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Standing in the Dark: Sloth and Stability, Paralysis and Perseverance in Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*

In Book IV of the *Confessio*, tales link and cross, as in a dance or a hall of mirrors. Images, moments, and circumstances are picked up across the book and through Amans' conversation with Genius till stories converge: there are two abandoned women,¹ two statue women,² two *Iphes* (Iphises? Iphoi?),³ two sky-fliers,⁴ two women 'not interested' in love,⁵ and several replicating transformations; each set of stories/characters/examples invokes, amplifies and disputes with its reflection(s). Book IV is also a quiet 'book' in some respects, less about ferocious action than about the violence of inaction.⁶ Unlike the other sins in the *Confessio*, which require malevolent

¹ Dido (ll. 77-146) and Phyllis (ll. 731-886). Both come from Ovid's *Heroides*: Epistles VII and II respectively. All reference to the *Metamorphoses* come from Ovid. *Metamorphoses, Volume I and 2*. Translated by Frank Justus Miller. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 42. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916).

² Pygmalion's statue (ll. 371-450) from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Bk X, ll. 243-97; and Araxarathen (ll. 3515-3684)

³ Gower's first Iphis (ll. 451-505) comes from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Bk IX, ll. 666-797, right after the story about Byblis' incestuous love for Caunus; the second (ll. 3515-3684) comes from the Iphis and Anaxarete story in *Metamorphoses* Bk XIV, ll. 698-764, which is told by Faunus as his pick up line for Pomona.

⁴ Phaeton (ll. 979-1034) and Icarus (ll. 1035-1071).

⁵ Rosiphelee (ll. 1245-1446) and (arguably) Araxarathen.

⁶ Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 209: Sloth as "sin of neglect, it is the absence of an act, a lack of effort, and it is wrong because of what it doesn't do..." See also James Simpson, "Bonjour, Paresse: Literary Waste and Recycling in Book 4 of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*" *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 151 (2007): 257-84. For more general works on Sloth in the Middle Ages, see Susan Snyder "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition" *Studies in the Renaissance* 12 (1965), 18-59; Robert S. Gerke, "Fortitude and Sloth in the Wife of Bath's Tale and the Clerk's Tale" *Proceedings of the PMR Conference: Annual Publication of the International Patristic, Medieval and Renaissance Conference* 5 (1980): 119-135; Andrew Crislip, "The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of the Demons? The Demon of Acedia in Early Christian Monasticism," *The Harvard Theological Review* 98. 2 (2005): 143-169.

purpose, Sloth is more often a sin of failure: failure to act, failure to be brave, failure to be honest, failure to think of someone else. But it is not, therefore, a benign sin: this is a book about the abandoned, the suicides and the hanged.⁷ These things happen in the dark – the dark of secrecy, of love’s treachery, of vigil, of dream, of despair, of death. The rising sun does not bring perspective and clearer vision, but proof of dark despair’s victory. Alceone’s dream argues that the most we can hope for is knowledge of what happened; Pygmalion and the first Iphis urge us to wait for a miracle. The advice of this book is contradictory: is it best to hold on in love or give up when it’s pointless? Hercules and Pygmalion say hold on, but so do Dido, Phillis, and the second Iphis. The first two get what they desire; the others commit suicide.

And this is precisely the point of this vice: Sloth, doing nothing itself, goads others into end points. It is infectious. One person’s *Lachesce* results in another’s *Tristesse*. Sloth becomes itself, folds in on itself, works inwards, where other sins explode out. Motion is not movement: as we encounter each sub-sin, we wind further into ourselves. This is not Cary Howie’s claustrophilia, where enclosure opens out:⁸ this kind tightens and kills. All parts of Sloth restrict movement, action, or thought. Those who transform become trees, statues, monuments: unlike all the animal shapes, these metamorphs are static testimonies to their agony; all stay where they are, hardened into signification. The end stage of Sloth – *Tristesse*, that is, despair, obduracy – signals the awareness of lost time and self, and locks the sufferer into the conviction that no action is

⁷ It begins with Dido’s suicide and Aeneas’s callous disregard of her. The characterization of Aeneas is significant: this is not Pius Aeneas with his obligations to found Rome; this is the Aeneas of the *Heroides*, deceiving, dishonest, and dishonorable.

