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Article

On the Edge: Chaucer and Gower's Queer Glosses¹

Roberta Magnani, Department of English Literature and Creative Writing, Swansea University, and Diane Watt, School of Literature and Languages, University of Surrey

Abstract

In the Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale, the pilgrim implicitly compares favourably the poet Chaucer to his contemporary and friend Gower, stating that (unlike Gower, to whom we assume he is alluding), Chaucer 'no word ne writeth he' of the 'wikke ensample' of Canace or of the 'cursed kyng Antiochus' (III.77-8, 82). The reason we assume the Man of Law is alluding to Gower is that both the Tale of Canace and Machaire, and the story of Antiochus in the Tale of Apollonius of Tyre are related within Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, with the latter appearing as the last and longest narrative in this expansive collection. Critics have long argued about the significance of this passage, one of a handful in their works in which the poets refer to one another either directly or indirectly. In this article, however, we are less interested in seeing in this passage evidence of either a feud or a friendly rivalry, than in thinking through what it might reveal about the ways in which these poets, and their readers, might be experimenting with ideas of authority and interpretation. Our argument here is that both Gower, Chaucer and indeed some of their readers—as revealed through the glossing of Gower's English text, and the glossing in Chaucer's manuscripts—are acutely aware of the risks, and sometimes the pleasures, of misprision or queer (mis-)interpretation.

Introduction

In the Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale, the pilgrim implicitly compares the poet Chaucer to his contemporary and friend Gower, stating that (unlike Gower, to whom we assume he is alluding), Chaucer 'no word ne writeth he' of the 'wikke ensample' of Canace or of the 'cursed kyng Antiochus' (Benson, 1988, III.77-8, 82; all in-text references to *The Canterbury Tales* are to this edition). The reason we assume that Chaucer's fictional creation, the Man of Law, is alluding to Gower is that both the Tale of Canace and Machaire (III.143-336), and the story of Antiochus (in the Tale of Apollonius of Tyre in VIII) are related within Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, with the latter appearing as the last and longest narrative in this expansive collection (Peck and Galloway, 2000-2013. All in-text references to Gower's poem, including translations from Latin, are to this edition). Critics have long argued about the significance of this passage, one of a handful in their works in which the poets refer to one another either directly or indirectly (see Dinshaw, 1991). Here, however, we are less interested in seeing in this passage evidence of either a feud or a friendly rivalry, than in thinking through what it might reveal about the ways in which these poets, as well as their scribes and their readers, might be experimenting with ideas of authority and interpretation.

Our argument here is that both Gower, Chaucer, and indeed some of their readers (as revealed through the Latin glossing of Gower's and Chaucer's vernacular texts) are acutely aware of the risks, and sometimes the pleasures, of misprision or queer (mis-)interpretation. Jack Halberstam's discussion of 'the queer art of failure' and the generative potential of error may throw some light on these annotative practices: '[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative,

more surprising ways of being in the world' (2011, 2-3). On a similar note, both Tales display a broad concern with error including the spectre of deviant sexual practices and sodomitic desire in the homosocial communities of scribes, authors and readers participating in the production and circulation of vernacular literature at the time of Chaucer and Gower. These manifestations of the queer are intended, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words, as 'sites where the meanings didn't line up tidily with each other' (Sedgwick, 1993, 5). Her definition of queer chimes resonantly with our reading of the problematic representation of hermeneutics in the works of the two poets and their shared concern with what the Man of Law calls 'unkynde abhomynacions' ['unnatural and loathsome sins'] (II.88), as she argues that queer refers to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick, 1993, 8).

As Diane Watt argues in *Amoral Gower* (2003, 8-9), the tone of the alleged Chaucer-Gower feud is self-consciously humorous since Chaucer represents the Man of Law as a misreader. While the Man of Law's analysis of the Tale of Canace is accurate enough in essence—this is indeed a tale about a woman who 'loved hir owene brother synfully' (III.79)—he misses the point of the story as told by Gower, in which Genius explicitly condemns the violent anger of the father who discovers the incestuous relationship between his children. Similarly, when the Man of Law claims that Antiochus raped his own daughter 'upon the pavement' (III.85), he adds a salacious detail that is absent in Gower's text. As well as providing evidence of a 'rivalry' between the two male authors, the pilgrim's interpretative errors have another, arguably more significant, valence: they bring incest into focus and re-cast it as a strategy of problematization of authority. In the Man of Law's humorous

