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TIME PAST AND TIME PRESENT IN CHAUCER'S CLERK'S TALE AND GOWER'S CONFESSIO AMANTIS

BY JAMES DEAN

There can be no doubt that the English fourteenth century possessed a strong sense of the past, a feeling for history and its bearing on the present. Everyone knows that Chaucer in his works concerned himself with history, mutability, and changes in customs from pagan antiquity to the Christian era and his own times. Professor Bloomfield has stressed "the sense of poignancy, of the *lacrimae rerum*" in Chaucer's attitude toward history, while recently Professor Howard has argued that Chaucer had powerful feelings for institutions and values which were in his age passing out of fashion, and he regards "obsolescence" as a central aspect of Chaucer's style.¹ Other fourteenth century authors too recognized a gulf between a "golden" past and an inferior present time. In his *Travels* Mandeville voyages not just spatially to the Holy Land and points east but temporally into the pagan and Christian past, where he discovers men who act in accordance with natural law and, at the end of the earth, "a simplified, primeval Christianity." Mandeville conceives of the world in decline from a golden age, though the narrator in his role as the old arthritic knight looks inside himself to locate, in Howard's phrase, "a faith in man's capacity to improve the world."² The narrator of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, while suggesting the cyclic movement of time within an essentially linear, Christian frame, describes a golden age of chivalry, the time of Arthur and Gawain, a past whose high idealism largely goes unobserved in the present.³ A like concern with time and the past

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occurs in *Purity*, *Piers Plowman*, many Middle English lyrics, and the works of John Gower.⁴

In all of these writings we glimpse or sense a former age of greater virtue and simplicity, an age free from the evils of civilization. We also come to understand that the world has taken a nasty turn since the earliest times, that it has grown old and diseased like a man, and that the golden time is irrecoverable and gone forever, though there may be partial redemptions of time through memory, poetry, exemplary conduct, or religious understanding.

The disjunction between past and present gives rise to irony and sometimes satire, as in *Piers Plowman* or Gower's *Vox Clamantis*. The past is ironic in its very otherness: it has a kind of reality, as Augustine's famous meditation allows, but by its very nature it is that which no longer exists. The past's lack of existence is built into the language, for the substantive *past* is not related to existence—to the verb *to be*—but rather to passage and flux—to the verb *to pass*, the substantive *passage* (cf. Lat. *praeteritus*, Fr. *passé*). The linguistic opposite of the word *past* is *nowadays*, a term that achieved currency in the late fourteenth century and that was used only in a pejorative sense or context. Langland laments that lechery and flattery are games “nou a dayes” (A.xi.37), while Chaucer's Canon's Yeoman observes that because alchemists speak so “mistily,” ordinary men don't know how to carry out the alchemical process, “For any wit that men han now-a-dayes” (VIII, 1396).⁵ Though the Canon's Yeoman is sly and ironic in that formulation (his story has exposed some of the fraud involved in current alchemical practices), there is no denying a sense that in another time and in other circumstances men had the “wit” to perform the alchemical work. John Gower, after briefly outlining the rudiments of alchemy, remarks that with respect to the writings of past masters such as Hermes Trismegistus, Geber, and Avicenna, “Ther ben full manye now aday, / That knowen litel what thei meene” (IV, 2616-17).

If Chaucer and Gower had consulted one another on the relationship between time past and time present, they would have found much to agree upon. Both writers respected tradition and authority, proverbial lore, stories from antiquity, and old books. Chaucer the pilgrim, in the *Melibeus*, demonstrates the wisdom of heeding advice from venerable old counselors (VII, 1210-15, 1240-45, etc.); the Parson begins his sermon on spiritual renewal

through penitence by urging us to follow “olde pathes” or “olde sentences,” for the old way “is the goode wey” (X, 76); and in *Boece* Chaucer exclaims, “I wolde that our tymes shold torne ayen to the oolde maneris!” (II, met. 5). Similarly, Gower decries a falling-off from former times and recognizes the need for remembering the past. The world has waxed “lasse worth and lasse” (Prol. 629); Gower laments that “present fortune departs from the blessed time gone by and turns away from the ancient ways on earth” (Prol., Lat. poem ii); in the past men valued books and writing, and they preserved examples of virtuous and vicious behavior for later ages (Prol. 36-51).

Though both Chaucer and Gower expressed the sentiment that the world had grown old, and while they both tended to cast the passing of time in moral terms, they also relied ultimately on personal sensibility to define the relationship between present and past. They wanted to render the experience or feeling of time past, not merely to preach about it or explain its divisions. To demonstrate their shared attitude toward time and the past, I wish to focus upon two narrative moments: the conclusion to Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale (IV, 1139-69), and the climax of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (VIII, 2745-2940). In these moments Chaucer and Gower turn away from moralistic, clerical time and toward time as an experience rooted in the psyche, what might be termed “humanistic” time. Time, for Chaucer and Gower, is human time.