⁸ *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

possible, neither repentance nor redemption. There are no second chances. This dance with Amans is a slow and stately pavane: we move forward only to move back, and end where we began. It is the *basse danse* of the dead and desperate, depression's paralytic morris in the hamster wheel of never still, but never advancing thoughts. We hear Dido "That compleignende manyfold / Sche hath hire oghne tale told / Unto herself" (ll. 125-127)⁹ becoming her own audience for the experience she had; and Phillis likewise, watching for Demophoon, oscillates like the tide, arguing with herself and the evidence of her senses and reason:

Bot sche,
 The tyde awayteth everemo,
 And caste hire yhe upon the see.
 Somtime nay, sometime yee,
 Somtime he cam, sometime nocht,
 Thus sche desputeth in hire thocht
 And wot nocht what sche thenke mai. (ll. 807-813)

Their despair---all despair---is the result of false words, so it refuses lexical play, encourages mono-valence at every point, and requires denotative revenge. Words spoken knock around in the sufferer's head, with no end and no possibilities: language falls as each woman is betrayed, and then petrifies as thoughts run on a treadmill: he didn't love me---he said he did---I am a fool. In the end, one is only what one's *Tristesse* lets one say, which fixes words as immobily as bodies. After she has hanged herself, Phillis'

⁹All quotations come from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Middle English Texts Series, ed. Russell A. Peck with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway, vol 2. (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000–2004).

transformation locks both her and Demophon in one reading of their story, despair's denotative revenge:

Wherof the goddes were amoeved,
And Demephon was so reproeved,
That of the goddes providence
Was schape such an evidence
Evere afterward agein the slowe,
That Phillis in the same throwe
Was schape into a notetre,
That alle men it mihte se,
And after Phillis philliberd
This tre was cleped in the yerd,
And yit for Demephon to schame
Into this dai it berth the name.
This wofull chance how that it ferde
Anon as Demephon it herde,
And every man it hadde in speche,
His sorwe was noght tho to seche; (ll. 860-876)

The nut tree now called philbert (or hazel) commemorates Demophon's betrayal in Phillis' suicide, and the tree becomes a talking point and monument. Popular reiteration of their story fixes them both in stable words. Suicide becomes the only way to restore language's lost honour: the women, after all, keep their word and die.

And yet as much as Book IV is about hard, immovable or immobile hearts, it is also about plasticity, softness, and the impressionable. The very last story – Iphis 2’s suicide at Araxarathen’s hardness of heart---exemplifies the exchange between obduracy and plasticity, the reductiveness of denotative revenge, and the monumentality which accompanies these victims of Sloth. Despair ends in tombstones, this story says. As such, it is the epitaph for Book IV as well as for its last two characters. The first two characters, Dido and Phillis---impressionable, wronged, honourable, and driven to extremes---suggest that suicide is a virtuous thing: very worryingly, Genius claims that Dido at last “gat hireselve reste” (l. 136). They invite our sympathy, but they also teach Iphis to see their situation as a model for his.

But Iphis is not like them; he only thinks he is. That is, the application of their example to his life writes his story as that between a negligent lover and a desperate, which is only half true: he is desperate but with very little cause. Nevertheless, he writes himself as an abandoned woman, and kills himself as they do. His version of his story calls into question Genius’s whole project of narrative restoration: if seeing oneself in stories can result in delusional fantasy, what are we to do? We can follow Genius’s palliative judgement that Iphis “excedeth the mesure, / Of reson” (ll. 3525-26) but so does Pygmalion, and that love works out, because the god of love is favourable to those who are stable (ll. 443-44). But Iphis writes himself as stable, and so does Amans, so where does this get us? Genius’s advice is contradictory and we can’t tell how to be stable, or whether stability is distinguishable from paralysis. The one most puzzled by the conundrum is Araxarathen, who invites divine punishment (a.k.a.---suicide by god) for

being a character in Iphis's story. Tellingly, she perishes not for her own actions, but for his authorial control of them.

