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## In Search of the Perfect Spouse: John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* as a Marriage Manual

JOHN GOWER'S *CONFESSIO AMANTIS* is many things—a social commentary, a poem of consolation, and a treatise on the seven deadly sins, to name a few.<sup>1</sup> It is also an exploration of love, in which Venus' priest Genius leads the woeful, rejected lover Amans through an exercise of confession and in so doing teaches him about love by means of a series of stories that demonstrate both its positive and its negative aspects. Paul Strohm, in fact, reminds us that the “reordering of the unruly passions of a representative lover” is Gower's literal topic in this work and warns against interpretations that downplay “the pertinence of Gower's discussion of love.”<sup>2</sup> And according to J.A.W. Bennett's seminal article on the poem, Gower's concept of “honeste love” represents marriage.<sup>3</sup> Among other things, Bennett notes the centrality of the “Tale of Rosiphelee” in *Confessio Amantis*. In this tale, a king's daughter who has no interest in love and marriage meets a ghostly lady who has been condemned to ride a lame, black horse behind a bevy of women on white steeds each May for having that very attitude towards love during her life. After this encounter, Rosiphelee changes her

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dhira Mahoney for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> “Form and Social Statement in *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979): 28.

<sup>3</sup> See “Gower's ‘Honeste Love’,” *Patterns of Love and Courtesy: Essays in Memory of C.S. Lewis*, ed. John Lawlor (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1966) 107–21.

tune, and Genius makes his point explicit: he says, “thilke love is wel at ese, / Which set is upon marriage.”<sup>4</sup> These lines seem to reflect Gower’s attitude throughout the poem. Therefore, it is possible to read *Confessio Amantis* as a marriage (or conduct) manual, similar to works such as *The Goodman of Paris*, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, and Christine de Pizan’s *The Three Virtues*, in that it teaches proper behaviour for spouses through the use of both direct advice and exempla.

Reading a work of literature such as this as a marriage manual is not without precedent. Ordelle G. Hill and Gardiner Stillwell read Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Parlement of Foules* in similar fashion in their article, “A Conduct Manual for Richard II.”<sup>5</sup> They argue that Chaucer may have written this poem partly in order to encourage a young Richard II, who may have been experimenting with homosexual relationships, to marry and produce heirs to the throne. Significantly, the first recension of *Confessio Amantis* is dedicated to the same monarch, who had apparently requested “som newe thing” of Gower (P.51\*),<sup>6</sup> and who, at the time of the poem’s completion, was still a young man and, though wed, still childless.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, *John Gower’s English Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS es 81–82 (London: Oxford UP, 1900–1901) 4.1476–77. All future references will be noted in the text.

<sup>5</sup> See “A Conduct Book for Richard II,” *Philological Quarterly* 73 (1994): 317–28.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars have speculated as to whether the meeting of Gower and Richard II on the river Thames represents a real occurrence or is Gower’s invention; see R.F. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1990) 267–68. In addition, much work has been done on the change in the dedication between recensions of the poem (from Richard II to Henry IV) and the political implications thereof; see, for example, Lynn Staley, “Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture,” *Speculum* 75 (2000): 68–96. The asterisk in the parenthetical reference indicates that these lines appear only in the first recension of the poem.

<sup>7</sup> Childbearing, of course, was one of the purposes for marriage in medieval Christian doctrine, and J.A.W. Bennett, in discussing Gower’s promotion of marital fecundity, notes that the character Genius had been the “sponsor of reproduction” in the *Roman de la Rose* (“Honeste Love” 117–18). The reasons for Richard II’s childlessness (and his possible sexual preferences) are as much a matter for speculation as the historicity of his encounter with Gower on the Thames, but rumours are as important as facts in the context of public response. In any case, homosexuality is not a major theme in the *Confessio*, but it appears in the story of Iphis, a girl who is disguised as a boy to save her from her father’s vow that he will kill his child if it is not a son. When this female “son” is given in marriage to

