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The Unfinished Hope of Gower's Transgender Children

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The Unfinished Hope of Gower's Transgender Children

Acknowledgments
Enduring love for all of my children and also for my partner in all things.
The Unfinished Hope of Gower’s Transgender Children

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water the seeds already planted knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development . . .

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way.

~ Bishop Ken Untener (1976)

There is an unfinished hope that passes between us, like a story adapted from another time, like a ripple in the water that carries a queer reflection, like a transformative desire that resonates with bodies of another kind, like a fruit that falls slantwise from the tree.

There is much need for a message of hope and healing at present. Transgender children cry out as over one hundred anti-transgender laws are proposed within the first months of 2021. Some of these youths look like me; most do not. Yet the trans youths are our legacy and glory, just as we are the legacy of medieval sex workers and modern Stonewall rioters, who embodied the transness of a different age. These trans children who do not look like us nonetheless look to us for future-birthing hope, just as we look to dysphoric archives for the rhizomatic roots of hope in our past. Through these ongoing discourses between multiple eras and generations, transgender children may get connected with lawyers to fight unjust policies and hormone blockers to resist an unwanted flood of testosterone or estrogen; safe homes and schools where


2 Priya Krishnakumar, “This record-breaking year for anti-transgender legislation would affect minors the most,” CNN.com1(5 April 2021).
they can learn with dignity; reasons to live and the promise that their gravestones will name the deceased without memorializing deadnames. We want to be able to offer them the promise of gender affirming care and futures full of livable lives. We want this message of hope, affirmation, care, and healing to be accessible, just, and equitable for all trans, queer, and non-binary youths. They look to their folx and unrelated kin, those who do such parent-work and poet-work— for the hope we want to give them.

Yet if my womb is empty and fallow of inspiration, where can I locate and engender an agalma with prayers that might uplift the precarious lives of our children? Searching through the imperfect wisdom of the past, this pandemic of grief has brought me back to John Gower. Within his speculative confessions (called the Confessio Amantis), I see the imagined lives (and deaths) of transgender children, Iphis and Narcissus. In the “Tale of Iphis,” we see a trans masculine youth raised as a boy, married as a groom, and medically transitioned through the care of a god. In the “Tale of Narcissus,” we see a trans feminine youth, who sees herself as a woman within a well of water, feels a dysphoric need to touch and embody this reflection, but receives no gender affirming care or hope and dies by suicide. Half of these two trans stories in the Confessio end in life, half in death.

In my previous work, I have offered an in depth critical trans analysis of the “Tale of Iphis” and the “Tale of Narcissus,” available as two already published articles, “Unconfessing


Transgender”\(^5\) and “the Necropolitics of Narcissus.”\(^6\) Building on that research, I would now like to offer a reflection on what it means that Gower should include both of these stories within the same work. What insight, healing, and hope emerges from reading these two trans narratives alongside one another? I look to Gower just as Gower looked to Ovid, and perhaps we both are trying to articulate hopes for healing and livable life amidst contexts of plague and death.

Perhaps the contingent futurity of Gower, the poet-parent, whose one trans child lives and the other dies, resonates with me because I am a trans mother with children whose lives have diverged in dramatic ways: two are flourishing into their teen years and two were never able to be born. Thus, this article is dedicated to all our children and all who call us kin, especially our Clementine and Nora, our departed Ziggy and Embry Bahr-Bychowski, as well as those trans youths buried under deadnames and those surviving through grief. Along with each of you, our dreams and our dead are planted in the ground, watered with ink, tears, and blood, gardened with the hope that new futures may grow. May I see you there, where being meets becoming, where we all may confess together within woods of transformation and healing.

The dysphoria of this hope brings me back again to think of the declaration made by Gower in the Prologue to the Confessio, that each child, “for his complexioun / Is mad upon divisioun.”\(^7\) Life and love is \textit{mad} because of translocation, mutation, and generational drift. Yet


\(^7\) Gower, \textit{Confessio Amantis} I, lines 974–80.
life and love is also made of such veering. Authors and parents know that some of these divisions will be made by choice, some by context, and some by nature.

If the *Confessio Amantis* is a confession of love, I argue, one might see it also as a speaking-together prompted by parental love, a discourse between vertical and horizontal identities, like and unlike, generation and generation, the contingently known and the yet unknown. Amans calls his confessor “fader” and in turn Genius calls Amans his “sone.”8 Their confession is familial, even if the connection is not biologically bound. One generation is tied to another not by blood but by story. Metaphor carries love across social divisions that position them on different planes without recourse to vertical patriarchal lines linked by properties or genetic traits. As a trans mother, I love my children both by my bonding with them and also by my letting go of them, both by the times where our stories come together as one and the times when their stories are wholly their own. A parent’s love, especially across trans identifications and temporalities, is a queerly slanted love.

