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The Price We Pay for Envy: A Political and Social “Maladie”

“The Travelers and the Angel” is a short, curious exemplum. The story, a revision of a divine test of human nature, kindness, and cruelty from *The Fables of Avianus*, offers a seemingly simple judgment of the ills of the world, a lesson which Amans is encouraged to bring to mind in order to love and exist more generously.¹ While Gower’s exemplum is short, it nevertheless greatly amplifies the narrative of Jupiter, Phoebus, and the folly of greed and envy. *The Fables of Avianus* attempts to probe the uncertain minds of men, as Phoebus meets two men, one greedy and one envious, both praying to the gods. He offers to grant one petitioner’s prayer and to double it for the other. The greedy seeks to gain as much as possible, while the envious, knowing his woe will be doubled for the other, strikes out by praying to lose one eye. In a strange way, both get what they want, and the fable ends with a whimper and a laugh as Phoebus notes that “laetior infelix et sua dampna cupit” [the unhappy man is happier even as he desires his own damages]. The narrator’s link between personal desire and decay of the world (a connection traced earlier by R.F. Yeager) effects a call to change.²

¹ Avianus, *The Fables of Avianus*, ed. Robinson Ellis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1887). John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell Peck and trans. Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2013). All quotations of the *Confessio Amantis* refer to the edition.

² Robert F. Yeager, “‘Scripture Veteris Capiunt Exempla Futuri’: John Gower’s Transformation of a Fable of Avianus,” in *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck*, ed. Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack (Cambridge and Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 341–353. See also Russell Peck’s discussion of the changes Gower made to his source in the Introduction to the second book of the TEAMS edition of *Confessio Amantis*: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-volume-2-introduction>

Gower's changes—making the narrative Christian, highlighting the community between the two as travelers, transferring Phoebus's laugh to the envious wretch, and adding commentary throughout—make the narrative a logical fit for Book II of the *Confessio*, a book centered on envy and its impediments to love. In the depiction of two travelers and the envy and covetousness which structure their relationship, Gower emphasizes that the world continues to worsen because the desire to see others in pain is more pleasing than seeing others get things we might want. Rather than embrace communal pleasure and improvement, those in the world, like the envious traveler, choose communal pain. In short, the episode highlights the struggle with envy, which seems directly opposed to the kind of liberal love for which *Confessio* advocates. This lesson is one which we might be wise to temper with our different ideas and ideals of representative democracy and equality because Gower's ideals often seem repressive to modern readers. This is the case with envy because, as I will suggest in what follows, envy, as one of the Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings," is not only a vehicle for humankind's grasping nature and eternal discontent but also a call to highlight what is wrong or what can be fixed. Envy is not simply a vehicle for decay of the world and community, but also a way to point out how the commons have been fleeced, as public and communal support becomes privatized and income inequity worsens. This is how Ngai's "ugly feelings" can demonstrate how these negative affects can point to political problems and the highlighting of social and political ills. So, in the truth of Gower's exemplum, itself a revision of an earlier source, we might see new truths in this old story—that envy is central to the unraveling of common welfare and a social safety net that has been attacked for decades, often with racist implications in the figure of the "Welfare Queen." We see too that envy might show the folly of corporate welfare and tax avoidance leading to a billionaire space race, even as the earth suffers.

I admit that Ngai's work seems far afield from Gower studies and the working out of sin, love, and politics in the *Confessio*. Her investigation of affective responses to literature, however, suggests something that is germane to Gower: how one responds to literary and other kinds of artistic media can highlight what Ngai calls "obstructed agency," a painful combination of wanting to do and perform in systems that stymie action. These ugly feelings, often traced first as aesthetic judgements, are often

the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such—a dilemma I take as charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective.³

As a way to leverage the present and future onto this old story, Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* offers a different reading of these emotional responses on which Book II of *Confessio* concentrates. From envy and anxiety to paranoia, Ngai examines those feelings that uncover responses which, even when focused on aesthetics, remain political and, for Ngai, speak to the frustrations and pain that coalesce around engagements or disengagements with race and gender. In tying the literary and political through affective responses, Ngai can show how Gower's text traces these "ugly feelings." Indeed, in characterizing her own work, Ngai implicitly conjures what might be truly medieval about this kind of examination: "If *Ugly Feelings* is a bestiary of affects, in other words, it is one filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally

³ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3

being, well, weaker and nastier.”⁴ In this way, reviving the bestiary logic of animality and its morality, Ngai’s work highlights what is so incisive for Gower about these beasts and humanity.