Much has been made of the changes Gower made to Ovid's characterization of Araxarathen.¹⁰ While Ovid writes her as decidedly disdainful of Iphis, Gower does not: in the *Confessio* she is not hard-hearted at all, but prudent and modest, wise in her doubt of Iphis's words, as Dido and Phillis instruct her she should be. She is also a reflection on them insofar as she does not accept either Iphis's unequal station, nor yet his excessive words. However, her toughness is external. She's actually very softhearted and feels Iphis's suicide excessively. We ought to approve: if Iphis were a stable lover,¹¹ Araxarathen would be a model of good love. But he is the less her equal in judgment as he is superior in station. As Genius observes, Iphis "His deth upon himself he sowhte" (l. 3548). The verb is important: not only will death come by his own hand, it is also of his own seeking. Iphis, however, does not see things this way. In a moving, impassioned speech, he accuses Araxarathen of hardness of heart and deliberate disregard of him; his death will be a statement of her untruth and sloth:

O herte hard aboven alle,
 This deth, which schal to me befalle
 For that thou wolt noght do me grace,
 Yit schal be told in many a place,

¹⁰ Starting with her name: Ovid calls her "Anaxarete." Gower also reverses their social standing: Iphis here outranks her. For more discussion of Gower's changes, and for the tale in general, see David G. Allen, "God's Faithfulness and the Lover's Despair" in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998): 209-223, esp. 212-14; Götz Schmitz *The Middel Weie: Stil- und Aufbauformen in John Gowers Confessio Amantis* (Bonn: Grundmann, 1974): 74-75; Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 247-50.

¹¹ Note the subjunctive of condition contrary to fact.

Hou I am ded for love and trouthe
 In thi defalte and in thi slouthe.
 Thi Daunger schal to manye mo
 Ensample be for everemo,
 Whan thei my wofull deth recorde. (ll. 3583-3591)

In fact, the untruth is his, and so is the sloth, because she is wise, and not cruel, and because by this time, sloth means not slowness, or reluctance, but *tristesse*: obduracy and despair. Likewise, the hardness of heart is his: it is he who chooses to invest himself and her with the inexorability of his obsession. He's only soft on the outside; deep down, he's rock and stubbornness. Far less cause than either Dido or Phillis, he hangs himself outside Araxarathen's door. Most unfairly, she will become the letter of his words as the above passage concludes: "Thi Daunger schal to manye mo / Ensample be for everemo/ Whan thei my wofull deth recorde" (ll. 3589-3591). "Record," with its resonance of encoding in the heart,¹² begins to lock Araxarathen in a signifying cage. But she turns the key on herself. Her first action is to create the cage in public:

To al the world sche tolde it oute,
 And preith to hem that were aboute
 To take of hire the vengance,

¹² *OED: Record*, v – "Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French recorder (French recorder) to remember (about something) (first half of the 12th cent.; c1050 in reflexive use), to remember, recall (something), to repeat, to recite, to relate, tell, bear witness to, declare, to make a record of (all 12th cent.), *to learn by heart*,..." emphasis mine. For the links between heart and memory, see further Mary Carruthers, "Descriptions of the Neurophysiology of Memory," Chapter 2 in *The Book Of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 49ff.

For sche was cause of thilke chaunce,
Why that this kinges Sone is spilt. (ll. 3605-9)

She also accepts and passes on Iphis's re-writing of her motives

Sche takth upon hirsself the gilt,
And is al redi to the peine
Which eny man hir wole ordeigne.
And bot if eny other wolde,
Sche seith that sche hirselve scholde
Do wreche with hire oghne hond,
Thurghout the world in every lond
That every lif therof schal speke,
Hou sche hirsself it scholde wreke. (ll. 3610-18)

and it is her request for a sequel which draws the tale to its end:

“A godd, thou wost wel it am I,
For whom Iphis is thus besein:
Ordeine so, that men mai sein
A thousand wynter after this,
Hou such a Maiden dede amis,
And as I dede, do to me:
For I ne dede no pite
To him, which for mi love is lore,
Do no pite to me therfore.” (ll. 3622- 3630)

