https://10.51814/nm.148533

William Langland and Maximianus on Impotence

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Abstract Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower are known to have borrowed images of death and decrepitude from Maximianus's sixth-century Latin *Elegies*, a work studied in fourteenth-century English grammar schools. Fleshing out one of David R. Carlson's obiter dicta (2017: 75), this essay confirms the place of the third major named Ricardian poet, William Langland, on the roster of fourteenth-century poets whose reading of Maximianus informed their own poetry in English. As Carlson suggested in passing, Langland's representation of the dreamer's impotence in *Piers Plowman* B.20 owes much to the racy, morose, self-pitying, but always elegant and frequently sublime Latin elegiac couplets of Maximianus. Rather than identifying direct parallels of phrasing, the essay explores the revealingly similar tonality of both authors' descriptions of impotence.

Keywords William Langland, Maximianus, impotence, old age

Geoffrey Chaucer's use of Maximianus's sixth-century Latin *Elegies* (1.223–234) for the old man's apostrophe to Mother Earth in the *Pardoner's Tale* (*Canterbury Tales* 6.729–738) is well known (Cannon 2016: 194–195; Chaucer 1987: n. to *Canterbury Tales* 6.727–36; Mann 2006: 59–62). Chaucer would have first encountered Maximianus in grammar school, where the *Elegies* was a fixture in the core curriculum called *Sex auctores*. More recently, David R. Carlson (2017: 67, 75–78; see also Rogers 2019: [6–8]; Zeeman 1991: 228–229) identified echoes of Maximianus toward the end of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, just after the critical moment of anagnorisis when the poem's subject, Amans, morphs into an aged "John Gower" (8.2321).[1] There can be little doubt that Gower knew Maximianus's *Elegies*.[2] One can observe mid-career Gower trying out, possibly in advance of any very severe debility, how to talk about his aging body (Yeager 2012). He does so, in part, by channeling Maximianus's *Elegies*, a text that is at once sententious and self-pitying (like Gower) on the topic of growing old.

1 Quoted from Gower (2006–2013).
2 Gower cites Maximianus (in an evident misattribution) at *Mirour de l'omme* 1653. Cited from Gower (1899–1902).

Carlson points out the intrinsic likelihood of influence on the third major named Ricardian poet, William Langland: "An influence [of Maximianus's *Elegies*] on the passage in *Piers Plowman* concerned with the effects of the sudden assault of 'Elde the hoore' (B20.95) on the dreaming Will, including impotence. . .might have been asserted, though it has not, despite recognition that Langland was intimate with such other curricular authorities as the *Disticha Catonis*" (2017: 75; see also Zeeman 2020: 288). Carlson does not elaborate; the point occupies a single sentence in an essay otherwised focused on Gower, albeit set apart as its own paragraph. In this essay I propose to flesh out Carlson's suggestion, confirming Langland's place on the roster of fourteenth-century poets whose reading of Maximianus informed their own poetry in English. I build on studies by Jill Mann (2006) and Christopher Cannon (2016) showing the enduring influence that the grammar-school core curriculum as a whole had on Ricardian poets (see also Hanna 2011: 177–178). Neither Cannon nor Mann connects Maximianus in particular to Langland. There is admittedly no smoking gun, no direct parallels of phrasing, to prove the influence. I rest my case instead on the circumstance that the *Elegies* were taught in fourteenth-century English classrooms, as well as on stylistic comparison, namely the farcical or slapstick tone both Maximianus and Langland adopt when describing an old man's impotence, but which is surprisingly rare in premodern poetry outside the reception of the *Elegies*.

As Carlson noted, the scene in *Piers Plowman* analogous to Amans's transformation into Gower is the moment in B.20 when Elde (Old Age) launches a sudden attack against the dreamer, who has been observing Elde do battle with Life. This is where Langland's dreamer's age catches up with him, so to say (Putter 2011: 404–409):

	For care Conscience þo cryde vpon Elde	*then*
20.166	And bad hym fonde to fighte and afere wanhope.	*endeavor*; *frighten*
	. . .	
20.178	'Now I se', seide lif, 'þat Surgerie ne phisik	*medicine*
	May noȝt a myte auaille to med[l]e ayein Elde".	*fight*
20.180	And in hope of his heele good herte he hente	*health*/*salvation*; *courage*; *took*
	And rood [so to] reuel, a ryche place and a murye,	*manor*; *merry*
	The compaignye of confort men cleped it som tyme.	*called*