The Oxford Clerk sets his tale of Griselda and Walter in the context of a moralized past and contempt of the world. He learned the story, he says, from Petrarch, the “worthy clerk,” but Petrarch and a well-known philosopher of the time, John of Legnano, are now dead; they are already part of the past. The Clerk moralizes their deaths: But death, that will suffer us to dwell here (on earth) for only the twinkling of an eye, has slain both of them, and we shall all die (IV, 36-38). The present lasts only for the briefest time, the twinkling (lit., “winking”) of an eye; we blink and the present has become the past. In the words of a lyric formula, “All is turned to yesterday.” The Clerk in the above passage speaks of our consciousness or experience of time. Though time on occasions seems to delay and linger (as it does, say, for Troilus waiting for Criseyde’s return from the Greek camp), time in memory can be very brief. As humans aware of our own mortality, we can hold a

large space of time in our minds and contemplate it as a single moment. We can even imagine our own deaths and look back upon our lives from this projected future time.

The Clerk induces us to reflect on temporality at the beginning of his story. The Host calls on the Clerk to tell a tale by invoking Solomon's "every thing hath tyme." The Clerk then emphasizes that the Saluzzo region where the story takes place is an old region with many towns and castles founded in the time of the "old fathers" (IV, 60-61); that the marquis Walter comes from the noblest and oldest family (IV, 64-65, 71-72); and that Walter has no thought for the future, only for his "lust present" (IV, 80). He fails to consider not only the future of his subjects but also his own past, his noble family. He is wholly absorbed in the present moment which the Clerk has already characterized as fleeting and "twinkling."

The tale of Griselda takes place at some unspecified time ("whilom") in the Christian past. Walter acquires false papal documents from Rome, and Griselda prays to Christ. The temporal setting is thus our own era, the era *sub gratia*, the sixth world age or the world's senescence; and yet we experience the period as remote. While we can't be specific as to the story's historical moment, I am prepared to argue that the Clerk regards the time of the story as special, the "age of Griselda," so to speak, and that this time deepens our understanding of the past and of the world's degeneration from former ages, specifically the Golden Age.

Chaucer has described the virtues of the earliest ages in his short moral poems called his "Boethian" lyrics: "Lak of Stedfastnesse," "Gentilesse," and "The Former Age." The defining virtue of the Golden Age was *constancy*. At one time men were faithful to their words, constant in their bonds, but now there is no correspondence between word and deed ("Lak of Stedfastnesse"). In the earliest ages the "firste stok"⁶ was righteous and active; they "loved besinesse, / Ayeinst the vyce of slouthe, in honestee." But now men claim nobility although they don't manifest noble virtues, the qualities of the original stock ("Gentilesse"). Mankind in the Saturnian Golden Age was virtuous because untempted; his life was blissful, rich, and secure because there was nothing to lose. The former-age race ate the simplest fare the land afforded, drank water from the cold well, made no coins or weapons, and slept on the hard ground. But in our day, says Chaucer, it is otherwise. Nowadays there is only greed, duplicity, treason, envy, poison, manslaughter, and murder "in sondry wyse" ("The Former Age").

If the defining characteristic of the former age and first stock was constancy, it is also Griselda's chief quality. At home in her poor village she is content to live on what the land yields from hard labor (IV, 202-03), to drink water from the well rather than wine (IV, 215-16), and to sleep on a hard bed—seemingly her choice (IV, 228). She is busy and active: “She knew wel labour, but noon ydel ese” (IV, 217). Her attitude remains the same before her elevation in status, during her reign as marquise, and after she is returned to her village clothed only in her smock. During Walter's tests of her she maintains a stalwart, some might say grotesque, steadfastness. Through it all, she was ever serious and “constant as a wal” (IV, 1047). The Clerk makes the point that he tells the story to uphold Griselda as a model not of humility but of constancy in adversity.

That is the moral of the story, virtually the same moral Petrarch formulated in his version of the story. But the meaning of the tale for the Clerk is that “This world is nat so strong, it is no nay, / As it hath been in olde tymes yooore” (IV, 1139-40).⁷ Griselda is now, like Petrarch, in the past, and the world is poorer for it. As the Clerk says in his ironic parting shot, the *Envoy de Chaucer*, “Griselde is deed, and eek hire paciënce, / And bothe atones buryed in Ytaille” (IV, 1177-78). Italy for the Clerk has become a repository of virtue holding the earthly remains—and the memory—of Petrarch and Griselda.

To illuminate the distinction between past and present, the Clerk devises an elegant metaphor:

It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes
In al a toun Grisildis thre or two;
For if that they were put to swiche assayes,
The gold of hem hath now so badde alayes
With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye,
It wolde rather breste a-two than plye.

