Inventing Womanhood

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CHAPTER 2

BEASTLY WOMEN AND WOMANLY MEN

Gower's Confessio Amantis

Gower's idea of womanhood is in some ways more flexible and more radical than Chaucer's and it complements as well as counters the latter.¹ Gower's treatment of women has attracted less attention from critics (with a few notable exceptions such as Diane Watt and Karma Lochrie), perhaps because his interests in politics and morality have overshadowed his other concerns.² However, gender and morality prove to be closely linked in the Confessio Amantis and that text is crucial to the development of womanhood, providing a version that is at least as influential as Chaucer's for later writers. Throughout the Confessio, Gower constructs womanhood as analogous to both manhood and beastliness. He imagines all three identities to be characterized by observable signifiers; as a result, any given identity is not only subject to change but also can be learned or feigned.

In its focus on observable signifiers, Gower's idea of gender resembles Judith Butler's theory of the performative nature of gender. Seeking to clarify her position in the tenth anniversary edition of Gender Trouble, Butler offered this summary: "The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an 'internal' feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts."³ The "production" of womanhood fascinates Gower and he considers appearances as well as actions; he is also interested in manhood and beastliness as other identities that are similarly produced and rendered recognizable. On this issue, Gower goes further than Chaucer; to embrace an anachronism, Gowerian gender is performative. "What we take to be 'real,'” writes Butler, “what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable
This statement resonates with Gower’s conception of gender in the *Confessio Amantis*.

The “changeable” nature of identity makes Gower—like Chaucer—interested in what happens when characters undergo transformation. While Chaucer’s transformations involve an alteration in a woman’s circumstances, however, Gower’s transformations are more physical and explore how any figure can combine elements of womanhood, manhood, and beastliness. The intersections of these identities intrigue Gower and he locates them in many figures, including Amans. The loathly lady in the Tale of Florent, for example, is somewhere between a woman and a monster for most of the tale. Other characters, such as Achilles and Iphis, demonstrate the malleability of gender identities as they move from one to another. In order to express this multiplicity, Gower uses ambiguous language; straightforward labels cannot communicate the complex natures of the characters he represents.

Gower—again, like Chaucer—is also interested in the relationship between womanhood and social power. But while Chaucer explored how much power women might exercise through intercession and submission, Gower associates femininity with limited power. He finds more potential in women as the objects rather than the agents of authority, making womanhood serve an important social and narrative function by embodying the effects of moral and immoral actions. The disturbing depiction of the impact of Tereus’s behavior on Procne and Philomena, for instance, reinforces and deepens readers’ judgment of his dishonorable actions and, in many other tales, Gower’s representations of womanhood similarly enable critical reflection on morality. Womanhood itself is generally a virtuous state in the *Confessio*—associated with maidenhead or chastity, for example—but Gower does not spend much time detailing which virtues are involved. Instead, he focuses on how it can act as a register of the morality of others, especially men.

While the observable signifiers that characterize womanhood can also signal the effects of immoral (or, more rarely, moral) behavior, one must be able to interpret those signals accurately. This is the challenge that the frame story presents to Amans. Genius attempts to teach Amans how to be a man and an important element of that is how he should think about and react to women, especially the lady who is the object of his desire. He imagines that his lady should respond as a romance heroine, but she appears to be motivated by more practical concerns; this interplay reveals a gap between romance conventions and reality. In order to teach Amans how to treat women, Genius portrays the effects of sin on female victims, underscoring their sufferings as noteworthy injustices. This approach values women as worthy not only of pity but also of a respect and consideration that would have recognized and honored their virtue. Although Watt has persuasively argued that Gower is “amoral” in the larger context of the *Confessio*, the epithet “moral Gower”—originated by Chaucer—remains apt in reference to Gower’s portrayal of women.
Gower uses a complex of related terms—including *womanhood*, *womanish*, *womanly*, *motherhood*, *wifehood*, *maidenhead*, and *sisterhood*—to explore women, their natures, and their representations. *Womanhood* occurs twenty-four times in the *Confessio*, appearing in the frame as well as the tales and in every book except Book II, and, as Chaucer did, Gower revises his sources to make womanhood a central issue in a number of tales. This chapter presents a reading of the *Confessio Amantis* in three stages. The first examines some of Gower’s “beastly women,” female characters who either seem to be or literally become beasts. These characters demonstrate that identities are both unstable and overlapping. They also show that womanhood is vulnerable from within and without: some women lose it by acting wrongly while for others it is damaged by rape. The second section considers “womanly men,” men who adopt feminine roles or characteristics. These characters illustrate to what extent gender identities depend on observable signifiers and how womanhood itself can be acquired. Finally, the chapter connects Gower’s concept of womanhood in the tales with the figure of Amans’s lady in the frame narrative. As part of his attempt to educate Amans on how to be a man and hence how to react to women, Genius persistently interprets his exempla, even those with female protagonists, as lessons about male behavior. Only by understanding and sympathizing with female victims can Amans absorb the morals of the tales, but his continuing insensitivity toward his lady signals his inability to read women’s experiences accurately. Ironically, Amans’s own womanliness (in allowing himself to be ruled by love) mires him in the conventions of romance, which he improperly attempts to apply to his lady’s behavior. Gower undermines these romance ideals and, in the end, Amans is “cured” when another female figure, Venus, bluntly observes the incongruity between his idea of himself as a courtly lover and the reality of his unsuitability for that role. Restored to reason, he undergoes his own transformation by recovering his manhood. His closing vision of love demonstrates a new ability to recognize male misconduct, female suffering, and feminine virtue.

Beastly Women

The Tale of Florent contains the first appearance of *womanhood* in the *Confessio*. This tale considers the possibilities raised by transformation and establishes the importance of moral action. Before Florent’s ethical behavior reverses her transformation, the loathly lady’s unattractive appearance and aggressive behavior make him unable to tell whether she is an example of womanhood or a monstrous figure. By drawing on Ovidian and other classical traditions in which beastliness often takes the shape of an exaggerated femaleness, Gower reveals the parallel sta-
tus of womanhood and the monstrous as categories based on the assumption that the exterior represents the interior, but he puts this assumption in question for both. He emphasizes the loathly lady’s unstable identity as woman/beast through a recurring pun and romance conventions (sometimes inverted, sometimes straightforward). As the wedding night approaches, this instability becomes more troubling until, in the marriage bed, Genius resolves it by rendering the loathly lady beautiful.

The tales of Tereus, Cornix, and Calistona from Book V reverse this metamorphosis: women become animals. They are transformed when their maidenhead is lost or threatened; while Florent acts ethically and the loathly lady wields some power by providing the answer to his quest, these characters are exposed to abuses of male authority. The tales explore whether and in what ways the initial identity persists in woman-to-beast transformations. In each case, Gower demonstrates that both womanly and beastly identities are enacted rather than essential. Womanhood’s tie to maidenhead renders both vulnerable and changeable; they can be lost through no fault of the woman. The female characters are not exemplars but victims; nonetheless, Amans struggles to recognize that the male characters acted wrongly against them. Genius does discuss the virtue of preserving “maidehiede” but, oddly, through a male exemplar.

Gower’s exploration of womanhood begins with The Tale of Florent, where the quest to find what all women most desire presents a challenge similar to the conceptual problem of the word womanhood itself. Both seek to discover what makes women women across traditional categories of marital and class status. Gower stresses this challenge, noting that Florent receives many individual answers to his question, but cannot discover “such a thing in special, / Which to hem alle in general / Is most plesant, and most desired.”

In the well-known analogue of the Tale of Florent, the Wife of Bath’s Tale, Chaucer makes a similar point by appealing to marital categories, noting that representatives of each are present for the knight’s response:

Ful many a noble wyf, and many a mayde,
And many a wydwe, for that they been wise,
The queene hirself sittynge as a justise,
Assembled been, his answere for to heere.

After the knight has given his answer, Chaucer reiterates the varied nature of the women present: “In al the court ne was ther wyf, ne mayde, / Ne wydwe that contraried that he sayde.” This agreement among different female groups certifies the truth of the knight’s answer. Although revealed by the loathly lady, this answer presumably could have come from any of them. Nevertheless, the word womanhood does not appear in Chaucer’s tale.
The absence of womanhood from the Wife of Bath’s Tale is one of several notable differences between Chaucer’s and Gower’s versions of the story; others include the reason for and nature of the knight’s quest. In Gower, the quest is punishment not for rape but for killing a man in war and the answer to the question is not sovereignty in general but, more specifically, sovereignty in love. Many of the differences, however, arise in the portrayals of the loathly lady and these differences point up Gower’s interest in the performative aspects of womanhood and in its usefulness as a register of how others use their power. In the Wife of Bath’s Tale, the loathly lady is unattractive but unquestionably female. Describing the knight’s first sight of her, the Wife refers to the loathly lady as a “wyf” twice in three lines and the knight himself addresses her as “my levee mooder.” However, Gower’s narrator is ambiguous on this point, saying that the knight “syh wher sat a creature, / A lothly womman-nysch figure, / That forto speke of fleisch and bon / So foul yit syh he nevere non” (I, 1529–32). Genius does not refer to the loathly lady as a woman throughout this initial encounter; he uses the female pronoun but chooses “wight” as his noun. He does call the figure “wommannysch,” but that word can describe a creature like a woman rather than a human woman, as indeed it does in other tales. This adjective contributes to rather than dispels doubt about the loathly lady’s nature.