Ngai examines these often trivial and negatively viewed animals as metaphors for feelings which are not pretty, so in historical moments negativity appears to worsen, and Ngai highlights ugly feelings both as diagnosis and a place where cure might happen. These animalistic depictions of ugly feelings, “a bestiary of affects” echoes, unknowingly I think, the animalistic drama with which Gower’s *Vox Clamantis* opens—there the dreamer sees in the destruction of a hierarchy that is divinely-ordained humans literally turned to beasts. The beastly affects of Ngai are political and useful—they are just as political for Gower. Gower’s text, however, sees only the ugliness of these desires, as the dreamer portrays the ugliness of 1381 and the upending of an established order in terms of animalistic transformations. So in reading Gower’s political and social visions through Ngai’s ugly feelings, we are definitely reading against the grain.

However, as a place where literary judgments can facilitate diagnosis through “ugly feelings,” “The Travelers and the Angel” suggests that healing for the then-contemporary audience is as much about diagnosis as it is about cure itself. The problem with the fictive world of the angel and the travelers is that individual care is more important than the cure of communal issues and that individual cure implicitly maps onto communal harm—the envious traveler’s happiness is found in wounds that strike both him and his fellow traveler. While the exemplum itself seems hopeless—the world, it argues at the end, continues to worsen—healing is central to the framing of Amans’s journey through *exempla* from Book I to his unmasking as a textualized Gower and expulsion from Venus’s domains. But that healing is often, at least to me,

⁴ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 7.

incomplete: Gower as Amans finds healing in Book VIII as a kind of removal, as Cupid retrieves his dart and Gower is exiled from love and its search. But one ugly feeling that permeates Gower's text is a kind of pessimism. If healing is tenuous, then hope is even more so in the poem. Gower's text is clear that the world outside has worsened, which the different endings of the poem suggest: one highlighting Richard II and Chaucer and the other desperately, praying for England (and removing Chaucer and Richard II).⁵ One way to read the endings here is as a movement from hope in specific figures to an almost forlorn voicing of hope for institutions and ideals. What seems hopeless (Richard II) becomes an occasion for hope itself (the durable institutions of late fourteenth century England). What often seems negative or pessimistic in the *Confessio* instead signals where healing can begin.

This is how we might discuss hope or healing in Gower's poetry. The hope that can be found in Gower's poetry for problems that are either intractably old or symptomatic of our so-called modern world will be discovered in the mining of old texts for truth, wisdom, and succor that the *Confessio* routinely voices as sources of healing. These sources of healing, given in the dialectic between confessor and sinner, often center more on diagnosis than cure, but their value as sources of healing cannot be denied, even as the material for *Confessio* largely centers on critique and complaint. In the space of this healing from old sources, chronicles, and narratives, the text is also one which centers trauma and is replete with images of pain, abuse, and death, even as these images are meant to relieve this pain.⁶ These images are at once repetitive and

⁵ Candace Barrington, "Personas and Performance in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Chaucer Review* 48 (2014), 414–33.

