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# Unconfessing Transgender: Dysphoric Youths and the Medicalization of Madness in John Gower's "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe"

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Unconfessing Transgender: Dysphoric Youths and the Medicalization of Madness in John Gower's "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe"

M.W. Bychowski

Man / The which, for his complexioun / Is mad upon divisioun /  
... For the contraire of his astat / Stant evermor in such debat.

—John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*<sup>1</sup>

In an environment of over-determined gender expectations, a gender ambiguous child is born. The youth is assigned male at birth, but as he reaches puberty and falls in love, the boy's feelings and embodiment raise gender trouble. His body cannot fulfill the gender and sexual demands placed on him. An authority comes in and prescribes a radical operation that will transform his genitalia to fit within socially prescribed norms and correct the child's perceived chemical and mental imbalance. As a youth in an increasingly medicalized Christian society, the child has no voice in the decision. Like so many transgender and intersex children, his body is treated as the property and problem of his parents, doctors, and church leaders. Letting the child choose a gender would be considered medically irresponsible, socially irregular, and legally unlikely. The child's body and voice are taken from him; they are given to authorities to decide how to tell the story, how to frame it, and where to assign culpability.

While this may sound like a contemporary scenario, the trans youth being managed here is Iphis from the fourteenth-century *Confessio Amantis*, and the storyteller

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1. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006). All quotations are taken from the online vols. 1 and 2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.: <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1>. <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-gower-amantis-volume-2>.

exploiting and critiquing the tale is John Gower. What do we do with the silencing of the trans child? How do we respond to the lack of choice at the end of Gower's adaptation of Ovid's Iphis? To understand these questions, I examine the "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe" in the context of its framing discourses on division and sloth to map out how Gower presents madness as a corporate disorder arising from internalized division. This medieval concept reflects and prefigures the modern diagnosis of gender dysphoria.<sup>2</sup>

By tracing the ingrained cultural practices of defining and silencing transgender experiences centuries before modern medical sciences had established themselves, my reading foregrounds the process by which the discourse of trans lives became medicalized and alternative forms of resistant reading made themselves apparent. When I say "medicalization," I mean the privatization, but not always secularization, of treating perceived disorders. This privatization occurs in part as confession shifts from public testimony to personal analysis wherein a patient is subjected to examination by the will of authorities. I take Gower's Iphis as one such trans subject. While some scholars may claim that in the case of Iphis, the seven-year-old youth was at the age of reason, therefore old enough to distinguish good from evil and being held morally culpable,<sup>3</sup> my reading considers not the theoretical capacity of the child to decide but whether or not Iphis is given a substantial voice and opportunity to make this major life decision.

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2. For the purposes of this paper, I am expanding the medical definition of "dysphoria" to represent a discord between the body and agency caused by social divisions. "Transgender" or "trans" are terms used to refer to persons (modern and medieval) with non-binary gender identity or persons who transition from one socially designated gender to another. "Cisgender" refers to people who are neither transgender nor identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

3. Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 75.

To chart the ways in which Iphis's voice and choice are suppressed by social forces that compound the experience of dysphoria for the youth, I look closely at Gower's text as he illustrates the social character of confession in his discussion of "divisioun" and "acedia." In the introduction to the *Confessio*, Gower establishes "divisioun" as the fundamental feature of all created being with a social form of madness. The first part of this three-part essay explores "Divisioun and Dysphoria," to establish how Gower prefigures the modern social model of transgender as an experience of living in a world full of change and contradiction. The inherent madness of creation the poet sees functions like modern day dysphoria, where internal and external debates between mind and body, self and society, man and woman manifest in lives that defy clear boundaries. In part two, the particular social forms of "divisioun" identified here as "Acedia and Depression," signal Gower's discussion of the sin of sloth that frames the "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe." While reflecting different forms of discourse, one moralizing and the other medicalizing, both terms function as part of wider systems of social control. In both, bodies marked as especially dysphoric are silenced, depressed, and subjugated. Specifically, both terms become applied to bodies regarded as not properly (re)productive of patriarchal systems of gender and sexuality.<sup>4</sup> In the third part, I examine the figures of Isis and Eros within the context of the "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe" with emphasis on the shift from the Latin version of the tale about a goddess who promotes a dysphoric life at

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4. In this article, I am following in the work of prominent queer feminist medievalists, Diane Watt, most directly, and Carolyn Dinshaw, in spirit. Where they have stressed transgender in relation to queerness as a disruption of norms, here I work to establish these texts within an emerging field of transgender studies. Additionally, because the particular area of trans studies in question, dysphoria, I also draw on enmeshed studies on the management of madness, depression, and mental illness.

the request of the youth to Gower's Middle English adaptation in which (without being invoked) a god intervenes and supposedly fixes the dysphoric life. By removing the dysphoric youth's voice and agency, Gower emphasizes the systematic character of suffering caused by being managed between a dysphoric Nature represented by Isis and a subjugating patriarchal Nature represented by Eros.

Furthermore, by taking seriously the confessional frame provided by the *Confessio*, readers in their own time and place better appreciate how tales such as "Iphis and Ianthe" compel consideration of the ethical debates. This drive to "speak together" encourages an open discourse meant to prompt the sharing and debate of different experiences. While Gower's "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe" was written over six hundred years ago, it describes the predicament of many transgender youths in the twenty-first century.<sup>5</sup> Before the consolidation of a diverse community of gender non-normative persons under the name "transgender," a variety of labels were used by medical professionals, including but not limited to various "trans" terms such as "transsexual" and "transvestite." Each of these was developed by "cisgender" (non-transgender) persons to make "trans" bodies known and related in authorized medical ways while limiting the legitimacy of other modes of gendered embodiment. These distinctions still effect what voices and tales may be considered authentically transgender. Current trans scholarship maps and critiques modern politics and the history of transgender while rarely accounting

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5. See Katherine Romero and Rebecca Reingold, "Advancing Adolescent Capacity to Consent to Transgender Related Healthcare in Columbia and the USA," *Reproductive Health Matters* 21.41 (2013): 186-95; Gerald Mallon and Teresa DeCrescenzo, "Transgender Children and Youth: A Child Welfare Practice Perspective," *Child Welfare* 85.2 (2006): 215-41; Reid Vanderburgh, "Appropriate Therapeutic Care for Families with Pre-Pubescent Transgender / Gender Dissonant Children," *Child Adolescence Social Work Journal* 26 (2009): 135-54.

for texts and contexts before the rise of modern medicine, such as those just described in Gower's fourteenth-century *Confessio Amantis*. How do we respond to the omission of choice for youths in Gower's adaptation of Ovid's text or in present-day doctors' offices?

