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“Hol ynowh”

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“Hol ynowh”

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"Hol ynowh"

As I write this response at the end of 2021, a new Covid variant, Omicron, is dashing any hopes many of us had this past fall for an end to the pandemic. We seem to be trapped in a fast-moving cycle of hope and despair. Can we find hope and healing in John Gower's work? On June 19, 2021, Georgiana Donavin and Eve Salisbury led a symposium, "Hope and Healing in Gower: A Virtual Symposium Sponsored by the Gower Project," that explored this question. All six essays in this special issue originated as presentations at the symposium and focus primarily on the *Confessio Amantis*. Although this poem's resolution could, arguably, be interpreted as more pessimistic than optimistic, the authors argue that it does offer hope, and they examine Gower's exploration of different forms of cure. The essays reveal that Gower's hope is not naïve and that the healing is not always or unambiguously successful; it is just "ynowh."¹

The Gower that emerges from these six essays is, to a great extent, a poet as physician; most of them see Gower drawing a link between medicine and poetry. Eve Salisbury, for instance, argues that Gower challenges his readers to reflect on how "symbolic language brings poetry into conversation with medicine."² Gower uses narrative to describe and diagnose illness and prescribe different forms of healing; the possibility of healing then leads to hope. As he does in the *Mirour de l'Omme* and *Vox Clamantis*, Gower explores illness and recovery in the *Confessio* in socio-political and religious terms, but, unlike his earlier poems, the *Confessio* analyzes the process in personal terms as well. As Amans turns out to be John Gower at the end

¹ Amans uses the phrase "hol ynowh" at the end of the poem, right after Cupid pulls the arrow out of him and cures his love sickness: "of thilke fyri peine / I was mad sobre and hol ynowh," *Confessio Amantis*, VIII lines 2868–2869. Quotations from the *Confessio Amantis* are taken from *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS, e.s. 81–82, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1900–01).

² Eve Salisbury, "Gower's 'Herte-Thoght': Thinking, Feeling, Healing," 14.

of the *Confessio*, we are reminded of the proverb in Luke 4:23: “Physician, heal thyself.” The poet’s healing at the end of the poem, his rejection of earthly love, shows the path for the reader’s own personal healing. But Gower’s recovery is marked by loss, and his hope is marked by a deep sense of human limitations.

Gower sees sickness and recovery as complex processes that involve, at the individual level, heart and brain, as Salisbury demonstrates in “Gower’s ‘Herte-Thoght’: Thinking, Feeling, Healing.” In seeing heart and brain as deeply interconnected, Gower recognizes “thinking to be influenced by feeling and feeling to be affected by thinking.”³ Such a view challenges the Cartesian mind-body split that, though increasingly questioned in our own time, still has great influence in current ideas about sickness and healing. Gower’s understanding of sickness and recovery in the *Confessio*, Salisbury also argues, is applicable not only to individual bodies but also to the body politic.⁴ A similar analysis of the communal implications of individual suffering and healing is central to Kara L. McShane’s exploration of the intersections between healing, accountability, and community in the *Confessio*. Through complex analyses of the “Tale of Mundus of Paulina” and the “Tale of Lucrece,” McShane argues that for Gower interpersonal wrongs bring disease to the whole community and that disease can be cured through narrative: “In the language of social healing, the wound needs to be narrated before it can be healed.”⁵ McShane does not argue that Gower offers uncomplicated answers to the work and process of recovery. The “Tale of Lucrece,” she notes, still leaves us with questions about why the one most

³ Salisbury, “Gower’s ‘Herte-Thoght’: Thinking, Feeling, Healing,” 5.

⁴ Salisbury, “Gower’s ‘Herte-Thoght’: Thinking, Feeling, Healing,” 2–3, 12–14.

⁵ Kara L. McShane, “Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” 4.

wronged, Lucrece, is not healed but dies.⁶ Nevertheless, as she puts it, Gower, offers “flashes of healing possibility.”⁷

The very structure of the *Confessio*, a poem which starts with Amans as a lover seeking to be cured from his lovesickness, makes hope and healing central to the work, as two other essays point out, even as each still leads us in a different direction. In “The Consolation of *Exempla*: Gower’s Sources of Hope and ‘Textual Healing’ in the *Confessio Amantis*,” Curtis Runstedler emphasizes Amans’s own “active role in the text through his dialogue and engagement with Genius.”⁸ The *exempla* themselves, Runstedler argues, provide a form of recovery through narrative and understanding, a kind of therapeutic consolation, like the one provided by Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*; this recovery is meant not just for Amans, but also for the reader.⁹ Also noting the centrality of healing to the poem, M.W. Bychowski’s “The Unfinished Hope of Gower’s Transgender Children” focuses on two tales that offer different outcomes for transgender characters: the “Tale of Iphis” and the “Tale of Narcissus.” In this essay Bychowski makes a very important observation as she reminds us that our focus on our current pandemic, necessary and understandable as it is, has downplayed other forms of suffering, such as the suffering of trans youth in our times, and the related manifestations of communal disease or dis-ease evident in the hundreds of anti-trans laws that have been

⁶ McShane, “Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” 6.

