

“Foryet it thou, and so wol I”:
Absolving Memory in
Confessio Amantis

by Paul D. Stegner

JOHN Gower structures *Confessio Amantis* on the sacrament of confession and, more particularly, on medieval penitential handbooks in order to treat the problem that “love is falle into discord.”¹ Confession is doubly inscribed in the *Confessio*—externally to repair “divisioun” and internally to lead Amans toward self-awareness (pro. 992). Just as Gower’s style of “the middel weie” between “lust” and “lore” (pro. 17–19) is grounded in his intent to repair the external division caused by religious, political, and social discord, the poem’s penitential structure is designed to remedy the lover’s internal division and to function as an “[e]n[sam]ple” for readers (pro. 196). Amans identifies his confessional exchanges with Genius as capable of restoring his debilitated senses and providing a means to confess satisfactorily. Indeed, Amans expresses anxiety that his sinfulness has so afflicted his senses that he might fail to deliver a complete confession to Genius. He fears that he might “mistime / Mi schrifte” because he is “destourbed / In al myn herte” and “schal I moche thing foryete” but suggests that he can confess satisfactorily if Genius “my schrifte oppose / Fro point to point . . . / Ther schal nothing be left behinde” (1.220–27). Central to Genius’s confessional program, then, is the rehabilitation of Amans’s memory.

The final events of the *Confessio* point to the effectiveness of Genius’s penitential method in restoring Amans’s memory. Amans may continue to be a reluctant penitent after the end of “The Tale of Apollonius,” but once Cupid pulls out the arrow from his heart and Venus gives him a

¹ Pro. 121. All quotations from the *Confessio Amantis* are taken from *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899–1902) and will be cited in the text by book and line.

wondrous mirror that reveals his age, he experiences a conversion and asks for and receives absolution from Genius, who explains, "Thou hast ful pardoun and foryifte" (8.2897). He then withdraws "Homward a softe pas y wente" (8.2967). Critics have variously interpreted Amans's memorial state at the conclusion of the *Confessio* as demonstrating a "re-gained . . . sense of personal kingdom," because "he now prays, as poet, for common profit, and right use of memory, and good governance" and a reintegrated Augustinian "spiritual memory."² In such interpretations, the successful restoration of memory at the end of the poem reflects Gower's literary project. Yet for all of Genius's care to revitalize the lover's memory and to reconcile his interior spiritual condition, his absolution of Amans appears to undo this project: "Sone, as of thi schrifte / Thou hast ful pardoun and foryifte; / Foryet it thou, and so wol I" (8.2895–97). Whereas Genius typically associates forgetting with sinful behavior, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar's Dream, it here becomes a positive, essential mechanism for Gower's reintegration into the Christian economy.³ Genius's command to forget demonstrates the limits of memory: spiritual transformation cannot occur without the appropriate remembering of sin, but the process can only be completed through the productive forgetting of the desire to sin. In this essay, I argue that Gower represents a recuperative form of forgetting in order to signal the difficulty of reconciling auricular confession with narratives of desire, and I reveal the deep pressure between the penitent's memory of past transgressions and his reformation through confession.

Forgetting amatory desire functions as a necessary conclusion to Amans's memorial rehabilitation because of Gower's treatment of the complex relationship between confession, amatory desire, and reason. From the prologue to the *Confessio*, Gower establishes an oppositional relationship between love and reason: "love . . . doth many a wonder / And many a wys man hath put under" (pro. 75–76).⁴ He figures this

² Russell A. Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 182; and Katherine R. Chandler, "Memory and Unity in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Philological Quarterly* 71 (1992): 26.

³ See Russell A. Peck, ed., *Confessio Amantis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), xvii; and J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2004), 69–70. On Genius's attention to Amans's sin of forgetfulness, see Patrick Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), 49–70.

⁴ On this oppositional relationship between *kinde* and reason, see Hugh White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174–219. See also Ellen Shaw Bakalian, *Aspects of Love in John Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 3–12.

conflict in terms of the tensions between the "lawe of kinde" (natural law), which he associates with Venus and venereal love, and the exercise of right reason (1.31). Gower represents the limitations of *kindely* love separated from reason by associating it with blind, irrational lust and by defining it as fundamentally implicated in incestuous desire. Incest functions, as C. David Benson observes in his discussion of the brother-sister incest in the "Tale of Canace and Machaire," "not [as] a wild aberration of sexual love, but its essential image."⁵ Amans's participation in this incestuous venereal economy thus intensifies his internal discord between *kinde* and reason and, as a consequence, prevents his transformation from the lover Amans to the spiritually focused John Gower. The confessional process in turn seeks to mediate this relationship between the amatory and the spiritual by effecting closure and regulating memory. In Gower's poetic project, moreover, this process functions not only as an individual model for unifying and healing Amans/Gower's fractured self but also as a political model for reforming the fragmented English kingdom.

By representing a private, structured confession in the *Confessio*, Gower reflects in many ways larger developments in the administration and reception of the sacrament of penance.⁶ Gower's treatment of confession is situated within the larger penitential reforms initiated by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). According to the *Omnis utriusque sexus*, the twenty-first canon of the council,

Omnia utriusque sexus fidelis postquam ad annos discretionis pervenerit, omnia sua solus peccata saltem semel in anno fideliter confiteatur proprio sacerdoti; et injunctam sibi poenitentiam pro viribus studeat adimplere, suscipiens reverenter ad minus in Pascha Eucharistiæ sacramentum . . . alioquin et vivens ab ingressu ecclesiæ arceatur et moriens Christiana careat sepultura.

