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Hope and Healing in Gower: A Special Issue

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Hope and Healing in Gower: A Special Issue

\[ O \text{ mire des tous mals, Marie } \]
\[ A \text{ m’alme q’est ensi marrie } \]
\[ Donnetz, ma dame, medicine \]
\[ Pour la santé que je supplie. \]


Seeking spiritual health in a corrupt world, the sin-besmirched narrator of the *Mirour de l’Oemme* prays to the Virgin Mary for medicine that restores wellbeing. Here and elsewhere, John Gower beseeches the mother of God to bridge human brokenness and divine wholeness, to heal the wounds of wickedness before humanity faces the supreme judge. Gower’s pleas arose during a time of strife, in some ways much like our own, when disease, international conflict, corrupt government agencies, faltering spiritual leaders, and economic challenges spread misery among the people. Seeking antidotes to these ills in his poems, Gower promotes the strength of the bodily and political corpus, the purification of civil and ecclesiastical organizations, and guidelines for living and loving well inside interdependent groups. According to the *Mirour*, it is the Virgin’s intervention that cures ills and makes the restoration of human lives and institutions possible. For Gower, and for many still today, Mary’s mediation means hope and healing. The poet’s challenge, which Gower embraced, was to convey and restore faith in this promise through verse aligned with Marian values.

In 2021 the world and, within it, our community of Gower scholars looked for signs of hope and healing, tokens of a better future extending personal, social, and political recuperation. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, ideological division, hate-crimes and hate-laws, racist murders, crushing poverty, and more, many of us looked to narratives that localize and
personalize vast problems, narratives that confront the depth of human woe and in equal measure offer salves for weary sufferers. For the scholars contributing to this special issue, these honest and encouraging plotlines arise in John Gower’s fourteenth-century poetry. As Gower relies upon Marian virtues and mediation to answer contemporary vices and to offer hope for human healing, many in Gower Studies depend upon fourteenth-century poetry for expressions of fortitude and charity in the face of calamities. We perceive that narratives such as Gower wrote have remained popular for centuries partly because of their power to reflect current troubles and in turn to purge them through wise exemplars and the curative music of verse.

To assess the medicinal value of Gower’s poems and to coordinate digital conversations among researchers thirsting to share ideas during the pandemic, Eve Salisbury and I offered “Hope and Healing in Gower: A Virtual Symposium Sponsored by the Gower Project.” On June 19, 2021, thanks to Siân Echard’s willingness to host over Zoom, we gathered five additional presenters for a two-hour symposium meant to highlight innovative interpretations of Gower’s works and to privilege interaction and dialogue over passive listening and monologue. The symposium’s goal—in addition to exploring the titular topic—was to spark invigorating exchanges and thus to re-knit the bones of a scholarly community stress-fractured by the inability to meet in person for so long. It all began with Salisbury’s warm welcome and then with my own brief keynote address accenting observations from my forthcoming book, *John Gower’s Rhetoric: Classical Authority, Biblical Ethos, and Renaissance Receptions*. I focused on how “John Gower’s rhetoric cuts, cleanses, anoints, and cures” before turning the rest of the time over to the five-minute presentations of each speaker and the stimulating and sustained discussions that took place afterward.
We heard from Natalie Grinnell on the “balm” in Gower’s verses, Curtis Runstedler on the “consolation of exempla,” Will Rogers on “empathy,” Gabrielle Bychowski on “Gower’s transgender children,” Kara McShane on “healing, accountability, and community,” and Eve Salisbury on “herte-thoght” in Gower. Each of these provocative papers is published here in an amplified and revised form. In addition, two well-known Gower scholars in the audience, María Bullón-Fernández and Joel Fredell, have composed responses to the collection. Beyond what could be published here, others in the symposium audience contributed invaluable ideas on the pertinence of Gower’s poems to contemporary ills, the status of monuments in medieval and contemporary worlds, the degree of optimism shown in the conclusion to the Confessio Amantis, and more: all thought-provoking points that revealed how much research is still to be done in Gower Studies. All who attended the symposium were heartened by the wide range and vigor of the conversations that took place that afternoon.

The Gower Project now presents the special issue “Hope and Healing in Gower” as a tribute to the stamina of those in our field and an invitation to readers to access poetical therapies from the past. The issue promotes a new, holistic way of viewing the healing process: one that considers poetry’s influence over physical, mental, and spiritual wellness for both individuals and groups while reflecting on transhistorical methods for achieving these goals. While the Mirour de l’Ommé’s narrator entreated the Virgin for relief and a return to joy, let us turn to Gower’s poems and the papers published here for guides to restoration and delight.

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