

John Gower's Moral Adaptation of Ovid's "Tale of Actaeon"

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Abstract: *This paper argues that John Gower in his literary adaptations introduces strategic narrative changes that amount to more than being inferior approximations of the original classical "Tale of Actaeon". These changes, we claim, challenge the authority as well as the literary and cultural uniqueness of the classical sources he borrowed from. We discuss Gower's creative manipulation of his classical sources, specifically the differences between his and Ovid's version of "The Tale of Actaeon," pointing up the former's authorial uniqueness as an original English poet. We conclude that Gower uses his borrowed material according to his poem's moral purpose. He does not passively paraphrase his classical sources into Middle English; rather, he innovatively rewrites them in light of the Confessio's exemplary texture.*

Keywords: Confessio Amantis, John Gower, Medieval English poetry, Ovid, "The Tale of Actaeon"

1. Introduction

John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a medieval, 33,000-line exemplary poem that reports the confession of Amans the lover to Genius the priest of Venus, the goddess of love. This 14th c. English poem is divided into a prologue and eight books, each of which, except for the seventh, talks about one of the seven deadly sins, namely pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Discussing these fatal sins in relation with Amans' love experience (Breeze 2008: 363), Gower argues throughout the entire poem that love is a morally ennobling emotion as long as it is not *excessive*. Being "immoderate" or "excessive", love becomes "unavised" (unadvised), "mistimed", and "unkynde" (unkind) (Peck 1980: xxiv). To elucidate and support this viewpoint, Gower borrows different classical narratives, rewrites them in form of short tales, and categorizes them thematically, in association with the seven deadly sins. Gower borrows narratives from Boccaccio, Petrarch, Dante, Homer, Virgil, Ovid, and other writers through whose works 'the wyse man mai ben avised' (the wise man may be advised) (Peck 1980: 3). The English poet combines the various classical tales into a coherent, narrative poem that tackles each of Amans' prospective, love-based sins, in an attempt to warn Amans in particular, humans in general, against abusing their senses and emotions. However, this narrative design enables Gower to develop his own unique angle on these classical tales and arrange his borrowed material in light of the poem's thematic texture and purposefulness. *Confession Amantis* does not

depict Ulysses from the *Odyssey* as a man of war and politics, but as a lover. Gower writes:

When king Nauplius, father of Palamades, asked Ulysses to join the other Greeks in the siege of Troy, Ulysses, because of his love for Penelope with whom he would dwell in love at home, tried to beguile the king by feigning madness. He arose early and yoked foxes instead of oxen to his plow and sowed the land with salt (Peck 1980: 218).

Instead of celebrating the heroic deeds of Ulysses as a mighty warrior, Gower foregrounds Ulysses' enduring affection as a lover, thus revealing the dominant theme of Book Four of the *Confessio*—human love.

Likewise, Gower borrows the tale of Hercules and Achelous, which appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (2002) as an "old cronique," and transforms it into "a romance, without either fully conforming to the expectations of the genre or fully acknowledging what he has done" (Dutton, Hines and Yeager 2010: 75). This indicates that while borrowing myths and narratives from classical writers, Gower considers the limitations engendered by adapting classical viewpoints and rhetorical strategies to a fourteenth-century English poem. In Shutters' words, "[Gower] does not merely make use of classical source materials in the '*Confessio*' but also ponders the limits of their usability" (2013: 39). Gower's treatment of his sources is very contrived: "It is one of the incidental pleasures of reading the *Confessio Amantis* to see what surprising lessons [Gower] can extract from the most unpromising material" (Callan 1946: 270). That is to say, Gower does not translate his sources literally but interprets the meaning of his classical sources in a way that serves his poem's moral nature and didactic purpose, which is a very justifiable approach of literary translation (Al Muhaidib 2009: 27).

In fact, most critics of Middle English literature agree that Gower's treatment of classical sources is carefully executed in form and content. Derek Pearsall (1966) emphasizes how Gower creatively adapts the Greco-Roman myths to the English Christian scene, underscoring the source poet's narrative uniqueness. According to Pearsall (1966: 478),

[Gower] makes a mosaic of classical legends and myths, in which every tale is to have its place in a continuing overall narrative; but Gower, in every story he tells, suppresses all the cross-connections and allusions, and re-embeds the pieces of the mosaic in the only overall pattern he knows, that of humane Christian values.

