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Medicine, Passion and Sin in Gower

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This essay discusses the presentation of wrath and envy, primarily in the Middle English poem the *Confessio Amantis*, but with some references to the French *Mirror of Man*, as a means of exploring the fourteenth-century English poet John Gower's understanding of the body, medicine and sin. Wrath and envy present interesting case studies as Gower claims that they are the most unnatural of the seven sins. Yet wrath and envy are richly embodied in both his poetry, as well as contemporary medical and pastoral literature as will be shown. The essay argues for the hitherto unnoticed importance of medicine in understanding Gower's poetry. I would specifically like to address the question of whether wrath, envy and other passions cause or are metaphors for, sin, in Gower's representations of these passions. By attending to human physiology, Gower invites the reader to recognize their shared human weakness, particularly in reference to the passions (emotions) and the predisposition to sin: his text thus fosters co-passion or compassion in his reader, as I will argue.

Among the medieval poets, the late fourteenth-century John Gower is probably one of the least studied in his relationship to medicine or science. A study published in 1926 of *Medieval Sciences in the Works of Gower* concludes that there is "very little medicine" in his poetry (Fox 27). Although this opinion has not been challenged in later Gower studies, I would like to argue for Gower's knowledge of medicine, specifically in his descriptions of wrath and envy. Gower presents these sins as a means of understanding the body, medicine and sin, primarily in his Middle English poem *Confessio Amantis*, and to a lesser extent in the *Mirror of Man*, an allegorical French poem. Both works were written in the late fourteenth-century and reflect contemporary medical and pastoral

writing on the sins. Furthermore, critical questions are illuminated by putting his work in a context of medieval medicine, such as the ethical status of nature and what control people have over their own nature.

Confessio Amantis spans more than thirty thousand lines and consists of a prologue and eight books. Seven of these books consider a different sin framed around a lover's confession, and a further book summarizes the knowledge needed by a king to rule well. Throughout the text, the body is referenced as representative of the disordered macrocosm. In the Prologue, the poet describes how the body is divided from others through the separation of countenance and character, but it is also divided within its very physiology. Original sin is blamed for this division and disease. Scholastic and late medieval theologians characterize the source of physical and spiritual illness resulting from the disordered humors and the separation of sense and intellect that accompanies the Fall (Ziegler, "Medicine and Immortality" 201-242). Or as Gower writes in the Prologue to the *Confessio*: "the vice of alle dedly sin/ Thurgh which division came inne" (Vol. I 1009-1010). The poet dismisses protestations to "fortune" or "constellacion" as the cause of this state of affairs in seeming agreement with pastoral theologians who warned against such reasoning as a defense or excuse for sin in their manuals (Craun 35-45). For Gower, man is the cause of his own "well and wo." He writes: "That we fortune clepe so/ Out of the man himself it groweth" (Vol. 1 548-549). While rejecting the stars as a cause, his poetic expression also appears to belie his argument for human responsibility. If this impetus, the source of happiness and sadness, is organic and "groweth" from within the human, it would suggest a pathological or physiological basis.

If motivations are pathological, then how responsible can people really be for their sins? Elsewhere in the poem, the poet provides conventional medieval understandings of complexion or physiology as an explanation for dispositions to certain kinds of outlooks and behavior. In Book VII, he enumerates the four humors and their basis for particular ailments and dispositions. For example, cholera "makth a man be enginous/ And swift of fote and ek irous;/ Of kontek and folhastifnesse/ He hath a riht gret besinesse" (Vol. 3, Book 7 433-436). In what would seem a contradictory model to that indicated by his harsh words about human responsibility, the narrator here is advised to confess to love-drunkenness without shame. His confessor can tell by his physiognomy that he is predisposed to this behavior. (Vol. III, Book 6 104-111) Physiognomy was one tool at the educated confessor's disposal to determine culpability for sin. Thus penitential handbooks advise confessors to practice spiritual as well as material diagnosis: that is, they should

study complexion and physiognomy to determine a sinner's predisposition to particular sins (Langum 204-206).