(IV, 1164-69)

The Clerk, who is not so “worldly” as to have a benefice and who must beg money from his friends to purchase books, compares Griselda to a true coin, the kind of coin one tests by biting. Modern women like the Wife of Bath and “al hire secte” are counterfeit: they can't stand the test. The word “assayes” of course refers both to the assayings of coins to determine their gold content and to Walter's tests of Griselda. The world itself has become debased, as the Clerk believes: it has become morally weaker in that women “nowadays” would sooner break than bend. They are prideful and

unyielding rather than obedient and pliant. If Griselda is “true gold,” then the Wife is, like a counterfeit coin, brazen.

Gold is the symbol of the Saturnian Golden Age. The implication is that men were worth more in the first world age. Griselda lived in our era, the sixth world age, but she inhabited nonetheless a more virtuous time than ours. In her life and virtue she recalls the constancy, righteousness, and simplicity of the former age. In her patience and steadfastness in adversity she can claim to be a scion of the “firste stok.” Ironically, gold is what caused the downfall of the Saturnian Golden Age.⁸ Its discovery brought about a change in mankind’s moral attitude, his “permutacioun / Fro right to wrong, fro trouthe to fikelnesse,” that ushered in a new age. The Saturnian Golden Age was doomed because the seeds of its destruction were built into men’s personalities. It was a fragile time, a brief moment or “dream” (as Dante says) before the world’s degeneration began in earnest. In “The Former Age” Chaucer emphasizes that coinage, true or counterfeit, had not yet been invented. It was a cursed time, he adds, when man first “grubbed up” the hidden metal, for when they discovered gold—or rather *invented* it, for they had to have a prior conception of it to be tempted by it⁹—they also located the source of their downfall: *coveytyse*. The “age of Griselda” was similarly transient because women no longer measure up to Griselda’s “vertuous suffraunce.” Griselda embodies for the Clerk an ideal, to be invoked in poetry, whose virtue rebukes the present age of “brassy” arrogance.

II

The narrator of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, the “burel clerk” called Amans and finally named as “John Gower” in Book VIII, constructs a moral framework for his series of tales. The world has grown old—it is “old and fieble and vil,” as Gower explains in his Prologue (887)—because of a lack of proper or moderate loving, which has brought about division. The stages of degeneration are as follows: (1) Adam, through sin, initiated the war of man against man and man against world in Paradise at the moment of the Fall (Prol. 1002 ff.); (2) sin is the “mother of division” (Prol. 1029-30); (3) division is in turn the “mother of confusion” (Prol. 851-52); the result is that (4) the world has been thrown into a dizzying round of mutability, with empires rising and falling and the world wasting away daily—it “empeireth every day” (Prol. 833), so the world now appears to be only “a chirie feire” (Prol. 454); now (5) love has

departed from the world, "So stant the pes unevene parted / With hem that liven now adaies" (Prol. 169-71).

Gower's metaphor for worldly decline is traditional, Nebuchadnezzar's dream image (Daniel 2), with its head of gold, breast and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet of iron mixed with clay. Gower explains these bodily parts conventionally: the gold stands for the Babylonian, the silver for the Persian, the bronze for the Greek, the iron for the Roman, and the iron and clay for the Holy Roman empires. The dream statue in the shape of man the microcosm embodies the decline of virtue, specifically love or charity, in the macrocosm.

It is clear that Gower intends for Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian era to be regarded as a "golden" time, the first and best kingdom.¹⁰ But he doesn't dwell on Babylon's virtues, doubtless because historically Babylon has been the symbol of iniquity, the emblem of worldly splendor, in Jewish and Christian writings. It is one thing to identify Babylon as the *wealthiest* kingdom, as does Rupert of Deutz ("regnum . . . quod erat ditissimum"), and quite another to intimate, as does Dante, that the golden head stands for a long-departed better time, a golden age such as that described by Ovid, Virgil, or Boethius.¹¹ Gower uses Nebuchadnezzar's dream statue to illustrate his historiography, which is based upon the law of decline from past to present and upon the turning of Fortune's wheel. His tone here and throughout the entire Prologue is disengaged and moralistic, even when he explains that kingdoms fall and Fortune turns her wheel because of human wickedness. When an empire no longer deserves to govern, Fortune (directed by Providence) installs another reigning people. We aren't meant to conceive of Babylon as *the* Golden Age in Gower's work, though we should in general view the Babylonian era as more complete and less divisive than governments in the present age, which has seen an abomination such as the Babylonian Captivity.