In the same vein, Bruce Harbert (1988: 96) argues that "Ovid has been submerged, even dismembered, at the service of Gower's own poetry. He is never mentioned except in passing". Although it is undeniable that the *Confessio* heavily relies on *Metamorphoses*, Ovid is not fully acknowledged by Gower as a source of the *Confessio*. Marginalizing Ovid may be motivated by the English poet's desire to comply with the nature of confessional writing, which "is one of the most popular forms capturing the private life of an individual...This, as such connects the trope of the book, the text, the written word with the speaking self signifying orality and aurality, the mouth and the ear. The trope links exhibitionism with authority the compulsion to show oneself with the drive to

narrate one's story" (Sikorska 2003: 5). Otherwise, this marginalization of the source poet is to let the *Confessio* look "independent" of all its classical sources (Harbert 1988: 96). If not, such an attitude potentially reflects the English poet's calculated disregard for the typically classical representation of heroes and universe in favor of his Christian exemplary narrative.

In "The Tale of Actaeon," which is borrowed into the *Confessio* from Ovid's Latin *Metamorphosis*, for instance, Gower depicts the hounds that chase and devour Actaeon without focusing on their gory nature and personal characteristics that are precisely emphasized in Ovid's narrative. Instead, he refers to this incident briefly, emphasizing the moral suffering of Actaeon rather than the physically ferocious nature of the hounds. Probably, the English poet is not concerned about "[reflecting] typical characteristics of dogs: their behaviour (running, climbing, hunting, stalking), sound (barking, ringing), appearance (color, coat, teeth), breed (place of origin), as well as agility, strength, ferocity, and greediness" (Sypher 1992: 55). Simultaneously, he is interested in sustaining the *Confessio*'s Christian atmosphere and moral purpose by using Ovid's hounds-scene as a metaphor that symbolically explains how Actaeon's "hounds [or fairy] of desire [and love]" (Steadman 1963: 234) can torture the lover and his fortune. Thus, this paper considers Gower's unabashed engagement with tradition and argues that the English poet, in his literary adaptation, introduces strategic narrative changes that amount to more than being inferior approximations of the original. These changes challenge the authority as well as the literary and cultural uniqueness of the *Confessio*'s classical sources. In what follows, we discuss Gower's creative manipulation of his classical sources, specifically the differences between his and Ovid's versions of "The Tale of Actaeon," pointing up the former's authorial uniqueness as an original poet.

2. Ovid's "Tale of Actaeon"

The tale is placed in Book III of *Metamorphoses*, most of which focuses on Cadmus, the founder and great king of Thebes. Cadmus is ordered by Agenor to find Europa and not to return home without her. Unable to find her, he ends up an outlaw and so asks Apollo, Phebus, to find him a place where he can live peacefully, away from Agenor. Cadmus is directed to the island on which he establishes Thebes, of which he becomes king and where his offspring are born and brought up to enjoy high rank and *ironically* inherit their misfortunes of their ancestors (Berens 2009: 287-89). In his introduction to "The Tale of Actaeon", Ovid writes (2002: III 150-61):

Now Thebes stood in good estate; now, Cadmus, might thou say
That when thy father banished thee it was a lucky day.
To join alliance both with Mars and Venus was thy chance...
It was thy fortune for to see all men and women grown...
Among so many prosperous haps that flowed with good success
Thine eldest nephew was a cause of care and sore distress.

These lines describe Cadmus's eventual fated transition from fortune to misfortune, a state of affairs ascribed in Ovid to the arbitrary nature of fate or to

what is allegorically known as the *wheel of fortune*, which rotates endlessly and at random, tossing people very high and eventually bringing them down very low. In Boethius's words (1902: 13),

'As thus she [fortune] turns her wheel of chance with haughty hand, and presses on like the surge of Euripus's tides, fortune now tramples fiercely on a fearsome king, and now deceives no less a conquered man by raising from the ground his humbled face. She hears no wretch's cry, she heeds no tears, but wantonly she mocks the sorrow which her cruelty has made. This is her sport: thus she proves her power; if in the selfsame hour one man is raised to happiness, and cast down in despair, 'tis thus she shows her might.

