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Gower in Exile

*Est amor egra salus, vexata quies, pius error,
Bellica pax, vulnus dulce, suaue malum.*

[Love is a sharp salvation, a troubled quiet, a pious error,
a warring peace, a sweet wound, a soothing ill]¹

In the midst of a world pandemic whose sublunary waves now feel tidal, turning to Gower offers counsel and pathways to hope. As these scholars show, in the *Confessio Amantis* narrative itself is an act of love and healing. Contemporary readers may quail at the *Confessio*'s superstructure for love talk organized by the seven deadly sins, but Eve Salisbury burrows to the center of this conceit: in Gower's late-medieval world the heart is the body's king, directing cognition and human emotion. Gower deploys a massive number of tales suffused with suffering and death, most not connected to loving relationships. Kara McShane sees in two narratives of rape the power of storytelling as the first step in articulating social trauma when the storytellers are believed and trusted; Gower offers these women that agency. Curtis Runstedler more broadly argues that the *Confessio*'s tales are performative and restorative. Even Amans, grappling with that feeling, takes an active role in his own textual healing. Gower's tales reach deeply into the varieties of sexualities, embracing not just Ovidian change but agency for the many wounded by transformations as profound as gender fluidity provokes, for which M. W. Bychowski discovers an openness in the *Confessio*'s poet never granted to the clichéd construction of Moral Gower.

¹ *Confessio Amantis*, 1 headnote 1.8-9. Citations are to John Gower, *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS Extra series 81 (2 vols. Oxford: 1900).

Hope and healing in the *Confessio* come out of darkness, nonetheless, and the power of its counsel cannot be valued without confronting the depths and terror of suffering. Across the spectrum of identities and individuals, Natalie Grinnell points out, the fear of death amplifies human pain. That pain manifests as a political position projected onto others in the community through the “ugly” emotion (and deadly sin) of envy, but Will Rogers argues convincingly that envy can uncover and diagnose illnesses in the body politic. Gower the Archer, who inhabits the frontispiece for early copies of *Vox Clamantis*, surely stands ready to use any arrow in his quiver, including envy, to mark the political and moral wounds of the body politic. Yet in the *Confessio Amans* / Gower is *not* the archer, but the body whose love agony is marked by Cupid’s “firy dart” cast into the lover’s “herte rote.”² Note that Amans already suffers acutely before he speaks to the presiding deities of his dream-vision. The penetration and removal of the arrow inscribe the bounds of narrative counsel rather than the pain itself. That suffering outside the bounds of the confession also matters in this conversation. It induces what Bychowski calls the experience of feeling wrong in the world. Consequently, the aftermath of the confession, and the aftermath from the withdrawal of the “fyri lancegay,” destabilize the hope all of us writing here find in the tales told by Amans’s confessor.³

Part of my response to these essays emerges from the possibility that Amans’s love complaint is not some hackneyed convention of medieval poetry, but a passionate testimony to terrible pain. The conventional nature of the poem’s dream vision further obscures the agonies

² *Confessio Amantis*, 1.144-145

³ *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2798.

inscribed onto the body and mind of Amans as an avatar for the poet himself. I have begun to take seriously Amans's declaration "And evere I wisshide after deth, / Whanne I out of my peine awok."⁴ The dialogue with Genius then does not invoke a calm session on the couch, but a very very long suicide hotline call that does not end on a positive note--however much death may be deferred. Although, as Natalie Grinnell points out, emotional displays in all their verbose glories may be a special province of medieval elites, for both Genius and Amans love stands in for the full panoply of existential pain. Suffering and death are not either / or but both / and.

Many of us see the end of the *Confessio* as a positive Ovidian metamorphosis, a graceful acceptance of aging. Even so, in this state Venus decrees that sexuality fades away, ambition craters, and the only pastime suitable inside the waiting room for death is cultivating a garden of books that will not inflame the imagination. Retirement is a rupture and an exile, not a golden age joined with the whole community. Venus and Cupid in their final acts impose on the traumatized and suicidal Amans not just the loss of love, but also the loss of the body's connection to love, and the loss of knowledge about love—or at least the capacity to imagine love. In this series of extractions Venus does anoint Amans after Cupid pulls out the "fyri lancegay," but this medicine applied to his wound, his temples, and his kidneys (!) ages him immediately into a withered senescence, "riveled and woe besein," that vitiates his wildness and passions.⁵ Reason then comes along and removes the "sotie" (the image of the beloved) from

⁴ *Confessio Amantis*, I. 120-121.

⁵ *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2818-2819.

Amans's imagination.⁶ All these acts prompt Venus to laugh and banish Amans (now identified directly as the poet John Gower) from her court.⁷ As Rogers notes, in the *Confessio* laughter is rare, and in this moment certainly it "marks pain, hurt, and the capacity ... to hurt another."⁸ Amans / Gower has been treated for his arrow-marked trauma, but not cured. Instead, his withered body becomes the sign of his exile from life.

The lovers from which Amans, now named as the poet John Gower, is cast out display the "newe guise of Beawme," Bohemian fashions popular in the court of Richard II that defer to Richard's first queen, Anne of Bohemia.⁹ This political reference combined with the salve Venus uses to transform Amans's physical state can sound to contemporary ears like Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, a medieval biopolitics creating a bare life for John Gower.¹⁰ Even in the period after 1399, when Gower takes on the persona of a Lancastrian laureate for Henry IV and seems to be reintegrated politically to some degree, the biopolitics of old age becomes a common trope in Gower's lyrics. Admittedly it is Venus, not Richard, who wields this absolute power in the *Confessio*'s visionary landscape. And by the late 1390s Gower might well have considered exile from Richard's political maelstrom to be a healthy choice. After the dream vision "turnyd

⁶ *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2865-66.

⁷ *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2880-81.

⁸ Rogers, "The Price We Pay for Envy: A Political and Social 'Maladie'," 11.

⁹ *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2470.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazan. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3-4, 73.

into nocht” within himself Amans / Gower “gan to smyle / Thenkende uppon the bedis blake.”¹¹ So we do not see a wholly devastated figure at the end, but an embodiment of the potential for healing and hope the *Confessio* offers in its vast assemblage of tales. Yet Amans / Gower is deeply damaged at its end, and distinctively so. Among the many poet personae in Gower’s England--Langland’s Will, Chaucer’s pilgrim and dreamers, Hoccleve’s and Lydgate’s narrators--none are harmed in any substantial way within their narratives. In the *Confessio* Gower, on the other side of the arrow from his position in *Vox*, earns his status as a confessional poet who not only looks deeply into existential pain in his narratives, but also internalizes that trauma, and confronts the struggle to move forward. Loss does not end when healing begins. More loss inextricably wraps itself around trauma’s ghosts. Our six authors here make powerful and convincing cases for Gower’s great poem as a living source for the hope that waves of pain and pandemics will recede.

¹¹ *Confessio Amantis*, 8.2956-2959.

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