[Every *fidelis* (faithful member) of either sex shall after the attainment of years of discretion separately confess his sins with all fidelity to his own priest at least once in the year: and shall endeavour to fulfill the penance imposed upon him to the best of his ability, reverently receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at

⁵ Benson, "Incest and Moral Poetry in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 105. See also Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 140–41; Peck, *Kingship*, 165–66; and A. C. Spearing, "Canace and Machaire," *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993): 214.

⁶ For a discussion of *exempla* in penitential manuals, see Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval Literature* (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press 1952), 131–32.

least at Easter . . . otherwise let him during his life be repelled from entering the church, and when dead let him lack Christian burial.]⁷

The effect of the Lateran penitential reforms on the laity and the clergy is difficult to overestimate. Henry Charles Lea contends that the canon "is perhaps the most important legislative act in the history of the Church," and Pierre Payer observes, "Of its many reforming decrees the twenty-first canon of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) likely had the most effect on the lives of ordinary people and on the parish clergy alike."⁸ The medieval Church now expected the faithful to confess annually and the clergy to administer the sacrament satisfactorily, a requirement that led to the emergence of penitential manuals (*Libri poenitentiales*) and writings for academics (*Summae confessorum* or *Summa de casibus conscientiae*).⁹

Along with the Lateran Council's requirement for annual confession, medieval writers articulated an etiquette of confession that was designed to encourage contrition and a proper interior disposition and to avoid equivocation, concealment, and disobedience. Summaries of the components of a good confession began to appear in mnemonic verse.¹⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas's so-called sixteen conditions in his commentary on book 4 of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* provides one of the most popular and influential examples of the form:

Sit simplex, humilis, confessio, pura, fidelis,
Atque frequens, nuda, discreta, libens, verecunda,
Integra, secreta, lachrimabilis, accelerata
Fortis, et accusans, et sit parere parata.

[Let the confession be simple, humble, pure, faithful,
And frequent, unadorned, discreet, willing, ashamed,
Whole, secret, tearful, prompt,
Strong, and reproachful, and showing readiness to obey.]¹¹

⁷ Qtd. in Oscar D. Watkins, *A History of Penance*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, 1920), 2:733 and 2:748.

⁸ Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1896), 1:230; Payer, "Sex and Confession in the Thirteenth Century," in *Sex in the Middle Ages: A Book of Essays*, ed. Joyce Salisbury (New York: Garland, 1991), 126.

⁹ See Thomas Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 28–53.

¹⁰ See Bella Millett, "Ancrene Wisse and the Conditions of Confession," *English Studies* 80 (1999): 193–215.

¹¹ Qtd. in Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 106–7.

The insistence on the conditions that the confession be *simplex* and *accelerata* indicates the importance of regulating the presentation of sins as much as possible. In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's Parson cautions against elaborate confessions—"Thow most tellen it platly [flatly, directly], be it never so foul ne so horrible"—and treating confession lightly: "Thow shalt nat eek renne to the preest sodeynly to tellen him lightly thy synne, as whoso telleth a jape or a tale, but avysely and with greet devocioun."¹² In the late medieval penitential tradition, the Dominican Sylvester Prierias Mazzolini similarly indicates in his *Summa summarum* the importance of making a simple confession.¹³ These conditions emphasize the seriousness of the penitential process and inculcate the confessant's obedience to his or her ghostly father. On a deeper level, the penitentials' directions to confessors and confessants to handle sins without adornment suggest an awareness of the risks involved in the recollection of sins.

Sexual sins in particular posed the most significant obstacle to the penitential process because they threatened to transform the linear, future-oriented momentum of confession into a recursive movement in which former transgressions retain their appeal. According to medieval penitentials, confessors were required to question penitents about sexual sins but to treat them with caution. Accordingly, an early fourteenth-century manual supplies only general questions regarding sexual sins: "Haue 3e synned with enie sengle womman, wife, wydowe, with enie of youre kynne or enie of youre goostly children?"¹⁴ Priests were especially directed to avoid asking questions that could induce the penitent to commit further transgressions. When asking about marital sexual relations, for instance, priests were often warned about questioning the penitent about improper sexual positions unless the penitent implied that he or she had transgressed in this area. "Manuals of penance," writes Payer, "attempted to chart a middle course by advising confessors to be cautious in inquiring about the issue, but, if the evi-

¹² *The Parson's Tale*, 10.1021 and 10.1023. Quotations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Subsequent quotations will be noted parenthetically. R. Po-chia Hsia notes that Spanish missionaries in the Philippines were annoyed by Tagalog confessants who "discourse[d] . . . endlessly on various themes" rather than follow the prescriptions for a proper confession (*The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 180).

¹³ Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 107.

¹⁴ Maria Luisa Maggioni, ed., *Un Manuale per Confessori del Quattrocento Inglese (Ms. St. John's College Cambridge S. 35)* (Milan: Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, 1993), 51.

dence suggested they should, to pursue the questioning to determine whether there was an infringement of the correct form."¹⁵ The appropriate response to the memory of past sins is, to use Chaucer's Parson's phrasing, "sorweful remembraunce of the good that he hath left to doon heere in erthe, and eek the good that he hath lorn" (10.231). In confessional space, then, recollections of past transgressions must be restricted and channeled into their proper context—the economy of sin—before reconciliation to the Church and God is possible. Ideally, this reorientation accommodates the past in the present and moves the penitent forward in his or her spiritual life.