The first direct connection between this creature and womanhood comes only as Florent leaves her. He complains that “if he live, he mot him binde / T o such on which of alle kinde / Of wommen is thunsemlieste: / Thus wot he nought what is the beste” (I, 1623–26). This passage reverses the hyperbole used to describe female beauty in romance, and instead places the loathly lady on the border between womanliness and beastliness: she might still be a womanlike creature rather than a woman. This continuing instability depends on the first of several puns in the tale on “beste,” a word that can be read as either “best” or “beast.” Line 1626 means both that the knight does not know what the best course of action is and that he does not know what the beast is. This second interpretation raises numerous questions, including not simply whether the creature is a woman or a beast but whether she is enchanted, whether she is sexually appropriate and available, and whether she is good or evil. These concerns arise at this early moment because the loathly lady has been clear from the outset that she wants to marry the knight in return for aiding him with his quest. In Chaucer’s version, she asks only that he will grant her unspecified future request, deferring any sexual possibilities.

The loathly lady’s response to Florent’s question—that all women desire sovereignty in love—brings her closer to a womanly identity. Genius first describes her as a woman just before the knight gives the answer she provided, completing his quest and saving his life. He realizes that he must say the words that “the womman hath him tawht” (I, 1653; my emphasis). In Chaucer, the queen remains silent after the knight gives the correct answer. In Gower, the grandmother set the quest, and she reacts violently to the successful solution:
Sche seide: ‘Ha treson, wo thee be,  
That hast thus told the privite,  
Which alle wommen most desire!  
I wolde that thou were afire.’ (I, 1659–62)

There are many reasons for the grandmother to be angry with Flor ent. He killed her grandson and has now eluded her attempt to bring about his death through an apparently impossible quest. Nevertheless, the language of her answer suggests that she is angry only with the loathly lady and only because she has revealed an answer that a man alone would have been unable to discover.17

It is not clear whether the grandmother designed the question to be completely unanswerable or whether she assumed only that the answer would be unavailable to a man. Chaucer’s version favors the former, since all of the women at court seem surprised by the knight’s answer but unable to refute it. Gower’s version leans toward the latter, since the grandmother immediately recognizes the correctness of the answer and realizes just as quickly that a woman must have revealed it to Florent. Her reaction suggests that women are a community unified in keeping this secret from men and raises the possibilities that women may be unified in other ways and may be concealing other secrets about their natures. Supplying the answer certifies the loathly lady’s womanhood because it is something that only a woman would know but, paradoxically, it also constitutes a betrayal of her kind and so casts doubt on her womanhood.

As Florent returns to the lady to fulfill his promise, Genius offers an inverted blazon of “this vecke wher sche sat, / Which was the lothlieste what / That evere man caste on his yhe” (I, 1675–77). He notes the ugliness of her body and each feature of her face. The Wife of Bath, by contrast, never spends much time on the loathly lady’s appearance; she merely tells us that the lady is “olde” and “foule” without going into the gory details.18 Genius defines the loathly lady not only in terms of her looks (her cheeks, for instance, are “rivel as an emty skyn / Hangende doun unto the chin” [I, 1681–82]) but also in terms of her effect on men: her neck and shoulders “myhte a mannes lust destourbe” (I, 1688).19 This mockery of romance conventions highlights the loathly lady’s simultaneous distance from and connection to womanhood. She was most fully a woman when she revealed to Florent the female secret he sought, but as the time comes for him to keep his end of the bargain, the question of her monstrous aspect reasserts itself. The dilemma becomes urgent as the marriage becomes imminent: there is a horror of unnatural marriage (an issue to which Gower will return in the eighth book) but there is also the implied horror of the wedding night, when the nature of this creature must be revealed and faced.

As the loathly lady demands that Florent honor his covenant, “be the bridel sche him seseth” (I, 1697). Although the mixture of the beastly and the womanly in
her nature repels him, it also compels him: as a knight, he is bound to be chivalrous and “Thogh sche be the fouleste of alle, / Yet to thonour of wommanhiede / Him thoghte he scholde taken hiede” (I, 1718–20). Florent does not firmly connect the loathly lady to womanhood here. However, the possibility that she can lay claim to that identity—if only from its outermost borders—demands a certain standard of behavior from him. Even here, Gower imagines women as a positively characterized group. The loathly lady represents the furthest limits of womanhood, but not because of any vicious elements in her character. She is not evil or unfaithful or violent; in fact, she has saved the knight’s life. Only her appearance sets her apart. By implication, womanhood is virtuous and desirable and, above all, beautiful.

Romance defines women by a superlative beauty that inspires love, but the women are often passive in courtly love relationships. Florent’s bride-to-be violates that norm by aggressively requiring him to marry her: she forces him to agree in spite of rather than because of her appearance. Genius reinforces this impression by a repetition of the beast/best pun: Florent gathers his most trusted men and explains “that he nedes moste / This beste wedde to his wif, / For elles hadde he lost his lif” (I, 1740–42). Here “beste” might mean “beast” or “best woman,” but it is barely a pun; “beast” is clearly uppermost. Genius stresses the knight’s lack of choice: he must do this thing to save his life. The compulsion is dual; the loathly lady imposed the condition but the knight’s manly nature and dedication to courtly behavior oblige him to obey.

In preparation for the promised marriage, Florent attempts a “translation” similar to Griselda’s in the Clerk’s Tale. The bride-to-be is bathed and “arraied to the beste” (I, 1748) but the effort is unsuccessful: “when sche was fulliche arraied / And hire atyr was al assaiied, / Tho was sche foulere on to se” (I, 1757–59). She reconfirms her animal nature immediately after the wedding as she says, “My lord, go we to bedde, / For I to that entente wedde” (I, 1769–70) and then “profreth him with that to kisse, / As sche a lusti Lady were” (I, 1772–73). The loathly lady’s behavior undermines rather than proves her claim to womanhood. Although she exhibits female desire, her aggressive sexuality is not feminine. She acts “as sche a lusti Lady were,” but her “lusti” actions—like her “foul” looks—seem beastly instead.

She becomes a “lady” when her appearance alters. Her new husband finally turns to face her in bed and sees “a lady lay him by / Of eyhtetiene wynter age, / Which was the faireste of visage / That ever in al this world he syh” (I, 1802–5). This appearance of the loathly lady as beautiful is another point of difference between Gower and Chaucer; in the Wife of Bath’s Tale, she does not become beautiful until after he has granted her mastery. In the Tale of Florent, on the brink of consummation, at the very moment when the disjunction between her womanhood and beastliness seems irreconcilable, Genius firmly resolves it. In the context of the knight’s indecision over whether she should be beautiful by day or by night, the beast/best pun reappears, albeit weakly. Florent concludes, “I wol that ye be my
maistresse, / For I can nought miselve gesse / Which is the beste unto my chois” (I, 1825–27). Although that final line may hint that he cannot decide whether to have his wife as a beast by day or night, the primary meaning is that he does not know which is the best option. The pun has moved from favoring “beast” to favoring “best” as the loathly lady has moved in the same direction.

The rhetoric of this passage marks a sudden reversal. Up to this point, it has been unclear whether the loathly lady represents a love object to be desired or a monstrous obstacle to be overcome, but now Genius creates a traditional courtly love scene. The language of excess applies to the woman’s beauty rather than her foulness. She has vaulted, simply by virtue of the change in her appearance, from the outermost boundary of womanhood (where it was in question whether she was woman or creature) to the heart of that category. She has become a lady whose claim to womanhood is indisputable. She is beautiful and so, by definition, she exhibits womanhood. Although Genius has identified other women as ladies in the course of the tale, this is the first moment when he refers to the loathly lady in that way.

As with almost all of Genius’s examples, the point here is not the woman, her choices, or her behavior, but the male actions that affect her; this story illustrates the sin of disobedience for Amans. However, the tale raises the question of the relationship between identity and appearance. Is womanhood purely a function of beauty? Was the loathly lady always a woman, or was she a beast until the knight reinstated her womanhood by granting her mastery, restoring them both to their proper roles in courtly love? Is the outward change in her form matched by an inward change, or is her inner nature the same regardless of her appearance? Susan Crane argues that “the shapeshifter masquerades in both the beautiful and the deformed bodies . . . because both are exaggerated versions of womanhood that solicit a sexual reaction from men. This doubling of the masquerade complicates its challenge to gender categories. If both bodies are female, what are the defining characteristics of femaleness?” 21 In my reading, however, both bodies are not truly female: one is womanish, one womanly. In other words, one body approximates womanhood while the other epitomizes it. The defining physical characteristic of womanhood is beauty, both here and in the romance tradition, but this tale reminds us that such appearances are transitory and it underscores that message by demonstrating that the change can occur in either direction—through the loss of beauty or, less conventionally, its recovery.

Gower explores the transitory nature of womanhood in more detail through characters who transform from women to beasts in the tales of Tereus, Neptune and Cornix, and Calistona. Womanhood appears in all three stories. 22 As in the Tale of Florent, the female characters are prominent but their actions are not the moral point of the story; the tales illustrate the sins of rape and robbery. One of Gower’s innovations, and one of the characteristics that make the appellation “moral
Gower” appropriate, is his depiction of the effects of sin on others. While Chaucer begins the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* with the rape of a maiden who is never named or given a voice and subsequently disappears from the narrative, Gower’s unusual approach to reshaping stories affords detailed portrayals of the (usually female) victims of sinful behavior. Chaucer allows women greater agency throughout the *Canterbury Tales*, but Gower underscores their significance in purely human terms.

The Tale of Tereus, the first of the group, begins with Tereus’s rape of Philomena, his sister-in-law, and concludes with the transformation of Philomena, Procne, and Tereus into animals. Tereus provides an example of a man in whom human and beastly natures coexist. Genius introduces him as “A worthi king of hih lignage, / A noble kniht eke of his hond” (V, 5566–67). But Tereus “mislooks” and his character changes: “His yhe myhte he noght withholde / . . . / And with the sihte he gan desire” (V, 5619 and 5621). He loses “alle grace” and, Genius explains, “Foryat he was a wedded man” (V, 5630–31). As this last phrase implies, Tereus not only forgot that he was married but also forgot he was a man—indeed, nearly forgot he was human. The animal imagery first appears two lines later, when Tereus is like “a wolf which takth his preie” (V, 5633). The crucial element marking his transition from manly knight to beastly creature is his loss of reason: “he was so wod / That he no reson understod” (V, 5639–40). Foreshadowing Philomena’s future transformation, Genius describes the struggle between them: “As if a goshauk hadde sesed / a brid, which dorste noght for fere / remue” (V, 5644–46). Philomena picks up on this animal imagery in a speech that threatens to reveal Tereus’s crimes. She calls him “false man” (again, suggesting not only that he has been false in his actions but also that he is not a real man) and “mor cruel than eny beste” (V, 5676 and 5677). When Philomena concludes, Tereus, “as a Lyon wod,” cuts out her tongue (V, 5684).

