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The Tales of Acteon and Narcissus in the *Confessio Amantis*

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is easily the most important of the many sources of the stories in the *Confessio Amantis*.¹ Although Gower shows some knowledge of all the major works of Ovid, the *Metamorphoses* is clearly the one most suited to his purpose, and Gower is working in a well-established tradition in using the poem as a source of *exempla*. Work has been done to show that Gower may have been influenced by the popular moralised versions of Ovid in both French and Latin,² but there can be no doubt that he knew the original version well, although the name forms of the characters he takes from Ovid suggest corruptions in the text he used. Since Gower uses Ovid so extensively, and he is such an easily identifiable source, the stories of the *Metamorphoses* seem an obvious choice for a study of how Gower adapts his sources to suit his own purpose in the *Confessio Amantis*. The stories of Acteon and Narcissus, both from book one of the *Confessio Amantis*, and both having book three of the *Metamorphoses* as a source, serve as useful illustrations of Gower's methods.

The most obvious differences between Gower's and Ovid's versions of the story of Acteon³ concerns length; Gower's version is only about a third of the length of Ovid's. Despite Gower's alleged prolixity, and despite the inherent conciseness of Latin, it is not unusual for Gower to tell a much shorter version of a story than Ovid. This is usually due to Gower's desire to keep the story as simple and direct as possible - an encouragement to leave out details, as well as Ovid's digressions and amplifications.

Norman Callan⁴ has already pointed out the differences between Ovid's and Gower's descriptions of the vale of Gargaphie where Acteon meets Diana, and Gower is simply adapting the setting to fourteenth-century tastes. But there is more to it than that. Ovid tells us:

vallis erat piceis et acuta densa cupressu,
nomine Gargaphie succinctae sacra Dianae,
cuius in extremo est antrum nemorale recessu
arte laboratum nulla: simulaverat artem
ingenio natura suo; nam pumice vivo
et levibus tofis nativum duxerat arcum;
fons sonat a dextra tenui perlucidus unda,
margine gramineo patulos incinctus hiatus.⁵

while Gower says:

He syh upon the grene gras
 The faire freisshe floures springe,
 He herde among the leues singe
 The Throstle with the nyhtingale.
 Thus ere he wiste into a Dale
 He cam, wher was a litel plein,
 All round aboute wel besein
 With bussches grene and Cedres hyhe;
 And ther withinne he caste his yhe.
 Amidd the plein he syh a welle,
 So fair ther myhte noman telle. 6

Here Gower is doing more than suiting his description to fourteenth-century taste; he is suiting it to fourteenth-century imaginations. If Gower is to bring his story alive to his audience he must put the events into a background that can be seen in the mind's eye, so he sets the events in a northern European wood, in the sort of background familiar to his audience, both in fact and fiction. Gower does a thorough job in removing the hot, dry, mountainous scenery that Ovid describes, as well as dealing with cultural differences such as the Roman method of hunting on foot with nets, which Gower replaces with a hunting lord, riding through the forest complete with hounds and horn, a figure which should have been instantly recognised by his audience.

This is perhaps little more than common sense for a writer who wants to keep his audience's attention. But Gower goes one step further in his adaptation, making changes so as to arouse his audience's expectations. We must remember that this is the first fully developed 'tale' in the *Confessio Amantis*, and here the audience may have hoped that the work would fulfil the promise of the title. It must have seemed that Gower was indeed going to tell a tale of love, for he provides a plausible preamble to one. The lord riding through the forest hunting and getting separated from his companions:

So him befell upon a tide
 On his hunting as he cam ride
 In a forest al one he was 7

is a figure familiar from the opening of a Romance or a 'chanson d'aventure'. The setting of bird song, flower-strewn grass and the forest glade suggests spring and the typical setting of a poem of love; and Diana whom he sees bathing there is cast in the role of the Lady of the Fountain. Gower has carefully built up the audience's expectations only to do a sudden *volte face*, turning the love poem into a story of anger and death with shocking suddenness. This accounts for the apparent imbalance of the story, with over thirty lines taken up with setting the scene and establishing the required atmosphere,

and a mere eleven lines taken by the transformation and death of Acteon.

And sche was wonder wroth withal,
 And him, as sche which was godesse,
 Forschop anon, and the liknesse
 Sche made him taken of an Hert,
 Which was tofore hise houndes stert,
 That ronne besiliche aboute
 With many an horn and many a route,
 That maden mochel noise and cry:
 And ate laste unhappely
 This Hert his oghne houndes slowhe
 And him for vengeance al todrowhe. 8

Gower had no need to use the detailed descriptions that Ovid gives us of Acteon's fate. The sudden reversal of mood is sufficient to make his point. The speed of the ending reinforces the desired effect, and drives home the moral: even when the setting and the circumstances seem ideal for illicit love, your sins, in this case 'mislok', will find you out.

