



**Accessus:**

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

**Accessus**

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Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 3

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2013

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### Recommended Citation

Pearman, Tory Vandeventer (2013) "Blindness, Confession, and Re-membering in Gower's Confessio," *Accessus*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol1/iss1/3>

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## Blindness, Confession, and Re-membering in Gower's Confessio

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to Edward Wheatley for his thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this essay. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers of *Accessus*, whose comments were invaluable to shaping the essay into its final form.

## Blindness, Confession, and Re-membering in Gower's *Confessio*

Tory Vandeventer Pearman

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a poem about division and unity. Division not only produces the poem itself, but also serves as a structural apparatus: the poem begins with an illustration of social and political divisiveness in fourteenth-century England and the world at large, narrows in on the personal and physical divisiveness of Amans' lovesickness, and then recounts how remembrance can unite the political division of England and the internal division of Amans. Much scholarship on the *Confessio* has focused on the poem's assertion that poetic narration, represented by Amans' ongoing confession, has the ability to restore the fragmentary natures of social, physical, and spiritual bodies.<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, the role that the (dis)abled body plays in the poem's struggle with fragmentation and integration has been largely overlooked, despite scholars commonly noting the poem's emphasis on the blindness of love, the importance of seeing properly, and the problematic effects of "misloking."<sup>2</sup> Through a discussion of the poem's reliance on a topos of blindness that intertwines, conflates, and finally separates physical

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1. See Katherine R. Chandler, "Memory and Unity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Philological Quarterly* 71 (2005):15--30; Paul D. Stegner, "'Foryet it thou, and so wol I': Absolving Memory in *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in Philology* 108 (2011):488--507; R. F. Yeager, "The Body Politic and the Politics of Bodies in the Poetry of John Gower," in *The Body and Soul in Medieval Literature*, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1999),145--66; and Hugh White, "Division and Failure in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Neophilologus* 22 (1988): 600--16.

2. See esp. Andrea Schutz, "Absent and Present Images: Mirrors and Mirroring in John Gower's '*Confessio Amantis*,'" *The Chaucer Review* 34 (1999):107--24. Just as traditional scholarship on Gower has overlooked the disability perspective, examinations of his work are markedly absent within the field of medieval disability studies as well, one exception being a special session, "Enabling Access: Gower and Premodern Disability Studies," held at the 128<sup>th</sup> MLA Annual Convention in Boston on 4 January 2012. It is my hope that this essay will add to and stimulate more discussions of disability in Gower's life and work.

and metaphoric blindness, a process that is most explicitly depicted in the “Tale of Constance,” I will demonstrate that the formal structure and thematic explorations of the *Confessio*, in fact, rely upon the (dis)abled body and its inextricable relationship to narration in order to stress the importance of proper spiritual sight to the health of the body and soul. Indeed, it is Amans’ disabling illness that inaugurates the poem and provides Gower with the vehicle through which to critique the fractured body politic of fourteenth-century England, and it is only through the act of narration that both bodies may be “cured.”

Gower’s poem opens with a prologue that stresses the importance of remembering to the unification of division. He directs readers to look to books “[o]f hem that written ous tofore” and notes that they should “drawe into remembrance / the fortune of this worldes chance” by bringing to mind stories of “olde daies passed” (Pro. ll. 1. 69--70, 55).<sup>3</sup> These stories, characterized by Amans’ confession and Genius’ exempla—both of which are kinds of memory in that the former recounts past experiences and the latter consists of a tale recounted from memory and intended for memorization by its receiver—demonstrate that narratives unify, that they limit the deviance created by their own inception. A narrative only exists, after all, in order to solve the problem of plot, to answer a question, to repair a fissure. In filling those gaps, narrative produces the fiction of teleology: “Narrative is a way of constructing continuity over time; it is a coherent knitting of one moment to the next.”<sup>4</sup> In opposition to the unifying effects

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3. All quotations from the *Confessio Amantis* are taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 3 vols., ed. Russell A. Peck (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.

4. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, “Shape Structures Story: Fresh and Feisty Stories about Disability,” *Narrative* 15 (2007):113--23 (113).

of remembering an ordered and orderly past, Gower cites the devastating effects of division, “the moder of confusion” (Pro. I. 852), on the kingdom, the Church, the commons, the natural world, and the human body itself. Division’s own “moder,” Gower reveals, is “Senne” caused by the corruptible and corrupting human body: the body’s “complexioun / Is mad upon divisioun / Of cold, of hot, of moist of drye” (Pro. II. 975--77). In addition to the body’s divided physical composition, its dualistic nature facilitates further division in its inability to resist sin. As a result, it is man’s physical body that ultimately leads to the destruction of social bodies at large: “The man is cause of alle wo, / Why this world is divided so” (Pro. II. 965--66).

Gower’s use of the disabled body as a metaphor for political and social disorder compounds his insistence on humankind’s implication in that disorder. Though scholars have noted the importance of the monster of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream to the poem’s larger themes, none has discussed the monster in relationship to bodily ability despite the overlapping characteristics between the social understandings of monstrosity and disability in the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Though not all medieval monsters have disabilities and certainly not all medieval people with disabilities were viewed as monsters, monstrosity and disability are often discursively linked, particularly in medical literature that describes children with congenital deformities as monsters.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the statue in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is not only monstrous, but also

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5. See Russell A. Peck, “John Gower and the Book of Daniel,” *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 158--87; Eve Salisbury, “Remembering Origins: Gower’s Monstrous Body Poetic,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus, 1998), 159--84; Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language Sex and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), esp. 107--18; Deanne Williams, “Gower’s Monster,” in *Post-colonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127--50; and Yeager, “The Body Politic.”

6. For instance, Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’s treatise on human reproduction *De Secretis Mulierum*, which combines medical and philosophical writings by Aristotle, Avicenna, Averroës,

disabled, as I will show below. Thus, I contend that a disability perspective reveals the *Confessio*'s insistence and dependence on the disabled body, itself "disordered," in order to illustrate the restorative effects of narrative. As Nebuchadnezzar dreams, he sees "a wonder strange ymage" of a monstrous statue upon a stage (Pro. l. 604). The monster has the shape of a man, but his head is made of gold, his arms and shoulders of silver, his torso of brass, his legs of steel, and his feet of crumbling stone (Pro. ll. 605--24). The figure embodies Gower's principal assertion that his present, as symbolized by the crushed feet, is a deterioration of a past "golden age." After describing the statue, Gower offers an extended explanation, connecting each bodily division with a complementary narrative of an empire's development and collapse, beginning with the fall of Babylon and ending with the discord of Gower's England. Discussed separately, each body part tells a single, contained story; together, the divisions unite into one complete body and compose a unified, teleological narrative of history. The figure of the monster, as its Latin origin *monstro*, *monstrare* suggests, demonstrates three ends: it models Gower's central argument, the need to unify division through the narratives of memory; his poetic strategy, the use of narratives of memory to unite the poem; and the *Confessio* itself, a poem divided into separate narrative parts that together create a whole. Remembrance, then, unifies, or *re-members*, the body politic, the body personal, and the body poetic.