Gower does recognize a golden age like the Saturnian Golden Age. He depicts this time at the beginning of Book V, Avarice, and toward the opening of the Prologue (93 ff.). As with Chaucer's former age, the defining characteristic of Gower's first age is constancy or *moderation*.¹² Gower portrays a primitive early time soon after the Creation when there were only a few people in the world and hence no "press" for worldly goods. The golden-age race shared the goods. But the age's peace was shattered by "war" when men found gold, for they began to hoard wealth immoderately,

building castles to keep in their treasure and forging weapons from digging tools to guard it. In Gower's golden age all things maintained their proper ratios: there was observance of hierarchy (Prol. 103-06). This golden age stands at the farthest remove from the present time not so much chronologically as psychologically and morally, and Gower locates the "goldenness" of the golden time in man's psyche, in his innate sense of moderation—*mesure*—which was overturned by greed. As we learn in *Vox Clamantis*, a law of the "golden mean" operated in the blessed age: "The times which were golden are now revealed as iron; an iron condition, on this account, inheres in man. Furthermore, the golden mean of righteousness which our forefathers maintained now, behold, fades away through cupidity" (VII, ii, 109-12).

The way back to golden-age harmony, unity, simplicity, and moderation is through memory and poetry.¹³ Through poetry we can journey into the past and experience, if only momentarily, the primeval bliss of the earliest times. Poetry creates something like an ideal space which man can visualize and to which he can aspire. To suggest the possibilities of poetry, Gower at the end of his Prologue recalls the story of Arion, who through the power of his lyric song restored the conditions of the classical Golden Age: he tamed the wild beasts, "sette in love" the nobles and commons, brought general concord, and banished melancholy (Prol. 1053-69). It is important that Arion strummed a well-tempered harp and sung a song "of good mesure," because the lyric casting of the song should harmonize with the virtue and attitude which is being invoked, the virtue of moderation. While Gower's claims for his own poetic powers are more modest than those he cites for Arion, he takes pains to reassure us that he seeks "the middel weie" between "lust" and "lore" in his *Confessio* (Prol. 17-19) and that his book "stant betwene ernest and game" (VIII, 3109). He wishes that England now could produce another Arion to restore the harmonious time (Prol. 1053-54, 1072-77). Yet there is some evidence that Gower considers himself a humble approximation of the poet-figure and his *Confessio* a means of bringing about limited or local harmony. To be sure, he disclaims any heroic abilities to bring back the Golden Age at the beginning of Book I. He says there he can't stretch *his* hand up to heaven nor can he, like Arion, set the whole world "in evene" (I, 3). Love's law, he observes, is "out of reule," and every man is to blame for the immoderate loving

of “tomoche or of tolite” (I, 18-20).¹⁴ There is now no one who can “tempre the mesure” of love (I, 23). On the other hand, he closes his headnote to the Prologue with the words:

Ossibus ergo carens que conterit ossa loquelis
Absit, et interpres stet procul oro malus.

(Since my poem is lacking in style or ornament [*ossibus*], let that which destroys style by wordiness be absent, and let the evil interpreter remain far away from the gold.)

The meaning here depends on word-play. *Ossa* can mean both “bones” and “outlines” or “style,” as of a literary work. The *Confessio*, Gower declares, is written in a rude language, English, and it is lacking in rhetorical niceties; and he admonishes those who would destroy his literary effort—those who would break bones with a tongue—to stay away from his writings. He adds: “and let the evil interpreter remain far away from the gold.” The phrase *procul oro* also depends on word-play for its full significance. We know generally what Gower means by “the gold” before we begin the narrative. He must mean the good things, the “nuggets” of wisdom embedded in his poem, the subtler aspects of his poetic achievement from which the vicious reader should be debarred as unworthy and debased. More specifically he means the “goldenness” which he has “drawen to memorye” in his *Confessio*, the remembrance of things past, the alchemical gold whose secrets have been lost in the present age (IV, 2580 ff.), and the Golden Age whose image Gower conjures up in his exemplary stories.

The broad moral context of division in love and loss of the Golden Age prepares for the main body of the *Confessio*, the eight books loosely based upon the Seven Deadly Sins. In these books Venus’s priest, Genius, instructs Gower or Amans in all of the Deadly Sins through illustrative tales. It takes a long while to get through the *Confessio*, and we may become distracted from the realization that Gower has fallen in love only recently. The poem is written from memory and recounts a particular event that took place in May, when Cupid threw a “fiery dart” through his heart and brought on his specific love complaint to Venus. The episode is idealized in a conventional way, of course, as is Pandarus’s narration to Criseyde of Troilus’s revealing “his woe” (II, 506-88); but the fiction is that at a certain time in the past, not long ago—“siththe go noght longe” (I, 64)—Gower located the source of his pain as Cupid’s arrow and took steps to remedy his condition,

including confessing to Genius and petitioning Venus. It is important to keep in mind that Amans is old and that he received Cupid's dart at an advanced age. As Donald Scheuler points out: "The conditions of being too old *and* a lover represent a paradox which accounts for the hopelessness of the lover's suits."¹⁵ The lover's suits are, in fact, the same as those of a younger man, namely, that he has derived no benefits from his service in love, only pain, and that he would like either the solace of his love or freedom from its bondage. Gower as Amans is himself an emblem of the division in love that Gower decries in his Prologue. Like the senescent world, Amans is old and feeble and vile. His pose in Book VIII of the *Confessio* may not be very different from the actual infirmity he describes in a letter to Thomas of Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury: there he characterizes himself as "senex et cecus . . . corpus et egrotum, vetus et miserabili totum."¹⁶ The conception of the world's growing old like a man is a medieval commonplace or topos; but Gower renews the commonplace by exposing his own complicity in the world's degeneration and by offering himself as an example of immoderate loving. The Golden Age may have existed a long time ago; Amans's prime too has gone the way of all flesh.