The overdetermined voices and silences set by the medicalization of transgender cut across disciplines. Just as trans scholarship limits itself primarily to the study of the nineteenth century onward, medieval studies have likewise been hesitant to read premodern figures as participating in transgender history. Too often transgender and medieval studies are separated by an inability to speak together, in part because of long historical practices of erasing trans histories and silencing trans voices. In one direction, transgender studies scholarship is yet to extend its current critical work of recognizing the social agency and subjugated voices of the premodern past. In turn, medieval scholarship needs to embrace to a greater extent how its work of allowing different voices to speak together across traditionally defined divisions of time furthers not only transgender studies but deepens and enriches the study of the Middle Ages.

How can medieval studies gain new insights from transgender theory and learn to hear trans voices in its histories and literature? While it is true that premodernity did not use the language of gender dysphoria expressed in modern medical texts such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, such psychological diagnoses are critiqued by trans scholarship. Judith Butler's "Undiagnosing Gender,"<sup>6</sup> for instance, marks a significant turn in the prominent queer gender theorist's work toward the particular concerns of transgender thought by offering social models of trans

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6. Judith Butler, "Undiagnosing Gender" in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 75-101.

identification that use cultural definitions instead of the strictly medical. Over time, trans embodiments and social positions exist in relationships with medical definitions and authorities, while not being contained by or excluded from these discourses. Butler writes: “narrative is not capturable by a category, or it may only be capturable by a category for a time. Life histories are histories of becoming, and categories can sometimes act to freeze that process of becoming.”<sup>7</sup> Following Butler, trans theory offers medieval studies the tools to map modes of living in society that are genealogically connected to what would later be defined as dysphoric.

Gender dysphoria is a term from the fifth edition of the *DSM* that frames modes of knowing and treating transgender persons with psychiatric authority. The *DSM* defines gender dysphoria as a division of the gender expressed by the mind of the subject and the gender society assigns to the body of that subject. Previously “transgender” has been defined chiefly through medical treatment, particularly surgery, while the “trans” (short for “transgender”) community has been increasingly defined by medical diagnoses. While Butler critiques the way diagnosis limits trans liberty, she notes the promised benefits: “the diagnosis facilitates certain entitlements to insurance benefits, to medical treatment, and to legal status.”<sup>8</sup> A diagnosis is typically required for gender affirming surgeries (formerly known as “sex change operations”), hormone treatments, or other psychological care. Most government agencies require a formal diagnosis and / or confirmation of genital surgery to permit the rectification of gender status on legal documents such as drivers’ licenses and passports.

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7. Ibid., 80.

8. Ibid., 76.

Trans scholarship on gender dysphoria as a social construct shows that both supporters and opponents of trans politics consider the confession of dysphoric symptoms witnessed by medical authorities as fundamental to the recognition of legitimate trans subjectivities. Butler writes that because authorities who regulate trans lives are fixated on psychological definitions, those who cannot choose whether or not to be diagnosed, particularly children, are denied agency over their bodies. Butler stresses, “we ought not to underestimate the pathologizing force of the diagnosis, especially on young people who may not have the critical resources to resist this force. In these cases, the diagnosis can be debilitating.”<sup>9</sup> The young can be denied access to care and community by authorities who choose for them. Parents, doctors, and community leaders’ diagnoses, such as gender dysphoria, are mechanisms for society to limit and control how or if a person is defined as “transgender.”

In the demand for trans people to speak their condition before authorities as part of processes of diagnosis, readers see the limited and medicalized way premodern practices of confession still operate today. But, as John McNeill and Helena Gamer note, there is an important distinction to be made: “In discussing the public and private aspects of the penitential discipline, it is important to distinguish between confession and penance.”<sup>10</sup> While McNeill and Gamer’s *Medieval Handbook of Penance* is now a bit dated, the lack of recent engagement on the difference between public and private confession provides evidence for many recent scholars to take the private (what I call

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9. *Ibid.*, 82.

10. John T. McNeill and Helena M. Gamer, *Medieval Handbook of Penance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), 10.

medicalized) form of confession for granted. Yet this is as much, if not more, a mark of modern conceptions of confessional discourse than it is a reflection of the medieval period that would have more readily understood the complex, even competing forms of confession. Broadly defined, confession is the practice of “speaking together,” from the Latin “con” (meaning “together”) and “fateri” (meaning “to reveal”), which started in the early Church where publicly shared stories propelled reconciliation between divided parts of a community.<sup>11</sup> Over the course of several centuries, the public form of confession was inverted as it became medicalized, “entailing acts of penance that were mainly or wholly private.”<sup>12</sup> Penitential manuals and practices structured the discourse of confession, stressing the individual shame of disorder and the need for privacy before an authority driven by the compulsions to regard distress as the problem of individuals.<sup>13</sup>

While there is a shift from public confession to private penance, in a historical trajectory of medicalizing, or what I am calling “unconfessing” discourses of care, the social form of confession continues as an alternative model in works such as Gower’s *Confessio*. In her study on the politics of both private and public confession, *Confession and Resistance*, Katherine Little writes that the *Confessio* does not align with private penance.<sup>14</sup> She notes that the framing dialogue between Amans and Genius is “not

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11. *OED Online*, s.v. “Confess,” accessed October 13, 2015, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

12. McNeill and Gamer, 6.

13. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 1 (New York: Random House, 1972), 61-62; Butler, “Undiagnosing Gender,” 89.

14. Katherine C Little, *Confession and Resistance: Defining the Self in Late Medieval England*, (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 104.

sacramental or even particularly religious,” as it fails to conclude with a personal fault to be expunged through submission to a higher authority.<sup>15</sup> This positions the *Confessio* as more fully aligned with public rather than private confession. As a disciplinary act, penance removes pathologized individuals from community life to internalize the law privately.<sup>16</sup> Yet Gower’s text continually points away from Amans toward the intermeshed stories of others. By participating in a community discourse the *Confessio* operates in a public mode of confession that offers alternative ways to speak of dysphoria that contrast both private forms of medieval penance and modern psychiatric diagnosis.

### **Part I: “Divisioun” and Dysphoria**

To situate Gower’s *Confessio* as a confessional project of collecting diverse persons, texts, and disciplines in order to get them to “speak together,” it is necessary to understand how the poem introduces “divisioun.” For Gower, “divisioun” is the mechanism that establishes and demarcates social boundaries while also provoking certain lives to cross and embody the divide. This concept speaks to and anticipates insights from transgender and madness studies. I use Lynne Huffer’s revolutionary queer intervention into madness studies in her book, *Mad for Foucault*, to theorize how medicine turns public discourses of madness, such as gender dysphoria, into an isolated

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15. Ibid.

