



A Close Reading Analysis of Gower's Tale of Tereus, *Confessio Amantis*, V, ll. 5655-5705.

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In this passage taken from Book V of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the tale of Tereus acts as an exemplum to 'Amans', as his confessor and the priest of Venus warns him of avarice and its dangerous consequences. However, in doing so, 'Genius' also brings to our attention the theme of language and the power of the voice, in particular that of the female voice. Gower gives Philomena a powerful speech in the first half of this extract; he develops this theme through employing an anaphora of words that relate to her articulation. For example, we read how she threatens to 'telle' (5659),¹ 'clepe and crie' (5667) and 'reherce' (5673) to the heavens the crime which Tereus has committed. This repetitive acknowledgment of Philomena's verbalization gives her voice a strong presence and points to language as a powerful tool against tyranny. Gower also applies a high register to Philomena's language through the use of Latinate vocabulary such as 'ensample' (2681); her voice here is didactic as she clearly expresses Tereus's behaviour as 'an example to be avoided'.² This links directly to the exemplum genre of the text and aligns a sense of authority to this female character.

The passion for justice is also evident in Philomena's voice through her use of legalistic language, which displays a high register but also adds conviction to her speech and Philomena thus becomes a more serious threat to Tereus. One example of her legal diction is 'felonie' (5668); from this word we can assume numerous meanings derived from the Middle English definition. This one word informs us that Tereus has committed a wicked crime; he has betrayed both Progne and King Pandion's request; in raping Philomena he has broken the law; and lastly, it highlights his cruel and violent nature. By using this familiar legalistic term, Gower is emphasising both the public and the private horror of Tereus's crime. Throughout *Confessio Amantis* Gower is extremely focused upon the ideas of kinship and how much we can depend on others, as well as that of self-governance. Moreover, his suggestion of the impact that Tereus's actions have on both the microcosm and the macrocosm demonstrates the development of this theme, thus giving Philomena's outburst an even greater purpose than that of accusation.

Other examples of legalistic language work in a similar way, such as 'untrouthe' (5683) and 'beheste' (5678), which not only emphasise Tereus's marital infidelity but also his failure to be true and obedient to God. Furthermore, it is important to not let our disgrace over Tereus's actions undermine Philomena's monologue. Gower presents a woman who is not afraid to voice her rage and who is able to laugh in the face of her attacker when she questions, 'Ha, false man, where is thi fere?' (5676). Gower's Philomena appears to be much stronger than her counterpart in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is the major source which Gower draws

¹ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. by Russell A. Peck (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 311. Unless otherwise noted all quotations from *Confessio Amantis* will be from this text, cited by line number(s).

² Taken from *MED*, 04/11/2013. Persistent link to this MED entry (ensample, n.): <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED13965>

upon for this work. Unlike Gower's source text, where Philomena has to 'shrug off (her) shame'³ in order to reveal Tereus's crime to the world, Gower's Philomena expresses no such loss of modesty or guilt at the theft of her maidenhood. Instead she focuses on ridiculing and condemning her attacker, which enables Gower's reading of Ovid to explore further the power of language against tyranny, whilst presenting a much stronger image of female empowerment.

Yet Gower manages to complicate this particular reading through his use of irony and certain imagery that appear in Philomena's protest. However negative her depiction of Tereus is, Philomena points to his physicality by declaring that he attacked her 'be strengthe' (5662) and her ambition to inform the whole world 'in brede and lengthe' (5661) again reminds us of Tereus's overpowering physical ability. This emphasis upon bodily strength somewhat removes us from Philomena's intentions of revealing his cruel nature by describing his forceful capabilities and decreasing that of her own. The strong image of Philomena is further weakened by Gower's use of irony in foreshadowing the end of the tale in her monologue; she declares how 'if I to the wodes wende...crie it to the briddes oute' (5669-5701), and this is exactly what she does when she herself is transformed into a bird at the tale's conclusion. This mirroring is also evident when Gower describes how she can only 'chitre' (5700) like a bird, consequently damaging the presence of female empowerment that without this context can be assumed.