And Elde after [hym]; and ouer myn heed yede *went*
And made me balled bifore and bare on þe croune; *bald*
20.185 So harde he yede ouer myn heed it wole be sene euere. *will*;*forever*
‘Sir yuele ytauȝt Elde!’ quod I, ‘vnhende go wiþ þe! *ill-mannered*; *woe to you*
Siþ whanne was þe wey ouer mennes heddes? *Since when*; *road*
Haddestow be hende’, quod I, ‘þow woldest haue asked leeue”. *If you were* [*courteous*; *permission*
‘Ye, leue, lurdeyn?’ quod he, and leyde on me wiþ Age, *you wretch*
20.190 And hitte me vnder þe ere; vnneþe [may] ich here. *scarcely*; *hear*
He buffetted me aboute þe mouþ [and bette out my wangteeþ]; *molars*
And gyued me in goutes: I may noȝt goon at large. *shackled*; *walk*
And of þe wo þat I was Inne my wif hadde ruþe *pity*
And wisshed ful witterly þat I were in heuene. *utterly*
20.195 For þe lyme þat she loued me fore and leef was to feele *member*; *loved*
On nyghtes namely, whan we naked weere,
I ne myghte in no manere maken it at hir wille,
So Elde and [heo] hadden it forbeten. *she*; *beaten down*

(20.165–166,20.178–198)[3]

Supplementation of the alliteration by patches of rhyme (20.190 *ere*/*here*, 20.196–197 *weere*/*manere*, *naked*/*maken*) enhances the scene’s comic punch. Langland’s dreamer’s devastating shift from observer to victim is precisely analogous to what befalls Gower’s Amans/“Gower” at the end of *Confessio Amantis*, who, after eight volumes of edifying narrative delivered by his confessor Genius, looks up from the book, as it were, to find he has aged into a historical person. Thus both poets equate the extent of their poem, its runtime, with the extent of a lived life. Langland particularly invites the comparison, for he has added other biographical or pseudo-biographical touches to earlier passages of *Piers Plowman*, as when Holy Church reminds the dreamer of his baptism (1.76–78); or as in another sudden aging of the dreamer (11.60); or as when Imaginatif says he has been following the dreamer for “fyue and fourty wynter” (12.3b), his “myddel age” (12.7a).

3 Quoted from Kane & Donaldson (1975).

Nicolette Zeeman (2020: 265–297) and other scholars (Paxson 1998: 89–92; Paxson 2001; Pigg 2007: 399–402) have explored the ethical, cultural, and poetic meaning of Langland's self-identification with a representation of an aged and impotent male body. By staging the showdown between Elde and the dreamer, Langland opens his dream-vision poetics to physical and indeed metaphysical questions about embodiment and time. These are precisely the terms activated by Maximianus's *Elegies*.

What most concerns the present investigation in the Elde passage in *Piers Plowman* is the closing, justly famous representation of the dreamer's impotence with his wife. It is at once funny and pathetic, in exactly the way that Maximianus is when discussing the same topic. Just when the reader believes Langland's dreamer's wife may be expressing compassionate solicitude and hope for his soul ("my wif hadde ruþe"), she instead underscores how useless to her he has become.[4] Compare:

> Dirigui, quantusque fuit calor ille recessit,
> et nata est venae causa pudenda meae.
>
> ("I froze, and what had been great lust for her receded,
> and my old pecker was a cause of shame".)[5]
> (Maximianus, *Elegies* 5.35–36)

Soon thereafter, Maximianus again experiences impotence, in a quasi-cinematic sequence in which the girl vigorously attempts to arouse him and then, in despair of obtaining satisfaction, launches into a long, bitter, frantically inventive eulogy on the penis, "busy celebrator of the holidays, /

4 Putter (2011: 407–408): "since Elde is meant to be Conscience's ally, it seems initially promising that Will's wife has 'ruthe'—but, as it turns out, the word cannot mean 'compassion' here, for the wife feels sorry only for herself. Again, in normal circumstances, her wish that Will might be in heaven would redound to her credit, but here she is only wishing he were dead".