16. McNeill and Gamer, 9-14.

subject for study through a list of medical terms.<sup>17</sup> Such diagnoses for transgender historically included “gender identity disorder,” “paranoia,” and “schizophrenia,” among others.<sup>18</sup> Huffer’s work follows Butler’s by using queer and gender non-binary cultural models in order to recontextualize the conversation on madness from the privacy of doctors’ offices and mental health institutions to the public sphere where the voices deemed to be mad, both past and present, are valued alongside those of medical professionals. As I will demonstrate, the challenge posed by this reading of Gower and trans texts is to shift from a model of gender dysphoria that looks for disorder in the person toward a critique of how dysphoria is present and generated in the environment.

While some may critique the use of such medical terms as overly determined there have been important shifts even within the psychiatric community to widen language and definitions of trans related diagnoses to better reflect insights from social models of transgender. The *DSM-5* defines gender dysphoria as a medical condition that belies its attendant social pressures and denied agencies. “For a person to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria,” writes the American Psychiatric Association, “there must be a marked difference between the individual’s expressed / experienced gender and the gender others would assign him or her, and it must continue for at least six months.”<sup>19</sup>

While the *DSM* focuses on the mental distress of dysphoric persons, it acknowledges that

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17. Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 58-61.

18. Huffer, *passim*. Butler, 75-101.

19. “Gender Dysphoria: Fact Sheet,” *The Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publication, 2013), 1-2.

this is often a response to cultural definitions of gender imposed by society. Mentioning duration is helpful in understanding that this oppressive diagnosis is not a once-and-for-all happening involving one individual but rather a sustained systematic issue. Most importantly, to receive care patients must be able to “express” the dysphoria he or she experiences. This contingency means that not everyone has the voice to counter his or her depressed power.

The *DSM* goes into greater detail on the contingent social aspect of dysphoria by specifically discussing the need for youths to express themselves. “In children,” states the *DSM*, “the desire to be of the other gender must be present and verbalized. This condition causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.”<sup>20</sup> The *DSM* begins by tying agency with the ability to speak. Diagnosis is dependent on the youth being able to verbalize his or her gender. As a result, if youths cannot speak, they cannot be diagnosed with dysphoria. However, the *DSM* adjoins to and expands this statement that dysphoria can nonetheless be analyzed as a feature of the environment. Rather than being the cause of a lack of power, dysphoria is the *effect* of being “impaired” in social and occupational functioning. In other words, the *DSM* defines dysphoria as a kind of disability that inhibits productivity, in a manner not unlike descriptions of sloth, while locating this disorder as in the environment rather than in the person.

While the modern medical definition of dysphoria is a feature of the twenty-first century, it describes a social position that isolates and silences many in the medieval past. The “Tale of Iphis and Ianthe” in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* begins by establishing a

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20. Ibid.

domineering father who warns his wife that he will kill any girl child she bears. When she becomes pregnant, she fears for the life of a child if it is born a girl. In response to her prayers, Isis arrives and helps her deliver the child and present the newborn as a boy, named Iphis. Iphis is raised as a boy and when he reaches adolescence, he is wedded to a young girl, named Ianthe. In the Latin text by Ovid, Iphis and Ianthe engage sexually after marriage and after a time Iphis prays again to Isis to give him a penis so he might consummate his marriage through penetrative sex. In Gower's Middle English version, readers are told that the pair do not even kiss before Cupid arrives to transform Iphis's body before he can ask for help.

While we cannot know what psychological events occurred inside the mind of Gower's Iphis, readers can analyze the circumstance described in the text. "It must be said," claims Diane Watt, "that Iphis does not undergo any sort of identity crisis."<sup>21</sup> In other words, Iphis does not express any identified or desired gender, conventional or otherwise. For this reason, some may view Iphis as existing outside even modern definitions of gender dysphoria. In Gower, Iphis does not openly speak at all. Yet, as will be seen, Iphis experiences gender in a way other than medieval society understands manhood or womanhood and is impaired from important areas of functioning in both. In turning to Gower's *Confessio*, readers discover a premodern confession of dysphoria, or what he calls "divisioun," not as a privatized personal disease but as a corporate disorder. Indeed, this dysphoric "divisioun" as defined in the Prologue, not only frames this tension of self and society as the central theme of the *Confessio*, but includes all of creation.

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21. Watt, 75.

Gower nests his tales in a series of frame narratives that relate particular life stories within wider social discourses. These frames work like nesting dolls, with “Iphis and Ianthe” occurring within a discussion of “pusillamité,” positioned within a study of “acedia.” In turn, this discussion occurs within a confessional dramatic frame of Amans, a young lover revealed at the end to be old Gower, speaking to his confessor, Genius. A public confessional mode is suggested by the nesting subdivisions of the text, with each particular discourse always already arising out of a wider conversation which is itself related to still larger debates. While the Prologue begins the work with a polemic on “divisioun” and the promise that Love gives salvation, the text’s conclusion lacks resolution as Amans is denied Love’s cure, suggesting that the *Confessio*, a text full of tales of “divisioun,” is unable to imagine life without dysphoria.

In the Prologue to the *Confessio*, Gower testifies to sin as an embodiment of collective “divisioun” (or dysphoria) both of the body’s humors and the political environment and defines “divisioun” as the madness all humans share as a result of their making. “Man,” writes Gower, “[t]he which, for his complexioun / Is mad upon divisioun / Of cold, of hot, of moist, of drye, / He mot be verray kynde dye,/ For the contraire of his astat / Stant evermor in such debat” (Prologue, 974-80). Gower explains the madness of humanity as rooted in the “divisioun” of different kinds (“kyndes”) of bodies, a term the *Middle English Dictionary* defines as its diverse composition (“the aggregate of inherent qualities”), form (“the natural form, shape, or appearance of a person, bodily part”), and “gender.”<sup>22</sup> While the prior definitions of “kyndes” are more familiar, the extension to

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22. *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. “Kinde,” accessed February 8, 2016, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/>.

gender is less commonly understood. Medieval concepts of gender extended beyond any one characteristic, such as genitals. Gender was an aggregate of many different “inherent qualities” of the body as well as the “appearance” of social performances of various functions in society. Concerning bodies, gender is both in genitals but also the society that categorizes those genitals. Concerning actions, gender is both in the names and pronouns of person but also in the society that develops and assigns the language to that body. As a form of categorizing and relating bodies, the concept of “kynde” functions as a social act of marking certain aspects of life as significant while deemphasizing others. The diverse qualities enfolded into “kynde” point to the wider variety of elements in a person’s life that medieval people considered significant to gender. Indeed, as humoral medicine and medieval studies of the elements of nature demonstrate, different forms of matter were considered gendered in different ways. Thus following humoral science, when Gower claims that each body is made of many “kyndes” of matter, he is conscious that this implies that anyone’s body is an aggregate of many different “kyndes” of gender: the feminine cold and wet qualities or appearances as well as the male hot and dry qualities.<sup>23</sup>

This emphasis on the physical composition of the body presents “divisioun” as a feature of the act and product of creation as Gower’s contemporaries knew it. Watt notes that for Gower and medieval Christian readers, “division... is a further indication of our fallen natures.”<sup>24</sup> Yet, fallen as the word is, reading for “divisioun” raises awareness both

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23. Galen, *On the Natural Faculties*, trans. A.J. Brock (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), II. ix.

