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page 131**Gower's *Confessio Amantis* IV, 1963-2013:**

The Education of Achilles

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John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a poem of multiple sources. The story of the education of Achilles in Book IV (lines 1963-2013) is from Statius' *Achilleid*, but Gower also uses Benoit de Sainte-Maure's *Roman de Troie* (which does not describe the education) for information about Achilles. Gower mentions Achilles once each in Books II, III, and VII of the *Confessio* and twice in Book VIII; he mentions Achilles four times in Book IV and twice in Book V. The story of the education of Achilles is one of growth into maturity, which I believe is a major theme of the *Confessio*. Achilles seems to represent an ideal to both Genius and Amans, albeit in different terms. Genius prefers Statius' Achilles, while Amans seems to wish to emulate Benoit's. In his use of the Achilles material, Gower intertwines his sources, playing one against the other in a way which may tell us something about the underlying structure of the *Confessio* as a whole and about Books IV and V in particular. I believe that Statius' Achilles represents the heroic ideal of the *Confessio*, while Benoit's represents romance used as the poetry of accommodation to the realities of the world which we all inhabit. Romance, as Gower uses it in the *Confessio*, recognizes inevitable human and worldly imperfections more generously than does Gower's version of the classical ideal. My first question is, what does the story of the education of Achilles have to do with the other Achilles material in the *Confessio*, particularly with that in Books IV and V? My second: what use is Gower making of

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Statius here, and how does that relate to his use of Benoit? By considering these questions I hope to disentangle at least one of the thematic threads of Gower's long narrative as well as shed some light on his narrative technique.

The story of the education of Achilles is preceded in Book IV by several similar stories of the rite of passage into adulthood: Iphis and Iante (451-505), Pheton (979-1034), Icarus (1035-1071), Rosiphelee (1245-1446), and Jephthah's Daughter (1505-1595). Beginning this sequence is the story of Pygmalion (371-436), which is a maturation story at least insofar as it is about the creation of an adult human being. The only story which interrupts the sequence is that of Demophon and Phillis (631-878), but Phillis is specifically described as "of yong age" (743).¹ After this series of growth stories comes Book IV's first mention of Achilles (by Amans), followed by three stories by Genius about death or danger to young men or children and then by the education, which is close to the physical center of Book IV. Also in Book IV (with that first mention of Achilles), Amans makes an attempt to speak for himself, to assert his individuality even while listening to Genius' teaching. Self-assertion is one of the clearest hallmarks of adolescence, of course. But what Amans says when he speaks for himself is as important as the attempt. In lines 1648 and following he refuses to kill, even for the sake of love. He first cites Christ's teaching as proof that killing is wrong.² Second, he approvingly refers to Achilles' refusal to bear arms because of the love of Polixena of Troy. To be a lover, he implies, is to refuse to fight. In 1693-1701, Amans momentarily usurps Genius' function to tell the story of how Achilles laid down his arms for Polixena. This story is from Benoit; it is not in Statius.³ Amans tells the story

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poorly he begins in the middle and leaves out a conclusion but he does force Genius to respond directly. In 1798-1803, Genius answers Amans with a tale he refers to as "contraire," that of Nauplius and Ulysses (in which Nauplius forces Ulysses to come to the Trojan War by placing the life of Ulysses' young son in danger). This tale is followed by the brief tale of the death of Protesilaus (1901-1935) and by the briefer one of the deaths of Saul and his son Jonathas (1936-1962).⁴ It is hard not to see these stories as some sort of warning to Amans' own budding independence. Genius does not seem to recognize that while Protesilaus, Saul, and Jonathas are assertive in war, Amans insists that he desires peace. Judging from Genius' criticism and from his tales, any attempt by the individual to assert his own will results in death or the threat of death for that individual or his progeny. From these kill stories, Genius goes on to the education of Achilles. Perhaps Genius is trying to guide Amans in his maturation here, to force him to grow up as Genius thinks right. If so, then Genius appears to believe that there is only one correct road to maturity and, by implication, only one correctly mature life. However, before beginning to conclude anything about Book IV, I wish to examine Book V as

well.