5 Because Juster regrettably omits to punctuate or capitalize his Latin text of Maximianus (2018), I take the liberty of supplying punctuation and capitalization to match Juster's translation. For "great lust" at *Elegies* 5.35 *calor ille*, I might favor a morally neutral translation such as "passion".

an old delight and treasure that was mine [*festorum cultrix operosa dierum, / quondam deliciae divitiaeque meae*]" (5.87–88). In the elegy's closing couplet, she leaves Maximianus naked and prone on the bed "as if [his] last rites were over [*velut expletis. . .exequiis*]" (5.154). The brief elegy 6 ends on the same note and as though in the same bed:

> Infelix, ceu iam defleto funere surgo;
> hac me defunctum vivere parte puto.
>
> ("Morose, I rise now as if mourned at my last rites;
> I think I'm living partly dead this way".)
> (6.11–12)

The verb *surgo* "rise" may carry sexual connotations, ironic in context (Maximianus 2018: n. to *Elegies* 1.125). That is, Maximianus's speaker's morbid resurrection is provocatively figured as a recovery of sexual prowess.

Elegy 5 mines the tragicomic potential of impotence with particular zeal, but it is a theme that runs right through Maximianus's *Elegies*:

> Non sum qui fueram; periit pars maxima nostri.
> ("I am not who I was; my greatest part has perished".)
> (1.5)
>
> Me vero, heu, tantis defunctum in partibus olim
> ("Alas, with me long truly dead in many parts")
> (1.117)
>
> set, quia nos totus "membrorum" deserit usus,
> nullus in amplexu quod memoretur habet
>
> ("but, since all function of our 'parts' has gone away,
> nobody has a memory of sex")
> (2.37–38)

Si modo non possum, quondam potuisse memento.
("If I can't do it now, recall that I once could".)
(2.57)

Maximianus's old age is "futile [*inutile*]" (1.111), a word that, like the defunct *pars* "part" in 1.5 ("periit pars"), 1.117 ("defunctum in partibus"), and 6.12 ("hac. . .defunctum. . .parte"), may euphemize sexual impotence (Maximianus 2018: nn. to *Elegies* 1.5 [against this insinuation], 1.111 [in favor], 6.12 [against]). Elsewhere, his penis is his *membrum* "member" (2.37, 5.57, 5.83, 5.107), the Latin word on which Langland's *lyme* is calqued. Both words usually mean "limb" (Maximianus's *Elegies* 1.15, 1.26, 1.38, 1.40, 1.86, 1.136, 1.228, 1.232, 1.266, 5.34; Langland's *Piers Plowman* B.5.100a, B.6.124a, B.19.8a, B.19.105a, B.20.77a). Even elegy 4, set in Maximianus's potent youth, looks ahead to his future incapacity in a clever double perspective mimicking a passage in Ovid's *Amores* (3.7.17–18):

et nunc infelix tota est sine crimine vita
et peccare senem non potuisse pudet.

Deserimur vitiis; fugit indignata voluptas
et quod non possum non voluisse meum est.

("and all my dreary life now is without reproach
and humbles an old man unfit to sin.

We're left behind by vice; the scornful pleasure flees
and what I cannot do I haven't wanted".)[6]
(4.51–54)

6 Closer to the Latin for *Elegies* 4.54 is the translation of Carlson (2017: 69): "my part is not to want what I am incapable of". I refrain from substituting Carlson's prose rendering for Juster's so as not to perturb the meter of Juster's verse translation. Cannon (2016: 168), quoting an edition that reads *et*] *nec*, mistranslates, "I cannot do what I was unable not to want", as if the infinitive *voluisse* followed *possum* rather than being the substantivized subject of *est*. Cannon (2016: xiv) indicates that translations of Maximianus come from L. R. Lind's translation (in Maximianus

Note the repetition of the sexually laden perfect active infinitive *potuisse* from 2.57. In the *Elegies*, the unexpressed verbal complement of *potuisse* is *convenire* (or a more vulgar synonym for "have sex").