In the *Confessio*, Genius conforms to the etiquette of confession by commanding that Amans offer a plain and complete account of his past sins.¹⁶ Genius insists, "let nothing be forsake, / Tell pleinliche as it is befall" (1.210–11); and Amans requests that Genius "oppose" his confession "[f]ro point to point" (1.225–26) because he may be unable to remember all of his sins. By guiding Amans from point to point through the penitential rite, Genius offers a "systematic" examination of Amans's conscience but one that will also avoid excessive adornment or amplification.¹⁷ The phrase "Fro point to point," which can mean "item by item," "in detail," or "in every way," takes on a special significance in the *Confessio* (*MED*, 5.d. and 6.d.). On the one hand, it articulates the connection between Genius's method for administering the rite of private confession and the rehabilitation of Amans's memory. On the other hand, Gower uses the phrase to define the purpose of his method at the beginning of book 1:

To hem that ben lovers aboute
For point to point I wol declare
And wryten of my woful care,
Mi wofull day, my wofull chance,

¹⁵ Pierre Payer, *The Bridling of Desire: Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 77–78. See also Payer, "Sex and Confession," 133; and Diane Watt, "Sins of Omission: Transgressive Genders, Subversive Sexualities, and Confessional Silences in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Exemplaria* 13 (2001): 549. John Burgh's *Pupilla oculi* (1385) similarly warns confessors against "overly explicit" questions; see Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Penitential Theology and Law at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century," in *A New History of Penance*, ed. Abigail Firey (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 277.

¹⁶ The illustrations of Amans's confession to Genius in various manuscripts conform to the etiquette of confession prescribed by medieval penitential manuals. See Jeremy Griffiths, "*Confessio Amantis*: The Poem and its Pictures," in *Gower's "Confessio Amantis": Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 163–78.

¹⁷ J. A. Burrow, "The Portrayal of Amans in *Confessio Amantis*," in *Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Minnis, 9.

That men mowe take remembrance
Of that thei schall hierafter rede.

(1.72–77)

The completeness of Gower's point-to-point narrative allows a manageable form for the reader's memory to process the material.¹⁸ This organization corresponds to the traditional conception of memory as a storehouse or treasurehouse in which an individual orders mental images and then proceeds from place to place to retrieve them.¹⁹ This structure not only provides the reader with a mnemonic strategy for arranging the narrative past of the poem but also seeks to alter the reader's perspective on the material. As Steele Nowlin observes, "Gower's reorganization of narratives of the past is received into the memory where it is assessed and reorganized and . . . becomes a new past," a project that "can in fact restructure the present through the re-configuration of the past."²⁰ Accordingly, Gower connects the activation of memory to a renewed awareness about the limitations of courtly love. The reader is to remember Gower's woefulness, which he underscores by repeating "wofull" three times in two lines, from the newly fashioned perspective of an aged, impotent lover at the conclusion of the poem. By the same token, Genius's "pointz of schrifte" (1.288) will enable a confession that will "shewen everychon" (1.246) so that Amans "schalt knowe and understonde / The pointz of schrifte how that thei stonde" (1.287–88). By defining where Amans stands in relationship to the Seven Deadly Sins, Genius claims that his exemplary method will

¹⁸ In *Mirour de l'Omme*, Gower similarly connects the phrase to the proper exercise of memory. At the conclusion of the treatment of the Seven Deadly Sins, the narrator explains,

Ore est a trere en remembrance
Comme je par ordre en la romance
Vous ai du point en point conté
Des vices toute la faisance.

[Now one should recall how I have told you the story in order, from point to point, about all the doings of the vices.] (18373–76)

English translation of the *Mirour* is taken from John Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme* (*The Mirror of Mankind*), trans. William Burton Wilson, rev. Nancy Wilson Van Baak (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992), 252.

¹⁹ On the storehouse structure of memory, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 1–27; and Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33–45.

²⁰ Nowlin, "Narratives of Incest and Incestuous Narratives: Memory, Process, and the *Confessio Amantis*'s 'Middel Weie,'" *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35 (2005): 238 (italics in the original). See also Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 67.

rehabilitate Amans's interiority and be able to lead him to a "conclusion final" (1.249). The announced style and structure of the *Confessio*, both in terms of Gower's narrative frame and the confession itself, hold forth the promise of easily understandable and manageable content that will be conducive to the proper use of memory. Just as Gower establishes the significance of his point-to-point narrative, he anticipates Genius's requirement that Amans confess "pleinliche" by advertising that his narrative will be told "pleinly" (1.71). Despite the shift from the public to the private at the opening of book 1, then, Gower uses these stylistic and structural parallels to advance the shared goals of Amans's private confession and the broader political vision of the poem.