To understand responsibility for sin, the poet suggests, we must understand the relationship of sin to the body and its sicknesses. *Confessio Amantis* is replete with references to the "maladie" of lovesickness and the wounds of sin conventional in romance and confessional literature (Wack; McNeill and Gamer 44-50). The conceit of the poem is structured around both the associations of illness with love and cure with confession. Recognizing that he has a "maladie" that "myhte make a wis man madd" (Vol. I, Book 1 131), Amans pleads to Venus as "mannes hele" (Vol. 1 133). Venus encourages him to "schew" his "seknesse," emphasizing that she will not be able to administer medicine if he conceals his "sore" or disguises his symptoms (Vol. 1, Book 1 185). However, following the mandates of Lateran IV that all secular medicine be preceded by pastoral medicine – the cure of confession (Lateran IV "Canon 22") – Venus calls for her priest to "hier this mannes schrifte" (Vol. 1, Book I 197). It is conventional confessional enquiry, whereby the priest both interrogates and educates the confessant, that presents the poet with an opportunity to explore the seven sins and their various forms. The sins of envy and wrath are described as particularly unnatural or against "kind" as they have no instinctual prompting or urging in nature yet cause great destruction to man's moral and physical being. *The Mirror of Man* condemns envy as "sur tous mals . . . desnatural" ["the most unnatural of evils"] (3757). Likewise, in *Confessio Amantis*, the poet writes of envy: "for ay the mor that he envieth,/ The more agein himself he plieth" (Vol. 2, Book 2 3145-3146). Likewise, wrath is "forein" to Nature's law in that it works against the basic drive toward self-preservation. Throughout his exposition on wrath, the Confessor emphasizes its destructiveness. He states: "to kinde no plesance/ It doth, bot wher he most achieveth/ His pourpos, most to kinde he grieveth" (Vol. 2, Book 3 8-10).

Diseases were one of many schemata designed to help priests and parishioners understand and memorize the seven deadly sins as part of the broad pastoral movement of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Wenzel 154-156). Gower's use of disease to describe the sins in the *Mirror* participates in this tradition, as well as the trend toward more detailed and naturalistic portraits of the vices in the later Middle Ages (Katzenellenbogen 44). The reforms of the third and fourth Lateran councils required annual auricular confession and generated new genres of confession and penance, as well as those of instruction and exemplification, which flourished in the vernacular in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Boyle 30-43; Shaw 44-60). At the same time, technical manuals, such as physiognomies, encyclopedias, surgical manuals and

medical recipe books, were also being translated into the vernacular (Getz 1-17). The rise of these two discourses – religious and technical – did not occur in a vacuum. The historian Joseph Ziegler remarks that the filtration of medical material into religious discourse in the later Middle Ages “served to make medicine a significant cultural agent” (*Medicine and Religion* 177). With this in mind, scholars have been attending more to how medieval literary texts, such as *Piers Plowman*, deploy medical imagery (Gasse 177-197).

Gower’s interest in the inter-relation of the medical with the ethical is apparent in *The Mirror of Man* where the seven deadly sins are described in terms of diseases and various physical ailments. In this allegorical French poem focusing upon the effects of sin upon the world, some of the seven deadly sins are figuratively correlated and others materially correlated to illnesses. For example, the poet figuratively compares pride to frenzy as it “tolt la resoun enterine” [“removes reason entirely”] (2526). Gluttony is ascribed two sets of physiological effects. Gluttony is first figuratively compared to “loup royal,” a disease which as he explains uses up medicines without producing a cure just as gluttons devour and waste animals without ever being sated (8521). Then, gluttony’s material symptoms are described: it impairs reason, causes pain in the belly and bowels, leads to gout, makes the mouth stink and so on (8596-8604). Sin is thus symbolically and physically the cause of specific diseases and general symptoms.

