

GENIUS AND THE PRACTICE OF ETHICAL READING

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Abstract

There has been a tendency in Gower scholarship to emphasize what Genius is *not* doing in the *Confessio Amantis*: the stories he does not tell, the sins he fails to discuss, and the interpretations he does not pursue. Some critics view Genius's supposed deficiencies as intentional failings designed by Gower to challenge his readers; still, these readings are centered on absence rather than presence. This paper offers a new interpretation of Genius's role in the *Confessio*, and, in particular, of Genius's use of classical exempla, by arguing that the absence of allegorized versions of these tales is, in fact, the result of a conscious decision to use an alternate method of reading—ethical reading—rather than allegorical interpretation. Instead of merely appropriating or desecularizing “old bokes,” the process of ethical reading preserves the status of secular texts while reframing them to make them morally useful for new generations of readers.

Keywords: John Gower, medieval literature, medieval education, Ovid, readers, classical reception, medieval hermeneutics.

Genius begins his confession in Book I of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* with a prefatory lecture on the five senses and the dangers of suggestion. The first few exempla—those of Acteon, Medusa, the asp, and Ulysses—serve to narrow the topic of discussion to just two of those senses, leaving Genius with one simple lesson: Amans must learn how to “kepe and warde” (*CA* I.331) his eyes and ears, even to keep them locked up if necessary, to protect himself from foolish suggestions.¹ If Amans can learn to govern his eyes and ears, he will have no problem governing the other senses. They are that fundamental.

In addition to teaching Amans this important lesson, Genius's discussion on the senses functions as an introduction to the entire confession because he uses three of the major sources for the exempla in the *Confessio*—Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Bible, and Trojan history—to provide four stories that

¹ All references to the *Confessio Amantis* are from Macaulay (1899-1902).

acquaint Amans (and the reader) with many of the topics that will be found in the first book, and indeed, throughout the whole of the text, such as pride, consent, self-governance, judgment, and wisdom. To counteract any potential confusion that might arise due to the broad scope of topics introduced here, Genius restates his primary lesson every chance he can. For example, he begins his version of the tale of Acteon with a couplet that plainly states both the source and the moral of the story: “Ovide telleth in his bok/Ensamble touchende of mislok” (CA I.333-34). After the tale ends (less than fifty lines later), Genius transitions to the next example by telling Amans the moral again, “Lo now, my Sone, what it is/A man to caste his yheamis” (CA I.379-80), and citing Ovid as the source for his next story, which also teaches the dangers of “mislokyng” (CA I.445).

From this brief overview, it should be clear that this prefatory section is (or at least appears to be) a straightforward introduction to the confession that follows. From the perspective of modern scholars, however, the four exempla contained in this section have often been seen as elusive, disadvantageous, misconstrued, or even, in the words of Farnham, “morally ridiculous” (1974:168). This is an important problem, one which significantly affects our understanding of the *Confessio*, and thus merits further discussion.

The primary issue at stake here is how critics have responded to Gower’s omission of the allegorized versions of these tales. Hatton (1975), for example, armed with the writings of the church fathers and with Gower’s own *Mirour de l’Omme*, explains that Gower was familiar with the “spiritual” interpretations of the tale of the asp, even though the interpretations Genius provides are “carnal” (i.e. literal) ones. In Hatton’s reading, Genius, blind to the obvious allegorical possibilities of his own exempla, is actually “mistelling his tales to make them support the narrow literal points which he attempts to impress on Amans” (1975:33). Meanwhile, Gower, knowing his audience is more perceptive than Genius, “imbeds in the tales clues that Genius overlooks which suggest that his creator intends the reader to remember the spiritual significances that elude the Priest of Venus” (Hatton 1975:33). A similar argument is made by Olsson, who outlines the standard interpretations of the story of the asp in order to support this conclusion: “The point is not that the story lacks the potential for a gloss, but that it is open to multiple readings, and Genius rejects that wealth of significance” (1992:67). Olsson does not argue that Genius is “mistelling” the tale, just that Genius leaves out these allegorical readings, and that this rejection can be seen by the reader as Gower’s way of highlighting the similarities between Genius and the tales he tells:

The story of the asp, as Genius himself tells it, illustrates by analogy that difference in his character as a *genius*. Readings *in bono* and *in malo* of serpent and charmer disappear in the *narratio* and its simple, incomplete

moralitas. Gower “centers” our attention on the telling, and as with the narrative, so with Genius: the poet provides no explicit readings of his persona; he “centers” him as a narrator, even as judge, giving us little opportunity to make a definitive judgment *in bono* or *in malo*. (1992:68)

Olsson’s (1992) Genius is a “patron of too much” (56) a “personified *demande*” (146), an ingenious yet untrustworthy figure who destabilizes our reading and, in doing so, “encourages multiple and ultimately wiser responses to the poem” (52). Hatton’s Genius is a well-meaning yet ignorant servant of Venus, whose “doggedly literal handling of richly allegorical materials” (1975:36) demonstrates the limits of carnal understanding and the dangers of concupiscence.