references to Gower's works, anxieties about authority, both political and literary, are fundamentally gendered and profoundly imbricated in constructs of masculinity. Building on Carolyn Dinshaw's discussion (1989, 103-5) of the incestuous mothers-in-law in the *Man of Law's Tale* itself, we contend that their 'abhominacions' are here pre-empted by figuring the woman, in this case Canace, as the agent of incest, as she is the one who loves sinfully (rather than the one who is loved). Grammatically, the burden of sin is firmly put at her door. In other words, female sexual agency reverses the asymmetry on which the gender binary is traditionally constructed (male superiority and female subjugation) as it undermines male authority by equating masculinity with the passivity traditionally associated with femininity. Anxieties about queer sexualities (incestuous or otherwise), fears of castration and the spectre of sodomy, which we will discuss below, are foregrounded here in Canace's deviant sexuality. Additionally, following Watt's argument (2003) that in Gower's works rape (and sodomy) are manifestations of ethical misgovernance, the spurious detail of Antiochus's rape perpetrated 'upon the pavement' makes the act, and the consequent destabilization of Antiochus's authority, erroneously but overtly public. In other words, the purely masculine and patrilineal underpinning of the two poet's anxious exchanges and of canon formation, more broadly, appear to be inadequate interpretative frameworks, as they are indeed shaken by the presence of the queer: deviance and error, both literary and sexual, open up a reading of their 'rivalry' to more capacious and disjunctive ways of accounting for textual transmission and production.

What we bring to the discussion of Gower's and Chaucer's anxiety about authority and interpretation is a fully developed comparison of the glosses of the *Confessio*

Amantis and those of the *Canterbury Tales*. Here we concentrate our focus primarily on a narrative that both Gower and Chaucer chose to relate—that of Constance, which appears in Book 2 of *Confessio Amantis*, and which the Man of Law himself relates in *The Canterbury Tales*. As Jonathan Hsy points out in his article for this Special Issue, recent scholarship has shed light on the collaborative quality of manuscript production and circulation in fifteenth-century Britain by accounting for the complex networks of scribes, compilers, authors and readers of which Chaucer and Gower were integral part. As we outline in more detail in our introduction, it is on the importance and influence of these networks that our reflection on shared practices and anxiety is founded, beyond direct exchanges of source material. Of course, the question of authorship is a problematic one, for while the glosses to the *Confessio Amantis* discussed here are, as we will see, generally attributed to Gower himself, this is not the case with the glosses to the *Canterbury Tales*, which overtly lay claim to another more ancient authority and did not necessarily originate with Chaucer, as the lack of critical consensus testifies (Caie, 1984, 1999, 1999a; Partridge, 1992, 1993). Nevertheless, the analysis of glosses, as hermeneutic sites *par excellence*, has the potential to throw new light on the connected literary projects of Chaucer and Gower, especially in relation to issues of interpretation and queer error.

Inglorious Gower?

One challenge with which modern readers and editors of the *Confessio Amantis* are faced is the interaction of Latin and English elements in the poem. While the lover's exchange with his confessor, and the narratives embedded within this, are in English, this is supplemented in both the medieval manuscripts of the text (and in some, but not all, modern editions) by a range of different types of Latin, some considered more

clearly authorial than others. These Latin elements include the verses which introduce sections and subsections throughout the poem, the prose commentary glosses, additional occasional glosses which serve principally as speaker markers, additional Latin verse, rubric and colophon that appear at the end of many manuscripts, and additional apparatus which Siân Echard refers to as an ‘indexing tool’ (Echard, 1998, 11). It is the first two of these Latin elements—the verses and glosses—which are our focus in the first part of this essay, elements most commonly ascribed to Gower himself. Andy Galloway describes Gower’s glossing practices as ‘inglorious’ or reductive (Galloway, 2009, 66). Echard, however, argues that while the poem as a whole ‘appears to be about control—of interpretation of texts, of tongues,’ in fact ‘this appearance of control *is* merely appearance’ (Echard, 1998, 5). Indeed, we would take this further and suggest that the poem is in its very structure, queer: multilingual, palimpsested and hermeneutically polyvocal.

Despite the fact that *Confessio Amantis* exists in different, but arguably equally authoritative, versions or recensions, to use Macaulay’s terminology (Macaulay, 1900-01; 1979; challenged, for example, by Fredell, 2010), the numerous fifteenth-century manuscripts are unusually uniform in their appearance in relation to the inclusion and positioning of the Latin apparatus, as well as the illustrations and decorated initials. Two of the earliest, University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Fairfax 3 (c.1400), which formed the base text for Macaulay’s edition, and University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 902 (first quarter of the 15th century) are strikingly similar. These manuscripts are widely regarded as representing Gower’s own compositional programme concerning the poem’s layout, and specifically how the English and Latin components should be arranged (see Pearsall, 2004a and 2004b and Nicholson, 2012). It is therefore useful to give some consideration to the *mise-en-*

page of these manuscripts, focusing primarily on MS Fairfax 3, while acknowledging that readers encountering other manuscripts and texts experience the poem very differently.² Whether or not the layout was actually based on Gower's scheme, and indeed whether or not the Latin verses and glosses were actually composed by Gower, is irrelevant to our argument here. The point is simply that they are *considered* authoritative.