Ovid reports that the wheel of fortune prefers Cadmus's house to other houses by saving Cadmus's life and giving him the opportunity to get Apollo's help in establishing Thebes. Nevertheless, that same wheel of fortune also causes Cadmus and his descendants many hardships and sufferings. As made evidently clear in the tale, Cadmus and his descendants, including Actaeon, have enjoyed the many privileges of royalty. Simultaneously, they have been crushed by the wheel of fortune, which replaces their happiness and repose by "care and sore distress" (Ovid 2002: III 161), which are brought to Cadmus's family through the eldest nephew of Cadmus, namely Actaeon.

While this suggests that Actaeon is responsible for the misfortune of Cadmus and his entire family, it is interesting that the myth of Cadmus states that it is Cadmus's slaying of Ares's dragon that causes many calamities to king Cadmus and his descendants (Berens 2009: 287-89). This is not to propose that Ovid adjusts the myth of Cadmus in order to view him less criminal than Actaeon or vice versa; rather, it is to emphasize Ovid's *pagan* understanding of the mass revenge of gods when they are challenged, or disobeyed by humans. Obviously, the Roman poet portrays humans as a victim of gods' *unconditional* wrath and revenge, which "reinforces the theme of Olympian [partial rather than absolute] justice" (Schlam 1984: 91). Throughout his lines, Ovid (2002) points out the notion that Cadmus suffers because of Actaeon who suffers, in his turn, for being Cadmus's descendant. As a descendant of Cadmus, Actaeon is transformed into a hart after accidentally seeing Diana the goddess naked in the forest and then is mauled into pieces by his own hunting dogs. In response, Cadmus suffers for having one of his close relatives cruelly punished in such a way. In other words, Ovid views Actaeon as a young man who "comes upon the goddess by accident and is destroyed for an innocent trespass" (Schlam 1984: 82). He is viewed as a *sinless* hunter whose main "guilt was misfortune, not a crime" (Morford and Lenardon 1999: 144). Simultaneously, the poet shows Cadmus as the main victim of the "harshness of divine vengeance" (Schlam 1984: 97), thus promoting his pagan viewpoint that man's misfortune is part of unjust destiny.

In his conclusion of the tale's first fifteen lines, Ovid (2002) writes, "But if you sift the matter well, ye shall not find desert/ But cruel fortune to have been the cause of this his smart" (III 164-5). To refer to fortune as "cruel" may seem unproblematic for some readers; nevertheless, it is very critical from medieval

Christian perspective. Defining fortune and whatever happiness or suffering people experience, Boethius (1902: 59) writes:

[The] Creator sits on high, rules all and guides, king and Lord, fount and source of all, Law itself and wise judge of justice. He restrains all that stirs nature to motion, holds it back, and makes firm all that would stray. If He were not to recall them to their true paths, and set them again upon the circles of their courses, they would be torn from their source and so would perish. This is the common bond of love; all seek thus to be restrained by the limit of the good. In no other manner can they endure if this bond of love be not turned round again, and if the causes, which He has set, return not again...'Consider this,' she [Philosophy] said: 'all fortune, whether pleasant or difficult, is due to this cause; it is for the sake of rewarding the good or exercising their virtue, and of punishing and correcting bad men: therefore it is plain that all this fortune which is allowed to be just or expedient, must be good.'

In light of this excerpt, Ovid's description of fortune as "cruel" and his representation of misfortune as a form of *divine* injustice do not cope with the Christian culture of fourteenth-century England, which explains why Gower modifies his classical source text heavily.

However, despite its individual significance and value, the hunter's tale in Ovid is treated as an *adjunct companion piece* to the main myth of Cadmus for the purpose of foregrounding the latter's suffering. To dramatize Cadmus's "care and sore distress," or his misfortune (Ovid 2002:161), Ovid begins his tale reporting the transformation of Actaeon into a fearful creature "whose head was armed with palmed horns, whose own hounds in the wood/ Did pull their master to the ground and fill them with his blood" (162-3). In an attempt to steer the narrative's focus towards Cadmus rather than towards Actaeon, the poet here purposefully foregrounds Cadmus's "sore distress" rather than Actaeon's ill-fated metamorphosis. Actaeon is not the central figure of his own tale; rather, he is marginalized. The poet uses so many lines and literary techniques in "The Tale of Actaeon" to show Cadmus as the center of the whole narrative.