At the end of the tale, Tereus, Philomena, and Procne become birds. Genius describes Philomena’s transformation into a nightingale first, bringing the issue of womanhood to the forefront:

For after that sche was a brid,  
Hir will was evere to ben hid,  
And forto duelle in prive place,  
That noman scholde sen hir face  
For schame, which mai noght be lassed,  
Of thing that was tofore passed,  
Whan that sche loste hir maidenhiede:  
For evere upon hir wommanhiede,  
Thogh that the goddes wolde hire change,  
Sche thenkth, and is the more strange. (V, 5949–58)

These observations are unique to Gower’s version. Rather than overtly condemning
Tereus, this passage represents the effects of his actions on Philomena: her shame, damaged maidenhead, and lost womanhood. Philomena sings a song on these same themes, seeming pleased that “nou I am a brid, / Ha, nou mi face mai ben hid: / Thogh I have lost mi Maidenheede, / Schal noman se my chekes rede” (V, 5985–88).

Carolyn Dinshaw argues that Philomena’s song “sounds just like a conventional courtly love song” and thereby “converts the experience of forcible rape into desirable, idealized, elite love.” The song does contain courtly conventions; Genius explains that she sings of love as “wofull blisse” and “a lust i fievere” (V, 5993 and 5995). However, the substance of the song—and particularly the part Philomena voices directly—focuses on her feelings, showing the impact of the rape. It demonstrates the destructiveness of the sin by showing the suffering of the victim; this is both a natural outgrowth and a particular payoff of Gower’s vision of performative womanhood. Readers can observe the effects of immorality as they are enacted through and alongside gender itself. Gower ironically underlines this strategy in the insensitive reaction of Amans, who affirms his obedience to his lady’s will after this tale but later expresses his wish to violate her. By contrast, Chaucer’s version of the story restricts Philomela to only a few ineffectual cries for help (“Syster!,” “Fader dere!,” and “Help me, God in hevene!”). Chaucer’s Philomela does not threaten to reveal Tereus, nor does she describe her suffering.

Like her voice, Philomena’s womanhood is both lost and partially preserved through transformation. Gower collapses the category of maidenhood into the category of womanhood and then womanhood into humanness. After the rape, but before being transformed into a bird, Philomena cries out that she can no longer be a “worldes womman,” something “that sche wissheth everem ore” (V, 5755–56). Because Tereus has imprisoned her, she cannot participate in the world, but the loss of her maidenhead also suggests that she cannot take on the roles of women in the world as wives and mothers. For Philomena, the loss of her maidenhead cloisters her, making her situation a perversion of a dedicated virgin’s. Maidenhead and womanhood are irrevocably linked; a loss of the former necessarily entails the loss of the latter. At the same time, it is clear that maidenhead is not interchangeable with womanhood; it is a part-to-whole relationship. Once Tereus raped her, Philomena was no longer fully a woman. She lost her virginity and, as a result, her potential for wifehood. Ultimately she attempts an inhumane revenge and literally loses her humanity.

Both sisters participate in the revenge against Tereus, revealing that both have lost their claim to a traditional womanly identity. However, Genius connects Procne’s loss of womanhood to her loss of motherhood:

This Tereüs be Progne his wif
A Sone hath, which as his lif
He loveth, and Ithis he hihte:
His moder wiste wel sche mihte
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Genius first suggests the loss by describing her son as “this child.” While not directly from Procné’s perspective, the passage represents her thoughts (beginning with the phrase “His moder wiste wel”) and so bears the overtones of her voice. Genius names her as “his moder” but not the boy as her son. He is “lief” to Tereus but not (or at least no longer) to Procné. She perverts the motherly and wifely actions of caring for a child and preparing a meal; her behavior is a mockery of true womanliness. In contrast to the loss of reason that led to Tereus’s beastliness, the loss of pity—particularly that pity that should be most natural for women, the pity for their own children—causes Procné to lose her womanhood and humanity.

Much as Tereus “forgot” that he was a married man, Procné “forgets” pity. She is able to forget it because she is “withoute insihte of moderhede.” If maidenhead is the essential characteristic of unmarried womanhood, motherhood is the essential characteristic of married womanhood. However, neither completely defines womanhood for Gower, not least because neither can be simply or completely signified in visible ways.

The Tale of Neptune and Cornix further explores the relationship between maidenhead and womanhood as Genius uses Neptune’s attempted rape of Cornix to illustrate the vice of robbery. Neptune’s trouble—like Tereus’s—begins with his gaze. He realizes that Cornix is not powerful enough to resist him.

This passage characterizes maidenhead in two quite different ways, as a treasure and as a flower. The treasure metaphor, part of Genius’s attempt to accommodate the sin of robbery to love, is disquieting. It raises the questions of whether maidenhead is a woman’s treasure or one belonging to her father or husband and, if the former,
whether it is spent once her virginity is lost. Even as a treasure, it does not seem very valuable; Neptune likens it to “some othre smale thinges” (V, 6174). Later in the tale, we are told that its worth to Cornix was much greater because it is something “That no lif mai restore” (V, 6211).

In order to preserve this treasure, Athena transforms Cornix into a crow before Neptune can violate her:

Out of hire wommanisshe kinde  
Into a briddes like I finde  
Sche was transformed forth withal,  
So that Neptunus nothing stal  
Of such thing as he wolde have stole. (V, 6199–6203)

Cornix exchanges her “wommanisshe” nature for the likeness of a bird, further evidence that nature is both changeable and multivalent. The word “wommanisshe” suggests that femininity is not necessarily innate to Cornix, nor is it the only possible nature for her.

A few lines later, Genius compares the womanly and avian natures, as if both are costumes that are put on (if not as easily discarded):

[It] was to hire a more delit,  
To kepe hire maidenhede whit  
Under the wede of fethers blake,  
In Perles whyte than forsake  
That no lif mai restore ayein. (V, 6207–11)

The crow nature is like clothing, a “wede of fethers blake,” and parallel to the appropriate attire for a woman (and perhaps suggestive of a bride) “in Perles whyte.” The crucial constant is the inner intactness that Cornix has maintained. She does not have the shame of which Philomena sang; instead, Cornix is pleased to have escaped. Maidenhead is so valuable that it is better to be an animal than a woman without her maidenhead. The irony, of course, is that Cornix avoided the loss of her maidenhead but, as a crow, she is no longer truly in possession of it. To be a woman is always to be at risk of losing your womanliness in one way (rape or violence) or another (transformation). Gower is heavily influenced by Ovid’s versions of these narratives, but Ovid represents female metamorphosis as a weak mirror of divine transcendence whereas Gower interrogates how it affects human—and especially womanly—identity.

The final story of woman-creature transformation presents a woman who loses her maidenhead but manages to maintain vestiges of motherhood, even as a creature. Calistona’s story is also unusual because she is a dedicated virgin and follower
of Diana, a maiden who has vowed “To kepe hir maidenhode clene” (V, 6246). The narrative glosses over her rape by Jupiter, unlike the rape and attempted rape in the previous tales. Genius explains that her maidenhead was “priveliche stole away” (V, 6248) and that Jupiter “From hire it tok in such a wise, / That sodeinliche forth withal / Hire wombe aros and sche toswal” (V, 6250–52). Calistona’s reaction is not detailed. She feels shame, like Philomena, but Genius describes these feelings only when Calistona must reveal her naked body to Diana and her virgins. Diana sees Calistona’s pregnant body and cries, “Awey, thou foule beste” (V, 6275). The violation of her body has made Calistona beastly in Diana’s eyes before the physical transformation occurs. As the earlier tales suggested, the loss of maidenhead causes a loss of womanhood and even of humanity. The beastliness becomes literal when, after the birth of Calistona’s son, Juno transforms her into a bear. The rape robbed Calistona of her maidenhead, but the metamorphosis takes away her “grete beaute” (V, 6303), another important element of her womanhood.

Calistona’s case is atypical because women as well as men act against her. Still, most disturbing is the near-victimization by her unknowing son that provokes a climactic reappearance of her “wommanhiede.” Calistona sees her grown son, Archas, hunting in the forest:

When sche under the wodesschawe  
Hire child behield, sche was so glad,  
That sche with bothe hire armes sprad,  
As thogh sche were in wommanhiede,  
Toward him cam, and tok non hiede  
Of that he bar a bowe bent.

And he with that an Arwe hath hent  
And gan to teise it in his bowe,  
As he that can non other knowe,  
Bot that it was a beste wylde. (V, 6324–33)

The incident represents a clash between her two natures; unlike Procne, Calistona has not completely lost motherhood. On one hand, her outward appearance is completely a bear’s and even her son sees her as a “beste wylde.” On the other hand, a beast would react instinctively by running from the danger, but Calistona’s maternal instincts remain uppermost and so she approaches her son. Her posture—arms spread wide to embrace him—is a human one, suggesting that, even at the physical level, vestiges of humanity remain.

