

Public Poetry and the Psychology of Confession  
in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

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## Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the political, confessional, and psychological frames of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1390-93). This dissertation proposes an integrated understanding of the poem's frames, in which both the confessional and psychological frames respond to the political one that Gower presents in the poem's Prologue. By moving the discussion of politics to a setting of unrequited courtly love and then establishing a need for the failed lover to confess (his sins against Love), Gower creates complex layers of meaning that ultimately seek to educate his readers.

This dissertation examines Gower and the *Confessio* under different contexts, starting with his historical context. Thus, the first two chapters provide a broader perspective on the external factors that influence Gower's writing. Chapter 1 examines Gower's self-establishment as a figure of authority writing in the vernacular to lay the foundation for the meticulous production of his manuscripts and works. Chapter 2 examines the English political situation that led Gower to write the *Confessio*, in particular the politics of 1380s and how they are represented in the poem, as well as Gower's position as a public poet. The *Confessio* is a response to the division Gower sees corrupting both the nation and its people; this chapter thus sheds light on how the poet moves from the body politic to the individual. Moving on to Gower's literary contexts, Chapter 3 provides an overview of confession as a practice in the late Middle Ages and compares medieval manuals for penitents and theological treatises on confession to the portrayal of the lover's confession in the poem. This chapter establishes that confession is not just a listing of sins but an examination of the penitent's conscience and that both the penitent and the priest

can learn from the confessional process. With confession established as a means of probing into the penitent's conscience, Chapter 4 then studies the lover and his priest (i.e. Amans and Genius), and how they represent the mental faculties of Will and Wit in Gower's scheme of the psyche. Highlighting their development as the confession progresses, the chapter shows how these characters come to embody Gower's model for the readers' education. Finally, the Conclusion delves into the perceived "incongruities" of the poem, particularly those from Book VIII, and suggests a reading that reconciles its seeming disparate frames under one unified voice.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Vera, who taught me to be resilient and fair; to my father, Pena, who taught me to be curious and inquisitive; to my aunt, Silvia, who taught me to be pragmatic and resolute; to my grandmother, Laura, who taught me to be compassionate and vigilant; and to my Canadian mother, Donna, who taught me to be welcoming and patient.

## Introduction

We live in an age of uncertainty: elected officers are unfit to rule (e.g. the former President of the United States), political tensions are a constant (e.g. the Ukrainian-Russian and Israeli-Palestinian wars), new legislation is questionable at best (e.g. anti-LGBTQIA+ laws in several US states), civic discontent borders on civil disobedience (e.g. the Capitol Hill riot), morality is consumed by greed (e.g. fossil fuel companies profiteering from the Ukrainian war), and we must deal with the aftermath of a devastating pandemic (i.e. COVID-19). We often feel isolated and surrounded by chaos, instability, and prophecies about the doom of civilization. According to his own accounts of the English State in the last quarter of the fourteenth century, so did John Gower (c.1330-1408). However, unlike the majority of us who interiorize our discontent, Gower voiced his. In fact, he decided to effect change by taking on the challenge of sorting through the chaos himself, making himself a political leader. To change his world, Gower had to change people's way of thinking, and he endeavoured to do so through his writing.

Gower's early life is largely unknown because his family name was a popular one, and there seems to have been at least one "John Gower" who appears in chancery records in the 1360s regarding residential disputes; historians are thus uncertain about Gower's actual birthplace and family connections (Gray).<sup>1</sup> Critics tend to agree, however, that he held civil office during his earlier adult life and that he was both a personal friend of and later (c.1377-1386) an estate attorney for Geoffrey Chaucer. Gower began dedicating his life towards writing

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed summary of Gower's early life and these uncertainties, see Douglas Gray's entry on John Gower in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. For a detailed biography of Gower, see John Fisher's *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer*.

as he got older, focusing especially on morality and politics, and giving up of his civil career for the sake of poetry sometime in the late 1380s. From his residence in the Priory of St. Mary Overie in Southwark, Gower assimilated with a network of scribes, bureaucrats, and legal advisors, and he focused predominantly on his writing. It is noteworthy that Gower's shift to poetry was also a shift to political engagement. In fact, Gower's growth in the political sphere becomes more evident in his move away from civil office and toward writing, culminating with the *Confessio* (a piece of public poetry), and his finally being proclaimed the Lancastrian poet laureate by Henry IV in 1399, though he remained in Southwark until his death in 1408.

Gower lived during a tumultuous period of English politics, and his major poems not only reflected but also remarked on this tumult: he denounced the Commons, the Nobility, and the Church first in Anglo-Norman, then in Latin, and finally in English (Irvin, “*In Propria Persona*” 2). In fact, some critics see Gower's *Mirour de l'omme* (approx. 30,000 lines, in Anglo-Norman, written ca. 1377-79), *Vox Clamantis* (approx. 10,000 lines, in Latin, written shortly after 1381), and *Confessio Amantis* (approx. 33,000 lines, in English, first compiled between 1388 and 1390) as a continued critique of the social and political spheres in England during his time, across all three languages, each focused on a particular estate. It follows that Gower's oeuvre is particularly attuned to themes of religion and politics, and it responds to the tumultuous environment in which he lived (Irvin, “*In Propria Persona*” 6).

Analyses of Gower's work tend look for a consistent theory of morality and politics, often suggesting that Gower portrays a monologic view on thought, but they fail to integrate the multiple voices of his poems into one cohesive argument. I provide a reading of Gower's *Confessio* that seeks to answer this question in relation to his major English poem. I focus on Gower's *Confessio*, an encyclopaedic collection of exemplary tales, written as a mirror-for-

princes that educates its readers on matters of morality and civic duty. Specifically, I analyze the frames of the *Confessio* to shed light on Gower's careful structuring of the *Confessio* as a self-reflective educational project. The *Confessio* has been studied for its politics but neglected and criticized for its didacticism, moralizing, and the seemingly disjointed nature of its frames. Thus, I seek to address some of the biases against Gower's didacticism, to complicate and expand the understanding of his morality and his commitment to it throughout the *Confessio*, and to examine the complexities of the poem's structure in order to offer insight into his goals as a public poet.

### The Frame Narrative as Multilayered

Gower begins the *Confessio* by describing how books help shape the present and how they can also help shape the future. Because few men indite in English, he decided to write a book for England's sake (Prologue 22-25), to record examples of good-natured men, and to offer sage advice against cruelty and tyranny (Prologue 44-51), reviving the traditions of virtuous writing of the past.<sup>2</sup> However, he sets his poem as a lover's confession to a priest. The *Confessio*'s narrative thus brings together politics, which Gower describes in his Prologue, and courtly love (i.e. a traditional narrative of unrequited love) through confession—the dialogue between Amans, the lover, and Genius, his priest.

Gower's choice for the frame narrative has caused controversy because of the seeming conflict between love poetry and a penitential examination. As critics have noted, Gower draws from multiple forms of love poetry, including “the Old French courtly love lyric, ‘allegorical’ love narrative, and, as John Burrow has shown, the fourteenth-century *dit amoureux*” (Zeeman, “Verse” 222). Nicolette Zeeman argues that Gower uses these traditions but also subverts them in

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<sup>2</sup> All references to the *Confessio* are from Russel A. Peck's edition from *TEAMS*, and all translations of the Latin passages and glosses are from Andrew Galloway, unless noted otherwise.

order to focus on the moral and philosophical lore of his text (223). Winthrop Wetherbee, on the other hand, argues that the *Confessio*'s "framing dialogue draws [Gower's] moral and political concerns into uneasy coexistence with a meditation on love grounded in a complex rereading of such familiar models as Jean de Meun and Alan of Lille" ("John Gower" 591; Farber, "Ethical" 166). Terms such as the "*uneasy coexistence* between the amatory and the didactic, whether the latter is discussed in relation to penitence [e.g. McNally and Kinneavy] or morality [e.g. Yeager, Minnis, and Zeeman]," imply a destabilizing dichotomy in the frames of the *Confessio* and that the amatory is necessarily apolitical or amoral (Farber, "Ethical" 167).

Arguing against this divisive reading of the text, Paul Stegner claims that "just as Gower's style of 'the middel weie' between lust and lore [Prologue 19] is grounded in his intent to repair the external division caused by religious, political, and social discord, the poem's penitential structure is designed to remedy the lover's internal division and to function as an 'ensample' for readers" (488). Stegner's analysis implies that love poetry and social politics are not mutually exclusive; he sees Gower's engagement of both the amatory and the moral as a means to create a more dynamic and layered text based on the tradition of *exempla*.<sup>3</sup> Gower actually hints at his reasoning for using the courtly love tradition to discuss morality: the tradition established by Ovid. This line of criticism allows for a more comprehensive approach to Gower's decision to assert his authority over politics through a discussion of love. As T. Matthew N. McCabe puts it in *Gower's Vulgar Tongue*, Gower likens the description of the fallen world from Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Prologue 663-966) to the primal chaos from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (17-19, 22-23, 27-29). Commenting on the interplay between the political,

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<sup>3</sup> Some critics argue that Gower used the courtly love frame because of its appeal with contemporary audiences. See Farber's "Ethical," especially 168-69. I side more closely with Stegner's reading, which acknowledges the courtly love tradition as a rhetorical device to introduce the tales, but also finds it thematically appropriate for dealing with matters of social and political division.

confessional, and courtly love *frames*, McCabe goes on to argue that Gower contrasts his poem with Ovid's in two ways: first with the Prologue and second with Books I through VIII (31-34). McCabe explains that these two streams of comparison are parallel, and that they bridge the political dimensions of the Prologue to the courtly love frame of the lover's confession by grounding them on these commonalities with Ovid's poem. These commonalities reveal how Gower's emphasis on mutability and change (e.g. Nebuchadnezzar's dream), a factor we see in many of Genius's tales and in Amans's behaviour, is tied to political and psychological division throughout his poem.

Candace Barrington offers an alternative reading of the *Confessio*. She suggests that the poem "is, first and foremost, a didactic poem," which "only masquerades as a courtly poem" (431). Barrington's claim relies on the much discussed Latin note to line 59 of Book I, which reads "*fingens se auctor esse Amantem* [the author (only) pretends to be this Amans]".<sup>4</sup> This assessment of the *Confessio* suggests the possibility of a deeper meaning to the frame character of Amans and, consequently, Genius as well. As I discuss at length in Chapter 4, this deeper meaning is an allusion to the allegorical functions of Amans and Genius (as Will and Wit), including, but not limited to, their joint function as models for the readers' psyche.

In *Love and Ethics*, Peter Nicholson argues that the *Confessio* cannot be understood in its separate elements, but that it ought to be understood instead as a single unified project. To this end, he writes, "the moral structure of the poem is the fundamental harmony rather than opposition between God's ethical demands and love's" (vi). Nicholson posits that the *Confessio*'s meaning lies in its seemingly disjointed nature, that it is the interplay of the amatory and the moral in the lover's confession that Gower elucidates with his choices of frames, and that the

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<sup>4</sup> Despite their contributions, Stegner and Barrington say little about the way in which Gower's didacticism functions as they focus, instead, on his politics.

poem must be read from beginning to end (vi). In this analysis, Nicholson is implicitly criticizing those who study a single tale, scene, or Book and offer conclusions about the poem as a whole. Therefore, what Stegner, McCabe, Barrington, and Nicholson suggest is the need for more comprehensive readings of the *Confessio*, ones that account for all its structured layers of meaning—the political, the confessional, and the psychological.

The issue that arises here is that such readings of the poem expose its narrative “inconsistencies.” For instance, Wetherbee claims that “the inconsistencies in the impulses and teachings of Genius” make it difficult to determine Gower’s purposes for the book (“John Gower” 607). Wetherbee understands Gower’s morality as fully expressed and encompassed in the figure of Genius.<sup>5</sup> However, Wetherbee’s reading of the poem fails to explain the complexities of the text, particularly how Genius’s incongruent lessons fit the larger scheme of the interactions between Amans and Genius. Although there has been a more recent movement to consider these inconsistencies as sources of interest rather than failure (including the works of Robert F. Yeager, Diane Watt, Siân Echard, and Lewis Beer), some criticism (including the works of J. Allan Mitchell and Michael Cherniss) still cites discrepancies in the poem. As Lewis Beer writes, “many studies have noted discrepancies between Genius’s tales and the lessons they are supposed to teach, or between the ‘confession proper’ and the palinodal ending, or between the bulk of the confession and the various so-called ‘digressions,’” e.g. the entirety of Book VII (236). Overall, however, what these critics who focus on these discrepancies characterize as structural shifts are explained by Genius’s and Amans’s dialogue, and, even more specifically, by Amans’s changing interests in the course of the narrative—e.g. the shift from confession to

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<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Wetherbee’s position, Denise N. Baker argues that Gower’s use of Lille’s and de Meun’s influences is so skillful that his Genius balances both accounts to prove Amans’s moral fallibility (288). Critics, therefore, either state that Genius is an inconsistent character, or that he is the authority figure of the poem, as Baker argues. Neither set of assumptions, however, sees Genius’s shortcomings as a reflection of his didactic intentions for Amans.

politics in Book VII.<sup>6</sup> It is this dismissive reading of the frame narrative and its characters that has caused Amans's and Genius's *relationship* to be overlooked, leaving many questions unanswered when it comes to the presentation of Gower's ethics or the tenor of the political critique of the later books.<sup>7</sup> Such studies, which place the tales at the core of Gower's (and consequently Genius's) didactic intentions, implicitly yet consistently dismiss the dialogue between the lover and the priest and its significance beyond framing the compendium of tales.<sup>8</sup>

It is easier to focus on Gower's politics and morality if we are able to bracket off material that appears inconsistent. One such example is the discussion of homicide in Book III, in which Genius contradicts himself by justifying homicide in one tale after having criticized it in a previous one—a contradiction that Amans notes and brings to the priest's attention.<sup>9</sup> However dissonant such shifts in the narrative might be, they all contribute to a unified reading of the layered frames: the political, the confessional, and the psychological. Kurt Olsson, who carefully studies the speakers of the *Confessio*, concludes that each individual voice is fallible (*John Gower* 50). However, I argue that, in their multiplicity, these voices offer a coherent expression. Gower's own voice as a poet can only be heard and understood as the sum of the collection of voices and narratives of this major poem; he is not simply Amans *or* Genius, but his voice mostly

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<sup>6</sup> It is precisely Amans's request for more information on the education of Alexander the Great that leads Genius to discuss the topic at length.