⁶ M. W. Bychowski, "The Necropolitics of Narcissus: Confessions of Transgender Suicide in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality* 55, no.1 (2019): 207–248 (209–210).

unique in their arc of individual and collective pain, demonstrating to Amans the litany of sins and shortcomings he should avoid. This emphasis on trauma and the traumatic response is one which is certainly tied to healing, which helps to frame how the emotional engagement with problems and politics can say something new to us. Indeed, “The Travelers and the Angels” seeks to diagnose covetousness and envy, feelings which often make political and social solutions nearly impossible, but for us, the later readers of the *Confessio*, envy often signifies something like an urge to action. In this way, it is a tool to highlight problems such as income inequality that we might otherwise accept, especially because the social order that the poet and his poetry upholds is one that we find foreign and often offensive in its defense of hierarchies and ancient privileges. And this emotional effect of envy makes it especially apt for diagnosing problems in the body politic. As Jessica Rosenfeld has argued,

Instead of aiming at a desirable object that is imagined to bring pleasure, envy is oriented toward the emotions of another person. Alone among the sins, envy is marked by a viciousness that inheres in a disposition of antipathy toward a neighbor’s experience of happiness and sorrow.⁷

Very often, these feelings harm those who harbor them, even as they harm those who are subjected to them. The diagnosis for this problem, then, is partly found in the repetitive telling of tales that treat trauma, pain, and crisis in this confessional frame. This necessary subject is, like Cupid’s dart, something which must be expelled or removed but whose existence cannot be undone, and the cure is about narrative and description, even if that treatment is painful. The

⁷ Jessica Rosenfeld, “Compassionate Conversions: Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and the Problem of Envy,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42, no.1 (2012): 83–105 (86).

traumas of Gower's text, therefore, require discussion before healing, and that healing is always on the horizon, even at the end of Book VIII. In this way, portraying envy might be useful.

Taking the *Confessio*'s framing seriously, then, I wonder what these verses from the past tell us in the present. Thinking in these terms, I aim to show how the diagnosis of "ugly feelings" can begin to point us toward healing and toward the lessons in "The Travelers and the Angel." In looking at this tale, I do want to stress that one of the implicit lessons we might draw is one of empathy for pain in others, especially when that pain becomes communal, a point made earlier by Rosenfeld. Thinking about empathy constructed in and present throughout Gower's poetry is, again, a thread tied to "comune profit," and one whose importance, while obvious perhaps, bears repeating.⁸

Communal Pain and the Problem of Envy in the *Confessio*

The "Tale of the Travelers and the Angel," like the narratives about envy which it follows and which follow it, make central the problem of envy to love and community. This expanded version of Avianus's fable foregrounds the relationship between envy, resenting what someone has, and covetousness, wanting what they have. Gower contextualizes the narrative with Genius's comments and Amans's acknowledgement that he himself has been guilty of finding pleasure in another's pain, thereby proving the truth of the Latin verses which preceded the Middle English verse:

Envy feels joy, born in mind from itself alone, when it sees another's pain or sorrow. The envious man chortles today at others' weeping, for whom tomorrow's outcomes prepare his own laments. Thus in love, the man who is joyous when he

⁸ See again Rosenfeld, "Compassionate Conversions," 83–105.

sees baffled lovers stands in the same circumstance as the envious man. Even if in vain, and even if he himself is destroyed at the same time, he nonetheless hopes for solace by another's ruin.⁹

Envy here is constructed as not only joy in another's pain but also as the implicit opposite to love—born alone to itself, an impediment to love. But it also functions here in this description as a prelude to the grief of the envious themselves—indeed, the envious merely invite their own pain by feeling happy at the sight of another's. Dennis Okholm, in tracing the history of Invidia, defines envy as “grieving over another's good when it seems to lessen the envier's own good name or esteem. It is a self-inflicted wound in which one is wracked by the prosperity of another person.”¹⁰ By wishing to see pain in others, the envious actively move toward despair themselves, even as envy might in late capitalism prove politically useful.¹¹ Genius of course introduces the tale as indicative of this very point: Those driven by envy

takth his gladnesse

Of that he seth the hevinesse

⁹ The Latin follows here:

Orta sibi solito mentalia gaudia liuor
 Dum videt alterius dampna doloris agit.
 Inuidus obridet hodie fletus aliorum,
 Fletus cui proprios crastina fata parant.
 Sic in amore pari stat sorte iocosus, amantes
 Cum videt illusos, inuidus ille quasi.
 Sit licet in vacuum, sperat tamen ipse leuamen
 Alterius casu, lapsus et ipse simul.