Her emotions are also human; she is happy to see her son. To label this “human” is imprecise, however; the passage explains that she acts “as thogh sche were in wommanhiede.” It is not her human nature that endures, but her motherhood and so her womanhood—these transcend the basic human/beast divide. The emphasis
on Calistona’s womanhood is particular to Gower’s version; Ovid states only that “her human feelings remained, though she was now a bear [mens antiqua tamen facta quoque mansit in ursa].”35 The four concluding lines of the tale quickly tell us that Jupiter intervened to save both mother and son, although no specific details are given. While this might seem like an expressive (rather than performative) concept of gender, Gower’s notions of how identities develop and change can be extended to suggest that Calistona—and other characters, as we will see with Achilles—acquire and perform even those identities that seem most natural to them. In other words, Calistona’s combination of womanhood and beastliness is less a case of a core identity showing through an imposed one than of the imperfect overlay of one identity on top of another, but not necessarily more innate, one.

Calistona’s tale is also unusual in depicting the struggle between her womanly and beastly natures after her transformation. Though we hear generally how Procne and Philomena feel as birds and that Cornix is pleased to be a crow, we see nothing that they experience as creatures. This last of the three tales proves that the beastly and the womanly (though they may conflict) can coexist within one self; if the loathly lady in the Tale of Florent proved that both aspects can manifest themselves in a single body, then Calistona’s more extreme case shows that they can also act as a dual influence on behavior. The tale suggests that motherhood, at least, can endure through such transformations. By extension, womanhood also persists in observable ways: not in appearance, but actions. Genius explains Calistona’s situation: “For thogh sche hadde hire forme lore, / The love was noght lost therfore / Which kinde hath set under his lawe” (V, 6321–23). This adds an additional level to womanhood; it involves specific emotions (although we can only apprehend these emotions when they are enacted). Procne forgot pity for her son and lost her womanhood before becoming a beast, but Calistona continues to love her son and retains an aspect of womanhood even as a beast. Motherhood is not a purely physical phenomenon and, as a result, neither is womanhood. Still, behavior is a significant manifestation of the otherwise invisible elements associated with those conditions.

Because beastliness can result from actions as well as appearances, there are other “beastly women” in Gower’s text, including Clytemnestra and Medea. Womanhood exists precariously between enacted violence and experienced violation; both virginity and humanity are at risk. Maidenhead is not exclusive to women, however. At the conclusion of these three tales, Genius illustrates “Hou maiden-hod is to commende” (V, 6358) with the example of Phryns, a man who was so attractive that he gouged out his eyes to prevent women from desiring him. With this action, “his maidehiede he boghte” (V, 6384).36 It is unusual to consider virginity as a male virtue but much more so to apply the etymologically feminine word “maidehiede” to a man. Gower’s male-dominated focus in the Confessio Amantis and hence his need to establish the virtue as one with universal value may dictate
this move, which is broadly similar to Chaucer’s Clerk’s attempt to universalize the example of Griselda in the tradition of Petrarch. Still, if “maidehiede” can belong to a man, then we must wonder whether womanhood can, as well.

Womanly Men

In other tales involving transformation, Gower demonstrates that men can exhibit womanhood as well as maidenhead. He investigates the connection between womanhood and manhhood most deeply in the Tale of Achilles and Deidamia, the Evil Example of Sardanapalus, and the Tale of Iphis. Achilles’ experience illustrates that both manhhood and womanhood can be acquired or imitated. He takes womanhood as a disguise, learning to dress and act in womanly ways; this parallels an early education that cultivated his manliness. Genius uses Sardanapalus as a negative example of love overcoming reason, an unmanly attitude (and one which, as the final section will discuss, Amans embodies). Sardanapalus loves womanhood rather than an individual woman, even going so far as to learn womanly tasks. Iphis is an unusual case: her parents raise the girl as a boy but when she falls in love with a woman, Cupid makes Iphis male. Watt considers some of these same tales as examples of Gower’s “transgressive genders,” such as feminine masculinity. I see this model as even more widely applicable; these narratives reveal that any person might show evidence of womanhood or manhhood because those conditions are identified by appearance, behavior, and speech—all of which can be adopted by anyone.37 Even desire, as Iphis’s story shows, is not completely natural. Throughout, Gower continues to capitalize on the multiplicity of language to suggest the multiplicity of nature.

The best known and most detailed of the tales of womanly men is the Tale of Achilles and Deidamia. This tale is found in Book V, which also includes the rape and transformation tales and the example of Phrynys’s male maidenhead. Achilles’ famed masculine behavior makes him a particularly interesting and convincing case; if he can practice womanhood, then any man could. The story begins with Thetis disguising her son as a woman in order to circumvent a prophecy that he would die in the Trojan War. Significantly, she seeks to conceal Achilles’ physical appearance, wondering “Hou sche him mihte so desguise / That noman scholde his bodi knowe” (V, 2972–73). This comment reveals the intensely performative nature of Gowerian gender: the biological sex of Achilles’ body is a fact, but he can change how that body signifies.38

An earlier tale from Book IV reveals how Achilles acquired his manly nature and appearance. He built strength and courage by killing dangerous animals every day:

And thus of that Chiro [the centaur] him tawhte
Achilles such an herte cawhte,
That he nomore a Leon dradde,
Whan he his Dart on honde hadde,
Thanne if a Leon were an asse:
And that hath mad him forto passe
Alle othre knihtes of his dede. (IV, 2005–11)

Gower uses puns in order to make his point. The “herte” that Achilles “cawhte” refers both to a hart, the stereotypical prey, and to his heart, the courage that he learned. The consistent use in the text of *hert* for *hart* and *herte* for *heart* strengthens the latter reading. Achillies is a great warrior not by nature, but by training. His manliness is less the result of an innate essence than of an intensive education in the behaviors of manhood.

The disguise that Thetis devises involves a new education in how to be a woman. It begins with Achilles’ outward appearance, specifically his clothing: Thetis “Hire Sone, as he a Maiden were, / Let clothen in the same gere / Which longeth unto wommanhiede” (V, 2983–85). He does not reject the clothes as unnatural or inappropriate; Genius says only that Achilles “tok non hiede” (V, 2986). The education continues when his mother teaches Achilles how he must behave:

For Thetis with gret diligence
Him hath so tawht and so afaited,
That, hou so that it were awaited,
With sobre and goodli contenance
He scholde his wommanhiede avance,
That non the sothe knowe myhte,
Bot that in every mannes syhte
He scholde seme a pure Maide. (V, 3002–9)

In the first occurrence of “wommanhiede,” it was distinct from Achilles; here he not only exhibits but also owns it: “his wommanhiede.” Gower again plays with ambiguity: “avance” suggests that Achilles can improve or further his womanhood but also that it is something he advances or puts over on others. With womanly clothes and actions, Achilles is a maid to “every mannes syhte”; Genius later underscores this point by clarifying, “He was a womman to beholde” (V, 3021). These descriptions may indicate that Achilles is a woman only at a shallow level or that the change from man to woman involved a virtual loss of voice, but they also indicate that gender is closely identified with appearance, particularly clothing. To be a woman, one must look like a woman. If someone looks like a woman, most people find little reason to suspect that the person has any other identity.

A later passage suggests that both manliness and womanliness are “manners” that can be discarded or adopted, even by this most manly of men. Thetis places
Achilles in the company of King Lichomede’s daughters:

[She] lefte there Achilles feigned,
As he which hath himself restreigned
In al that evere he mai and can
Out of the manere of a man,
And tok his wommannysshe chiere. (V, 3051–55)

Here again, Genius does not distance Achilles from womanliness but explicitly describes it as part of him. His “wommannysshe chiere” is parallel to the “manere of a man” and both seem based on appearance and replicable actions rather than one being more natural than the other. Karma Lochrie points out that “the fact that . . . gender-passing is so completely successful in the story of Achilles points to the instability of the cultural construction of gender.”

Gender is unstable because it does not belong to either sex exclusively; however, the “cultural construction” of womanhood involves a stable set of behaviors, and so men as well as women can embody it. Achilles’ struggle and need for restraint results from conflicting educations—one manly, one womanly—rather than a conflict between his nature and disguise.

Gower again exploits the ambiguity of language when Achilles’ manhood asserts itself through sexual desire:

The longe nyhtes hem [Achilles and Deidamia] betuene
Nature, which mai noght forbere,
Hath mad hem bothe forto stere:
Thei kessen ferst, and overmore
The hihe weie of loves lore
Thei gon, and al was don in dede,
Wherof lost is the maydenhede. (V, 3062–68)

This passage suggests either that Achilles’ sexual desire is naturally masculine or that his inculcated manliness overrides his more recent education in womanliness; the final line supports both readings. It literally signifies that Deidamia has lost her virginity but, because “the maydenhede” rather than her maidenhead is lost and because we have already seen that maidenhead can apply to men, that line may also indicate that Achilles has lost his virginity. The most interesting possibility is that the line hints at the unmasking of his disguise. He has lost his maidenhead in a metaphorical sense because he no longer exhibits womanhood, at least by night. The following line supports that interpretation: “And that was afterward wel knowe” (V, 3069). What becomes well known in the tale is not Deidamia’s loss of virginity but Achilles’ identity as a man. Gower’s careful construction of the line holds all of these possibilities in tension.
The unmasking of Achilles seems to suggest that nature triumphs over nurture. Because of Gower’s ambiguous language, however, the scene may indicate only that the stronger nurturance wins out. When Ulysses goes to find Achilles, Ulysses knows where Achilles will be and that he will be dressed as a woman. Ulysses witnesses the women singing and dancing in a Bacchic ritual, but the Greeks cannot tell Achilles apart: “Thei couden wite which was he, / Ne be his vois, ne be his pas” (V, 3150–51). His voice and appearance make him indistinguishable from “real” women. Ulysses lays out “the moste riche aray, / Wherof a womman mai be gay” (V, 3105–6) and a “knihtes harneis” (V, 3157), allowing every lady to choose whichever gift she most likes. Achilles’ choice of apparel reveals him:

*Whan he the bryhte helm behield,*  
The swerd, the hauberk and the Schield,  
His herte fell therto anon;  
Of all that othre wolde he non,  
The knihtes gere he underfongeth,  
And thilke aray which that belongeth  
Unto the wommen he forsok. (V, 3169–75)

Because his “herte” leads Achilles to the knightly gear, his “true” nature seems to be asserting itself unconsciously but irresistibly. However, the earlier tale of Achilles’ education also allows for the possibility that his education in how to be a man is overcoming his more recent education in how to be a woman. Gower’s use of *herte* in both tales strengthens this interpretation. The “herte” that leads Achilles to the armor is the “herte” that he “cawte” through the centaur’s instruction. Achilles’ rejection of the womanly “aray” rejects womanhood in the form of the clothing and behavior it entails; he embraces manhood on the same superficial level.