<sup>7</sup> Concerning Amans's direct relationship with Genius, Wetherbee goes as far as to say that "Amans is passive, melancholy and virtually ineducable. (...) Repeatedly he draws Genius away from large concerns to focus on his private discontents, reducing their dialogue to a parody of the relationship of private to public virtue central to the earlier poems" ("John Gower" 601). This critique of Amans's character dismisses not only his role as a penitent, but also the poem's focus on his courtly love as the catalyst for the detailed exploration of sin and virtue that follows.

<sup>8</sup> The major exception to this linear view is the tale of Apollonius in Book VIII, which is usually studied for its political similarities to other tales because it is taken as the summary of all of Genius's teachings. For a detailed comparison between this tale and Amans's trajectory in regards to the subjects of desire and incest, see Stegner. This lengthy narrative about the issue of incest has an easier explanation, though; it is the culmination of the discourse of sins, the most perverse action to illustrate lechery to Amans.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 4 presents a much more detailed breakdown of Genius's flaws, and, in particular, the inconsistencies of the moral lessons he provides for his tales. See the discussion of Books IV, V and VI.

derives from their *interactions* as a penitent and his priest in contrast to the *exempla* and the courtly love narrative. In addition, while critics acknowledge that the *Confessio* is a penitential narrative, they often neglect the implications of the lover's confession, which requires both Amans's gradual recognizance of his role in the remedying of his sins and a nurturing relationship between him and his priest. Not only do critics downplay the dialogue between Amans and Genius, but they invariably also dismiss the dialogue's nature as a confessional practice.

My dissertation attempts to address this particular gap in the criticism in order to provide a reading of the *Confessio* that not only celebrates its seeming incongruities but justifies them as part of Gower's larger educational project. By moving the discussion of politics to a treatment of unrequited courtly love and then establishing a need for the failed lover's confession (of his sins against Love), Gower creates complex layers of meaning that are contingent on the interactions of the lover and his confessor priest. If we are to understand Gower's voice as a public poet, as well as his educational goals for the *Confessio*, we must be attentive to how meaning is created in the poem. Therefore, I propose a holistic reading of the poem's frames, and I argue that both the confessional and the psychological frames respond to the political one that Gower presents in the Prologue.

## Chapter Breakdown

Each of this dissertation's chapters examines Gower and the *Confessio* in relation to a different context, moving from those further away from the literary text to those that directly frame it: from the biographical and historical to the cultural (or religious in this case) and psychological. By carefully examining the means in which Gower writes himself into his

sociopolitical and historical contexts while interacting and responding to them (and, at times, in order to respond to them), I propose a reading of the *Confessio* that is grounded on its medieval contexts and provides unity for the seemingly disparate forces at its core.

Thus, the first two chapters provide a broader perspective on the factors external to the poem that influence its writing. Chapter 1 examines Gower's characterization as a "moral" writer, the stigma associated with his didacticism and morality, and how these attributes contribute to his self-establishment as an author writing in the vernacular. This chapter also deals with the criticism surrounding the "incongruities" of the narrative by providing a defense of Gower's monologism as a means to shock and subvert readers' expectations. In particular, this chapter studies the connections between didacticism and the reading public Gower envisions, and it analyzes how Gower approached the *Confessio*, attempting to maintain his authority through supervision of manuscript production and to preserve the public image he creates for himself. I also provide an Appendix to accompany this Chapter. This Appendix details a case study of a manuscript of the third recension of the poem to establish that the care Gower shows for the writing of his poem is reflected in the meticulousness of his manuscript layout and its glosses.

Expanding on the external factors that influence Gower's writing, Chapter 2 offers insight into the political context that led Gower to write the *Confessio*—in particular, the politics of the 1380s, including the Rising of 1381, the revolt of the Lords Appellant, the Merciless Parliament, the tensions between the Church and the State, and the return of Richard II to the throne. Gower himself offers an overview of his politics in the Prologue. Therefore, drawing on the socio-literary space Gower inhabits, this chapter explains how the poet situates the *Confessio* as a response to the tumultuous political situation of late fourteenth-century England, which, in turn,

requires correction and, thus, his guidance. Turning directly to Gower's critique of the State, and his depiction of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the fallen world in the Prologue, this chapter investigates the issue of *division*, as Gower sees it, both of the nation and of the individual. In doing so, this chapter also sheds light on how the poem moves from the body politic to the individual, and how Gower situates himself as the answer to this problem of division as a public poet in the figure of the new Arion.

The chapters that follow analyze how Gower answers the problem of division by portraying the conflicts of an individual's psyche and their potential resolution. Here we see how Gower address the individual's division through a process of guided healing: confession, repentance, and absolution. In order for us to understand Gower's model of the psyche, however, we first need to delve into private confession in the Middle Ages as a means of examining a penitent's conscience and probing it for answers.

Following the opening lines of Book I, Chapter 3 begins with an explanation of Gower's perspective on love as a universal experience and the way in which he associates Amans's lovesickness with a quest for universal (not courtly) love. The chapter argues that the confessional frame comes as an answer to the courtly love narrative by being introduced as a remedy to Amans's malady—his own form of division or corruption of a higher concept of Love. In order to explain how confession comes to address Amans's division, Chapter 3 provides an overview of confession as a practice in the late Middle Ages, including debates about the influence of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 on universal private confession, the development of penitential manuals, and vernacular literature in general. The Chapter then compares medieval manuals for penitents and theological treatises on confession to Gower's portrayal of Amans's confession, focusing on how confession provides a structure for instruction

and enables an exploration of the psyche—one that leads to healing. This chapter argues that confession is a means of self-reflection, an examination of the penitent's conscience that works through sophisticated probing of the penitent's mind and motivation, and that both the penitent and the priest can benefit from this process. Chapter 3 thus situates Gower's choice of a confessional frame, explains its function in providing an examination of Amans's psyche, implicates Genius's active role in Amans's confession, and provides the grounds for the exploration of free will and motivation that comes in the following Chapter.

Following this movement from one's external reality to interiorized analyses of one's psyche, Chapter 4 discusses the psychological frame that develops as a result of the confessional process—the examination of penitent's conscience. This chapter studies Amans and Genius and how they represent the mental faculties of Will and Wit in Gower's scheme of the psyche. Highlighting their development as the confession progresses Book by Book, the Chapter shows how the frame characters develop and come to embody Gower's model for the readers' education and growth as they come to read (and learn from) the poem. The chapter concludes with an explanation of Book VII, which relocates the poem to the political frame, becoming a microcosmos of Gower's political endeavours for the *Confessio* as a whole, and how this political discussion is in fact integrated in Amans's confessional process. This Chapter concludes that, with Amans (and, in theory, the readers) open to consider how the psyche works and how we come to exercise our free-will, Gower is finally free to proselytize on the makings of civil morality and the informed citizen.

From here, both the poem and the dissertation must find their means of concluding Amans's epic journey into one unified whole. In order to address a solution to the many layers of meaning of the poem, the Conclusion delves into the perceived "incongruities" of the poem,

particularly those in Book VIII (e.g. Amans's stubborn behaviour in refusing to let go of his lovesickness), and suggests a reading that reconciles its seemingly disparate frames (the political, the confessional, and the psychological). The answer to the individual's division comes in the harmony offered by God's love, one that is reciprocal, and one that offers ultimate salvation. The lover's journey concludes with his own prayer for the rest of the country—leading us back to the Prologue and the prophetic figure of the new Arion. Thus, the Conclusion offers a final reading of the interactions of several layers of meaning and several consciousnesses under one unified voice: Gower's own.

## Chapter 1 - The “Moral Gower” and the Ambitions of Vernacular Poetry

Geoffrey Chaucer’s characterization of his friend and fellow writer John Gower as “moral Gower” (*Troilus and Criseyde* V. 2957) has influenced much Gower criticism. For instance, Winthrop Wetherbee claims that critiques written not long after the completion of the *Confessio* have considered Gower “the moral voice of his age,” “or less flatteringly ‘an encyclopedia of current prejudices and ideals’” (“John Gower” 589), which have made him “a spokesman for cultural, as well as natural, values” (601). Following these depictions of Gower, critics have tended to undervalue his texts. Even when his poetic abilities are recognized, they are overshadowed by this moral legacy. For instance, according to Robert R. Edwards, “in most reckonings, Gower figures as a poet who writes as a moralist” (65). Historically, as R. F. Yeager argues, Gower has been undervalued for two main reasons. First, Gower did not receive the same status as Chaucer during the Renaissance because Gower’s moral voice came to be associated with the (antiquated) Catholic Church after the English Reformation while Chaucer’s came to be associated with (more exciting) Proto-Protestantism (“Eighteenth-Century”). Second, Gower’s overt didacticism and fixed code of conduct were unappealing to Victorian readers during their recuperation of medieval literature (“Eighteenth-Century”).

Nowadays, when critics approach Gower, they often avoid his morality and didacticism;<sup>1</sup> instead, they turn to his political inclinations and likely involvement in the production of his own

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<sup>1</sup> Those who do touch on Gower’s didacticism often do so to discuss his literary sources or his social politics. See, for example, Stegner and Barrington.

manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> I argue that we can only do Gower justice if we are prepared to accept his didacticism and morality and explore how they work. In fact, Gower's didacticism and concerns with morality, the sources of modern bias against his writing, were the very reason behind his popularity in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries when a new urban readership sought didactic texts. Gower's didacticism is directly correlated to his public concerns and political ambitions; by claiming a public space as a poet writing in English, Gower thus provided a voice for his urban contemporaries.

### Didacticism and Allegory

The stigma surrounding Gower's characterization as a moral writer extends to his choice of genre, i.e. allegory, his choice of structure, i.e. the frame narrative, and his control over his texts. As Ann Astell reminds us, Gower as a writer himself provides clues on how to read the *Confessio* both through his marginal notes (i.e. glosses) and in the opening tales of Book I. According to Astell, the four tales from the "Sins of the Eyes and Ears" teach readers that they ought to exercise caution when reading the *Confessio* to get to the "message veiled behind the obvious one" (92). Although Astell provides little treatment to the discussion of the *Confessio* in relation to Gower's politics, the connections between allegorical reading and interpretation runs strong both in her analysis and in Gower's writings.

Some critics fail to acknowledge the contribution that the allegorical figures of Amans and Genius, as well as Amans's confession, makes to the unity of the poem. For example, although James I. Wimsatt acknowledges that "the stories in [Gower's *Confessio*] are structurally subordinate to the discussions [between Amans and Genius]," he contends that "as a matter of

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<sup>2</sup> See Rita Copeland's *Rhetoric*, Derek Pearsall's "Manuscripts and Illustrations" (80-82, 86), and Siân Echard's "Introduction" (8-10). I return to this idea in the section "Gower and Authority."

fact, the interest of the narratives overshadows that of the [confession]” (155). Wimsatt then adds, “the main purpose which the confessional frame serves is to provide occasion for 141 stories” (156), a fact which he claims “places the work in contrast to both *Handlyng Synne* and the *Canterbury Tales*” (158).<sup>3</sup> Wimsatt’s claim that “the stories in themselves are the chief merit of the *Confessio Amantis*” (158), especially in light of his reading of the poem as an “Allegory of Reason” (158), glosses over the layers of reading and interpretation presented by Amans’s confession and the frame characters themselves, both as models for Will and Wit and as models for the readers.<sup>4</sup> Much as an allegory is an extended metaphor, these dynamic figures are extended allegories that may represent more than one allegorical meaning at a given time.