Whether or not the counsel on marriage in *Confessio Amantis* is directed specifically towards Richard II, its relevance in the poem is clear. For although R.F. Yeager asserts that the king is “intended as [the poem’s] primary audience” (268), Judith Ferster, following Anne Middleton, speaks of *Confessio Amantis* as “public poetry,” written both to instruct the king and to engage a wider public.<sup>8</sup> And if concepts of kingship and proper rule can provide material for public debate,<sup>9</sup> so much the more is marriage a subject with wide application in a public sphere. Indeed, marriage was a hot topic in the Middle Ages. Marital advice appears in works ranging from literature to sermons, and Gower can be seen as continuing the conversation rather than as changing the subject.<sup>10</sup> Further, asserting the centrality of marriage to *Confessio Amantis* does not lessen the importance of the political and philosophical elements of the poem; in fact, many scholars have noted the continuity between Gower’s moral and political ideas: good government begins with self-government; private morality leads to public morality.<sup>11</sup>

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a woman, Cupid takes pity on the innocent couple and turns Iphis into a man so that they may live together without offending nature (4.451–505). By extension, then, this tale implies that Iphis and Iante *were* offending nature when they lived together as two women and that homosexual desire must be replaced by heterosexual, marital love in order to bring the tale to a happy conclusion (without blaming Iphis or Iante for their pre-transformation, parentally imposed homosexual relations). It is hard to imagine a gentler, less judgmental way for Gower to get his point across—whether or not the point was aimed at anyone in particular.

<sup>8</sup> See Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1996) 180–81; and Anne Middleton, “The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II,” *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94–114.

<sup>9</sup> For a consideration of *Confessio Amantis* as a “mirror for princes,” see Ferster, *Fictions of Advice* 108–36; Staley, “Making Culture” 68–96; and Richard Firth Green, *Poets and Princepleasers: Literature and the English Court in the Late Middle Ages* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980) 142–43.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the portrayal of marriage in medieval literature, including *Confessio Amantis*, see, for example, Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975); for a discussion of marriage sermons, see Rüdiger Schnell, “The Discourse on Marriage in the Middle Ages,” trans. Andrew Shields, *Speculum* 73 (1998): 77–86.

<sup>11</sup> J.A.W. Bennett, for example, says, “‘honest love’ in wedlock, *caritas* in the commonwealth, are wholly compatible ideals” (“Honeste Love” 121); see also Russell Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower’s “Confessio Amantis”* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1978) xxi.

The marriage stories in *Confessio Amantis*, moreover, form a pattern separate from the consideration of the seven deadly sins that provides the formal framework for Genius' treatise. For example, Genius tells one of his marriage stories—the "Tale of Ceix and Alceone"—in what is essentially an aside. In the middle of a discourse on sloth, he and Amans start talking about dreams, and their conversation reminds Genius of a story he just happens to know about a dream that proved to be prophetic. And so he tells the aforementioned tale although it has nothing to do with the particular sin they've been discussing (4.2928–3123). Likewise, Genius uses the tangential excuse of illustrating an appropriate response to the sin of envy in order to tell the "Tale of Constance," whose protagonist just happens to exemplify marital fidelity (2.587–1598).<sup>12</sup> While the inclusion of these stories (and others that are similarly incidental to the main framework) may be accidental from Genius' point of view, it is surely intentional from Gower's standpoint, for these stories reveal a carefully arranged pattern of virtues and vices relating to marriage.

Significantly, the last and longest story in *Confessio Amantis*, "Apollonius of Tyre," brings many of the themes of the other marriage stories together. This story makes up the bulk of Book Eight, which is devoted to incest. Incest has come up several times already in Genius' tales, and it is striking that Gower has substituted incest in particular for lust in general in his discussion of the seven deadly sins. This focus on incest may seem anomalous—unless we consider incest to be, unlike lust, the direct opposite of marriage. Lust may occur regardless of one's marital state, but incest is a type of love that by church law cannot end in matrimony.<sup>13</sup> Incest thus

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<sup>12</sup> Winthrop Wetherbee notes the importance of the roles of wife and mother in Gower's portrayal of Constance in his "Constance and the World in Chaucer and Gower," *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989) 72.

