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**The Passive Poet: Amans as Narrator in Book 4 of the *Confessio Amantis***

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Of the eight books of the *Confessio Amantis*, Book 4 most aptly suits the work's title, for it devotes a notably large amount of space to Amans' discourse. In Book 4, the book concerning the sin of sloth, Amans becomes active with words. He uses the forms and vocabulary of courtly poetry to express his ongoing imaginative condition of passive desire. Throughout Book 4, Amans' poetry enables Gower to explore both the nature of desire disjoined from its function in nature and the nature of the poetry which delineates and sustains such desire.

Amans' courtly poetry reflects the way he interprets courtly vocabulary, especially the term *gentilesse*, which Genius dwells on at length in Book 4 (4.2190-2337). *Gentilesse* and the similar term *courtoisie* had a spectrum of meanings in medieval poetry that underlie, in part, the way Amans discourses on love and adapts aspects of previous texts, such as the *Roman de la Rose* and Chaucer's *Troilus*, for his own poetry.<sup>1</sup> Both these works depict desire in ways related to the theme of *gentilesse*.

While *gentilesse* originally referred to noble lineage, it came to suggest innate superiority in several areas: morality, rational intellect, sensibility, and behavior. *Gentilesse* is a major theme in many medieval works, from courtly romances to philosophical and religious treatises. Thus, its importance for Gower springs not only from its connection to high social status, exquisite manners, and

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refined sensibility but also from the Boethian idea that true gentility shows itself not in noble birth, but in a virtuous character.<sup>2</sup>

In Book 4 of the *Confessio*, Genius applies the term to lovers. He suggests the *gentil* and thus virtuous lover deserves requited love; such love in turn increases the lover's *gentilesse*. Genius links *gentilesse* to the ongoing ennobling experience of "love honeste" (4.2297), that is, love in marriage, which brings natural generative love into accord with society's bonds.<sup>3</sup> Amans, however, sees *gentilesse* in terms of courtly decorum. He concerns himself with the sensitive emotional and imaginative state of the *gentil* lover, plus the *gentil* lover's conversance with the correct behavior to show his condition. For Amans, the *gentil* lover is one who expresses devotion with the gestures that the poetry of *amour courtois* prescribes. Such a lover feels his experience of love causes him to act with greater *gentilesse* toward both his lady and society, but his desire is divorced from a goal such as generative marriage and equally divorced from the active, aggressive aspect of desire Amans fears.

At the beginning of Book 4, Amans shows he follows the protocol for the *gentil* lover's poetry but admits to Genius the unreliability of his own poetry as communication; he cannot address his lady and expresses poetry only in his heart:

For thogh my tunge is slowh to crave

At alle time, as I have bede,

Min herte stant evere in o stede

And axeth besiliche grace,

The which I mai noght yit embrace. (4.54-58)

No longer communicative, Amans' text turns reflexively back in his imagination. Yet he

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asserts defensively that his imagination is active as his heart repeats his longing. Moreover, he implies he is a *gentil* lover, for a *gentil* lover's heart can feel and show love with great delicacy; the *gentil* lover has a *gentil herte*, as Chaucer indicates in the *Troilus* (Burnley 153-55, Gaylord 28). But as Amans imagines his *gentil herte* ever beside his lady begging grace, he reveals his actual separation from her.

Indeed, Amans confesses that when he approaches his lady, his words disappear from his mind:

Lich to the bok in which is rased

The lettre, and mi nothing be rad,

So ben my wittes overlad,

That what as evere I thoghte have spoken,

It is out fro myn herte stoken.... (4.580-85)

Amans loses a poetic text to express his longing because he fears aggressive desire. When he makes no overture to his lady, Amans grants her neither the chance to reject him nor the chance to accept him and necessitate his action toward her. Amans erases his own text and cannot express his desire in imagination until safely removed from his lady. Even then, he addresses not his lady but himself in a tirade against forgetfulness. His poetry expresses suspended imaginative desire for a love object, his lady, from whom he alienates himself even when in her presence. It formalizes desire which does not seek physical gratification and generates nothing but more of the same condition. Amans' poetry therefore borrows the form of the non-narrative courtly lyric. The lyric text enables him to justify his ambivalence toward his lady and also embodies his suspended desire as it

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sets his desire into the courtly context of *gentil* lovers.<sup>4</sup> Amans lives a lyric, condemning himself to desire without plot or ending. Yet throughout Book 4 he attempts a paradox: he seeks a text which would both eliminate narrative action and enable him to find himself miraculously gratified by his lady's favor, a lyric of love granted. Amans seems to have no notion of the narrative actions necessary for him to attain his lady; he wishes to "make an ende" (4.957) but does not know how to initiate the beginning.