St. Augustine of Hippo is one of the first majorly influential writers in the Middle Ages to confront this aspect of allegories. In Book I of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine writes that “all teaching is teaching of either things or signs, but things are learnt through signs,” and he goes on to apply this philosophy to language itself by adding that “nobody uses words except in order to signify something” (156). It follows that language is the means of acquiring and communicating knowledge because even our thoughts are bound in language as “the word which we hold in our mind” (157). He further states that “there is no reason for us to signify something except to express and transmit to another’s mind what is in the mind of the person who gives the sign” (158). Knowledge, in this logic, is a product “of our observation and consideration of things previously experienced,” and it is also gained through language, which is itself created for the purpose of communication and education (158). From this, in Augustine’s argument, comes

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<sup>3</sup> The comparison between the *Confessio* and the *Canterbury Tale* in particular presupposes, on Wimsatt’s part, a distinction between Gower’s simple narrative device and Chaucer’s allegorical and more complex frame. In this view, while the confession in Gower’s poem is a vehicle to deliver tales, the pilgrimage in Chaucer’s poem is as important as the tales to impart the poet’s genius.

<sup>4</sup> The discussion of Amans and Genius as representations of Will and Wit and as a unified model for the readers is one of the central analyses of Chapter 4.

the necessity for studious reading, for language is the means through which God has revealed Himself and has granted access to His knowledge. Therefore, linguistic knowledge, especially that concerning literal and figurative meanings—the discernment of metaphors and parables—leads to a higher knowledge, and is in fact necessary for its achievement.

In Book II of *De Doctrina*, Augustine attempts to answer why allegories are used in the Bible, noting that “careless readers are led astray” by allegorical meanings (6). He explains that Scripture is written to contain “manifold obscurities and ambiguities” and “expressions so obscure as to shroud the meaning in the thickest darkness” because it purposefully avoids “a feeling of satiety in the intellect,” that associated with literal readings, which causes readers to “hold in small esteem what is discovered without difficulty” (Book II. 7). What Augustine then explains is the pleasure of reading allegories. He argues that readers derive more pleasure from reading allegories than from reading “plain language.” According to Augustine, the psychological exercise of reading allegory, of parsing through literal and allegorical meanings, causes pleasure. In addition, in contrast to plain language, allegories can offer a deeper understanding of the matter being discussed.

Modern critics have adapted Augustine’s views in their critiques of Gower’s use of allegories. C. S. Lewis explains that “the function of allegory is not to hide but to reveal, and it is properly used only for that which cannot be said, or so well said, in literal speech” (166). According to Stephanie Gibbs Kamath and Rita Copeland, Gower’s *Confessio* “uses key elements associated with the traditions of philosophical and erotic allegory, but it seems to forgo allegorizing itself in favor of the end product of late medieval integumental reading: the moral truth that is understood to lie beneath the fictive surface” (143). In other words, the danger Gower would face in openly critiquing the king and court constrained him to use allegories in

referencing his political concerns. One of Gower's major accomplishments in the *Confessio* is his ability to "produce a text that appears courtly while criticizing courtly behavior" (Barrington 424). As Beer puts it, "the poem invites us to formulate our own moralizations of Genius's tales, in accordance with our individual circumstances, and to find meanings in them that Genius does not articulate fully" (236). Beer is of course following a long line of Gower critics who argue that the ethical matters raised by Amans and Genius are left open-ended for the readers' own interpretation rather than fully developed by Gower (as the writer-poet).<sup>5</sup> The emphasis on the reader's understanding and internalization of the text is the primary reason why the genre was so pervasive as a didactic tool.

Nonetheless, there is a problem with allegories: the same difficulty that entices the reader also opens up the possibility of misinterpretation. Augustine in fact argues that allegorical language, such as that employed by Solomon in the Song of Songs comparing "teeth" to "a flock of sheep," offers more to the reader or listener than plain language. Here Augustine contrasts the language from Solomon, i.e. "Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are shorn which came up from the washing, whereof everyone bears twins, and none is barren among them," against plain language, i.e. "there are holy and just men whose life and conversation the Church of Christ uses as a means of redeeming those who come to it from all kinds of superstitions, and making them through their imitation of good men members of its own body" (Book II. 7). He admits, "I feel greater pleasure in contemplating holy men, when I view them as the teeth of the Church, tearing men away from their errors, and bringing them into the Church's body, with all their harshness

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<sup>5</sup> For further examples of critics who agree with Beer's claim regarding Gower's meanings and morals (beyond the expositions delivered by Genius) and who take on the challenge to conciliate them with the discourse within the poem, see Russell Peck's *Kingship and Common Profit*; David W. Hiscoe's "The Ovidian Comic Strategy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*;" Thomas J. Hatton's "John Gower's Use of Ovid in Book III of the *Confessio Amantis*;" Simpson's *Sciences of the Self*; Ellen Shaw Bakalian's *Aspects of Love in John Gower's Confessio Amantis*; and Peter Nicholson's *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis*.

softened down, just as if they had been torn off and masticated by the teeth” (Book II. 7). The analysis that Augustine provides is in itself an allegorical illustration of the acts of “holy men” as the “teeth of the Church,” which reveals more about their role in the church and in guiding parishioners not only away from sin but also towards the discipline of the Church. Augustine goes on to write, “It is with the greatest pleasure, too, that I recognize them under the figure of sheep that have been shorn” (Book II. 7), revealing the second layer of the allegorical interpretation of the biblical verse. He compares the “burdens of the world” to the fleece that is shorn off the sheep, the “washing” to baptism, the “bearing of twins” to the commandments of love, and the fact that “none is barren” to the understanding that they all bare the fruitful commandments of love. This exercise presents holy men as passive instruments of God’s love, which is opposite to the image of the much more aggressive teeth, which tear men away from sin.

In relation to the *Confessio*, Jeffery Stoyanoff focuses on the revelation of Gower’s persona in Book VIII to claim that the poem offers readers a warning against deception, and, more specifically, against deceptive writing and reading (57). He goes on to add that “Gower remedies the effects of misguided reading by modeling the right way to read” (60). Although Stoyanoff does not explain how this “deception” should be seen in light of the gloss entry for Book I, line 59 (i.e. “*fingens se auctor esse Amantem*”), what his essay reveals is his position on allegorical interpretation: that allegory is educational, and that allegory offers multiple layers of meaning. The same two assumptions can be seen in a similar reading of the *Confessio* by SunHee Kim Gertz. She asserts that, through this particular narrative twist, readers are encouraged “to return to the beginning, to see if [this] new knowledge changes the allegory in decisive ways” (335). In his efforts to teach readers to read at multiple levels, Gower brings

together synchronic and diachronic modes of interpretation, but the tension between the two is not revealed until the reader begins to pay closer attention to the potential layers of meaning behind Gower's allegories, specifically those found in the frame characters (Gertz 349). Gertz writes that these tensions allow Gower to create "living metaphors," challenging more rigid interpretations of allegories and revitalizing the process of reading allegory (349).

In their didactic use, allegories have the potential to work on the readers. Lewis warns that "it is a mischievous error to suppose that in an allegory the author is 'really' talking about the thing symbolized, and not at all about the thing that symbolizes; the very essence of the art is to talk about both" (225). As Augustine explains, this lexical ambiguity leaves the onus of synthesizing these lateral meanings to the readers' self-consciousness—the exercise of interpretation. Numerous critics have stressed the complexities of such interpretation. For instance, Gordon Teskey argues allegory works on the reader and that it "[does] psychological work of which we are hardly aware" (2). He later claims that "allegory breaks down the wall of division between the mind of the reader and the mind that appears to think in the text as the two are engaged in a circuit. The other that thinks in the text must think through the reader that is thinking through it, just as the unconscious can make its thought known only in the consciousness by which it is probed" (62-63). Maureen Quilligan takes this view further. She claims that looking at allegory hierarchically stops us from considering the relationship of meanings across the gaps between the layers (27), and that "the absurdity of the surface of a text is necessary for the existence of allegory" (28). The utilitarian view of allegory therefore finds the genre's usefulness in its ability to let poets "advance the most sweepingly authoritative political claims" to influence readers (Teskey 123).

This didactic function of allegory serves well the kinds of writers who “looked for a sophisticated response from their intended audiences” (Astell 4-5). According to Astell, medieval writing could be elaborate, layered, and potentially misleading as a result; medieval poets thus managed to elicit sophisticated responses to their writing through the employment of elaborate allegorical meaning.<sup>6</sup> The combination of didacticism, politics, and elaborate layers of meaning is exactly what we encounter in the *Confessio*. My reading of Gower suggests that Gower was deliberately writing a sophisticated text, in which Amans and Genius are in fact elaborate allegories that help him construct, in his view of his project, sophisticated and civically engaged readers.

In her influential analysis of Ricardian poetry, Anne Middleton explains how the two frame characters of Gower’s *Confessio* elicit a sophisticated reading as she states that the voice Gower adopts in the poem invites his readers “to share [a] common vantage point [of worldly experience], the only one we can bring to the *instruction* the speakers undergo in the course of the poem” (109, emphasis mine). Middleton’s observation that the speakers of the poem—Amans and Genius—undergo a process of instruction suggests that these frame characters act as extended metaphors or allegories for the readers themselves, i.e. they metaphorically perform and embody the readers’ experience of teaching and learning. As Middleton phrases it, Amans and Genius represent “a rhetorical embodiment of their audience’s best and most actively responsible selves as members of the human community” (109). According to Middleton’s perspective, the frame characters are didactic tools not only because their dialogue acts as a

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<sup>6</sup> Astell argues that “King Richard’s failure to interpret the *Confessio* properly—that is, allegorically—will incur for him a heavy penalty” (91). What Astell imparts with this statement is that the *Confessio* ought to be considered as a means of instruction and with implications in the political realm. She goes as far as to claim that even the poem’s “royal audience,” i.e. Richard himself, ought to “identify with” certain characters in the poem and understand the poem’s lessons through them (91).

frame for a compendium of moral tales, but also because of the changes and growth they experience as their interaction develops. Considering the nature of their dialogue—the fact that Genius is a priest and Amans is a penitent—Gower uses them to further his goal of educating his readers on matters of civil morality and politics for the betterment of the country. As Amans is to be instructed by Genius, so are the subjects of the kingdom to be instructed by Gower. Similarly, just as Amans and Genius must share their development and grow into political dialogue together, so should the readers of the book embrace the discussions that Gower brings to the forefront of his moral analyses so that they can grow into the political themes to which the book directs them.

Detailing these mirrored dynamics of the *Confessio*, Middleton refers to the frame narrative as “didactic allegory” (110), though, to use her own term, *public allegory* might have been a better descriptor. Allegories can be employed as simple veils for moral truths. However, as previously noted, the *Confessio*’s frame characters are not fixed or attached to one particular definition or concept, and they actually develop as the confession progresses. They are complex, multi-layered allegorical figures who simultaneously highlight and conceal Gower’s dynamic educational process, ultimately standing for the poem’s readers. After all, according to Gower’s own preamble, he is writing for the common profit—benefiting both the king, who is the subject of the *speculum principis* genre, and the nation, or, more specifically, the educated reading public who would have access to a copy of the manuscript.

It follows that, because allegory is inherently didactic and has a political potential, it helps Gower to create readers and a reading public. The rise of mercantilism and the professional classes in the city (i.e. London) and the social unrest of the 1380s in England provided the right circumstances for the development of this new kind of reading public and what might be

considered a new public sphere. According to Lynn Arner, “the ability to read was burgeoning among significant numbers of men and women from the nonruling classes in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England” (2). Examples in London include “the rank and file of the greater companies,” “artisans and retailers,” “prosperous shopkeepers,” “the master craftsmen,” and “other leading members of lesser companies,” as well as “trained employees in their respective crafts” (23). The non-ruling urban classes were arguably the target readers for Gower’s *Confessio* and Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*—both written at approximately the same time, 1386-1393—even though the ostensible reader for the *Confessio* is Richard II and for the *Legend* Anne of Bohemia, both standing for a courtly audience in broader terms.<sup>7</sup> Similarly commenting on this expansion of the reading public, Roger A. Ladd explains that estates satire, as the genre studied by Mann, “becomes relatively rare in the fifteenth century” (81), which he attributes chiefly to “the expansion of the available reading audience” (i.e. wealthy mercantile readers in English) and the consequent failure of the triadic social model to address concerns exterior to the antiquated “socioeconomic stereotypes” (81). Gower and Chaucer, recognizing that obsolescence, redirect their attention toward critiquing “what people do, rather than who they are imagined to be” (81), even as they adapt the extant estates format in organizing their poetry.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on this new urban reading public, see Chapter 1 of Arner’s *Chaucer, Gower, and the Vernacular Rising*.

<sup>8</sup> Ladd argues that Gower in the *Confessio*, like Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*, “relegate[s] focused estates satire to an introductory role in their overall structure” (86). What brought Gower and Chaucer to realize the diminished literary value of estates satire was the shift in readers, away from aristocrats and the clergy to merchants—a shift made apparent by the recent work of Simon Horobin, Linne Mooney and Estelle Stubbs, tying manuscripts to scribes affiliated with the Guildhall, and presumably commensurate customers. For more information on this shift of readers, particularly in the early fifteenth century, see Horobin’s “Adam Pinkhurst,” Mooney’s “Chaucer’s Scribe,” and Mooney and Stubbs’ *Scribes and the City*.

