

Sovereign Genius: Fiction as History in *Confessio Amantis*
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Gower sees a certain tension between history and memory, expressed in *Confessio Amantis* by the lines: “As I finde in a bok compiled / To this matiere an old histoire, / The which comth noi to mi memoire”¹ Using Giorgio Agamben’s terminology in *Homo Sacer*, I will show memory as related to *zoe* (as a sort of “bare experience”), and history as related to *bios* (as “qualified experience”). These structural divisions of experience into bare and qualified spheres suggests the existence of both a “law” (or set of criteria) for distinguishing between the two, and a “sovereign” who can make exceptions to the law (such as allowing fictional tales to be “historical” if they are instructive).

Within *Confessio Amantis*, this division and its impact are most evident in the frame-narrative. Amans confesses his bare experiences (memories), which have left him in disarray, to Genius, who responds by using instructive tales (histories) to qualify Amans' experience. The individual tales within the frame reveal the operation of the sovereign exception on two levels: first, Genius grants the tales, collectively, privilege over Amans' experience despite their fictitious nature and (in many cases) pagan origins, and second, within many of the tales themselves. This second level is particularly true of Book I, in which the “Tale of Mundus and Paulina,” “The Trump of Death,” and the “Tale of the Three Questions” all draw their morals (and therefore, their status as instructive history) from an exception to the codes within which their characters normally operate. The use of sovereign exceptions to qualify Amans' memories through morally instructive fictions suggests that in *Confessio Amantis*, “history” does not simply consist of accounts of events, but rather of those accounts that have something to teach.

¹ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Vol. 3, ed. Russell Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), online ver. accessed September 13, 2012: lines 1381-3.