What both critical readings share, aside from a grounding in allegorized versions of the story of the asp, is a concern with the potential story as understood by Gower’s readers as opposed to the actual story as told by Genius to Amans. Both readings take as their starting point the expectations of Gower’s readers, and from there, they make judgments as to the success of Genius’s interpretations. One would not want to downplay the significance of discussing the interpretive potential of Genius’s stories, or entirely disagree with Mitchell and others who maintain that “in the strongest sense the poem remains to be invented through reader response” (2004:52).² However, it does appear that Genius’s reputation has been unfairly damaged by arguments that focus more on what Genius is not doing than on what he is doing. Instead of insisting that the omission of allegorical readings is a failure on Gower’s part, or that it is nothing more than a blatant invitation for the reader to supply these readings, we should consider the possibility that Gower avoided allegorical readings for another reason entirely, one which has implications not just outside the fiction of the text but within that fiction as well. We should consider that there was another method of interpretation available to Gower, and that this other method supported his didactic intentions in a way that allegory could not.

The method of interpretation that Genius practices is not allegorical interpretation but ethical reading. Developed in medieval grammar schools as a way of justifying the use of imaginative literature in the classroom, ethical reading challenges readers to view this literature as a source of practical wisdom, even if that wisdom is not always apparent on the surface of the text.³

² See also Hiscoe (1985) and Simpson (1995).

³ Medieval educators did not actually use the phrase “ethical reading,” nor did they routinely acknowledge the existence of this category. However, there is much to be gained from the introduction of a well-defined concept of “ethical reading” into our scholarly discourse—a concept derived from the medieval perception of the educative function of literature and from the interpretive methodologies developed in order to understand that function. Previous

The difference between ethical reading and allegorical interpretation is evident in Kaster's comparison of Basil (who recommends what could be called ethical reading, although Kaster does not use that term) and Augustine (who advocates allegorical interpretation):

Basil assumes that the literary culture would remain a sanitized but unmistakably secular propaedeutic: as the first step toward the final good of the soul, Moses' preliminary gymnastics among the Egyptians have a value in themselves and are left, so to speak, *in situ*. But when Augustine speaks of the use of the foreign culture, in the metaphor of despoiling the Egyptians, the emphasis is wholly on passing out of Egypt. The bits and pieces of the literary culture that one can surreptitiously appropriate are valued only to the extent that they do not remain secular; the metaphor of propaedeutic, with its implications of continuity and progress, yields before the metaphor of possessive alienation. (1997:87-88)

Kaster is discussing the interpretation of secular texts, since they were the primary targets of Augustine's method of reinterpretation, but the distinction between ethical and allegorical reading can be relevant for the study of religious texts as well, especially if they are placed alongside secular texts and used as exempla (as they are in Gower).

We can recognize the difference between ethical reading and allegorical interpretation as it relates to the tales in Gower's *Confessio* if we compare, on the one hand, Genius's own interpretation of the Acteon story, which he tells as an exemplum about a man who "caste his yheamis" (*CA* I.380), and, on the other hand, the interpretation proposed by Wetherbee, for whom "the vulnerability of the young hunter's senses to the sight of the nude goddess is a synecdoche for the nature of fallen man" (1991:28). Both are perfectly valid interpretations, but the method of ethical reading that Genius uses has the advantage of preserving the integrity of the literary text while still opening the text up to a discussion of ethical issues. Rather than composing an allegorical

discussions of ethics and medieval interpretation have provided useful insight on the significance of the ethical approach to literature, but to do so, they have often had to sacrifice specificity and context. Thus, we find such generalizing statements as Allen's "to define ethics in medieval terms is to define poetry, and to define poetry is to define ethics" (1982:12) and Dagenais's substitution of "ethical reading" for "medieval reading" (1984:8). It is true that the broad influence of ethics in medieval literary culture deserves further study, but to argue that medieval poetry and hermeneutics are inherently ethical is overstating the case. Obviously, a full discussion of ethical reading is beyond the scope of this essay. The goal here is simply to examine the relevance of ethical reading to Gower studies, in the hope of directing our attention to this gap in the scholarship on medieval education and hermeneutics, and to the importance of those fields of study for our understanding of literate (i.e., Latin educated) authors such as John Gower.