In the Evil Example of Sardanapalus, his heart chooses womanhood over manhood and hence leads him into trouble. As its title indicates, the tale is an extreme and notable negative illustration. Genius tells it to demonstrate that, while love is natural, one must not let it overcome reason:

*To sen a man fro his astat*  
Thurgh his sotie effeminat,  
And leve that a man schal do,  
It is as Hose above the Scho,  
To man which oghte noght ben used. (VII, 4303–7)

This passage suggests that, rather than women driving men to distraction (the role traditionally given women in romance), men are responsible for letting their love overcome their reason. Courtly poets often portrayed men as feminized by desire;
here, by driving themselves to distraction, men are taking on the conventional woman’s role and hence are “effeminat.” The hose and shoe image indicates that love is over reason rather than under, or subject to, it. Because the passage discusses men taking on a female role, the image also has a secondary meaning: for men, their manly nature should be over their womanly nature. Genius identifies a lack of manhood as the root of the problem; overtaken by love, “manhode stod behinde” (VII, 4311). This issue is crucial. Genius has already established that a man should not “change for the wommanhede / The worthinesse of his manhede” (VII, 4255–56). Men should display and practice manliness and not the womanliness that results from love overruling reason; indeed, this is Amans’s central problem.

Sardanapalus is guilty of womanly behavior in this figurative sense but also in more concrete ways. In his case, the hose is definitely over the shoe:

[He fell] into thilke fyri rage
Of love, which the men assoteth,
Wherof himself he so riotteth,
And wax so ferforth womannyssh,
That ayein kinde, as if a fissh
Abide wolde upon the lond. (VII, 4318–23)

Sardanapalus does not fall in love with a particular woman but with all women, effecting a sort of self-transformation; the text tells us that “In wommen such a lust he fond” that he “only wroghte after the wille / Of wommen” (VII, 4324 and 4326–27). Genius does not describe a specific love object: although Sardanapalus experiences the “fyri” love typical of romance, he seems to love womanhood itself. Unreasonable love may make men “womannyssh,” but in Sardanapalus’s case, his love for womanly things and behaviors leads him dangerously close to demonstrating womanhood.

That love brings Sardanapalus to the women’s chamber, and

. . . ther he keste and there he pleide,
Thei tawhten him a Las to breide,
And weve a Pours, and to enfile
A Perle: and fell that ilke while,
On Barbarus the Prince of Mede
Sih hou this king in wommanhede
Was falle fro chivalerie. (VII, 4331–37)

Like Achilles, Sardanapalus exhibits womanhood as the result of an education in how to behave like a woman; here, he learns to perform specific feminine tasks. Unlike Achilles, Sardanapalus seeks out womanhood and therefore becomes a nega-
tive example whereas Achilles was absolved from blame. But Sardanapalus's position seems to be the most critical difference; while Achilles shows that one person can accommodate both “chivalerie” and “wommanhede,” at least in sequence, Genius presents these as mutually exclusive alternatives for a king. Sardanapalus chooses the latter at the expense of the former and, because kingship in this tale requires masculine chivalric behavior, his choice jeopardizes the kingdom and ultimately leads to his usurpation.

Sardanapalus and Achilles choose their identities, although for different reasons; Iphis has an identity imposed upon him/her. Iphis’s tale, which appears in the same book as the Education of Achilles, represents a woman who becomes manly and ultimately undergoes a sexual transformation, showing that manly and womanly natures coexist in women as well as men. In this brief narrative (which, until recently, critics generally overlooked), a king threatens to kill his unborn child if it is female, and so his wife raises the daughter to whom she gives birth as a boy named Iphis. Iphis eventually becomes engaged to a duke’s daughter and Cupid, in order to prevent their love from being unnatural, turns Iphis into a man. This tale directly follows the Tale of Pygmalion and the Statue; if that tale demonstrates that a statue can be a convincing woman, then the Tale of Iphis shows that a woman can be a convincing man. In both cases, Genius approves the manipulation of nature. Iphis shows no struggle between his/her identities or natures, and in fact does not even seem to be conscious that he/she is anything other than the gender he/she was raised to be. In Ovid, Iphis is disturbed by his/her love for Ianthe, but Gower eliminates any reference to that inner struggle. Throughout the tale, Genius refers to Iphis using masculine pronouns, showing no more consciousness of Iphis’s conflicting natures or identities than Iphis himself/herself. In this tale, nurture successfully overcomes nature and finally Cupid refigures the latter.

As with Achilles, the education begins with the proper clothing. Iphis is “clothed and arraied so / Rih as a kinges Sone scholde” (IV, 472–73). Because he/she is betrothed at ten years old, there is no discussion of how Iphis functions socially as male. We do not see him/her undergo any experiences other than the betrothal and subsequent sexual experimentation. The tale quickly proceeds to the problem of desire, which is between two characters of the same sex but different gender identities. At the moment that Iphis desires a woman, however, Genius recalls Iphis’s sex by applying the feminine pronoun to him/her for the first and only time. After the betrothal

. . . ofte abedde
These children leien, sche and sche,
Whiche of on age bothe be.
So that withinne time of yeeres,
Togedre as thei ben pleiefieres,
Liggende abedde upon a nyht,
Nature, which doth every wiht
Upon hire lawe forto muse,
Constreigneth hem, so that thei use
Thing which to hem was al unknowe. (IV, 478–87)

The two are “constreign[ed]” by Nature here, but the phrase “sche and sche” evokes the more complex issue of Iphis’s nature. In the midst of Genius’s otherwise consistent use of masculine pronouns, this phrase is doubly disruptive. Here Gower reverses his strategy from the Tale of Florent, where he dispelled tension in the bedroom scene with an quick transformation; rather than allowing the reader to forget (as Iphis apparently has, if indeed he/she ever knew) that this character is a woman acting as a man, Gower reminds us at the moment where it might seem most problematic for medieval readers.\footnote{45}

Unlike Achilles, Iphis experiences the sexual desire of his/her adopted gender (within a heteronormative framework) and this more extreme situation apparently necessitates supernatural intervention. Despite the earlier portrayal of this same-sex desire as in accord with Nature, Genius now depicts the love of Iphis and Ianthe as unnatural:

\begin{quote}
For love hateth nothing more
Than thing which stant ayein the lore
Of that nature in kinde hath sett:
Forthi Cupide hath so besett
His grace upon this aventure,
That he acordant to nature,
Whan that he syh the time best,
That ech of hem hath other kest,
Transformeth Iphe into a man. (IV, 493–501)
\end{quote}

The passage suggests that their love is unnatural because Iphis is biologically female, even though we have seen no evidence of womanly nature from her/him. However, as is typical of Gower’s language when describing such issues, there is ambiguity: the love may be unnatural because it is queer desire or because Iphis’s womanly nature has been so completely subsumed in his/her manhood.\footnote{46 In other words, it is not clear whether the sexual encounter itself is unnatural or whether it merely brings to the forefront the problem of Iphis’s unusual nature.}

The physical transformation that resolves the situation has no visible impact on Iphis. There is no relief, no puzzlement, and no acknowledgment. Still, the ending is happy: “thei ladde a merie lif, / Which was to kinde non offence” (IV, 504–5). Lochrie maintains that “gender itself proves to be merely a disguise in the
story—it neither provokes the desire of the two girls for each other nor constrains them.”

Gender does operate as a disguise, but desire is an important part of that disguise. Desire for women is part of manhood, and desire for men is part of womanhood. This tale suggests that desire is not necessarily more natural than clothing and actions.

Most women learn womanliness and most men learn manliness. As the exaggerated cases in these tales show, however, any person can demonstrate manhood, womanhood, beastliness, or some combination of these aspects; even sexual desire appears acquired rather than innate. It is not surprising that Gower presents both men and women as possessing the potential for beastliness. It is more interesting that he presents womanhood, manhood, and beastliness as overlapping identities defined primarily by what is displayed, not what is essential, and potentially present in women as well as men. This is not to say that the problem is identical for both sexes. Only women can be beastly because of their appearance (as in the Tale of Florent) and only women become beasts through the violation of their bodies (as in the tales of Tereus, Cornix, and Calistona).

“Mi ladi, which a womman is”

Throughout the Confessio Amantis, Amans believes his problem to be unrequited love. In other words, his lady does not act within the romance conventions that the text supplies through its own tales. Gower implies, however, that the problem lies not in the fact that the lady does not comply with the courtly love role but in the very attempt to force reality to accord with romance, a misuse of social power.

“Chivalry,” Winthrop Wetherbee writes, “is in effect the villain of the Confessio.”

Influenced by his own idea of chivalry, Amans allows his beastly and womanly aspects to be uppermost and needs to develop a manly heart, as Achilles did in his early education. Amans reveals his beastliness in his desire to violate the lady, like Tereus, and his womanliness in his inability to allow reason to overcome love, like Sardanapalus.

In the exempla, Genius tries to correct Amans’s views of his lady and himself by portraying women sensitively and highlighting male responsibility. Rather than applying these stories to himself, however, Amans uses them to accuse his lady of improper behavior, comparing her to the Gorgons and Sirens—a misreading that confirms his love is overruling his reason. This tendency increases through Books I–VI; aspects of the narrative that invite misinterpretation further encourage Amans. For instance, in the tales of Iphis and Araxarathen, Rosiphelee, and Jephthah’s Daughter, Book IV seems to judge women for refusing to engage in love. Although Genius relates these tales to masculine sins, Amans draws on them
to critique his lady. In Book V, the difficulty of adapting financial sins to love leaves room for Amans to argue that the lady owes him for the love he has given her. Genius combats this reading by refiguring the value of the exchange between Amans and the lady. In the end, Amans must recognize himself as primarily a man rather than a lover, minimizing his beastly and womanly aspects by reading female behavior sympathetically and his own less indulgently.