Where did Langland get the idea to include a comic impotence scene at the end of *Piers Plowman*? One might imagine that senile impotence was all over premodern literature, especially in Latin, a literary language dominated by male authors and directed toward presumptively male audiences. Certainly age and aging have long been favorite subjects for poetry. Separately, literary depictions of impotence and other sexual escapades are not hard to find, from Ovid onward. But outside of Maximianus the topic of an old man's impotence is, in fact, scarce in French or Latin texts with which Langland could have been familiar (Carlson 2017: 77).[7] It was felt by most authors, perhaps, to be an excessively pathetic circumstance for poetic making. Maximianus himself might have agreed—until old age caught up with him. Langland's treatment of the subject, moreover, resembles Maximianus's. In making poetry out of these matters, Maximianus took his cue from Horace and Ovid, both of whom narrate episodes of impotence (Maximianus 2018: nn. to *Elegies* 5.1–3, 5.87); but Langland's passage is closer in atmosphere to Maximianus than to either of the earlier poets. Langland and Maximianus share—that is, we may now hypothesize, Langland *acquires* from Maximianus—a recognition of the bittersweet comedy of the aging process. These are scenes of "poignant

1988)—as they mostly do, but with unannounced adjustments. Lind's rendering of the line in question is entirely different from Cannon's, and more accurate: "Now that which I cannot do I wish I had done".

7 Barney (2006: n. to *Piers Plowman* C.22.193–98) identifies one out-of-the-way pre-Langlandian English example, in the Kildare poems. Zeeman (2020: 286–288) notes parallels in Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* and Eustache Deschamps's ballades. When Deguileville's Vieillece threatens to render the pilgrim "impotent" (*Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* 17286), the word does not necessarily connote sexual impotence, nor does Deguileville elaborate. The primary meaning of *impotent* in both Old French and Middle English is "enfeebled, powerless". Deguileville's use of a single, ambivalent word is still a far cry from the developed scenes of impotence in Maximianus, Langland, and Gower. For Langland's likely familiarity with Deguileville, see Justice (2014: 52–56); Nievergelt (2016); Watson (2016: 209–211). No one, to my knowledge, has argued that Langland read Deschamps, though he might have. For close parallels between the two poets in one passage of *Piers Plowman*, without a claim of direct reading, see Strakhov (2016).

comedy" (Barney 2006: n. to *Piers Plowman* C.22.183–200).[8] One of the saddest yet also funniest consequences of aging, a schoolboy Langland learned when studying Maximianus, is that a man can no longer pay his lover her sexual "debt [*munera*]" (Maximianus's *Elegies* 5.48).[9] The metaphor is familiar from Chaucer, e.g., "Myn housbounde shal it have bothe eve and morwe, / Whan that hym list come forth and paye his dette" (*Canterbury Tales* 3.152–153: *Wife of Bath's Prologue*). Given the cultural currency of a marital "debt", sexual poverty was an acutely and uniquely painful form of lack. If Langland's impotence scene recalls late medieval English drama (Barney 2006: nn. to *Piers Plowman* C.22.183–200, C.22.186–190), this is also because it responds to Maximianus, who drew equally from Augustan elegy and from Roman comedy (Maximianus 2018: nn. to *Elegies* 1.16 [Plautus], 2.1–2 [*senex* character], 3.17 [*pedagogus* character], 3.53 [Plautus], 4.38–39 [eavesdropping], 5.141 [Seneca or pseudo-Seneca], *et passim*).

There is a reason, besides the general neglect of Maximianus among medievalists, why the connection had not been mooted before Carlson's essay (2017) and why it has not been developed since. Langland has a way of metabolizing his reading without translating or adapting it as other authors do. The action and dramatis personae of *Piers Plowman* are unique; these features run interference on what could otherwise be uncontestable source relationships. The most immediate interpretive context for *Piers Plowman* is always itself. Nevertheless, in B.20 one can hear a reminiscence of Langland's encounter, even if only decades earlier in school, with the retired lover persona of Maximianus's *Elegies*. That Chaucer, Gower, and Langland all turned to this text for its depictions of decrepitude and impotence confirms its presence on fourteenth-century English grammar-school syllabi and suggests that the *Elegies* was capable of making a durable impression on young minds.[10] As well it might: modern scholars have felt Maximianus's *Elegies* to

8 In the parlance of the social media platform X (*olim* Twitter), Maximianus and the Langland of B.20 are poets of the "lolsob". See https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lolsob.

9 Interestingly, Langland never uses *dette* in a sexual sense. The biblical proof-text for the idea of a mutual marriage debt is 1 Corinthians 7:3, where the word in the Vulgate is *debitum*. Quoted from Weber (1994).