Thus, in the *Mirror*, the medicalized body serves as both a useful analogy for metaphorical exemplification and a material site for the ravages of sin. Reflecting upon similar ideas in *Confessio Amantis*, Gower addresses fundamental questions about human responsibility for sin. Wrath and envy present particularly interesting case studies as Gower claims that they are the most unnatural of the seven sins. Yet wrath and envy are embodied in both his poetry, as well as contemporary medical and pastoral material. In Gower’s conception, we may ask, does human physiology serve as a metaphor for or a cause of sin, for example? And what implication does this have for his general view of the causality of and freedom from sin? By attending to human physiology, Gower prompts the recognition of shared human weakness, particularly in reference to the passions (emotions) and the predisposition to sin, and thus co-passion or compassion.

Before looking at the effects of envy and wrath upon human health, I would like to put these sins in context: how unnatural did medieval medical and pastoral writers consider them to be? In evaluating human physiology, medieval medicine recognizes the division of “natural” forces such as complexions, humors, organs, operations, and the circulation of air and “non-natural” things, those things which are not “es-

sential parts of the body or of life itself." These non-naturals include rest, diet and the passions, or emotions. (Luke Demaitre 106). The passions are most likely organized into four in medieval contexts: joy, anger, sadness and fear (Knuuttila, "Medieval Theories" 57-58).

Wrath is almost invariably included among the passions, and envy is often at times included as a passion in its own right or discussed as a species of sadness (Aquinas *Theologica* II. IIae., Quaest. 36. Art. 1). One of the most widely cited sources on the passions in the later Middle Ages, Haly Abbas, describes the passions or "accidents of the soul" as forces, which cause the movements of the vital spirits and heat either towards or away from the heart. Anger, for example, was thought to cause the spirits and heat to rush from the heart to the extremities, heating and drying the body and causing swelling. Envy's physiology produces the opposite effect: it draws heat to the heart (Knuuttila, "Medieval Theories" 56-58). Medieval medicine holds that both animals and people are subject to passions. However, where passions lead animals, the former are subject to reason in human beings. As the English encyclopaedist Bartholomaeus Anglicus writes, "wrappe, fitynge, indignacioun, enuye, and suche passiouns" "ariseþ in opir bestis . . . withoute discrecioun. But in men suche passiouns buþ ordeyned and iruled by certeyn resound of wit" (*On the Properties of Things*, Vol. 1 107).

Theologians also elaborate upon the functioning of the passions, particularly in descriptions of the effects of the Fall on human nature. While passions are not a consequence of original sin, they were originally entirely under the complete control of the rational will. Thus, there were no spontaneous reactions of the sensitive soul before the Fall (Knuuttila, *Emotions* 180). After the Fall, passions are spontaneous, physiological reactions to stimuli. Both Augustine and Aquinas emphasize the physical and physiological in relation to the passions in postlapsarian man. In particular, Aquinas maintains that physical changes, such as an increase or decrease in the heart-rate or enlargement or contraction of the heart, always accompany the passions (Knuuttila, *Emotions* 242). It falls to reason to rule the passions. When reason fails, then passions are occasions for sin (254).

However, these discussions were not limited to the ancient philosophers, scholastic theologians and medical authorities. Contemporary references to passions in vernacular texts suggest a general cultural understanding of the role of the passions: although distinct from sins, they were impulses that needed to be controlled lest they prompt sins. For example, Chaucer's translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 1380) mentions the "fourre passiouns" with the warning not to allow them to "overcomen" or "blenden the" (*Boece* 1.m.7.20). In a sermon for the Day of the Martyr, John Wycliffe (d. 1384) writes that there are

“four passiouns in a mannis soule” in which lie both “synne” or “mede” depending on how they are “reulid” (187).

This subject is tackled more systematically by the English bishop Reginald Pecock (d. c. 1461). Although writing later than Gower, Pecock provides a clear vernacular account of how to distinguish between passion and sin, or spontaneous and willful reactions, and the particular problem that wrath and envy present, which is consistent with earlier vernacular accounts. Drawing upon the etymology of passion, he describes passions as “suffryngis of þe wil” rather than “actijf or wirching deedis of oure wil” (Pecock 94). Passions are stirred by sense impressions – what is said or heard, for example. The will may suffer more owing to humoral imbalance; i.e., if a man predisposed to a choleric temperament then he must suffer more anger and struggle more to control it. However, passions themselves are ethically neutral: “neipir moral vertues neipir moral vicis.” As neither free will nor reason is involved, people should be neither praised nor blamed for them (96).