Gower's monster demonstrates that the disabled body emblemizes the division that the poem so desperately seeks to repair. The statue's feet are composed of a mixture of steel and earth, a combination of strength and feebleness that threatens the statue's integrity: "The fieble meynd was with the stronge, / So myhte it wel nocht stonde longe" (Pro. ll. 615--16). Gower later

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and Galen, notes that non-missionary sexual positions may result in "a monster in nature," such as "a child with a curved spine and a lame foot" (114). See Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women's Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

calls this mixture “brutel” (Pro. l. 877) and “departed so” (Pro. l. 643). The descriptors *fioble* and *brutel* emphasize the weakness of the monster’s body, and *departed* indicates that the feet, because of their mixed substance, are severed from the statue’s main body.<sup>7</sup> Once composed of “riche” gold (Pro. l.633), its body has become progressively impure and infirm. The statue’s foundation, as a result, is unsteady, and the monster is already disabled even before it is crushed by the “gret ston” (Pro.l.618). When the stone rolls from its “hull on hyh” (Pro.l.618), it lands upon the monster’s feet, pulverizing them and crumbling the statue:

With which ston al to broke was  
 Gold, selver, erthe, stiel, and bras,  
 That al was in pouldre broght,  
 And so forth torned into nocht. (Pro. ll. 621--24)

The use of “al to broke” to describe the powdered feet demonstrates how disability, for Gower, serves as the ultimate emblem for the division that his poem attacks. Of course, the phrase references the utter destruction of the monster’s feet; they have been completely smashed by the stone. But, in addition to denoting fragmentation, *tobroke* connotes bodily infirmity: according to the *MED*, the term could indicate affliction, disease, malady, or an opening into the body.<sup>8</sup> More than simply crushed clay and steel, the monster’s crumbling feet impair its body, the body politic it represents, and the human body upon which Gower places ultimate blame for the catastrophic division the *Confessio* decries.<sup>9</sup>

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7. The *OED* states that *departed* can indicate divided, separated, and severed.

8. “Brok.” Def. 1. *MED*.

9. The figure of Nebuchadnezzar’s monster is undeniably multivalent and apparently important for Gower and his readers, as more than half of the *Confessio*’s manuscripts contain illustrations of the monster. In fact, it appears so frequently in the manuscript tradition that it is

Gower's use of the disabled body and/or disability as a metaphor for social ills places his work within a long literary tradition. As disability theorists David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note, in addition to often depending on the disabled body as an impetus to narrative, a phenomenon they call narrative prosthesis, writers have frequently made use of disability to signify social problems in need of reform; these bodies provide the concrete representation of abstract notions, making the intangible tangible, and, in the process, reinscribing those abstractions upon the bodies of people with disabilities.<sup>10</sup> Scholars of medieval disability studies have found that, like the modern writers Mitchell and Snyder study, medieval writers sometimes used the disabled body as an emblem of sinfulness.<sup>11</sup> I write *sometimes* to make clear that, as

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considered one of two "standard" images of the text, the other being an image of Amans kneeling before Genius. See Jeremy Giffiths, "'Confessio Amantis': The Poem and Its Pictures," *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 163--78 (177) for a chart outlining the locations of the image and the manuscripts in which it appears. Other readings of the image include Richard K. Emmerson, "Reading Gower in a Manuscript Culture: Latin and English in Illustrated Manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 21 (1999):143--86, which links the use of the image to the process of manuscript revision; Joel Fredell, "Reading the Dream Miniature in the *Confessio Amantis*," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 22 (1995):61--93, which reads the image in a political context; and Derek Pearsall, "The Manuscripts and Illustrations of Gower's Works," *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 73--99, which gives an overview of illustrations in the *Confessio* manuscripts (86--90). An illustration of the monster appears, moreover, in the poet's earlier *Vox Clamantis*, there as a commentary on the events leading up to the Rising of 1381. The *Confessio*'s monster, in contrast, provides a critique that stretches from the specific turmoil of England to a commentary on the fallen state of humanity. See Salisbury, "Remembering"; Watt, *Amoral*; and Yeager, "The Body Politic," 158--59.

10. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 63.

11. Studies that have investigated literature that links outward physical differences to inward sinfulness include Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010); *Disability in the Middle Ages: Reconsiderations and Reverberations*, ed. Joshua Eyler (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010); Tory V. Pearman, *Women and Disability in Medieval Literature* (New York:



Irina Metzler has found, the link between disability and sin in the Middle Ages was not always constant and that not all literary characters with disabilities are associated with sin, despite the prevalence of claims to the contrary.<sup>12</sup> People with disabilities in the Middle Ages often functioned without remark and even thrived,<sup>13</sup> and reactions from those with able bodies ranged from indifference to even reverence, particularly for those whose impairments signified spiritual singularity, such as saints and martyrs, or made them necessary to a spiritual economy centered on acts of charity. However, there are instances in medieval literature in which disability and sin are intertwined, as the *Confessio* demonstrates. As Edward Wheatley argues, the Church of the later Middle Ages influenced discursive notions of bodily infirmity, making an implied connection between physical appearance and sin and stressing the importance of spiritual health to physical health. Wheatley's religious model allows us to see the disciplining effects of the medieval Church's insistence on "the possibility of cure through freedom from sin and increased

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Palgrave, 2010); and the special essay cluster on "Disability and the Social Body" in *postmedieval* 3.2 (2012):142--94.

12. Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment During the High Middle Ages, c. 1100--1400* (London: Routledge, 2006), 63.

13. Examples of well-known people with impairments in the Middle Ages include the mendicant Francis of Assisi, the composer Francesco Landini, and poets Guillaume de Machaut, John Audelay, and, of course, John Gower. It is more difficult to find documentation of impairments among laypeople or those who were not renowned. Many people with impairments are documented in accounts of miraculous cures in saints' lives. The relatively rare instances of disabling that appear in hagiographical miracles indicate that many with impairments were supported by their families and communities. For example, Gregory of Tours's *Life of Saint Martin* notes that it was routine for children with disabilities to be raised as if they were able-bodied. See Gregory of Tours, "*Liber de virtutibus sancti Martini episcopi*," in *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul*, ed. and trans. Raymond Van Dam (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 420. For a detailed documentation of people with impairments in saints' lives, see Metzler, *Disability*.

personal faith.”<sup>14</sup> Wheatley cites Jesus’s miraculous healings of the New Testament as well as the Fourth Lateran Council’s decree that people with physical ailments must acquire spiritual before physical health as major influences on discursive representation of disability in the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup>

The importance placed on one’s spiritual health as an indicator of bodily health by the medieval Church is echoed in the *Confessio*. Just as the monster’s incomplete body signifies the destructive effects of postlapsarian humanity, Amans’ lovesickness represents his inner disunity and spiritual lack. The healing of the microcosm—Amans/humanity—will restore the macrocosm—the statue/the world, or, as Mahoney notes, “Amans’s search for healing and repose is parallel to the need for peace and unity in England.”<sup>16</sup> The *healing* of the disabled body in the poem, thus, is just as important, if not more so, than the disabled body itself. This is in keeping with medieval literature that illustrates the tenets of the religious model, such as fabliaux, farce, and drama that portray disabled characters as sinful and in need of conversion and cure.<sup>17</sup> Healing of disability is essential to hagiography as well; by miraculously curing

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14. Wheatley, *Stumbling*.

15. The decree: “Since bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin, the Lord saying to the sick man whom he had healed: “Go and sin no more, lest some worse thing happen to thee (John 5:14), we declare in the present decree and strictly command that when physicians of the body are called to the bedside of the sick, before all else they admonish them to call for the physician of souls, so that after spiritual health has been restored to them, the application of bodily medicine may be of greater benefit, for the cause being removed, the effect will pass away.” As quoted in Darrel W. Amundsen, “The Medieval Catholic Tradition,” in *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Darrel Amundsen (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 88--89.