reinterpretation of the text that might suit his purposes, Genius merely has to enclose the text in a moral framework and then subtly excerpt or amend the text so that it can plausibly function as an example of the topic under discussion. In ethical reading, therefore, the text can be just as important as the moral, whereas in allegorical reading, the focus is on the interpretation, and the original text is rendered virtually irrelevant (a fact which might explain why critics have been so hesitant to accept non-allegorical readings of texts that have already been despoiled).

In order to understand Genius's use of ethical reading and the advantage he gains from practicing it, this essay will focus on two examples that are often featured in discussions of Genius's "misreading": the tale of Phebus and Daphne (Book III), and the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone (Book IV). Before discussing those tales, however, it will be useful to turn away from Gower for a moment and look at the evidence for this type of reading in the medieval commentary tradition. The context here is highly significant. Ethical reading is, first and foremost, a product of medieval pedagogy, and as such, it functions by cultivating a certain type of relationship between texts and readers that is particularly suited to a pedagogical setting.

A rich source of information about literary culture in the Middle Ages, and, in particular, about the ways in which classical texts were interpreted is to be found in the *accessus ad auctores* [introductions to authors], brief prefatory documents that often circulated along with the commentaries on authoritative texts like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to provide an overview of the text and its author.⁴ In general, the content of these *accessus* involved literary topics such as the life of the author, the structure of the work, and the author's intention in composing the work, but in the twelfth century specifically, a type of *accessus* emerged that asked –in addition to the standard literary questions– “cui parti philosophia es upponitur” (“to which part of philosophy does it belong”). The most common response –unsurprising, given that literature provides abundant examples of human behavior– was “ethica es upponitur” (“it belongs to ethics”).⁵ Obviously, the mere mention of ethics in an *accessus* does not in itself

⁴ On the *accessus ad auctores*, see Huygens (1970), Hunt (1980), Allen (1982:5-10), Minnis (1984), and Quain (1986).

⁵ For example, in the collection of *accessus* edited by Huygens (1970), seventeen out of the twenty-seven texts introduced are classified under ethics. Of the remaining ten, five are described without any mention of philosophy (or, in one case, with no response to the question of philosophical classification, even though it is mentioned at the outset of the *accessus*), one is classified under *physicae* (physical science), one is classified under *logicae* (logic), and three have a double classification (in the *accessus* to Horace's *Ars poetica*, for example, the commentator mentions that the text could be classified under ethics or logic). The practice of classifying texts under the parts of philosophy betrays the origins of this

constitute an ethical reading. Some commentators simply insert the phrase “*ethica es upponitur*” into their *accessus* without any further explanation, and others use it merely to provide a general definition of ethics. But these are not the only methods employed by commentators to align their texts with moral instruction, and *ethica es upponitur* is not the only part of these *accessus* that determines the ethical potential of the text that follows.

Consider, for example, the way in which one commentator uses ethics and utility to provide a unified statement about the moral content of Ovid’s *Heroides*:

Ethicae subiacet quia bonorum morum est instructor, malorum vero extirpator. Finalis causa talis est, ut visa utilitate quae ex legitimo procedit et infortuniis quae ex stulto et illicito solent prosequi, hunc utrumque fugiamus et soli casto adhareamus. (Huygens 1970:30)⁶

The general importance of *Heroides accessus* for the study of Gower’s *Confessio* has been established by Minnis, who explains that “Gower’s *exempla amantium* are patterned in a way which is basically similar to what mediaeval commentators regarded as the *Heroides*-paradigm, where *exempla* of legal lovers are juxtaposed with *exempla* of foolish lovers and unchaste lovers” (1980:208).⁷ It is true that Gower could have been influenced by the paradigms

particular type of *accessus*, which was initially used for introductions to philosophical texts. The overwhelming emphasis on ethics, however, speaks to a larger discussion about the value of imaginative literature and the moral responsibilities of grammar instructors. Irvine addresses this topic in his discussion of late antique commentaries on Virgil: “Vergil’s works, and other canonical writers, became the core of an ethically and ideologically centered literary education. The commentaries provoke important questions about canonicity, literariness, and the nature of literature itself as an institutional formation, questions which serve to distance the modern from the medieval era. The classification of poetry under the ethical division of philosophy in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries simply made explicit what was presupposed in earlier medieval *grammatica*” (1994:161).