Writers like Gower, who were looking to represent a public voice as is clear from his earlier poems, especially *Vox*, whose title references the voice of the public, were now furnished with a new language that allowed them to circulate their ideas within a defined social circle to which they themselves belonged.<sup>9</sup> Steven Justice comments on how Gower adopts this particular voice in the 1380s: “when the Rising erupted, Gower had recently completed the *Vox*, a poem in which he commissioned himself as a public poet, the formal voice of the commons” (208). According to Justice, Gower added the *visio* of the Rising in the opening of *Vox* to salvage his reputation and his position as a public poet (208). In this section, Gower denounces the rebels of the Rising: “*Vox clamantis erit nomenque voluminis huius, / Quod sibi scripta noui verba doloris habet*” [And the name of this volume shall be the Voice of One Crying, because the work contains a message of the sorrow of today] (II. 83-4).<sup>10</sup> Gower’s critique of the rebels, whom he describes as unreasoning, bestial creatures, continues throughout the *Vox*: “*Hec est gens ratione carens vt bestia, namque / Non amat hec hominem, nec putat esse deum*” [This is a race without power of reason, like beasts, for it does not esteem mankind nor does it think God exists] (V. 631-32). Gower needed to demonstrate his awareness of the volatile political situation and distance himself from the voice of people associated with the Rising in order to maintain his authority as the mouthpiece of the common good of the nation: the role of the public poet.<sup>11</sup> As Sarah Novak succinctly argues, “when Gower speaks with the voice of the people, he means

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<sup>9</sup> David Carlson argues that, with the sociopolitical changes of the 1380s, poets in England chose new subjects. According to Carlson, during the post-plague fourteenth century in England, there was a shift in the types of entertainment and literature that were popular among aristocratic circles and the general public. Instead of solely focusing on narrow clerical topics, poets, including those who wrote solely in Latin, began exploring broader subject matters that would appeal to a wider audience. This allowed them to create modes of expression that could engage both lay individuals and those with some level of clerical status (390).

<sup>10</sup> All references to the *Vox* are from Macaulay’s *Complete Works*. All translations are from Eric Stockton, unless noted otherwise.

<sup>11</sup> I return to the idea of the public poet in Chapter 2.

people like himself: educated, owning land, namely the rising middle estates, who are worthy of counseling and passing judgment on the upper end of the hierarchy” (320-21). Therefore, when it came to the writing of the *Confessio*, Gower already had a mode of writing to reference that was fitting for his goals of educating the nation on civil behaviour.

In fact, according to Andrew Galloway, Gower was consciously responding to contemporary concerns regarding self-interest, urban mercantilism, “and the kinds of governance and authority that might contain those forces” with his social didacticism (“Gower’s Quarrel” 246). Gower acknowledges in a gloss that he draws inspiration for his *Confessio* from “*poetarum philosopharumque dictis*” [the sayings of poets and philosophers], a move that ties his text into the tradition of wisdom literature (Prologue, note to lines 34-5). However, avoiding the repetitive and disorderly structure of traditional wisdom literature in the Middle Ages, Gower systematically presents his tales and morals through the narrative of the frame characters in order to instruct his audience. Specifically, it is through the lover’s confession and the priest’s exposition of the seven deadly sins that the poet presents his didactic lessons; the longer the confession progresses, the further into politics and morality the dialogue between the lover and the priest goes.

### The Voices of the *Confessio* and the Question of Dialogism

Just as readers have complained at Gower’s use of allegory, they have also complained at his excessive control over the text, thus objecting to the *Confessio* because they perceive it as single-voiced. Yet, despite this critique, readers also criticize the *Confessio* for its textual “incongruities,” especially when it comes to the character of Genius and his flaws. It almost

seems that Gower is condemned, either because he is overly controlling and didactic and writes with too single a voice, or because he is self-contradictory.

One of Gower's most sophisticated literary devices is his literary personae: not only of the character of Amans who narrates the poem, but of the poem's other voices who speak with varying degrees of authority and apparent authorial sanction. Many readers of the *Confessio*, Olsson and Watt among them, have detected an effect of fragmentation as Gower's authorial presence moves between the roles of Amans, Genius, the moralizing voice of the Prologue, and the poem's Latin glosses. The authorial presence of the poem is fractured between voices with competing claims to authority: the moralizing voice of the Prologue, which recedes from the poem until the end of Book VIII; the sometimes defiant voice of Amans, which evolves and grows but is not always reliable; the pedagogical voice of Genius, which is compromised by his allegiance to Venus and not always logically sound (especially in relation to Christian theology); and the glossatorial voice, which maintains its distance from the others due to its Latinity. Gower multiplies his personae and his impersonations so that no single voice can be confidently identified as the locus of authority.

Amidst the profusion of Gowerian personae, the rejection of the foolish lover Amans in favour of the older and wiser John Gower offers the poem's best hope of transformation: Amans may not be much enlightened by Genius's attempts to counsel and teach him, but John Gower, having extended himself through the impersonation of his various fictional alter egos, is ultimately able to dramatize a deeper kind of self-knowledge when he returns to himself.<sup>12</sup> As James Simpson argues, Gower's return to himself at the end of the poem models a kind of "psychic integration" that can only be achieved through the proper balance of the faculties of

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<sup>12</sup> I detail this transformation more carefully in the Conclusion.

Will and Wit (271). While the *Confessio* may not offer its reader the opportunity to become an Alexander (a role that it suggests we may do better not to imitate too closely), it does offer the opportunity to become a John Gower: to achieve wisdom and self-integration through the negotiation of fictional selves.<sup>13</sup>

Implicit in this critique of the *Confessio* being divided in its multiple voices, and highlighted by the understanding that allegories necessitate multiplicity of meaning, is a question about whether the *Confessio* presents a monologic or dialogic philosophy. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's publications in the first half of the twentieth century, critics have adopted the category of dialogism broadly, including in analyses of medieval poetry. Just as Coleridge's championing of the symbol at the expense of allegory has been widely accepted in literary criticism, so too has Bakhtin's championing of dialogism at the expense of monologism.<sup>14</sup> Critics tend to agree that the *Confessio* is an allegorical and didactic work, but they tend to dismiss it as being forcefully monological or not dialogical enough, associating dialogism with dialogue and monologism with moralizing. On the one hand, the learned voice of Genius as a representation of Reason suggests a favouring of monologism, a fact that has clouded some critics' judgement of the role Genius plays in the narrative: though he stands for the higher intellect, he is not a direct mouthpiece for Gower's voice. On the other hand, Genius and Amans come to embody the sum of the human psyche in their dialogue, which points towards dialogism, both being presented as flawed characters during the discussion of the more serious tales (particularly in Book V). Yet, regardless of one's understanding of this tension between Genius and Amans, the appearance or revelation of Gower's own persona in Book VIII complicates the discussion, as it multiplies the

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<sup>13</sup> Alexander here is a reference to Alexander the Great, who was supposedly mentored by Aristotle, but ultimately failed to maintain a position of moderation. Gower presents his own version of Aristotle's education of Alexander in Book VII of the *Confessio*.

<sup>14</sup> See Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*.

representations behind the figure of the lover. As the layers of narrative contrast with Gower's authorial drive and quest for unity in a divided world (described in the Prologue), allegorical interpretation becomes entwined in Gower's own politics and sociopolitical commentary on the art of reading to provide a multi-layered yet unified vision for the poet.

### Dialogism and Monologism in Gower's *Confessio*

In order for us to understand this debate about the *Confessio*'s voices, we must turn to Bakhtin. Developing his dialogic model for an analysis of the novel, Bakhtin argues that the artistic key to Dostoevsky is his polyphony: "the unification of highly heterogeneous and incompatible materials with the plurality of consciousness-centers" (*Problems* 17). Specifically, Bakhtin claims that "if Dostoevsky's highly heterogeneous material had been developed within a unified world corresponding to the unified monologic consciousness of the author," then "Dostoevsky would be a poor artist, with no style at all" (*Problems* 15-16). This critique is often applied to Gower in his quest to join together these seemingly incompatible voices. However, contrary to this Bakhtinian view of monologic and didactic texts as boring and not worthy of literary credit, I argue that the *Confessio* is both didactic and literarily engaging, appealing to multiplicity of thought in a unified project.

According to Bakhtin, dialogism opens texts to more possible interpretations because it sets authorial intention aside to favour multiplicity of meaning through the individual voices of the characters. However, when it comes to medieval poets writing in the fourteenth century in England and France, authorial intent, or even just the notion of authority for a vernacular writer, has greater importance than it does for modern writers. Setting the authority of the writer's position aside for medieval poems of the late Middle Ages does not simply mean opening up

more paths of interpretation, but emphatically rejecting these authors' attempts to establish themselves as figures of authority. As we will see in his control of manuscript production and his self-establishment as a public poet, Gower epitomizes authorial control. He places himself as the voice of public and his *Confessio* as an educational guide for King Richard (in the first recension of the poem) on matters of kingship and governance. He relies on *auctores* and well-known tales to prove himself a figure of authority. Yet, as I will argue, when it comes to his characters, in particular Amans, Genius, and Venus, while they may be placed in the narrative for a centralized didactic purpose, each one has a unique perspective, validity, and narrative weight. The whole point of the lover's confession is to bring together two isolated characters—Amans and Genius, Will and Wit—in an exercise of self-reflection. Venus, as a deity of Love, has a much fuller comprehension of Amans's actual malady as the incongruence between his mindscape and his reality (as an old man, a persona of Gower), which is different from his understanding of his "lovesickness" (i.e. his infatuation with his Lady). To claim, as Bakhtin does, that a narrative becomes whole without authorial input is to remove the writer from the act of writing and expect a cohesive plot. Even in Gower's writing, which is characterized by his authorial control, we can still read multiple perspectives; the difference is that these perspectives then come together to offer a unified meaning.

Put simply, Bakhtin favours the openness and possibilities of dialogism over what he perceives as the closure and reductiveness of monologism (13, 16, 18-19). Implied in Bakhtin's distaste of the monological world is a veiled political critique of Stalin's rule of the USSR, where meaning is dictated by a single voice. To a certain degree, what Bakhtin criticizes, the form of control imposed under the Soviet regime, is akin to what Gower wishes to reclaim, the social control that would reimpose the unity that the corruption of the individual and the nation has

eroded. But this unity is not monolithic. If we consider the model of the psyche that Gower develops in the *Confessio*, we can see that he sees complexity in the internal interactions of an individual's mind. It is the very fact that Amans and Genius are at odds in Book I that proves that Gower does not remove the rights of individual consciousness from his characters, but he does see it as a problem. If we see Bakhtin countering monologism with his proposal for dialogism, then Gower offers monologism as a counter for dialogism. Answering the idea of the evolution of a unified spirit in the narrative or as steps "arranged as links of a unified dialectical sequence," Bakhtin concludes that

we would have in the best instance a philosophical novel, a novel with an idea (albeit a dialectical idea); in the worst instance we would have philosophy in the form of a novel. The ultimate link in the dialectical sequence would inevitably turn out to be the author's synthesis, which would then cancel out all preceding links as abstract and totally superseded. (26)

This scenario is precisely what we shall see in Gower—a philosophical monologue unfolding dialectically. However, this dynamic does not diminish what the medieval writer accomplishes in the *Confessio*. Not only does he provide a model of the psyche and a model for education that moves political discourse into a discussion of an individual's choice of (moral and civil) behavior, but he integrates several consciousnesses in his writing.

Responding to the critique of the limitations of monologism as portrayed by Bakhtin, Sarah Kay presents a perspective that is more closely aligned with the kind of authorship exhibited by medieval writers like Gower, Jean de Meun, Guillaume de Machaut, and Christine de Pisan. Kay in fact clarifies that "when [she] began writing [her] book several years ago, interest in didacticism, and in monologic discourse more generally, seemed to [her] a valid way

of questioning a critical orthodoxy that privileged playfulness, irony, multiplicity, and indeterminacy” (xi). In other words, Kay argues that “multiplicity is not inherently more radical than oneness” (xi). In her analysis, Kay explains that these medieval poets focused on a unified interpretation of the subject matter at hand, reflecting a consensus of truth, in order to create this oneness of meaning. For example, in Gower’s case, this consensus, tied with the role of the public poet, insists that morality is a virtue every person ought to possess and that in order to exercise it we must curb our own desires for the common profit. Following this logic, I argue that Gower’s project is a radical one, especially in his model of psyche and confession as a process in which both Will and Wit (penitent and priest) learn from their experience, and in his handling of matters of kingship and governance in a poem ostensibly written for the ruling king. The *Confessio*’s centralizing factor is in fact the quest for oneness, which is not only reflected in Amans’s journey of self-discovery, but also the answer to the problem of division from the Prologue.