In Book V, Genius alone handles the Achilles material. He presents the story of Deidamia in lines 2961-3216; the source is Statius. In lines 7591-7596, he tells the beginning and the end of the Polixena story which Amans began in the middle and left open-ended in Book IV: Achilles falls in love with Polixena when he sees her at the Temple of Apollo and then dies because of that love. Genius places his brief version of the story at the end of the long Paris/Helen story (source Benoit) and immediately before an equally brief

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version of the Troilus story (for which Benoit is one of the standard sources). As I have mentioned, the source for Polixena/Achilles is also Benoit. Here and elsewhere when using material from Benoit, Genius disapproves of Achilles' behavior; when he tells stories in Books IV and V using Statius as a source, Genius approves of Achilles.⁵ In Book V, Genius' anti-Achilles moral is "Don't fall in love in church." This interpretation is obviously too simplistic to explain completely the three tales to which it is attached, but by comparing the two versions of the Achilles/Polixena story we can see that not only does Genius use the story to point a negative moral (while Amans uses it to demonstrate a positive) but that Genius' version is technically more complete and in context than Amans'. In a sense, Amans is in the position of a pupil who has done poorly, being corrected by his master's example. That even a poor attempt to emulate the teacher might be worth encouraging does not seem to occur to Genius; his version of the Achilles/Polixena story is so diametrically opposed to Amans' that it might almost be calculated to prove to the pupil that he has no storytelling ability at all. Whether or not this is Genius' conscious intention, that seems to be the effect of his response to Amans' self-assertion: after IV, 1770, Amans tells no more tales.

Genius' more obvious intentions in using the Achilles material also have relevance to his relationship with Amans. On the whole, the young Achilles of the education and of the Achilles/Deidamia story provides a positive example for Amans. But Genius is not in control of the *Confessio*; Gower is. My premise is that the education and maturing of Achilles is Genius' pattern for the growth of a perfect "gentil" and worthy knight and that Gower deliberately places this pattern into a

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disjointed and imperfect world. The ideal lover is, by definition, a knight-warrior: the perfect man. In the best of all possible worlds, Achilles would have been the flawless warrior-lover which Genius seems to think still should be able to exist even in this world in which love and war are antithetical. In an unfallen world, death would not be death as we know it. It would be process, the eternal change in the natural world which permits birth and growth; love would be the other part of the cycle, the generative half. However, when Achilles is behaving as a lover, he is unable or unwilling to be a warrior, to kill and risk death; when he is at war, he has no time or inclination for love. The conflict and contradictions in his own nature eventually kill him. In the world of the *Confessio*, love has become lustful and selfish as opposed to procreative and generous; death is absolute, infertile destruction, preventing birth and growth rather than encouraging them. Perhaps love and death should still work in harmony, but Gower knows that they cannot. So does Amans, though he may not be consciously aware of his knowledge; he is a child of Gower's imperfect world. Thus the contradictions in Achilles illustrate the wall separating Genius, with his understanding of a world in which all levels of meaning work together, and Amans, who is born to and sees in terms of a world disjunct and self-contradictory. It is important to remember that Amans is able to use Christian arguments against Genius in Book IV, arguments which Genius never answers: Christianity may be seen as the ultimate attempt to put as right as possible a world which Genius does not believe should be wrong. (He may perceive the wrongness, but I don't believe that he can fully understand either the cause or the ultimate consequences.) Genius urges Amans to grow up perfectly in an

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imperfect world; his best example of such an attempt at perfect is Achilles. In the earlier Book IV maturation stories, two of the successes (Iphis and Iante, Rosiphelee) involve children growing up to become ordinary, if noble, adults doing ordinary things such as falling in love and having babies. I include Jephthah's Daughter with these two because Jephthah's Daughter does succeed in becoming adult and in taking on adult responsibilities; if her father's oath had not caused her death, she presumably would have behaved much as Rosiphelee and Iante later in her life. Book IV's failures (Pheton, Icarus) involve boys who try to grow up by doing the impossible or at least in the course of doing the impossible. Instead of becoming adult, they die. But Achilles is the success story of boy-into-hero, the man who must do the impossible. His successful maturation will affect the course of nations and the shape of the world. Genius seems

to regard this situation as normal; it is not, as Gower's use of his sources shows. To understand how complex and tragic the maturation of Achilles is, we must go back to the beginning, to Gower's sources and the changes he makes in them.

