‘Thus Syr Gwother coverys is care’: The Role and Significance of Canine Care in the *Tale of Sir Gowther*

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Abstract

In the cryptic Tale of Sir Gowther, the narrative follows a child born out of demonic rape and rejected by his mother out of fear. Refusing to breastfeed him, the child grows up in isolation. After his violent youth, the young knight undertakes a penance, during which he is only allowed to eat the food he receives from the mouths of dogs while remaining silent. In the story, Gowther’s education into a proper person, inhabiting the bounds of humanity is only one facet of the tale. His nutrition (denied by the mother, mediated by the dogs) and psychosis, preventing him from his integration into society, are strongly interconnected; his only carers are the dogs, reserving judgement and providing him with sustenance and behavioural imprint alike when humanity rejects him. The dogs not only are able to reveal his inner capacity for goodness, but also care for him in his state of penitent muteness.

The penance and salvation of Gowther draw attention to many motifs, which persist into our day of pandemic and refugee crisis. During the pandemic, the importance of animal companionship, especially the role of dogs as carers, has been emphasised. Dogs have been fulfilling the role of carer in many cases, providing unwavering dedication and invaluable help over the ages. Similarly, networks of care during the period of the Late Middle Ages have been observed, where human and animal actors interact during the time of crisis brought upon them by plague, war, and famine. Their interactions allow one to negotiate the boundaries and challenges lying in the liminal spaces outside the strict bounds of normalcy. The current conflicts bring further avenues of interpretation into question regarding the help provided by animals as people affected by war cling to their pets and stuffed animals for comfort.

Keywords: care, hounds, animal, disability, eating.

'To care for oneself is to know oneself' – sounds Michel Foucault's thesis in a compressed form, formulated in his lectures found in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005) and in his last book, titled *The Care of the Self* (1990). The approach proposed by the seminal French philosopher draws from both modern and classic philosophy. It is based on the ideas of Socrates and classic Hellenistic rhetoric, echoing both within the period of the late Middle Ages and our times as well. One can trace this great tradition in the period's fascination with Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 524), where the healing power of knowing oneself is prominently depicted. Foucault claims that the two strongly interconnected activities allow one to reflect internally, and in turn allow one's attitudes toward the external world to be properly modulated.

What happens, however, when the subject is capable of neither? How can one reflect internally and modulate externally when both practises are made impossible for some reason? The protagonist of the *Tale of Sir Gowther*, a late fifteenth century knightly romance, is a case in point. In the tale, the protagonist of the romance is born to the hitherto childless ducal couple of Estryke, or Austria. He has been sired by a demon due to the desperate prayer of the duchess and turns out to be a demonic child of monstrous appetites. He suckles wet-nurses to death and bites his mother's nipple. In his young adulthood he continues the rampage of violence, culminating in him raping nuns and burning down their nunnery. After he learns about his demonic parentage, he travels in shame to Rome, where he receives a puzzling penance from the Pope: he is not to speak and is only to eat what he can snatch from the mouths of dogs. The errant youth eventually finds his way to the Emperor's court, where he lives and eats amongst the dogs. He takes to the battlefield disguised in his suit of armour provided to him by God. He fends off the Saracens besieging the castle, decapitating the Sultan demanding the hand of the emperor's mute daughter. As a result, Gowther protects the castle and the maiden, earning his final salvation. During his journey from his demonic origins towards redemption he is to encounter many, differently coloured instances of knowledge gained through the activity of care. Knowledge of his self, and the knowledge of others will come to him, while he in turn will be known through being cared for.

As Samantha Zacher establishes, the tale offers a view on humanity and animality both, anticipating and gesturing towards modern contemporary post-humanist discourse in its conflicted and complicated approach to these discursive frameworks. Such frameworks are perceived to not be monolithic but interacting with one another on a spectrum: categories of humanity and animality becoming fluid, serving as criticism on their boundaries (2017, p. 430). The instances of providing and receiving care within the story are such symbolically rich and contextually poignant explorations. Michael Uebel identifies Gowther as the 'abject other' or 'the foreigner within' (2002, p. 96-117). Such otherness, despite what a modern reader's perception of such categories operating within the Middle Ages may be, has been often utilised in the period's art and literature. The influential Christian philosopher St. Augustine of Hippo associated otherness with insight, which has been interpreted as one of the governing principles of Sir Gowther's narrative (Czarnowus 2009, p. 9-42). Otherness served as a lens through which the period's thinkers found ingress into the realms of pre-Freudian psychoanalysis. The *Tale of Sir Gowther* has been likened by critics to both of the above mentioned works due to the dynamics of

salvation involved in it. Gowther's physicians come in many shapes and sizes and are equipped with a diverse array of abilities to produce meaning.