<sup>13</sup> See Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic* 217–18 for a discussion of the Latin etymology of incest ('unchaste'), which "broaden[s] the meaning of the term beyond the sexual" (217); see also Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit* 165. This argument is not incompatible with mine; in the broad sense, incest as the lack of virtue, sexual or non-, contributes to the breakdown of marriage, as will be shown in this essay. In its narrow sense, as Yeager points out, incest is "the ultimate crime against family" and therefore "emblematic of all forces destructive of community and the state" (217). By way of contrast, Georgiana Donavin argues that the incest narra-

provides a foil for the “honeste love” Gower extols and a representation of the unnatural, unfruitful love that, according to Genius, always brings sorrow.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, in the conclusion to *Confessio Amantis*, Amans appeals to Venus one last time for relief from his suffering. If we consider that his love, while not incestuous in any narrow sense, is unlikely to lead to marriage because of Amans’ age, impotence, and failure to attract the interest of his beloved, Venus’ cure—removing his thoughts of love completely—makes sense in terms of the ideals Gower has set up. Incidentally, Venus also intervenes in one of the stories in *Confessio Amantis*, when she answers Pygmalion’s plea and turns the statute he has created (and fallen in love with) into a woman. Although loving a statue may seem to be particularly unpromising, in this case, the statue’s transformation allows the relationship to end in marriage: Genius specifies that the “colde ymage” becomes “a lusti wif” (4.422, 424). Implicit in these contrasting examples is the message that fruitful love (love with marriage potential) should be developed, while unfruitful love (love without marriage potential) should be avoided.<sup>15</sup> Remembering that Venus is the one who has sent Genius to instruct Amans in the first place makes the message all the more significant.

Adding, then, the results of Amans’ petition to Venus to the themes of Genius’ final tale to the pattern of stories that contrast

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tives in *Confessio Amantis* expose the lewdness of Cupid, Venus, and their Court of Love, and that through these tales Amans is led to replace love with the loftier goal of contemplation. She uses the “Tale of the Three Questions” and the “Tale of Constance” as examples of how incestuous attraction is transformed into Christian devotion (*Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower’s Confessio Amantis* [Victoria, BC: U of Victoria, 1993]). However, I find it significant that the protagonists of both of these tales end up married.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the “Tale of Canace and Machaire,” in which a brother and sister commit incest without knowing better, see Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic* 254–55; Donavin, *Incest Narratives* 33–39; and Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001) 80–84. Although Gower portrays the pair sympathetically and condemns instead the father who keeps them confined together and then reacts violently to their misdeed, their end is nonetheless a sorrowful one (3.143–336).

<sup>15</sup> Kelly explains the seemingly contradictory fact that Gower does not explicitly condemn adultery every time it appears in a tale by noting that “an exemplum is normally told to illustrate one lesson alone, without much worry about whether it contradicts earlier or subsequent lessons” (*Love and Marriage* 131).

good and bad spouses gives us a work that says quite a bit about Gower's views on the matrimonial state. But although many critics acknowledge Gower's concern with marriage, few have discussed what Gower has to say about it. Yeager, for example, notes the consistency of Gower's views on marriage but limits his discussion to the poet's treatment of sexuality in marriage and the role of marriage in society.<sup>16</sup> A close look at the positive and negative examples of married couples in Genius' stories reveals much more than that: these stories also demonstrate what qualities Gower thinks a good spouse should have and what qualities make a spouse a bad one. In this paper, I will give a brief overview of five recurring positive qualities: honesty, compassion, mutual counsel, fidelity, and appropriate displays of affection.<sup>17</sup>

The "Tale of Florent," in which Florent agrees to marry an old hag in exchange for the answer that will save his life, provides an example of a marriage built on honesty, especially when compared with its analogues. It is significant that in Gower's version of the popular tale, the condition of marriage is made explicit *before* Florent decides to accept the loathly lady's offer. In contrast, in Chaucer's Wife of Bath's Tale, the character who is Florent's equivalent merely agrees to fulfil the hag's next request, whatever it may be, in exchange for the much-needed answer; it is not until after he has given that answer to Guinevere's court that she steps forward and claims marriage as her forfeit. This significant difference illustrates that there is no element of deceit in Gower's loathly lady. Florent exhibits a similar sense of honesty. Unlike his analogue, who is claimed by the loathly lady before the court and forced to fulfil his vow under protest, Florent returns to make good his promise of his own volition, for no other reason than that his honour demands he be true to his troth.<sup>18</sup> Genius explains,

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<sup>16</sup> See Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic* 246–60.