⁷ McShane, “Healing, Accountability, and Community in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” 12.

⁸ Curtis Runstedler, “The Consolation of *Exempla*: Gower’s Sources of Hope and ‘Textual Healing’ in the *Confessio Amantis*,” 1.

⁹ Runstedler, “The Consolation of *Exempla*: Gower’s Sources of Hope and ‘Textual Healing’ in the *Confessio Amantis*,” 3–4.

introduced in numerous states in the United States in the last year or two.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Bychowski, like the other authors in this special issue, sees in the *Confessio* reason to hope: “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.”¹¹ At the end of the poem Amans / John Gower is relieved of his pain and shown the path to a livable life. The search for positive reasons to live is thus integral to the work.

The essays by Will Rogers, “The Price We Pay for Envy,” and Natalie Grinnell, “Writing into Hope: Laughter, Sadness, and Healing in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” start from a more ambiguous stance that acknowledges strong doubts beneath the hope expressed in the *Confessio*. Rogers contends that “[w]hat often seems negative or pessimistic in the *Confessio* instead signals where healing can begin.”¹² Rogers adds an important insight: Gower shows us that an “emotional engagement with problems and politics can say something new to us.”¹³ This argument echoes Salisbury’s: Gower’s diagnosis is that the physical and the emotional need to be addressed together for the cure to be effective. Natalie Grinnell also examines Gower’s seemingly negative moments and humorlessness in his work, but she argues that Gower still creates “a space for narrative healing” even as he acknowledges our mortality.¹⁴

¹⁰ M.W. Bychowski, “The Unfinished Hope of Gower’s Transgender Children,” 1.

¹¹ Bychowski, “The Unfinished Hope of Gower’s Transgender Children,” 14.

¹² Will Rogers, “The Price We Pay for Envy,” 5.

¹³ Rogers, “The Price We Pay for Envy,” 6.

¹⁴ Natalie Grinnell, “Writing into Hope: Laughter, Sadness, and Healing in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” 2.

All six essays reveal that the *Confessio* does not offer easy answers or remedies to sickness. In fact, the poem at the end, it is important to point out, even doubts that there is any remedy at all for sickness in this world. At the end of the poem, Gower tells us that no physician can cure earthly love, because its "nature is so divers":

... my final leve
I take now for evere more,
Withoute makynge any more,
Of love and of his dedly hele,
Which no phisicien can hele.
For his nature is so divers.¹⁵

This seems like an odd moment for a poem that has just taken thousands of lines to attempt to cure Amans, and it is one of the reasons why the poem could be seen as pessimistic at least in its ending. The adjective "divers" applied to love's "nature" suggests that the sickness love produces has several causes; these are not just physical, and for this reason physicians cannot cure lovesickness, at least fully. Neither was Genius able to cure Amans, as a few hundred lines earlier, the lover himself had complained to the priest.

The cure, it turns out, depends on divine intervention and, ultimately, personal acceptance. Venus helps Amans through a two-step process: first, she has Cupid pull the arrow out of him, which helps him forget what love is; second, she helps him realize that he is John Gower, an old man.¹⁶ This moment of self-awareness leads Gower to accept his limitations.

¹⁵ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 3152–57.

¹⁶ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2793–2912.

After Venus takes her leave, Amans / Gower looks at the beads she gave him and “in my self y gan to smile.”¹⁷ Amans / Gower finally finds consolation and peace, but this peace is still surrounded by the language of loss. Once Venus leaves, he laments that

... y was left with outen helpe.
 So wiste I nought wher of to yelpe,
 Bot only that y hadde lore
 My time, and was sori ther fore.¹⁸

Similarly, a few lines later, he says, with a resigned tone,

And whanne y sigh non othre weie,
 Bot only that y was refusid,
 Unto the lif which y hadde usid
 I thoughte nevere torne ayein.¹⁹

Reading the *Confessio*—following Amans’s struggles and final acceptance of the limitations of love—can be a balm for our current struggles with the pandemic disease and an aid in accepting our own limitations. Acceptance may bring to us, as it does to Gower, a smile and a sense of peace. However, along with Gower, we also recognize that any sense of peace during sickness, in the midst of our human limitations, will be rooted in feelings of loss. A sense of peace and hope comes from accepting that the cure will likely make us feel just “hol ynowh.”

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¹⁷ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, line 2958.

¹⁸ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2951–2954.

¹⁹ Gower, *Confessio Amantis* VIII, lines 2962–2965.