¹⁰ Dennis Okholm, “Envy: The Silent Killer,” *American Benedictine Review* 59, no.2 (2008): 121–140 (125).

¹¹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 20.

Of othre men. For his welfare
 Is whanne he wot another care:
 Of that another hath a fall,
 He thenkth himself arist withal.¹²

This description—the envious taking their pleasure from other’s pain, believing that the fall raises them—seems antithetical to the larger project of the *Confessio* and the structure of pity and compassion throughout. And Amans, asking for advise and counsel, responds in kind that he has been unkind in these ways,. Amans’s counsel comes in a story about an envious traveler, his covetous companion, and the angel who offers a gift to discern their nature. Following fairly close to the original structure of Avianus’s fable, Gower’s version nevertheless amplifies and expands, depicting in greater detail the discord between the two disputants, one envious and one covetous. In Gower’s version these two are questioned by an angel, who then offers, after seeing their true condition, a gift: the angel will bestow what one wants and then double that to the companion. Wanting twice the reward, the covetous traveler is greedy and defers to the envious traveler, who being envious is all too willing to take his portion first. Rather than choose a gift or treasure or love or anything that would give his fellow traveler joy, he wishes to be blinded in one eye—thinking that if he is partially blinded, the fellow will receive twice as much pain. Ngai’s description of envy is certainly useful here: “Envy is, in a sense, an intentional feeling that paradoxically undermines its own intentionality.”¹³ The traveler seeks to punish and is punished himself:

¹² Gower, *Confessio Amantis* II, lines 223–228.

¹³ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 20.

And his felawh forthwith also
 Was blind of bothe his yhen tuo.
 Tho was that other glad ynowh,
 That on wepte, and that other lowh,
 He sette his on yhe at no cost,
 Wherof that other two hath lost.¹⁴

The angel is true to his word and blinds the envious man in one eye and the covetous companion in two. Images of impairment and the loss of visual power, partly for one, completely for the other, are marshalled to make clear the problem of envy and covetousness. These corporeal wounds foreground how the urge to see pain in others by taking from what they have threatens Gower's carefully constructed social order, which revolves around a divinely ordained monarch ruling justly over those who both have and have not, a balance he had been shocked to see described earlier in his description of the Uprising of 1381 in *Vox Clamantis*. Diagnosing the increasing horror of the world through "The Travelers and the Angel," Gower allows the reader to see what the travelers cannot—envy and covetousness will only produce misery. In lines chilling for their simplicity, Genius argues that

Of thilke ensample which fell tho,
 Men tellen now fulofte so,
 The world empeireth comunly,
 And yit wot non the cause why.
 For it acordeth noght to kinde

¹⁴ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* II, lines 359–364.

Min oghne harm to seche and finde
 Of that I schal my brother grieve;
 It myhte nevere wel achieve.¹⁵

Examples of envy and covetousness exist in great numbers. Folks repeat these unkind narratives in their own actions and yet appear unaware of why the world worsens: the “fault is not with nature...but with selfish people.”¹⁶ The answer to this problem is deceptively simple: don’t find pleasure in another’s pain, especially because that drives decisions which harm both the person feeling pain and the one experiencing pleasure as a result.

And this is why the laughter, in the lines that follow the judgment and gift of the Angel is so haunting, as the now partially-blinded traveler is “glad ynowh, / That on wepte.” Laughter seems rare in the *Confessio*, appearing ten times in this form.¹⁷ And this laughter is unsettling—appearing as a response to the envious companion’s response to wound his fellow, as their joy at causing this result outweighs their own blindness, which Genius remarks on a few lines later. Many of the other instances of laughter in the *Confessio* seem genuine, arising from joy. Here, however, bodies are wounded and pain is welcomed—in the face of the angel’s gift, laughter marks pain, hurt, and the capacity of a traveler to hurt another.

Welfare Queens and Billionaires in Space

The cure for this hurt appears simple: do not hurt a fellow traveler in the world or revel in the pain of another. But then again, it’s apparently not so easy. Even as empathy would have us

¹⁵ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* II, lines 365–372.