Gower's problem in love is lack of self-knowledge. Both Venus and Cupid labor to bring about a greater awareness of self in him. Genius explains that his mode of loving is lust and tells him that he should "Take love where it mai noght faile" (VIII, 2086). He says that Cupid is a blind god and his followers are likewise short-sighted; and since one should avoid pain, it is "wonder thing to se" that Amans should so zealously pursue his own lust. When Gower submits his formal petition to Venus, the goddess herself appears to explain the crucial facts to him. Look, she observes, it doesn't matter how long you've served me or how much pain you've endured in that service. The plain truth is you're too old. I don't have any medicine for "thee and for suche olde sieke" (VIII, 2368). Although you feign a youthful "corage," she says, your face shows that "olde grisel is no fole [foal]" (VIII, 2405-07). There are many who outwardly affect a youthful demeanor who are "withinne of pore assay" (VIII, 2410-11).

No one to my knowledge has ever accused John Gower of being a comic poet. He is usually characterized as moral or learned, even tedious—at best occasionally ironic. One looks in vain through his writings for a misplaced kiss, a windy eagle, a garrulous exegetical

wife, or a parliament of courtly birds; Gower is not the poet of “jolitee.” Yet this one passage, at least—when the aged lover, at once trembling and hopeful, confronts the stern love goddess—is amusing and poignant. There he is: the old, sick man pretending he is young and unaware that he cuts a grotesque figure. After patiently explaining that she has no remedy for this latter day January, Venus points out that he should quietly withdraw from love’s battlefield: “Betre is to make a beau retret” (VIII, 2416). And she hints that Amans may not be capable of carrying out his amatory intentions. She adds maternally:

Mi Sone, if thou be wel bethoght,
This toucheth thee; foryet it noght:
The thing is torned into was;
That which was whilom grene gras,
Is welked hey at time now.
Forthi mi conseil is that thou
Remembre wel hou thou art old.

(VIII, 2433-39)

When Gower hears the verdict of Venus and the Court of Love, he feels as if someone has thrown cold water in his face. He faints and revives to find before him in a pageant Cupid and the entire host of erstwhile lovers. These are young lovers whose stories are mostly tragic, and the army’s captain is Youth, who doubles as marshall of the Court of Love. There is another company present, the army of old lovers, whose stories are most tragi-comic and who see in Amans their own cause. They pray to Venus on his behalf, and because of sheer noise she grants their petition, agreeing to take pity on the senescent lover. In the climax of this *opera bouffe*, blind Cupid gropes for the arrow which originally found its way to Gower’s heart, and he is finally healed of love’s pain when Venus spreads balm on his wound. He now realizes that for some time he has acted the fool, that his pain, rightly considered, is a matter for laughter rather than tears.

At this moment in the narrative, just before what Professor Fisher calls the return to “the context of universal truth,”¹⁷ we should recognize that Amans is a comic emblem of the larger world. We understand how the world has grown old through the experience and psychology of one man. We come to know the large through the small, the macrocosmic through the microcosmic, the apocalyptic through the eschatological. If the world has declined through lack of love, it is not a result merely of abstract forces and momentous

historical events—the turning of Fortune’s wheel, the alternation of empires, the Babylonian Captivity—though these are illustrations of the problem. The fault is not in the stars or in external things but rather in ourselves, especially so when we fail to realize our complicity in the world’s decline and in the perpetuation of the present iron age.

III

Both the Oxford Clerk and Gower of the *Confessio* let us *experience* time and the sense that the world has grown old. Both men, though moralists, lead us away from didactic lore and toward personal understanding. When the Clerk sighs “This world is nat so strong, it is no nay,” we learn more about the Clerk than we do about the world’s old age. We are led back to ourselves and to the realization that time exists chiefly in our sensibility of it. The Golden Age may have existed in the thither and yore; but it is as difficult to imagine an era before *coveytyse* as it is to envision the heavenly Jerusalem. The end of the world may loom, as the apostle John tells us (1 John 2:18), yet in the Clerk’s Tale we are plunged back into a search for the world and a way of dealing with the Wife of Bath. The passing of time for the Clerk feels like a cruel fact or a sardonic joke, depending on whether we focus upon Griselda’s absence from or the Wife’s presence in the world.