Following from his extensive discussion of the passions, Pecock explicitly distinguishes between passion and vice. He argues that anger is a passion while wrath is a vice: “angir is a passioun of þe wil or of þe louþer sensual appetit, and wraþ is a fre deede chosen freli by þe wil” (Pecock 110). Because of their rootedness in the humors and complexions, passions cannot be wholly eradicated. However, in addition to the will and reason, the passions can be controlled through the balance of the humors, which is accomplished through diet and the other non-naturals. For example, Pecock writes that anger can be controlled through the manipulation of the choleric humor and envy through the manipulation of the melancholic humor (112-113).

Although wrath and envy as passions may be unavoidable conditions of human physiology, it does not follow that they are perceived as “natural” or healthy by most medieval medical or moral authorities. Because of the perceived inevitability of wrath, Aristotle argued that anger is a natural impulse and seeks to preserve the self (Knuuttila, *Emotions* 29). However, most writers generally condemn wrath and envy as counter to natural law and personal health. While moralists present all the seven deadly sins as self-destructive to some extent, descriptions of these sins, and wrath in particular, are often more physiological in nature, and it is less clear whether what is being described is the vice or the passion or a conflation of the two.

The Mirror of Man offers both figurative and material implications for how envy works upon the body. Figuratively, envy is like leprosy: “De l’alme la figure/ Envie fait desfiguré . . . Envie fait la purreture/ Des oss a celui qui l’endure.” [“Envy disfigures the appearance of the soul . . .

Envy makes rottenness of the bones of him who bears it"] (3769-3772). Later in the passage, envy is compared to consumption:

Ethike Envie est comparé.
 C'est un desnaturel ardour,
 Que deinz le corps u s'est entré
 De son chalour demesuré
 Arst comme ly fieus dedeinz le four;
 Dont ensechist du jour en jour
 Le cuer ove tout l'interiour,
 Que dieus en l'alme avoit posé;
 Siqu'il n'y laist du bon amour
 Neis une goutte de liquor,
 Dont charité soit arousée. (3817-3828)

[She is a fire, which, within the body she has entered, burns with excessive heat like fire in the stove; whereby day by day she dries up the heart with everything God has placed in it, so that she leaves there not a single drop of the liquor of good love with which to water charity]

Here, the implications are both figurative and material. While the liquor symbolizes the nourishment and flourishing that love provides, the burning and drying of the heart describes the physiological process of consumptive envy, or the disease consumption and the passion envy.

The *Confessio* describes envy as an illness where the afflicted is "sek of another mannes hele" (Vol. 2, Book 2 14-15). More specific descriptions of symptoms reflect a medical understanding of consumption. An envious cardinal has fire burning in his heart. Amans confesses that his "hertes thoght withinne brenneth" (Vol. 2, Book 2 23). In a vivid example, Confessor personifies Envy as the whore who pours the drink that makes the heart burn. He goes on to describe how the envious are destroyed by this internal fire, which causes a fatal dryness in the body. While consumption is not named in the *Confessio*, these symptoms of "hot envy" parallel those found of consumption in the medical tradition.