16. Dhira B. Mahoney, “Gower’s Two Prologues to *Confessio Amantis*,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, 17--38 (26).

17. For instance, in what is considered the first French farce *Le Garçon et l'aveugle*, the blind character is portrayed as excessively greedy, deceitful, and sinful. In the Middle English

impairments, saints prove their spiritual singularity. In the case of the *Confessio*, Amans first asks Venus for medicine to cure his illness (I. ll. 30, 33), but before providing a medical cure, Venus insists that Amans “be schrive” by her personal priest, Genius (I. l. 190). Venus, thus, follows the decree of the Fourth Lateran Council that a patient must first heal his or her soul through confession before seeking a physician’s cure, despite the fact that she has the power to cure Amans without his confession, as James Palmer notes.<sup>18</sup>

While disability in many forms appears in the *Confessio*, I contend that the poem’s use of blindness most effectively exposes the curative effects of narrative on bodies of all kinds. Indeed, Amans’ lovesickness, which would have been contracted after catching sight of his beloved, is characterized as capable of leaving Amans physically and metaphorically blind. While to modern readers it may seem an over-generalization to categorize Amans’ lovesickness as a disability instead of merely a disease, it is clear that the logic of the poem follows classical and medieval medical literature in marking it as disabling.<sup>19</sup> In keeping with the social model of disability, I distinguish here between physical *impairment* and the social and historical standards for

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*Croxton Play of the Sacrament*, moreover, the Jewish character Jonathas must convert to Christianity before his maimed hand can be healed.

18. James M. Palmer, “Narratives of Healing: Emotion, Medicine, Metaphor, and Late-Medieval Poetry and Prose” (PhD diss., Purdue University, 2002), 34.

19. The medieval understanding of lovesickness begins with descriptions of the disease in Constantine the African’s *Viaticum*, a medical handbook that brought classical and Arabic medical traditions to Europe in the eleventh century; the *Viaticum*’s glosses; and Avicenna’s *Canon Medicinae*, an Arabic text translated in the thirteenth century. This medical notion of the disease is later taken up by a literary tradition influenced by Ovid’s depiction of lovesick paramours in works like the *Metamorphoses*. Medieval physicians and poets alike understood lovesickness as a very serious disease with physical consequences, including insomnia, pallor, and loss of appetite. In Mary Frances Wack’s translation of the *Viaticum*, Constantine describes sufferers of lovesickness thusly: “Their eyelids are heavy [and] their color yellowish, this is from the motion of heat which follows upon sleeplessness. Their pulse grows hard and does not [...] keep the beat as it should” (189). See Mary Frances Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: the Viaticum and its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

normalcy that mark an impairment as *disabling*. Disability thus results when an impairment blocks a person from full correlation with societal norms.<sup>20</sup> Though there was no medieval term for *disability* or *disabled*, it is clear that the social process of disabling did occur to some extent in the Middle Ages, as is evident in the portrayal of Amans' lovesickness in the *Confessio*.<sup>21</sup> Amans' impairment is both emotional and physical. In addition to the mental anguish Amans suffers, the poem describes his lovesickness as a physical wound, "[a] fiery dart" thrown by Cupid "through [Amans'] herte rote" (I. ll. 144--45). Amans declares, moreover, that the emotional pain of his unrequited love has had physical effects that alter his quality of life. His frequent sighs have left him "without breth" and hoping for the reprieve that only death can bring (I. ll. 119--20). He likens his "maladie," a term used throughout the poem to describe his emotional and physical state, to insanity (I. 130) and the complete loss of his "wittes" (I. l. 228). Palmer agrees that "Amans conceptualizes his ordeal as a sickness that needs a physician's cure" and characterizes his lovesickness as "debilitating."<sup>22</sup> Amans' experience with unrequited love exemplifies the medieval conception of lovesickness in both the medical and literary tradition as

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20. For a description and evaluation of the social model of disability, see Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 266--73.

21. Though Metzler's *Disability* has argued that disability in the social sense was rare in the Middle Ages, other works including Wheatley's *Stumbling*; Pearman's *Women*; and Eyler's introduction in *Disability in the Middle Ages* have suggested that bodily difference is inextricable from its social and cultural perception.

22. James M. Palmer, "Bodily and Spiritual Healing through Conversation and Storytelling: Genius as Physician and Confessor in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *Approaches to Teaching the Poetry of John Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager and Brian Gastle. (New York: MLA, 2011), 53--58 (53).

an illness with very real physical symptoms.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Amans views his disease as disabling; unable to go on in such a state, Amans prays to Venus for a cure, noting that the lack of one would prove fatal (I. 163).

Central to a late medieval understanding of lovesickness is the notion that erotic love begins in the eyes, a convention found in both medical and literary depictions of the disease. There are three standard steps to this process found in both medical literature and poetry: the sight of the beloved enters through the lover's eyes, passes through the faculties of the brain causing the lover to think of the beloved incessantly, and finally takes over the lover's body, mind, and soul. It is the sight of the beloved in the lover's thoughts, then, that awakens the lover's passion, causing physical and emotional trauma throughout the rest of the body. Peter of Spain, in his commentary on Constantine the African's *Viaticum*, an authoritative text on lovesickness, explains, "It must also be noted that love enters through the senses to the interior faculty, namely to the fantasy, and from the fantasy [it progresses] to the estimative faculty, whose function is to recognize friendship and enmity [...]. [Lovesickness's] causes are also taken from the desired objects, and from desire itself, and from the frequency of thoughts that are in the estimative faculty and in the memory."<sup>24</sup> In her study of lovesickness in the *Confessio*, Ellen Bakalian notes that medieval medical authorities associated the eyes, heart, liver, and brain with desire, but gave the eyes "prominence, a medical theory that is certainly borne out in

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23. For studies of medieval lovesickness, see Massimo Ciavolella, *La 'malatti d'amore' dall'antichità al medioevo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1976); Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexualité et savoir médical au Moyen Age* (Paris: PUF, 1985); Wack, *Lovesickness*; and Julie Singer, *Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2011), esp. 1--53. For an extensive discussion of lovesickness in the *Confessio*, see Ellen S. Bakalian, *Aspects of Love in John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

24. Peter of Spain, "Questions on the *Viaticum* (Version B)," quoted in Wack, *Lovesickness*, 233--51 (233).

medieval literature. It was thought that a beautiful sight was imprinted in the memory which in imagining or remembering it stirred up one's passions."<sup>25</sup> Though a medical understanding of the process determines that the lover's image is imprinted in the lover's memory, poetic depictions of the process often portray the image as an imprint upon the lover's heart, a process Singer calls "the love-imprint."<sup>26</sup> The Palamon-Emelye-Arcite love triangle in Chaucer's Knight's Tale provides a well-known example of the poetic topos of the love-imprint. After spying Emelye in the garden, both men immediately fall in love. Palamon's explanation that he "was hurt right now throughout [his] ye / Into [his] herte" succinctly summarizes the process.<sup>27</sup> Vision is thus essential not only to falling in love, but also to contracting lovesickness. Andreas Capellanus even notes in his *Art of Courtly Love* that physical blindness is an impediment to love since a blind person would not be able to view the love-object.<sup>28</sup> Medieval medical commentaries on lovesickness indicate that the eyes could also physically suffer due to the illness.<sup>29</sup> The excitement brought on by the sight of the beloved, according to medieval physicians, could result in the depletion of *spiritus*, an important fluid in the male body. This depletion could lead to blindness and would cause the lover's eyes to appear enlarged. As a result, Mary Wack explains, "The affliction of the eyes [...] is possibly the most fitting symbol of the disease and its causes,"

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25. Bakalian, *Aspects*, 127.