⁶ “The work pertains to ethics, because [Ovid] is teaching good morality and eradicating evil behaviour. The ultimate end of the work is this, that, having seen the advantage gained from lawful love, we may shun both of these and may adhere to chaste love” (Minnis and Scott 1991:20-21). As Hexter (1986:158) points out, the subject of the “quia” clause in the first line is ambiguous. The translation quoted above reads “because *he* is teaching” (my emphasis). For clarity’s sake, this has been changed to “because [Ovid] is teaching,” but it is certainly possible that it could be Ovid’s work (the *Heroides*) that is being referred to rather than Ovid himself. This slight ambiguity, however, does not affect my argument. What is significant here is that this commentator strengthens the force of “*ethica es ubiacet*” at the beginning of this passage by adding an explicit statement about Ovid (or his work) teaching us ethics, and by following that statement with an explanation of the work’s utility that pushes the ethical responsibility of the text onto the reader.

⁷ See also Minnis (1983:57-58).

familiar to him from commentaries on the *Heroides*, as Minnis argues, but we may nonetheless come up short if we use this line of influence to look for deeper connections between the reading methods presented in these *accessus* and the methods used by Genius in the *Confessio*. The particular *Heroides accessus* that Minnis (1980:208) uses to introduce his argument, for example, has very little to say on the subject of ethics: “Ethices ubponitur quia agit de moribus.”⁸ The *accessus* cited above, however, is quite explicit about the ethical potential of Ovid’s text. Taking us beyond paradigms and general definitions of ethics, this commentator suggests that the *Heroides* can be classified under ethics not merely because we can learn about ethics from the text, but because Ovid *is* teaching us ethics. In this *accessus*, both the author and the audience are given new roles: Ovid becomes an instructor of ethics, and the readers become his students. The explanation of Ovid’s *finalis causa* pushes this interpretation even further, using first-person plural verbs such as *fugiamus* and *adhereamus* to direct the ethical force of Ovid’s instruction towards the reader, who is expected to live up to the ethical and hermeneutic challenges outlined in the *accessus*. By adapting the conventional rhetoric of the *accessus* to his needs, this commentator has strengthened the didactic potential of the text and laid the groundwork for a lesson in active reading.

Another example of ethical reading, this time from outside the realm of *exempla amantium*, can be found in the *accessus* to a commentary, written by Arnulf of Orléans, on Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* (known to the Middle Ages as the *Pharsalia*). Arnulf’s *accessus* is extensive, and includes a *vita* of Lucan as well as a full summary of the historical events behind Lucan’s poem. Near the beginning of this *accessus*, Arnulf provides an ethical *utilitas*, followed by a clear description of the moral content readers should expect to find in the *Bellum Civile*:

Vtilitas magna quia, uiso quid contingeri tutrique de ciuilibello, uidelicet Pompeio capite truncari, Caesari XX et IIII plagis in Capitolio perforari, caeamus nobis a bello consimili. Ethices upponitur, non ideo quod detpreceptamorum, sed quodam modo inuitat nosad III uirtutes, fortitudinem, prudenciam, temperanciam, iusticiam, per conuenientes personas, ostenden do bonam moralitatem sicut in Catoneet in ceteris bonis ciuibus qui ad politicas uirtutes ni tunturque ethices upponuntur. (Marti 1958:3)⁹

⁸ “[The work] pertains to ethics because it deals with behavior” (my translation).

⁹ “The [work’s] usefulness is great because, when it is seen what happened to each of the protagonists as a result of the civil war, that is, that Pompey had his head cut off and Caesar was transfixed by twenty-four wounds on the Capitol, we may steer clear of any similar war. It pertains to ethics not because he gives moral instruction but because in a certain way he encourages us to practice the four virtues, courage, wisdom, self-control, and justice, by

Arnulf's graphic account of the results of the war echoes the graphic language of Lucan's poem, gives the reader a preview of the monitory *exemplum* contained within the text, and pushes the ethical content towards the reader with the first-person plural *caueamus nobis*. But unless Arnulf were instructing future kings, his political lesson alone might not carry the weight necessary to teach students the function of exemplary tales. His extended discussion of *ethicaes upponitur*, with its explicit move from didactic rhetoric (*det precepta morum*) to exhortative rhetoric (*inuitat nos ad IIII uirtutes*), its list of virtues, and its reference to virtuous Cato, provides an entirely new framework for the epic as a narrative about exemplary virtue.