Medical texts describe how consumption dries the body's natural moisture. Due to lesions and tumors in the lungs, hot air cannot be filtered from the heart, so the heat grows and grows and the body wastes away through dryness (Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Vol. 1 375-6). Gower also offers a pathological description of Wrath. In *The Mirror*:

Ire est en soy toutdis divise,
 Car de soy mesmes ne s'avise
 Et de l'autry nul garde prent,

D'enflure dont elle est esprise:
 Au cardiaque l'en divise
 Le mal de luy, car tristement
 Fait vivre, et trop soudeinement
 Le cuer ensecche tielement
 Q'a luy guarir n'est qui souffise;
 Nounpas le corps tansoulement
 En fait perir, mais asprement
 Destourne l'alme a sa juisse. [5089-5100]

[Anger is completely described in the swelling that inflames her, for she does not consider herself and pays no attention to anyone else. Her malady is comparable to heart disease, for it results in a sad life and soon dries up the heart so that no one is capable of curing it. Not only does she ill the body, but she also harshly perverts the soul to her will.]

Here we see medical understandings of wrath as causing swelling and dryness as the vital spirits rush to the extremities. In line with Pecoock, Gower understands that wrath is first a disorder of the body that becomes a disorder of the soul as the will consents to the sin.

In the *Confessio*, the Confessor defines the vice of wrath in terms of its heat. Ire "is/ That in oure Englissh Wrathe is hote,/ Which hath hise words ay so hote,/ That all a mannes pacience/ Is fyred of the violence" (Vol. 2, Book 3 21-24). The association of wrath and fire is consistent in medieval discussions of both wrath the sin and wrath the passion and reflects a figurative, if not physiological consensus, as to how wrath reigns over the human. Angry dispositions are associated with an imbalance of the hot quality, the fire element and the choleric humor.

Gower's representation of envy and wrath as both destructive to others and to the self is echoed in other pastoral texts (Diekstra 437-441). A sermon in a fifteenth century sermon cycle preserved in London Palace MS 392 also makes a figurative comparison of envy to leprosy in that it corrupts the soul (f. 172v). Wrath is also pathologized in pastoral literature in terms of self-destruction, unnatural heat and fever. For example, the compiler of the pastoral *Book of Vices and Virtues* describes the wrathful person as one who "werre wiþ himself" (25). The writer continues with an account of physiological decline and death:

when wrappe is ful in a man, he turmentep his soule and his body so þat he may haue no sleep ne reste; and operwhile it bynemep hym mete and drynke, and makeþ hym falle in-to a feuere, or in-to suche a sorwe þat he takeþ his dep. Þis is þe fier þat wastep al good of þe hous (25).

This particular correlation of fever and wrath is found in many medieval homilies and relies upon both metaphorical and material understandings of how wrath impacts the body (Ziegler, *Medicine and Religion* 109-111). Medical sources claim that anger and excess cholera cause continuous fever, putrifying the blood and burning up the interior and exterior of the body (*On the Properties of Things*, Vol. 1 389-390). One medieval homilist uses the medical explanation in his exegesis of John 4:46 ("And there was a certain ruler whose son was sick at Capharnaum"). This sick boy's fever is shown to represent sin, specifically wrath. The sermon explains that both fever and sin cause swelling: the first in the body and the second in the soul (Ziegler, *Medicine and Religion* 110-111). However, given the physiological implications of wrath the passion to cause fever and swelling, the metaphorical use of medicine to describe sin blends with the more literal use of medicine to describe passion.

Likewise, moral action is used to medical purpose in medical passages. In his late medieval surgical manual, Lanfrank of Milan writes of the dangers wrath poses to the patient, advising the surgeon to "entempre he þe herte of him þat is sijk, for to greet wrappe makip þe spiritis renne to myche to þe wounde & þat is caus of swellynge" (*Lanfrank's "Science of Chirurgie"* 17). Here, Lanfrank's sense of "entempre" is physiological in the sense of achieving humoral balance by pacifying the physiological effects of anger, but has an ethical application. One way of tempering the body and countering anger is to actively guard against it with the will. That anger causes swelling leads some writers to use it as a simple synonym for swelling. For example, in a passage on ague fever, one medical writer instructs the doctor to "anonynte hym firste with popilion, if he hafe anger in his lyuer" (*Liber de Diversis Medicinis* 61). To feel anger is a material event in medieval medicine, something physically evidenced, instantiated in the body.