She herself demands the end of possibilities. Gower walks the edges of beautiful puns, here: “And with this word sche fell to grounde / Aswoune, and ther sche lay a stounde” (ll. 3632). A *stounde* means for a time, an hour, but it is also a homophon with *astounde*, meaning astonished, stunned. Astounded does not come from stone (though it surely ought to!), but from OF *estonner* > out of thunder. However, one doesn’t get struck by thunder, but by lightning; Araxarathen lies between earth and sky, granted place in neither grave nor heaven. For this reason, it is difficult to see her metamorphosis as example of the gods’ pity,¹³ even though it appears to be mercy at her great grief. Like Niobe, Araxarathen is first reduced to her own sorrow, and then enclosed within it:

The goddes, whiche hir pleigntes herde
 And syhe hou woefully sche ferde,
 Hire lif thei toke away anon,
 And schopen hire into a ston
 After the forme of hire ymage
 Of bodi bothe and of visage. (ll. 3633-3638)

She becomes a statue, a monument to her own beauty and to her grieving expression. She also becomes a monument of a different kind: like Phillis, she becomes a tourist attraction:

And for the merveile of this thing
 Unto the place cam the king
 And ek the queene and manye mo;
 And whan thei wisten it was so,

¹³ As Nicholson suggests we do: *Love and Ethics*, 249.

As I have told it hier above,
Hou that Iphis was ded for love,
Of that he hadde be refused,
Thei hielden alle men excused
And wondren upon the vengeance. (ll. 3639-47)

She is also a narrative occasion, a wonder, and an occasion for wonder in others. What is left of Araxarathen the prudent, wise and cautious woman? Nothing: she is now only Iphis's headstone.¹⁴ She marks his story, and not her own; she grieves for him, and not for herself. No one grieves for her. She has become the thing he made her: hard-hearted, inexorable and immovable. She is enclosed not only in the stone surrounding her flesh; she is trapped in what people say she is. The final insult is that she becomes Iphis's happy ending: the officious king and queen take their son's body and his headstone and have them carried to the temple of Venus, to lay them "Togedre bothe tuo..." (l. 3660) in some mockery of marriage. They are united in his death, though that is not quite what Iphis wished. Iphis, then, is equally enclosed in stone, equally enclosed in the inexorable narrative of his obsession for the woman who stands at his grave head, in eternal grief and regret. It should be noted that the tomb specifically marks Iphis's resting place, not Araxarathen's. To make doubly sure that the tale is told the right way, the epitaph is inscribed "as thing which scholde abide stable" (l.3671):

¹⁴ "And forto kepe in remembrance, / This faire ymage mayden liche / With compaignie noble and riche / With torche and gret sollempnite / To Salamyne the Cite / Thei lede, and carie forth withal / The dede corps, and sein it schal / Beside thilke ymage have /His sepulture and be begrave:..." (ll. 3648-56).

'Hier lith, which slowh himself, Iphis,
 For love of Araxarathen:
 And in ensample of tho wommen,
 That soffren men to deie so,
 Hire forme a man mai sen also,
 Hou it is torned fleissh and bon
 Into the figure of a Ston:
 He was to neysshe and sche to hard.
 Be war forthi hierafterward;
 Ye men and wommen bothe tuo,
 Ensamplenth you of that was tho.' (ll. 3674-84)

She is not at rest; she is working as perpetual sign. Regardless of what she was like in life, she is now forever the hard-hearted one, merciless, sadistic unto death. Iphis likewise is eternally too soft: his softness in life underscored by his now decomposing corpse, enclosed in his marble shell of a tomb. They trade places here: he who was too soft on the outside and too hard on the inside is now soft, melting flesh surrounded by stone-hard shell; she who was hard on the surface and soft in the centre is rock through and through, though weeping and grieving on the surface.

Iphis warns against the too easy recognition of self in others' stories; Araxarathen warns against being caught up in another's telling, perhaps to instill in Amans some care for how he is writing his lady. The only stability to be found in this tale is in that epitaph, inscribed in marble and affixed to the tomb. But actually, not the stone, but only the words about the stone endure. This suggests rather strongly that the only stability to be

found is in narrative control---a radical suggestion at any time, and no less so when it occurs in a story so strikingly different from its source. In any case, in a book on despair, what reliance can be placed on interpretive claustrophilia, especially when it reinforces depression's conviction that all judgements are final? Despair's hamster wheel doesn't stop: its morris limps and jigs and the *basse danse* goes on endlessly, while women's deaths are commemorated in tree and monument, in life and stone.

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