26. Singer, *Blindness*, 14--15, 23--53.

27. Geoffrey Chaucer, The Knight's Tale in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Larry D. Benson, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 40,l. 1096--97.

28. Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, trans. John Jay Parry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 33.

29. Wack, *Lovesickness*, 101. Gerard of Berry's *Glosses on the Viaticum* explains, "From the body's part are the signs: sunken eyes, since they follow the *spiritus* racing to the place of the estimative [faculty]; also dryness of the eyes and lack of tears unless weeping occurs on account of the desired object," in Wack, 199--205 (201).

for the lover's enlarged eyes serve as visible markers of the disease.<sup>30</sup> Lovesickness and blindness, consequently, are necessarily entangled in poetic depictions of the disease. For example, the lover may incur visual deficiency or total blindness, and Love personified is often blind, as is the case with Gower's Cupid (VIII. 1. 2269).

Though Gower does not depict Amans as physically blind, it is clear that the effects of his lovesickness have resulted in a metaphoric blindness that impedes his interactions with the world. Before Genius begins his first tale, he instructs Amans that the eyes are necessary to rationality. He states,

Mi sone, I thence ferst beginne  
 To wite how that thin yhe hath stonde,  
 The which is, as I understonde,  
 The moste principal of alle,  
 Thurgh whom that peril mai befalle. (I. ll. 304--8)

Genius continues, "an yhe is as a thief / To love, and doth ful gret meschief" (I. ll. 319--20). In keeping with the Platonic understanding of the senses, Genius affirms that, because they perceive the world around them, the eyes, followed by the ears, are necessary to the illumination of the soul.<sup>31</sup> The Latin epigram preceding this section describe the eyes and ears as mind's doors, and Gower echoes this sentiment in later books. Amans' lovesickness, however, has rendered his senses "so blinde" (I. 1. 228). Thus, lovesickness is an impediment to reason; like fortune, "love is blind and may nocht se" (I. 1. 47). Gower uses the descriptor "blind" to characterize other lovers in Genius's tales, fortune, and various sins, all of which go against the unity that reason

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30. Ibid., 101--2.

31. See Peck's note for Book I. ll. 304--08.

can bring. As Paul Stegner has noted, this opposition is figured by a conflict between reason and the natural law of Venus and erotic love: “Gower represents the limitations of *kindely* love separated from reason by associating it with blind, irrational lust by defining it as fundamentally implicated in incestuous desire.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the Latin term *cupiditas*, though it signifies sin in general, stems from Cupid and Venus’s incestuous union. In Gower’s retelling of this relationship, he explains that Cupid’s blindness and lack of reason are what leads him to participate in the relationship with Venus, thus linking blindness to incest and irrationality (V. ll. 1411-13). The erotic love that Venus exemplifies, then, is enmeshed with incestuous love and becomes part of an “incestuous venereal economy” that figures incest as emblematic of love itself.<sup>33</sup> Watt succinctly explains, “In *Confessio*, incest is metonymic of sexuality, which is simultaneously perverse and natural, and sexuality itself is metonymic of humanity’s fallen, sinful state.”<sup>34</sup> Gower’s ambiguous depiction of the blindness of Venus and Cupid emphasizes the multivalence of incest. Venus is never described as physically blind, but her actions are associated with metaphorical blindness throughout the poem. Her linkage to the blind goddess Fortune both in the poem and in medieval literature more generally strengthens this association.<sup>35</sup> Cupid’s blindness, on the other hand, is both metaphoric and physical. Initially, Cupid does not

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32. Stegner, “Foryet,” 490.

33. Ibid.

34. Watt, *Amoral*, 90. See also Georgiana Donavin, *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower’s Confessio Amantis* (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria, 1993); Larry Scanlon, “The Riddle of Incest: John Gower and the Problem of Medieval Sexuality,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, 93--127; and Theresa Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 178--97.

35. Howard Patch notes that the two goddesses were so often associated with one another in medieval literature that they became interchangeable by the fourteenth century. See *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (New York: Octagon, 1967), 40, 90--98.



seem to be visually impaired—his eyes are “wrothe,” not blind (I.140). In fact, some scholars have limited his blindness to metaphor, asserting that he is not sightless.<sup>36</sup> However, the poem makes clear that Cupid is unable to see Amans when he attempts to remove his dart in Book VIII:

This blinde god which mai nocht se,  
 Hath groped til that he me fond;  
 And as he pitte forth his hond  
 Upon my body, wher I lay,  
 Me thoghte a fyri lancegay,  
 Which whilom thurgh myn herte he caste,  
 He pullet oute, and also faste. (ll. 2794--2800)

While scholars have already noticed that the use of the word *grobe* here suggests a possibly homoerotic encounter between Cupid and Amans,<sup>37</sup> I contend that it also draws attention to Cupid’s physical blindness. In this passage, then, the metaphoric connection between sexuality and disability that we have seen in the poem’s iterations of blind love is made literal by the blind god’s groping of Amans.

A connection between deviant sexuality and disability in medieval culture was not consistent or monolithic, but it did occur, particularly in regard to blindness. Because blinding was sometimes used as a punishment for crimes that included sexual transgression throughout the Middle Ages, the physical impairment itself, regardless of etiology, was often associated with

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36. See Watt, *Amoral*, 90; Tinkle, *Medieval*, 193.

37. See Watt, 67--68; and Rictor Norton, “Lovely Lad and Shame-faced Catamite,” *The Homosexual Pastoral Tradition*, last modified June 20, 2008, <http://rictornorton.co.uk/pastor05.htm>.

deviance.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the Christian labeling of Jews as blind for their supposed “turning away” from the spiritual truths of Jesus,<sup>39</sup> which led both Jews and the visually impaired to endure stereotypical accusations that included sexual deviancy, resulted in, as Wheatley notes, a catachresis that confused notions of metaphoric and physical blindness in religious and literary discourse. Wheatley explains, “[M]edieval writers would literalize the catachrestic meaning of blindness and use the impairment to punish sexually sinful characters” and would represent blind characters as sexually excessive.<sup>40</sup> As has been noted elsewhere, punitive blinding in texts like Thomas Chestre’s *Sir Launfal* represents an attempt to limit sexual transgression.<sup>41</sup> Wheatley traces the link between blindness and sexual deviance in medieval Europe to the Oedipus myth in which Oedipus blinds himself as a result of his incestuous union with his mother.<sup>42</sup> Gower’s presentation of blindness as an emblem of incest, which, in turn, is an emblem of venereal love, places his work within this literary tradition. That Gower connects physical blindness, blind love, sin, and incest demonstrates what Theresa Tinkle calls the poem’s “concatenation of sexual desire, love, irrationality, incest, idolatry, paganism, assorted sins, and fortune.”<sup>43</sup> Blindness is thus a unifying topos that runs throughout the poem, uniting Amans, various lovers in Genius’s tales, sinfulness, and lack of reason.