In the tale of Narcissus, Gower uses very similar techniques to those in Acteon, although to a different end. The story as Gower tells it is again in a shorter and more simple form than Ovid's version. This time, Gower has to disentangle the basic story of Narcissus from the story of Echo, which he tells us later on in the work.⁹ He removes Echo's chasing of Narcissus and the word-play that comes from her limited speech, just as in Acteon Gower has removed the mock-heroic catalogue of hounds. With these elaborations removed the stories acquire a simple tragedy that Ovid's stylistic embellishments tend to obscure. As in Acteon and many other stories, Narcissus' semi-divine status is removed and he becomes a proud young Lord who is a lover of hunting. Again the scenery and the hunting techniques are adapted to suit the audience's experience. Narcissus sets out in company to go hunting:

And whanne he cam into the place
 Wher that he wolde make his chace,
 The houndes weren in a throwe
 Uncoupled and the hornes blowe:
 The grete hert anon was founde,
 Which swifte feet sette upon grounde,
 And he with spore in horse side
 Him hasteth forto ride,
 Til alle men be left behinde.
 And as he rod, under a linde
 Beside a roche, as I thee telle,

Hy syh wher sprong a lusty welle.
 The day was wonder hot withalle,
 And such a thirst was on him falle,
 That he moste owther deie or drinke;
 And doun he lihte be the brinke
 He teide his Hors unto a braunche,
 And leide him lowe forto staunche
 His thirst: 10

Gower has taken pains here to give us a very vivid picture of the hunt, perhaps because the story comes so soon after Acteon, and he wishes to keep the two episodes as distinct as possible. The differences between the two hunting scenes, although not great, are significant. The love setting of spring is gone, and instead another well-established element is inserted, the stag who leads the hero away from his companions. We get a greater impression than in Acteon of the physical activity in hunting, and it may be that Gower is trying to exploit the familiar theme of the knight errant whose stag-hunting leads to adventure. This in turn distinguishes the springs which the two men find. Acteon's 'welle' is incidental, and simply leads him to the Lady of the Fountain; Narcissus' is the magic spring that leads to danger and the risk of death, although Narcissus thinks that he too has found the Lady of the Fountain.

Whatever the case may be, Gower's vigorous Narcissus is a far cry from Ovid's beautiful boy. Gower avoids all suggestion of the explicit homosexuality in Ovid, by the simple method of exploiting the traditional blindness of love. When Narcissus looks into the well as he stoops to drink, we are told:

He sih the lik of his visage,
 And wende ther were an ymage
 Of such a Nimphe as tho was faie,
 Whereof that love his herte assaie
 Began, as it was after sene,
 Of his sotie and made him wene
 It were a womman that he syh. 11

He thinks he has found the mistress of the spring, but is blinded by the 'sotie' of his love. There is no question of Gower's Narcissus recognising the true nature of his passion. Ovid's Narcissus realises that he burns with love for himself; Gower leaves it to us to realise the blind self-love that is the result of Pride.

The two descriptions of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection in the well are a fine illustration of the different approach the two authors have to

descriptive passages. Ovid gives us a long and very detailed description of Narcissus' woes, full of reported speech and elaborate rhetoric, and redolent of a somewhat sickly eroticism. Gower's version could hardly be more concise.

The more he came the welle nyh
The nerr cam sche to him ayein;
So wiste he nevere what to sein;
For whanne he wepte, he sih hire wepe,
And whanne he cride, he tok good kepe,
The same word sche cride also:
And thus began the newe wo,
That whilom was to him so strange; 12

Yet for all its brevity, the description is close to Ovid's, being a version of the lines:

cupit ipse teneri:
nam quotiens liquidis porreximus oscula lymphis,
hic totiens ad me resupino nituter ore
.....
cum risi, adrides; lacrimas quoque saepe notavi
me lacrimante tuas; nutu quoque signa remittis
et, quantum motu formosi suspicor oris,
verba refers aures non pervenientia nostras! 13

which contain the central idea of Ovid's description. In his development of the theme, Gower again echoes Ovid's technique. Ovid's Narcissus realises the irony of his position, the fact that he must play the impossible role of both lover and beloved:

Iste ego sum : sensi nec mea fallit imago
uror amore mei : flammas moveoque feroque
quid faciam ? roger anne rogem ? quid deinde rogabo ?
quod cupio mecum est. 14