Reporting Actaeon's dilemma at the forest, Ovid writes, "And down the eyes that were not his bitter tears did rain. / ...What should he do? Turn home again to Cadmus and the queen? / Or hide himself among the woods? Of this he was afraid" (240-3). In these lines, Ovid's main concern is not Actaeon's suffering but his decision (or lack thereof) to go back to Cadmus's palace. Here and elsewhere, Cadmus appears to be more significant than *homeless* Actaeon: Cadmus is depicted as the sole haven from fear and wilderness. Even at the conclusion of Actaeon's tale, Actaeon is marginalized while Cadmus's misfortune is accentuated as the main event, against which Actaeon's death and metamorphosis are always subordinately juxtaposed. Ovid (2002) writes, "Alone the wife of Jove/ Of liking or misliking it not all so greatly strove, / As secretly rejoiced in heart that such a plague was light/ On Cadmus' image" (309-12). While the myth of Cadmus dominates "The Tale of Actaeon" entirely, Actaeon is

introduced as a secondary character, despite his dramatic hardships and extraordinary suffering.

3. Gower's "The Tale of Actaeon"

Retaining the narrative rather than its details, Gower rewrites the 164-line narrative into a 62-line tale without dropping or eliminating any significant features. However, a closer inspection reveals how Gower is able to uniquely adapt a very pagan narrative like "The Tale of Actaeon" to a very Christian context like that of *Confessio Amantis*. Borrowing from Ovid, Gower rewrites "The Tale of Actaeon" as a complete tale that has its own value and theme—in isolation from Cadmus's 'chance' and misfortune. For example, Cadmus, in Gower's tale of Actaeon, is just a name: "To him that Thebes ferst on hyh/ Up sette" (I338-9). This statement focuses on Actaeon and never mentions Cadmus's misfortune, probably in an attempt not to distract the attention of Amans, the pupil, who should be learning about "A wothi lord" called Actaeon (43). This narrative modification of Ovid's lines makes of Actaeon the fulcrum of the entire narrative.

It is noteworthy that the myth of Cadmus embodies human ironic destiny rather than morality, while Actaeon's tale is about human morality and sin, a topic that is directly related to the *Confessio's* educational purpose. In his translation, Gower does not rewrite Ovid's "Tale of Actaeon" in its Cadmus-myth-context but scrutinizes Ovid's narrative looking for what is necessary to teaching Amans how to perceive love as a form of one's predestination, which constitutes a central part of the educational exemplum of the *Confessio*. He uses "The Tale of Actaeon" to warn Amans against the harms ones' eyes may harvest, a discourse in which the myth of Cadmus could make no sense. Moreover, to efficiently use the tale of Actaeon to educate Amans, Gower tries to create a common ground between Amans and Actaeon. The poet writes, "This Acteon, as he welmyhte, / Above alle other caste his chiere, / And used it froyer to yere, / With houndes and greteHornes / Among the wodes and the thornes" (43; 340-44). Keeping close to Ovid's narrative, Gower's depiction of Actaeon as a hunter makes him an instructive model for Amans. Taking into consideration that hunting involves exploring new areas and going on a sort of adventure, Gower's emphasis on Actaeon's hunter-status is effective in instructing Amans on the matter of love since love is basically an adventure through which one explores his/her partner as well as himself/herself. Noticeably, the adventure-essence of Actaeon tale is very similar to Amans's intellectual and romantic exploits throughout the *Confessio*, considering that to set the adventure-atmosphere as a common ground between Actaeon's hunting escapades and Amans's educational project is very crucial to establishing the integrity of "The Tale of Actaeon"(Nicholson 2008: 84-5) and to encouraging Amans to absorb, sympathize, and get fully influenced by the moral texture of "The Tale of Actaeon." Due to this, as Wickert (1981) says, "He is the 'moral' Gower in the sense that he pushes his heroes and stories with high-principled directness towards a question of moral decision" (221).