Amans nonetheless seeks to control narrative action and to employ explanatory narratives that defend his imaginative state and emphasize his fidelity to his lady. He therefore endeavors to appropriate Genius' function as storyteller. To prove he retains his lady in his memory, Amans refers to the story of Moses and Tharbis, wherein Moses used a magic ring to cause his Ethiopian wife to forget him. Amans assures Genius he would not forget his lady as Tharbis comes to forget Moses and insists on his fidelity:

Although I hadde on such a Ring,

As Moises thurgh his enchanting

Some time in Ethiope made

When that he Tharbis wedded hade.

Which Ring bar of Oblivion

The name, and that was be resoun

That where it on a finger sat,

Anon his live he so foryat,

As thogh he hadde it nevere knowe:

And so it fell that ilke throue,  
Whan Tharbis hadde it on hire hond,  
No knowleching of him sche fond,  
Bot al was clene out of memoire,  
As men mai rede in his histoire;  
And thus he wente quit away,  
That nevere after that ilke day

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Sche thocht that ther was such on;  
Al was foryete and overgon. (4.647-64)

Amans' story reveals his idiosyncracies as narrator of unfolding action. He opens nearly at its conclusion, fumbles back to its beginning, only to return to its ending. His tale neither describes Tarbis' love for Moses nor explains how and why Moses sets the ring on her finger; instead, the ring appears on her hand only because Amans states it is there. Losing nearly all narrative action, Amans' story is not about Moses and Tarbis but about the ring's magical properties; his tale concerns not actions and consequences but the ring's power to undo them. The tale's structure delineates the undoing of narrative action as it mirrors the circular shape of the ring itself. As the ring undoes the union of Moses and Tarbis by erasing memory, Amans' tale undoes the story of Moses and Tarbis by erasing the narrative he cites.

The tale nonetheless indicates much about its narrator. Introduced by Amans to prove that he, unlike Tarbis, will not forget his beloved, the tale instead shows how the ring lets Moses extricate himself from Tarbis' embraces. The ring undoes the consequences of marriage, and becomes, in effect, an anti-wedding ring. Amans' poetry thus shows his ambivalence toward his own desire and his underlying wish to forget aggressive sexuality. As it undoes the marriage of Moses and Tarbis, the ring causes her to forget Moses as completely as Amans forgets his text of love when near his lady.

Yet Amans still remembers many details of his tentative courtship. Attempting to prove he is not idle, he lists a series of endearing vignettes (4.1122-1220). He tells, for example, how he escorts his lady to church, how he runs to perform errands for her, how he kneels when

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she sits and stands when she stands. Yet these vignettes remain only a series of pictures; they contain no more of an advancing narrative than does the description of the magic ring. Amans' use of the present tense indicates that his life consists of repeated small gestures, empty courtesies that follow the dictates of the *gentillesse* from the texts he copies rather than actions that progress toward a goal.

Amans' narrative strategies reveal the limited scope of his experience. In the same way, his small gestures of courtly conduct show his dislocation from any real attempt to gain gratification from his lady. In the series of vignettes he reveals ingenuous satisfaction with the limited pastimes that reflect his notion of *gentillesse*. For example, Amans recites poetry in his lady's presence, a performance he appears to direct as much at the air as at the lady herself. He repeats what he claims is an Ovidian lyric:

And otherwhile I singe a song,  
Which Ovide in his bokes made,

And seide, "O whiche sorwes glade,

O which wofull prosperite

Belongeth to the proprete

Of love, who so wole him serve!

And yit therfro mai no man swerve,

That he ne mot his lawe obeie." (4. 1210-17)

Amans states he borrows from Ovid in accordance with the medieval conception of Ovid as the seminal poet of amorous experience. Yet Amans' lyric employs oxymora he could have found in Ovid but could as easily have found in virtually any medieval discussion of love; his poem merely expresses a commonplace. Moreover, it celebrates the condition of desire rather than his lady as the object of desire. Thus, Amans

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lacks even a lyric which allows him to approach his lady directly; instead, he retreats into imaginative and reflexive yearning.

