essential part of human life did not begin until the Renaissance."<sup>10</sup> Classen identifies Boccaccio, in his *Decameron* most specifically, as one of the first to present a "critical theory" of laughter as a means to both delight and instruct.<sup>11</sup> Gower must have, in part, agreed with the felicitous pedagogical function of laughter, if, that is, laughter can be read as part of the "Somewhat of lust"<sup>12</sup> that makes up his "middel weie."<sup>13</sup> Described in the *Confessio's* Prologue, the middle wa, as is the case, too, for Boccaccio, always includes "moral, political, philosophical, ethical, and religious" purposes behind or beside the delight.<sup>14</sup> An early example of this kind of wit may be found in the Book I, when Genius is warning Amans about the dangers of the five senses. He describes Medusa and her sisters as cursed by their stars—"upon here natitvite / Such was the contellacion"<sup>15</sup>—so that "Fro kynde thei be so

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<sup>9</sup> Natalie Grinnell, "The Lover's Silence: Earnest Amans and Focus of the *Confessio Amantis*." Paper presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May 10, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Albrecht Classen, ed., *Laughter in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 23.

<sup>11</sup> Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* Prol., line 19.

<sup>13</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* Prol., line 17.

<sup>14</sup> Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Times*, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 392–393.

miswent, / That to the liknesse of Serpent / Thei were bore”<sup>16</sup> and warns about the men who turn to stone from looking upon the monster. This dramatic warning, paired with the story of Acteon and followed by the example of Ulysses protecting himself against the Sirens, eventually results in Amans proclaiming in despair that:

Mi fader, ye, I am beknowe,  
 I have hem [his eyes] cast upon Meduse,  
 Therof I may me noight excuse:  
 Min herte is growen into Ston,  
 So that my lady therupon  
 Hath such a priente of love grave,  
 That I can noight miselve save.<sup>17</sup>

The humor here comes at Amans’s expense, and perhaps at Genuis’s as well. One might empathize with the pain of being unable to stop loving someone who seems to have carved herself into one’s heart, but comparing her to a Gorgon and transforming her from mere foe into a monster not only emphasizes Amans’s helplessness, but makes one wonder about his intelligence. The somewhat common erasure of Medusa’s history as a victim of sexual assault further renders Amans’s associating her power with that of his beloved even more confusingly disturbing. The layered uses and misuses of Ovid for comic purpose here, articulated decades

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<sup>16</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 395–398.

<sup>17</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, lines 550–556.

ago by David W. Hiscoe, form a web of wit for readers familiar with other versions of these tales that continues throughout Gower's poem.<sup>18</sup>

But as the *Confessio* progresses, that kind of humor, such as it is, shifts, and Amans becomes both more unwilling to change his behavior and more frustrating in his responses to the interpolated tales. Genius guides the confession away from Amans's personal erotic desire and toward a theory of self-governance that brings him perilously close to shaming the goddess whom he's supposed to serve. Amans can't or won't follow Genius's guidance; he's stuck, persistently, blindly in love with his lady, and what begins as comic becomes steadily less so, due to repetition and the unrelenting anguish in the Lover's complaints. In fact, the "middel weie" becomes, in Amans's poetic supplication to Venus in Book 8, an untenable position of agony between the forces of nature and reason, and between life and death. Unlike, for example, the protagonist of the *Roman de la Rose*, Amans is a failed lover. Because of Amans's failure, the *Confessio* lacks discourse on the *pleasures* of courtly love or space for heroic action on the part of the lover. Amans never draws a sword, defeats an enemy, or plucks his rose. Neither the joy in love's pursuit nor the satisfaction in love's physical completion is permitted to the character John Gower, and his juxtaposition with the characters in the interpolated stories, as well as his allusive contrast to characters such as Jean de Meun's Lover, leaves him looking dour by comparison. Thus, on the level of funniness, the kind of humor that produces spontaneous joy and laughter, the *Confessio* fails.

But one might argue that the comic mode of the joke would be inadequate in the face of the serious social trauma to which Gower's works respond, just as the occasional YouTube video

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<sup>18</sup> David W. Hiscoe, "The Ovidian Comic Strategy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Philological Quarterly*, 64, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 367–385.



or humorous meme provides only momentary respite from the litany of gloom in the years 2020–2021. In contrast, comedy as a medieval genre which celebrates the supposed truth of the Christian afterlife (of which the primary example might be Dante’s *Commedia*) offers more potential for healing, especially for those who share the comic vision of this belief system. Such a theory is clearly applicable to the kind of transcendence which, beyond individual moments of surprise or disjunction, is the source of joy in works such as the *Divine Comedy*. Not only is it a celebration of the ordered universe and its benevolent god, but it celebrates the immortality of the human soul and the possibility of perfection beyond the dark wood of human life. Such a mode of comic healing might even be extended to include Middle English poetry like *Troilus and Criseyde* or *Piers Plowman*.