Ovid's *Heroides* and Lucan's *Bellum Civile* do not, on the literal level, offer the same type of experience for the reader. But through ethical reading—a method of reading that explicitly guides the reader towards the ethical and didactic content of the text—both texts are made to serve an exemplary function, teaching their readers about the intricacies of practical ethics. It is important to recognize, of course, that these examples of ethical reading are derived from the prefatory material appended to commentaries, and not from the commentaries themselves, which are unquestionably geared towards linguistic (as opposed to ethical) instruction. The absence of ethics in these commentaries has led some scholars to question the significance of all ethical claims made in the *accessus ad auctores*. For example, Black writes: “Moralizing *accessus* were an ideal way to pay lip-service to the moralistic aims of education, which teachers felt under no obligation to make into a reality in the classroom” (2001:315).¹⁰ There is, however, another way to view the relationship between philological commentaries and their ethical *accessus*, as Gillespie suggests:

The broad and common taxonomy of literary analysis found in most medieval *accessus* encoded a way of thinking about a text (and not just the one under immediate study) that was transferable to other texts and contexts. The literary prospectus provided by such introductions usually offers a more reflective and theoretical perspective on the text under discussion and on its relationship to the metatextual and archetypal literary issues of intention, utility and philosophical orientation. The *accessus* was a means of placing a text in the literary continuum of history, in the narrative continuum of an author's work, or in the ethical and hermeneutic continuum of the textual community of its original and medieval readers. It taught a way of looking at and thinking about literature that was formative as well as summative. In other words, it sought to create the taste by which it was to be appreciated. (2005:146-47)

means of appropriate characters, showing us good morality as in the case of Cato and other citizens who strive after those virtues in the state which pertain to ethics” (Minnis and Scott 1991:155).

¹⁰ See also Hexter (1986:212).

Gillespie's assessment resolves what he refers to as "the disjunction between *accessus* and commentary" by underlining their differences. If we read commentaries expecting to find *accessus* categories, we will be disappointed, but we should not take that as a sign that the *accessus* were quickly abandoned once the commentary began. The significance of the *accessus* lies in the moral framework it establishes for further interpretations of the text, and in the theoretical model it provides for future study.

In the commentary on the *Aeneid* attributed to Bernardus Silvestris (henceforth "(Pseudo-)Bernardus"), we can find yet another example of ethical reading, this time paired with an allegorical interpretation of the same text. (Pseudo-)Bernardus tells us, in the preface to his commentary, that Virgil is both a poet and a philosopher, and that readers must keep this "double teaching" (*gemine doctrine*) in mind as they read the text.¹¹ The ethical reading of Virgil's *Aeneid* is located in the discussion of "Virgil the poet," under the heading *cur agat* (i.e., what the *accessus* writers refer to as *utilitas* or *finalis causa*). (Pseudo-)Bernardus tells his readers that one of the lessons they will find in Virgil's text is "recte agenda prudential que capitur exemplorum exhortatione" ("knowledge of how to act properly, acquired from the exhortation imparted to us by the examples"; l. 20-21). He continues:

Verbi gratia: ex laboribus Enee tolerantie exemplum habemus, ex affectu eius in Anchisem at Ascanium pietatis, ex veneratione quam diis exhibebat et ex oraculis que poscebat, ex sacrificiis que offerebat, ex votis et precibus quas fundebat quodammodo ad religionem invitamur. Per immoderatum Didonis amorem appetitu illicitorum revocamur. (Jones and Jones 1977:1-31 n. 21-24)¹²

¹¹ The attribution of this commentary to Bernardus Silvestris has largely been discarded, but scholars are hesitant to remove his name from the title because the commentary is still tied to him in the scholarship and because the unknown author seems to have been writing during the same time period and within the same intellectual schools that we associate with Bernardus Silvestris. The name "(Pseudo-) Bernardus" has been adopted from Ziolkowski and Putnam (2008). For a discussion of the authorship issue, see Jeauneau (1964:821-65), Stock (1972:36-37), Baswell (1985:199-221), and Wetherbee (2005:135). For further discussion on the commentary itself, see Wetherbee (1972:104-11), Copeland (1991:80-86), and Baswell (1995:91-130).

¹² "For instance, the trials of Aeneas give us an example of endurance; the love he showed towards Anchises and Ascanius an example of steadfast loyalty; the reverence he displayed towards the gods, his seeking out of oracles, the sacrifices he offered, and the prayers and vows he poured out attract us in a certain way towards religious observance. The excessive love of Aeneas for Dido restrains us from the desire for what is unlawful" (Minnis and Scott 1991:150-53). All further English translations of (Pseudo-)Bernardus are taken from this edition.