The romantic representations in the tales contrast with the relative reality of the frame narrative; this gap allows the lady to refuse Amans. In her reading of the *Franklin’s Tale*, Crane has argued that romance rhetoric does not allow a woman to refuse a man who pursues her. Because the lady in the *Confessio Amantis* is not completely contained by these rules of courtly love, she is able to reject Amans’s suit. This interest in the malleability of desire marks another radical aspect of Gower’s conception of gender; the lady can step outside courtly love conventions without morphing into an antifeminist stereotype. If she inhabited one of the tales, she might be constrained to reciprocate or suffer punishment; in the frame, she has the power to act on her own feelings and wishes. Nonetheless, all of the tales that involve womanhood reflect on the representation of the lady. These tales help to define womanhood and Amans, Genius, and even the reader measure the lady against this definition. However, the lady and her connection to the tales have not figured prominently in the critical tradition, which has taken for granted that Amans’s attitude toward his lady is relatively straightforward and of minor importance to the text.

In an influential reading, G. C. Macaulay argues that the lady is a paragon: “Gower, who was quite capable of appreciating the delicacy and refinement which ideal love requires, has here set before us a figure which is both attractive and human, a charming embodiment of womanly grace and refinement.” Although Amans does represent the lady as an ideal, he also bitterly tallies the ways in which she falls short of that ideal.

Amans’s education on this point develops from the first book through the end of the text; his ambivalent attitude toward the lady is apparent from the outset but becomes increasingly acerbic through Book VI. His earliest critique compares her to the Gorgons and Sirens, figures who mix womanliness with beastliness. In the Tale of Medusa, the Gorgons are clearly unnatural; Genius calls them “Monstres” (I, 404 and 425) and “dreadful Monstres” (I, 435). However, he also refers to them as daughters and sisters, portraying them as unfortunate rather than evil. This departs from Ovid’s version, where the Gorgons’ nature is a punishment. Genius explains that the Gorgons are the result of “the constellacion” at their births (I, 393) and places the responsibility for their effect on men who “Misloke, wher that thei ne scholde” (I, 418) and thereby turn themselves to stone. In this way, the Tale of Medusa draws on the first tale in the text, that of Acteon, which showed that men should not violate women by looking when (or where) they should not. The moral of these stories is not about the women but the men; Genius emphasizes to Amans
“That thou thi sihte noght misuse” (I, 437) because a man must “wel his yhe kepe / And take of fol delit no kepe” (I, 441–42). However, in absolving the Gorgons in this way, Gower also robs them of any true agency.

The treatment of the Sirens is similar. Genius also calls them monsters (I, 485, 514, and 526), but they are further over the border between woman and beast than the Gorgons. The mixture of woman and beast that the Sirens represent is literal: women “Up fro the navele” and fish “doun benethe,” singing with “wommanyshe vois” (I, 489, 490, and 495). They are “Lik unto wommen” (I, 488) and “wommanyshe”—womanlike rather than womanly. With their seductive singing, the Sirens display slightly more agency than the Gorgons. Nonetheless, Genius blames not the monsters but the men who ignore “reson” and “here Ere obeie, / And seilen til it so befalle / That thei into the peril falle” (I, 504 and 510–12).

Amans uses images of both the Gorgons and the Sirens to make sense of his lady’s behavior. He admits that he is guilty of the sins of the eye and the ear:

I have hem cast upon Meduse,  
Therof I may me noght excuse:  
Min herte is growen into Ston,  
So that my lady therupon  
Hath such a priente of love grave,  
That I can noght miselve save.  
...  
[And] whanne I may my lady hiere,  
Mi wit with that hath lost his Stiere:  
I do noght as Uluxes dede,  
Bot falle anon upon the stede,  
Wher as I se my lady stonde;  
And there, I do yow understonde,  
I am topulled in my thoght,  
So that of reson leveth noght,  
Wherof that I me mai defende. (I, 551–56 and 559–67)

Following the models of the Sirens and Gorgons, Amans absolves the lady of responsibility for her effect on him. She is the object of his gaze and her speech is more overheard than directed at him. At the same time, these comparisons to monster-women enable Amans’s criticism of the lady’s failure to reciprocate his love. His consequent divided feelings, which intensify as the poem progresses, are here already visible. Amans’s recourse to courtly rhetoric only emphasizes the lady’s resemblance to the womanish monsters. If anything, she is more active and hence more blameworthy, for she engraves “a priente of love” on Amans’s heart. Although he admits to the initial acts of looking and hearing, the lady then takes over and produces effects that are beyond his control.
By Book III, Amans’s romantic rhetoric begins to break down. Addressing the sin of hate, he qualifies his feelings for the lady after she rejects him: “Thogh I my ladi love algate, / Tho wordes moste I nedes hate; / . . . / The word I hate and hire I love” (III, 875–76 and 883). Amans’s tone is not that of a wistful lover but of a sulky rejected suitor. He returns to the lady’s lack of mercy later in the same book with a direct accusation. If he were to die, he claims, she would be guilty of homicide; she has “Withoute pite gentilesse, / Withoute mercy wommanhede” (III, 1606–7). This is the first overt criticism of the lady Amans has ventured and his first reference to womanhood. The accusation bears some relation to courtly rhetoric, where unrequited love may result in death (as it will in the Tale of Iphis and Araxarathen). Because Amans takes his idea of womanhood from romance, he sees mercy or pity as its fundamental characteristic—an idea that we have already seen in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* and that Genius later seems to support.

In Books IV and V, Amans seizes upon several of Genius’s remarks in order to mount a stronger critique of the lady. The tales of Rosiphelee and Jephthah’s Daughter provide a basis for Amans to disparage the lady for not returning his love. Departing from Genius’s practice of relying on male examples, both tales offer female examples of idleness in love. Although they provoke little direct response from Amans, the tales provide rare instances of female sin against which he can measure the lady. Rosiphelee, the daughter of a king, has no desire to marry but receives a supernatural warning not to delay. Learning that she will be sacrificed, Jephthah’s daughter laments that she has not married and had children. These tales present another way in which womanhood can be endangered or damaged, if not lost altogether: if she fails to marry and produce children, a maiden never achieves full womanhood. Jephthah’s daughter bewails that “sche no children hath forth-drawe / In Mariage after the lawe, / So that the poeple is noght encresed” (IV, 1569–71). She goes to mourn with a group of maidens, each of whom “hire maiden-hiede / Compleigneth upon thilke nede, / That sche no children hadde bore” (IV, 1585–87). Maidenhead is an important element of womanhood, but only within a limited time frame. Some of the urgency that Genius represents women as feeling (or needing to feel) may be the result of the prospect, which has been vividly represented, of losing womanhood in ways that are not under a woman’s control.

Amans applauds the condemnation of women’s behavior. He is pleased “That ye the wommen have noght spared” (IV, 1600). He easily sees how women sin, but does not follow Genius’s application of Rosiphelee and Jephthah’s daughter to masculine behavior (IV, 1602–7). As Rosiphelee “was chastised,” Genius explains, “Riht so the knyht mai ben avised, / Which ydel is and wol noght serve / To love” (IV, 1455–58). It makes sense for Genius to adapt these two tales that focus on female behavior for his primary audience, Amans. But it is curious that Gower selects such stories, rather than ones that might be more obviously relevant, at this moment and nowhere else. If idleness in love is a problem particularly for women (a logical conclusion, since the time for marrying and child-rearing is most limited for
women), then why does Amans need to hear about it? If love idleness is not a specifically female issue, then why does Genius use not one but two female examples to illustrate it, when female examples are absent elsewhere in the text? It may be that the extreme nature of the example makes it more effective. In other words, it seems more unusual for a woman not to want to marry and so the behavior is that much more reprehensible. But these stories also introduce the possibility that Amans most wants to deny: that women (and hence his lady) may not be interested in love.

Genius does not stop his elucidation of the moral of the Tale of Rosiphelee with the application to men. He continues, “Bot forto loke aboven alle, / These Maidens, hou so that it falle, / Thei scholden take ensample of this” (IV, 1463–65). He then discusses at length how peculiar it is that a maiden would not want the kind of love that leads to marriage:

A gret mervaile it is forthi,
  How that a Maiden wolde lette,
   That sche hir time ne besette
   To haste unto that ilke feste,
  Wherof the love is al honeste. (IV, 1480–84)

Genius suggests both that marriage is an unalloyed good and that all women should participate in it. Further, the passage imagines wifehood followed by motherhood as the only conceivable outcome for women. Genius goes on to explain that women should not wait to get married because they must have children for the world to continue.

In the Confessio, the only sinful behavior discussed through female examples is withdrawing from the system of marriage by refusing or failing to marry and have children (a passive rather than an active sin). The implication might be that a woman’s sole responsibility is to fulfill these two roles; other issues of behavior in love can be taken up with men. Unlike Amans’s ideas about the lady, which draw on courtly representations of women, Genius’s concerns about female behavior are firmly grounded in social reality and concerned with social ramifications. There is no discussion of how women ought to act as love objects or as wives and mothers, only the assertion that they should take on both of the latter roles. Since courtly love is not a necessary predicate for wifehood and motherhood, the lady is not obligated to love Amans but only to marry and have children eventually. As the conclusion will reveal, Amans’s age makes him a weak candidate for love with these practical purposes.