The tale has deep roots in Arthurian romance, but it also serves as crucible for a vast array of conventions and motifs prevalent in the period. It has seen several iterations on its French source material titled Robert le Diable, and in English it exists in two manuscript versions: British Library Royal MS 17.B.43 and National Library of Scotland MS Advocates 19.3.1 (referred to as Royals and Advocates, respectively, in Hopkins 1990, pp. 157–58). The text's unique richness has offered purchase to these methods and many more aside. This study utilises the version designated as Advocates for several reasons. Firstly, it is considered the more definitive version of the two, for the Royals version has been much sanitised and tamed for the consumption of a courtly audience. Secondly, it features a language much more preoccupied with the dynamics of consumption, which serves as an important semantic locus informing the motifs discussed within the study (Chen 2012, p. 361-2).

Gowther's turbulent psyche, manifesting in his infantile oral violence, has been likened to Thomas Harris's *Hannibal* series, while the hybrid canine knight's unleashed rampage and commentary on the nature of chivalry finds resonance in George R.R. Martin's *Hound of the Song of Ice and Fire* (1996 -). They may be works of art and literature which come to life with half a millennium difference, yet, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, it is only now, with the benefit of our modern methodologies, that we can truly interpret and understand the works of past ages (2006, p. 27). Even though one must be cautioned against reading and interpreting medieval texts from the perspective of our day and age, connections can be made by utilising specific methods. These comparisons, however useful they may be in the bounds of a comparative analysis, may result, as Samantha Zacher warns, in 'inexact parallels' (2017, p. 428), for the *Tale of Sir Gowther* is even within the context of his own period's literature very much a unique one. According to Hostetter, its 'narrative nourishment' is derived from the different modalities of consumption and the underlying tensions in their representations, which are so prominent in the tale (2017, p. 516). This essay aims to focus only on a narrow slice of the contextually rich, conflicting dynamics of the tale: that of care, which centres around the interconnected motifs of consumption and care.

The connections between consumption and language are inseparable in the narrative; the interactions of the motifs connected with learning, control of the self, and being nursed all centre around one another (Chen 2012, p. 360-83). The tale is a narrative, as Margaret Robson designates it, about disguise and uncovering, internality and externality. In her interpretation it is also a tale of moral regeneration. It is also a story, according to Dana Oswald, where 'bodies of lack', or bodies characterised by something missing, can be found caring for one another (2010, p. 186-92). Emily Huber also interprets Gowther from a similar perspective, emphasising the importance of these lacks within the narrative. In her reading, muteness and the 'desire for articulateness' are the primary movers of the narrative, the crisis arising from the conflicting categories of 'kind' and 'kinship' (human or beast) (2015, p. 288-9).

Within this conversation in the late medieval Europe dogs occupy a particular position, rendering them a versatile vehicle for communicating a wide array of themes. Canines in general

(wolves, dogs, and foxes) are widely deployed symbols across all strati of art and literature, ranging from fables to sermons. Their symbolic significance can be just as varied and colourful within narratives. Dogs can serve as a warning presence, moral exemplars, or find themselves invested with the ability to unconceal the truth hidden behind falsehood. They can connote savagery and greedy consumption but can also display control over these instincts, representing unselfish care and humble obedience simultaneously. Dogs can be greedy consumers of unrestrained appetite, or serve as faithful companions, their tongue a salve to wounds. Thus, they can be called polysemous symbols, which represent all such layers at the same time, allowing complex interactions and contextually sensitive conflicts to be depicted by them. They live close to us and one is to learn from observing them. Both the medieval and the contemporary discourse centred around the dynamics between human and animal symbolism are complex and multifaceted. In the context of Gowther's tale, Zacher's words encapsulate the main dynamics animating such a discourse concisely: 'In Sir Gowther, animality is constructed as one vital and even productive condition of human identity' (2017, p. 430).

Gowther grows rapidly and as a young adult becomes a terrifying menace to the duchy. Indeed, as the poet reminds, he behaves accordingly to his demonic father's will at all times, both in his activities and inert state alike: 'He wold wyrke is fadur wyll, Wher he stod or sete' (176-7). Gowther's depredations are as violent as they are inventive in their symbolic cruelty aimed against both the church and the female body. During his hunting trip he stumbles upon a nunnery, which he burns to the ground and rapes the nuns. He takes maidens and wives against their will, even slaying the husbands of the latter. He makes friars jump from cliffs and hangs parsons from hooks (169-204).