As a trans scholar, I will pull back the soil to show the roots of the *Confessio*’s ethical system by reading the stories of Gower’s two trans children side by side, Iphis and Narcissus, paying special attention to the division points where one’s life extends into the future and the other one’s life is cut short. My dysphoric analysis of these stories from our pre-modern past seeks to reveal a moral choice that faces us regarding the future of trans people in our society: whether we shall affirm (or not), through the instruments of law and healthcare, the gender of trans children who might (or might not) see their lives extending beyond our time and meaning.

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8 Gower, *Confessio Amantis* IV, lines 11–16.
Slanted Love and Diagonal Identities

While Gower does not use the word “transgender” in his writing, his words and rhetoric do the work in a medieval context akin to what transgender terminology does in the modern context. Various scholars have noted how Gower explores the diverse spectrum of genders and sexuality through Ovidian lore. Assessing Gower’s project of adapting Ovid for his own time and place, Kathryn L. McKinley stresses how medieval versions of the classical tales resonate with the political and social world of England in the 1300’s. “In some cases, Gower will opt for a moralized version as it suits his narrative purposes better,” McKinley observes, “in others, he will work directly from an unmoralized Latin text of Ovid’s verse.” This affirms how Gower’s work enacts ethics and desires of his own that do not always accord with tradition. Focusing specifically on how Gower adapts old stories in order to help him through contemporary (i.e. medieval) sexual politics, Karma Lochrie distinguishes Gower’s version of queer tales from Ovid’s by unpacking how the medieval author withholds the moral judgement placed on characters by the classical source. These alterations engender different meanings and futures


12 McKinley, “Gower and Chaucer,” 199.

for his textual progeny, guiding them down certain directions while liberating them from other fixed tracks. Through this openness to change and uncertainty, Gower raises hope that the future will not look the same as the past or present day.

That brings us to the metaphor of Gower as a poet-parent of transgender children. While we have no evidence that Gower personally raised transgender children in fourteenth century London, Gower brings together the seed of linguistics and the egg of real trans and queer lives within the womb of his poetics. Engendering trans youths within the narratives of the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower both directs their stories and follows them on their divergent paths. Gower touches upon what Laurel Billings locates in the “Tale of Iphis and Ianthe:” “foolish hope [that] operates as a future-oriented affect and enables trans* survival.”

Although Iphis and Narcissus are not biological spawn of Gower, the poet-parent nonetheless engages in fatherwork for these transgender children. Impregnated with the classical material from Ovid, Gower engenders and gestates his own iterations of the characters. In yet another sense, Gower is a steward or guardian of these characters, passing along their stories and tropes from generation to generation. Insofar as these patterns remain consistent from iteration to iteration, down through a genealogical family of texts, they might fall into what queer scholar Andrew Solomon calls “vertical identity.”

This verticality points upwards on the genealogical tree towards Ovid’s tales and downwards in a “future-oriented affect” of “foolish hope” towards today’s children.

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Yet in another sense Gower breaks from the past, and these youths take on the peculiarities of Gower’s medieval age and London context. What medieval examples could Gower have glimpsed before he imagined a trans feminine person like Narcissus or transgender hope like we see in his “Tale of Iphis?” In *A Burnable Book*, Bruce Holsinger imagines just such an embodiment of medieval trans feminine perseverance in Eleanor Rykener, a verifiably transgender woman, when he states that “Eleanor felt a nudge of hope.”16 This moment of transgender hope emerges as Eleanor Rykener and John Gower try to locate books, beloveds, and livable lives in medieval London. Holsinger’s novel is inspired by the histories of the real Gower—presumably a cisgender male poet—and the real Rykener—a trans sex worker—who both plied their various trades in premodern England.17 Might Gower have encountered Rykener as they both went about their lives and business? Maybe or maybe not. Yet if we find records of one transgender life eking out a living in medieval London, we can guess that there may have been many more Eleanor Rykeners who did not get caught and subjected to interrogation by the legal system. The nudging hope that kept Rykener going may have been passed from person to person and perhaps found its way into Gower’s ears and mind. Insofar as these patterns of personality and quality reflect Gower’s queer world—full of women like Eleanor Rykener—these children might exhibit, “horizontal identities.”18

How then might Gower’s transgender children relate to Ovid’s Iphis and Narcissus? How might trans youths today relate across the ages to Gower’s medieval tales? To answer this, I turn ____________________________


18 Solomon, *Far From the Tree*, 2.
to Solomon’s opening statement in *Far From the Tree*, “there is no such thing as reproduction.” In other words, there is no such thing as a perfect mimesis of one’s vertical genealogies of identity. A child is not an exact copy of a parent, no matter the fantasies that might be placed on them. Nor is there such a thing as exact normality or homogeneity among horizontal identities. Not all trans people are exactly alike, even within the same time and place.