<sup>17</sup> These qualities correspond remarkably well to what Rüdiger Schnell identifies as "the five characteristics of a just and legitimate marriage" that are discussed in a medieval marriage sermon by Peregrinus: temperance and honesty, love, mutual help, fidelity, and education of children ("Discourse on Marriage" 771). I was especially struck by this correspondence because Schnell's article was not brought to my attention until after I had drafted this essay.

<sup>18</sup> For a discussion of "trouthe" in marriage, see Kelly, *Love and Marriage* 123–26.

He wolde algate his trowthe holde,  
 As every knyght therto is holde,  
 What happ so evere him is befall. (1.1715–17)

Being thus true to his vow wins him a wise and ultimately beautiful spouse, and the honesty of both parties bodes well for this marriage.

The “Tale of Mundus and Paulina” is another example of the importance Gower places on honesty between spouses as an element of a good marriage. In this tale, the duke Mundus falls in love with the beautiful but married Paulina. When he perceives that she will remain true to her husband no matter what he does to convince her to do otherwise, he enlists the aid of a couple of priests of Isis, who ask Paulina to await the god Anubis at the temple one night in order to serve him. Paulina immediately goes to her husband and tells him everything. Together they agree that she ought to obey the god’s behest. Although they are both deceived by Mundus’ plot, they do not deceive one another. Later, when Paulina discovers that she has been tricked into sleeping with Mundus, she quickly and truthfully tells her husband what the matter is when he asks why she is weeping. Essential to this kind of honesty is trust. Paulina shows that she trusts her husband by thus confiding in him, and he clearly trusts and believes her without question. In modern terms, their lines of communication are open.

Paulina’s husband demonstrates another important element of a good marriage: compassion. On the advice of his friends, he sets aside thoughts of revenge upon Mundus “til that sche [his wife] was somdiel amended” (1.1003) and instead focusses his attention on cheering her up, catching her up in his arms and holding her close as he swears to his wife that she has not fallen in favour because of what has been done to her. Such assurance shows true concern for his wife’s well-being.

Wives as well as husbands show compassion for their spouses by giving aid in times of trouble, sometimes at the cost of great personal sacrifice. Alcestis, for example, willingly suffers death in order to save her husband’s life when she learns from Minerva that she can take his sickness upon herself (7.1917–43; 8.2640–46), while Alceone accompanies her husband Ceix to the sea “forto don him felaschipe” (4.2950), despite her sorrow at his imminent departure. The king’s brother’s wife in “The Trump of Death” pleads “with

sobbinge and with sory teres" (1.2182) before the king for her husband's sake when he has fallen into disfavour and been threatened with death. Here, it is her compassion itself—the sorrow she feels at her husband's fate—that becomes a way for her to help him out of his difficulty.

Not only do good spouses show compassion to one another, they are also shown to be compassionate people generally. In the "Tale of Constance," for example, Alla learns by a counterfeit letter that his son is deformed. He writes back with instructions to keep the child safe, regardless (2.931–96). Although his instructions are not carried out, his intentions are compassionate. By way of contrast, King Ligdus tells his wife Thelecuse that he will kill her baby if it turns out to be a girl ("The Tale of Iphis" 4.451–57). This kind of unreasonable demand undermines the trust in their marriage and leads to deceit and division, thus demonstrating one possible result of a lack of compassion in a marital relationship.

The "Tale of Albinus and Rosemund" provides an even starker contrast to the qualities of both compassion and honesty. Albinus, in his pride, tricks his wife into drinking from a cup he has had made from the skull of her father, whom he has slain in battle. This is a clear betrayal of trust on Albinus' part; Genius emphasizes that Rosemund "nothing wiste / What Cuppe it was" (1.2551–57) until after she has drunk from it (at which point Albinus reveals the cup's origin, thinking it a good joke). Not only does Albinus deceive his wife in this action, but he also shows absolutely no consideration for her feelings, valuing his own pride above her dignity and filial affection. Rosemund, though wronged, is just as duplicitous. Rather than communicating her displeasure to her husband, she feigns sickness and proceeds to plot against his life—the ultimate betrayal of the trust that should exist between two people who have given their lives into one another's keeping. Rosemund also deceives Helmege, who becomes her instrument of revenge, by taking her maid's place in his bed in a ruse to obtain his aid. That the two of them raid the king's treasury on their way out of town caps off their treachery (since robbery is yet another form of dishonesty), and one can only speculate as to whether Rosemund's maid had intended to place her lover on permanent loan with her mistress or whether she was also deceived. In any case, this destructive and eventually destroyed marriage demonstrates how important both honesty and compassion are to a successful marriage by indicating what may happen when they are absent.