Besides the strategy of setting a common ground between Amans and his *tutor*, Gower fulfills the *Confessio's* instructive purpose by modifying Ovid's narrative style. For example, Ovid (2002) reports that Diana punishes Actaeon by making "A pair of lively old hart's horns upon his sprinkled head/ She sharps his ears; she makes his neck both slender, long and lank;/ She turns his fingers into feet, his arms to spindle-shank" (III 230-2). The Roman poet continues his description of Actaeon's hart-status when he reports that "He flies through grounds where he was oftentimes he chased had ere tho;/ ... He strained oftentimes to speak, and was about to say,/ 'I am Actaeon. Know your lord and master, sirs, I pray'" (274-7). This physical transformation "serves to illuminate the incongruity between form and invisible substance, illusion and reality [. . .] providing an opportunity for the revelation of the victim's true identity" (Hawes 2006: 22). In short, the *new* identity of Actaeon is represented through many paired oppositions such as, human/animal, female/male, appearance/reality, and hunter/quarry. The former hunter becomes a hart with a human mind, a structure that increases the man's suffering, as he realizes his present dilemma and the fact that he could do nothing about it.

Actaeon's transformation in *Metamorphoses* is summarized by Ovid (2002) as such, "Till of his fault by bitter death the ransom he had paid" (III 304). Though "bitter death" seems very appropriate for closing the dramatic narrative of Actaeon, the Roman poet proceeds to remind his reader of the invalidity of audience standards to discussing the embedded (in)justice in Actaeon's tale. Ovid concludes that among gods "Much muttering was upon this fact. /... Each party did apply/ Good reasons to defend their case" (305-9). Thus, understanding and appreciating Ovid's Actaeon requires using the tale's self-contained logic, instead of the readers' standards, since applying extrinsic logic to the physicality of Actaeon's transformation might threaten the plausibility of the entire tale.

On the contrary, Gower avoids threatening the plausibility of the tale by making Actaeon's punishment and transformation more spiritual than physical. For instance, he eliminates the many words Ovid uses to point out the physicality of Actaeon's transformation, such as "ears", "neck", "feet", "arms", and "hair". Although Gower does not plainly state that Actaeon suffers spiritually, Actaeon's physical transformation reflects the poet's plan to focus on the spirituality of that transformation. Such strategy might have stemmed from Gower's Christian upbringing, which is central to whatever he writes. The English poet potentially believes that sin and punishment are more serious, effective, and painful when they are transformed from the material or physical into the spiritual level. Nonetheless, he describes Actaeon's transformation thus, "Sche made him taken of an Hert,/ Which was to fore hisehoundesstert,/ That ronnesbesilicheaboute" (I 371-3). The beauty of the naked body of Diana captures Actaeon's attention, so he falls in love with her. In consequence, the strong and bold hunter is transformed by Diana's beauty into a meek "Hert" "That madenmochel noise and cry" (375). Interestingly, the word "Hert" does not necessarily indicate Actaeon's new "animal-status"; rather, it functions as a metaphor of his excessive emotional vulnerability. Actaeon is a "Hert" making much noise because he is unable to

embrace his beloved, simply because he is a human while his beloved is a goddess.

Being trapped in such an inescapable and unachievable love, Actaeon becomes miserably taciturn "And ate laste unhappely/ This Hert his oghne houndes slowhe" (I 376-7). Realizing the impossibility of fulfilling his wishes and love for Diana the goddess, Actaeon falls silent and miserable. The main consequence of Actaeon's unrequited love of Diana is thus not physical; rather, it is spiritual: psychological, moral, and mental. Thus, instead of reading "This Hert his oghne houndes slowhe" literally, viewing the hounds as an embodiment of Actaeon's psychological and mental disorders or more animalistic desires makes Gower's narrative more meaningful. Attributing Actaeon's misery to his unreciprocated love of Diana makes his eventual suffering more romantic. In brief, changing Actaeon's physical transformation, as found in *Metamorphoses*, into a spiritual one, as found in the *Confessio*, makes Gower's narrative, rather than, Ovid's more relevant to the actual experience of humans.