As with the readings of Ovid's *Heroides* and Lucan's *Bellum Civile* discussed above, ethical reading turns the text –in this case, Virgil's *Aeneid*– into a collection of exemplary tales, according to which particular sections of the text can be pulled out and assigned relevant Christian virtues. Here, again, we have a discussion of the moral content of the work, complete with the use of first-person plural verbs, which effectively push the ethical potential of the text towards the reader and exhort him to follow the examples Virgil has provided for the reader's benefit.

(Pseudo-)Bernardus departs from the *accessus* writers, however, when he moves from his discussion of “Virgil the poet” to his discussion of “Virgil the philosopher.” It is here that we are given a preview of the allegorical interpretation that becomes the primary focus of (Pseudo-)Bernardus's commentary:

Scribit ergo in quantum est philosophus humane vite naturam. Modus agendita liest: in integumento describit quid agatvel quid paciatur humanus spiritus in humano corpora temporaliter positus. [...] Integumen tumest genus demonstrationis sub fabulosa narratione veritatis involvens intellectum, unde etiam dicitur involucrum. Utilitatem verocapit homo ex hoc opera, scilicet sui cognitionem. (ll. 29-37)¹³

The difference between ethical reading and allegorical interpretation represented here is one of content as well as depth. The reader focused on “Virgil the poet” reaches just below the surface of the text in his search for practical moral exempla, while the reader in search of “Virgil the philosopher” plunges deeper into the text in pursuit of spiritual and philosophical truths, and, ultimately, self-knowledge.

The commentary that follows this preface is an allegorical one, but for our purposes, what is significant is that (Pseudo-)Bernardus offers the ethical approach and the allegorical approach as separate, yet equally valid, methods for interpreting the text. A text as complex as Virgil's *Aeneid* can support not only multiple readings but multiple types of readings (in the same way that the Bible can be read, for example, at both the tropological and the allegorical level). In other words, the existence of a long tradition of allegorical interpretations of Virgil's text does not rule out the possibility of using the text for other purposes.

¹³ “In so far as Virgil is a philosopher he describes the nature of human life. His mode of proceeding is as follows. In the integument he describes what the human spirit, placed for a period of time in the human body, does or suffers. [...] The integument is a kind of teaching which wraps up the true meaning inside a fictitious narrative, and so is called ‘a veil.’ Man derives benefit from this work, the benefit being self-knowledge.”

The same can be said, of course, about Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Gower and his readers would have been aware of the allegorized versions of Ovid, but they would also have been aware of other interpretive methods such as ethical reading, which may have suited Gower's didactic intentions in a way that allegorical interpretation could not.

In Book III, Genius provides the tale of Phebus and Daphne as an example of "folhaste" (i.e. hastiness, rashness) and as a counterweight to the arguments against sloth in the next book. When read together, these stories teach the virtue of moderation. Yet neither Amans nor modern critics are content with Genius's interpretation of this exemplum. For Amans, the tale cannot possibly apply to him, because, as he says, his lady is "No tre, but halt hire oghne forme" (*CA* III.1731). He reads the tale more literally than Genius tells it. The critics, however, have the opposite reaction—they are puzzled by the lack of allegory. Hatton (1989:270), for example, points out that the story is typically read as an exemplum about concupiscence and chastity. Harbert provides even more examples:

The *Ovide moralisé* offers several explanations for the story of Apollo and Daphne, some pure rationalisations: the river Peneus has many laurels alongside it and the sun (Apollo) makes them grow, or Daphne was a girl who died fleeing her lover and was buried under a laurel-tree. Alternatively, Daphne is virginity fleeing corruption, changed into a laurel because it is evergreen and never bears fruit; or else Daphne is the Blessed Virgin, who was the laurel with which the Son of God crowned himself by taking up residence in her body. (1988:91)

Although Genius hints at these interpretations by mentioning that the laurel tree is evergreen, and that Daphne will "duelle a maiden stille" (*CA* III.1719), his interpretation of the tale is far from allegorical.