His rampage comes to a halt when an elderly Earl points out that Gowther simply cannot be of Christian stock due to his sadistic acts. Gowther recoils and interrogates his mother about his parentage at the sword-point. After the revelation of his demonic father, he bids farewell to his mother and proclaims his intentions to go to Rome in order 'To lerne anodur lare' (237). The Pope prescribes a unique penance to Gowther to counteract his youthful ravages: to not speak and to only eat what he receives from the mouths of dogs or 'revus of howndus mothe' (snatches from a hound's mouth; 296):

> Wherser thu travellys, be northe or soth,
> Thu eyt no meyt bot that thu revus of howndus mothe
> Cum thy body within;
> Ne no worde speke for evyll ne gud,
> Or thu reyde tokyn have fro God,
> That forgyfyn is thi syn. (295-300)

Both parts of the penance, eating and silence, are directed towards the literal and symbolic source of infantile oral violence: Gowther's mouth. His penance has been prescribed to him with the intention of turning it from a site of ungoverned hunger and violence into a locus of symbols constantly kept under surveillance. In the Pope's prescription there is an effort to divorce the

impulse of aggression and the actual actions the young duke performs, in order to properly adjust him to both the aristocratic dining habits and to domesticate him in the context of Christendom. Anna Czarnowus explains, that 'Gowther's choices are very likely instinctive and therefore "naturally" grounded in his physicality' (2009, p. 119). Gowther thus needs to redirect his constantly active aggression and unnaturally disproportioned libidinal energies toward external objects and turn them into an internalised, self-reflective modality. In order to achieve this state, the most straight-forward way is for him to be rendered passive, and vulnerable. This state of being is intended to return him to a non-violent childhood which never existed in Gowther's case, in a reversal of his earlier life.

The penance that Gowther has been prescribed has many puzzling features. Firstly, during the late Middle Ages in Europe sharing food with animals, even dogs, was a taboo that itself would have necessitated penance. It was considered an act that violates the boundaries between humans and beasts, especially in the case of dogs, as Joyce E. Salisbury points out (2012, p. 53). Yet, the penance is most appropriate, for it serves first and foremost as a transformative pedagogical process, as Alison Langdon emphasises (2018, pp. 41-57). Thus, Gowther's penance provides a point of connection, an avenue of ascent from demonic, through animal, to human – from irredeemable to saved (Hudson 2015, p. 116). Furthermore, the penance draws attention not only to the mouth, but to the canine aspect of Gowther as well. In Huber's reading, the Pope unconceals Gowther's lurking canine aspect, with which thus far the violent duke has avoided confrontation (2015, p. 298). According to Margaret Robson, this particularity is the key mechanism of the game of covering and uncovering, the question of disguises and recognition becoming a crucial tension arising in Gowther's narrative (1992, pp. 148-49). The penitent duke has to not only bring his violent behaviour, governed by his monstrously enlarged physicality, under control. He is also to contemplate and learn to decipher God's will in creation through observing both himself and his environment in the process. 'The injunction to eat only food taken from the mouths of dogs not only forces Gowther into a position of humility, but also becomes a means of teaching Gowther to inspect the world for signs of God's will', Angela Florschuetz summarises (2014, p. 56). Gowther, in essence, must domesticate his internal hound, just like the dog-headed saint, Saint Christopher, did. Jamie C. Fumo emphasises the importance of domestication of the internal hound: 'Gowther's challenge is not to exterminate but to internalize, to domesticate, the dog he (figuratively) is in order to become a faithful man of God' (2018, p. 228).

The penance, however, is not entirely what one might expect. The verb 'revus' (296) is a problematic one in this context, meaning 'to snatch'. Gowther is encouraged to now fight for his food on an even footing with actual dogs, to snatch the morsel meant to sustain him from their mouths with his own. The semiotic emphasis relies both on similarity and proximity. The papal decree is contrasted with the Royals variant of the tale, where the same line prescribes passivity for Gowther - 'And gete thi mete owt of houndis mouth' (283). In the Advocates version Gowther is not merely to passively receive the penitent alms of food from the dogs, but he is to fight for it, snatch it from their mouth, following the letter of the penance. Yet there will be only one instance when he does so at the court of the Emperor, when he encounters a spaniel. Gowther otherwise

receives his penitent meals by either the benevolent and divine greyhound, a breed associated with holiness and nobility, or through the mediation of the emperor's daughter, the mute princess. After receiving his instructions, and pilfering a piece of bone he can snatch in Rome from a dog (304-5), Gowther walks off into the wilderness to seek his penance. As he sits down at a base of a hill, something extraordinary happens:

> He went owt of that ceté
> Into anodur far cuntré,
> Tho testamentys thus thei sey;
> He seyt hym down undur a hyll,
> A greyhownde broght hym meyt untyll
> Or evon yche a dey.
>
> Thre neythtys ther he ley:
> Tho grwhownd ylke a dey
> A whyte lofe he hym broghht;
> On tho fort day come hym non,
> Up he start and forthe con gon,
> And lovyd God in his thoght. (307-318)