Working for such an end, Gower also modifies Ovid's *intimidating* diction, which is replete with nerve-wracking words and phrases, such as "grave", "sore distress", "pull their master to the ground", "his blood", "cruel fortune", "Great slaughter", "savage beasts", etc. Avoiding these phrases and words helps Amans focus on the moral, rather than corporal, hardships of Actaeon and enables Genius, Gower's priest and spokesman in the *Confessio*, to keep Amans uncontaminated by Ovid's amoral, corporal description. Gower's modification of Ovid's diction functions as a narrative technique which McCabe (2011: 144) calls "tameness": "the brighter tone of Gower's metamorphoses, and--in the sense that they are purged of the disorienting tendencies found in Ovid--their 'tameness,' is easily seen. In comparison to Ovid's, Gower's metamorphoses are 'tame'".

A good example of Gower's attempt to 'tame' Ovid's narrative is his tendency to get rid of any narrative pauses and disturbances in order to make Ovid's complex narrative simpler and more straightforward. For instance, the transformation of Actaeon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is interrupted, at least, three times by three different conversations. The inception of the tale is interrupted by Actaeon's speech with his friends (Ovid 2002: 171-7):

'Our weapons and our toils are moist and stained with blood of deer;
This day hath done enough, as by our quarry may appear.
As soon as with her scarlet wheels next morning bringeth light,
We will about our work again...

Take up Take up your toils and cease your work, and let us go our way'.

This speech reflects Actaeon's power and high position among his companions, as he seems in control of what they are doing. Also, it reveals the various codes that connect Actaeon to Cadmus, such as his being a man of high birth, a talented orator, a skillful hunter, and a group leader. Another interruption of Ovid's narrative is made by Diana's speech to Actaeon at the moment of his transformation: "Tell if thou can; I give thee leave. Tell hardly; do not spare" (228). The strong, noble personality of Actaeon is undermined here by Diana's godly power. Actaeon's powerful speech with his friends (171-7) is muted and

replaced with silence, which reflects his new weak, taciturn, passive, and miserable status. The last interruption of Ovid's narrative is made through reporting the debate among the gods about Diana's controversial maneuver against Actaeon. Ovid writes, "...Some [gods] thought there was extended/ A great deal more extremity than needed; some commended/ Diana's doing, saying that it was but worthily/ For safeguard of her womanhood..."(III 305-8). Closing the narrative by focusing on the debate between the gods associates Actaeon's status with sort of a heavenly social prestige, which disturbs the focus on the entire narrative.

Aware of how destructive interrupting the narrative is, Gower eliminates all these interruptive actions and conversations since they do not serve any moral purpose in the tale. He "uses only those features of Ovid's [narrative] which contribute directly to the point he is trying to make" (Beidler 1982: 4). The English poet selectively reads Ovid's narrative details and eliminates most of them because they aren't necessary to his narrative structure. He reintroduces Ovid's narrative "with different words, different emotional inflections, different perspectives, and different details" (Herman 2007: 39). Instead of Ovid's highly rhetorical language, Gower uses a plain, straightforward repertoire, thus making his narrative as one complete piece that is never interrupted or encumbered by a dialogue or conversation. Again, to maintain the instructive and exemplary value of his *Confessio*, Gower makes his narrative straightforward by avoiding dialogue, unessential details, and ornamental dramatization.

4. Conclusion

In light of these differences between Ovid and Gower, one might conclude that Gower's borrowing from Ovid is a creative process that blends both "narration" and "focalization", where "*narration* is the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience"; *focalization* is the "submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter" (Herman 2007: 94). Gower relies on Ovid's Actaeon not for its historical-mythological value but as a narrative that can contribute to the moral instruction of Amans about moral vs. amoral love, which reflects the English poet's *undeclared* viewpoint that "it is not the formal features of texts but the purposes they serve and the way they are perceived in a speech community that make them literature" (Moody 2008: 62). Aware of the great difference between *Confessio Amantis*'s moral context and *Metamorphoses*' mythological one, Gower creatively rewrites Ovid's Latin, pagan narrative of Actaeon into a very Middle English, Christian narrative. In Callan's words (1946: 271), "Gower keeps close to his original; but he is never the slave of it". The English poet uses his borrowed material according to his poem's moral purpose. He does not passively paraphrase his classical sources into Middle English; rather, he innovatively rewrites them in light of the *Confessio*'s moral texture.

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