The advantage of ethical reading, for Genius, is that it allows him to maintain his focus on "folhaste," while still leaving the tale open to further interpretation. He removes from the story any mention of the argument between Cupid and Phebus, which might have drawn our attention away from the main point of the exemplum. The fault here lies entirely with Phebus, who, by the time Cupid arrives on the scene, has already fallen in love with Daphne and has begun to pursue her tirelessly. Cupid has been reduced to an afterthought, whose darts serve only to confirm a preexisting love (as they did for Amans in I.143-47). And Daphne's transformation, stripped of its etiological connotations, serves as both an echo of the original text and a quick way of ending the story so that Genius can proceed to the moral. The story may seem too unrealistic to be useful, but only if we are reading the tale literally, as Amans initially does. Genius responds to Amans's literal interpretation by opening up the tale beyond the subject of love:

Mi Sone, sithen it is so,
 I seie no mor; bot in this cas
 Bewar how it with Phebus was.
 Noght only upon loves chance,
 Bot upon every governance
 Which falleth unto mannes dede,
 Folhaste is evere for to drede,
 And that a man good consail take,
 Er he his pourpos undertake,
 For consail put Folhaste aweie. (CA III.1736-45)

Genius's reading of this tale assigns it a moral significance beyond the particularities of the story, but it does not close the tale to further interpretation (as often happens in allegorical readings). Moreover, the moral Genius provides is not a normative prescription. He is not giving Amans strict rules to follow, but rather, offering him exemplary scenarios that highlight specific ethical issues. If Amans is going to find relief from his love, he must learn to read his own situation in terms of its broader ethical implications. Mitchell's conclusion here is worth repeating: "The strength of the exemplum, alongside contrary cases, is that it invites the lover to reflect on the moral issues involved without legislating a course of action independent of personal reflection and the contingencies of his own cases" (2004:55). For Mitchell, however, Genius's method of reading "is incomplete without the transition from text to meditation and action" (2004:17). He continues: "Until it is realized in the conscience or conduct of a practitioner as a form of life, exemplary morality exists only *in potentia*" (2004:17). It is true, of course, that the ethical utility of a text can only be realized in action. But Mitchell's analysis runs the risk of taking us too far from the text. Within the text, Genius's exempla serve only to provoke discussion on moral issues and to prompt Amans to dutifully request more exempla.

For Amans (and the reader), the tale of Phebus and Daphne is a relatively easy lesson. Genius has given us Ovid's tale, but simplified it to make it more useful as an exemplum on the vice of "folhaste" and related topics. The same cannot be said for the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone. And yet, Genius still has little use for allegorical interpretations. For this tale especially, they were abundant, and must have been difficult to avoid. Gower's audience would have known two standard allegorical readings of the tale: a negative reading (such as that found in Giovanni del Virgilio's *Allegorie Librorum Ovidii Metamorphoses*), in which the lovers represent cupidity, uxoriousness, spiritual sloth, and a concern for the pleasures of this world over those of the next; and a positive reading (such as that found in Pierre Bersuire's *Ovidius Moralizatus*), where Alcyone

becomes the Christian soul, suffering the loss of Ceyx, who represents Christ.¹⁴ Obviously, there is nothing to prevent that same audience from reading those interpretations into Gower's text, even if Genius does not make them explicit. But the *possibility* of an allegorical reading does not mean that one is present in the text (if that were the case, then Virgil really would be a prophet). How, then, does Genius interpret this tale?

The moral of this tale, for Genius, is twofold. Prompted by Amans's remark that he has no use for sleep, Genius initially tells the tale as an exemplum on the utility of dreams. After stating this moral, however, Genius adds a cautionary note: "Bot slowthe no lif underfongeth/Which is to love appourtenant" (*CA* IV.3130-31). This second moral—that sloth and love are incompatible—ties the tale of Ceyx and Alcyone in with the rest of Book IV and initiates the discussion that will lead to the next tale, "The Prayer of Cephalus." The first moral, on the utility of dreams, speaks to the larger issues of the text. Amans's entire confession, we might recall, began with a dream-vision-like scenario, and the absence of any mention of Amans falling asleep hardly negates the strong parallels between dream-vision literature and *Confessio* as a whole. Even if the events narrated by Amans are not part of an actual dream, there can be no doubt that they are removed from Amans's ordinary existence in some manner. By instructing Amans on the utility of dreams, Genius is looking ahead to Book VIII, when Amans (and the reader) will be expected to learn from these otherworldly encounters. Genius's lesson also looks back to the opening lines of the *Confessio* (*CA* Prol.1-11), in which Gower praises the utility of old books and their role in the transmission of learning. Books, like dreams, are fictions that need to be interpreted before they can yield any sort of knowledge, and both are often dismissed as trivial, or, even worse, as harmful.