As Gowther rests under the hill a greyhound, appearing rather unexpectedly, brings him meat and white loaves of bread for three days. On the fourth day the greyhound disappears from the narrative, its vanishing from the narrative prompting Gowther to continue his journey, which will eventually lead him to the court of the Emperor. The scene of canine care provided by the greyhound is one that, most characteristically to the narrative, moved critics to animated discourse. Both the scene of the silent penitent, rendered vulnerable and exposed in the wilderness, being fed by an animal, and the symbolism of the greyhound are important within the context of the narrative. These elements are both inspired by other popular romances and hagiography and meant to re-contextualise them in turn.

The pastoral episode, drawing inspiration from and gesturing towards the lives of saints, remains a unique addition to the text. Firstly, it is absent in the original source material, Robert le Diable, upon which Gowther's tale is based. Secondly, as Huber points out, 'the episode is never explained nor even mentioned again, and it has no causal connection to the plot in the rest of the poem' (2015, p. 284). The holy greyhound, its mission seemingly done, vanishes from the narrative. This particular breed of dog has been perceived in the context of the period's European Christian discourse as the most holy and noble of breeds. Its significance is reinforced by Dante featuring it as prominent symbol in his Divine Comedy, or the stories Saint Guinefort, healer of children, a greyhound venerated as a saint. The greyhound will appear again when Gowther's penance is progressed, serving as mediator between him and the mute princess. David Salter points out the significance of the greyhound in the context of both the larger hagiographic tradition and the tale of Sir Gowther as well. He emphasises Gowther's connection with the

greyhound, which in turn is a symbolic mirror of the young duke's noble nature and his role as an aristocratic hero within the romance (2001, p. 80). The dogs, therefore, are not only signs to be interpreted by Gowther, but also spiritual and psychological signifiers on their own, introducing a pattern of behaviour both novel and alien to Gowther. The presence of the canines within the narrative allows the young duke to interpret his own internal world through them and their conduct. The greyhound is simultaneously a teacher and a symbol of restraint that is to serve as template for Gowther's ideal behaviour. As Uebel highlights, '[p]assivity, however, may be the real point: Gowther is compelled to base his interactions with this gentle other — beast, oriental — upon restraint and receptivity' (2002, p. 106).

Indeed, in its serenity within the wilderness, the scene is in sharp contrast with both Gowther's violent past and violent future, for he is later to complete his penance through applying himself on the battlefield in defence of Christendom and the Emperor's daughter. Both past and future, the first and the final thirds of the poem, are characterised by violence and activity depicted in graphic, forceful language. Yet this scene is one that renders Gowther the most passive, vulnerable, and calm. In a poem so characterised by action, movement, and forceful language, this moment of silent contemplation stands out. However unique the scene might appear at first, though, it is not without precedent. Similar motifs of canine care can be found in the popular legends of Saints Guinefort, Roch, and Cainnech, all relative contemporaries of Gowther's tale (Zacher, 2017, p. 436). The scene marks the first instance of Gowther gentle interaction with the non-violent canine other, allowing him to be both vulnerable and cared for, without a trace of aggression. It focuses Gowther's attention on the affective piety represented by the behaviour of the canines, their discipline and selfless behaviour, while also allowing space for him to reflect upon the control of his libidinal energies (hunger, sexual desire, violence). Furthermore, it allows him to feel 'enmeshed' into the fabric of beings, acknowledge his place within a conceptual ecosystem, without the aggressive attack on the external other (Steel 2011, p. 242).

The scene can also be analysed from an economic perspective, thus placing the canine care outside the economics of consumption. 'Cut off from human speech and the normal economies of consumption, Gowther is effectively removed from the principal channels of social exchange', Zacher observes (2017, p. 434). Indeed, for Gowther to learn a new lore, he is displaced from the societal exchanges which he has infiltrated and subverted in his sinful youth, perverting categories such as child, noble, knight. Similarly to Zacher, Karl Steel interprets the scene from the perspective of social economics, contending that the strangeness of the exchange lies precisely in its being so disruptive to the economy. Strictly speaking, nothing is exchanged; no blessings or benedictions are offered from either side (2011, p. 240). The care Gowther receives is markedly unselfish, ostensibly circumventing any ascetic suffering a penance would have necessitated. Gowther, in this instance, is not required to suffer for his sins but to be returned to the non-violent state of receptive childhood, which primes him to receiving the Eucharist later throughout the narrative (Uebel 2002, p. 106).