Still, Amans considers that he acts in courtly fashion toward his lady when he recites his lyric and thereby proves *gentil* perseverance in love. In the same way, he defends himself against the charade of somnolence with another similar series of vignettes (4.2773-2830). Both series show how poetic texts direct Amans' imaginative formulations. Furthermore, the first series adopts diction from one of Amans' major poetic sources, the *Roman de la Rose*, which provides both much of the poetic vocabulary Amans borrows and some of the connotations of *gentillesse* that influence his imaginative state.<sup>5</sup> He repeats his wish to have his lady, "Withoute *danger* at mi wille!" (4.1149; my emphasis). He refers to the personification *Daungier* from the *Roman*, the figure who guards the Rose and represents not only the lady's standoffishness but also the lover's fear of his own aggressive urge toward her.<sup>6</sup> The reference is peculiarly apposite for Amans. Thus it is not surprising that even before the discussion of dreams in Book 4, Amans admits to a fantasy influenced by the text of this dream-vision. Moreover, the *Roman's* influence becomes more pronounced in the subsequent section on dreams.

Similarly, the second series includes a crucial allusion to the *Troilus*. Amans points out a list of demands his lady may make; a request concerning the story of Troilus stands out among them:

Or elles that hir list comaunde

To rede and here of Troilus,

Riht as sche wole or so or thus,

I am al redi to consente. (4. 2794-97)

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Just as does the *Roman*, Chaucer's *Troilus* provides the diction and thematic content that aid Amans to invent the sort of poetry he wishes.<sup>7</sup>

Amans finds both texts congenial in part because both the hero of the *Roman* and Troilus himself exemplify the literary model of *gentillesse* which Amans dutifully follows; like the heroes of courtly lyrics, they supply the gestures Amans copies to express his gingerly desire. The hero of Guillaume de Lorris' opening dresses fashionably, dances well, acts polite and well-bred, and submits his natural erotic urge to the refining dictates of his courtly society. Like him, Troilus is nobly-born, courtly and well-mannered, and unceasingly loyal to Criseyde. Both express love with the intensity that marks those with *gentil hertes*. Just as he imagines that his circumscribed gestures repeat the *gentillesse*

displayed by his literary models, Amans also imagines he is a similar exemplar of *gentillesse* who will thus be rewarded by his lady.

Both texts also attract Amans because, by different strategies, they combine lyric and romance. Guillaume's *Roman* presents a lyric hero in a dream landscape where he may express his lyric yearning as a quest both for the beloved and for self-fulfillment in a *roman d'aventure* (Freeman 166). In Jean de Meun's continuation, the French namesake of Gower's hero finally achieves the object of his quest. Troilus first yearns for Criseyde and, unable to give her any sign of his desire for her, expects no return. He seeks to continue his lyric state of suspended desire divorced from seeking a goal. It is Pandarus who transforms the story's lyric beginning into a romance. Even so, after Pandarus introduces Troilus to Criseyde, Troilus still prefers suspended, unconsummated desire.

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Pandarus must act further in Book 3 of Chaucer's poem to make the Trojan prince consummate his love. Thus, both Chaucer's text and the offer to Amans the notion that he may in some unspecified way conflate his imaginative experience as lyric persona with the narrative of romance to attain the static lyric situation of love fulfilled for which he claims to long.

Drawing imagery and language from his borrowed texts, Amans relates his imaginative dreaming in the section on somnolence. Seized by the "dede slep" (4.2890), he vacillates in his dreams between joy and sorrow in love, as his fears hold him, but finally dreams of his lady, and:

That I al one with hire mete

And that Danger is left behinde;

And thanne in slep such joie I finde,

That I ne bede nevere awake. (4.2902-05)

Amans relates no narrative to indicate how he achieves his goal; in his convenient dream, some mysterious agency circumvents his lady's Danger, rather than any action on his part. That agency appears to be Amans' editing of his dream text; as earlier he edited the narrative of Moses and Tarbis, so here he deletes Danger. Although Amans borrows from the *Roman*, he adapts its text to avoid its narrative. He likewise avoids the necessary sexual assertiveness the lover in the poem shows in Jean de Meun's conclusion. While Amans' dream may seem an experience beyond his conscious control, it results from the way he recollects poetic texts to invent a dream-vision which he indulges in before sleep seizes him.