The Tale of Iphis and Araxarathen licenses Amans to attack his lady’s behavior from a new angle. Araxarathen resists Iphis’s advances in an attempt “To save and kepe hir wommanhiede” (IV, 3534). When Iphis hangs himself, the tale seems to
blame Araxarathen’s lack of pity: she asks the gods to punish her and they turn her
to stone. In the end, however, Genius interprets the tale as an example of why men
should not despair. Iphis, rather than Araxarathen, is the negative example; her self-
accusation and punishment make her the victim of his improper behavior rather
than the other way around.\textsuperscript{59} The twist in the middle of the tale toward blaming
Araxarathen (which is more in keeping with Ovid’s version) becomes a digression
rather than the point. Still, it is easy to understand why Amans may have con-
cluded that women who do not reciprocate love are culpable rather than that men
should not despair. The accusations he will later make against his lady seem to draw
in part on the depiction of Araxarathen’s lack of mercy.

The issue of mercy returns us to the problem of matching romance with reality.
In courtly rhetoric, women respond mercifully to their lovers. Those who do not,
like Araxarathen, are blamed and punished. Amans wants and expects his lady to
play this role; if she does not conform to romance models, he does not know how
to behave. He struggles to reconcile or at least adapt literary representations to
the social reality of women, and the reader experiences this struggle with him. He
wonders how the lady can have womanhood if she is not behaving as she would in
a romance, how she can be the reasonable and desirable object of his affections and
yet reject him, and whether the lady’s behavior or the literary role is unnatural. The
romance version of womanhood would seem to dictate that she reward his loyal
love and devotion, if only in some small way. What we have learned about Amans’s
behavior, however, makes her treatment of him understandable, even appropriate.
As with Araxarathen, the lady’s rejection of Amans may preserve her womanhood
rather than undermining it.

Influenced by these tales, Amans becomes much freer and more overt in his
critique of the lady and her behavior. Lack of mercy in the mode of Araxarathen
becomes the basis for accusations of usury against the lady; idleness in love in the
mode of Rosiphelee and Jephthah’s daughter becomes the basis for accusations of
parsimony. In this same book, Amans first expresses a troubling desire that critics
have largely disregarded: to violate his lady.\textsuperscript{60} After the Tale of Tereus, Amans said
he would rather be drawn apart by wild horses than go against his lady’s will (V,
6053–58). Here he anticipates that tale and his vow by describing how, at night, he
will “thenke upon the nyhtingale” (IV, 2872). He then details how his heart virtu-
ally satisfies his contrary wish:

\begin{verbatim}
Ther is no lock mai schette him oute,
Him nedeth nght to gon aboute,
That perce mai the harde wall;
Thus is he with hire overall,
That be hire lief, or be hire loth,
Into hire bedd myn herte goth,
\end{verbatim}
And softly taketh hire in his arm
And fieleth hou that sche is warm,
And wissheth that his body were
To fiele that he fieleth there. (IV, 2879–88)

Although such thoughts go against Genius’s teaching, they are in keeping with romantic discourse, as in the *Romance of the Rose*. Within that context, they are even relatively mild; the intent, however, remains disquieting. This passage is embedded in a much longer speech by Amans and Genius does not react to this point.

Amans’s desire to possess his unwilling lady is a persistent theme; he refers to it again briefly near the opening of Book V. Although scholars generally consider the problem books to be VII and VIII, serious problems begin in the fifth book as Genius attempts to adapt the sins of avarice to love. The sexual economy is difficult to develop consistently and always skirts dangerous implications. As Nicola McDonald declares, “Book 5 simply does not work.”61 Here Amans makes his most serious condemnations of the lady, stimulated by the tales from Book IV and the problematic logic underlying Book V. To a certain extent, Genius does act to correct these misinterpretations, but Amans’s behavior in making the accusations is remarkable. They undermine his sense of himself as an ideal lover and expose his attitude toward the lady as far from the easy admiration critics have assumed it to be.62 He denies avarice, but only because he has never gotten what he wants. What he wants, in this context, seems to be sex, although he claims that kissing the lady would be enough. He says, “If I that swete lusti wif / Mihte one s welden at my wille, / For evere I wolde hire holde stille” (V, 76–78). This language uneasily recalls the violation fantasy of the previous book. Amans may be using “wif” in the general sense of “woman” or he may be imagining the lady as his wife, a woman subject to his will and required by law and custom to submit to his sexual overtures. If she were his wife, he could truly “welden [her] at my wille.”

The troublingly inexact adaptation of avarice to love in Book V allows room for Amans to misapply the sins to the lady’s behavior. First, he claims that he has given her much and she has granted him nothing in return. His tone becomes increasingly bitter. Amans begins by mourning his general misfortune in love and the speech quickly becomes a specific attack as much as a complaint:

And if sche of hire goode leve
Rewarde wol me noght again,
I wot the laste of my bargain
Schal stonde upon so gret a lost,
That I mai nevermor the cost
Recover in this world til I die. (V, 4470–75)
At this point Amans’s words are still primarily mournful and focused on himself. He then fully excuses himself and turns to the guilt that he perceives on the part of his lady: “So that the more me merveilleth, / What thing it is mi ladi eilleth, / That al myn herte and al my time / Sche hath, and doth no betre bime” (V, 4481–84). I argued earlier that the location of the frame outside the courtly love tradition created a space for the lady to refuse Amans’s suit. Nevertheless, Amans continues to locate himself within that tradition and, as a result, he cannot comprehend the lady’s behavior. He “merveilleth” at her actions and can only imagine that something “eilleth” her. He plays his role and she does not respond as he expects; the Tale of Iphis and Araxarathen reinforced his idea that the lady should have mercy on him and return his love, to avoid divine punishment if for no other reason. The disappointment of his expectations leads to his harsh accusations.

Amans appeals to Genius to support his judgment: “Touchende usure, as I suppose, / Which as ye telle in love is used, / Mi ladi mai noght ben excused” (V, 4490–92). Amans elaborates on the grounds for his accusation, casting the lady as responsible for his love and therefore bound to repay him, at least in some part:

That for o lokinge of hire yë
Min hole herte til I dye
With al that evere I may and can
Sche hath me wonne to hire man:
Wherof, me thenkth, good reson wolde
That sche somdel rewarde scholde,
And yive a part, ther sche hath al. (V, 4493–99)

Amans plays the trump card: reason. Her act of “lokinge” takes his “hole herte,” he argues, and she should repay him somehow. He cleverly reverses the idea of “mis-looking” by aligning the lady with the men who looked where they should not in Book I but his logic here also exploits the difficult nature of Book V. Gower’s reasoning throughout the text has removed the agency of love from women, placing the responsibility on the men who should be able to control their reactions when a woman’s appearance affects them. Although Amans’s application of usury to the lady’s behavior violates this central tenet, it does seem reasonable when judged solely based on the problematic description Genius provided earlier in the fifth book.

Usurrious lovers, Genius explained, “thogh thei love a lyte, / That scarfys wolde it weie a myte, / Yit wolde thei have a pound again” (V, 4411–13). Placing the lady within this economy of love, Amans sees her as giving the “myte” of a look and receiving the “pound” of his “hole herte,” an obviously uneven exchange. He continues to build on this metaphor:
Amans’s tone becomes increasingly angry and self-pitying. His most condemnatory expression comes near the end: “Hire oghte stonde in ful gret doute, / Til sche redresce such a sinne, / That sche wole al mi love winne / And yifth me nocht to live by” (V, 4514–17). Amans blames the lady completely, leaving himself as the injured bystander. Not realizing that Iphis was at least as guilty as Araxarathen, Amans declares his lady to be guilty of “sinne” and vaguely threatens punishment. He retreats somewhat at the end of his speech, however, reiterating that he is innocent of usury and stating that “if mi ladi be to wyte, / I preie to god such grace hir sende / That sche be time it mot amende” (V, 4530–32). This wishful conclusion, pious on the surface, is self-serving: if the lady “amende[s]” her usury by the system that Amans has described, she must return his love. She cannot refund it as one might money, so she must give him something else of value. Genius has elsewhere presented maidenhead as a woman’s treasure, but even Amans does not directly demand this as payment.

Rather than acknowledging that love cannot be explained entirely in economic terms, Genius extends his logic to correct Amans’s view. Genius says sternly “that thou tellest in thi tale / And thi ladi therof accusest, / Me thenkth tho wordes thou misusest” (V, 4536–38). In characterizing Amans’s speech as a “tale,” Genius implicitly compares it to his own exempla and finds its application of usury to the lady flawed; he exposes Amans’s narration of his love as a romance. The potential of words for misuse is a theme in the Confessio, and something that the text itself guards against. Genius’s refutation of Amans’s accusation turns on a revaluation of the lady’s behavior. He explains: “Sche mai be such, that hire o lok / Is worth thin herte manyfold; / So hast thou wel thin herte sold, / Whan thou hast that is more worth” (V, 4542–45). Genius counters Amans’s depiction of the situation by revising the relative weight of the values rather than by replacing the system. He plays with Amans’s inflated rhetoric regarding the lady’s value by suggesting that her “lok” may be of more “worth” than his “herte.” Genius also casts Amans himself as the active agent in the exchange. In Amans’s description, he was an unwitting (if not unwilling) buyer; in Genius’s description, Amans is the seller. He “sold” his heart and so accepted whatever price he was paid.