I begin my discussion of Gower's sources by recalling Amans' version of the Polixena story in Book IV. Amans says simply that Achilles refused to fight, "for Polixenen, / Upon hire love whanne he fell" (1696-1697). In Benoit's *Roman de Troie*, the love affair between Polixena and Achilles starts in lines 17489-18470 and continues to be an important narrative element for several thousand lines following. Obviously, Gower's version (even including V, 7591-7506) is much shorter. In Benoit, Achilles sees Polixena at rites honoring the anniversary of Hector's death and falls in love with her. He writes to Hecuba, who consults Priam. Priam takes counsel, then the Trojans respond

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cautiously to Achilles, who lays down his arms and instructs his men to do the same. In 20691-20812, after he has been convinced to let his men fight without him and they have been defeated, Amors and Mesfaiz struggle within him and Amors loses when Achilles returns to the battle. Achilles is then treacherously killed by Paris at a supposed rendezvous with Polixena (arranged by Hecuba). In lines 26241-26590, Pirrus sacrifices Polixena on Achilles' tomb in revenge. Polixena never speaks when Achilles is courting her, never has control over her own love affair. She is pure love-object to Achilles, bait to Paris and Hecuba, and symbol of vengeance to Pirrus. Gower's Polixena is even more of a nonentity than Benoit's: neither Amans nor Genius gives her speech or feelings, in either Book IV or Book V. Benoit's Achilles, acting as lover, does refuse to act as warrior for a time, as Amans declares. But Amans never discusses the consequences of Achilles' refusal (the defeat of the Greeks) nor Achilles' return to war and eventual death. He leaves Achilles in stasis, like the lover in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and like Amans himself. This shortening tends to soften the harshness of the story. Genius' version of the story is starker, for Genius insists on giving Achilles' life a conclusion; he does not leave the character trapped in the center of his own tale. Instead, he uses Achilles here as a bad example to Amans, warning his pupil against behaving as Achilles did in falling in love with Polixena. Thus, in this story Genius sternly condemns Achilles for falling in love which is a relatively atypical stance for Genius. These conflicts are artfully worked out; Gower is using his source very carefully here.

He uses his source even more carefully when that source is Statius. The education story's specific source is the *Achilleid* II, 94-167. In

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Statius, Achilles is nurtured on savage meats in Chiron's rude cave. Chiron will permit him to hunt no timid beasts but only bears, tigers, and lionesses. In Gower, too, Chiron commands Achilles to hunt only wild beasts and not "buck and doo and hert and hynde" (1991). However, as important as Statius' actual recounting of the education of Achilles is the glimpse of that education which we get in Book I of the *Achilleid*. Here, Statius describes Chiron as old, a formerly great hunter who teaches his pupil music and medicine as well as war and hunting (I, 104-118). When Thetis arrives to take Achilles to Lycomedes' court, Chiron prepares a feast (which doesn't appear to include lion's entrails) for her and her son, and Achilles entertains his mother by playing on the lyre as she rests (I, 119-125, 184-187). Gower mentions nothing of this part of Achilles' training, in either Book IV or V. He has Genius emphasize the savagery of Achilles' education and omit the civilization.

The differences continue with Statius' version of the Achilles/Deidamia story. In Gower, Achilles is a true innocent. Iphis in Book IV is an innocent girl clothed as a boy; Achilles in Book V is an equally naive boy clothed as a girl:

And he [Achilles] was yong and tok non hiede,

Bot soffreth al that sche [Thetis] him dede.