Gower's Tale of Constance is as much concerned with what *is not* said, as with what *is* said, and with the queer gap between them, the fissure between the spoken and the unspoken. The Tale of Constance appears in Book 2 of *Confessio Amantis*, which focuses on the sin of Envy, and it illustrates the particular vice of Detraction:

Inuidie pars est detraccio pessima, pestem
Que magis infamem flatibus oris agit.
Lingua venenato sermone repercutit auras,
Sic ut in alterius scandala fama volat.
Morsibus a tergo quos inficit ipsa fideles,
Vulneris ignoti sepe salute carent.
Set generosus amor linguam conseruat, vt eius
Verbum quod loquitur nulla sinistra gerat.

(Latin verse before II.383)

[The worst part of Envy is Detraction, which stirs up a plague of infamy with the gustings of the mouth. The tongue resounds in the air with poisonous speech, just as Rumor flies away, in scandal to another. The faithful ones whom she inflicts unawares with bites from the back often lack a medicine for

the wound. But noble love guards a tongue, so that the word he speaks
produces nothing sinister.]

This Latin verse in MS Fairfax 3, fol. 29v is accompanied by a 3-line decorated initial, which signals a major text division (Brewer, 2014, 48), indicating that the verse should be read in conjunction with the ensuing vernacular narratives. Yet, there are some inconsistencies, insignificant at first sight, between this verse and the Tale of Constance that begins on the verso side of the next folio of the manuscript. Whereas the Latin personification *invidia* is gendered feminine, within the Tale itself, Envy is represented by men as well as women, with the heroine, Constance, a victim of multiple atrocities, or indeed ‘unkinde abhominacions’, namely, the duplicitous speech and cruel actions of the Sultan’s mother, the evil deeds and false accusations of the knight frustrated in his desire for Constance, the malicious lies circulated by Allee’s mother Domilde, and the sinful intentions of the steward who attempts to rape her. However, whereas in Latin, *amor* is grammatically masculine, in the vernacular text Love is feminized, with Constance keeping her council in the face of her persecution, and speaking only in order to convert, teach or pray. This silence extends beyond a refusal to accuse others. After she has been first cast adrift, Constance refuses to reveal her full identity or tell her story, even to her second husband Allee, until she is finally reunited with her father, husband and son. Yet, whereas in the opening verses, victims of backbiting may be unable to find a cure, here ‘to the sike a medicine / Hath God ordeined of His grace’ (II.1202-1203) and a happy resolution proves possible. This gap between text and paratext exposes the queer possibilities imagined by Gower for his vernacular poem in relation to the more overtly binary Latin verse.

Similar disjunctions between the Latin and English elements of the text are found in the interplay of the Latin glosses and English verses. The Tale of Constance is one of the more heavily glossed narratives in the *Confessio*. While Constance repeatedly resists telling her own story, it is in effect, narrated twice, first by priest Genius as he illustrates the sin of Detraction in order to aid the lover Amans in his confession, and then by the glossator, who provides a seemingly coherent abridgement, which is however marked by significant omissions and other subtle changes. The Latin glosses are accompanied in MS Fairfax 3 by single-line decorated initials, signalling minor text divisions (Brewer, 2014, 48), which assist the reader in navigating the text. It seems reasonable to assume that a Latinate reader will therefore read these glosses before reading the English verses. Of the two, the Middle English version appears at first reading to be more innovative than the Latin. The inclusion of the Latin glosses might be understood as an attempt by the author to police the vernacular text, to limit and to fix its meaning, perhaps born out of an anxiety that meaning cannot be fixed. Despite the importance of exposing possible strategies of ‘policing of queer’ (Magnani, 2014) in operation in the material space of the codex, our interest here goes beyond setting up a largely unhelpful binary between unorthodox text and orthodox gloss. Instead, we are invested in the queer gaps between the glosses and the vernacular text that punctuate a narrative very much concerned with ideals and distortions of masculinity and femininity, and with the fluidity, rather than fixity, of hermeneutics.

The opening Latin gloss to the Tale represents Constance in strikingly passive terms. We are told that, in order to marry Constance, the Sultan of Persia vowed to become a Christian:

cuius accepta caucione consilio Pelagii tunc pape dicta filia vna cum duobus
Cardinalibus aliisque Rome proceribus in Persiam maritaggi causa nauigio
honorifice destinata fuit. (II.587ff Latin marginalia)

[With his pledge having been accepted, by the counsel of Pelagius, the pope at
that time, the said daughter along with two cardinals and other dignitaries of
Rome was sent with full ceremony on the voyage for the sake of the marriage
in Persia.]

Constance here is reduced to the object of a marriage exchange between cultures, and
a means by which the early Church secured the conversion of a political as well as a
religious adversary. In contrast, near the start of the vernacular narrative, we are told
that in her home city of Rome, Constance ‘was so ful of feith, / That the greteste of
Barbarie, / Of hem whiche usen marchandie, / Sche hath converted’ (II.598-601).