We do not see any reaction from Amans, but he tries another accusation two sins later. He charges the lady with parsimony because “sche wol noght take, / And yive wol sche noght also, / Sche is eschu of bothe tuo” (V, 4746–48). She
does this, Amans acknowledges, to prevent him from having “eny cause of hope” (V, 4751). Whereas usury was a misuse of love’s economy, parsimony is a refusal to participate in it. Here Amans sees in his lady the idleness in love against which (in his interpretation) the tales of Rosipheelee and Jephthah’s Daughter warned. His real complaint, though, is that she participates in the exchange with others while excluding him:

Bot toward othre, as I mai se,
Sche takth and yifth in such degre,
That as be weie of frendlihiede
Sche can so kepe hir wommanhiede,
That every man spekth of hir wel.
Bot sche wole take of me no del. (V, 4753–58)

This passage indicates that the lady’s womanhood is at stake in this system of exchange. In friendly exchanges with others, she is able “kepe hire wommanhiede.” The implication is that an exchange with Amans would not allow her to do this, either because of his character (an interpretation supported by his repeated wish to violate her) or because he wants an exchange of love rather than of “frendlihiede.” At one level, “wommanhiede” suggests the lady’s chastity or virginity, but it also includes her honor or reputation (two things which cannot be separated for women, as the Rape of Lucrece shows). Genius does not respond to this accusation of Amans’s, but quickly moves into the next tale.

In the context of the sin of ingratitude, Amans renews his accusation of the lady’s usury in a fresh guise: “I wol noght say that sche is kinde, / And forto sai sche is unkinde, / That dar I noght” (V, 5197–99). Although the expression is slippery, the basis of this complaint is similar to his earlier one:

That sche for whom I soffre peine
And love hire evere aliche hote,
That nouther yive ne behote
In rewardinge of mi servise
It list hire in no maner wise. (V, 5192–96)

Amans appeals over Genius’s authority to “god above” (V, 5199), emphasizing his own innocence and hinting at the lady’s guilt (and perhaps wishing for an Araxarathen-style punishment from the “god above,” since Genius is not inclined to corroborate Amans’s judgments). Here the complaint is not as explicitly situated in an economic context; Amans’s desire to be “rewarded” for his “servise” draws more on the language of chivalry, recalling the romance ideals of womanhood dear to his heart.
Genius responds to Amans’s accusation in the same terms, turning the tables by accusing him of unkind behavior:

Mi Sone, of that unkindeschipe,  
The which toward thi ladischipe  
Thou pleignest, for sche wol thee noght,  
Thou art to blamen of that thoght.  
For it mai be that thi desir,  
Thogh it brenne evere as doth the fyr,  
Per cas to hire honour missit,  
Or elles time com noght yit,  
Which standt upon thi destine. (V, 5207–15)

When Amans’s complaint was made within an economic system of love, Genius responded in kind. When Amans recasts it within a chivalric system (still with economic overtones), Genius again responds within the terms Amans himself set. Genius’s references to “desir” that burns like fire and to concepts like “honour” and “destine” signal this context. Measured against his own romance ideal, Amans falls short.

Again, we do not witness any response from Amans. Whether Genius’s speech convinces him or he sees that Genius will not sympathize with his self-pity, Amans does not attempt any further criticisms of his lady. This change in behavior does not correspond to any noticeable shift in attitude, however; he continues to voice his desire to violate the lady in the sections on the stealth and sacrilege of lovers. We might expect some eventual change in Amans’s outlook or behavior, but the text makes this impossible. Genius’s approach to educating Amans about the sins of love relies on the effectiveness of the illustrative tales. However, those tales depend on the listener’s empathy for the women depicted, since Genius portrays male behavior primarily through its effects on women. Amans does not demonstrate an ability to empathize with the lady; his ignorance of the impact of his own behavior on her confirms that he is unable to interpret Genius’s tales correctly.

The last significant references to the lady occur in Book VI; the trajectory ends here in part because the themes of the seventh and eighth books (the education of Alexander and incest, respectively) are less relevant to Amans’s critique of the lady and in part because he appears to acknowledge the beastly nature of his desire for her. Having expressed that desire and perhaps beginning to recognize the impossibility of its fulfillment, he ceases to reaffirm it. When Amans admits to love delicacy in the sixth book, his imagery reveals the beastliness of his wish to violate the lady:

For loke hou that a goshauk tireth,  
Riht so doth he [my eye], whan that he pireth
And toteth on hire wommanhiede;
For he mai nevere fulli fiede
His lust, bot evere aliche sore
Him hungreth, so that he the more
Desireth to be fed algate. (VI, 817–23)

In comparing himself to a “goshauk,” Amans shows the beastly side of his nature: that side which, as we have seen throughout the text, wishes to possess the lady against her will. More specifically, this passage suggests a likeness between Amans and Tereus, who was also described as a “goshauk.” This disturbing passage figures consummation as consumption. Genius is trying to reveal this aspect of Amans’s nature to him and thereby eradicate it. The text is about the education of Amans in love, but more fundamentally about his education in manhood. He must learn where he is crossing the line from manly to beastly.

In the course of his confession, Amans reveals the multiplicity of his own nature: manhood, womanhood, and beastliness. He cannot separate the first from the other two and his ideas are too dependent on romantic conventions to be accurate. In being ruled by love, Amans is like the “evil example” of Sardanapalus, exhibiting womanhood. In his wish to violate the lady, Amans shows his beastly side. His reactions to the lady reveal his nature, but she acts as more than a foil; she also represents womanhood. Gower uses the representation of the lady to discredit the inaccessible ideals of romance and offer a more realistic example of womanly nature. Amans must allow reason to modify romance ideals. He has suggested that he is doing so by trying to figure his love for the lady as a reasonable reaction to her qualities, but true reason involves the recognition that Venus offers him: that he is too old and the lady does not love him. He must use reason to distinguish between romance and reality, and his new idea of manhood must be based on a new understanding of womanhood. By the end of the text, Amans needs to be able to answer Venus’s initial question “What are you?” correctly by saying, “A man,” playing down his identity as a lover as well as his beastly and womanly aspects.

Womanhood is a significant subtext in the Confessio because it plays a vital role in constructing and transmitting the ideas about manhood that Amans must recognize. The tale of King, Wine, Woman and Truth presents the argument that “Thurgh hem [women] men vinden out the weie / To kniithode and to worldes fame; / Thei make a man to drede schame, / And honour forto be desired” (VII, 1904–7). Although the point that truth is the strongest force later supersedes the argument of which this expression is a part, its validity is evidenced throughout the tales and the frame. It is through women that the effects of sin are vividly demonstrated and through Amans’s representation of the lady that we can measure his progress (or lack thereof) toward reason and reality. The point of the text was
to reveal “thilke love which that is / Withinne a mannes herte affermed” (VIII, 3162–63) and, more importantly, to create the “mannes herte” in which that love could exist. The lessons contained in the text cannot be extended from male behavior to female. Creating the proper “woman’s heart” would be a different project altogether.

Nevertheless, womanhood remains a critical issue in the *Confessio Amantis* and functions importantly in the ending. After Genius finishes, Amans is still unconvinced, explaining—in a shift into the first person—that “Tho was betwen mi Prest and me / Debat and gret perplexete” (VIII, 2189–90). He writes a plea to Venus and Cupid seeking the resolution he has wanted from the outset: “This wold I for my laste word beseche, / That thou mi love aquite as I deserve” (VIII, 2298–99). Rather than requiring the lady to return his love, however, Venus forces Amans to withdraw it and “tak hom thin herte ayein” (VIII, 2421). Speaking with “scorn” (VIII, 2397), she points out that he is old and likely impotent. This intervention finally shocks Amans and, swooning, he has a vision of the company of love. In narrating this vision, he is able to condemn negative male behavior, identifying Theseus as “untrewe” (VIII, 2511), for example. Amans then describes the complaints of various women, including Dido, Phyllis, Ariadne, Medea, Deidamia, Procné, and Philomena. Although he did not recognize their suffering in Genius’s tales, he acknowledges it here. But “above alle” (VIII, 2605), he sees four exemplary women—Penelope, Lucrece, Alcèste, and Alcione—and tells their stories. He specifically commends Penelope for keeping “hir wommanhiede” (VIII, 2629) but all four are models of womanhood.

In this vision, Amans proves his recovery: he is able to censure male misbehavior, sympathize with female victims, and recognize female virtue. The lady has disappeared from the narrative, but would no doubt appreciate this resolution.

Unlike Chaucer, Gower focuses on the performative nature of gender, the significance of its observable aspects such as clothing, behavior, and speech, and hence the possibility that it can be counterfeited. For Chaucer, womanhood includes certain specific virtues; for Gower, womanhood is a virtuous state, but the more interesting issues are how it can intersect with other identities, how it can be signaled to others, and how the ability to interpret such signals correctly can help to develop manhood. Gower’s female characters embody the effects of male characters’ actions, whether honorable or not, and the ability to recognize those effects and adjust one’s behavior accordingly proves to be a key test for Amans. While both poets participate in the initial phase of the evolution of womanhood, then, Gower goes even further than Chaucer by illustrating not only that womanhood can span various possibilities for femininity but also that any figure can encompass womanliness, manliness, and beastliness to varying degrees (and that this composition may change radically through transformation or over time). We might see this approach as another way of drawing on the mediating possibilities of womanhood: Chaucer
conceives womanhood as mediating between different female roles and traditions of feminine representation while Gower imagines it mixing with manhood and beastliness.

Gower’s more radical take on identity also indicates a divergent approach to the relationship between gender and language. Whereas Chaucer was interested in the mediating function of language, Gower emphasizes its potential for ambiguity and multiplicity: words, like the observable signifiers of gender, are malleable. But, rather than leading to moral indeterminacy or relativism, the need for interpretation means that careful attention to such signals—whether embodied, spoken, or written—becomes a moral imperative. The connections between the exempla and the frame story underscore that necessity and allow the Confessio to provide a template for how literary representations can affect “real” experiences or mindsets; readers might learn the same lessons that Amans does from Genius’s stories, or might learn other lessons from the careful interpretation of other texts. In the next chapter, I will explore how John Lydgate and Robert Henryson receive and revise these powerful and distinct fourteenth-century views of womanhood and of the possibilities for gendered language. If Chaucer and Gower are working to pin down some of the central aspects of femininity and how they operate, then the fifteenth-century poets are scrutinizing the limits of the categories that terms like womanhood and femininity might describe; in the process, Lydgate and, to an even greater degree, Henryson push these words in recognizably modern directions.