Confessio, V, 2986-2987

The young warrior only smiles when he sees himself dressed as a girl. Passive and biddable, he doesn't quite follow what is going on. His relationship with Deidamia is due to proximity and "kinde" rather than to conscious desire (3058-3061). It is Thetis who controls,

who is specifically referred to as deceptive by Genius (3206-3211). Statius' Thetis is also deceitful, but Statius' Achilles is no innocent.⁷ He refuses to dress as a woman until he sees Deidamia at a public festival and desires her (I, 301-324). Gower's Thetis apparently never considers the possibility of her son's having adult desires; Statius' Thetis smilingly manipulates her son's appetites in order to hide him. Statius' Achilles also wins his goal, while Gower's simply reacts to the circumstances surrounding him. The end result the seduction of Deidamia and the birth of Pirrus is the same in both cases, but the characters are very different. Gower's Achilles is, in fact, almost as passive as Amans. Even though his Achilles does succeed in love (and in begetting a child and going to war), he is no forceful striver. Genius' version of Achilles here is therefore the embodiment of contradiction: a passive character who achieves action. Like Amans, he does little; unlike Amans, he succeeds. Paradoxically, Genius urges Amans to emulate this passive figure as if it were a completely active one. Genius does not appear to recognize the stress of impossible contradiction in the character of a man who does not act, yet acts. I believe that Amans does recognize the difficulties inherent in a life of contradiction and that this is what attracts him to Benoit's Achilles. Benoit's Achilles is not passive, but he is capable of being made to seem so as Amans demonstrates in Book IV. This distortion is perhaps indicative of Amans' own basic passivity, but it offers us insight into more than Amans himself. Amans is incapable of following the example of Genius' Achilles not only because of inadequacies in his own nature but because of the sheer impossibility of that example.

Of the difference between Statius' version of the education story and Gower's, it seems to me that the blood-covenant which Gower's Chiron makes with his pupil is particularly important. Statius' Achilles, describing his education, says merely that Chiron, before embracing him, would check his weapons to see if they were bloody. The act is customary, but no more than that. Genius, on the other hand, speaks explicitly of the "covenant" between Chiron, the older member of society, and young Achilles, the learner or initiate:

And therupon a covenant

This Chiro with Achilles sette,

That every day withoute lette

He scholde such a cruel beste

Or slen or wounden ate leste,

So that he mihte a tokne bringe

Of blod upon his hom cominge.

Confessio, IV, 1998-2004

The terms are simple; the language is not. A covenant is a formal agreement or contract, and a token is a sign or symbol, here of the fulfilling of that contract. Gower's refinement of this minor point is apparently his own. The contract and the act are reminiscent of primitive rites of initiation, particularly those sometimes called manhood or puberty rites (Bettelheim, 170-180, 221).⁸ I do not claim that Gower is consciously working with or is even aware of primitive initiation rituals here, but he and Genius require a sign that the boy is ready to become a man and a warrior, and that sign is provided first by the blood in Book IV. The almost cabalistic emphasis on blood is largely Gower's, as well as the covenant; it seems logical to see the blood and covenant as the beginnings of Achilles' final initiation into the rites and mysteries of war,

particularly since Chiron's expressed intent is to make Achilles "forto passe / Alle othre knihtes of his dede" (2010-2011). The initiation of Achilles the ideal warrior-lover is thus begun in Book IV, but it is not finished there.

I include Book V and the Deidamia story in Achilles' maturation because war is only half the sphere of adulthood. Achilles' initiation as lover is contained in the Deidamia episode. In Book V, Achilles (for all his skill and knowledge) is still an innocent. Gower stresses Achilles' innocence, his lack of knowing. Gower also stresses Deidamia's innocence and the loss of her maidenhead. The loss of virginity and the act of bearing a child are often linked to both female and male maturity (Bettelheim, 219, 245-248). More, Deidamia's lost maidenhead and the birth of Pirrus give us two implicit bloody signs in this episode, the blood of the broken hymen and childbirth blood. Both, presumably, "stain" Achilles in the same way that the hunting-blood stained him when he operated under Chiron's covenant: he is responsible for the bleeding. Thus, he demonstrates his own maturity even as he gains wisdom in the ways of love and procreation: because he can show Deidamia to be a grown woman, he must therefore be a grown man. In a more perfect world, this deed would complete the education of the perfect warrior-lover: he would be learned and participatory in both death and life, being able both to kill and to give life. But the world in which Achilles reaches adulthood is far from perfect: he has to leave Deidamia in order to go to war, where he meets Polixena and then, through that sterile love, his own death. Process and procreation are thus disjunct: life and death, love and war do not work together as

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parts of the whole but rather are become rivals for the allegiance of one man and, by extension, mankind.