Constance is able to transform and redeem almost everyone, from the Islamic
merchants, to the Sultan himself, and the pagans of Northumbria, their king and his
advisors. Winthrop Wetherbee argues that in the vernacular text, Gower’s Constance
represents ‘the mission of the church’ and certainly she is much more overtly active
than the opening Latin gloss indicates, and also than in Gower’s source, Trivet’s
Chronique, or for that matter in Chaucer’s subsequent retelling (Wetherbee, 1989, 70).

In Gower’s vernacular verse, Constance, like the Church, is located at the centre of
Christendom, and her ability to draw others to her religion is the key driving force in
the narrative. The *mise-en-page* in MS Fairfax 3 (f. 30r column 1) is significant here,
with the contrasting Latin and vernacular representations of Constance as passive and
active juxtaposed, and the blank space highlighting the gap between them. This
dissonance between the representation of Constance in the Latin glosses and the
vernacular verses in turn points towards the unresolved contradictions inherent in

Constance herself, who embodies silent passive suffering, and yet simultaneously is an eloquent agent of metanoia.

Constance, as a personification of virtue—*omnium virtutum famosissima* (II.587ff. Latin marginalia)—is opposed in the vernacular text, and in the glosses, to her two envious mothers-in-law, the Sultan’s mother and Domilde. The Sultan’s mother who ‘feigneth wordes’ (II.654) and acts decisively ‘In destourbance of this spousaile’ (II.642) and with unbounded cruelty (‘Hire oghne sone was noght quit / Bot deide upon the same plit’: II.691-2), lacks any maternal feelings. The vernacular verses provide the reader with an insight into the reasons behind the murderous actions of the former, who, we are told, is preoccupied with a stereotypically masculine concern that her status will be diminished by her son’s marriage (her ‘astat schal so be lassed’ (II.649)). The Latin gloss, in contrast, makes no reference to this anxiety: she is simply ‘huiusmodi nupcias perturbare volens’ [‘desiring to disturb this marriage’] (II.641ff Latin marginalia). With this omission in the accompanying Latin marginalia, the Sultan’s mother acts malignantly and without motive.

The Sultan’s mother of the marginalia anticipates the portrayal of Constance’s second mother-in-law, Domilde, who, like the Sultan’s mother also dissimulates, having ‘feigned joie’ (II.952) on hearing that Constance had given birth to her grandson, and devised a plan to rid herself of both her daughter-in-law and the child. In this case, no motivation is provided for Domilde’s actions in either the English verses or the Latin marginalia. Domilde is simply a personification of evil, ‘inuida Regis mater’ [‘the envious queen mother’] (II.931ff. Latin marginalia). Like the incestuous figures condemned by the Man of Law in the introduction to his Tale, the deeds of these two women, and indeed the women themselves in their performance of gender, are depicted as ‘unkinde abhomynacions’ that go against the perceived natural

order in which maternal figures are considered nurturing and protective of their offspring. These 'abhomynacions' are predicated on a hermeneutic of error and misprision, that is, on interpretative gaps which open the text up to the possibility of the queer.

In this tale of repeated patterns and variations of patterns, Constance is not only the victim of two envious mothers-in-law, but also of two male aggressors. The first is a knight, brought up from childhood by the Northumbrian chamberlain, Elde, who takes Constance into his protection, and who with his wife is converted to Christianity. This knight sets out to frame Constance for the murder of Elde's wife, and as with the Sultan's wife, the English verses suggest an explanation for these actions: not only is he unsuccessful in his attempt to win Constance ('Wherof his lust began t'abate, / And that was love is thanne hate', II.809-810), but also, like the Sultan's wife, he recognizes that his own position as the chamberlain's favourite is threatened by this interloper: 'Of hire honour he hadde Envie' (II.811; see Craun, 1997, 149). While 'honour' might well here refer to 'virtue' or 'moral or spiritual uprightness', it can also mean 'happiness' or 'good fortune' and also 'exalted position or status' (Kurath, H., S. M. Kuhn, and R. E. Lewis, 1952, sv 'honour' 4, 3(b), and 5 (b)). The Latin gloss here, however, is quite notably at odds with the English text:

Qualiter quidam miles iuuenes in amorem Contancie exardescens, pro eo quod ipsa assentire noluit, eam de morte Hermynghelde, quam ipsemet noctanter interfecit, verbis detractoriis accusauit. Set Angelus domini ipsum sic detrahentem in maxilla subito percuciens non solum pro mendace comprobauit, set ictu mortali post ipsius confessionem penitus interfecit. (II.779 ff. Latin marginalia)

[How a young knight burning with love for Constance, to which she did not want to assent, accused her with detracting words of the death of Hermynghelda, whom he himself had killed by night. But an angel of the Lord, striking him suddenly in the jaw while he was detracting her, not only convicted him for his lie but also, with a mortal blow after his confession, utterly killed him.]