What emerges across generations may be better described as a genealogical or cultural drift: diagonal identities. In character and story, Gower’s children have a slanted relationship to the identities of past iterations. Gower’s Narcissus is another iteration and adaptation of Ovid’s Narcissus in a semi-vertical tradition, and yet Narcissus is also a woman with semi-horizontal ties to the medieval era. So too, although I have fallen some ways off in my own modern Polish-American context, I am a trans feminine person who can trace a diagonal identity back up the historical tree. In this crooked and queer way, I love and identify with Gower’s Iphis and Narcissus. Their identities actively “trans” their genders as sets of resonant markers and qualities, crossing and connecting the vertical and the horizontal but in directions that break from fidelity to either tradition or context. In other words, Gower’s readers and Gower himself could not have totally known the direction or destiny of Iphis and Narcissus. As Gower engendered trans stories in the same city and age where Rykener turned tricks, could he have imagined that a trans woman might read these stories centuries later? Much like Bruno Latour’s theory of “the slight surprise of action,” a poet-parent (much like a parent of flesh and blood children) might have no idea what their children might do or where their stories will go.

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19 Solomon, *Far From the Tree*, 1.

Inherited Debates and Unfinished Hopes

Reflecting the uncertain futurity of transgender children, medieval and modern, Gower provides vastly different conclusions for his two trans children. The crisis of the trans man, Iphis, is answered: he is given magical gender-affirmation surgery from the gods, and he lives happily ever after. The crisis of the trans woman, Narcissus, is not answered. Despite being surrounded by many faeries able to hear her cry, Narcissus’s prayers go unanswered, leaving her victim to death by suicide.

Why is one child answered and the other ignored? As is the case in many instances of transphobia and transmisogyny, the stage is set by traditional patriarchal sexism. Iphis’s trans masculine identification can be rationalized within the story and audience of the medieval tale. Various iterations of Ovid’s story of Iphis begin with parents concerned over the potential birth of a female child. This fear and hatred of women may be given individual justifications, yet personal prejudices against women cannot be wholly disentangled from the patriarchal social systems that position femininity lower in the order of power. The parents’ support of Iphis living a trans masculine life is treated not as inherently trans-affirming but rather as an attempt to work around personal and social misogyny. Outside of the convoluted reasons for the mother to disguise the child, cisgender audiences would understand the rationale that living as a man has more benefits and consequently is more desirable. Modern transphobes such as children’s


22 Lochrie, “Gower’s Riddles,” 81–85

literature author, J.K. Rowling, use such misinformed explanations for why they believes trans youths (especially trans boys) transition. In a world dominated by the patriarchy, Rowling speculates that even she (an antagonist against the trans community) would have been tempted to transition merely to escape being a target of misogyny: “I’ve wondered whether, if I’d been born 30 years later, I too might have tried to transition. The allure of escaping womanhood would have been huge.” Indeed, it is homophobes and as well as transphobes that can find reasons to rationalize Iphis’s transition for reasons other than affirming trans identity. Lochrie observes that Iphis’s magical gender affirming surgery is provided—at least in Ovid’s version—because the author and readers are supposedly unwilling to accept the sexuality of two queer women. Thus one must become a man. None of these reasons for outside cisgender support discount the reading that Iphis may be a transgender man with personal masculine identifications. None of these rationalizations —based on sexism, homophobia, or transphobia— actually explain (or, explain away) trans experiences. One might observe that when cis people talk about trans persons or characters, there is a tendency for the conversation to have more to do with the experiences and concerns of cis people rather than those of trans people. Yet these reasons do explain why Iphis would receive relatively more support from people who otherwise might not understand or affirm trans identity.


25 Rowling, “Reasons for Speaking out on Sex.”

The trans feminine character is not in the same situation as the trans masculine child. Nonetheless, the two divergent ends of the transgender children are affected by the same force: patriarchal sexism. Julia Serano articulates the transphobia of cisgender women against transgender women as manifesting internalized misogyny. The same premise that supports Iphis for climbing the patriarchal ladder, moving from the subordinate position of female to male, would conversely condemn Narcissus for desiring to move lower down the ladder, descending from the dominant male position to the level of women. Feminist scholarship has worked hard to explain and correct the internalized acceptance of female inferiority among women. Yet even among feminists, Serano argues, we see symptoms of misogyny. In her chapter from *The Whipping Girl*, “Putting the Feminine Back into Feminism,” Serano observes the ways in which women have bought into the myths of misogyny in the struggle to gain power. In order to claim and retain authority that is traditionally commanded by men, claims Serano, women have imitated masculine forms of dress and speech, even buying into preferences for male-dominated jobs and misogynistic media. To be a girly-girl, within this misogynistic tactic for power, is to be considered anti-woman or anti-feminist. Trans feminine people fall into this condemnation as much as cisgender women. Concurrently, there are movements among feminists to protect the dissolution of women and femininity by such patriarchal prejudices. Lilian Faderman powerfully historicizes the ways in which the second wave women’s movement