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38. See Pearman, *Women*, 90--1; Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 29--42.

39. This tradition can be traced to the Pauline letters of the New Testament. For a clear example that characterizes the Jews as metaphorically blind, see Romans 11:7--11. Augustine’s *The City of God* and Bede’s reading of the Book of Tobit conflate this metaphorical understanding of blindness with the visual impairment.

40. Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 129.

41. Pearman, *Women*, 84--95.

42. Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 129--31.

43. Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses*, 193.

Though blindness is part of the poem's theme and structure, it frustrates Amans' ability to heal himself. Blinded by love and incapable of reason, Amans is unable to take part in the remembrance that the poem asserts is essential to unifying the fragmentation of the spirit, the body, and the body politic. As a result, the poem brings together physical and metaphoric sight (or the lack thereof) and implies that the restoration of memory through confession is dependent upon the restoration of the body. The act of remembrance itself is intertwined with sight. One must visualize in order to remember, and memory itself, according to classical and medieval thought, is "a storehouse or treasure house in which an individual orders mental images and then proceeds from place to place to retrieve them."<sup>44</sup> Amans indicates a realization of the necessity of clear sight, both metaphoric and physical, to proper confession when he acknowledges that his blind "wittes" may "mistime / [his] schrifte" (I. ll. 228, 220--21). Amans understands that he must narrate his life "fro point to point," recreating a visual, mental remembrance of himself that will recuperate both his own self-memory and his ailing body (I. l.226). The intimate connections Gower draws between confession and sight recall the late medieval practice of the *elevatio*, during which congregants could partake in the Eucharist by witnessing the elevation of the Host. While participating in traditional communion required official confession, this "communion with the eyes" allowed believers to participate in the Eucharist without confessing.<sup>45</sup> As a result, viewing the Host became a kind of "visual confession" that excluded the visually impaired from a fundamental Christian ritual and from the varied physical benefits—

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44. Stegner, "'Foryet'," 494. See also Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

45. G. J. C. Snoek, qtd. in Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 16.

including protection from blindness—that viewing the *elevatio* could impart.<sup>46</sup> The verbal and visual nature of Amans’ own confession, which will cure his metaphoric blindness, reflects the complex status of blindness as both fact and metaphor in the Middle Ages.

Palmer has argued that the poem’s representation of Amans’ lovesickness as a disease and his act of confession as a cure establishes Genius as both a priest and physician, occupations that were linked in penitentials from as early as the seventh century. Both occupations rely on narrative; just as a priest needs a sinner to narrate his or her sins, the physician must hear the story of a patient’s malady. Thus, “the cure” for Amans “is storytelling through the conventions of confession to invoke ‘remembrance.’”<sup>47</sup> Conversely, Palmer adds, Genius’s storytelling serves two ends: “in his role as priest,” his tales “heal the soul of its sins, while in his role as physician,” he tells stories that “heal the body.”<sup>48</sup> The simultaneous healing of the body and the soul that confession brings to Amans mirrors the admonition of the Fourth Lateran Council that one must seek spiritual healing before bodily healing. Significantly, the Fourth Lateran Council also insisted on yearly confession. Wheatley notes, “It is surely not coincidental that [the edict that one seek spiritual healing before medical intervention] came out of the same council that required the annual confession of sins, which may be the restoration of spiritual health to which the passage refers. Confession at least temporarily removes sin, allowing the ‘effect’ of the infirmity to pass away.”<sup>49</sup> Gower’s text, because it forges a deep connection between spiritual

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46. Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 15--16.

47. Palmer, “Narratives,” 35.

48. *Ibid.*, 37.

49. Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 11.

and physical health and confession reveals the symbiotic relationship between discursive notions of disability and the therapeutic functions of confession.

Strikingly, the tales in the poem's first book focus on the sins of "misloking," and the consequences of "misloking" are echoed throughout the poem. Establishing the sin of "misloking" early on allows the narrative to provide an impetus for both Amans' confession and Genius's exempla. Andrea Schutz has found that in particular the tales of Acteon, Medusa, Narcissus, and the Trump of Death allow Gower to establish a complex joining of the metaphor of sight as perception and the notion of the book as mirror for the self.<sup>50</sup> Gower literalizes this metaphor in the remainder of Genius's tales, which, as mirrors, reflect both the image of the gazer, and what the gazer is not but should aspire to be. Amans' cure can only occur, then, when the Self and the Other reunite, which Schutz marks as occurring at the end of the poem when Amans looks into his own mirror and sees the truth of his aging body, the Other within.<sup>51</sup> By repeatedly emphasizing the links among sin, sight, and the body in conjunction with medieval notions of metaphorical and physical blindness, the poem depicts the following process: improper sight (both physical and metaphorical) causes sin, that sin requires narration in the form of confession (a remembering), and the confession leads to cure (a re-membering).

Gower's "Tale of Medusa" is the first tale to detail explicitly the dangers of sight by aligning "misloking" with lustful desire, so I will discuss it at some length here before turning to the "Tale of Constance." The tale makes ample use of references to vision, seeing, and being

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50. Schutz, "Absent," 107.

51. *Ibid.*, 121.

seen in order to stress the connection between sin and sight.<sup>52</sup> The tale opens with a description of the three Gorgon sisters, who because they are “[f]ro kynde [...] so miswent,” were born in the likeness of serpents (I. 395). Hideous (and dangerous) to look upon, the three women share “bot on yhe/ Among hem thre” (I. ll. 405--6) that they pass back and forth in order for each sister to see.<sup>53</sup> As a result, we can read the Gorgons’ single eye as a kind of visual impairment that fractures their vision, allowing them to see only bits and pieces of the whole. Their myopic vision is reminiscent of the blindness of love from which Amans suffers, focusing on one object, the love object, at the expense of all else. It is possible to read the Gorgons here as mirrors for Amans. Like Amans, their myopic vision, in its metaphoric and physical natures, serves as a marker of their *unkindeness*. Moreover, like Amans, they are associated with lust, but their lustfulness is magnified in their monstrosity. Though they are described as monsters, they still attract a great number of men who seek to ogle them despite the inevitable outcome of their looking. Interestingly, it is the gaze of others upon the Gorgons that turns an onlooker “out of a man into as ston,” not the monsters’ gaze upon an onlooker as Ovid’s version presents (I. l. 415). As objects of the gaze, the sisters are aligned with the unnamed beloved of Amans. All are capable of harming the bodies of men: Amans contracts lovesickness presumably from the sight of his beloved, and those who look upon the Gorgons are turned to stone. The Gorgons demonstrate the metaphoric blindness of love, the connection between blindness and sexual deviance, and the ability of “misloking” to harm both physically and metaphorically. Because the monsters serve as symbols of the extreme consequences of metaphoric and physical blindness, it

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52. Schutz explains that Gower’s version of the Ovidian tale makes significant changes to the source text that involve vision in some way. Schutz, “Absent,” 112.

53. Peck explains that Gower mistakes the Gorgon sisters for the one-eyed Graeae, a mistake that Boccaccio also makes in *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, X.10. See Peck’s note for Book I, line 389ff.).

is not surprising that the tale ends with their deaths, for the rupture to the narrative they cause is so great that their removal from the narrative altogether is necessary for its resolution. Gower's description of the approach Perseus uses to kill the monsters deviates from his source text. Instead of using his shield as a mirror in order to help him slay Medusa without actually looking at her, he uses his shield as a barrier between his eyes and the sight of the monsters (I. ll. 431--32). Here, temporary blindness provides an advantage; like the blind lovers Capellanus describes, Perseus's inability to see an object of desire impedes the physical and emotional dangers that object of desire can inflict upon him.