The most arresting difference between the Latin and English versions lies in the description of the death of the knight. In the vernacular verses there is no angel smiting the knight *in maxilla* in the very act of slander. Rather the knight's account of the murder is disbelieved from the outset, but it is when he is forced by Elde to swear upon a 'bok' (II.868; by implication a Christian Bible), a detail omitted from the Latin gloss, that he receives a blow from 'the hond of hevene' (II.874), causing his eyes to pop out of his head, a blow accompanied by a supernatural voice condemning him for his sin. The gloss thus sets up expectations that are disrupted in the English account. Again, the layout of the page in MS Fairfax 3 is significant. In this case, the Latin gloss on fol. 31v, at the bottom of column two, precedes the episode's appearance in the vernacular, which only reaches its dramatic resolution in the second column of fol. 32r. The contrasting fates of the knight appear opposite one another, on the facing folios of the open manuscript.

Figures 1 and 2: Layout of English text and Latin gloss in University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Fairfax 3 (c.1400), fols. 31v and 32r.

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This layout facilitates the reader returning to the Latin gloss that introduces the episode, disrupting the linear flow of the narrative; in other words, it encourages a

process of reading queerly ‘across’ the text, not only across languages (Latin and English), but also across the codex as a physical artefact.

The comic, almost farcical, nature of the divine vengeance renders the divergence between the two accounts all the more marked, highlighting the fissures between them. As a consequence attention is drawn to the more subtle differences as well, such as the motivation of the knight himself, who in the Latin gloss is simply driven by frustrated desire. Indeed, in contrast to the English verses, the Latin gloss implies that the knight defames Constance and murders Hermyngeld in order to cover up his unsuccessful advances. The threat of sexual violence inherent in the knight’s actions and words becomes an explicit threat of rape in the English verses in Constance’s subsequent encounter with a Spanish steward, Theloüs, who steals aboard her boat in order to ‘demene hire at his oghne wille’ (II.1101). Here, however, Constance plays a more active role in saving herself (and the child with her), tricking the steward and invoking the assistance of God. Again, divine forces are at work, and the steward is cast out of the ship and drowns. Surprisingly there is no Latin gloss to summarise this episode. The attempted rape of Constance, and her spirited self-defence, are quite literally, glossed over in MS Bodley 902, fol. 32v, which lacks any Latin marginalia. In MS Fairfax 3, the rape and its repercussions are alluded to, but only indirectly in a gloss on fol. 33v describing how Constance’s ship travelled into Spanish Saracen waters ‘a quorum manibus deus ipsam conseruans graciousissime liberavit’ [‘from whose hands God, preserving her, liberated her by His grace’] (II.1084 ff. Latin marginalia). In Dinshaw’s discussion of Chaucer and Gower’s alleged rivalry, she convincingly argues that rape, or the aggressive suppression of female agency, is a means of ““consolidation of masculine identity””, a phrase that she borrows from Patricia Joplin’s feminist reading of René Girard’s work (quoted in

Dinshaw, 1991, 133). Both the knight and the steward attempt to assert their masculinity by controlling and destroying Constance. The Latin gloss in MS Fairfax 3 and the absence of a gloss in MS Bodley 902 function similarly, removing Constance's agency, and limiting or policing her autonomy and indeed her significance, closely identified as she is in the vernacular text with the vengeance of God. Female agency opens up a queer fissure which necessitates closing up. Yet, simultaneously, the fissure between the 'inglorious' Latin gloss of MS Fairfax 3 and the vernacular text that it accompanies, serves the opposite function by indicating that there are multiple, contradictory, ways of interpreting the figure of Constance, and that the meaning of her story is not fixed but powerfully polyvalent.

Unmoored Chaucer

Much like Gower's Tale, Chaucer's text is heavily glossed. In fact, it is the most consistently and conspicuously annotated of Chaucer's works. As we hope to demonstrate, these glossarial practices are underpinned by a concern, shared by Chaucer as well as Gower, with literary *auctoritas* and the policing of meaning, that is, with a queering of authority as a monolithic principle. In *Social Chaucer*, Paul Strohm discusses the heterogeneous social composition of Chaucer's homosocial affinity including 'several knights in royal and civil service, [...], London acquaintances [...] and newcomers of the 1390s (Scogan and Bukton): all gentle and none, apart from William Beauchamp, was aristocratic or baronial' (Strohm, 1989, 42-43). Despite their composite social positioning, they all shared aspirations for social advancement and for a consolidation of their authority, political and literary at once, as many of them were indeed writers. To borrow a useful term from Ethan Knapp (2001), they all functioned as 'bureaucratic muses' for fifteenth-century scribes and compilers with

artistic and social ambitions of their own. We suggest that glosses provide evidence of shared preoccupations with the workings and validation of vernacular literature amid the professional and intellectual circle frequented by the two poets at the end of the fourteenth century and by scribes operating in the fifteenth century. In particular, the bulk of the annotations are quotations from one of Chaucer's main sources: Innocent III's didactic work *De contempt mundi* also known as *De miseria condicionis humane*.