Kay goes on to argue that, in order for these medieval poets to centralize their space or plane of thought and create complexity in oneness, they appealed to spatial imagery or, quite literally, a singular central setting in which the narrative takes place. Yet, Kay identifies a “tension in all these poems between unity of meaning—the didactic purport of the text—and awareness of the singularity of the poet’s own perception” (178), a singularity evident in the “common places” (intertextualities and spatial images) they share. In the *Confessio*, the central space is the field, or sweet great plains, where Amans finds himself, as described in the opening of Book I (113). Cupid and Venus come down to meet Amans in this field, thus bringing the Court of Love to him. Genius also meets Amans in the lover’s field. As the narrative moves through courtly love and the many tales both frame characters tell, we always find ourselves

returning to the one space Amans inhabits. At the end of Book VIII, Gower reminds us of this locale when he sends Amans off to turn towards God and pray for the future of the nation. Even though the poem deals with multiple layers of meaning and a nuanced balancing of these layers, it always returns to the sweet great plains, providing a unifying cohesion to the “place of thought” Gower envisions.

### Reassessing the Structure of the *Confessio*

In studies of late fourteenth-century English poems, in particular those which juxtapose Gower’s writing against that of Chaucer, critics tend to refer to the concepts of dialogic and dialogism as opposite to Gower’s pursuit of unity, which is associated with monologism. For instance, Steve Guthrie uses Bakhtin’s concept of polyglossia (“multiple voices”) to study Chaucer’s metric variety and response to late fourteenth-century linguistic diversity while placing Gower and his more rigid metric as foils to contrast Chaucer and his verse. Guthrie’s dismissal of Gower exemplifies critics’ favouring of Chaucer over his “moralizing” contemporary. Guthrie writes, “Gower’s line is ruled by *ergon*, the submission of linguistic material to the authority of an abstract metrical system. The presence of French words in either his English or his French line makes it a bilingual *ergon*, but essentially it is no different from a monolingual one. Its faith is in the ultimate tractability of words” (99). According to this view, Gower superimposes himself onto his text, controlling its signification, and relying on pre-established structures of authority in the metric of his verse. In contrast, Guthrie writes of Chaucer that his “line is ruled by *energeia*, the animation of linguistic material in tension with a concrete metrical system based in the material itself; ‘no ideas but in things.’ Its faith is in the ultimate vitality of words. Its metrical complexity is rooted in its linguistic complexity and its

capacity for polyglossic perspective and laughter, the two prerequisites of what Bakhtin calls novelistic discourse” (99). Guthrie is thus extending the dialogic model to unusual territory by claiming that even Chaucer’s metrics can be seen as dialogical. Chaucer relinquishes his authorial control of the text in order to let the multiple voices of his characters come through the narrative, a trait of his writing that, according to Guthrie, can be noted even in his complex metric system. What this comparison reveals is that each author was writing for his own purposes, with Gower taking the more controlled approach due to his political inclinations or aspirations, or indeed both.

On the one hand, Chaucer may favour a more dynamic display of multiple voices with no particular resolution (as seen in *Troilus and Criseyde* or *The Canterbury Tales*) while Gower may seek to bring cohesiveness to the division of the world by emphasizing a moralized perspective (as seen in any of his major works). Unlike the *Canterbury Tales*, where the narrator never intrudes his morality upon the teller, the *Confessio* presents a more focused dialogue between a pupil and an instructor, and this dialogue finds its final resolution in a turn to the divine. On the other hand, however, the *Confessio* presents characters at disagreement and a combination of traditions (courtly love and confession) that seems at odds with itself.

Commenting on Gower’s approach to the *Confessio*, Alice Spencer writes that “the path to truth and enlightenment seems to lie in a descent into detailed examination of the subjective self in its fallen state and the world around it rather than an immediate ascent beyond particular worldly concerns to monologic political preaching or religious contemplation” (173). What Spencer terms “monologic” in this assessment ought to be understood as *monolithic* instead. The complexity of division requires a descent into the self, but a unified self. The work, at this level, remains monologic. Indeed, Gower is aware of the social politics of language, and he is careful

in his construction of the poem as mirror-for-princes veiled within the confession of a lover. Amans only comes to better understand himself as he comes to understand his role within society and as he examines the tales Genius tells about other social dynamics. Amans's curiosity is piqued when he and Genius discuss the justification for murder in a social context in Book V, particularly after Genius contradicts himself based on a moral lesson from a previous tale. These factors all suggest that Gower is conscious of dialogic and dialogism (anachronistic as these terms may be), but he chooses to provide a final authoritative position in his voice as the writer of the *Confessio*, the one unifying voice to bring the discordant aspects of the poem together in the end. Spencer contends, however, that, in this transformative process, Gower "dramatizes the difficulty of attaining to such a unity of self" as he demonstrates in Amans's development into the figure of old Gower (200-01). The quest for unity of meaning and unity of self is thus parallel in the *Confessio*, and Gower chooses to portray them as such.

The complexity of reading that the layers of the *Confessio* create leads us to consider its impact on Gower's didactic purposes. Writing on the question of the *Confessio*'s reader, William Robins argues that Gower's setting of a romance like the Tale of Apollonius (as the last tale of Book VIII) within the confessional and moral frame invokes "dramatically opposed strategies of reading" (158). While the romance favours a setting in which invisible external forces impose on an individual's agency; the moral frame represents Genius's teachings, which focus on the idea that "internal moral disposition will determine the outcome of external events" (161). Yet, because teaching in itself is "an external force," Gower creates a "paradox of exemplarity" (165). Amans can only overcome this paradox when he recognizes his old age, his inability to continue as the figure of the lover, and resumes his position as old Gower. At this stage, possibilities of self-conception open up for Amans-Gower. Robins writes, "able now to review and give shape to

the experience of having read his own life through and against available narrative patterns, the character/narrator recognizes that he occupies an individual position of ethical responsiveness, and his readers are spurred to realize that they too can articulate their course of engagement with various models of self-conception” (178). Reconciling these divergent forces is no easy task, and, in fact, this exercise may be the primary lesson of the *Confessio* as a whole. Robins goes on to argue that “Gower is not primarily concerned to represent the subjectivity of a character, but rather to provoke the subjectivity of the reader, to create the conditions whereby a reader can come to understand the site he or she occupies at the intersection of incommensurable modes of narrative self-conception” (180). If we as readers must content ourselves with the fact that our own thoughts are dialogical, can we aspire to a monological discourse? While Gower may not be offering a definitive answer to his readers, he is certainly trying to convey his desire for unification both of individuals and of his country. And he achieves unity by bringing the seemingly disparate aspects of the *Confessio* together.

According to Zeeman, “although later medieval vernacular religious allegory does work towards some central synthetic meanings, it also often exploits discrepancies within its components” (“Medieval” 150), and “what we see in these allegories is an intense religiosity coupled with a sense of how difficult it is to access the divine from a complexly material and embodied world” (161). The layers of the *Confessio* make its reading that much more difficult to integrate into one cohesive message. J. Allan Mitchell writes that the *Confessio* “is not easily assimilated to the typical repertoire of concepts and practices that belong to academic criticism” (“Teaching Gower” 110). He then explains that multiple aspects of the *Confessio* including the manuscripts, the page layouts, and the narratives, “all command attention,” so he poses the question: “How can all the matter hang together?” (“Teaching Gower” 110-11). Mitchell then

posits that a particular aspect of the poem might be of interest to a different theory, ranging from intertextual studies to questions of dialogism (“Teaching Gower” 116). More broadly, Mitchell suggests that the multiple layers of meaning require readers to assimilate each aspect at a time, which then lead to more generalized conclusions about the *Confessio* as a whole (“Teaching Gower” 117). What Mitchell does not consider is that the polysemy of the poem and its multiplicity can still be contained within a monologic tradition.

The urge for certainty cannot be satisfied in dialogue; in the dialogic system, instead, we must content ourselves with uncertainty. Bakhtin writes, “the single adequate form for verbally expressing authentic human life is the open-ended dialogue” (“Discourse” 293). However, if we are dealing with a system concerned with certainty and accurate representation, we are operating in the monologic. In Gower’s time and for Gower’s purposes, the lack of certainty is dangerous. He is concerned with establishing a clear vision of his reader within his writing. Consequently, Gower’s movement towards reconciling wit and will and bringing them together as a metaphor for the reader can be understood as a quest for unity.

#### Gower and Authority: The Voice of the Poet

The scope of Gower’s *Confessio* in this quest for unity is ambitious. According to Gower’s argument in the Prologue, the corruption of the physical body (i.e. the mind or soul of individuals) has caused a corruption of the body politic (i.e. the whole governance of a nation), and both forms of corruption have engendered a form of the biblical apocalypse (i.e. the culling and last judgement). All three estates—the Church, the Nobility, and the Commons—are in disarray. More importantly, the Prologue parallels the perversion of the estates with the corruption of the statue from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in order to bring a vision of the

apocalypse as the future of a divided England—a future from which the nation must be saved by someone with power and authority. This salvation comes, Gower suggests, in the new figure of Arion. In a gloss to line 1053, Gower writes,

*Hic narrat exemplum de concordia et vnitate inter homines prouocanda; et dicit qualiter quidam Arion nuper Citharista ex sui cantus cithareque consona melodia tante virtutis extiterat, ut ipse non solum virum cum viro, set eciam leonem cum cerua, lupum cum agno, canem cum lepore, ipsum audientes vnanimiter absque vlla discordia adinvicem pacificauit.* [Here he tells a story about the stimulating of concord and unity among human beings: and he says how a certain Arion, a harper in recent times, was of such power and virtue because of the harmonious melody of his song and his harp that he pacified those hearing him unanimously and without any discord, not only making mutual peace between man and man, but even lion and deer, wolf and sheep, and hound and hare.]

The position Gower claims for himself, represented in the figure of Arion, is that of a mediator for harmonious living: the potential saviour of the nation and humankind. As a poet who wishes to instruct and curry favour with the king, Gower places lay political authority as an alternative to ecclesiastical authority, while maintaining the interdependence between kingship and poetry. Lee Scanlon argues that, because Gower shows moral disorder permeating all three estates, “[he] demonstrates the need for the sort of order provided by the king. But to the extent such disorder also affects kingship, [Gower] demonstrates the indispensability of the moral correction that comes from the poet” (249). It follows that, in order to present his vernacular book as the solution to the nation’s problems, in particular the corruption of morality and good judgement,

Gower must establish his vernacular poetry as an authoritative and stable voice in the political field.

Gower's claims to authority as a poet concerned with the future of the nation are multiple, and they begin with the connections he implies between his writing and politics. Gower was a moralist; however, his position as a moralist was tied to his self-conception as an *auctor*. Robert Edwards suggests that, in fact, "Gower functions as a moralist precisely by being an author" (66). Edwards goes as far as to argue that, "Gower's poetic career reflects a sustained and continually renewed performance of authorship in the service of ethical and political reflection. Authorship is the necessary condition of 'moral Gower'" (66). The Prologue, which begins with the assertions of the role of books in education, goes full circle to end with the poet's role as the educator and guide of the nation: England's own version of Arion. Kimberly L. Fonzo explains Gower's logic:

Building upon already established connections between classical authorship and prophecy, Gower exploits a prophetic subject position in order to clarify his function as a mediator between subject and audience. More than a mask from behind which to safely advance political critiques, the persona of the prophet Arion allows Gower to define the nature of his authority and his relationship to his readers. (ii)

When Gower assumes the prophetic and authoritative voice of reason that describes and laments the fallen state of humanity in the Prologue, he is asserting his own responsibility to instruct England as a nation—he is, after all, writing a book for England's sake, a poetic means of expressing the commonweal.

Gower's political ambitions explain his efforts to establish himself as a poet writing in English and as relevant to the nation's political field. Siân Echard notes these ambitions as she writes that "whatever one thinks of his politics, Gower was a supremely political poet" ("Introduction" 9), both in his content and his intent. It is then noteworthy that he would choose English as the language for his poem, since this vernacular did not enjoy as much authority as Latin, which he chose for his *Vox*, or as much prestige as French, which he chose for the *Mirour*. Gower explains some of his reasoning for this choice in the Prologue, as I discuss in Chapter 2.<sup>15</sup> However, the decision to use English for the *Confessio* reflects broader implications about Gower's claim to authority and broader connections to the rise of vernacular literature in the late fourteenth century. Gower's goal was to claim a public space for himself as an English poet with enough authority to denounce the Nobility and educate kings. Critics have historically favoured Chaucer as the champion of English poetry, and cast Gower as the poet who hedged his bets, writing in Latin, French, and English. Yet Gower's motivation to set himself as an authoritative and political writer in English, as well as Latin or French, was part of a broad movement in Ricardian England to find what Anne Middleton has called a "common voice" for "public poetry" (98), a movement whose most powerful exponents were Langland, Chaucer, and Gower. While Middleton does not raise the issue of the state of Middle English, this search for a "common voice" would find support in, or might be seen as a reflection of, the development of standard forms of written English during this period.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See section "Gower's Literature and Politics" in Chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara M. H. Strang cites "a standardized written form of English arising out of this phase of London development [i.e. migration to London]" (162). Since M. L. Samuels's influential essay on Middle English dialects, critics have been divided in their view of a development of an English standard: some focus on textual production and bureaucratic scribal practice (Chancery English), which they often see beginning with the Lancastrians, and some focus on a broader linguistic movement (Standard English), which many would trace back to the reign of Richard II or even Edward III. John Fisher, in a number of articles gathered together as *The Emergence of Standard English*, argues that the clerks of Chancery worked deliberately to standardize their English and were encouraged to

As Alastair J. Minnis has shown in *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, the concept of the vernacular author was a result of the attempts of select writers in the late Middle Ages who drew from the traditions of Scriptural exegesis to establish authority over their vernacular texts.