The objection to viewing the *Confessio* this way lies with the fact that it lacks this transcendence. Amans is healed by Cupid at the end of the poem, but his revelatory vision is only of a complicated lovers’ dance from which he is specifically excluded, not of an ordered universe. Successful lovers, unfortunate lovers, even old lovers, join in, while he lies silent and unmoving, exiled from the garden of love. Obviously, nothing else has worked. Amans himself confesses that Genius fails with him, that he cannot, on his own, follow reason:

Tho was betwen mi prest and me  
 Debat and gret perplexeté:  
 Mi resoun understod him wel,  
 And knew it was soth everydel  
 That he hath seid, bot nought forthi  
 Mi will hath nothing set therby.  
 For techinge of so wis a port

Is unto love of no desport;  
 Yit mihte nevere man beholde  
 Reson, wher love was withholde;  
 Thei be noght of o governance.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that passion destroys happiness, friendship, and the concord of a well-governed society is what binds together the story of Amans's personal erotic desire and the world upsidedown of the fourteenth century described in the Prologue. Wisdom, education, textual authority: none of these is sufficient for they "be noght of o governance" with the fallen will of human desire.

Amans, on the other hand, looks not at the heavenly spheres, but on a vision of his own face as the years reform and deform it in the mirror held by Venus:

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 there was nothing full ne plein,  
 I syh also myn heres hore.<sup>20</sup>

There is laughter at the end of the *Confessio*, but it's Venus's laughter, not Amans's, as he recounts that she "beheld me than and lowh, / And axeth, as it were in game, / What love was,"

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<sup>19</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2189–2199.

<sup>20</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2824–2831.

a question which Amans can no longer answer.<sup>21</sup> He can answer her when she asks his name, however, and “John Gower” has replaced his response in Book I, where he simply describes himself as “a caitif that lith hier.”<sup>22</sup> Freedom from the pains of love is bought with the knowledge of his own mortality; immortality must, on the other hand, be prayed for rather than revealed in a divine vision.

But this is where, in my reading, the *Confessio Amantis* invokes genuine healing. One can, of course, read Venus’s laughter as mocking and cruel, and perhaps it is. But the kind of love she represents is endlessly, frustratingly painful. Amans’s cure, the withdrawal of Cupid’s arrow and the healing of his wound, is ultimately met with relief, an end to pain at last. Amans recounts that he “was mad sobre and hol ynowh,” rather than made glad.<sup>23</sup> Concord, true governance, the restoration of reason: the price of these in the *Confessio* is the loss of the folly and pain of love, a loss that does not occasion laughter, but sobriety, both seriousness and clarity. This ending, in fact, which so compellingly thrusts the narrator away from his obsession and finally restores his reason, is *happy* in the sense that the character is finally freed from the painful desires of the flesh which have so tormented him. Such a release not only suits the comic story of medieval Christianity, but also invites the reader to generate what McAdams refers to as a redemptive self, “a common way that especially productive and caring. . . adults, in their midlife years, tend to understand their own development,” creating a coherent story that integrates pain and suffering into a nevertheless hopeful future.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2870–2872.

<sup>22</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* I, line 161.

<sup>23</sup> Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2862–2869.

<sup>24</sup> McAdams, “The Redemptive Self,” 82.

Certini, somewhat tritely, asserts that “Lacking accurate and certain medical knowledge, the peoples of Antiquity used fiction and imagination to explain—especially to themselves—the origins of disease, which almost always involved divine prophecies and curses connected to supposed immoral and heinous actions committed by women and men.”<sup>25</sup> But, of course, the moving literature of the past contains far more depth and nuance than this description allows. Gower, in both his major and his minor works, is persistent in his concern for suffering. Whether it was the trauma of the Rising of 1381, or other events, both public and private that drove him, both the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Mirour de l’Omme* present a call for moral and political reform, not just in reaction to chaos, but to the real violence and pain that, from Gower’s perspective, filled his world.

But unlike his other works, the *Confessio* moves from pain, through a narrative of loss, hurt and confusion, to a healing balm at the end. It is easy enough to find the moment when Amans gazes into his aged face in the Mirror of Nature a kind of narrative trick, a last joke on a not-very-bright or effective lover, or to dismiss the ointment with which his wounded heart is healed as the extension of a common trope in medieval erotic love poetry, but no other narrative of the Middle Ages, not even the *Commedia* or the *Roman de la Rose*, so completely integrates the encyclopedia of story which makes up its culture into the redemptive story of an individual in pain—and releases him from that pain, not into the heavens, where we can’t follow, nor into a near-pornographic assault on a flower, where we probably don’t want to follow, but back to his life. Amans reads, with Genius, the stories of his culture, examining the victories and defeats, the terrible violence and the lessons learned by those who have become story, and what he finds at the end is himself, John Gower. And he walks away, slowly, having become part of the story and

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<sup>25</sup> Certini, “Illness, Narration and Healing,” 148.

achieved the narrative identity that McAdams argues is fundamental to the formation of the self. He is healed not just by the removal of love's arrow, but also by becoming both poet and poetry.

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