When Gower characterizes the world as “old and fieble and vil,” we are meant to realize two things about the nature of time. First, time rushes toward its consummation as mankind declines morally from day to day. Time has progressed through a series of revolutions from original wholeness to division and dualism. Second, time has a redeeming and a healing function. Gower says in his Prologue that he wants to write about the world that existed long ago and that, despite its decline, “neweth everi day.”¹⁸ By taking on flesh and entering time, Christ ensured that man can reform and renew himself spiritually, in time. The way back to original wholeness, according to Gower, is through memory, recollection of the past, and poetry. Gower wishes that there were another Arion; but since there is no Arion to redeem time literally, he takes upon himself the task of filling out time as best he can through his poetic art. The *Confessio*, more than most medieval narratives, is a temporal phenomenon. It takes a *long* time to read or listen to the work; and like Amans we become educated as to the nature of love and sin within a certain space of time. We are implicated in this temporal

education-process when we learn in Book VIII that Amans is too old to play any sort of erotic role. Because we didn't fully realize Gower's age before Book VIII, Gower's moment of self-knowledge is a revelation for us as well. When Venus passes the mirror to old Amans, we catch a peek at our own features in the glass. The *Confessio* offers a glimpse of time redeemed in the form of virtue in the antique world, the world that "whilom tok [existed]," but it finally denies the dream by showing us that old age and infirmity—the passing of time—is the best antidote to lust and division.

Hans Meyerhoff has written that "The quest for a clarification of the self leads to a *recherche du temps perdu*."¹⁹ The converse is also true: the search for lost time leads to important insights about the self. Chaucer, Gower, and other writers of the fourteenth century in England discovered that the quest for the meaning or quality of time brought them back to their attitudes toward themselves and their world.

E. R. Curtius has argued that the conception of the world's growing old is a topos or commonplace and that its appearance in literature tells us nothing about the particular author using the topos. He says: "If, in a seventh-century chronicle, we find the statement, 'The world is in gray old age,' we must not make the psychological inference that the period 'has a feeling of advancing age' but see a reference to Augustine's parallel between the (Roman) end phase of world history and human old age."²⁰ While this may be true for some medieval authors, it is by no means true for all who expressed the sentiment that the world has grown old. The idea was often invoked in commonplace ways, as in the quotation from Fredregarius which Curtius cites above; but the conception represents a vitally important attitude toward history and time in the Middle Ages,²¹ and should be regarded less as a medieval commonplace and more as a fundamental habit of mind. When the Clerk says "This world is nat so strong, it is no nay, / As it hath been in olde tymes yooore," we should seriously misread Chaucer to think of Augustine or the six world ages. To be sure, centuries of historical thought and theology somehow "stand behind" the Clerk's pronouncement. Yet we don't understand the Clerk's meaning any better for knowing the history of the topos—perhaps we understand it less, to the extent that we ransack chronicles and Biblical commentaries and hence tiptoe away from the Clerk and Chaucer. The Clerk never alludes to the "end phase of world history," nor is Chaucer the poet of apocalypse. The Clerk, who studies Aristotle

together with the Bible, realizes that he must ultimately return to the world. He is melancholy, perhaps somewhat nostalgic for the wifely ideal which he feels has become obsolescent in his own day, though it would be a mistake to view the Clerk as "living now and preferring to live then."²² In any case, the Clerk's is not, I submit, a commonplace formulation.

It is impossible to say how Chaucer might have experienced time in his ordinary life as husband, father, and civil servant. Doubtless his response to time was as complex in his private life as it is in his works. Consider the following verses from the Man of Law's Prologue:

Lordynges, the tyme wasteth nyght and day,
And steleth from us, what pryvely slepynge,
And what thurgh necligence in oure wakyng,
As dooth the stream that turneth nevere agayn,
Descendynge fro the montaigne into playn.
Wel kan Senec and many a philosophe
Biwaillen tyme more than gold in cofre;
For 'los of catel may recovered be,
But los of tyme shendeth us,' quod he.
It wol nat come agayn, withouten drede,
Namoore than wole Malkynes maydenhede,
Whan she hath lost it in hir wantownesse.

(II, 20-31)

Harry Bailly speaks these eloquent lines to the pilgrims in preparing to call on the Man of Law for a story. We can discern in them, I believe, what Ricardo J. Quinones has characterized as a Renaissance sense of time.²³ There is a moral undertone to the Host's words, even an eschatological threat, to the extent that time steals our moments from us like a thief in the night; and Malkyn can never again recover the maidenhead she forfeited in an unguarded moment of sin. But at the same time there is an elegiac tone, the sense of continual and irrevocable loss—time's forever slipping into the past as the stream that makes its way from the high to low places without ever changing its downward flow. Seneca may bewail time's loss for moral reasons: each moment could have been redeemed for good purposes. But the Host's comparison is with gold in a coffer. Whereas you can replace the gold which you've expended from your treasure trove, you can never put back time. Time is a precious commodity to the Host, to the Man of Law, and doubtless to Chaucer as well. The unalterable fact about the past is that it is gone; and it is no more likely to return than is the Simois

river to flow back to its source or Criseyde to return from the Greeks.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Chaucer's Sense of History," *JEGP*, 51 (1952); rpt. in *Essays and Explorations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 24; Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 89-90. "By obsolescence," says Howard, "I mean the experience of things not yet obsolete about which it is feasible to predict an end. Chaucer distinguishes it from 'newfangledness' and from 'old things.' Obsolescence bears the marks of past and future, for in it we see the boundary of each" (p. 90).