Minnis posits his thesis as follows:

Thirteenth-century schoolmen produced a critical vocabulary which enabled the literary features of Scriptural texts to be analysed thoroughly, and which encouraged the emergence in the fourteenth century of a more liberal attitude to classical poetry. Something of the new status which had been afforded to Scriptural poetry in particular and to the poetic and rhetorical modes employed throughout Scripture in general, seems to have “rubbed off” on secular poetry. (6)

According to Minnis’s argument, the conception of the vernacular author was based on the Latin *auctores*, moral (and often religious) writers who were considered specialists or masters of the trade and who held authority in their fields of study and over their texts (10, 85). Drawing from

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do so by the Lancastrian regime. Fisher claims that “Chancery Standard was based upon the personal language and style of Henry V” (46). Fisher also attributes the large-scale copying of literary manuscripts to Lancastrian efforts to legitimate their regime: “I do not believe that this sudden burst of production of manuscripts written in English after 1400 was simply a natural evolution. I believe that it was encouraged by Henry IV, and even more by Henry V, as a deliberate policy intended to engage the support of government, business, and the English citizenry for the questionable Lancastrian usurpation of the throne” (20). Lister Matheson explains that, though the very term “Chancery English” now seems uncertain, Fisher’s broader point, that the Lancastrians promoted the use of English, including the copying of literary texts, stands (649-50). Fisher’s work has been sharply criticized by Michael Benskin, who notes, in particular, how seldom Chancery clerks wrote in English. As Benskin puts it, “Chancery Standard was Latin” (38). However, even if the Chancery was not the driving force for standardization of written English, there is no doubt that the late fourteenth century saw an increased use of a standardized written English in the London area, including Westminster. This standardization was encouraged by merchants and lawyers, not just bureaucrats. Lawrence Warner, while primarily concerned with questioning the identity of Adam Pynkhurst as “Chaucer’s Scribe,” questions this view of Lancastrian influence. He argues, instead, that scribal copying was more diffuse: “I think it is time, however, to leave behind the ideas that Adam Pynkhurst or ‘Adam Scryveyne’ provides any access to the author, that we can confidently attribute legal documents of the 1380s that do not look much like B’s hand to him anyway, that senior clerks of the Guildhall spent their time copying manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, *The Canterbury Tales*, and the *Confessio Amantis*, and that that institution exerted a centripetal force on figures like Thomas Hoccleve” (138). For a full discussion of these matters, see Samuels, Fisher, Strang, Benskin, Warner, Horobin, and Mooney.

Marie-Dominique Chenu's work, Minnis points out that, in the Middle Ages, the term *auctor* would become "an accolade bestowed upon a popular writer by those later scholars and writers who used extracts from his works as sententious statements or *auctoritates*, gave lectures on his works in the form of textual commentaries, or employed them as literary models" (10; Lee 21).<sup>17</sup> As Fonzo puts it, "Minnis notes that contemporary medieval authors often did not attain the status of *auctores* because that honour was reserved for classical and Scriptural authors, whom time had afforded greater fame" (5).

In the logic of medieval authorship, there were a few means by which vernacular authors could emulate the Latin literary tradition, and in the process achieve the same respected status as the classical *auctores*. For instance, Fonzo explains that, "less concerned than modern authors with 'intellectual property,' medieval authors openly compiled, adapted, and wove together a variety of stories of other writers. For medieval authors, rewriting received matter was an important individual skill" (8). As Jenny Lee observes in her analysis of other critics' studies, including Copeland and Steiner, the "reverential postures taken by later medieval writers towards earlier *auctores* did not translate into passive deference to authority; instead, writers would creatively exploit the displacements produced through such acts as translation and commentary to innovate on previous authors' work and, in the process, attain authority of their own" (21). According to Ardis Butterfield, "like Machaut and Froissart before him, Gower makes use, not only of the Prologue, but also of the form of the explanatory rubric, to announce himself as author" (95). As Copeland argues, Gower sought to bring the authority of Latin texts to the English vernacular. Writing his own Latin glosses for his poem, he created a system of "auto-

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<sup>17</sup> An example of an *auctor* that is particularly useful for understanding Gower's *Confessio* is Ovid, whose *Metamorphoses* inspired many of his tales. A similar comparison is done by Echard when she comments on Gower's relation to and revival of classical texts, referencing his fondness for Ovidian tales in particular in the texts of the *Vox* and *Confessio* ("Introduction" 16-17).

exegesis” that required significant scribal attention to textual detail for the *mise-en-page* (*Rhetoric* 3, 276).<sup>18</sup> My understanding of Gower, influenced by Copeland’s postulation that a writer could achieve the quality of authorship (in terms of the Latin *auctores*) through the writing of commentary or glosses, places him exactly in a pioneering group of English writers that were seeking to bring the same Latinate authority to vernacular literature.<sup>19</sup> Lee argues that “whether one privileges the function of Latin or the vernacular, the *Confessio*’s claim to authority has thus been defined in terms of language” (76). I add that it has also been defined in terms of its page layout.

The roles of authors, scribes, and compilers were not clearly defined in the late Middle Ages, and this blurring of roles complicates studies of medieval authorship and manuscript design. Playing with these distinctions, Minnis writes that “if Gower was a compiler who tried to present himself as an author, Chaucer was an author who hid behind the shield and defence of the compiler” (*Medieval Theory* 210). From a medieval perspective, however, the line between these two roles is not clear. As Steven Partridge states, “‘compiled,’ like ‘makere,’ could refer

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<sup>18</sup> Literary critics, including Copeland and Seth Lerer (see *Chaucer and His Readers*), focus on early fifteenth-century writers and their references to their predecessors. If Chaucer and Gower construct themselves as authors by commenting on their own works (through acts of what Copeland terms auto-exegesis), the next generation, through writing their commentary, construct their predecessors into a literary canon. Chaucer becomes the father of English literature in the writings of Lydgate and Hoccleve. Gower, in his use of auto-exegesis, would seem a fellow traveller with Chaucer, but, in his control of his manuscripts, he is more like the French court poets (Machaut et al.) discussed by Sylvia Huot. As Huot puts it, the “concept of the author corpus is central to Machaut’s poetic career: he is the author of books, and these books are at once carefully articulated anthologies and poetically unified wholes” (*From Song to Book* 235). This same control is exercised by Gower. Conversely, the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*, with its marginal glosses, its handsome layout, and its famous illustrations, is the work not of Chaucer; he was no longer alive by the time of the manuscript’s production, and he had not left clear instructions for its copying. Instead, the manuscript is the work of the so-called Ellesmere team. It is not just that the great early luxury manuscripts of Chaucer are posthumous; it is that these manuscripts are constructing Chaucer as a canonical author and that the people commissioning these manuscripts, and the people copying them, and the people collecting and editing the material to be copied are Lancastrians.

<sup>19</sup> The same movement was earlier seen in France (see Sylvia Huot) and Italy (see Kenneth P. Clarke), where writers were taking charge of vernacular literature for an ever expansive number of texts.

both to scribal activity and to authorial composition in the later Middle Ages” (128). Gower claims both kinds of authority over the *Confessio*. Minnis claims that Chaucer “wished to use the names of the *auctores* to cash in on their antiquity and *auctoritas*” (*Medieval Theory* 210), not only drawing Chaucer closer to Gower in the status of compiler, but also solidifying the understanding that the very concept of medieval authorship in the vernacular is based on mimesis of the Latin *auctores* and their classics. Copeland goes beyond “Minnis’s description of Gower as a (mere) compiler” and argues “that Gower in fact produces his own authority through his unique manipulation of his sources” (Lee 75). According to Copeland, as a talented “vernacular transmitter and transformer of the classics” (*Rhetoric* 207), Gower successfully crafts a poem that both relies on and supersedes its need for his *auctores* in a way that “translation, working within the structures of exegetical service, becomes full-fledged rhetorical appropriation, and thereby asserts its own canonical authority” (*Rhetoric* 202; Lee 75). Thus, in his English poem, Gower distills the *auctores* into “a discourse of inclusion rather than of privileged exclusion” (*Rhetoric* 219; Lee 75-76).

One of the prevalent methods to establish authority over vernacular texts became the copying of the Latin apparatus of academic commentary (the glosses) to construct a sense of literary tradition for the vernacular.<sup>20</sup> Gower followed this pattern extensively in his *Confessio* with his Latin glosses, offering commentary and explanations of his tales as well as their provenance (Gower often mentioned the author from whom he had borrowed a tale) and the morals he was hoping to portray.<sup>21</sup> Butterfield explains Gower’s use of Latin in similar terms:

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<sup>20</sup> For more careful consideration of Gower’s use of Latin glosses in his English poem, see Galloway’s “Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.”

<sup>21</sup> Pearsall offers a similar reading of the Latin apparatus Gower uses, comparing it to Boccaccio’s in *Choisi to his Teseide* (“Gower’s Latin” 14).

Gower's use of Latin, far from being a sign of conservatism in any simple sense, seems rather a strikingly distinctive means of investigating the complex guises under which authorship was emerging in the books of vernacular writers. It is possible to understand it, in other words, not merely as a means of affirming his *auctoritas*, of lending gravity and cultural seriousness to his writing, but rather as a voice in a much larger dialogue, embracing vernacular as well as Latin, in which authorship is newly figured. (96)

This reflecting back to the classical authors was another method of establishing a connection between the new vernacular texts and the existing literary tradition. This process of reworking classical tales was certainly employed and reworked by Gower, who, as I have suggested, borrowed many of his tales from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The last major strategy to establish self-authority over a text was the incorporation of meta-criticism in the vernacular text itself. This included discussions about books, translation, classical authors, the social and political values of writing and reading, and sometimes even featured the incorporation of a persona of the author as one of the characters in the narrative. According to Yolanda Plumley, Guillaume de Machaut's collection of fixed-form lyrics, "*the Loange des dames*, has revealed that Machaut often engaged in an intensive recycling of material to construct his lyric texts" (161). Plumley explains that "in some cases of explicit self-citation of this kind, Machaut was clearly inviting his readers or listeners to interpret one poem through the filter of another, or even several others" (161). Plumley's argument is based on a larger study by Sylvia Huot of Machaut's writing and self-establishment as a vernacular author (*From Song to Book* 211-13, 234-38). I argue that these analyses of self-referentiality can be applied to Gower; in the use of the Latin glosses, Gower, too, is self-referential. Moreover, Gower expands on the

kind of self-referentiality we find in Machaut in adding his own persona into the plot, thus raising questions about reading and its social function as means of informing socially conscious citizens like himself.<sup>22</sup> As the poem reveals in its last Book, it turns out that Amans, the old man confessing his sins to Genius, is a persona of Gower, who can also be understood as a representation of the *Confessio*'s readers.<sup>23</sup>

It is not too farfetched to consider that Gower deliberately employed these frames and techniques into his writing to establish a public space for himself. In fact, this framed understanding of auto-exegesis and mechanisms of self-referentiality that Gower employs was also employed by other writers, insofar as these authorial creations became the keys to understand the works—a key example being Christine de Pisan.<sup>24</sup> Both Gower and Christine went further than Machaut in putting their self-construction as an author to a political purpose. While Gower took on the persona of Arion in the Prologue of the *Confessio*, allegedly responding to his encounter with Richard II, Christine promoted her vision of moral reform through the presentation of one of her manuscripts (the Queen's Book, MS Harley 4431), a luxury anthology of her works, to Queen Isabel of Bavaria, who was regent of France, in 1414. Harley 4431 offers what is perhaps the most powerful example of authorial construction through control of a manuscript presentation in the history of French court poetry, an effort on the part of a self-constructed author to urge moral reform at the highest level. According to the paleographer Gilbert Ouy, most of Christine's manuscripts, including the Queen's Manuscript, are the work of three scribes: P, R, and X. X, who is "omniprésente," corrects P and R's work by scraping or

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<sup>22</sup> Echard also considers that Gower drew from Machaut, as well as de Meun and Froissart, emphasizing that his endeavours in writing the *Confessio* were indebted not only to the Latin but also the French tradition of meta-criticism, which was much more developed than the English ("Introduction" 19-20).