Education, maturity, love and war are, therefore, inextricably mixed in Books IV and V of the *Confessio Amantis*. Amans begins the mixture by demonstrating the inherent contradiction in the idea of a perfect warrior-lover; Genius contends with that contradiction even while illustrating it in his tales. The education of Achilles in war and love does not work as Genius seems to think it should, any more than does the rational education of Alexander by Aristotle in Book VII. In fact, that education, in reason and logic, seems to work less well than the education of Achilles.⁹ Even Reason cannot resolve the inherent contradictions of this world: love and war are contradictory, but we need both procreation and process, even in debased form, in order to survive. Since an irrational contradiction is necessary to existence, Reason cannot be completely effective. That Genius feels it necessary to interpolate the rational education of Alexander so late in the *Confessio* demonstrates that even he is uneasy about the success of his earlier lessons, but that unease does not lead him to recognize that the ideal man is not possible in an imperfect world. He has tried to teach Amans; he continues to try until the end; he continues to fail. Books IV and V thus become the pedagogical turning point of the poem, with Book IV beginning and Book V completing the turn. After this point (by Genius' perception) either Amans will begin to mature along the ideal pattern of Achilles or he will remain at best static, trapped in a living death of permanent preadolescence much as his version of the Polixena story trapped Achilles. We know Amans won't follow Achilles' pattern: in Book IV he explicitly rejects a life

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of active contradiction, desiring instead to emulate his own unreal but very passive Achilles. When Reason's teaching methods also fail in Book VIII, it seems clear that Amans will not profit from Genius' teaching as Genius seems to think that he should. But is Amans therefore incapable of growth?

I do not believe so. It seems to me that Amans represents the average mortal; he is not the ideal, perhaps not even the best possible, but he is capable of learning. Gower offers us one last instructive clue in Book VIII (2440-2725), when Amans describes the Company of Lovers. In Book IV, Rosiphelee saw a similar company of ladies and learned from the sight to accept love; Book VIII's Company is Amans' last lesson, a review of most of the *Confessio*. The appearance of Achilles, Deidamia, and Polixena here is worth examining. Achilles is described in lines 2545-2546 as a worthy Greek who died for love. Deidamia, in 2567-2570, is abandoned by Achilles for Troy but is mentioned with him. Polixena is mentioned in 2590-2596 with her slayer Pirrus but not specifically with Achilles. She dies for love, guiltless yet loveless. In light of earlier stories in the *Confessio* about those who are punished for rejecting love, it seems significant that Polixena could die guiltless for love and yet loveless: there is room in the Company of Lovers for those who die loveless (unprocreative, ungiving) through no fault of their own. Both Achilles and Deidamia do their best with war and love and the offerings of an imperfect world; the world is too imperfect and offers too little for Polixena, but she is granted a place beside them even in her inaction. Genius, seeing narrowly, may recognize only one ideal, but I believe that Achilles, Deidamia, and Polixena are all flawed models which the *Confessio* offers to those who try to live as best they can in

this flawed world. It seems possible that Amans has patterned his life on, at best, Polixena and comes to recognize and accept his choice as the *Confessio* ends. Polixena is a model from romance, from Benoit. Her presence in the Company evidences the use Gower makes of romance to express a comparatively forgiving attitude towards human weakness: she is passive but worthy. Achilles and (to a lesser extent) Deidamia are too active for Amans, too involved in life even in Genius' description of them. Amans chooses instead the path of least resistance, initiating no love but longing for it, like Polixena guiltless (or almost) yet loveless. It is not surprising that Genius fades cut in Book VIII and Amans sees the Company of Lovers for himself. In the end, Amans, though circumscribed, is more clear-sighted than Genius about the limitations of this world and his own capabilities. In the end, he sees for himself.