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branched off into women separatists or “Lesbian Feminist” movements that promoted misinformation and enmity against trans people.\(^{31}\) In order to protect women and femininity, these movements in the 1970’s and 80’s worked to define and police the exclusivity of womanhood. This led to open statements against trans women who were framed as spies for the patriarchy trying to invade women’s spaces.\(^{32}\) Importantly, we can speculate that the tragic exclusion and conclusion of Narcissus in Gower’s tale might likewise arise from similar prejudices. In Gower’s tale, Narcissus sees the image of herself as a nymph and desires to touch that form in reality.\(^{33}\) When she calls out for help, the nymphs in the area ignore her pleas and only arrive after the death of the trans feminine youth. Like modern separatists’ movements, as well as anti-trans women like Rowling, the nymphs turned away from Narcissus’s need to articulate herself as one of them.\(^{34}\) And perhaps Narcissus feared returning to the patriarchal world of her home out of fear that she would be condemned for her feminine identifications by traditional sexism. Isolated from both male and female support, Narcissus dies.

Putting Gower’s two transgender children and their conclusions side by side, an ethics lesson emerges: providing gender affirming care to transgender children is essential to help them survive and thrive into the future. This is an important message for the fourteenth century and one that remains timely for the twenty-first century.


In the past months, over one hundred anti-trans laws have been introduced in over thirty states, most of them targeting trans children and trans healthcare.\(^{35}\) This is more than politics and culture wars. We are living through a pandemic not only of biological diseases but also a pandemic of racism, ableism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. To call our current anti-trans political contexts “a pandemic” is not an exaggeration: according to recent studies, 29% of trans girls and women, 41% of non-binary children and adults, and 50% of trans boys and men will attempt suicide.\(^{36}\) Like Gower, over the last century the modern medical world has come around to the truth that providing gender affirming care to trans children is essential for their wellbeing and futurity. In places where trans people receive protection by trans affirming care from trans affirming medical providers the death rate drops.\(^{37}\) In places where trans people are excluded or targeted by anti-trans laws and by debunked pseudo-science like conversion therapy, the death rates climb higher.\(^{38}\) Presently, we ask: how will the story of our transgender children end? Do our prayers over the foundations of the earth echo like prophesies or eulogies?

As we look across time for the seeds of answers, trans youths past and present, literal and literary, look to us as gardeners of their hope and healing. Where will we leave them? Where does Gower leave us? Was Gower pronouncing our doom by the hands of partisan politics when

\(^{35}\) Krishnakumar, *CNN.com*.


he writes that humanity “mot be verray kynde dye, / For the contraire of his astat / Stant evermor in such debat?” Will we stand evermore in debate? Must the lives of transgender children always be opposed by political parties or movements defining themselves as transphobic contrarians? Does there need to be a Narcissus, the trans girl who is excluded and suicidal, for every Iphis, the trans boy who is given gender affirming protections and care? Is it just a matter of the state or the story in which you happen to be planted?

Gower does not promise us any finished or definite salvation from these debates. What he does offer is a mirror in which to reflect on ourselves, our society, our laws, and our healthcare. He offers a voice crying out against the laws, classism, and social injustices. As I note in “Necropolitics of Narcissus,” Gower frames *Confessio Amantis* as a dialogue occurring within a wood of suicide, where the main character will kill himself if not given the means for a livable life. The means that the character is offered is an analysis of the sins and virtues of society. If we are to provide for ourselves (especially the most vulnerable to exclusion, isolation and death), then we must address these social ills. He offers us a public confession wherein we may speak-together on social pandemics such as transphobia. Again, and again, Gower points us towards the hopeful and healing work of a love that refuses to stop caring.

**Future Intercessions**

So take this as an *agalma*.

Dream it, be it, plant it, and pass it along.

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As long as we keep digging into the earth, striving for better choices and better care, speaking up and speaking together, then our votive hopes may slip slantwise through the cracks in vertical hierarchies and horizontal cultural epochs.

Drifting through the broken genealogies of language, law, history, and identity, this persistent nudging may yet take root in the lives of estranged kin.

Again, we may find the spirit of our beloveds blossoming in yet unborn generations, in unpredictable queer times and queer worlds, in unimaginable likeness and strangeness, in work and promises unfinished.

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