Gowther, seen earlier as a manifestation of the Anti-Christ undergoes a reversal in the scene. He is transformed from the demonic youth to an affective saint tended to in the wilderness

by animals: the sign of divine providence, achieved by the mediation of the hound. The image would have been very much recognisable for the period's reader from different sources, the motif firmly embedded into hagiography, or the lives and deeds of saints. Indeed, the serene pastoral scene is reminiscent of the scriptural Valley of Death (Psalm 23:4, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With Apochripa: New Revised Standard Edition*), with Gowther seated in the shadow of the hill. (Huber 2015, p. 305). Gowther remains in this unidentified 'far country', lying down and docilely receiving the white loaf the greyhound brings to him. Instead of the problematic and aggressive verb 'revus', or snatching of the morsel, as the penance would literally have him do, Gowther remains static. The scene is surprising from this perspective for a good reason: as Gillian Adler argues, the canine care received by Gowther during the pastoral episode has defused any instinct to approach the dog in an aggressive fashion. The scene serves both as a reversal and an unconcealement of true identities. As Adler puts it, it 'indeed challenges Gowther's original position of domination even countering the expectation that the dogs would share a similar nature to the brutish protagonist' (2017, p. 59). If Gowther has been an overbearingly dominant, uncontrollably destructive, prematurely hyper-masculine figure thus far, while his future holds martial expression and proper chivalric conduct, in this very moment he occupies a space in-between those states. The salvific dynamic of the scene introduces the essential capacity of self-reflection. Within this meditative state Gowther is tended to by the greyhound. He remains prone, 'ley', the greyhound tending to him. His posture is not unlike that of a pup. Huber identifies this as the first expression of authentic love towards Gowther, to whom the experience of the tender emotion must be entirely alien up until the moment. He, however, reciprocates love with love, for he is finally in a state both meditative and silent (2015, p. 305).

In Adler's reading,

> [t]he greyhound at Rome becomes one among a series of dogs that symbolically acquire a divine role in that they effectively perform the maternal task of feeding, like Gowther's mother and wet nurses. The first dog teaches him to receive food properly and with restraint, and thus to contravene his prior indulgent eating habits. (2017, p. 59)

Thus, the greyhound becomes a transfigured mother surrogate to Gowther, a new materialisation upon which he is to map his identity. The imitiatio Christi performed by the divine greyhound invokes a priestly interaction and is the first stage of feeding Gowther the proper Eucharist (as opposed to the one violently perverted or denied by him as an infant), allowing him to be incorporated into the communion through the act of love expressed through authentic and virtuous charity, or caritas. On the fourth day the greyhound vanishes and Gowther, now capable of interpreting God's will through signs, continues his journey. He shows the first instance of internality during the narrative, finally not acting and attacking, but thinking. And he thinks of the love of God.

Gowther, following the moving scene in the shadow of the mountain, sets out. He arrives at the court of the emperor of Almeyn, where he is taken in and fed amongst the dogs. The emperor

proves to be receptive of the penitent duke's situation, suspecting that he is undertaking some sort of penance. Thus, Gowther suffers no mistreatment and eats from the mouths of the hounds, adhering to his penance. While the penitent duke continues his life under the table as Hob the fool, the Saracen sultan attacks the emperor, demands his mute daughter's hand in marriage. Gowther is miraculously provided with arms, suits of armour and horses by God. The armour conceals his identity as he battles the Saracens in defence of Christendom. When it comes to the description of the emperor's daughter, the text establishes a connection between her and Gowther:

> But now this ylke Emperowre
> Had a doghtur whyte as flowre,
> Was too soo dompe as hee;
> Scho wold have spokyn and myght noght.
> That meydon was worthely wroght,
> Bothe feyr, curteys and free. (373-8)

The quality unifying Gowther and the princess is their shared quality of muteness. She is placed in a conceptual constellation with Gowther, for their bodies are both governed and characterised by lack, which in turn unites them both in a silent understanding and a new 'trigonometry' with the dogs under the table: 'Her body is the next mediating "partial object" which will pull him closer to a full identity', Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes (2015, p. 130). She, however, proves to be much more than a mere partial object facilitating the penitential process. She is not even relegated to a supportive role, as she and the care she provides become instrumental in Gowther's penitential pattern. 'The princess is carefully brought into the narrative; her growing love for Gowther is a quiet, private business, conducted away from the noise and bustle of the court', Andrea Hopkins points out (1990, p. 156). The princess is displaced from the realm of humanity due to her muteness, thus sharing the liminal space with Gowther, committed to his canine penance. When the Sultan asks for her hand from the Emperor, he emphasises her beauty but the Emperor corrects him:

> Tho Emperowr seyd, "Y have bot won,
> And that is dompe as any ston,
> Feyrur thar non be feyd." (388-90)