24. Watt, 35.

of a kind of madness and a kind of making. Indeed, in Gower, the word “mad” appears to function both as “made” and “mad,” a pun possible in Middle English. Elsewhere in the Prologue, Gower describes Nebuchadnezzar’s statue as composed of diverse elements, a head made of “gold” and “legges . . . mad of stiel” (Prologue, 603-14). Later, Gower muses on whether creation could be otherwise, “if a man were / Mad al togedre of o matiere / Withouten interrupcioun, / Ther scholde no corrupcioun” (Prologue, 983-90). This unity of gender and other matters, free from all dysphoria, seems to be a cisgender world view, yet is for Gower only a speculation to contrast the actual “divisioun” creation inscribes into everything and anything made out of the combination of diverse materials or social forces. One can imagine an ideal homogeneity only after observing and collapsing all real heterogeneity.

Gower also uses forms of the word “mad” to express the experience of being made as part of a dysphoric creation as a kind of madness. Book I of the *Confessio* starts with a plea to the gods stating that without love Amans will go mad from “divisioun.” “O thou Cupide, O thou Venus, / Thow god of love and thou goddesse,” says Amans. “Now doth me pleynly live or dye, / For certes such a maladie / As I now have and longe have hadd, / It myhte make a wis man madd” (I. 124-31). Just as making comes from bringing diverse bodies together, madness comes as the experience of long suffering from that “divisioun.” Madness as a feature of “divisioun” without love is evident in Gower’s use of the word to describe a woman divided from relationship with her family, “sche is madd / And loveth nocht hire housebonde” (V. 495-96). Here, as elsewhere in the text, for Gower, being “mad” is not an isolated condition but due to the “divisioun” and “debat” inherent in the social environment.

Because of the ubiquitous nature of madness both as the condition of being made and the experience of madness in a world of “divisioun,” it would seem very difficult to overcome dysphoria, and scholarship suggests that Gower may intend it to be fixed. “There is at the heart of Gower’s writing a contradiction that he does not and cannot resolve,” writes Watt.<sup>25</sup> Rather than offer conclusive endings to his tales, definitive prescriptions for sins, or an actualized unified world, Gower’s stories of “divisioun” open up and flow one into the other. He shows stories and the world in all their messiness, he presents contraries that “[s]tant evermor in such debat.” Such debates certainly set up later tales and discourses in the *Confessio* to respond to conflicts Gower establishes earlier in the text. Likewise, the overtly confessional and ethical concerns of the *Confessio* suggest that readers too might be prompted to respond to the debates presented. Gower seems to open a “debat,” such as that on dysphoric youths, and then not close the matter with a definitive solution. His provocative theses that testify to the state of the world and tales that testify to states in society reach out to readers and ask them to “speak together” and “debat” with the ethics of each tale.

To embrace “debat” as an invitation for love to transcend “divisioun,” one must learn to write and read in a confessional mode of “speaking together,” without allowing one voice to silence the other. This embrace of dysphoria as a mode of relating to a larger community resonates with what Huffer calls “coextensivity.” Referring to a mutual extension across divides, Huffer’s term identifies the breakdown in the self as either on one side or the other, an existence that gestures toward both. “The coextensive subject is

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25. *Ibid.*, 21.

the exposure of the ‘I’ as the result of an inward folding,” writes Huffer. “Coextensivity is a concept that unfolds the ‘I’ to reveal the illusionary nature of subjectivity conceived as a separate, coherent, stable form of individualization.”<sup>26</sup> While dysphoric subjects may seem to be so particular as to be exceptions in society, the process of managing them as isolated individuals limits debates that reveal that it is this act of “unconfessing,” of making divisions, that causes the sense of madness.<sup>27</sup>

So what is gender dysphoria? While many describe dysphoria as a disjunction between one’s mind and body more consistent with premodern notions of dualism, must we assume this necessarily takes place internally? Can we see this as a form of social disorder, of corporate sin, or of injustice? Gender dysphoria is what people suffer when they are denied power over their embodiment and that tense union called a self by society. This suffering is not merely momentary or personal but sustained over time, usually over generations. In “Crusades and Crusaders” from *Sins of the Father*, Brian Mills and Roger Mitchell explain how social disorders and corporate sins in the modern day were inherited from medieval England through a genealogy of systems and behaviors. “The cycle gets repeated in successive generations because the problem is not addressed,” write Mills and Mitchell.<sup>28</sup> Offering a social and historical model of dysphoria, confessional texts such as Gower’s encourage coextensive identification with

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26. Ibid., 30.

27. Huffer, 27.

28. Brian Mills and Roger Mitchell, “Crusades and Crusaders,” *Sins of the Father: How National Repentance Removes Obstacles for Revival* (Tonbridge, UK: Sovereign World, 1999), 49.

the dysphoric in order to implicate readers in the “debat” his tales examine. Like Mills and Mitchell’s *Sins of the Father*, Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* encourages us to see how systems and habits in which we participate affect others, whether these others live down the street today or in an imagined past.

“Reading Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* in the twenty-first century invites self-reflection,” writes Watt, “as it must have done in the late fourteenth century and fifteenth century.”<sup>29</sup> Watt asserts that the interplay of love and “divisioun” functions less as an exemplum that situates the figures in them as extraordinary individuals than as invitations for identification with dysphoria, “to allow the audience an imaginative participation in and an aesthetic experience of the division of the world.”<sup>30</sup> Dysphoric subjectivities extend to wider audiences, both past and present, through the unfolding of narrative. As a result of such narrative work, current-day trans readership can unfold from a sense of temporal isolation in the modern world by coming to identify with experiences of medieval “divisioun.” By encouraging coextensivity, where those isolated by circumstance unfold lives toward one another through shared social mechanisms, confession reestablishes a communion across historical divides.

For Gower, a poet who reads dysphoria as a disorder caused by existing across divided states at once, rather than insisting on existing in only one category within absolute divides, is a corporate sin that demands public “debat” and confession, calling readers to identify across “divisiouns” of gender and time. “Gower seems to be a good student of the model of encouraged identification,” writes Little, “familiar in vernacular

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29. Watt, xii.