At the beginning of book 8, however, Genius deviates from his previous narrative method by including a history of incest and only one *exemplum*, "The Tale of Apollonius," to treat incestuous desire. Genius's inclusion of incest would be an appropriate subject for confession because treatments of incest are often included in medieval penitentials.²¹ In *Handlyng Sinne*, for instance, Robert Mannyng calls incest the "werste" of the seven manners of lechery and states that "[y]e ner syb she ys hys kynde, / Ye more plyght shal he þere fynde" (7369–74).²² But Genius's concentration on incest to the exclusion of the other types of lechery raises questions about the progress of Genius's confessional program. First, Genius proceeds to treat incest in spite of Amans's protest that "[s]o wylde a man yit was I nevere, / That of mi ken or lief or levere / Me liste love in such a wise" (8.171–73). Second, and more significantly, the complex structure of the "Tale of Apollonius" directly challenges Amans's memory, for, as Genius explains, it is "a tale in remembrance, / Which is a long process to hier" (8.268–69). Apollonius's crisscrossing voyages across the Mediterranean and the doubling and even tripling of several of the characters—Apollonius/Antiochus/Athenagoras, Antiochus's daughter/Thaise, and Antiochus's wife/Apollonius's wife—frustrate any attempt to establish a clear perspective for interpretation. The tale contains a "confusing narrative," and its "compression . . . makes the story as difficult to remember in all its details as it is to forget

²¹ See Elizabeth Archibald, "Incest in Medieval Literature and Society," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 25 (1989): 2; Georgiana Donavin, *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower's "Confessio Amantis"* (Victoria: University of Victoria Press, 1993), 21; and Jean-Charles Payen, *Le Motif du repentir dans la littérature française médiévale des origines à 1230* (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 104–5.

²² Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Sinne*, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983), lines 7373–74.

in its entirety.”²³ The tale requires Amans to interpret and to organize narrative material—the very abilities that he could not perform reliably at the beginning of the poem.

Concluding Amans’s confession with a sustained treatment of incest nevertheless functions as a test case for Genius to measure the rehabilitation of Amans’s spiritual condition and memory. The history of incest and the “Tale of Apollonius” provide Genius with the occasion to refute Amans’s protest that he has never been so *wylde* as to be affected by incestuous desire. Indeed, at the beginning of book 8, Genius comments on Amans’s lack of proper understanding—“nou I see / Thi word stant evere upon o place” (8.184–85)—and his misguided willingness to “excuse / Of love such as som men use” (8.187–88). Genius’s central aim in book 8 is to bring Amans to the realization that his internal discord is a result of the connection between his amorous desire and incest. Amans’s successful withdrawal from sinful desire depends on his ability to perceive *kinde* through the lens of reason. Following Aquinas, Gower’s conception of the law of *kinde* corresponds to both natural appetite (*appetitus naturalis*) and sensual appetite (*appetitus sensitivus*) and the law of reason to rational appetite (*appetitus rationalis*).²⁴ The function of the appetites is involuntary, but acting upon them through the will (*voluntas*) is voluntary. As Aquinas states, “Potest enim homo velle et non velle, agere et non agere, potest etiam velle hoc aut illud, et agere hoc aut illud. Cuius ratio ex ipsa virtute rationis accipitur. Quidquid enim ratio potest apprehendere ut bonum, in hoc voluntas tendere potest.” (For man can will and not will, act and not act; again, he can will this or that, and do this or that. The reason (for) this is seated in the very power of the reason. For the will can tend to whatever the reason can apprehend as good.)²⁵ Original sin does not impair the freedom of the will, but it does disorder the appetites through the “disordered affectivity” of *concupiscentia*, which leads the “natural desires and appetites to pursue their own objects in disregard of the proper order of reason.”²⁶ Concupiscence cannot control the will, but it struggles against

²³ Larry Scanlon, “The Riddle of Incest: John Gower and the Problem of Medieval Sexuality,” in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville: Pegasus Press, 1998), 115.

²⁴ Aquinas treats the appetites in *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae 77–83 and the will in 1a2ae 8–17. Quotations from Aquinas are taken from the *Summa Theologiae*, ed. and trans. Thomas Gilby, 60 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964–76), and translations are taken from *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. and trans. Anton C. Pegis, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1945).

²⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a2ae 13.6.

²⁶ Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 48.

the will toward desired objects. A similarly “antagonistic” relationship in the *Confessio* exists between *kinde* and reason because of “Nature’s lack of concern for morality” in the natural sex drive.²⁷ The project for Genius in book 8 is to reveal that the “*amoris causa*” [cause of love] is the conflict between reason and *kinde* (book 8, margin 3).²⁸

Over the course of the *Confessio*, Genius gradually reveals that incest functions as a synecdoche for amatory desire. However, early in the poem, in the “Tale of Canace and Machaire” in book 3, Genius refrains from condemning brother-sister incest because of his divided allegiance to Venus.²⁹ He describes their incestuous union as originating from their childhood living arrangements—“While thei be yonge, of comun wone / In chambre thei togedre wone”—and classifies brother-sister incest as a natural outgrowth of the law of *kinde* that Venus governs (3.149–50). By attributing their desire to Venus, who “is Maistresse / In kinde and techeth every lif / Withoute lawe positif,” Genius identifies their incestuous union with natural love (3.170–72). Likewise, in the catalogue of pagan gods in book 5, Genius expresses his reluctance to reveal the incestuous roots of amatory desire. When Amans asks his confessor to “declare” (5.1380) the origin of Venus and Cupid, Genius expresses his unwillingness:

Mi Sone, I have it left for schame,
Be cause I am here oghne Prest;
Bot for thei stonden nyh thi brest
Upon the schrifte of thi matiere,
Thou schalt of hem the sothe hierie.
(5.1382–86)

As with the endogamous relationships between Ysis and Isirus (5.801–2) and Juno and Jupiter (5.1176–77), Genius states that Venus “[b]e Jupiter hire oghne brother / Sche lay, and he begat Cupide” (5.1404–5); and he informs Amans of how Cupid, in addition to being the product of an incestuous union, committed incest with his mother: “[he] fond his Moder amorous, / And he was also lecherous. (5.1409–10). The incestuous ori-

²⁷ White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness*, 215. On the conflict between *kinde* and reason, see also James Simpson, *Sciences of the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s “Anticlaudianus” and John Gower’s “Confessio Amantis”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 167–97.