In the Ellesmere manuscript (Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9; c.1400), and less conspicuously in Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poet. 223 (1450s), all these citations from Innocent, bar one, appear to be of particular hermeneutic significance as they are signposted through an extra diacritic marker: the word *auctor* penned in the opposite margin of the folio. They function as speech markers, as they all have in common one feature: they signal an apostrophe or a vocative exclamation uttered by the *auctor* whose moral and intellectual potency is brought into focus by the annotation. Thus, as we remarked earlier, although there is no critical consensus as to the authorship of these glosses, their status is as akin to the authoritative status of the Latin glosses in *Confessio Amantis*.

Despite serving the orthodoxy of the text by marking its moral excellence, we would argue that these glosses also create a fissure that signals not only the repression of the feminine, but also the potency of female agency which calls for urgent policing. Etymologically, an apostrophe is a 'turning away' (Wales, 2014, 29), a change in the narrative voice and perspective, as the third-person narrative is suspended by introducing the narrator's and the *auctor*'s voice. As an example of ecphronesis, while articulating an invective against a character or concept, this voice elicits an affective response in the reader who, once implicated, is expected to share and perpetuate the *auctor*'s moral stance. However, arguably, in fact, this gap in the narrative opens the

text up to the possibility of a multiplicity of hermeneutic responses, as the monolithic authority of the *auctor* is de-centered in favour of plural interpretations and (competing) *auctoritates*. The gloss *auctor*, a reference to an unmovable principle of signification, adds to this interpretative fluidity, as Innocent's *auctoritas* is here invoked deferentially, but also appropriated by Chaucer and the Man of Law: in fact, who is the *auctor*?

It is one of these particular apostrophes to which we shall turn now, as it raises important questions about the queer 'unkynde abhomynacions' that preoccupy Chaucer and Gower. Specifically, we shall attend to the source gloss signalled by the note *auctor* and appended to the passage commenting on the failed attempt to rape Custance. Instead of chastising the 'thief' for his unchastity and violence, the apostrophe is addressed to the 'foule lust of luxurie' that corrupts a man's body and soul:

O foule lust of luxurie, lo, thyn ende!

Nat oonly that thou feyntest mannes mynde,

But verrailly thou wolt his body shende.

Th'ende of thy werk, or of thy lustes blynde,

Is compleynyng. Hou many oon may men fynde

That noight for werk somtyme, but for th'entente

To doon this synne, been outhere slayn or shente! (II.925-931)

Concerned with the threat of queer, alternative masculinities, the verse's invective against 'luxurie' and the annotation that punctuates it, re-establish the asymmetry on which gender relations appear to be founded in a Tale in which Custance is repeatedly equated to a commodity to be exchanged between men. In the vernacular verse, in particular, troubling representations of female masculinity saturate this part of the

narrative and arguably permeate the entire tale. Specifically, queer figurations of femininity such as Donegild's phallic or 'mannish' (II.782) gender positioning and the consequent threat to male 'ligeance' (II.895) are suppressed in favour of a narrative aimed at restoring masculinity's moral integrity and superiority. In line with commonplace misogynistic readings of the Fall, the burden of sin is apportioned so that the man, namely, the thief/rapist, in the case of the Man of Law's Tale, is exonerated, as both grammatically and morally he is the object and not the subject of acts of corruption. The rapist's wounded and diminished masculinity ('thou feynest mannes mynde'; 'slayn or shente') is certainly the result of the corrupting agency of 'luxurie', but it is also diminished further by his failure at a violent repression of the feminine. Dinshaw argues that rape is instrumental in realizing the fantasy of the monolithic singularity of masculinity; this is achieved by 'eradicating the evidence of something threateningly other' (1991; 135), in this case, a figuration of femininity which is overtly queer and agential. In sum, not only does the thief fail to commit rape and therefore compromise his masculinity, but he also fails to eradicate these queer subjectivities. His failure opens up fissures or gaps that at once reveal the oppressive operations on which heteronormativity is founded, and the ontological ubiquity of the queer within hegemonic structures.

The threat of the queer frames the verse chastising 'luxurie' for the thief's moral undoing: if the spectre of Donegild's queer femininity precedes the invective, it is, in turn, followed by Constance's virile resistance to rape:

How may this wayke womman han this strengthe

Hire to defende agayn this renegat?