30. *Ibid.*, 35.

sermons and penitential manuals, in which the priest directs listeners or readers to . . . see themselves in relation to both the language of sin and contrition and the virtuous or sinful figures.”<sup>31</sup> Because engines of alienation and sexism extend beyond a single life, readers can identify with youths undergoing dysphoria in other eras. The particular lives of characters and readers may not historically overlap, but the systems that produce dysphoria are sustained over time. Thus systems that divide and isolate individuals within distinct categories end up providing the shared circumstances that allow for readers to identify across differences in gender and time.

Over the centuries, even as confession became medicalized and privatized, confessional literature demands that sin, disorder, and division be considered corporately rather than personally. Both the *Confessio* and the *DSM-5* produce a sense of “divisioun” and dysphoria that, in the words of Huffer, “interrupt the knowingness that would confine inarticulable experience within diagnostic categories.”<sup>32</sup> “Divisioun” and dysphoria mark discourses where diverse and contradicting forces “speak together” without demanding that the debate be fully resolved or that one voice win out over the other. This interruption can be read as the work of sloth or as a lack of productivity because it halts reproduction of conventional categories of gender. Rather than fix individuals who are a problem for the system, the texts suggest the failure of diagnostic terms to predetermine the use and end of a dysphoric life. It is the system that is disordered and needs to be changed.

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31. Little, 105.

32. Huffer, 38.

## Part II: “Acedia” and Depression

Reading and identifying with dysphoria can produce a desire to sustain shared discourses of “divisioun” that threaten the production of supposedly desirable, fixed states of gender leading to what Gower calls “slowthe” and modern medical authorities call depression. What should happen to the cisgender ideals of masculinity and patriarchal structures of gender divides if people dwell in alternative middles spaces or freely cross over systems of difference that work to ensure stable productions of sex and gender? These anxieties are present in current-day opposition to transgender studies and activism and acknowledged in medieval scholarship of confessional literature. Among the sins of sloth are storytelling and leisurely reading, such as Gower’s *Confessio* encourages through the poet’s interconnected tales that seem to defer resolution. Reading Ann Cvetkovich’s insightful contribution to affect studies, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, alongside the discussion of sloth that directly frames the “Tale of Iphis and Ianthe” illustrates a social model of “acedia” as the systematic depression of a person’s agency and illuminates how the *Confessio* resists the penitential demand to fix the “accidiam.”<sup>33</sup> By looking back at medieval “acedia,” Cvetkovich helps establish how confessional literature looks forward to and anticipates future trans and disability studies insights on depression.

In Book IV, Gower examines the “accidiam,” an accusative term derived from “acedia,” or “slowthe,” as setting up a key social disorder to be illustrated in the “Tale of

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33. Storytelling as slothful is recurrent throughout Chaucer’s “Second Nun’s Prologue” and “The Parson’s Tale.” See *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

Iphis and Ianthe,” which it frames. While sloth, like depression, can be considered a personal matter, Gower points to “acedia” as the symptom that comes from silencing or otherwise limiting a person from participating in community life. “Est modus in verbis, set ei qui parcit amori / Verba referre sua, non fauet vllus [nullus] amor,” Gower writes (“There is moderation in words; but love does not favor the man who is stingy in uttering words to his love” [IV. ii]).” Silence can be a virtue, Gower admits, but silence of a physical or spiritual nature is different from social alienation. Even those who are physically mute may communicate in some way. It is clear then that Gower’s consideration of “acedia” considers the choice not to speak or the effects of having one’s voice silenced to be important.

The multiple meanings of silence in relation to the depression of the spirit, as choice and as social alienation, are evident in the Latin preface to “pusillamité,” the form of sloth with which Iphis’s tale is associated. Gower writes, “Qui nichil attemptat, nichil expedit, oreque muto / Munus Amicie vir sibi raro capit” (“He who tries nothing accomplishes nothing, and a man rarely collects the reward of Friendship with a silent mouth” [IV.ii]). The reason for the lack of Friendship’s gifts is unclear in the Latin. In the second edition of volume I of the *Confessio*, Andrew Galloway translates “oreque muto” in a footnote as “a silent mouth” (IV. ii). In the first case, silence and inaction appear to be the choice of one who does not try to speak. Yet, situating love’s reward as the consequence of friendship suggests other possible scenarios for the friendlessness. In the outcomes of this particular form of the sin, the social implications are evident. Gower is warning that the silenced do not receive the gifts of a community, among which is the ability to communicate to the public and to speak back to power. As in the *DSM*’s

definition of dysphoria, these silences compound over time, inculcating the social orders of “divisioun” and shame that keep the “accidiam” in a silenced, isolated, depressed position.

To understand how physical muteness and depression differ from the medieval sins of “acedia” and “pusillamité,” we must mark the difference between the medical and social models of madness and examine how Gower positions his examination of sloth (“acedia”), which “in its original Greek,” writes Cvetkovich, “means without care or careless.”<sup>34</sup> Following an impulse common to transgender and disabilities studies to look at the “public” environment rather than the “personal” pathology for the grounds of diagnosis, Cvetkovich’s work on sloth and depression comes out of a project to establish these affects as the consequence of impossible labor demands. Unpacking the term “acedia,” Cvetkovich determines that the presence and lack of “care” continually points away from the body and toward a person’s relations. While care can be understood as a feeling for another person, carelessness as its binary opposite suggests being without loving relationships. Care can also be an active treatment for another’s health, meaning that being without care is to be without support. In both cases, depression and “acedia” are social problems based in culture and merely private medical ones based on biology.<sup>35</sup> Care always occurs in a community and so carelessness signifies a separation from public life. As such, issues of care may have as much if not more to do with social systems that inhibit relations of care than with individuals who simply lack the ability to care.

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34. Ibid., 88.

35. Ibid., 88-90.

In the social model of madness, depression means the suppression or release of power. Gower's study on "acedia," like Cvetkovich's study of depression, suggests that the medicalization of "divisioun" and sloth produces a population marked as perpetually depressed, powerless, and unproductive. Diagnoses such as "acedia," writes Cvetkovich, "produce life and death not only by targeting populations for overt destruction . . . but also more insidiously by making people feel small, worthless, hopeless."<sup>36</sup> The obscuring and internalization of social mechanisms of control and destruction is critical to their widespread functioning. Systems of power are more effective when people police themselves. Indeed, sloth as a systemic disease can manifest through a host of symptoms from suicide to social erasure. Society targets those marked by dysphoria to be relegated to oblivion. The targets are coerced through isolation and shame to kill themselves like Narcissus or through the impossible demands of compulsory cisgender to become a depressed, docile, and silent subject like Iphis.