² Donald R. Howard, "The World of Mandeville's *Travels*," *YES*, 1 (1971), 12. Of the Isle of Bragman, Howard writes: "Whereas in the Holy Land, at the heart of Christendom, we found Saracens, here at the earth's end we find a simplified, primeval Christianity . . . Like the relics and shrines of the Holy Land or the peoples and creatures of the East, all things to be seen in the world bespeak a past age from which the world has declined" (p. 15).

³ See John M. Ganim, "Disorientation, Style, and Consciousness in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA*, 91 (1976), 377; Donald R. Howard, *The Three Temptations: Medieval Man in Search of the World* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 260-72.

⁴ The structure of *Purity* has recently been seen in terms of the six world ages: T.D. Kelly and John T. Irwin, "The Meaning of *Cleanness*: Parable as Effective Sign," *MS*, 35 (1973), 234n. There is an increase of defiling of vessels in the poem climaxed by the spoliation of Solomon's temple vessels during Belshazzar's feast (Babylonian Captivity: fifth world age); yet the most obscene defiling is the handling of Christ's body (the Chosen Vessel) during the mass by an unclean priest (sixth world age). Morton W. Bloomfield interprets *Piers Plowman* from the viewpoint of time, eternity, and salvation history in *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), while recently Katherine Bache Trower, "Temporal Tensions in the *Visio* of *Piers Plowman*," *MS*, 35 (1973), 390, has argued that "in the *Visio* Langland sought to dramatize the transition in salvation history from a period analogous to a pre- or near-Christian situation to that final period in time termed the sixth world age or the Age of the Church, the period initiated by the birth of Christ." At the 1975 MLA Seminar on Time in Medieval Literature, John M. Ganim in an intriguing paper suggested that Langland invokes and then subverts a number of possible historical and temporal constructs, thus creating in the reader a change of consciousness as to the nature of time ("Piers Plowman and the Rhetoric of Time: Some Notes on Time in Late Medieval Narrative"). Sarah Appleton Weber has attempted to show links between sacred history and Middle English religious lyrics: *Theology and Poetry in the Middle English Lyric: A Study of Sacred History and Aesthetic Form* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1969). John H. Fisher, in chapter four of *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), identifies decay of the world and lament for former times as two of Gower's major concerns.

⁵ All quotations from Chaucer's works are taken from *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957); citations from Gower's works are to the edition of G. C. Macaulay, *The Works of John Gower*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899-1901).

⁶ Robinson in his explanatory note to line 1 of "Gentilesse" identifies the "firste stok" as Christ or God, citing the Wife of Bath's Tale (III, 1117 ff.) as support. He then refers to Brussendorf, who urges Adam and Eve as the "firste stok" on the strength of Lydgate's *Thoroughfare of Woe*. But the best reading of the phrase is Adam and Eve *and* the golden-age race, as in Dante's *Purgatorio*:

Quelli ch' anticamente poetaro
l'età de l'oro e suo stato felice,
forse in Parnaso esto loco sognaro.
Qui fu innocente l'umana radice . . .

(XXVIII, 139-42)

(They who in olden times sang of the Age of Gold and its happy state perhaps in Parnassus dreamed of this place. Here *the root of mankind* was innocent . . .)

Text and translation of Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 312-13. For an analysis of these lines see Singleton's *Journey to Beatrice*, Dante Studies 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 188-91. The *Ovide Moralisé* associates the Golden Age (*Saturnus*) with Paradise: they both converge in the "fullness of time" (*plenté de temps*).

⁷ I am by no means the first to emphasize the significance of these lines to the Clerk's scheme of things. See Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), p. 197; Alfred L. Kellogg, "The Evolution of the 'Clerk's Tale': A Study in Connotation," in *Chaucer, Langland, Arthur: Essays in Middle English Literature* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1972), p. 314; Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales*, p. 259.

⁸ On this motif see the discussion by Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 11-12.

⁹ This remark is made (referring to the discovery of an ancient papyrus or the discovery of America) by Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961), p. 15.

¹⁰ See Fisher, *John Gower*, pp. 186-87. Fisher shows that the metals of the statue in traditional glosses were sometimes explained not in terms of the decline of empires but rather in terms of the four ages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; and he further demonstrates that the statue figure is an important symbol in Gower's other writings. He does not mention the interesting commentary on the dream image by the abbot of the Belgian monastery of Bonne Espérance, Philippe de Harvengt, who offers several explanations of the statue based on the six ages formula. See George Boas, *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1948), pp. 181 ff.