10 The *Accessus Maximiani* recommends the work because it "senectutem cum suis uiciis uituperat iuuentutemque cum suis deliciis exaltat" (5–6), a clever way to

be an unexpected choice for schoolboy reading (Clogan 1982: 203; Gillespie 2005: 156; Hanna 2011: 177; Hunt 1991: 1:68; Mann 2006: 48; Orme 1973: 103; Woods & Copeland 1999: 382), given its "pornographic and obscene" content (Carlson 2017: 68).[11] But I think Carlson's phrase puts the matter altogether too strongly. For throughout the text, apart from the girl's direct speech in elegy 5 and the detail that he cups her "breasts [*papillae*]" (5.27), Maximianus makes clever use of euphemism and innuendo to avoid outright obscenity. For example, only the girl is permitted to refer to the penis by a particularized and non-metaphorical word, "prick [*mentula*]" (5.87). Within the parameters of his chosen subject matter, Maximianus evinces a relatively strict sense of verbal restraint. Of Maximianus's fourteenth-century English students, Langland hewed closest to the same line of decorum. Langland's contemporaries stayed further away from the risk of obscenity. It is quite impossible to imagine Chaucer or Gower writing, in their own, author-identified voices and with reference to their genitalia and their wives, "þe lyme þat she loued me fore | and leef was to feele / On nyghtes namely, | whan we naked weere".[12] We shall have understood *Piers Plowman* better if we can try to read it in relation to the racy, morose, self-pitying, but always elegant and frequently sublime Latin elegiac couplets of Maximianus. Like Gower, Langland constructed an authorial persona that was not only masculine but aged; like Gower, Langland then had need to stage a scene wherein the poet's everyman, middle-aged avatar (recall B.12.3–7) suddenly grows up and merges into the putatively, or actually, decrepit author who created him. For this task, it was only natural for both poets to turn to Maximianus.

market a text about old age to schoolboys. Quoted from Huygens (1954).

11 In a different essay, however, Hanna (1999) had explained the vital connection between elementary education and male sexuality, with reference to Langland's *Piers Plowman*.

12 But see Carlson (2017: 75–76), some passages at the end of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* hinting at impotence and attributed to Amans/"Gower". Tellingly, the most overt—still not very explicit—reference to sexual impotence occurs, not in Gower's persona-voiced English (8.3127), but in the disembodied Latin verses framing the text (8.iii.7–10). In context, 8.3127 *impotent* does not have a narrowly sexual meaning. Subsequent hints at sexual impotence (8.2412–2423) come in the voice of Venus and moreover are discreetly couched as a hypothetical. Burrow (1983: 18) characterizes Venus's reference to Amans's/Gower's impotence here as "quite tactful"; I concur.

A possible objection to the hypothesis that Maximianus influenced Langland is that no influence was necessary, because Langland or his friends experienced impotence firsthand: life, not Maximianus, taught Langland that senile impotence was funny and sad. One could respond firstly by distinguishing between life-knowledge and literary knowledge: the ubiquity of impotence as a real condition did not prompt very many poets between Maximianus and Langland to write about it. So, too, the parallel use of *membrum* and *lyme* in the *Elegies* and in *Piers Plowman* hints that Langland learned to write about impotence from reading earlier writers and not solely from lived experience. Moreover, both explanations can be true. The coincidence of (early) reading with (late) life is probably part of the *raison d'être* of Langland's farcical, lopsided battle scene between Elde and the dreamer. Both Langland and Gower, and Chaucer too, not to mention innumerable other medieval schoolboys who reached old age, had the incomparable experience of enduring, in their personal lives, circumstances about which they had first learned through the objectivizing medium of Latin grammar and composition lessons. What their school-reading had exhibited to them in the guise of a fable or an admonition from on high had, in some sense, come to pass. As Cannon (2016: 231–257) emphasizes, the flash of recognition that poets in such a situation would be liable to feel finds its expression in literary echoes and recollections. For Chaucer, Gower, and Langland in relation to Maximianus, that meant three rather different passages in the *Canterbury Tales*, *Confessio Amantis*, and *Piers Plowman* dealing with old age, death, and impotence. It is characteristic of the three poets' mutual similarities and differences that Gower's and Langland's Maximianus passages, but not Chaucer's, mention impotence and are identified closely with the authorial persona, while Chaucer's and Langland's, but not Gower's, are dramatic in form and are played for laughs.[13] N

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13 The passage translating Maximianus in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* is not at all funny within the tale, but its melodramatic style becomes sarcastic when read through the lens of the character of the hypocritical Pardoner, who boasts to his fellow pilgrims how he uses the arts of rhetoric to squeeze pennies out of his audiences.

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