Among the populations most marked by the depression of dysphoria are youths. As a period in which lived gender identity goes through significant shifts that may be in contradiction to what society demands or even the person's own will, childhood and adolescence exaggerate dysphoria. Certainly that is the case with Gower's story of Iphis. Cultures with strong patriarchal traditions, such as found in medieval gentry and in Gower's tale, insist on ending phases of ambiguity as soon as possible. This is especially true when considering the demand for more men to sustain and reproduce the patriarchy. "Of that he mihte do now hier / He tarieth al the longe yer," Gower writes of the slothful (IV. 8). Like the alchemist practice of "solve et coagula," described alongside Iphis in the

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36. Ibid., 13.

book on the “accidiam,” mutations of gender are considered a waste of time. They challenge the constancy and coherence of the patriarchy over time (IV. 8-10).

Young people who remain in dynamic states are doubly marked as disordered and slothful, unproductive and non-reproductive. They are marked as slothful because they prolong periods of gender ambiguity that allow them to embrace dysphoria, to exist in what queer and trans studies scholar J. Jack Halberstam calls “the wondrous anarchy of childhood.”<sup>37</sup> Halberstam establishes the power of this anarchy in *The Queer Art of Failure* as the possibility for alternative forms of growth and productivity.<sup>38</sup> This power, Halberstam argues, is most evident in trans and queer youth because of the ways they resist teleological fulfillments of cisgender, heterosexual compulsions to become properly governed men and women, but remain open to anyone marked by immaturity. Indeed, there are those who can and would embrace an anarchic personal diagnosis of sloth. Yet in “Undiagnosing Gender,” Butler asks the question of anyone who would assume that all youth are equally able to actualize such an anarchical potential to appropriate the systems of discipline, such as diagnosis, which compel their submission. Butler writes, “are children and teens always capable of effecting the distance necessary to sustain a purely instrumental approach to being subjected to a diagnosis?”<sup>39</sup> As a form of social regulation such medicalization has the potential to overpower a young individual. Because much of

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37. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.

38. Ibid

39. Butler, 82.

a young person's physical and social bearing is yet to be set, children are denied the power to make lasting decisions, even those pertaining to the future of their bodies.

Defined by Gower as "lack of herte," "pusillamité," amounts to despair that labor will never produce a prescribed end (IV. 334-35). Put in a depressed position, the person suffering the social disorder of "pusillamité" does not attempt what he knows he cannot reach; he "dar no mannes werk beginne. / So mai he nocht be resoun winne" (IV. 317-18). Rather than failing at the impossible, the depressed person gives up work and so cannot experience success. A person who suffers "pusillamité" may surrender just as the system is beginning to crack, making real change truly impossible: "evere he faileth ate nede, / Til al be spilt that he with deleth" (IV. 332-33). Marked by failure in narratives of "pusillamité," depression becomes associated with subjugated populations. The depressed are less likely to take chances, as the odds are stacked against them. "Of this vice the nature / Dar nothing sette in aventure," writes Gower (IV. 321-22). The sin of "pusillamité" is its presumption that the flow of power is so set that there is no chance for change. Lacking choice and voice, dysphoric youths become depressed, fulfilling diagnoses that such youths are careless.

By situating the "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe" within a study of "acedia," Gower presents the compulsory production of gender norms and the heterosexual reproduction of the proper gender ideal (that is, cisgender men) as due to natural and social "divisious." Thus, the social danger of dysphoric youths is their refusal to produce and reproduce for the patriarchy. Unsettling the constancy of the patriarchy leads authorities to fear that dysphoric children may change society as they work toward uncharted futures. The dysphoric become medicalized as suffering from sociopathic conditions that

make them inherently antisocial. Gower writes that the dysphoric have natures that keep them private and away from community, “this propreliche of kinde, / to leven alle thing behind” (IV. 5-6). Such diagnoses for depression are effective ways of justifying the isolation and silencing of those with no loyalties or, rather, no loyalties to patriarchal gender norms. Rather than seeing the dysphoric as alienated by society, it would be better to allow for the suggestion that they might have legitimate critiques of the social order through which their marginalization is explained as inherent to who they are. Working in too many directions, producing too many “kinds” of embodiment, the lack of movement in one socially legible direction under “the plogh” and “labour” of patriarchal cisgender leads authorities to discredit dysphoric youth by labeling them directionless. A part of this discrediting comes in the form of medicalizing depression as essential to a certain “kinde” of gender. As noted earlier, the Middle English word “kynde” commonly suggests the pseudo-medical condition of the body, “[t]he aggregate of inherent qualities.” Yet the less commonly considered but pertinent definition of “kynde” as “gender” remains. A particular reading of Gower’s statement is that certain genders are more likely to eschew all (e.g. identities, habits of behavior, or embodiments) assigned to them by nature, tradition, or patriarchy. One might suppose that certain marginalized genders, such as trans youth, would feel less loyalty to systems that subjugate them. Yet, the “divisioun” of genders inscribed in the youth through Nature and society is likely to spur on further social “divisiouns.”

While certain constitutions and genders may be medicalized as essentially depressive, Gower suggests wider social causes for diverging—or, dividing one’s self—from patriarchal values. In the Latin introduction to Book IV, Gower writes, “Dicunt

accidiam fore nutricem viciorum” (“They say that Sloth is the nurse of the vices” [IV. i]). Introducing his study of “acedia,” Gower’s assertion that sloth is the midwife of sin sets high stakes on the relation between depression and “divisioun.” If “divisioun” is the consequence of sin, then Gower is establishing a formula where systems that depress people’s agency create the foundations for other forms of violence and alienation to be inscribed and compounded. In effect, “acedia” names recursive systems that progressively decrease people’s power while increasing their isolation from life-giving and life-affirming social resources. In the end, being removed from the community is essentially a social death that sets persons on a road to despair and deeper elimination. Gower writes, “Qui nichil attemptat, nichil expedit” (“He who tries nothing accomplishes nothing” [IV]). This establishes a conceptual slippage between a lack of socially valued labor and nothingness. He enacts nothing and so comes closer to nothingness. While silence may be deemed a less overtly violent mode of controlling populations, for Gower, the force of individualized medicalization causes the internalization of shame, the feeling that the self is essentially without value, a life essentially not worth living.

In an instance where the form of the text reflects and sympathizes with its content, Gower’s *Confessio* can be considered slothful because it lacks a resolution. In the conclusion of its frame, Amans is not given the kind of love necessary to fix his experience of “divisioun.” Little notes this spiraling as critical to its confessional project. The “failed consolation” at the end of the frame where Love is unable to cure Amans is a signal that change needs to happen on the public and not only the private level: “confession (and the absolution it brings) returns a prayerful and hopeful Gower to

‘amende’ his social world.”<sup>40</sup> The confessional frame does not imagine personal solutions without social change. Watt concurs with the social reading of Gower’s frame and argues that the creation of tensions that are not resolved, the orders of nature that are established and undermined, and the “interplay of order and disorder” is fundamental to understanding the form and content of the *Confessio*’s ethical message.<sup>41</sup> Composing a text that makes many different texts, social problems, and discourses “speak together” but failing to be properly penitential, lacking absolution, or cure, Gower leaves his confession dealing with the ongoing problem of “divisioun.”