<sup>23</sup> I return to this idea in fuller detail in the Conclusion.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of Christine de Pisan's adoption or appropriation in England, often without acknowledging her identity, see Jennifer Summit's "Women and Authorship" and *Lost Property*.

inserting corrections between the lines; X is “la main correctrice” of the manuscripts (Ouy 37). Commenting on Christine’s presentation in his description of Harley 4431, James Laidlaw claims that “the collection was planned, copied, decorated and corrected under Christine’s direct supervision, before being presented to Queen Isabel early in 1414.” Deborah McGrady draws further conclusions from the meticulousness of the hands of the Queen’s Manuscript. She argues that “Christine and the bookmakers of Harley 4431 appear to be less concerned with acknowledging the queen than with valorizing the author” (“What is a Patron” 203), and notes Christine’s implicit criticisms of Isabel’s conduct. What McGrady offers is a reading of manuscript control that valorizes the author over the manuscript’s patron, whose power she claims was in recession by the beginning of the fifteenth century (203).<sup>25</sup> In all three cases, Christine is at the centre of her own self-fashioning as a vernacular author.

As the examples of Machaut and Christine de Pisan indicate, authors could exert a high level of control over the copying of their manuscripts and could use this control to promote their aesthetic or even political visions. Gower certainly shared their interest in promoting himself as a vernacular author, and the dedications to Richard (in the first recension) and Henry (in the third) would have served this purpose. The presentation (or, at least, dedication) to the King indicates a performative move that empowers Gower’s work as a whole. Whether Richard II or Henry IV

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<sup>25</sup> Ouy goes as far as to claim that X “agit comme régisseur des opérations de l’atelier” for the placement of the illuminations and the current titles, but it also adds textual changes (37). There are also cursive versions of these hands: P', R', and X'. These hands are used for the preparation of rubrics (very few rubrics remain; they are mostly in the gutter or intended to disappear by scraping). X' is much more frequent, providing directions (e.g., catchwords, indications of the first words of the next page written at the bottom of a page, and corrections and even glosses that summarize the content). Ouy is convinced that X and X' are the main hands of Harley 4431 (37). Although Laidlaw does not identify the hands of the manuscript, as Ouy does, he does insist on Christine’s supervision of the manuscript’s production at different stages. See also McGrady’s “Reading for Authority: Portraits of Christine de Pizan and Her Readers.”

actually read the poem is not relevant in establishing Gower's intended readers.<sup>26</sup> As McCabe explains, "Gower's dedications of his various works provide important evidence of his intended audience, but it would be a mistake to assume that Gower restricted his intended audience to the recipients of presentation copies" ("Vernacular Authorship" 570). Gower's poetry is only complete with an audience, implied or otherwise, which the poet seeks to educate. Despite Gower's references to both kings (in different recensions of the *Confessio*), the reader with whom he was concerned was the reader that would understand his references, his sources, and his critiques: someone who occupied a similar social and political position and shared similar interests, someone from a similar reading community, and, ultimately, someone he could convince of public duty.<sup>27</sup> As Lynn Arner puts it, the beginning of English literature did not effect "a democratization of culture;" instead, it provided authors with "a new means of constructing authority and imposing social control" veiled under this façade of education (160). It has also been suggested that Gower's move from "a book for King Richardes sake" (Prologue \*24) in the

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<sup>26</sup> There had, of course, been numerous works that offered moral instruction for the ruler; what is relevant here is that the intended audience of the *Confessio* is not the ruler but the nation as a whole. Many readers have understood the *Confessio* as an extended *speculum principis* composed for Richard's benefit, in which the amatory matter serves as the ethical counterpart to the political questions explored in Book VII, and whose written counsel may reach, and perhaps be of use or interest to, a broader audience than the royal one to which it may ostensibly be addressed.

<sup>27</sup> Reading communities both real and imagined were at the centre of medieval entertainment and interpretive sites of literature. As Wendy Scase highlights, medieval poets and illustrators often depicted scenes of manuscript presentation and public reading performances, though these were not always accurate depictions of lived realities (560-1). Scase is one of the many scholars who note that illiteracy, difficulty of access to books, and the high cost of manuscripts necessitated reading be a communal activity (561). She points out that "well into the later medieval period, even when they were alone, readers of vernacular texts would customarily read aloud" and that "public readings in company were the preference even among those who possessed books and were literate" (561). As A. S. G. Edwards points out in "Books and Manuscripts," "the role of memory in the circulation of literary works in the medieval period is unquantifiable but very probably pervasive" (18). Moreover, even the size of some manuscripts seems to indicate that they were meant to be read publicly instead of being used for private reading (Scase 566). Scase writes that "medieval books were often made by and for specific communities" and that, in turn, "the contents of medieval books were often shaped by the communities for whom they were made" (563). Reading communities could take shape in coterie settings; evidence of coterie readings can be noticed in poems directed to a particular reader or set of readers and which reference the author's other writings, assuming a sense of the readers' familiarity with them (Scase 563).

first recension to “a bok for Engelondes sake” (Prologue 24) in the third recension reflects the work’s evolution from a *speculum principis* to what we might call a *speculum gentis*: a mirror for the nation rather than its ruler.<sup>28</sup> The question that remains is how far Gower controlled the production of the manuscript copies of this book.

### The Control of Manuscript Production: The Recensions of the *Confessio*

Most critics tend to agree Gower exercised close control of his manuscripts because of the regularity of the reproductions of the recensions of his work. Compared to other vernacular manuscripts of the time, extant copies of Gower’s *Confessio* show much less variation.<sup>29</sup> It would seem, then, as Pearsall argues, that there were at least two teams of scribes working for Gower directly—the Trinity team, including scribe D or Adam Pinkhurst, and a second yet unidentified team—for, without direct contact with the writer, copying the *Confessio*’s glosses and their layout correctly would have been nearly impossible.<sup>30</sup> Gower’s popularity and ascension to the Lancastrian court could explain the addition of three hands (Pearsall,

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<sup>28</sup> On the ideological (rather than factional) significance of rededicating the poem to the nation, see Staley’s *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (26-27) and Scanlon’s *Narrative, Authority, Power* (252-53). For a contrasting argument that the rededication of the poem does not necessarily reflect a change in loyalty, see Nicholson’s “The Dedications of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.” Nicholson’s argument supports Scanlon’s suggestion that a poem whose dedicatee can be so easily changed is more invested in the idea of kingship than in the person of any individual ruler.

<sup>29</sup> For more on Gower’s supervision of scribal work, see Pearsall’s “Manuscripts and Illustrations” (80-2, 86) and for some justification of the process, see Echard’s “Introduction” (8-10).

<sup>30</sup> In a similar attempt to decipher the puzzles of Gower manuscripts and their many scribes, Sebastian Sobecki not only argues that British Library’s Additional MS 59495, the Trentham manuscript, likely belonged to John Gower until his death in 1408, but also that one of its scribes was Gower himself (54-56). Sobecki’s argument is that one of the hands show signs of poor vision, which could reflect Gower’s growing blindness in his last years (55). If Sobecki’s theory is accepted by the field and further research confirms his assessment, the next paleographic study will likely attempt to decode and compare the hand from the Trentham manuscript to hands in other Gower manuscripts in order to assess his direct involvement with their production. See Sobecki’s *Last Words*, especially Chapter 1.

*Descriptive Catalogue* 281) to the scribal groups who worked directly under his supervision and later carried on his legacy.<sup>31</sup>

The idea of manuscript control, however, brings into question what have been critically accepted as the three major recensions of the *Confessio*.<sup>32</sup> The first recension is the starting point; in the case of the *Confessio*, it was compiled in 1390 and dedicated to King Richard II, with an acknowledgement of Gower and Chaucer's friendship as well. There are 31 surviving manuscripts that contain this recension of the *Confessio*. The second recension does not have the dedication to King Richard or Chaucer, but it acknowledges allegiance to Henry of Lancaster and expands some of the *Confessio*'s Books to include a few other tales. Critics debate whether this change was primarily political or literary, but both options indicate Gower's concern with his public image. There are seven surviving manuscripts presenting this version of the text. The third recension, compiled in 1393, six years before Henry of Lancaster seized the British throne, is the best known version of the work as it is usually assumed to be the Gower's final vision for his poem. Only eleven manuscripts of this recension survive.<sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy that, although there are three recensions of the *Confessio*, there is stability within these recensions.

Joel Fredell questions this understanding of the recensions, asking that more scholars analyze other surviving manuscripts to reconsider the changes made by Gower to his glosses and main text. He argues that the full manuscript record of Gower's poetry indicates that Gower

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<sup>31</sup> If we accept Shailor's dating, then we must reflect on the implications of Gower's authorship and control of manuscript production beyond his active supervision of scribal work. The stability of the text of the *Confessio* in a span of these fifteen years would suggest that Gower's vernacular authority did in fact maintain its status in sites of manuscript production even after his death—an indication that his control of manuscript production to establish this canon of works placed him as an authority figure after all.

<sup>32</sup> The following classification is based on Macaulay's explanations of the recensions (II. cxxvii-cxxxviii) and Pearsall's categorizing of known *Confessio* manuscripts (in a study done in 2004, which was subsequently digitized in his online archive, *Descriptive Catalogue*).

<sup>33</sup> This includes Beinecke's MS Osborn F.a.1, which will be the subject of study shortly.

entered a flurry of activity in the late 1390s and early 1400s—when there was active demand for his works among the commercial scribes of London and Westminster, and when Gower (willingly or not) became the Lancastrian laureate. He concludes that “this period, then, is a likely time for Gower to revise the *Confessio* text and/or marginalia, with some discreet touches to make the revisions seem more about prescience and less about opportunism” (249). Fredell further implies that Gower deliberately changed the Ricardian version of his text after he wrote the Henrician one; he argues that the record of manuscripts, only indicating copies of the first recension later than the earlier version of the third one, is proof that Macaulay’s stemma requires revision.

There is debate concerning Gower’s decision to revise his work. It would be possible to argue that, in trying to establish himself a vernacular author, Gower took the whole enterprise of manuscript production seriously and that he carefully controlled the restructuring of his text. He sought to command not only the words on the page (the scribal work), but also its interpretations (the glosses) and its audience (including the changes in dedication). If Gower decided to revise his work primarily for political reasons, perhaps, as Gray suggests, because of King Richard II’s poor treatment of officers of law, which may have offended the poet because of his earlier practicing of civil law and his connections in Southwark, then Gower could have been trying to remain relevant in the political sphere despite Richard II’s increasing unpopularity. Political revisions of this kind could also be seen as a means of maintaining his good image as the “moral Gower” in order to gain favour with the ruling class that opposed Richard II.

Regardless of the political motivations, or even the structural shifts of the text (the editing of the Prologue and other sections), the acknowledgement that the *Confessio* went through recensions presupposes authorial intervention. The editing of a text by scribes and their

sensibilities does not cause critics to structurally categorize revisions of works when they discuss differences in manuscripts. However, when it is understood that the author was involved in this editing, scholarship begins to classify different (and subsequent) versions of a text as *recensions*. Of course, this discussion is complicated when one takes into account that all recensions of the *Confessio* were being reproduced in different sites, and that most (if not all) copies of the first recension that have survived were produced later than what scholarship considers to be the standard copies of the third recension, including MS. Osborn F.a.1.<sup>34</sup> Despite these difficulties, however, the consensus is that Gower indeed revised his work for reasons related either to his own public image or to King Richard II's unpopularity.

Gower's interest in establishing himself as a vernacular author whose works might be ranked with the classics of literature and philosophy, while it may in part have been no more than an effort to differentiate himself from minstrels and entertainers (as explained by Echard), ultimately led to higher ambition to secure his place in the political realm.<sup>35</sup> The concern with tradition and respectability, crucial for political influence, could explain Gower's investment in the production of his manuscripts—both his literal commitment to glosses and classical tales, and his supposed supervision of scribal reproduction of his texts. While most vernacular writers in late fourteenth-century Britain did not attempt to supervise the scribes who copied their works, Gower invested himself in this process of manuscript production in order to be recognized as a serious writer and scholar in the growing vernacular field. Partly, Gower's concern was to ensure

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<sup>34</sup> Despite this chronological conundrum, according to the existing scholarship, it is the dating of each opening in the Prologue—in which Gower indicates the year of King Richard's rule when he produces the manuscript—that informs the consensus about the original production date of a version of the *Confessio*, and therefore places a given manuscript into one of the three recensions.

<sup>35</sup> Echard's "Introduction" 8-9.

that scribal copying did not affect the reproduction of his work so that his image was neither tarnished nor misrepresented in public.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, not all writers chose to exercise such close control of the production of their manuscripts, and, on occasion, modern readers, seeking elaborate literary cohesion, have attributed greater control than the evidence supports. Derek Pearsall argues in “The Whole Book” that “the desire for the author remains strong in literary studies, despite reports of his demise (...) the idea of the author, real or imagined (...) gives the critic the opportunity to ventriloquize his own ideas and desires in an ostensibly disinterested quest for authorial intention” (18). Pearsall questions whether the complex patterns of meaning we find in manuscripts are just wishful thinking. In regard to manuscript studies and the categorization of miscellanies, he argues that “it is possible, and all too possible, to overestimate the activity of the controlling or guiding intelligence of the scribe-compiler in the making of late medieval English secular miscellanies” (29). Pearsall’s skepticism and attacks on over-interpretation reflect his concern for the limits of a text.<sup>37</sup> Yet Pearsall’s distinction between miscellanies and anthologies is based on the assumption of an organizing principle (21-22).<sup>38</sup> Pearsall writes, “what makes the difference between an anthology and a miscellany” is “the idea of a single purpose” (21). He explains that “the purposes that are described in an anthology or anthology-booklet have to be specific, direct and fairly obvious to the imagined contemporary reader” (21). However, it becomes clear in Pearsall’s own argument that even miscellanies are organized according to

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<sup>36</sup> Echard agrees with this reading. See “Introduction” 8-9 and 16-17.