Such recollection is evident as Amans begins to exercise his imagination. He contemplates the nightingale, "Which slepeth

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noght be weie of kinde / For love, *in bokes* as I finde" (4.2874-75--my emphasis). He does not listen for a real bird in its natural setting. Instead, he conjures up the literary nightingale he discovers in texts such as Chaucer's *Troilus*.<sup>8</sup> As he reads that the nightingale is the bird of love, Amans conscientiously adopts that literary convention to define his own preoccupations. Still, he does not consider the convention's complexity. The nightingale represents both the artistic sublimation of love and the aggressive natural sexuality Amans fears. Isolated within his artificial world of texts, Amans is cut off from the world of natural fecundity wherein real nightingales reside. As he considers the nightingale, he turns to purely literary inspiration for a waking dream:

Thus ate laste I go to bedde,

And yit min herte lith to wedde

With hire, wher as I cam fro;

Thogh I departe, he wol noght so,  
Ther is no lock mai schette him oute,  
Him nedeth noght 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,  
And softly takth hire in his arm  
And fieleth hou that sche is warm,  
And wissheth that his body were  
To fiele that he fieleth there. (4.2875-88)

As he does with his ensuing dream, Amans derives his description of his heart to a degree from the *Roman's* ending, wherein Jean de Meun's hero storms the Castle of Jealousy to impregnate the Rose. Amans imagines his heart may "perce" the "harde wall" and enter his lady's bed, even

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if, Amans adds, his lady is loath to accept his heart's presence. Yet it is illuminating that Amans assigns his aggressive role not to himself, even in imagination, but to his heart. Only his heart can act as the imaginary assertive lover, just as earlier only his heart could remain near his lady to crave grace. Moreover, the active role of Amans' heart is belied by the structure of Amans' text; once again, it contains no real narrative. Amans' heart appears beside his lady by the agency of Amans' words only. His heart overcomes boundaries while bound in the confines of his text. Amans further contradicts his heart's seeming assertiveness when he describes its behavior in his lady's bed. His tentative heart enters her bed "softly" and simply holds her. Amans' sexuality appears unfocused, passive, and curiously innocent, as his heart snuggles gently against his lady. Amans himself would make an unassuming, possibly ineffective, lover, if only some agency equivalent to his authorial control of his text could place him in his lady's bed as he sets his heart.

Amans' imaginative vision owes much not only to the *Roman* but also to the *Troilus*, which provides a model of erotic fulfillment appropriate to Amans' ambivalence. Like Amans, Troilus is a passive lover, who, in Book 3 of Chaucer's text, achieves his lady in circumstances that Amans' vignette echoes as much as it echoes the *Roman*.<sup>9</sup> Troilus, too, secretly entering Pandarus' house and then ushered into the hidden chamber, finds himself beyond walls that do not lock him out. He is not only placed beyond a "harde wall" by a method that requires no great assertiveness on his part, but also placed in his lady's bed by Pandarus' aggressive agency. Once in bed with Criseyde, Troilus simply enfolds her in his arms, just as Amans' heart, when placed by his

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text in his lady's bed, holds her with similar diffidence. It is Criseyde who must persuade her lover to further action. Thus Troilus seems to lack the aggressive desire Amans fears but receives the consummation of love for which Amans believes he longs. Troilus attains a suspended moment of fulfilled desire commensurate with Amans' suspended condition of unfulfilled desire. Yet Troilus remains for Amans a literary ideal of *gentillesse* rather than a model for him to imitate outside his imaginative text.

Like Troilus, Amans requires an aggressive agent such as Pandarus but lacks someone to perform that role. Amans adopts a literary antecedent which does not inspire assertive love but instead gives him a precedent for his passivity. He is a poet for whom words and conventions supersede directed meaning; they allow him to justify his passive state

as following the poetic dictates of *gentillesse*. Amans feels that works such as the *Troilus* are among the "bokes" (4.2299) Genius cites as authorities on *gentillesse* when Genius discusses the term before Amans narrates his imaginative vision. Moreover, Amans has further textual evidence from the *Troilus* to link *gentillesse* to the night of idyllic consummated love his fantasy copies:

Resoun wol nought that I speke of slep,

For it acordeth nought to my matere.

God woot, they took of that ful litel kep!