O Goliath, unmesurable of lengthe,

Hou myghte David make thee so maat,

So yong and of armure so desolaat?
Hou dorste he looke upon thy dredful face?
Wel may men seen, it nas but Goddes grace.
Who yaf Judith corage or hardynesse
To sleen hym Olofernus in his tente,
And to deliveren out of wrecchednesse
The peple of God? I seye, for this entente,
That right as God spirit of vigour sente
To hem and saved hem out of meschance,
So sente he myght and vigour to Custance. (II.932-45)

Much like the Latin gloss in the manuscripts of *Confessio*, Chaucer's vernacular text polices female agency and its complexities by recasting it as vicarious and a mere appurtenance of the male authority of Christ ('it nas but Goddes grace'). Nonetheless, the repetition of heroic-militaristic rhetoric ('For with hir struglyng wel and myghtily'; II.921) underpins Custance's display of masculine strength when resisting rape. Like the biblical Judith, in this passage, she is positioned as a phallic woman whose physical potency ('vigour') is matched by her valour as a warrior ('corage or hardynesse'). Strikingly, David, with whom Constance is also implicitly and somewhat surprisingly compared, is represented as adolescent and lacking armour, or the prosthetics of masculinity, his physical prowess at odds with received gender constructs and notions of muscular maleness in particular. The series of pressing questions generated by the troubling potency of female masculinity and effeminate masculinity, or sexual deviance more broadly, articulate the anxiety generated by the queer.

The accompanying Latin source gloss, while testifying to the moral and theological orthodoxy of the *auctor*'s invective, opens a fissure which, as well as confirming the misogyny of much clerical thinking, reveals the presence of the queer at the very heart of orthodoxy. Building on Dinshaw's argument on the violent repression of the feminine other in order to consolidate the 'one-ness' of masculinity (1991; 135), we contend that this Latin source gloss functions as a material/textual strategy that constructs hegemonic heteronormativity as a coherent system. While seemingly serving the heteronormative imperative of masculinity's monolithic stability, the accompanying Latin annotation in the Ellesmere copy of the *Man of Law's Tale* in fact widens instead of papering over the gaps exposed by the performances of female masculinity and deviant sexuality in the text. Strategies of suppression of the spectre of the queer and sodomy in particular become visible through the fissures created by disjunctions between Chaucer's vernacular verse and its Latin gloss:

O extrema libidinis turpitude que non solum mentem effeminat set eciam
corpus eneruat semper sequuntur dolor et penitentia post et cetera

[O utter foulness of lust that not only effeminates the mind but enervates the
body, always followed by pain and repentance etc] (Magnani's translation)

Differences in the gendering of the two passages unveil a shift in preoccupation: if the vernacular translation, otherwise rather accurate, focuses on a fantasy of male one-ness by exculpating the rapist, Innocent's Latin articulates an urgent warning against the queering power of femininity. In other words, failure to resist the feminising excesses of gluttony and to expunge the feminine through violent containment, such as rape, is here linked to its ultimate consequence, that is, the most radical form of emasculation/castration of the superior male agent: sodomitic desire. The manuscript

follows Innocent's text *verbatim* and therefore uses the verb *effeminat* (fol. 60r) instead of the vernacular's 'shende', 'feyntest', 'slayn' which, despite articulating the destructive and debasing effect of 'luxurie', are more elusive in their gendering of this sin, here not explicitly female and queer.

Figure 3: Marginal gloss in Huntington Library MS EL 26 C 9 (c.1400), fol. 60r. Reproduced with permission.

In Chaucer's verse 'luxurie' is feminizing but not overtly female coded, while in the gloss both *turpitude* and *libidinis* are gendered as unequivocally feminine. As Watt argues in her discussion of sodomy (or its silencing) in *Confessio*, sodomy is the 'manifestation' of the 'feminine' and the 'degenerate' (2003, 65). In *De Planctu Naturae* Alain de Lille associates sodomy with error, that is, with an aberration of what is perceived to be the natural role of men as dominant and active at the moment when it degenerates into feminine passivity: 'The sex of active nature trembles shamefully at the way in which it declines into passive nature. Man is made woman, he blackens the honor of his sex, the craft of magic Venus makes him of double gender' (Moffat, 1908, 3). The error here is both sexual and linguistic; the vernacular (mis-)translation deviates from the Latin, much like the submissive male deviates from desirable figurations of masculinity. In so doing, the error opens the text up to alternative identities and hermeneutics. However, as Custance's name indicates, the Tale is invested in depicting femininity as an immovable construct and its female protagonist as the embodiment of the constancy of the gender binary founded on male dominance and female subservience. Chaucer's Tale is underpinned by a construction of Custance as hermeneutic fantasy of fixed meaning; in a complexly entangled world of conflicting religions, races, languages and gender identities she represents a desire for female constancy. Nonetheless, Custance is repeatedly unmoored at sea, a loose

signifier which allows the text to be punctuated by queer, non-binary figurations of gender. As a result, traditional constructs of masculinity are also eroded, as both Alla and the Sultan are figured in the feminizing act of kneeling before their mothers. In so doing, they reverse the power dynamic of female subjugation and male dominance on which gender asymmetry is founded. Such queer gestures of disorientation of the binary are hermeneutically disjunctive, as they operate along non-linear modes of production of meaning: the manuscript page is capacious and fluid, as it accommodates a plurality of significations and subject positions.