The Emperor's admission contains several important attributes. He emphasises the muteness of the princess over her beauty. Her father is aware of her vulnerability and her status as an outsider. '[T]he princess's silence renders her abject, dependent on other modes of communication besides speech', observes Huber (2015, p. 313). She may be rendered abject but through her muteness she is rendered insightful as well. Due to her body being characterised by lack much more than her fair beauty, she also does possess the ability to unconceal Gowther's true identity (Robson, p. 150–51). The insight provided to her is in line with Augustinian doctrine, identifying otherness as an attribute that affords insight (Czarnowus, p. 19-27). She is able to see

not only the man under the armour, the knight in the penitent canine act. She can see much more, the canine under the human disguise hitherto concealed. The motif is an iteration on the common trope of the mysterious knight. Unconcealing Gowther, however, is not merely a function of the princess, afforded to her by her status of an outsider. She also unconceals the canine penance's hidden mechanisms relying on the reciprocity of tender care. Thus, the princess herself also serves as a disruptive element within a medieval discourse on otherness. 'Unlike Gowther, her muteness does not signify any specific correlation to either sin or animality: she is "curteys", free, and exceedingly beautiful, all traits that signify her status as a noble and gentle woman', Zacher writes (2017, p. 446). Anna Chen emphasises that the emperor himself measures his daughter through the language of consumption, gesturing towards her transcendently nourishing capacity (2012, p. 362). Here the princess again is described through a language similar to that used by the passers-by to curse Gowther, who lamented that his mother ever fed him (164-5). The princess, however, represents a nourishing counterpoint to Gowther's intertwining physical and spiritual hungers.

Gillian Adler points out a peculiarity of the maiden's description, gesturing towards the fact that, historically, women could leverage the aspects of themselves traditionally deemed inferior into mechanisms of spiritual influence and authority. Both dogs and the mute maiden thus serve as displacing agents of what one might expect to be a very patriarchal religious power. By performing the act of Imitatio Christi, or imitation of Christ, both are capable of re-contextualising what they actually mean (2017, p. 51). The mute princess is no mere supportive character. Zacher points out that 'her muteness, portrayed in the poem as a lack or a disability, registers a far more cynical view of human essentialism: speech, we learn, is not essential to human beings; nor is its lack limited to non-human animals' (2017, p. 447). The princess is characterised by lack, but she is not limited by it. Her capacity to interpret and care are reliant on her silent observation, being positioned on the peripheries of the court, despite her rank. While the emperor suspects the young duke to be undergoing a penance, only the princess possesses sufficient insight into Gowther's character.

After the first such scene takes place, the princess recognises Gowther. 'Non hym knew bot that meyden gent' (419), for she too is characterised by lack, their perspective and insight shared. Therefore it is precisely the princess' insight which allows the following remarkable scene to occur:

> Tho meydon toke too gruhowndus fyn
> And waschyd hor mowthus cleyn with wyn
> And putte a lofe in tho ton;
> And in tho todur flesch full gud;
> He raft bothe owt with eyggur mode,
> That doghty of body and bon. (445-50)

The princess washes the mouth of the greyhound with wine and sends it over to Gowther, with fresh meat and a loaf of bread, which he eagerly devours. The scene offers much to uncover, its

symbolism layered and significant from the perspective of the narrative whole. One such instance is a reversal of sinfulness through the act of care. 'The poem locates the hounds' spiritual currency in their capacity to deliver healing through their mouths, inverting the proverbial model of dogs' mouths as sources of sinfulness,' Huber observes (2015, p. 310). If a shift from indiscriminate violence to culturally and socially sanctioned violence indicates the reformation of one facet of Gowther's animal self, his capacity to interact gently with other creatures is also formulated in the context of his animality. The princess, due to her role as something of a social outsider at court, is capable of accurately perceiving that Gowther can only be physically sustained by the meals he wrestles from the mouths of dogs (Oswald 2010, p. 184). She is one uniquely positioned to identify his authentic need as spiritual, instead of purely physical, and can thus provide care for him through her actions.