But lest this nyght, that was to him so deere,

Ne sholde in veyn escape in no manere,

It was byset in joie and bisynesse

Of al that souneth into gentillesse. (TC 3.1408-14)

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Here, rather than representing the abstract quality that defines the virtuous lover, *gentillesse* is associated with the act of love. Troilus loves with *gentillesse*: courteously, gracefully, gently. His unaggressive love seems extolled in the description of its consummation; the text appears to Amans to confirm his interpretation of *gentillesse*. Amans, an ingenuous reader, does not consider that Troilus' *gentillesse* here is limited to a way of experiencing a particular night.<sup>10</sup> It is only tenuously related to the deeper connotations of the term that involve true virtue and rational self-awareness. Troilus' *gentillesse* cannot overcome the fragility of his love, soon to be disrupted by dawn. Because he bases his fantasy of his heart on Chaucer's poem, Amans feels his text expresses the same *gentillesse* and thus evades the connotations both of his passive desire and of *gentillesse* as Genius defines it.

Indeed, Amans shows he is a poet of form more than of substance in Book 4 of the *Confessio*; his poetry reveals he has no real goal in relation to his lady and prefers the fixed state his poetry enables him to sustain. Thus he transforms poetic sources, such as the *Roman* and the *Troilus*, and poetic vocabulary, such as the term *gentillesse*, to invent the poetry that continues his suspended condition. *Gentillesse*, at this stage of the *Confessio*, does not suggest the connotations of rational virtue and moral sensitivity to Amans; it is a word he restricts to the narrowest sense of courtly behavior and accompanying imaginative sensitivity in a lover, despite the way Genius applies the term both to rational virtue and generative love in marriage. Thus Gower shows how the forms of courtly poetry, however beautiful, entrap Amans. Only gradually through the rest of the *Confessio* does Genius' continued

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narrative and instructive poetry, rather than static poetry, aid Amans to discover the broader connotations of *gentillesse*. Indeed, Genius' poetry assists Amans in part because it is itself complex and incomplete in the answers concerning Amans' circumstances that it provides. In dealing with such poetry, Amans can then eventually transcend Genius' teaching and concern for generative love in the natural world. At last he discovers, through poetry of substance, some insight into his fallible human condition as an aging man no longer tied to desire and the poetry of desire. He transcends the limitations of the entrapping forms of poetry.

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Notes

1. For a discussion of the various usages of *gentillesse* in medieval literature, including Chaucer's *Troilus*, see Burnley 151-70. For a discussion which focuses on Chaucer's use of the term in the *Troilus*, see Gaylord 19-34.
2. See *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, 3. Prosa 6. In Chaucer's translation, Chaucer refers to the concept of noble birth as *gentillesse*. *Boece*, 3. Prose 6.32-54.
3. Russell Peck comments that Genius in Book 4 is primarily concerned with generation: "Here more than elsewhere his [Genius'] perspective is defined by one aspect of 'kynde', that is, by Natura's desire and need to keep herself regenerate and plenitudinous. Sloth is especially odious to Genius since, when provoked by Sloth, he would have all creatures bending their steady backs in love. This particular aspect of his character, an aspect which Gower takes from the *Roman de la Rose*, accounts not only for his moralizing but also for his selection of tales." (83) Genius' concern with generative love owes much not only to his character in the *Roman* but also to his earlier character in Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae*. For a thorough discussion of the "law of nature" as the animal urge to procreation, see Olsson 230-34.
4. For a discussion of courtly lyric poetry that deals with both the character of the lover and the context of the court see Goldin.
5. Cf. Peck 82.
6. For this insight into the personification

*Daungier* in the *Roman*, I am grateful to Winthrop Wetherbee, seminar lecture.

7. Although Amans refers here only to reading and hearing of "Troilus" and not more specifically to Chaucer's version of the *Troilus* story, I believe both thematic and poetic references in Amans' vignette of his heart can point only to Chaucer's *Troilus*, as I hope to demonstrate in detail below.
8. It is instructive to notice, for example, how in Book 2 of the *Troilus*, Criseyde hears a real nightingale outside her window before she is taken by the "dede slep" (TC 2.924) and has the dream of the eagle removing her heart and replacing it with his own.
9. I would further suggest that the passage in the *Troilus* is itself influenced by the *Roman*.
10. Compare Gaylord 31.