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Notes

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1. The stories of Pheton, Icarus, and Pygmalion are from Ovid. Iphis is the daughter of King Ligdus, whose mother disguises her as a boy to prevent her from being killed by her father; she is married to Iante and on their wedding night Cupid compassionately changes the bridegroom into a man. Rosiphelee is a king's daughter who refuses to love until she sees a richly dressed company of ladies followed by one poorly mounted and dressed lady; when she learns that the former are rewarded for their service to love and the latter punished for her rejection of it, Rosiphelee vows to fall in love. Jephthah's Daughter is the Biblical story of the general who swears to sacrifice the first person he sees on coming home; that person is his young, virginal daughter (emphasis Gower's). Phillis is the beloved of King Demophon; she hangs herself in grief (and is changed into a tree) when he does not return to her at once from the Trojan War. Of these stories, all but Rosiphelee and Jephthah's Daughter are at least partially from Ovid. Rosiphelee is similar to a story in Andreas Capellanus' *De Amore*, though Gower has altered it considerably, and Jephthah's Daughter is from Judges xi. All are also stories of love, war, and/or growth.

2. Amans' premise is that "Crist bad thei scholden preche / To al the world and h{~ feith teche" (1667-1668); the heathen should therefore be converted, not slain in battle. That this reasoning apparently has little to do with the story of the pagan love affair he then describes does not seem to occur to him.

3. Statius' *Achilleid* is of course incomplete, but Benoit's *Roman* is not; since the

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former does not contain the Polixena story and the latter does not contain the education, the narrative distinction between Gower's two is quite clear.

4. Protesilaus is the king who is warned by his wife that his destiny will be death if he fights at Troy. Being apparently young and daring, he prefers dying as a knight to living as a king and does so; the source is Ovid. The Biblical King Saul is warned by Samuel that he and his son Jonathas will die on the first day of battle if he chooses to fight. For pride in his knighthood, Saul does not listen, and he and his son die; the source is I Samuel xxviii.

5. The lengthy Achilles reference in Book III (the Tale of Telaphus and Teucer, 2639-2717) is from Benoit, and Gower does use it as a positive example. But the greater part of the narrative deals with Telaphus, who argues Achilles into behaving positively by telling his own story. On the whole, when the source is Statius, Genius approves of Achilles, while when the source is Benoit, Genius either disapproves or does not explicitly give his opinion. In Book VII, 3581-3593, Genius commends Achilles' "knyhtliheide" over that of Tersites but gives his source as Horace. Macauley comments that the source is really Juvenal. This source-confusion leads me to consider the reference as separate from Gower's general use of Achilles.

6. Statius tells the education story as a flashback; Gower has placed it into correct chronological order. It is curious, though perhaps not unduly significant, that this narrative represents one of the few times Gower has Genius recounting a life history more in sequence than his source. The exception to Genius' order is the mention of Pirrus as

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Achilles' son in IV, 2161, in the story of the death of Penthesilea. I do not discount this reference: it may be that Gower (through Genius) implies by it that even Achilles' attempts at generation must end in more destruction. Pirrus is a noble hero in his honorable slaying of Queen Penthesilea, but he remains anti-generative, a killer of women. The conflict becomes even clearer when we consider that Pirrus is also the slayer of Polixena, Achilles' childless love. The relative chronological order of the history of Achilles in the *Confessio* may indicate the importance of the figure of Achilles; Pirrus' misplacement may then stress the contradictions in the history and character of Achilles, though that may be reading too deeply.

7. Statius describes Achilles as young but rough and masculine, already coming into manhood; when Thetis carries him away, Pelion's nymphs "sperata diu plorant conubia" (I, 24).

8. The male rite of passage almost invariably involves the ritual use of blood or some red substance representing blood. It may also include the dressing of the boy as a girl and his seclusion (Bettelheim, 211-214).

9. Genius' stories of Alexander do not depict him as a particularly wise or even rational king. See the Tale of Diogenes and Alexander and the Tale of Alexander and the Pirate in III, 1201-1311 and III, 2366-2416, respectively; see also the Tale of Nectanabus in VI, 1989-2366. In Book VII, Genius does not mention Alexander's response to Aristotle's teaching.