In Gower, Narcissus receives an ironically just punishment; the man who thought himself above all women and whose pride forbade him to bow to love finds in his own reflection a reflection of his nature, and is punished with his own hard-heartedness:

Tho made him love an hard eschange,
To sette his herte and to beginne
Thing which he mihte nevere winne.
And evere among he gan to loute,

And preith that she to him come oute;
 And otherwhile he goth a ferr,
 And otherwhile he draweth nerr,
 And evere he fond hire in o place
 He wepeth, he crieth, he axeth grace
 There as he mihte gete non. 15

As in Acteon, death follows suddenly and swiftly. The result of this feverish activity (which is not found in Ovid) is that:

... ayein a Roche of Ston,
 As he that knew non other red
 He smot himself til he was ded. 16

This of course is very different from Ovid's version, where Ovid exploits the fact that Narcissus' parents are water-divinities and has the fire of his love consume Narcissus' aqueous nature, so that he just fades away. Gower's Narcissus dies in a way which is a reflection of his unnaturalness. Led by Pride into the sin of despair - *As he that knew non other red* - his method of suicide reflects his stony heart and hard pride. The flower that springs from Narcissus' grave again shows the role Nature plays in punishing the unnatural. Just as in the story of Tiresias¹⁷ it is for his disruption of Nature in killing the snakes that Tiresias is punished by having his own nature disrupted, so the flower becomes a warning against being contraire to kynde:

And thanne out of his sepulture
 Ther sprong anon par aventure
 Of floures such a wonder syhte,
 That men ensample take myhte
 Upon the dedes which he dede,
 As tho was sene in thilke stede.
 For in the wynter freysshe and faire
 The floures ben, which is contraire
 To kynde, and so was the folie 18
 Which fell of his Surquiderie.

How typical of Gower's Ovidian stories are these two tales? These tales have much in common in the material that Gower leaves out in his versions, in particular in the way in which he reduces violence whenever possible, deals very briefly with metamorphoses and puts as little stress as possible on the divine nature of the characters. Thus we find that although neither of the two authors gives any account of the metamorphosis of Narcissus, Ovid gives a very detailed account of the changes experienced by Acteon as he is transformed into a stag, while Gower simply tells us that he was forschop. In general, Gower is not interested in the process of change and plays down

this element. Thus we are told in the story of Daphne:

This Daphne into a loror tre
Was turned. 19

And after Juno has upbraided her, and told her that she will make her hated by men, we are told of Calistona:

With that the likeness of a bere
Sche tok and was forschape anon. 20

Along with this omission of the metamorphosis in Acteon, Gower leaves out the suffering both mental and physical that Acteon experiences before he dies. Ovid gives us a detailed description of the hunting and actual tearing apart of Acteon by his hounds, whereas Gower simply gives us the description quoted above, ending with the brief but effective:

And ate laste unhappely
This Hert his oghne houndes slowhe
And him for vengeance al todrowhe. 21

This again is typical, for Gower reduces the details and violence wherever possible. But above all these stories are typical as examples of Gower's attempts not only to draw his morals from the stories, but of his desire to bring the stories alive for his audience by adapting them to suit contemporary experience and by the addition of his own vivid details.

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NOTES

1. Twenty-eight stories are taken from the Metamorphoses, while others show its influence.
2. See C. Mainzer, 'John Gower's use of the 'Medieval Ovid' in the Confessio Amantis', Medium Aevum XLI, 1972.
3. Confessio Amantis I, 337-378; Metamorphoses III, 138-252.
4. N. Callan, 'Thyn Owne Book: a Note on Chaucer, Gower and Ovid', The Review of English Studies 22, 1946.
5. Metamorphoses, ed. F.J. Miller, Loeb Classical Library; III, 155-162.
6. Confessio Amantis, ed. G. Macaulay; I, 352-362.
7. Confessio Amantis, I, 349-351.
8. Ibid., I, 368-378.
9. Ibid., V, 4573-4652.
10. Ibid., I, 2295-2313.
11. Ibid., I, 2315-2321.
12. Ibid., I, 2322-2329.
13. Metamorphoses, III, 450-62.
14. Ibid., 463-6.
15. Confessio Amantis, I, 2330-2339.
16. Ibid., I, 2340-42.
17. Ibid., III, 361-379.
18. Ibid., I, 2349-2358.
19. Ibid., III, 1716-17.

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20. Confessio Amantis, V, 6310-11.

21. Ibid., I, 376-78.