Readers of the *Confessio* can benefit from Genius's lesson on sloth and the utility of dreams, or they can bring their own ethical interpretation to the tale, because, as with Phebus and Daphne, Genius's interpretations are not prescriptive but suggestive. He tells the tale in a way that would support his reading, but he also leaves numerous openings for further ethical inquiry. For example, if we want to read Alcyone in a wholly positive light, then we have to consider the idea that her impatience could be a virtue (or, at least, not a vice). Ceyx told Alcyone he would be gone two months, and "whan the Monthes were ago,/The whiche he sette of his comynge" (*CA* IV.2960-61), Alcyone immediately began praying for knowledge of her husband's whereabouts. How do we reconcile this with Genius's teachings on patience in Book III? Or, to take a closer example, can we draw a parallel between Alcyone and Phyllis?

¹⁴ The allegorical readings of Ceyx and Alcyone are discussed in Hiscoe (1985:375-76) and Harbert (1988:91).

And how does that affect our reading of Ceyx if at all? Surely we cannot blame him for dying. But can we blame him for leaving? Genius certainly provides more explanation for Ceyx's departure than he does for that of Aeneas (also in Book IV), but that does not mean the reasons for this departure are entirely clear either. We do not, for example, learn why his brother was turned into a goshawk, or why Ceyx has to travel to pray to the gods (especially since Alcyone prays quite successfully without leaving home). Genius gives us enough information to attempt our own interpretation of the text, but not enough to control the outcome of that interpretation. He tells the story of Ceyx and Alcyone in a way that highlights the ethical concepts being discussed at this point in the confession, the "horizon of possible outcomes," in Mitchell's (2004:59) terms, at the same time as it encourages an exploration of the other moral topics that can be found in the tale.

The purpose of ethical reading, for the interpreter who chooses to practice this method, is that it enables the reader to derive moral content from even the most salacious texts, to "sanitize" the text, as Kaster says, while still keeping it intact. After learning to read in this manner, the student would most certainly be expected to apply these skills in ways that reach beyond the scope of the classroom. The ideal reader is one who can learn from the moral lessons that he finds in the texts, and who, in turn, will become a teacher himself (maybe not in the literal sense of the word, but in some way). As Gower himself says in his prologue, we are taught by old books, and therefore, we should compose our own books to leave for future generations. "Upon those who understand this essential character of books," Yeager writes, "a certain implicit responsibility is conferred, to perpetuate the transmission of learning" (1981:41-42). The *Confessio Amantis* is Gower's contribution to this learning process. Gower called upon the old stories and the reading methods that he would have been familiar with from his own schooling, and set them side by side with conventions drawn from the love literature of his own age, to produce a didactic text in which he (as Genius) teaches himself (as Amans) about the process of ethical reading and ethical judgment.

Writing on Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus*, Simpson argues that the "real meaning" of this poem –and of Gower's *Confessio*– "is to be located not so much in its represented action as in the experience it provokes in its reader" (1995:203). If this is the case, then it might appear that the "real meaning" of the poem will forever elude our grasp. As Mitchell reminds us,

Gower is the first 'reader' of his own text to open it up to complex and opposing responses. He says he writes in such a manner "Which may be wisdom to the wise/And pley to hem that lust to pleye" (*CA* Prol. 84-85*), even if it should seem palpable to us which response 'moral' Gower would prefer. (2004:41)

The text encourages multiple (and often contradictory) responses, particularly among readers who know their Ovid, so to speak. Everything in the

Confessio has a history –from Genius and Amans to the stories drawn from pagan and Christian literature– and even if Gower does not always make use of those histories, he certainly makes no attempt to conceal them, since a large part of his project depends on the transfer of knowledge from authors to readers, and from teachers to students (or, to put it another way, from confessors to penitents). At the same time, we should recognize that “the experience it provokes in the reader” is “its represented action.” In other words, what the *Confessio* portrays is that same process of reading and learning that readers are expected to experience, particularly if you keep in mind Coleman’s (2002) argument that the “readers” of the *Confessio* may just as well have been “listeners.” Amans listens to Genius. He learns to read (i.e. interpret), and his understanding of each story is quite obviously influenced by his knowledge of the topic at hand and the way in which he applies the story to his own experience. In other words, since it is the very process of reading that is enacted in this poem, we might say that the experience provoked in the reader, which, for Simpson, constitutes the “real meaning” of the poem, is itself an important part of what Gower is doing in the *Confessio*, and is, therefore, situated as much in the text itself as it is in the person who happens to be reading it.

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