Genius makes clear that Amans is to learn about the dangers of misusing sight from the tale. After noting the death of the sisters, he offers his advice:

Lo now, my sone, advise thee,  
That thou thi sihte nocht misuse:  
Cast nocht thin yhe ypon Meduse,  
That thou be torned to ston. (I. ll. 436--39)

Genius overtly links the misuse of sight to lust, noting that if a man “wel his yhe kepe, / And take of fol delit no kepe, / That he with lust nys ofte nome” (I. ll. 441--43). For Genius, then, lust is equal to “misloking,” and Medusa, or the love object, is the catalyst for the bodily dangers that “misloking” can lead to, for it is through the sight of her that a man may be turned to stone. When Genius asks Amans, “Hast thou thin yhen oght misthrowe?” (I. l. 549), Amans confesses,

I have hem cast upon Meduse,  
Therof I may me nocht excuse:  
Min herte is growen into ston,  
So that my lady therupon

Hath such a priente of love grave,  
That I can noght miselve save. (I. ll. 551--56)

Amans' response makes clear that he has internalized the explicit connection between the Gorgons of the tale and his own beloved. Amans also reveals his understanding of the cause and physical effects of the love-imprint when he notes that, after seeing his beloved, her image becomes "a preinte" that transforms his heart into stone.

The topos of blindness in the tale of Medusa is tied to Amans' confession of his own experience with "eyeing Medusa," an initial step in the process of converting Amans from a lovesick caitiff to a self-aware man. The interlinking of blindness and confession is more fully explored in the "Tale of Constance," but, in an oscillation among physical, judicial, and spiritual blindness, the emphasis pointedly turns to Christian spiritual sight.<sup>54</sup> Blindness appears in two forms in the tale: as a vehicle through which to prove the power of Christian faith and as a punishment for murder. After being exiled on a rudderless ship and landing in Northumberland, Constance continues her famous knack for proselytizing to and converting pagans to Christianity. One pagan that she converts, Hermyngeid, is gifted with the ability to cure blindness after Constance "tawhte the creance / Unto this wif so parfityl" (II. ll. 754--55). While walking on the shoreline with her husband Elda, Hermyngeid is approached by a blind man who beseeches her to grant him his sight. Though frightened, Hermyngeid tells the man, "In trust of Cristes lawe, / Which don was on the crois and slawe, / Thou bysne man, behold and se" (II. ll. 769--71). Amazingly, the man regains his sight in full view of many onlookers who "merveile"

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54. Interestingly, though scholarship on Gower's "Tale of Constance" is plentiful, the tale's use of blindness has not been a popular subject of study. Although it is mentioned in passing, usually in comparisons of the depiction of healing of the blind Briton in the tale and its analogues, only Wheatley's *Stumbling* examines the tale's portrayal of blindness from a disability studies perspective, 138--44.



at the miracle (II. I. 774). Especially moved by the event is Elda, who immediately decides to convert to Christianity (II. II. 775--78). The purpose of the blind man in this scene is to serve as a vehicle through which to demonstrate Christian faith and lead unbelievers to convert. Though we know that he does recover his eyesight, the tale makes no further mention of the once-blind man. It is probable that his blindness serves as a metaphor for the unconverted: they are blind until they “see” the truth of Christ. The audience of pagans who view the miracle might then, like Elda, be compelled to convert. The spectacle of the cure both positions the impaired body as a marker of sin, here as a sign of “false” spiritual sight, and illustrates the promise of conversion, to grant sight to the spiritually “blind.”

Blindness makes an appearance later in the tale, this time as a punishment. After a “false knyht” murders Hermyngheld, he frames Constance for the crime, citing the visual evidence of the murder weapon that he planted in Constance’s bed. The bloody knife, however, does not convince the others of Constance’s guilt, so the knight tries a second tactic: he gives a false confession. After swearing on a book, he claims, “Now be this bok, which hier is write, / Constance is gultif, wel I wot” (II. II. 872--73). Immediately after voicing this lie, he is struck blind by “the hond of hevene,” which causes “bothe hise yhen lore, / Out of his head the same stounde” (II. II.876--77). Gower’s description of the punishment fixates on the knight’s eyes: he explains that “thei weren founde” after they fell out, and he adds that a divine voice speaks “whan that they felle” (II. II. 878, 879). Gower’s emphasis on the eyes is telling, for it closely relates the knight’s false actions to improper seeing. He does, after all, bear false witness to Hermyngheld’s murder. The scene also connects visual impairment with the act of confession. As the eyes are falling to the ground, a voice, presumably God’s, commands the knight to “[b]eknow the soothe er that thou dye” (II. I. 883). The knight complies, confessing “his felonie”

before his death (II. l. 884). In this instance, physical blinding is impetus enough for the knight to see the error of his ways.<sup>55</sup> He finally offers a true confession, a “tale” that solves the disorder brought upon by Hermyngeld’s murder and the false accusations against Constance. Though the knight’s confession is a judicial one, it is clear that Amans, who is supposed to use Genius’s stories as mirrors, should utter his own spiritual confession in order to heal his ailing body.

Like the scene in which Hermyngeld heals the blind man, the knight’s blinding serves as a spectacle that effects conversion. Soon after hearing of the knight’s fate, Alla takes “it into remembrance” and is baptized in “Cristes feith” before marrying Constance (II. ll. 894, 899). Both scenes present divine miracles that demonstrate God’s power. Both also make use of blindness to forward Christian values, but they do so in oppositional ways, through the healing of blindness and the harming with blindness. Though the methods seem contradictory, they underscore the complex constructions of blindness in medieval society and place Gower’s use of blindness squarely within the religious model. Wheatley has studied the versions of the Constance tale by Nicholas Trevet, Gower, and Geoffrey Chaucer, revealing the ways in which each operates or does not according to the religious model. While he does agree that Gower’s version “follows the religious model entirely,” he ultimately contends that his version is limited in that it does not result in the mass conversion that Chaucer’s text does.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the linkages among vision, punishment, and conversion are not as forceful as they are in Chaucer’s tale, but I

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55. In Trevet’s and Chaucer’s versions of the tale, King Alla sentences the knight to death before he finally utters his confession. Here, the blinding is all the knight needs. For detailed comparisons of the three versions of the tales, see Peter Nicholson, “The Man of Law’s Tale: What Chaucer Really Owed to Gower,” *The Chaucer Review* 23 (1991):163--81; R. F. Yeager, “John Gower’s Images: ‘The Tale of Constance’ and ‘The Man of Law’s Tale,’” in *Speaking Images: Essays in Honor of V.A. Kolve*, ed. R. F. Yeager and Charlotte Morse (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2001), 525--57; and R. F. Yeager, “‘The Tale of Constance’ in Context,” in *Approaches to Teaching*, 159--71.

56. Wheatley, *Stumbling*, 141.

contend that their power is not reduced, just differently directed. While Chaucer's version is more concerned with exploring the importance of spiritual sight within a community of believers, Gower's text emphasizes how an individual should practice proper vision and avoid "misloking," thereby reinforcing the poem's contention that healing of the microcosm heals the macrocosm.