²⁸ Translations of marginalia in the *Confessio* are taken from *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck and trans. Andrew Galloway, 3 vols. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001–3).

²⁹ See Scanlon, “Riddle of Incest,” 106.

gin of Venus reveals how she represents “natural sexuality divorced from reason and, therefore, vulnerable to perversion.”³⁰ Because Cupid lacked “yhen . . . / To se reson” and Venus “nothing wiste / Bot that which unto lust belongeth” (5.1412–15), their incestuous and promiscuous acts underscore the “foule mescreance” (5.1444) of the Greek gods and irrationality of amatory desire.³¹ The incestuous origin of Venus opposes reason because it transforms an individual capable of interpreting external reality, either through the physical senses or “bokes . . . / Whereof the world ensampled is,” into one locked in blind desire (pro. 46–47). Genius’s treatment of the incestuous origin of Venus indicates to Amans how his amatory desire has blinded him to reason.

By the beginning of book 8, Genius openly condemns the incestuous undercurrents of amatory desire by following the common medieval comparison of incest to the sexual behavior of animals. In the history of incest, Genius explains to Amans that “love . . . is unbesein / Of alle reson” (8.153–54), and

Bot as a cock among the Hennes,
Or as a Stalon in the Fennes,
Which goth amonges al the Stod,
Riht so can he nomore good,
Bot takth what thing comth next to honde.
(8.159–63)

This image corresponds to Chaucer’s Parson’s description of incest as a sin that “synne maketh hem lyk to houndes, that taken no kep to kynrede” (10.906). Genius compares incest to bestial desire in order to reveal, as Kurt Olsson writes, “what it is like for a person to live without choice, as a ‘beste’ limited to momentary sensual pleasure with those who live in closest proximity.”³² Genius’s treatment of incest recalls Gower’s description of wantonness in the *Mirour*: “Resoun est morte en telle gent / Vivant noun resonnablement, / Ensi comme fait la beste mue” (Reason is dead in such people, who are not living reasonably, but rather as dumb animals do) (9541–43).

³⁰ Denise E. Baker, “The Priesthood of Genius: A Study of the Medieval Tradition,” *Speculum* 51 (1976): 290. See also R. F. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 1990), 180–87.

³¹ The origin of amatory love in multiple incestuous relationships is a striking example of the immorality of irrational desire because it recalls Gower’s representation of the incest between the Devil, Sin, and Death in the *Mirour* (205–76).

³² Olsson, *Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the “Confessio Amantis”* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 216. See also White, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness*, 183.

In the "Tale of Apollonius," Genius intensifies his treatment of the conflict between reason and *kinde* by detailing how incest reduces the "wys man" to the "wylde . . . man" (8.171). In that intensification, he uses the tale as a counterpoint to Amans's own story because it contains within its extended narrative the awareness that containing and escaping the incestuous underpinning of venereal desire require a "long process" (8.269). Genius uses the doubling of characters to establish the proper use of reason and memory in responding to the threat of incest. On the one hand, he represents Antiochus as a cautionary *exemplum* of reason overwhelmed by incestuous desire. Antiochus embodies all of the hallmarks of the bestial, blind nature of incest. The immediate cause of Antiochus's incestuous desire for his daughter is the death of his wife, which causes him to make "mochel mone" (8.283). Instead of turning outward to another exogamous relationship, however, Antiochus retreats inward to his daughter who "in hire fadres chambres duelte" (8.291). Like the closeness of Canace and Machaire, that physical proximity contributes to development of incestuous attraction. Furthermore, Antiochus's incestuous desire overpowers his conscience:

For likinge and concupiscence
 Withoute insihte of conscience
 The fader so with lustes blente,
 That he caste al his hole entente
 His oghne doghter forto spille.
 (8.293–97)

This spiritual blindness causes Antiochus to become a "wylde father [who] thus devoureth / His oghne fleissh" (8.309–10) and to be so consumed with "delit" that he "thoghte that it was no Sinne" (8.345–46). Antiochus's incestuous rape of his daughter causes him to forget his appropriate roles as father and king. The creation of the riddle demonstrates that his "hole entente" is focused on his "privete" rather than his public role as monarch of Antioch (8.425).

Whereas Antiochus functions as an *exemplum* of sinful forgetting, Apollonius acts as a model for freeing oneself from the unreasonable law of *kinde* through the use of right memory. The amatory temptations facing Apollonius, whom Genius describes as "ha[ving] to love a gret desir," are in many ways analogous to Amans's desire for his mistress (8.376). Moreover, both men are lovers confronted with the incestuous root of venereal desire: Amans encounters it through Genius's explanation of the origin of Venus and Cupid, whereas Apollonius discovers it

through Antiochus's riddle of incest. Indeed, Genius links Apollonius's narrative with Amans's point-to-point shrift through the description of Apollonius's solution of Antiochus's unintelligible riddle, which he "reherseed on and on / The pointz" before offering the solution (8.421–22). Unlike Amans, however, Apollonius already exercises his memory and reason properly and is able to recognize the darker side of amatory desire.

