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Preface

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Preface

Current efforts among medievalists to forge more inclusive scholarly communities expose the fissures of race, class, gender, and other prejudices that have ruptured emerging networks and limited the scope of the field. The article that we feature in *Accessus* 4.2, “Covetousness in Book 5 of *Confessio Amantis*: A Medieval Precursor to Neoliberalism” by Jeffery G. Stoyanoff, deploys Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory to uncover covetousness as the cause of broken communities. As contemporary scholars seek academic interdependencies that cross artificially imposed boundaries and remediate injustices, we must often advance beyond the limits of self-serving behaviors, which is the limitation that John Gower, in Stoyanoff’s estimation, identifies and explicates so artfully.

No better example of divided community exists than the recent controversy in Medieval Studies concerning the activities of white supremacists. How might a field largely dominated by white scholars renounce false privilege for the good of the whole, cast off covetousness in Gower’s terms, better incorporate medievalists of color, and reject the misappropriation of premodern tropes by racist groups? The violence in the U.S. shocks us into recognition that we must respond.

Many of the articles published in *Accessus* thus far have attempted to address current issues. By encouraging our audiences to engage in a dialogue between then and now, this journal explores how premodern literature enables us to see something about ourselves and our own societies that would otherwise remain unacknowledged. Despite notable differences between past and present political structures—medieval monarchies versus contemporary democracies, for instance—there are correspondences in the ethical expectations of both eras. Aimed toward

the unveiling of corruption during the troubled reign of Richard II, much of Gower's poetry resonates with the same ethical standards for which we, too, are yearning.

That the article we highlight in this issue of *Accessus* speaks to the pervasiveness of the turmoil caused by corruption at the top of the current political hierarchy is likely to have pleased a fourteenth-century poet who so emphatically urged the writings of the past to be understood as prologue to the future. "Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri." What emerges from Stoyanoff's study of Book 5 of the *Confessio Amantis* and Gower's exemplary tales of covetousness provides a clearer understanding of a human transgression that contributes to the dissolution of communities regardless of historical epoch. Gower recognizes, even more astutely than his contemporaries Chaucer and Langland, an emerging prototype of free-market capitalism fueled in large part by the unregulated greed and economic self-interest we now call "neoliberalism." Avarice and all its nuances constitute the "sin" explored to full effect through Genius's dialogue with Amans in Book 5. In order to expose the conditions that lead to an undermining of community by avaricious, self-centered individuals, Stoyanoff chooses tales that illustrate interactions affecting all strata of premodern society "from emperor to beggar" (1). In his deployment of Bruno LaTour's Actor-Network-Theory, Stoyanoff turns away from conventional ways of defining the "social" and looks instead to broader models of society, made up of collectives and networks that include material objects—from mirrors and coinage to capons and rings—as well as human actors from across the economic and political spectrum. In Stoyanoff's choice of exempla: the "Tale of Virgil's Mirror," the "Tale of Two Coffers," the "Tale of the Beggars and the Pastries," and the "Tale of the King and the Steward's Wife" he shows us just how disruptive covetousness can be to communal cohesiveness. "Covetousness breaks . . . collectives," Stoyanoff says (15).

In these aptly chosen exempla Stoyanoff recognizes a “narrative of societal decline” that resonates with the current political situation (both in the U.S. and the U.K.) brought “to fruition under the guise of neoliberalism” (28). These stories and Stoyanoff’s incisive explications provide a means by which we may recognize how the greed and corruption of our own time undermine the very principles that democracies such as ours claim to value. How ironic, then, that it takes a fourteenth-century monarchist-poet to hold up a mirror to our own historical moment in which the many are disadvantaged by the rampant greed of a privileged few. Just as they speak to a voracious minority of wealthy people seeking to control Western democracies, Gower’s writings also contain lessons for academic institutions that hoard power instead of embracing, supporting, and identifying with the plurality of diverse scholars.

As Stoyanoff notes, “Gower shows his readers that Covetousness destroys the collectives that make up a functioning society in the vain pursuit of capital” (28-29). Like emperors, officers, beggars, and lovers we are entangled in a society in which “our leaders have sold the welfare of [that] society for the monetary benefit of the ruling class,” “our politicians seek wealth only to come up with straw and stones,” and we ourselves “covet what we do not have rather than appreciating the love we do have” (29). Gower’s “distrust of the market” and the tales cited in this stunningly resonant article aptly demonstrate how some things never change even when systems of governance do (20). As medievalists, let’s change the systems in our purview in the interest of strengthening wider networks, respect for difference, and the kinds of collaboration that encourage inclusiveness.

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