¹¹ Rupert of Deutz, *De Trinitate et Operibus ejus: In Daniele Prophetam*, vi, *Patrologia Latina* (Migne), 167, col. 1505. Dante in Canto XIV of the *Inferno*, the *gran veglio* section, advances a poetic view of Daniel's dream image. In Dante's realization the statue stands inside Mt. Ida, where Jupiter was born, and looks to Rome "as on a mirror," weeping tears that fall from the golden head down through fissures in the statue's metallic limbs finally to Hell, where they form the four rivers of the underworld. Dante's "old man" is an elegiac emblem of a golden age remembered both in pagan literature and in Scripture.

¹² Moderation is the primary characteristic of Boethius's golden age race (II, met. 5) as it is with Bernard of Morval's *aurea gens*: "Multa modestia, multaue copia conveniebant" (They harmonized their great wealth with much moderation). See *De Contemptu Mundi*, ed. B. Hoskier (London: B. Quaritch, 1937), Book II, line 39. Harry Levin in *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance*, p. 29, claims that "a new note" of asceticism occurs in Alexander Barclay's version of Brant's *Nar-*

renschiff, but Bernard of Morval in the twelfth century portrays the “golden people” as virtual pre-Christian monks who work the soil, hold goods in common, and live moderately and piously.

¹³ Russell A. Peck in the Introduction to his edition of the *Confessio Amantis* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1968), pp. xvi-xix, suggests that forgetting is the agent of worldly division and that memory (as confession and example) is the means back to wholeness both individually for the lover and collectively for the world.

¹⁴ Gower perhaps alludes to Christ’s apocalyptic prediction that at the end of the world “because iniquity hath abounded, the charity of many shall grow cold” (Matt. 24:12). The theme is common in Middle English complaint lyrics. One poem laments that “Charite, chaste, pite arn waxin al colde; / Couetise, Lust, & maistrie, arn be-comin al bolde . . .”; in *Political, Religious, and Love Poems*, ed. F. J. Furnivall, EETS, O. S. 15 (1903; rpt. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 264. See also the lyric beginning “Loue is out of lond iwent” (pp. 257-58). A thirteenth century poem *De Mundo* complains that “byrid is trwloue”; see *Religious Lyrics of the XIVth Century*, ed. Carleton Brown and rev. G. V. Smithers, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), p. 54. Cf. the macaronic verses appended to *De Mundo* and Brown’s parallel citations on p. 259. See also *Contra Ambitiosos et Avaros*, line 144, and *De Mundo Cupiditate*, line 39, in *The Latin Poems Commonly Attributed to Walter Mapes*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Camden Society, 1841), pp. 157, 168. Gower himself says that when the end of the world draws near “Pes and accord away schol wende / And alle charite schal cesse / Among the men and hate encesce” (Prol. 1034-36).

¹⁵ “The Age of the Lover in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *MAE*, 36 (1967), 155. Schueler argues convincingly against critics like Dodd and Lewis who profess shock or disappointment at (Dodd) or fail to take full account of (Lewis) the lover’s age in Book VIII.

¹⁶ As quoted in Fisher, p. 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁸ There are at least two important ways of dividing time and history in the Middle Ages: the tripartite division by eras, *ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *sub gratia*, an optimistic progression from natural law to revealed law to God’s grace; and the six ages scheme which is based upon decline, a pessimistic progression. Though Christ brought grace and renewal in the era *sub gratia*, the sixth age, the physical world continues to decline. See Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action*, rev. ed. (1959; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 222-38.

¹⁹ *Time in Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1955), p. 2.

²⁰ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; rpt. New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 28.

²¹ Some of the important studies on the subjects of the world grown old and the six ages of the world include: Roderich Schmidt, “Aetates mundi: Die Weltalter als Gliederungsprinzip der Geschichte,” *Z. f. Kirchengeschichte*, 67 (1955-56), 288-317; Marie Dominique Chenu, *La théologie au douzième siècle* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1957); Auguste Luneau, *L’histoire du salut chez les Pères de l’Église: La doctrine des âges du monde, Théologie historique*, 2 (Paris, 1964); Giovanni Miccoli, *Chiesa Gregoriana; ricerca sulla riforma del secolo XI* (Firenze: La nuova Italiana, 1966), Excursus: *Mundus Senescens*, pp. 301-03 (with bibliography); V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 88-89, 292n.

²² Levin’s phrase in *The Myth of the Golden Age*, p. 8.

²³ Ricardo J. Quinones, *The Renaissance Discovery of Time*, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 31 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), emphasizes the new secular and mercantile uses of time, which made time precious for men of the Renaissance. He characterizes medieval time as slower paced and more

“abundant” than Renaissance time, and he sees the Florence of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio as the point of departure for the new sense of time. But Chaucer exhibits most of the qualities that Quinones identifies as “Renaissance” except pride in family.