Traces of this queer, non-directional hermeneutics can be found, perhaps unexpectedly, in the Latin source gloss and, more specifically, in the textual variants recorded in British Library MS Egerton 2864 (1425-50), the Cardigan manuscript (now University of Texas Library MS 143; 1550s), and Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson Poet. 223 (c. 1450-1460). These manuscripts offer alternative verbal forms to *effeminat*, namely *efferat* (fol. 78r), *effectuat* (fol. 62v) and *infatuat*, respectively. The spectre of misreading, misinterpretation and queer error with which we started our article resurfaces here, in the glosses themselves, at the heart of the hegemonic. *Effectuat* (to bring about, to cause) indicates that bodily and moral corruption is the logic consequence of gluttony in a perfectly teleological cause-effect framework. The other two manuscript variants gesture more directly to the problematic quality of the Ellesmere gloss. They both imply the othering and debasement of the sinner: ‘efferat’ suggests that lust brutalizes and bestializes the mind, while the use of ‘infatuat’ casts gluttony as the impairment of one’s ability for rational thinking. Notwithstanding this process of othering, they do not point towards the feminizing implications of excessive desires, unlike the Ellesmere variant. Although they still imply the sinful subject’s alterity, they silence sodomy as the ultimate form of effeminacy.

Conclusion

As Watt has previously observed in relation to Dante, Gower and Brunetto Latini (Watt, 2003, 38-60), the obliteration of sodomy betrays a fundamental male anxiety about the queer, that is, the possibility of homoerotic desire built within the homosocial relations between authors, like Chaucer and Gower. Much like Constance/Custance's non-directional peregrinations at sea, the queer disjunctions between the Latin glosses and the vernacular text indicate an unstable hermeneutics in which meaning is indeed not constant. As Hsy argues, the interlinguistic and intercultural threads woven by Custance are marked by the haphazard movement of 'aventure' and chance rather than by a firm causality (Hsy, 2013, 69). Similarly, the transferrals of meaning from Latin to the vernacular do not operate according to a principle of teleological-unidirectional equivalence, but as Hsy would put it, they rather 'posit a model of linguistic traversal that diverges from a presumed linear trajectory of translation' (72). We argue in the Introduction to this Special Issue, patrilineal or 'straight' epistemologies of canon formation and transmission do not account for the queer dissonances which characterise manuscript culture. Figuring Chaucer and Gower's exchanges as male rivalry unhelpfully casts literary production in terms of a muscular contest for patriarchal supremacy over the burgeoning Middle English canon. Such reading obliterates the poets' anxieties about the instability of authority (literary and otherwise) and, perhaps most importantly, the pleasures they (and we) find in such errors and deviances from the restrictions of linear norms.

Notwithstanding attempts to police gender, hermeneutics and authorship, the threatening presence of the queer emerges in the fissures within the very practices of suppression. The pleasure of queer errors and 'abhomynacions' becomes visible in the

gaps in the monolithic structures of patriarchy. The composite, palimpsested surface of the manuscript page allows for the policing and the performance of the queer pleasures of misreading and polyvocal hermeneutics. The inglorious disjunctures between vernacular texts and Latin glosses, and perhaps most importantly, within the annotative apparatus itself, reveal an anxiety about, but also a desire for being, like Constance/Custance, unmoored, rudderless, cast adrift at sea.

Sidenotes

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² Siân Echard has pointed out to us that in a number of manuscripts the glosses move from the margins into the text column, sometimes disrupting the grammatical flow, and thus the sense, of the English poem. This sort of unruly, and potentially queer, in-text glossing is particularly marked in the Tale of Constance. An example of such a manuscript is Washington DC, Folger Shakespeare Library, MS V.b.29 (third quarter of the fifteenth century). The same can be said for Chaucer's manuscripts, in particular in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson Poet. 223, fol. 75v. Here the gloss that is copied in the margins of the Ellesmere manuscript appears in red in the main column. The queer entanglement of the Latin and English texts is evidenced in the layout of some of the manuscripts.

About the Authors

Roberta Magnani is a lecturer in English Literature at Swansea University. Her main research interests are in late medieval literature with a specific focus on Chaucer's works, manuscript studies and gender theories, especially queer theory. She is currently completing a monograph entitled *Chaucer's Queer Textualities: The Challenging of Authority*, which will be published by Palgrave Macmillan in the 'New Middle Ages' series. Diane Watt is professor of medieval English literature at the University of Surrey. She works on Old and Middle English literature, especially women's writing, and gender and sexuality. Her books include *Secretaries of God: Women Prophets in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (1997), *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Gender* (2003), and *Medieval Women's Writing: Works by and for Women, 1100-1500* (2007).

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