Apollonius's success in avoiding the threat of incest depends on the technical skills that allow him to counteract the blinding effects of sorrow. His technical skills keep in check his "hevynesse" (8.729–30). The significance of these skills is clear in Apollonius's ability to adapt to the customs of Pentapolis. At the wrestling match, for instance, "Appolinus, which war and wys / Of every game couthe an ende, / He thoghte assaie, hou so it wende" (8.696–98), and his victories garner the attention of Arestrathes, who recognizes in his physical abilities his "grete gentillesse" (8.730). Similarly, the prince's musical skills delight the court and reveal "gentil blod" to Arestrathes's daughter (8.794). Apollonius's subsequent instruction of Arestrathes's daughter in music and singing leads not simply to their marriage but also encourages her, unlike Antiochus's daughter, to assert her ability to choose. As she states to Arestrathes, "Bot if I have Appolinus, / Of al this world, what so betyde, / I wol non other man abide" (8.898–90). Artistic skills thus function as a means to recuperate an individual after emotional trauma and serve as a medium through which to establish communication through reason, to "mesure . . . [what] ye mene" (8.773).

At the same time, the transmission of knowledge underscores the connection between the technical and the memorial. Not only does Apollonius's wife learn musical abilities from her soon-to-be husband, but she also arranges her knowledge accordingly in the storehouse of memory. This provides her with the necessary ability to recount her personal narrative to Master Cerymon in Ephesus: "Fro point to point and tolde him oute / Als ferforthli as sche it wiste" (8.1228–29). In creating a memory map, she secures a place in the temple of Diana in Ephesus in order "[t]o kepe and holde hir chastete" (8.1244). The deployment of technical skills has a twofold significance: it enables the individual to establish his or her social position and elicits the socially appropriate response from the listener. Likewise, Apollonius instructs Strangulio to raise his daughter Thaise in "bokes lore" during his absence (8.1300). This early education gives Thaise the ability to transform her private sorrows in Leonin's brothel into public "wofull pleintes" (8.1442) that

"kepte hirself fro schame" (8.1446). By contrasting the different ways in which characters use language and artistic skills to respond to traumatic events, Genius offers an applied illustration of the correct relationship between reason and *kinde*.

By the same token, the failure of the memorial and technical leads to the loss of reason and renewal of the threat of incest. Although Apollonius initially escapes the threat of incest, news of Thaise's death nevertheless causes him "pure sorwe and care" and leads him to withdraw into the privacy of the ship's hold where he separates himself from external counsel (8.1599–600). The apparent loss of his daughter reinscribes him in the incestuous pattern of Antiochus by rendering him unresponsive to Thaise's singing and "many soubtil question[s]" (8.1683) and leaving him "as a madd man" (8.1687). At this point, Apollonius lacks the ability to recognize the very technical skills that initially allowed him to penetrate Antiochus's incestuous riddle. The extent to which Apollonius has lost his reason becomes apparent when he strikes Thaise "with his hond," for this act of violence functions as an analogue to Antiochus's incestuous rape of his daughter (8.1693).³³ Unlike Antiochus's daughter who always remains silent, however, Thaise applies her reason to perceive that he is "desesed" and responds "courtaiisly,"

Avoi, mi lord, I am a Maide;
And if ye wiste what I am,
And out of what lignage I cam,
Ye wolde noght be so salvage.
(8.1696–99)

Thaise's rebuke causes Apollonius to recognize that "he hire loveth kindly / And yit he wiste nevere why" (8.1707–8). Apollonius's inability to perceive the cause for his attraction advances the limits of desire when separated from reason. He cannot understand fully his relationship with Thaise until their "hertes bothe anon descloseth"—a process that unfolds through a series of questions about her identity that he "unto this maide opposeth" (8.1711–12). By describing Thaise's narrative as moving "[f]ro point to point," Genius underscores how reason effectively responds to the ambiguous impulses of *kindely* love (8.1725). Thaise's narrative creates a space for her father to distinguish himself from the blind longings of Antiochus and to remember his appropriate place within the familial structure. In turn, it causes him to experience

³³ Elizabeth Archibald, *Incest and the Medieval Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 98–99.

"such a joie as . . . / Was nevere sen" (8.1733–34) and find "newe grace" (8.1739). Genius signals Apollonius's reformation through his transition from the private to the public, from the endogamous attraction to Thaise to her exogamous marriage to Athenagoras.³⁴

Genius figures the completion of Apollonius's rehabilitation in terms of penitence in an effort to emphasize to Amans the parallels between that and his internal discord. Apollonius's rehabilitation allows him to make his "schrifte" with "gret devocioun / Of holi contemplacioun / Withinne his herte" at the temple of Diana in Ephesus (8.1837–39). He manifests his spiritual recuperation and reintegration into the public sphere through recounting all of his adventures:

And there in open Audience
Of hem that stoden thanne aboute,
He tolde hem and declareth oute
His hap, such as him is befallé,
And ther was nothing foryete of alle.
(8.1842–46)

On the narrative level, Apollonius's ability to remember and recount his story without omission leads to the reunion with his wife. At the same time, in relation to Genius's penitential program, it functions as a powerful didactic moment through which he signals to Amans the necessity of remembering the negative repercussions of incestuous desire. Likewise, Genius emphasizes the significance of memory in the moralization at the end of the tale by encouraging Amans to recall the difference between Apollonius's loving "[h]onesteliche" (8.1996) and Antiochus's loving "ayein kinde upon vengeance" (8.2007). The distinction between these two kinds of love points to Genius's attempt to delineate between the positive form of lawful, amatory love in marriage and the negative form of disordered desire by which individuals "take lust as doth a beste" (8.2025). The repeated associations for *kindely* love with beasts and blindness throughout Genius's treatment of the sin of lechery are designed to demonstrate the sinfulness of love divorced from reason.