### **Part III: Isis and Eros**

Situated within competing debates of silencing difference or speaking together, as well as empowering or depressing those marked as pathological bodies, Gower’s “Tale of Iphis and Ianthe” directly engages the tension between “divisioun” and love established as foundational in the natural order of the Prologue in order to revisit, nuance, and contrast differing forms of understanding and enacting Nature, Eros, and “divisioun.” To do this, Gower’s tale holds up dysphoric youths to bear witness to and confess the corporate “divisiouns” that silence them and depress their power (IV. 451-505). In an act that is effectively an embodied reconciliation with the patriarchy, Gower evidences that many actors work on Iphis’s behalf to turn the dysphoric child into an ideal cisgender man. Yet insofar as those both inside and outside the tale limit the dysphoric and

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40. Little, 127.

41. Watt, 35.

depressed youth's speech, these actors inhibit confession's function to give voice to the silenced.

In this concluding section, my reading pays close attention to certain details in the "Tale of Iphis and Ianthe" in order to note the changes Gower makes in adapting the text from Ovid: the exchange of Isis for Eros as the reformer of the youth's body and the absence of Iphis's voice in the English text. By attending to the social networks around the youth, I contend that we see how the change of a body designated female into a body designated male evidences environmental discord in the community and the gendered oscillation of cold and heat in a body's humors. This in turn suggests a deeper allegory operating in the characters of Isis and Cupid as representations of a dysphoric feminine Nature and a reproductive patriarchal Nature. The opposition of these two forces echoes the "accidiam" brought on by "divisioun" and illustrates how establishing the dysphoric youth as a crisis in the order of Nature can excuse excessive measures to fix him.

The tale begins with Iphis born into a crisis of gender and constancy in the stability of the patriarchy, a dysphoria emphasized by the insertion of Isis as a divine midwife. When Iphis's mother becomes pregnant, she is concerned because of her husband's decision to kill any child other than a boy. Desperate, the mother prays to Isis for help since as a goddess of "childinge," or childbirth, Isis governs transitions. Savvy in navigating "divisiouns" of and around embodiment, Isis insists that the child be born "in private" (IV. 460-66). There, apart from the rest of the household, Iphis is born and designated "a dowhter." Yet, in this private space, as though in penance, the child is reformed, redressed and renamed, then presented publicly, as "a sone." Isis answers the gender debate by privatizing the problematic body. In the process, the goddess

compounds corporate gender dysphoria by adding “divisiuous” between father, mother, and child, as well as between Iphis’s body and gender identity. Socially, Iphis’s father knows his child as a son, yet the mother knows the child in other ways. Physically, Iphis both follows the patriarchy’s prescribed gender performance and creates an alternative mode of embodying it.

In contrast to Eros who appears to facilitate and expedite the desires of the patriarchy to have a son who better passes as male, Isis’s position is more ambiguous. She facilitates the work of others but in a way that compounds dysphoria and “accidiam” rather than correcting it. She complicates gender embodiment and relations. Describing “accidiam” as a midwife of all sin, the root of which is “divisioun,” Gower writes, “Dicunt accidiam fore nutricem viciorum” (“They say that sloth is the nurse of the vices” [IV. i]. Yet this midwifery also applies to Isis.<sup>42</sup> While it has been asserted that the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid provides a key text for Gower’s *Confessio*, both follow in the wake of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius (a.k.a. *The Golden Ass*), which developed ideas used by the later works, particularly in establishing Isis as a dysphoric figure. At the conclusion of Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, Isis describes herself as Nature inconstant: “I am nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen of the ocean, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are.”<sup>43</sup> Isis is a

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42. Isis as midwife also marks pregnancy and birth as processes of transition and bodily change.

43. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 47. <http://faculty.cua.edu/> (accessed February 8, 2016).

craftswoman whose Nature is also mad and many faced. This is evident when she puts together her dead husband, Osiris, following the alchemical dictum, “solve et coagula,” and Iphis is remade in the image of Nature, a dysphoric Nature that creates without constancy and makes “divisiuous” even as she reforms them.

While Ovid’s Isis returns in the conclusion of the Tale to answer Iphis’s plea to grow a penis so he can penetrate his wife, Gower eschews the agency of the dysphoric by having Eros intervene, unasked, to give the family’s patriarch the male heir he wanted. “Forthi Cupide hath so besett / His grace upon this aventure,” Gower writes, “That he acordant to nature . . . Transformeth Iphe into a man” (IV. 496-501). Marking Cupid here as an agent of Nature aligns him with Isis, yet the masculine nature of Eros does what the dysphoric feminine Nature, Isis, cannot or will not do. “For love,” writes Gower, “hateth nothing more / than thing which stant agein the lore / of that nature in kinde hath sett,” (IV. 493-95). These two gods represent two competing natures: the nature of dysphoria and the nature of cisgender (“nature in kinde”). The mutable nature of Isis is represented as an “aventure,” an unexpected happening. “Aventure” is a common feature in medieval romance where chance interrupts the proper order, sending characters and relations veering off into diverse paths and setting the narrative’s dramatic events into motion. Isis did not cause the disorder in the patriarchy but she did arrive as an “aventure” to compound and confuse it. In contrast, Eros’s transformation of Iphis into a man is meant to signal a restoration of the cisgender order of embodiment and relationship that Isis’s “aventure” frustrated.

The exchange of Isis for Eros has more than allegorical significance, as the transition from dysphoric feminine to lustful masculinity corresponds to changes in

humor. The “grace” that Eros bestows means an increase in blood corresponding to the wet body becoming warmer (IV. 497). “Wherof the kinde love he wan,” continues Gower, “[o]f lusti yonge Iante his wif” (IV. 503-04). In the process, Iphis takes on the gender and humoral register of Love, that is, male. He is of the “kynde” of “love” (the gender of Eros) because of the circuit that Iphis and Ianthe form. Humorally, Iphis’s arousal with Ianthe mirrors the change that takes place at the point of the mutual “kest” (IV. 478-500). In other words, the medicine of Eros fills Iphis’s loins with blood as he becomes erect, changing a (cold and dry) melancholic girl into a (hot and wet) lustful boy.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, even in the twenty-first century, transgender hormone medication can be accompanied by hot flashes and mood changes.