Gower also demonstrates that good husbands and wives build on honesty and compassion through mutual counsel. There are several examples of good spouses talking to each other. Paulina and her husband, for example, decide together that she should obey the behest of the “god Anubis.” (Although their decision is bad, based as it is on false information, their marriage is good.) Florent is likewise blessed because of his willingness to listen to his wife’s counsel—both before and after they are married. And the husband and wife in “The Trump of Death” decide together what course of action to pursue. On the other hand, the Steward’s wife, in the “Tale of the King and the Steward’s Wife,” gives good counsel to her husband, but he ignores it. She, an example of a good wife, ends up married to the king, while the Steward, who not only refuses to listen to his wife but also uses her for his own gain—thus putting his own interest over hers—is in the end punished for his behaviour. The text makes his folly clear: “Lo, there a nyce housebonde, / Which thus hath lost his wife for ever!” (5.2818–19).

A fourth quality essential to a good marriage—rather an obvious one, actually—is fidelity, and there is no more appropriate example of this virtue than Constance, who remains devoted to her husband Alla despite the long separation that results when her jealous mother-in-law forges a letter that results in Constance’s being put to sea in a boat without oars. Alla shows faithfulness as well. Upon learning of Constance’s fate, he says “that he schal nevermore be glad”:

Til that he wiste how that sche spedde,  
Which hadde ben his ferste wif. (2.1304–07)

He remains true to her, and she to him, until they are reunited in Rome, years later. In truth, all of the good husbands and good wives discussed above are true to their spouses, and the other attributes I’ve mentioned so far—honest communication, loving concern for the other’s well-being, and willingness to counsel together—are all both reasons for and demonstrations of fidelity.

Gower also gives us examples of unfaithful spouses. In the “Tale of Tereus,” Tereus, as a favour to his wife, returns to her homeland to bring her sister Philomena over for a friendly family visit. However, during the return voyage he allows this sister’s beauty

to dim his memory of his wife and rapes her.<sup>19</sup> Tereus' unfaithfulness is accompanied by cruelty: having raped Philomena, he cuts out her tongue to keep her from telling the tale (5.5551–5700). Similarly, in the "Tale of Orestes," Climestre, having yielded to the advances of Egistus during her husband's long absence, does not scruple to plot his murder when he returns (3.1885–2195). Again, Gower shows that a spouse who betrays the marriage covenant sexually usually has other serious faults as well.

The last attribute in this discussion of marriage is the appropriate display of affection, including (though not limited to) physical affection. Gower specifically notes, for example, that Alla kisses Constance when they are reunited (2.1520–23). There is, in fact, quite a lot of kissing in *Confessio Amantis*. When Alcestis returns to Ametus with the news that she can keep him from dying by taking on his disease, she takes him in her arms and kisses him (7.1937–39). And when Alceone finds that both she and her drowned husband have been turned into birds,

Upon the joie which sche hadde  
 Hire wynges bothe abrod sche spradde,  
 And him, so as sche mai suffise,  
 Beclipte and keste in such a wise,  
 As she was whilom wont to do. (4.3101–05)

That each of these kissing-scenes coincides with a significant event strongly suggests that these embraces are expressions of emotion (joy at meeting or sorrow at parting, but above all love for husband or wife) rather than physicality for its own sake. Tereus, who rapes his sister-in-law Philomena, provides a contrast. His lust, described in turn as heat, fire, and rage, turns him into a "tirant raviner" (5.5627) whose violent and unnatural behaviour is compared to that of a wolf.