After hearing the "Tale of Apollonius," Amans explains that the "tale is herd and understonde" (8.2030) and signals his desire to bring his

³⁴ See Elizabeth Allen, "Chaucer Answers Gower: Constance and the Trouble with Reading," *ELH* 63 (1997): 639. On exogamy as an imperfect solution to the problem of incest, see Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Monarchy and Incest in Renaissance England: Literature, Culture, Kinship, and Kingship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 140–41.

shrift to a conclusion: "me be some weie teche / What is my beste, as for an ende" (8.2058-59).³⁵ Genius responds by exhorting the penitent lover to remember the "ensamples" of the confession and "to withdrawe, / And set thin herte under that lawe, / The which of reson is governed / And nought of will" (8.2133-36). Genius has fulfilled Amans's request to proceed from point to point through his confession and has brought him to the moment of choice: "I can do to thee nomore / Bot teche thee the rihte weie: / Now ches if thou wolt live or deie" (8.2146-48). Even though Amans indicates that he acknowledges the truth behind Genius's advice—"Mi resoun understood him wel, / And knew it was soth everydel / That he hath said"—he nevertheless continues to conform his will to amatory desire: "bot nought forthi / Mi will hath nothing set therby" (8.2191-94). This refusal to regulate the will exacerbates his interior strife and further binds him to the law of *kinde*. Instead of experiencing a moment of joyous recognition at the end of his confession like Apollonius, he continues to suffer as a dejected lover because he refuses to accept Genius's teaching. Whereas Apollonius "accommodates natural law to reason and a generic moral probity (*honestum*), as well as to the special honesty of marriage and chastity," Amans continues to place his faith in "lust [which] is but awhile" and languish as a dejected lover (8.2139).³⁶ Amans's resistance to Genius even goes so far as to lead him to transform his previous confession into an exculpatory complaint by arguing that love should not be bound by reason: "For wel I wot, and so do ye, / That love hath evere yit ben used, / So mot I nedes ben excused" (8.2168-80). Amans's appeal to the history of amatory desire serves as a counter-narrative to Genius's history of incest and warning against those whose "lust of love exceedeth lawe" and indicates his attempt to use memory to justify his disordered love (8.263). Amans's resistance to Genius and his insistence on composing the supplication to Venus suggests that the confession has been unable to effect a spiritual rehabilitation.

The interaction between Amans and Venus nevertheless indicates the degree to which the confession contributes to the lover's internal transformation, for when Venus asks him for his name, he replies, "John Gower" (8.2321). The emergence of John Gower from the allegorical

³⁵ The Latin marginalia at 8.2030 similarly indicates the end of Amans's confession and his reliance upon Genius: "Confessio Amantis, vnde pro finale conclusione consilium Confessoris impetrat" (The Lover seeks the Confessor's counsel as a final conclusion).

³⁶ Kurt Olsson, "Natural Law and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s., 11 (1982): 232.

role of Amans signals a fundamental identity shift. No longer defined entirely by his amatory pursuits, John Gower here occupies an intermediary place between lover and penitent. This shift remains incomplete because a disjunction exists between the still amorous Gower's false memory of himself as a lover and his present reality as an old man. Venus attempts to force Gower to accept the need to forsake his role as a lover because "[i]t is no riht that thou it have" (8.2376). She insists that he recognize his inability to participate further in the venereal economy: "Forthi my conseil is that thou / Remembre wel hou thou art old" (8.2438–39). A difference exists between Venus's and Genius's condemnation of Amans's love, and that difference stems from their attitudes toward the law of *kinde*. Baker observes that "although Genius condemns Amans's love because it unreasonable and, therefore, sinful, Venus objects only because he is old and impotent."³⁷ While both require Amans to reject the self-delusion of an aged lover, each demands a different site of refocusing: Venus insists upon his submission to the material reality of *kinde*, whereas Genius counsels him to reconcile *kinde* and reason and direct his love towards the divine. Despite these differences, both call on Amans to exercise right memory and thereby assume his appropriate place in relation to the amatory and spiritual economies.

In an apparent paradox, though, Genius and Venus's project to restore Gower's memory is accompanied by his forgetting of his past amatory impulses. The removal of the "fyri Lancegay" (8.2798) provides Resoun with the opportunity to remove "the sotie / Of thilke unwise fanata-sie" (8.2865–66) and make him "sobre and hol ynowh" (8.2869). The emphasis on forgetting in the final events of the *Confessio* reveals how the destabilizing potential of the memory of amatory desire continually threatens to reactivate its original transgressive impulse. The only reasonable response for overcoming venereal desire is to reconceptualize it as a fantasy and forget that it ever was. The memorial effacement of past experiences effectively gives birth to the penitent Gower.