These actions of care performed by the 'meyden gent' are infused with divine significance. Her image, in the moment, is conflated with other symbols, which overlap upon one another and would have been immediately accessible for a reader of the period. Despite her marginal position the mute princess occupies the place both of a surrogate mother and the Virgin Mary, while also taking up the priestly duty of moderating the ritual of the sacrament. The Eucharist, symbolically depicted here, is one of the most significant Christian motifs. Christ's blood and body are transfigured in the bread and wine. The ceremony of Communion is offered to Gowther through these media. The ceremonial gesture of belonging and acceptance becomes authentic, because it is performed with unusual actors. As Zacher observes,

> [a]lthough this "mock sacrament" happens in obvious breach of the aforementioned penitential laws surrounding the profanation of the Eucharist by animals, the dogs in this scene are, in contrast, portrayed as divine messengers or mediators who step boldly into the scene in the fashion of priests to administer wine and bread/flesh. (2017, p. 448)

Indeed, in the domestic setting the preparation of food expected from the female member of the family becomes a transcended activity of sanctified care, just like the offered wine and bread become transcended symbols. Adler observes that:

> [i]n the Middle Ages, women had a unique relationship to Holy Communion; the eating of the Eucharist facilitated the encounter with Christ's humanity, but the rite presented late medieval women, in particular, with an opportunity to transform a traditional female role in the domestic space—preparing and serving food—into a religious act. […] The princess sanctifies the feeding process and reinforces the holy functions of the canine intercessors, and, together, the princess and the dogs recall the maternal attempt to nourish Gowther, delivering the physical nourishment and religious nurture Gowther refused in infancy. (2017, p. 67)

Thus, the gestures of tender care provided to Gowther become transcendent: the act transforms both sides. Gowther is transformed into his gentle canine self in interaction with the gentle

female other, while the princess is to a female figure enacting affective piety by nourishing him. The meat offered to Gowther is 'full gud', which mirrors the exact descriptor of the 'full gud knyghttys wyffys' (112), who have been offered to him as wet-nurses in his infancy, drawing equations between the two scenes.

Similar resonances are abundant in the passage. The peculiar verb featured in the exact description of Gowther's penance, 'revus' or 'to snatch', comes back in a transformed incarnation in the scene, signifying the beginning of a new stage in the duke's penance. 'He raft bothe owt with eyggur mode' (449), or Gowther has ripped them both (the bread and the meat) eagerly. Thus far Gowther has been prepared for this particular Eucharistic meal he is to receive, adjusting his physical and mental state to receive the symbolic meal. These preparations prominently featured the acts of care, shown to him by bodies characterised by either lack or otherness. The images of the hound taking care of him in the wilderness and the image of the gentle female recognising the outlines of both his penance and personal needs converge within the scene. The unconcealement of his true nature coincides with the exploration of the proper, nutritive qualities of the Eucharist, to which Gowther has been rendered receptive through the acts of kindness. As Huber summarises the scene, 'Finally, he is voracious for the right kind of nourishment' (2015, p. 310).

In opposition to Cohen, who observes that the motherly dimension 'vanishes from the narrative in its second half' (2015, p. 203), Adler convincingly argues that care is indeed an important attribute in interpreting the scene. He sees it re-emerge in the shape of transcended, transfigured maternal care provided by both the princess and the greyhound, finally sating Gowther's spiritual hunger, nourishing him through the Eucharist and the canine intercessor, both physically and spiritually (2017, p. 67). The motif of care allows one to interpret the scene with surety, seeing the different roles of caregiver superimposed upon one another in the image of the princess. She performs the ritual and literal act of feeding, fulfilling an authentic function that is simultaneously maternal and priestly, allowing Gowther to refocus his attention on this locus of symbols, progressing him further in his penitential process.

After Gowther's return from the battlefield, he immediately heads to his chamber, situating himself amongst the hounds:

> Among tho howndus down he hym seytt,
> Tho meydon forthe tho greyhondus feytt,
> And leytt as noghtt ware. (510-13)

The princess, naturally, says nothing to Gowther but brings forth the greyhounds and behaves as if nothing happened. She facilitates the reflection that Gowther is to undertake, while the lords and ladies celebrate. The princess alone understands that Gowther's penitent self-reflection is facilitated by the hounds, becomes a priestly figure in effect, guiding the communion (Adler 2017, p. 68).

After these touching scenes of strange, transcended domesticity, Gowther's redemption and transformation are now also centred around the mute princess. Her insight and care have provided an avenue of discourse for Gowther to negotiate, resulting in hitherto unexplored

emotional dimensions to be encountered with as the result. Among the new emotional vistas the penitent youth finds a genuine expression of belonging in the following scene.