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<sup>19</sup> Gower clearly equates infidelity with forgetfulness. Describing the rape, he says Tereus "foryat he was a wedded man" (5.5631). Similar language is applied to Theseus, who "hath al foryete the goodschipe / Which Adriane him hadde do" and leaves her behind on an inland after promising to marry her (5.5428–29). On the other side, Kurt Olsson locates the faithfulness of the four virtuous wives (Alceone, Alceste, Lucrece, and Penelope) from Amans' vision of "Youthe" in part in their "command of memory"; see "Love, Intimacy, and Gower," *The Chaucer Review* 30 (1995): 83.

Gower certainly approves of sexual relations within marriage, but implies that they should be based on true affection between spouses—and kept under control. The “Tale of Tobias and Sara” emphasizes this point. Sara, a particularly beautiful and virtuous maiden, has several suitors with the same motive as the one who wants to marry her “more for liking, / To have his lust, than for weddunge” (7.5325–26). In each case, when they reach for her,

Noght for the law of Mariage,  
Bot for that ilke fyri rage  
In which that thei the lawe excede (7.5351–53),

they fall dead on the spot. Finally Sara weds virtuous Tobias, who “his lust so goodly ladde, / That bothe lawe and kinde is served” (7.5362–63). Tobias thus represents Gower’s ideal of chaste marriage, which does not require abstinence, but rather self-control. The law of marriage mentioned here, while specifically referring to the duty of spouses to share their bodies with one another, may also extend to include the template Gower has set up for a good marriage—that is, one that includes honesty, compassion, fidelity, and so forth. Sexual relations based on mutual affection and sincere concern for the other, all within the bounds of marriage, would certainly meet Gower’s criteria of serving both law and nature.<sup>20</sup>

Appropriate displays of affection also include the sorrow at separation and joy at meeting that many of the good spouses exhibit. Alceone and her husband, for example, both weep when they part from one another (4.2956–59), Lucrece worries about her husband’s safety and wishes for his presence (7.4816–35), and Constance faints for joy when she hears of Alla’s return (2.1341–47). In Gower’s ideal world, tears, fainting, kissing, and embracing are all meaningful outward signs of inner devotion to a spouse.

To conclude my exploration of the Gower’s portrayal of marriage in *Confessio Amantis*, I’ll turn to one of the last stories Genius tells. As mentioned above, the tale of “Apollonius of Tyre” can be seen as a summary of what has gone before.<sup>21</sup> Many of the

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of Gower’s various uses of natural law, see Kurt Olsson, “Natural Law and John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 11 (1982): 229–61.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of how this tale also provides a review of the seven deadly sins, see Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic* 218–29.

qualities that have defined good and bad spouses (and good and bad marriages) in previous stories show up again here in the contrasting examples of Antiochus (the bad husband who demonstrates deceit, cruelty, unwillingness to listen to counsel, lust, and unfaithfulness) and Apollonius (the good husband who demonstrates honesty, compassion, openness to counsel, appropriate physical affection, and faithfulness).

First we are presented with a history of Antiochus, which has relatively little relevance to Apollonius' story beyond demonstrating Apollonius' discernment and giving him cause to flee the area and thus to set out on a long voyage. More important than this jump-start of the plot proper, Antiochus provides a clear foil to the virtuous Apollonius. The tale begins with Antiochus appropriately enough mourning his dead wife. However, he soon transfers his affections to his daughter. The unnaturalness of this union (harking back to the horror of Tereus' rape of his wife's sister) has several symptoms. First, Antiochus (like the Steward) ignores the protests of his daughter-wife. Second, he is secretive and deceitful (think of Albinus, Rosemund, and Helmege). Third, his unnatural union leads him to be cruel—to unfairly slay his daughter's suitors—in order to protect himself from discovery (again, think of Tereus).

With this quintessentially bad husband in mind, we can turn to Apollonius, who in many ways represents the ideal spouse.<sup>22</sup> If we consider just the last three points, we can begin to see the contrast. First, Apollonius recognizes his daughter's wisdom when she is brought in to console him (even though he initially refuses to speak to her), much as Florent heeds the counsel of the loathly lady. Second, the only thing he is secretive about is his identity as a prince; keeping that hidden allows him to demonstrate his virtue, kindness, and learning without a predisposition in his favour.<sup>23</sup> Third, Apollonius demonstrates compassion by giving grain to the

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<sup>22</sup> Speaking of Gower's Apollonius, Wetherbee says, "the center of his life is his marriage, and his ultimate vindication seems to be due almost entirely to a conjugal love in which natural feeling and social obligation are perfectly integrated" ("Constance and the World" 68).

