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The Consolation of *Exempla*: Gower's Sources of Hope and "Textual Healing" in the
*Confessio Amantis*¹

For both reader and lover, John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is rooted in issues of hope and healing. As a sufferer of lovesickness, Amans is ill and naturally in need of restoration. Yet rather than behave passively due to his illness, Amans maintains an active role in the text through his dialogue and engagement with Genius.² Over the course of the *Confessio Amantis*, Genius provides him with remedies through storytelling that repurposes classical *exempla* to illustrate the dangers of the seven deadly sins while also providing consolation to the sick lover. William Shakespeare and George Wilkins's play *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1619) similarly deals with this kind of healing.

It is the *exempla*, I argue, that provide such remedial action in the text, both for Amans as well as the reader, who not only shares these exemplary lessons imparted to Amans, but also learns from his shortcomings as a lover and indeed as a human being. The *exempla* are also sources of metaphorical healing in the text, functioning as what I have termed "textual healing," that is, the medicinal aspects of the text (knowledge, understanding, moral instruction) that helps remedy Amans back to full health. This idea of "textual healing" follows Arthur W. Frank's reading of the active yet injured raconteur in *The Wounded Storyteller*, in which he argues for the remedial power of narrative: "Through their stories, the ill create empathic bonds between themselves and their

¹ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, 2nd ed., Book 1, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006): <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confessio-amantis-volume-1>

² Compare Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xi.

listeners. These bonds expand as the stories are retold. Those who listened then tell others, and the circle of shared experience widens.”³ In the context of Genius / Gower’s retelling of stories, these stories are repurposed and shared with Amans and the reader as a means of creating and emphasizing such bonds. As an active and devoted “listener,” the reader also participates in the shared experience of bonding and healing that Frank describes through the act of reading and understanding the poem. This idea of “textual healing” further connects to the act of confession itself, as shown through the gradual restoration of Amans through the confessional framework of the poem.⁴ Through his confession, Amans is meant to purge the sins against love from his soul, although he shows resistance to certain *exempla* which are needed for this process. The reader, however, has the potential to read these *exempla* and succeed where Amans has shortcomings with his confession. Such a process is ultimately successful because it offers Amans and the reader the opportunity for introspection, self-improvement, and consequently a healthier mind.

As J. Allan Mitchell aptly suggests, in the *exemplum* “we recognize what we should be doing.”⁵ In other words, the *exemplum* drives the reader to do better, to be better, to recover to a better state of being, and thus it propels the healing process. Amans

³ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, xii.

⁴ Medieval confession was thought to address not only spiritual sickness, but also bodily sickness. The Canons produced from the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, for example, particularly Canon 22, explicitly link sickness with sin (Canon 22 <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/basis/lateran4.asp>).

⁵ J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 14.

navigates the *exempla* throughout the *Confessio Amantis* to make meaning of his situation and thus understand the “good” of his own love. As Mitchell points out, however, this “good” is ultimately achieved “outside the poem in the conscience of the reader.”⁶ Consequently, both the reader and Amans have the potential to live a moral life through their engagements with these *exempla*. I suggest that this participation with reading and understanding Gower’s *exempla* thus leads to a better and more fulfilled moral life for Amans and every reader, which is the end goal of the healing process. This experience enlightens Amans’s own understanding of love and provides him with introspection which he could not comprehend before. Genius and Amans’s interactions also illustrate this idea of promoting good through human learning. Education thus becomes a means of healing, a way forward to instill not only self-awareness within the capacity of sin, but also circulating and sharing moral messages with the intention of stronger ethical growth and repair. The tales are meant to be remembered and internalized with moral instruction, and as a result, they are understood and ideally acted upon.

That the *Confessio Amantis* is a text of hope and healing with medicinal *exempla* is due, in part, to its function as a *consolatio* poem.⁷ As Winthrop Wetherbee points out, Gower is indebted to the *consolatio* genre for the *Confessio Amantis*, particularly Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*. Like Boethius’s Prisoner, Amans begins the poem

⁶ Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower*, 59, 66.

⁷ For more scholarship on the *Confessio Amantis* as fitting the *consolatio* genre, see notably Winthrop Wetherbee, “Gower and the Boethian Tradition in the *Confessio Amantis*,” in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 181–96, and Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 20.

in poor mental health and is given consolation / metaphorical healing through his interactions with Genius. Prisoner is literally a detainee, reflecting Boethius's own fate, as well as a metaphorical hostage to his own insecurities and fallibilities. Similarly, Amans is a prisoner of love, and with it, its set of maladies, including insecurity and anxiety.