The recognition scenes between Alla and his son Moris and between Alla and Constance reinforce the poem's interlinking of proper sight and physical and social unification. Indeed, the depiction of Moris's birth itself is closely tied to issues of seeing properly. Moris's birth, which occurs while Alla is away, is greeted with disapproval from Alla's mother, Domilde. She intercepts a letter sent to inform Alla of the birth and changes it to read that his son has been "misbore" (II. l. 971). Domilde emphasizes the horrific visual image of the monstrous child, noting that the child "scholde nocht be seie" because the image of him "mai nocht be forgete" (II. ll. 967, 978). Upon receiving the letter, Alla responds by turning a "blind" eye to his son's alleged monstrous shape and sends a letter commanding that Constance and her child remain at court until he can return. Here again, the poem stresses the importance of proper sight to judicial matters. Though reading the letter from his mother is an act of seeing, Alla feels the need to look upon his son with his own eyes—to see the evidence—before casting judgment on Constance. However, Domilde again intervenes, changing Alla's letter to demand the exile of Constance and Moris. Like the false knight before her, Domilde crafts false narratives meant to result in mis-seeing. Her alteration of the letter prevents Alla from seeing the truth, his son's healthy body, and thus Constance and Moris are unjustly banished.

Domilde's story of an alleged monstrous birth to mark Constance as evil is notable, for a monster, as Gower reveals in his depiction of Nebuchadnezzar's statue, shows or demonstrates.

Though Gower's version of the tale does not use the terms *monster* or *monstrous* to describe Moris, it is clear that Domilde's letter depicts him as such. The letter falsely accuses Constance of being a "faerie" and explains that the child is, like the Gorgon sisters, "[f]ro kinde which stant al amis" (II. ll. 964, 966). Medieval medical authorities that refer to "monstrous" deliveries usually blame the child's uncommon shape on the sinful behavior of its parents, particularly the mother, thereby asserting such children as visible evidence of sin.<sup>57</sup> Writers such as Soranus and Galen, moreover, highlight the powerful effect women's sight could have on the physical shape of unborn children, explaining that viewing strange images or even picturing fantasies could result in misshapen children.<sup>58</sup> Domilde's labeling Constance a fairy capable of producing a monster intertwines sight, sinfulness, and improper seeing and that, in addition to his close physical resemblance to his mother, marks Moris as a visual signifier of Constance's innocence and Alla's (in)ability to see properly.

Like Constance's early accuser, Domilde is brought to justice for her deception. When Alla returns home, his men lament the loss of Constance and her beautiful child. Surprised, Alla presents them with the letter that describes Moris's monstrous appearance, which they deny authoring. The letter, which at first serves as evidence of Constance's alleged sin, here serves as tangible proof of Domilde's crime. When Alla confronts her, she, like the false knight, confesses her wrongdoings:

Bot ferst sche tolde out al the sinne,

And dede hem alle for to wite

How sche the letters hadde write,

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57. For more on the mother's role in the creation of monstrous births, see Marie-Hélène Huet, *Monstrous Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

58. Pearman, *Women*, 43, 167n96.

Fro point to point as it was wrought. (II. ll. 1288--91)

After her confession, Domilde is sentenced to death “[a]nd brent tofore hire sones yhe” (II. l. 1293). Like the blinding of the knight, Domilde’s punishment is a public spectacle meant to illustrate the dangers of illusions both to those who create them and those who interpret them as real. The punishment here, however, moves from the divine realm to the political realm, for it is Alla who tries, convicts, and punishes his mother. The public who witness Alla’s verdict and sentence deem them sound: “Wherof these othre, whiche it sihe / And herden how the cause stod, / Sein that the juggement is good” (II. ll. 1294--96). The progression from God’s spiritual judgment of the false knight to Alla’s personal judgment of Domilde demonstrates that Alla is beginning to internalize the lesson of proper sight that Genius hopes Amans will also internalize.

The reunion of Alla’s family, which occurs through a series of scenes involving recognitions and misrecognitions, emphasizes the tie between proper sight and confession that the poem has already established. When Constance and her son are found at sea by Arcenne, the husband of Constance’s cousin Helene, the two are brought to Rome. Helene does not recognize Constance, so she and her son live in Rome unidentified for twelve years. Significantly, Alla, who has just returned from war, plans to travel to Rome in order to “be relieved / of soule hele upon the feith / Which he hath take” by receiving “absolucion” from the Pope (II. ll. 1312--14, 1317). Thus, it is a desire to confess, an act he feels will restore his soul to health, that leads him to Rome. Constance hears word of his visit and sends Moris to attend the feast celebrating Alla’s arrival. In her advice to Moris, Constance stresses Moris’s status as an object of Alla’s gaze as well as Alla’s role as the gazer. She notes that Moris must “[b]e present in the kynges sihte, / So that the king him ofte sihe” (II. ll. 1368--69). Following his mother’s orders, Moris stands “tofore the kynges yhe,” causing Alla to see in Moris “his oghne wif Constance” (II. ll. 1370, 1375).

Alla is so moved by the visual resemblance, that he asks Arcenne about the child and thus hears the story of finding Moris and his mother at sea. Arcenne's story prompts Alla to wonder if the pair are his wife and son. In this moment, physical sight leads directly to reason. Thus, when Gower writes that "[t]he king hath understonde his sawe," (II. l. 1396) his use of the word "sawe," which denotes both story and sight, draws attention to the connection between proper sight and the restorative effects of narrative. Alla is beginning to comprehend, to see, the truth, and it is only through the narrative spurred by his gaze that he is able to do so.

After the feast, Alla asks the senator to take him to see Constance, whom Arcenne knows as Couste. Gower continues to emphasize the importance of Alla's physical sight by repeating that the king goes "[t]o se this Couste" twice in five lines (II .ll. 1431, 1435). When Alla recognizes his wife, the moment is witnessed by the public (II. ll. 439--45).

At first it may seem that the reunion of Constance and Alla serves as a satisfactory conclusion to the narrative; however, there is still one scene of recognition left to tie up the narrative's loose ends. Despite inquiries from Alla, Constance keeps her past a secret and asks him instead to make a feast for the Emperor, whom she does not reveal as her father. He agrees, and he and Constance and Arcenne and Helene travel to the Emperor's city. When Constance sees the Emperor from a distance, she rides forward alone and says loudly,

Mi lord, mi fader, wel you be!  
 And of this time that I se  
 Youre honour and your goode hele,  
 Which is the helpe of my querele,  
 I thonke unto Goddes myht. (II. ll. 1513--17)

Her words send the Emperor's heart "affliht" and spark "remembrance" of his daughter, the sight of whom Gower describes as a "wonder" (II. ll. 1518, 1519, 1527). Simultaneously, we find that Constance's own heretofore unmentioned physical malady, or "querele," is healed by the act of seeing her father.<sup>59</sup> In this moment, a publicly witnessed act of looking allows Constance to "confess" her past, leads the Emperor to access the storehouse of his own memories, and promotes bodily healing. In each of the tale's recognition scenes, sight leads to remembrance, and a moment of recognition either spurs or completes a story that progressively allows the characters—of both "The Tale of Constance" and Gower's frame narrative—to achieve greater and greater insight; essentially to learn to "see" and to understand what the seeing means.