This identity shift anticipates the kind of forgetfulness that accompanies the transcendence from earthly to heavenly existence. In *De civitate Dei*, Saint Augustine distinguishes in his discussion of the operation of free will in heaven between the knowledge of past sins and the feelings that result from them: "Quantum ergo adinet ad scientiam rationalem,

³⁷ Baker, "Priesthood of Genius," 291. See also Mariá Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower's "Confessio Amantis": Authority, Family, State, and Writing* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), 7.

memor praeteritorum etiam malorum suorum; quantum autem ad experientis sensum, prorsus immemor" (As far as its rational knowledge is concerned, it also remembers its past evils, but as for actually feeling them, they are completely forgotten).³⁸ This type of forgetfulness does not entail the repression or elimination of past memories but is rather limited to the guilt and suffering associated with them. The saints in the City of God "carebunt enim omnibus, ita ut penitus deleantur de sensibus eorum" (will be so unvexed by evils that evils will be completely out of their memory).³⁹ In this manner, Augustine preserves the blessed's knowledge of the memory of their own pasts even as he frees them from the negative effects of sin. For Augustine, the joys of heaven would not be possible without this positive form of forgetting. Along the same lines, in the monastic tradition, the final goal of the "storehouse of memory," writes Janet Coleman, is to achieve "the kind of knowledge that is atemporal, eternally present, a knowledge that requires for its achievement the forgetting of . . . all the constituents of the past which comprised the material, experienced world of a man's private past and personality."⁴⁰ Gower's spiritual resignation signals that the recovery of memory through confession likewise gives way to the positive forgetting of his former amatory pursuits.

At the same time, forgetting at the conclusion of the *Confessio* radiates outward to involve the social as well as the personal. Venus's questioning of Gower about "[w]hat love was" provides Gower with the occasion to display his newly restored right reason and to perform successfully his forgetfulness:

And I for schame
Ne wiste what I scholde ansuere;
And natheless I gan to swere
That be my trouthe I knew him noght;
So ferr it was out of mi thought,
Riht as it hadde nevere be.

(8.2872–77)

³⁸ Saint Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. George E. McCracken et al., 7 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957–72), 22.30. For a brief discussion of the different treatments of forgetting in heaven, see Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 131–51. See also Harald Weinrich, *Lethé: The Art and Critique of Forgetting*, trans. Steven Rendall (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 24–39.

³⁹ Augustine, *City of God*, 22.30.

⁴⁰ Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155.

Gower's profession of forgetting the past verifies his disposition toward amatory desire. In his absolution, Genius furthers this performance of forgetting when he commands Gower, "Foryet it though, and so wol I" (8.2897).⁴¹ Genius's promise of mutual forgetfulness conforms to the orthodox conception of the relationship between penitent and confessor after the completion of the penitential rite. Medieval theologians and preachers made a "persistent attempt" to "persuad[e] people that a supernatural power immediately effaced from the memory of the priest all the sins confided to him."⁴² At the same time, Genius appeals to a reciprocal, social form of forgetting and thereby transforms the rite of private confession, to use Isabel Karremann's terminology, into a public rite of oblivion.⁴³ Gower advances the success of his forgetfulness after the disappearance of Venus, for "Unto the lif y hadde usid / I thoughte nevere torne ayein" (8.2964–65). The complete lack of desire to return to his former life evinces how self-forgetting converts Gower's perspective from past amatory desire to the future-oriented prayers of "joie . . . endeles" and charitable love (8.3172).

In the concluding prayer of the *Confessio*, Gower reinforces the social relationship between memory and forgetting by evoking a future for England when "men takyn remembrance / What is to live in unite" (8.2988–89). He nevertheless frames the poem with acknowledgments of the impossibility of remedying the divisions of the land. Just as he begins book 1 with an explanation that "I may nought strecche up to the hevne / Min hand, ne setten al in evene / This world, which evere is in balance" (1.1–3), he concludes book 8 with an admission of failure in curing the effects of love in the world: "Of love and of his dedly hele, / Which no phisicien can hele. / For his nature is so divers" (8.3155–57). Yet appealing to the memory of a unified England registers Gower's effort to transcend the otherwise insurmountable problems in the present. For Gower, as for Augustine, "[m]emory becomes anticipation, and the longing of the will for beatitude reaches out in hope for the future fulfillment."⁴⁴ Gower gestures toward this Augustinian conception of

⁴¹ On strategies of self-forgetting, see Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., *Memory and Forgetting in English Renaissance Drama: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–24.

⁴² Lea, *History of Auricular Confession*, 1:422.

⁴³ Karremann, "Rites of Oblivion in Shakespearean History Plays," *Shakespeare Survey* 63 (2010): 24–36.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Scanlon, "Arendt's Augustine," in *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 161.

the individual mind's ascent through sensory perception to memory itself and finally beyond it to a form of mystical contemplation of God.⁴⁵ But Gower's concentration on the social also extends his understanding of memory to include productively forgetting the limitations of human agency. In holding on to and letting go of his memories, Gower indicates how remembering an English society bound together in unity first depends on forgetting the divisions that fracture the kingdom.⁴⁶ This focus on forgetting present conflicts and remembering a unified past takes on a particular significance in the tumultuous political climate in which the *Confessio* was composed and revised. In this sense, Gower uses memory and forgetting as one possible strategy for reconciling England's Ricardian past with its Lancastrian present and future.⁴⁷

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⁴⁵ See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse, trans. W. Watts, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), 10.17.26.

⁴⁶ On social forgetting, see Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 500–501.

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Robert R. Edwards, William Fitzhenry, and Steele Nowlin for their thoughtful suggestions on various revisions of this essay.

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