Gower notably exemplifies the notion of textual healing in the rejuvenation of Aeson episode located in the "Tale of Jason and Medea" in Book V of the *Confessio Amantis*.⁸ This tale is especially illustrative of textual healing because its ritual of rejuvenation enacts a healing in both the reader and Amans, as well as in the character Aeson, who is restored both metaphorically and physically. As a means of proving her love to Jason, Medea enacts a magical ritual which results in her killing, resurrecting, and consequently rejuvenating his father Aeson's body. This episode is also symbolic of the metaphorical healing taking place through *exempla* in the text. In fact, as Genius proclaims, the extent of Medea's ritual represents her deep love for Jason, as well as an extraordinary and exemplary act of healing:

Lo, what mihte eny man devise,
 A womman schewe in eny wise
 Mor hertly love in every stede,
 Than Medea to Jason dede?⁹

⁸ Compare William Rogers, "Old Words Made New: Medea's Magic and Gower's Textual Healing." *South Atlantic Review* 79, nos. 3–4 (2014), 105–117, and Curtis Runstedler, "Transmuting John Gower: Elias Ashmole's Hermetic Reading of Gower's Jason and the Golden Fleece." *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media* 6, no. 2 (2020): <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol6/iss2/3/>

⁹ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* V, lines 4175–8.

While Jason the perjurer ultimately rejects such positive healing and its implications, Medea's magic remains a source of motivation and an incentive for achieving ideal love for both the wounded lover (Amans) and the reader. In her demonstration of love and healing, Medea presents herself as an ideal and perfect lover, yet Jason is ultimately undeserving of her love. Medea's act of love, as shown in the rejuvenation of Aeson, functions as a textual model and a source of remedial action for Amans and the reader to heal. In addition, Aeson's textual healing also rejuvenates both Amans and the reader by creating a self-awareness of their own shortcomings as lovers as well as providing a model for them to aspire to.

Textual healing also notably appears in both Gower's "Tale of Apollonius of Tyre," which is told in Book VIII in the *Confessio Amantis* as an *exemplum* of lust, and in the tale's later incarnation in Shakespeare and Wilkins's play *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*.¹⁰ *Pericles* is also a story of healing and redemption (as is Gower's "Tale of Apollonius of Tyre"), yet the play provides a different kind of medicine because of the distinct way in which it transforms medieval sources and directs them to a live audience. Both the *Confessio Amantis* and *Pericles*, however, address lovesickness, as well as grief and trauma. Healing notably occurs in *Pericles* due to reconciliation, particularly in Pericles's reunion with Marina at the end of the story. As in Gower's "Tale of Jason and Medea" and "Apollonius of Tyre," which shows Apollonius's own redemption through his daughter Thaise, Shakespeare and Wilkins's *Pericles* likewise effects remedial action

¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, MIT Shakespeare <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/pericles/full.html>

through a special gifts of a female character.¹¹ After the father-daughter scene in the *Confessio Amantis*, however, and despite the countless *exempla* already instilled upon him, Amans, unlike Pericles, is still in need of reform, remarking to Genius: “Thi word stant evere upon o place.”¹² In this context, the story provides Apollonius of Tyre with his own healing and redemption through his reconciliation with Thaise, a recovery that might eventually help Amans and the reader to overcome lustful temptations and urges. Genius’s attempts to “Bot teche thee the rihte weie” shows that, as is the case for Amans, it is ultimately the reader’s decision to learn and to act upon the “rihte weie” in practice.¹³ The power of Apollonius and Thaise’s reunion offers to heal old wounds and overcome the pains of the past, despite the damage already done: “Alle olde sorwes ben forgete, / And gladen hem with joies newe.”¹⁴ Similarly, Genius’s storytelling here offers to restore Amans and its readers from their metaphorical ailments through this exemplary take on the classical tale, bringing “joies newe” through the shared understanding and experience of reconciliation and overcoming the evils of lust, as well as returning them to a better mental state before trauma was inflicted.

The character Gower in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* also comments on this idea of textual healing: “And lords and ladies in their lives / Have read it for restoratives.”¹⁵ In

¹¹ Larry Scanlon, “The Riddle of Incest: John Gower and the Problem of Medieval Sexuality,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998), 93–128 (123).

¹² Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, line 185.

¹³ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, line 2147.

¹⁴ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 1906–7.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, *Pericles*, I. Prologue 7–8
<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/pericles/full.html> According to the OED, “restore” comes

Shakespeare and Wilkins's play, restorative means returning to the original state. Textual healing has a similar function. In the late medieval and Shakespeare's Renaissance world, "restoratives" reflect a yearning or desire for a prelapsarian world, returning to a better state of being before the Fall.¹⁶ As a result, these "restoratives" yearn for an idealized nostalgic past, as exemplified by the mostly classical settings and characters that populate the *Confessio Amantis*. Such "restoration" also reflects reincorporating medieval sensibilities into a post-Reformation world, particularly Gower's literal role in the play as the Chorus.¹⁷ In connection with healing lovesickness, such "restoration" also trends toward a desired mental and physical state and health before the affected showed signs of sickness. Gower's classical tales are familiar to his late medieval audience, yet the possibility of textual healing with his tales offers fresh perspectives. Unlike the textual healing in the *Confessio Amantis*, however, Gower's restoratives in the play, as shown in the repurposing of his tales and his moral judgments as Chorus, are performative. The audience is meant to react to Gower's moral sensibilities as the Chorus as well as Shakespeare and Wilkins's repurposing of his tales as a means of the performance.¹⁸ As a

from the Old French *restorer* ("to give back"). Similarly, in Old English *haelan* means to "restore back to health."