As the reunion of Constance and her father demonstrates, Gower ultimately presents this proper sight as spiritual in nature. The Pope is rushed to the feast and, after hearing the story, attributes the "miracle" to God (II. l.1545). To underscore the importance of spiritual sight, Gower describes the joyous reaction of Alla's people when he and Constance return:

Whan sche was drive upon the stronde,  
 Be whom the misbelieve of sinne  
 Was left, and Cristes feith cam inne  
 To hem that whilom were blinde. (II. ll. 1568--71)

Alla's people here cheer for the return of the woman who has led to their conversion to Christianity and who has, essentially, cured them of spiritual blindness. Though this section undoubtedly refers to Constance's overall effect on the pagans, it also evokes the earlier scene in which Hermyngeld heals the blind Briton upon "the stronde." Although Hermyngeld, not Constance is the healer in that scene, her abilities are ultimately attributed to Constance's

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<sup>59</sup>. According to the *MED*, *querele* could indicate a physical ailment, and Amans uses this term to describe his lovesickness throughout the poem (def. 3b).

superior teaching skills. Because of the dual meaning of *hem* as both them and him, the section's last line could refer to both the spiritually blind pagans in general and the physically blind man specifically. Just as the microcosm, here represented by the blind man, is healed, so too is the macrocosm, here symbolized by the pagans. The reemergence of the blind man near the end of the tale, moreover, brings the narrative of his healing into the reader's remembrance, the vision of which is meant to inspire an act of worship, be it confession of sin or conversion. The "Tale of Constance," thus, makes use of blindness and sight as a means of access through which improper (non-Christian) ways of seeing, both physically and spiritually, are exchanged for proper (Christian) spiritual sight.

The use of a topos of blindness throughout the *Confessio* not only endorses proper sight, but also asserts the ways in which confession can produce bodily and spiritual health. By the end of the poem, Amans is able to use Genius's stories and his own story as mirrors in order to be healed of the spiritual blindness he has suffered. After Genius concludes his exempla, Amans puts into words his confession, writing a letter to Venus and Cupid with his tears. He begins by describing his painful "maladie," noting that medicine cannot begin to cure it; he must find his cure elsewhere (VIII. ll. 2217--18). As Singer has discovered, in the complex interplay between medicine and rhetoric that arises in the later Middle Ages, remedy beyond that which medical interventions can provide may be found in poetry, particularly in those poems that feature blind love. Though Singer focuses on French and Italian love poetry, it is clear that the *Confessio* also exploits "poetic remedies, "and like the Boethian poems she studies, uses the elements of poetry, particularly metaphor, to create alternative cures for blindness not found in medicine. As a result,



Gower asserts that, where the physician fails, “the rhetor and the poet can, indeed must, step in.”<sup>60</sup>

In the absence of a medical cure for his lovesickness, Amans turns to the poetic narration of his confession. Putting his “querele” into writing precipitates his cure; it allows him to supplant erotic love with reason, and it also compels him to reveal his true identity. When Venus appears before him this time, he identifies himself not as a caitiff, but as John Gower (VIII.1.2321). Revealing his name, however, is only the beginning of the unification of his true self. Venus explains that he must acknowledge the feebleness of his own body: “Remembre wel hou thou art old” (VIII. 1. 2439). Venus’s “tale” (VIII. 1. 2440) immediately evokes a physical response, causing him to swoon and, finally, to envision Cupid leading a parade of lovers, many of whom are characters from Genius’s exempla. In imagining the parade of lovers, Gower the character activates his “storehouse” of memories, internalizing Genius’s lesson and retelling and even rewriting the stories that have come before. Notably, the older lovers who compose the tail end of the parade do not merely exist as objects of his gaze; they return his gaze, staring intently upon his body and debating the likelihood of his cure. During the moment of this reciprocal stare, Cupid removes his dart, and Venus anoints his body. But his cure is not complete until he sees one final image, his own. Venus extends her mirror

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

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60. Singer, *Blindness*, 20.

So riveled and so wo besein,  
 That ther was nothing full ne plein,  
 I syh also myn heres here. (VIII. ll. 2824--31)

This last mirror, Shutz asserts, “is a mirror of self-awareness,” that Gower the character peers into with his “hertes yhe,” the eye of reason.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, he takes this image “into [his] remembrance,” finally putting into practice what he has learned.<sup>62</sup> He “re-members” himself by interpreting the memories his image recalls as a metaphor for the inevitable passage of time. Here, he sees his true self, the aging poet, John Gower. Though it is unclear whether this John Gower represents the “real” John Gower, the Amans-Gower connection is complicated by his allusion to his “yhen dymme,” which may refer to the poet’s own physical blindness, a condition that could already have been affecting Gower’s ability to work at the time of the *Confessio*’s production. Though he first describes himself as blind in 1400, his admission of suffering “siknesse” and being “feble and impotent” at the beginning and end of the *Confessio* indicates that the “dymme” eyes may well be his own (Pro. 61, VIII. ll. 3125, 3127).<sup>63</sup> In any case, the allusion to physical blindness at the moment in which Gower the character acquires the sight of understanding complicates the construction of blindness that the poem has put forth. Although his confession cures his lovesickness and his metaphorical blindness, his body is not restored. He remains, old, feeble, and possibly physically blind: ultimately, the fact is severed from the

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61. Schutz, “Absent,” 121.

62. Ibid.

63. John H. Fisher, *Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 65. Although *dymme* could merely describe the faded color of his eyes, the term could also suggest impaired vision (*MED* def. 3a).

metaphor. As a result, Gower establishes metaphoric blindness as far more debilitating than physical blindness.

Gower ends the poem by asserting the importance of the poet to healing the woes of metaphoric blindness, be they personal, social, or spiritual. After his confession restores his ability to prioritize properly erotic and spiritual love, he turns his focus outward, back to the divided England emblemized by the disabled figure of Nebuchadnezzar's monster in the Prologue. Gower the character and Gower the poet merge in the poem's final lines when he explains that Genius's stories and his own confession will compose an "engesch" book, a visible artifact that the English people can "se," and, like Amans, put its lesson into practice (VIII. ll. 3108, 3113). His book, he hopes, will spark an act of remembrance, and thus re-membering, that will heal the division that "no phisicien can hele" (VIII. 3156). As Genius does at the end of "The Tale of Constance," Gower inserts blindness into the close of his poem, noting that his own impairment may impede his ability to write eloquently, causing him to resort to "rude" and "pleyne" words (VIII. l. 3122). Gower's complex use of the topos of blindness throughout the *Confessio*, however, belies his modesty. Just after his poetic apology, he evokes blindness for a final time, lambasting the detrimental power that love that "mislokes" has; he will forsake this kind of love, "Which many an herte hath overtake, / And ovyrturnd as the blynde / Fro reson into lawe of kynde" (VIII. ll. 3144--46). Conversely, he argues moments later, a love based in proper spiritual sight "mai the bodi save" and "the soule amende" (VIII. ll. 3166-67). By ending the *Confessio* as a visually impaired poet whose spiritual blindness—and thus his soul—has been cured, Gower exposes the far more disabling effects of spiritual blindness. As metaphor and fact, blindness affords Gower the complex nuance needed to link physical and spiritual sight to the curative effects of narrative. By eschewing medical intervention and prioritizing spiritual health,

Gower argues that poetry can cure wounds caused by psychic and social fracture. This cure, he demonstrates, is contingent upon the act of confession, of providing a story that unifies the “trouble” of deviant bodies. As a result, Gower asserts the poet as the *rememberer* and *re-memberer* of bodies physical, social, and spiritual.

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