While protecting the Emperor, Gowther is wounded on his shoulder by a Saracen spear during his fight with the Sultan, whom he kills. The wound is a symbolically significant motif, an imitatio Christi: an act of imitating Christ, who has been similarly wounded by spear (Cohen 2015, p. 137). Witnessing the grievous wound, the maiden feels 'full sorrow', faints and falls from her tower (637). She lies in a coma for two days, although she is believed to be dead (642). The cascading causality of the scene sees Gowther finally confronted with a completely new emotion: compassion, a new aspect of empathy, which in turn induces the tender acts of care that have been so prominently missing:

To chambur he went, dyd of is geyre,
This gud knyght Syr Gwothere,
Then myssyd he that meydon schene.
Emong tho howndus is meyt he wan. (646-49)

After the fight, Gowther goes to his chambers, takes off his suit of armour provided to him by God (to allow him to both fight and conceal his identity) and authentically feels. He misses the 'meydon schene', the fair maiden who understood him and cared for him. The loss of the princess, whom he perceives to be dead, and the genuine emotions he feels in the face of the tragedy completes Gowther's penance. He grieves amongst the hounds, trying to find consolation or at least a measure of comfort in their presence. The scene allows Gowther's internality to come to the fore (similarly to the passage 'And lovyd God in his thoght' (318)), in contrast with his active, external fighting prowess governing the preceding lines. Here, again, his movement through categories, or kinds, through his acts and feelings of kindness can be observed. He cares for the princess, and his grief for the sublimated mother-figure caring for him is genuine and honest. Gowther in this moment is simultaneously mature and child-like. His sense of belonging is explicitly depicted in his time of grief, finding comfort among the hounds. Gowther's emotional maturity is encapsulated in his capacity to establish vulnerable connections, which require care to develop.

The Emperor sends for cardinals and the Pope to Rome. When the Pope arrives, the princess is magically resurrected and speaks the words of God. She does not simply gain the ability to speak miraculously but hers is now a priestly authority, becoming an intercessor between Gowther and God. While it has been the Pope who set the parameters of the penance, it is the princess who thus far has facilitated the canine penance in the social environment (the court), and her transformation makes the following miraculous episode take place (Adler 2017, p. 69):

Ho seyd, "My lord of heyvon gretys the well,
And forgyffeus the thi syn yche a dell,
And grantys the tho blys;
And byddus the speyke on hardely,

Eyte and drynke and make mery;
Thu schallt be won of His. (661-66)

The princess proclaims Gowther's penance to be over, conveying God's message. Receiving the divine mandate, the Pope kisses Gowther and designates him as the child of God, incorporating him both into Christendom and emphasising his child-like state to which his penance has returned him.

The transformation undertaken by the princess is both miraculous and corrective. Her body, characterised by lack before, is now made whole. Her words are significant, not only because now she can speak, but her speech also communicates God's intention directly, proclaiming Gowther to be incorporated into the body of Christendom. Finally, Gowther is rendered simultaneously child-like and the properly adjusted image of mature masculinity: a knight and a noble. The transformation would have been impossible without the help of the princess, who facilitated the Eucharistic activities. As Oswald explains, 'This transformation begun by the princess is confirmed and carried out by the words of the Pope: these two are the purest members of the community and are closest to God' (2010, p. 186). It has been the Pope who set the parameters of the penance but it the princess who, with the aid of the dogs, finally relieves Gowther of it (Adler 2017, p. 69). Indeed, as Huber argues, the poem 'tactfully reconfigures the conventionally supportive roles of these primarily silent companions, as nurturers and listeners, into positions of spiritual edification and influence, a reminder of the availability of new religious metaphors in the late medieval period' (2015, p. 70-71).

Gowther, now a changed man ('waryd', as Oswald explains, or 'transformed' (2010, p. 187)), returns to Estryke, marries his mother off to the old earl, and eventually becomes emperor himself. While Gowther's body remains outside of the reproductive and hereditary cycle of the system of nobility, his post-penitential activities become notable, for he aims to give back the care he has received and does so even after his death:

For he is inspyryd with tho Holy Gost,
That was tho cursod knyght;
For he garus tho blynd to see
And tho dompe to speyke, pardé,
And makus tho crokyd ryght,
And gyffus to tho mad hor wytte,
And mony odur meracullus yette,
Thoro tho grace of God allmyght. (737-44)

Before the final lines of the poem, we see Gowther as a corrective, healing presence. Gowther has been inspired by the Holy Spirit, a cursed knight turned into a venerated saintly figure. In Oswald's interpretation, 'his transformed body conducts miraculous transformations for other bodies constituted by lack' (2010, p. 192). This means that 'After his death, Gowther acts as a kind

of intercessor for God' (ibid.). This passage is followed by a line which resonates with a pun: 'Thus Syr Gwother coverys is care' (745). Although the line literally translates to 'Thus Sir Gowther has recovered his estate/keep' and may not be an entirely intentional pun, in our modern context it can be interpreted as evocative of the care Gowther has received. It emphasises a charge or a responsibility which Gowther has recovered: a proper sense of caring, in all the meanings of the word. His healing presence is embodied in his regained capacity to care for both others and himself, the site of his previously uncared-for body imbued with a corrective, divine power. The penitential process sees his true nature, his authentic self finally uncovered through acts of care, his intentions 'to lerne anodur lare' necessitated the help of others as well.

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