The co-existence of the physiological and the ethical in these medical and pastoral texts provides a context for understanding Gower's use of medicine in relation to the seven deadly sins. In his medically specific descriptions of wrath and envy as passions, Gower extends beyond the figurative to suggest a more material relationship between the body and ethics. But this raises the question: do these allusions to wrath and envy as passions contradict the argument for human responsibility and culpability?

While his descriptions invoke the passions, "passion" is a word seldom used by Gower. The Prologue to the *Confessio*, however, instructs "for as the man hath passioun/ Of seknesse, in comparisoun/ So softren othre creatures" (Vol. 1, Prologue 915-917). Animals and people have the capacity to suffer passion in common. In another passage, thinking of "other mennes passioun" is invoked as a prompt to compas-

sion and pity, specifically to ward off wrath (Vol. 1, Book 3 2721-2722). The polysemousness of Middle English might open an ambiguity of meaning here (Bishop 37-41) between whether Gower refers to passion as "suffering" or as "emotion." However Pecock's discussion of the passions as "suffryngis of þe wil" underscores the common passive reception and interchangeability of suffering and the emotions, passion and the passions.

While Gower may not use the word "passion" to denote the physiological forces of emotion in the body, he does distinguish nature from reason, that which distinguishes men from beasts. Yet as has been demonstrated by some studies of the poem, reason is often shown to fail against nature, particularly in the realm of love, where it seems an irrepressible force (White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness* 200-206).

The ultimate supremacy of reason and nature drives an important critical debate concerning the conclusion of the poem. In Book 8, after tens of thousands of lines of protest from the Lover, who seems to be a lovesick young man, we learn that he is actually old. He is goaded by Venus into recognizing his physical incapacity and the absurdity of his love. Two interpretations have been offered for this: first that the Lover's own nature is ultimately the cure for his natural desire. The Lover is simply too old to love and is drawn to choose a more spiritually perfect love in the face of his bodily deficiency (Burrow, "The Portryal" 17). Second, the poem has been understood to fail to provide a consistent argument (White, "Division and Failure" 613). Despite being able to physically love, the Lover still actively desires to love against reason. In my view, Gower encourages his readers to find in passion an opportunity for exercising compassion (cf. Rosenfeld 99). Gower's use of medicine encourages the reader to recognize physiological forces at work in human choices and actions, if not ultimately excusing him for bending to these forces.

By way of conclusion, I turn to one tale offered in *Confessio's* book on Envy. After describing the ravages of Envy, the Confessor claims that "ther is physique for the seke,/ And vertus for the vices eke" (Vol. 2, Book 2 3163-3164). This offer of medicine precedes the famous medieval tale of Emperor Constantine (Rawcliffe 245). In this tale, Constantine is struck with leprosy for which he is advised to bathe himself in the blood of children as a cure. As convention dictates, he is moved to pity and the story ends with his conversion and spiritual cure, as well as miraculous physical cure. Gower uses the story to reflect upon human bodily weakness. Constantine makes conventional reflections upon death as the great leveler of humanity. He remarks upon human vulnerability to pathology and illness:

Mai non eschuie that fortune
Which kinde hath in hire lawe set;
Hire strengthe and beaute ben beset
To every man aliche fre,
That sche preferreth no degree
As in the disposicioun
Of bodili complexioun. (Vol. 2, Book 2 3250-3256)

This understanding of human pathology assigns to nature responsibility for the gifts of their particular physiological balance or “bodili complexioun,” such as strength and beauty. Different types of bodily complexions, as the passions, are unavoidable facts of being human. However, from here he reasons:

And ek of soule reasonable
The povere child is bore als able
To vertu as the kignes sone;
For every man his oghne wone
After the lust of his assay
The vice or vertu chese may. (Vol. 2, Book 2 3257-3262)

Constantine’s compassion is ultimately a recognition of human passion, the capacity to suffer physically and emotionally. This compassion enables him to recognize the choice of acting upon reason against the interests or instincts of the body. It is this compassion that leads to his own healing, and which possibly presents a cure to the diseased world presented in the Prologue.

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