<sup>23</sup> In this he resembles the emperor's son in the earlier "Tale of the False Bachelor," who wins the sultan's ring on the basis of his valour before revealing his high birth (2.2501–781).

starving people of Tarsus and by the way in which he treats his wife (both before and after they are married). More generally, he is (like Alla) faithful to his wife's memory during their long separation and her supposed death. She is (like Constance) in turn faithful to him, even when she believes him to be drowned.

Also, their marriage itself is good, because of the virtue of both spouses and because of the love and trust that exist between them (think of Paulina and her husband). They, like many of the other good spouses in the text, show great sorrow at being separated and great joy at being reunited. Apollonius' wife faints "for pure joie" (8.1852) when she sees him (as does Constance in a similar situation). Apollonius, for his part, "tok hire in his arm and kiste" (8.1863) (much like King Alla). The two of them joyfully return to Pentapolim to be crowned together, and Genius sums up the moral of the story, which may be considered the moral of the whole of *Confessio Amantis*, at least as far as marriage is concerned:

Lo, what it is to be wel grounded:  
 For he hath ferst his love founded  
 Honesteliche as forto wedde,  
 Honesteliche his love he spedde  
 And hadde children with his wif  
 And as him liste he ladde his lif;  
 And in ensample his lif was write,  
 That alle lovers myhten wite  
 How ate laste it schal be sene  
 Of love what thei wolden mene. (8.1993–2002)

Gower's ideas about marriage seem to come together here. A good marriage, based on the existence of honesty, compassion, fidelity, and joy in being together (evidenced by appropriate expressions of physical affection), is the proper end for virtuous lovers.

Thus, *Confessio Amantis* works well as a marriage manual, in that it both espouses marriage and demonstrates characteristics that make marriage work. Like *The Goodman of Paris*, *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, *The Three Virtues*, and other such conduct books, it uses stories to teach principles of proper behaviour in the context of marriage. *Confessio Amantis* differs from these works, of course, in that it is not explicitly a conduct manual

and in that it is not directed exclusively or primarily towards women, as most conduct manuals are.<sup>24</sup> We might also notice that most of the virtues Gower portrays in his marriage stories are reciprocal—he expects honesty, compassion, counselling, physical affection, and fidelity from both husband and wife.<sup>25</sup> Conduct manuals geared towards women, on the other hand, tend to emphasize unquestioning obedience to one's husband, a non-reciprocal virtue that is not entirely absent from *Confessio Amantis* but is certainly not foregrounded.<sup>26</sup>

*Confessio Amantis* may not be only, or even mostly, about marriage, but between the poem's explicit commendation of the marital state, the themes of its culminating tale, "Apollonius of Tyre," and the pattern of stories that contrast good and bad spouses and highlight particular virtues, it has a whole lot to say about holy matrimony. When these teachings on marriage are seen in the context of the poem's concern with morality, they become an important part of Gower's overall message of self-government for kings and commoners alike. When they are seen in the context of the poem's literal subject matter—the confessions of a lover—they become central to Gower's overall exploration of the meanings and manifestations of "honeste love."

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<sup>24</sup> In this, *Confessio Amantis* is more like a medieval marriage sermon. Such sermons, according to Schnell, offer "practical, everyday advice" for both husbands and wives and acknowledge that "both sexes are responsible for the success or failure of their marriage" ("Discourse on Marriage" 772, 781). Schnell further distinguishes between medieval discourse on women and discourse on marriage, noting that the misogyny of the former does not necessarily extend to the latter (776–78).

<sup>25</sup> By way of contrast, Roberta Bux Bosse writes of the "double standard with a vengeance" (31) in *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, especially as it applies to expected sexual conduct, in "Female Sexual Behavior in the Late Middle Ages: Ideal and Actual," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 10 (1984): 15–31.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of marriage based on "likeness in nature and difference in power" (81) in Gower's works, see Olsson, "Love, Intimacy, and Gower" 71–100.