Eros’s cure targets Iphis’s body while silencing Iphis’s voice and depressing his agency to fix a disruption in the patriarchal line. The importance of physical changes in Gower’s story should not be underestimated. While modern medicine associates depression with the mind more than the whole body, Cvetkovich’s understanding of “acedia” is that the affect is bound up in the physical and spiritual as much as the mental.<sup>45</sup> Loss of agency over the body for any reason can cause or compound feelings of helplessness. In Gower’s tale, Iphis’s body becomes the site of cultural conflict and dysphoria about gender and sexuality. In other words, the medicine of Eros may be a kind

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44. While medieval thinkers did not approach the humors with the same language as a modern endocrinologist, premodern and early modern humoral scientists observed fluctuation in the blood, body temperature, and sexual characteristics. In a famous case of folklore, recorded by Michel de Montaigne, the change of a woman into a man is explained by intense exertion on a hot day causing such dramatic changes in her humors that her body pushed out her internal genitalia, forming a penis. Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 109-20.

45. Cvetkovich, 113.

of cure for dysphoria that the patriarchy provoked and nature compounded. If assigned a girl at birth, Iphis would have been killed. As a dysphoric youth, Iphis's power is depressed. The physical change empowers Iphis physically and socially. Yet Iphis did not have a voice in the formation and reformation of his gender. Perhaps, in the world as Gower sees it, Iphis would never have received a choice and would have remained silent and depressed. The poet suggests as much when he writes, "Poscenti tardo negat emolumenta Cupido" ("Cupid denies his rewards to the one asking tardily" [IV. i]). Those who are not able to speak cannot effectively receive the saving Eros in confession.

What do we make of Gower's omission of the dysphoric voice from his Middle English poem? Removing Iphis's prayer for aid, Gower changes how audiences read the text. In Ovid's Latin version of the tale, Iphis is given a voice in how to manage his dysphoria. "Juno, guardian of brides," prays Iphis, "and you, Hymen, god of marriage come to these rites."<sup>46</sup> Yet this prayer is not provided in the Middle English text of the *Confessio*. Watt notes that the change between Gower's English book and its Latin source is rooted in differences between his English and the Latin text. In the Latin marginal gloss in Book IV, line 455, Watt observes Gower's addition to the narrative, "Set cum Yphis debitum sue coinage vnde soluere non habuit, deos in sui adiutorium interpellabat" ("But when Iphis did not have it in her power to honor the debt owed to her spouse, she prayed to the gods in their oratories").<sup>47</sup> In this Latin commentary, Iphis is given the voice and agency she is denied in the English text, thus creating a division in the

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46. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Charles Martin (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), IX, 1097-99.

47. Watt, 74.

readership of the text. It is through the exclusively Latin element of the narrative that educated, often clerical, medieval patriarchs could hear Iphis's voice while English-only readers hear only silence. While medicine was far from only an elite vocation in the Middle Ages, the move to admit only the youth's voice in Latin reflects the sort of authoritarian control over how speech is allowed and structured characteristic of the privatization of medical discourses of the body. In this way, medieval patriarchs as well as trained medievalists can act as gatekeepers, able to shut down Iphis's voice from a wider English-reading community, both in the premodern past and today. Within the text, these divisions mirror the demands of Iphis's father to see only cisgender masculinity in his child. He is said to be "mad so to wene . . ."—made to understand—that Iphis is a boy, yet this echoes with the meaning that he is "madd" in his understanding of Iphis's masculinity (IV. 469). The father is divided by his own patriarchal language from effectively speaking with the text of Iphis's body or life story. The patriarchs and the dysphoric youths, doctors and patients, Latin and English readers are not all speaking the same language and reading the same story. This evidences the critical role dysphoric persons can play in society as cultural polyglots able to translate (literally, "move across") divided linguistic, class, and gender communities. Unless diverse readers "speak together," there cannot be understanding across "divisioun." Unless dysphoric youths are allowed to speak their multiple truths in multiple tongues, "divisiouns" will only widen.

Both in what he writes and what he omits, Gower speaks volumes. While boasting tales of dysphoric, transgender figures, in the *Confessio Amantis* Gower omits a prominent classical trans narrative, Ovid's story of one of Aphrodite's other children: Hermaphroditus. Unlike the silence at the end of Iphis, instead, the tale of

Hermaphroditus ends with a dysphoric cry against the gods who rule the world around him. When a nymph rapes the youth, his body taken and metamorphosed against his will, Hermaphroditus uses his voice to pray, “sed iam non voce virili” (“But it is no longer a man’s voice”).<sup>48</sup> Ovid not only records the youth’s plea but the particularity of his hermaphroditic voice. It is only when the youth speaks that he is named “Hermaphroditus” for his parents, Hermes and Aphrodite. The god of discourse and boundary-crossing and the god of love and sex inscribe the youth into the environment by enchanting the well in which he bathes into a site of perpetual gender change where all may experience and “debat” the natural environmental forces of gender dysphoria so that dysphoria may be read as a natural state of being and not a disorder.

Youths’ agency or lack of agency is at stake in the decision to regard “divisioun” and “acedia,” or dysphoria and depression, as medically individual or social in nature. While in the *Confessio* Gower does not give us the well of Hermaphroditus in which we can hear the echoes of dysphoric youths rippling through time, he begs critically trans readers to listen to the silences in his “Tale of Iphis and Ianthe.” By rooting his confession in the “divisiouns” of the social environment against the medicalization, or “unconfessing” of dysphoria, Gower offers a model of reconciliation that can only be realized by crossing boundaries, including those of time and gender, to find the silenced, so that they may be brought into a discourse of healing. By listening to the stories of these dysphoric youths, readers can come to hear the sounds of the environment, the patriarchy, and other social “divisiouns.” In the work of re-confessing silenced

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48. Ovid. *Metamorphoses*, IV, 317-45. <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/> (accessed February 7, 2016). Translation is my own.

discourses, learning to listen is critical to marking the social structures that limit dysphoric lives and to empowering these depressed voices.

In the end Gower holds up a sounding board and amplifier that disclose the corporate sins of the patriarchy. The role of readers then is to listen to these dysphoric texts to hear how they reflect the sounds and silences of both the past and the present. Gower prefigures the distinction between the medical models of dysphoria with which only modern trans persons are supposed to identify and social models that invite wider identification. Literary and trans scholars of confessional texts share a fate with dysphoric youths by dwelling in unresolved “divisioun” rather than insisting on the reformation of idealized norms. Gower leaves readers with the question: will you be like Eros who swoops in to solve individual problems without being asked, or like Isis who embraces and nurtures dysphoria? By affirming the creative (if unexpected) work of “divisioun” and dysphoria, readers are called to create alternative structures that invite the silenced and depressed back into community discourse. As a result of learning to speak together more effectively, rather than having one authority speak for another, our listening and waiting allow dysphoric youths to express their needs in their own voices.

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