¹⁶ James M. Dean, *The World Grown Old in Later Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1997), 250.

¹⁷ Compare Marie-Eve Oesterlen, "Why Bodies Matter in Mouldy Tales: Material (Re)Turns in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*," *The Upstart Crow* 24 (2004), 36–44.

¹⁸ The dialogue between Amans and Genius in the *Confessio Amantis* also functions as a performance and therapy, with Genius listening to Amans's complaints and presenting the *exempla* as a means of aid. Compare Robert J. Meindl, "A New Reading of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," Ph.D. Dissertation, Tulane University, 1965.

result, Gower's moral judgment prompts the audience to respond and engage with this material, and thus they are given, as Yayoi Miyashita puts it, an "opportunity for introspection."¹⁹ Shakespeare's audience reads Gower because his words are restorative for both Amans and the reader, particularly his *exempla*. As Russell A. Peck comments, "Tales enable the mind to rethink itself They clarify the meanings of right and wrong and can thus serve as the restorative."²⁰ The tales themselves are restorative—they metaphorically heal the reader and Amans by means of reading and understanding, and thus these fresh tales with moral instruction become invaluable remedies against vice.

In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower's repurposing of these familiar tales within his moral framework can also be read as further evidence of textual healing:

In oure tyme, among our hierie
 Do wryte of newe som matiere
 Essampled of these old wyse.²¹

The "old wyse" exemplify as well as give answers and meaning, but they also indicate textual healing. The "old wyse" are Gower's answer to the troubles of modern times, as shown in Amans's dire situation. Reading about the "old wyse" and their successes helps to restore or recover the lack of understanding and communication that ails the aged

¹⁹ Yayoi Miyashita, "Gower, the Chorus, as a Fictional Character in *Pericles*," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, Hokkaido University* 117 (2005), 89–108 (107).

²⁰ See Russell A. Peck, "Introduction," in John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 2nd edition, ed. Russell A. Peck and Latin trans. Andrew Galloway, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006): vol. 1 <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-1-introduction>

²¹ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* Prologue I, lines 6–8.

lover. *Exempla* thus function as a medicine to restore Amans's mental health. Healing is effectively a process which is gradual and cumulative through the course of the *Confessio Amantis*. These new approaches to the "old wyse" suggest immediacy, as well as a synthesis between the new and the old, echoing the desire to return to a prelapsarian state. Yet the process is very much a healing of the mind as well as the body. Peck describes *exempla* as experiential in that they "provide examples to be tested in the mind."²² It is crucial to understanding these familiar stories within the context of moral instruction, and particularly the framework of the *Confessio Amantis* within eight books is essential to this healing process shared between Amans and the reader. The telling of the *exempla* through the confessional framework of the seven deadly sins creates this healing process. As Peck points out, "Each tale demarcates a trial through which one has the potential to learn and grow."²³ With each tale, Genius simultaneously presents Amans and the reader with a new perspective on sin, as well as a gradual antidote for Amans's (and perhaps the reader's, to a lesser extent) malady. As readers, we recognize Amans's shortcomings as a character and lover, but in doing so, we can avoid his fallibilities as a lover and human being.

Gower's *exempla* are thus sources for hope and (textual) healing in the *Confessio Amantis*. Genius's *exempla*, taking familiar tales and filling them with a renewed sense of purpose and antidote, provide much needed metaphorical remedies to both Amans and

²² See Peck, "Introduction," in Gower, *Confessio Amantis*: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-1-introduction>

²³ See Peck, "Introduction," in Gower, *Confessio Amantis*: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-1-introduction>

the reader. These *exempla* have a vaccine-like function, protecting the listener or reader against the virus of sin. Such textual healing also enables the listener / reader to recover or restore their own metaphorical maladies, sense of hope, and mental health. And where Amans fails (or possibly fails) in the poem, readers can learn and improve their mind and ethical focus. In the case of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower's version of the rejuvenation of Aeson in the "Tale of Jason and Medea" metaphorically restores not only Aeson, but also the reader and Amans, returning them to a prior and better state of mental health. Similarly, the healing of trauma through the reunion of Apollonius and Thaise in the Apollonius of Tyre story suggests restoration to a period before sickness / trauma set in, despite the severity of the malady. Medieval sensibilities frame *Pericles* in order to provide an antidote to love's ailments. For both Amans and the reader, this healing process makes us more aware and enlightened readers and lovers.

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