This leads on to the second major theme of the passage which is the force of violence in order to reclaim authority. Gower's poetic style of tetrameter couplets is disrupted with the identical rhyme of 'armes' in lines 5687-88. This is a technique which Gower has inherited from French poetry and which acts as a bridge between the two themes of the passage, interrupting the fluidity of the verse to mark the exchange of power from language to violence. It is interesting to note how the contrasting meanings of 'armes' are juxtaposed, the first conveying how Tereus bound his victim's limbs together to restrict her resistance and the second demonstrating the performance of a military action, in this case one which is highly unchivalrous. The differing meanings behind this identical rhyme are used to parallel the weakness of Philomena's body against the moral weakness of Tereus's actions, and in this instance violence is victorious over language.

This theme of overpowering violence is clearly developed through the bestial imagery in reference to Tereus, Philomena describes him as 'cruel than any beste' (5677) and later he is said to be raging 'as a Lyon' (5684) and finally described in this metaphor as, 'that wode hound' (5701). If we link this imagery to the exemplum genre then we can see the connection to the wider themes of the poem which Gower is drawing upon, in this case it is that of self-governance and the power of tyranny. As already witnessed, Gower likes to complicate his moralitas and through the use of this animal imagery Gower is questioning how much agency Tereus has over his violent behaviour as he acts upon his emotions and instincts. However, we cannot ignore Gower's decision to exclude details surrounding Tereus's lineage to Mars which Ovid describes in his account, this gives greater responsibility over to Tereus as we cannot view him as innately evil and it is his 'unhappi handes' (5685) that are to take the blame. Although the lesson of taking responsibility for your actions is made clear, Gower is playing upon our sympathies and judgements. He taps into the larger question of whether the lover in this poem can ever have a true grasp on his emotions and on love, if Tereus can have no grasp upon his rage.

The violence which takes place at the end of this passage as Tereus cuts out Philomena's tongue is dramatically highlighted through the style of language and through word order. The frequent sharp 'c' sound echoed through words such as 'cauhte' (5686),

³ Ovid, *Essential Metamorphoses*, ed. by Stanley Lombardo and W.R. Johnson (Indianapolis, USA: Hackett Publishing Co., 2011), p. 86.

'caste' (5689) and 'clippeth' (5690) poignantly mirrors the cold and brutal disfiguring of Philomena. Her character is now forced to leave behind her earlier protesting and strength and has to completely submit herself to passiveness and great pain. The horror of this violence is further highlighted in the syntax and word order of the verse, Gower writes in mainly line stops in the first half of this passage however, when Tereus decided to attack his victim a second time, Gower's word order becomes more unusual. For example, in this line when the attacker is described to 'clippeth also faste/Hire tunge with...' (5690-91), the adverb 'faste' appears after the verb and before the object it is describing. By putting 'hire tunge' at the start of the new line, Gower is cleverly creating suspense in the verse by adding that feeling of shock as you read through the line. This is also evident in line 5700 when 'Bot chitre' appears at the start of the line, again this unusual placing of words draws immediate attention to the helplessness of Philomena who can now only make the sounds of a bird in contrast to her previous call out for justice.

The theme of violence comes to a conclusion as Tereus 'hent' (5702) her body from the floor, this verb does not just describe how Tereus brutally handled Philomena but it also objectifies her as she becomes his flesh prize to be caught and carried away. The passage ends with Tereus in full control of Philomena and the use of forceful and imperative diction as he 'sente hir there as be his wille' (5703) affirms this. We are now left to decide what function this passage has within the *Confessio Amantis*, for it is not the straight forward moral exemplum that it may first appear. Gower is using the form of the exemplum to explore further issues such as female authority and self-governance, moreover unveiling a tension between the force of language and that of violence. Gower may be pointing to issues surrounding his own authorship due to his persistent reliance upon other sources for his writing. In contrast to this, a covert message directed within the poem to Amans, trying to teach him that actions in fact speak louder than words is also a possibility. What is clear is that Gower's themes are not at all simple and separate, but they are in fact intertwined and confused to leave room for ambiguity and invite interpretation.

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