¹⁶ Peck, “Introduction.”

¹⁷ Robert F. Yeager, “Gowerian Laughter,” in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature: The Influence of Derek Brewer*, ed. Charlotte Brewer and Barry Windeatt (Cambridge and Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer. 2013), 144–153.

care for and think about those fellow travelers, especially as we might see how the harm of others harms us, the shortsighted impulse to better ourselves by making others miserable is apparently strong. Genius's words seem all too true for the moment, then, when we consider the number of apparently intractable problems which are supported implicitly and explicitly by many who are also hurt by them—problems such as white supremacy, income inequality, or climate change. How can we stop the world from getting worse when, to wound others, or stop their progress, we also hurt ourselves?

In order to show how political engagements have used envy in an ugly way, I turn now to a period of myth-making in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The myth of the welfare queen—a woman who did defraud the government—was likewise weaponized as a kind of envy, and this has been a central feature of right-wing belief in America since the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁸ Depicting welfare recipients as innate frauds, ne'er do wells who won't work, this "ugly myth" became entrenched, strengthened by racist beliefs. Welfare and the social safety net have, as a result, been under attack, by both Republicans and Democrats, especially in the 1990s. Those getting this welfare are made into targets for envy. Why are they buying steak and lobster, driving Cadillacs, and not working, when you and I are barely making ends meet and paying our taxes? Or so went Reagan's standard stump speech.¹⁹ The link here between the envious traveler blinding himself to doubly blind his fellow traveler is of course a direct one: the states most dependent on welfare are largely those which are run by regimes and represented by politicians

¹⁸ Jeremy Lybarger, "The Price You Pay," *The Nation* (2019): <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/josh-levin-the-queen-book-review/>

¹⁹ Gene Demby, "The Truth Behind The Lies Of The Original "Welfare Queen," *NPR* (2013) <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/20/255819681/the-truth-behind-the-lies-of-the-original-welfare-queen>

who voice and support the demonization of these social measures. What progress might be achieved if envy and racism did not define the debate about government help? This particular case became universal in a way that harms anyone who needs government help. This case also suggests that the revulsion we should feel to this fiction of theft can help clarify the power of group action to address seemingly intractable problems.

In this way, we acknowledge that even as envy exacerbates collective problems such as poverty that threaten the continued existence of humanity, envy might also help highlight and address problems which are not seen as harmful in Gower’s text. Envy, rightly positioned, might be central to healing and hope, a fact unvoiced in the *Confessio Amantis*. Indeed, as Ngai notes, “it is the only negative emotion defined specifically by the fact that it addresses forms of inequality.”²⁰ Envy, in short, might help address the unfettered accumulation of wealth. In an age where a Twitter account is updated each day that Jeff Bezos fails to solve child hunger, envy might be politically and socially useful.²¹ The wealth of a small group of billionaires is currently fueling a space race, which appears especially offensive considering the costs of climate change that these future space-based billionaires could address. The true welfare monarch is the billionaire who pays no tax and who nevertheless uses infrastructure and markets created decades ago through common investment. As Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor, tweeted, “No one needs Bezos to launch rockets into outer space. We need him to pay his fair share of taxes so people can thrive here on Earth.”²² We should envy their wealth, not for our personal

²⁰ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 20.

²¹ <https://twitter.com/HasBezosDecided> (Has Jeff Bezos Decided to End World Hunger?)

²² Mark Whittington, “The billionaires’ space race is just the beginning,” *The Hill* (2021): <https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/565759-the-billionaires-space-race-is-just-the-beginning>

gain, but because their legal tax evasion impoverishes everyone. This kind of accumulation is not “comune profit.”

Envy of course is a sin that the *Confessio* positions as out of place in Amans’s life. Envy is also incompatible with the vision of a society structured around the divine hierarchy of monarchy where the distribution of goods is, by its very definition, unequal. As billionaires in space, the newest horror of late capitalism, demonstrates, envy can be a potent political power. Envy, like trauma, might be useful even if painful. It points the way toward healing, after all.

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