<sup>37</sup> In the debates of New Criticism, W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and M. C. Beardsley claim that expanding a text beyond the possibilities it affords is to engage in “creative writing” (476).

<sup>38</sup> Although Pearsall’s critique can only be applied to Gower’s *Confessio* by extension or analogy, since most manuscripts of the poem are not miscellanies, these questions are relevant to the understanding of the field of manuscript production as much more fluid, malleable, and, perhaps, inconsistent than someone who is attempting to create a space for himself as a public poet would allow.

some logic (22) and that we must also consider “the circumstances under which compilations come into existence” and our speculations about intention and policy (25). As the case study from the Appendix demonstrates, there are substantial reasons for believing that Gower did indeed exercise a high level of control.

## Chapter 2 - Gower and 1380s Politics: The *Confessio* as Public Poetry

The first frame that needs to be addressed in a study of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is the political. The confessional and psychological frames, which will be studied in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively, are contingent on and result from the framing of Gower's politics. Indeed, Gower's political project guides his didacticism—a feature often put at the forefront of analyses of the poem's allegorical and confessional frames. The figure of Amans as a lover who must be educated by Genius, confess his sins, and be reintegrated into society thus emerges as the focal point for the confession and allegory that unfold. And it is through this confession that Gower depicts the psychological development that reading “good ensamples” can have on those who choose to benefit from his moral lessons. Yet the need for these examples and for an emphasis on morality and civil duty can only be understood in context of Gower's views on the division of the nation—i.e. the social disorder of the 1380s. That the opening of the Prologue emphasizes the relationship between literature and politics only serves as further proof that the poem as a whole is circumscribed by politics—specifically, Gower's responses to the sociopolitical unrest in England during his composition of the *Confessio*.

This chapter looks at the means through which Gower situated his *Confessio* in relation to the broader political issues and discussions of the 1380s, both as a means to contextualize his material and provide it authority, as well as to create a space for himself as a public poet and for his poetry as a didactic tool. In order to launch into this discussion of the *Confessio* as public poetry, a topic first developed by Anne Middleton in her reading of Ricardian poetry, I begin by tracing the literary and political contexts that Gower presents in the opening of the Prologue, thus

establishing the connection between literature (and specifically his poem) and politics. I move on to an overview of the politics of King Richard's turbulent years, in particular the Rising of 1381 and the Lords Appellant's Merciless Parliament, since Gower writes the *Confessio* as a response to these events. I then take a look at the strategies Gower used to simultaneously criticize the corruption of the State and align himself with the figure of the king. In this process, I discuss how Gower sets up a path for himself as the one capable of answering the needs of both the king and the nation for moral reform. I conclude with the discussion of Gower as a public poet, a writer taking on a new genre of literature that promotes the common good from a layman's (not a cleric's) perspective.

#### Gower's Literature and Politics

The opening of the Prologue is divided into a Latin incipit and Middle English verses. In the incipit, Gower employs a modesty *topos* to justify his reasoning for writing, and, in particular, for writing in English:

*Torpor, ebes sensus, scola parua labor minimusque*

*Causant quo minimus ipse minora canam:*

*Qua tamen Engisti lingua canit Insula Bruti*

*Anglica Carmente metra iuuante loquar*

*Ossibus ergo carens que conterit ossa loquelis*

*Absit, et interpres stet procul oro malus.*

[Listlessness, dull discernment, little schooling and tiniest labor cause me, the least of all, to sing these little things. Nonetheless, in the tongue of Hengist in which the island of Brutus sings, with Carmentis' aid I will utter English verses.

Let then the boneless one that breaks bones with speeches be absent, and let the malicious interpreter (I pray) stand far off.]

These lines provide insight into Gower's rationale for writing, assert his modest abilities yet confidence in success, and exhort those of ill intent to remain far off. They also reference two major figures of English history, Hengist and Brutus, who offer Gower authority to address the nation's politics, and a major figure of Latin poetry, Carmen, who offers Gower authority in his poetic endeavour. All of these will protect him from the "tongue that breaks bones with speeches," a reference to the idle or malicious speaker who sows discord, and thus a fitting counterpart to the "evil interpreter" who distorts meaning. Here Gower crafts a separation between speech and writing, championing writing from the outset of the poem.

Beyond the surface, however, these lines offer insight into Gower's social politics. In addition to providing justification for Gower's "song," the opening Latin verse "Torpor, ebes sensus, scola parua labor minimusque" lists some of the issues that Gower addresses in the work as causes for concern. Although Gower attributes torpor, dull discernment, and little schooling to himself (as justifications for his poem), these are all issues that have caused the three estates to be in disarray; the lack of motivation and civil duty behind these issues is what inspires Gower to address the nation from a moral ground.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, "behind the modesty trope, Gower challenges his audience to read his work sympathetically, even though it is written in English" (Peck, note to Latin verses). This challenge reveals that Gower does not simply wish to raise English as the new language of authority, thus displacing Latin. The Latin glosses in fact confirm that Latin remains the language of authority in the poem. As T. Matthew N. McCabe notes,

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<sup>1</sup> These descriptors could play into a veiled critique of the political unrest at the time—a failure of the current king, Richard II, to establish order, especially after the unrest of 1381 (the Peasants' Rising) and later 1388 (with the Lords Appellant and the Merciless Parliament). I dive further into the political context in the next section.

Gower places English as “an alternative medium,” one that is not only suitable to the subject matter—the future of England—but whose status and audience is “likely to achieve quite different results” (*Gower’s Vulgar Tongue* 89).<sup>2</sup> Gower uses the Latin verses to appeal to the language of instruction while building a shared communal perspective with his readers through his use of English. Gower’s favouring of English reflects of his ambition to outline a lay didacticism, accessible to a lay audience, outside of ecclesiastical control (3-4). Specifically, McCabe sees this choice as a means for Gower to explain the immanence and accessibility of grace to his reading community.<sup>3</sup> As Peck explains, to counteract the insularity of the English language, “Gower alludes to the history of the peoples of the island and the heroic origins of the nation founded by Brutus” (note to Latin verses).<sup>4</sup> Thus, Gower has proven that he is capable of writing in Latin, revealing that he counts as *litteratus*, but he chooses English as the heroic and historical language of the people whom he addresses, establishing a connection between his poem and classic antiquity. Moreover, “Gower will ‘utter’ but also *write* his English verses, an event implicitly as foundational as Carmen’s founding contributions to linguistic history” (Peck, note to Latin verses).<sup>5</sup> Gower is breathing new life into the language, the same way Carmen did with Latin in Italy. Lastly, through clever manipulation of the meanings of “tongue,” both as *lingua* and as the “boneless one” who lacks bones yet possesses “bone-breaking” power, a subject of many Latin proverbs (Echard and Fanger xxxvii, 3), Gower concludes this section by

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Gower’s use of English in contrast to his Latin, see McCabe’s *Gower’s Vulgar Tongue: Ovid, Lay Religion, and English Poetry in the Confessio Amantis*.

<sup>3</sup> To quote McCabe, “English emerges as a tongue whose chief resources for expressing theological truth reside not in technical precision—even less so than in Gower’s poetically self-aware Latin, however fraught with linguistic angst though it may be—but in intimacy, polysemy [sic], and affect—for example when Gower juxtaposes natural human ‘pite’ and divine ‘grace’ in ways that frequently assign the natural passion a salvific function” (“Vernacular Authorship” 573).

<sup>4</sup> Compare with Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain*, which narrates the founding of Britain.

<sup>5</sup> See Echard’s “With Carmen’s Help,” especially 3–10.

warning those who may speak ill of his endeavour or misinterpret it. Gower's warning here implies that there is a complexity to his writing that could be misunderstood by readers who are neither careful nor well intentioned.

Furthering the ideas about writing and reading from the Latin incipit, the verses in Middle English reveal Gower's insertion of the *Confessio* into a well-established didactic tradition, as well as his vision and hope for the kind of moral reading he expects of those who shall read his work:

Of hem that writen ous tofore  
The bokes duelle, and we therefore  
Ben tawht of that was write tho:  
Forthi good is that we also  
In oure tyme among ous hiere  
Do wryte of newe som matiere,  
Essampled of these olde wyse,  
So that it myhte in such a wyse,  
Whan we ben dede and elleswhere,  
Beleve to the worldes eere

In tyme comende after this. (Prologue 1-11)

In the opening sentence of the *Confessio*, Gower therefore announces the poem as a didactic tool: books are instruments that allow us to learn from the past, and it is this kind of book, one based on the old examples, that he is writing. Gower's new material (line 6), the poet hopes, shall survive and be left for future generations in the same manner as those written by his predecessors. According to Peck, in these lines, "Gower positions books as the repository of

moral values and history, against which he encourages the reader to judge present behavior. Books provide examples from ‘olde wyse’ (line 7); that wisdom of the past enables people to see what is new, whether in method, topic, or circumstance” (note to line 2). By aligning himself with the moral authors of the past and his goal with moral and practical guidance, Gower writes himself into a didactic tradition where he offers his readers necessary moral instruction. When we combine the ambitions he portrays in the English verses with the authority he evokes in the Latin incipit, we begin to get a picture of Gower as an innovative poet writing to a specific kind of reader.

Gower then proceeds to further justify his choice of English as the primary language for this didactic poem by focusing on its utilitarian purpose for the nation:

And for that fewe men endite  
In oure Englissh, I thenke make  
A bok for Engelondes sake,  
The yer sextenthe of Kyng Richard. (Prologue 22-25)

Since there are not enough books in English dealing with moral examples to be left for future generations, Gower sets out to write the *Confessio* as a book for England’s sake—for the sake of the future of the nation. These lines reflect another critique of the three estates, particularly of the Church. David Aers reads the phrase “for Engelondes sake” as the embodiment of Gower’s attack on the Church’s failure (Peck, note to Prologue 24). Aers argues instead that Gower offers his lay wisdom as an alternative to ecclesiastical rule. To this end, Aers contrasts what he understands as Gower’s “radical critique of the actually existing Church” “with a defense of the secular sovereign’s role in challenging the ecclesiastical hierarchy when it is judged to be in serious error” (“Reflections” 196; Peck, note to Prologue 24). In other words, Gower takes on the

responsibility to write to and for the king, and to pass on the examples of old onto new writing, which may guide the moral judgement of the ruler of the nation.

References to Gower's guidance for the nation are also found in revised versions of the *Confessio*. Five extant manuscripts dated from after the third recension of the poem contain a gloss at line 22 indicating a dedication of the poem to Henry of Lancaster: "*Hic in principio declarat qualiter in anno Regis Ricardi secundi sexto decimo Iohannes Gower presentem libellum composuit et finaliter compleuit, quem strenuissimo domino suo domino Henrico de Lancastria tunc Derbeie Comiti cum omni reuerencia specialiter destinavit* [John Gower composed and ultimately completed the present little book, which he especially designated with all reverence for the most vigorous lord, his lord Henry of Lancaster, at that time Earl of Derby]." The combination of the Latin note with the English verses positions Henry, already a prominent political figure in the early 1390s and later Henry IV, as stand ins for the nation—its utmost representative. It is also a retroactive claim from Gower that he was always on Henry's side.

A similar parallel between the nation as Gower's intended audience and a political stand in can be found in the first recension of the poem as well, though in this version of the poem Gower continues the modesty *topos* as means of securing favour with the king. Immediately after Gower explains that he is writing a book in English, he moves on to dedicate it to King Richard II. Instead of a book for England's sake, Gower writes,

A book for King Richardes sake  
To whom bilongeth my ligeance  
With al myn hertes obeissance  
In al that ever a liege man

Unto his king may doon or can. (Prologue \*24-28)

Given the political instability of the 1380s and the risks in addressing the perceived failures of a ruling monarch, it is noteworthy that Gower decides to write in the first recension of the poem to offer advice to King Richard II.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Gower's dedication of the *Confessio* to King Richard II was a strategic political decision since Richard was widely unpopular in the 1380s. More so than a dedication, this section is a site of Gower's self-construction as England's public poet, in which the tutor to the monarch becomes a tutor to the nation.<sup>7</sup> Here, the purpose of the book is both to please and to educate the young king.

Due to this approach, the poem is closely associated with the tradition of the *speculum principis* or mirror-for-princes—a didactic compilation concerned with educating the (future) ruler of a nation—who arguably stands for an informed citizen.<sup>8</sup> The late-fourteenth century saw the growth of the mirror-for-princes tradition in the English vernacular. Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate both followed Gower with their own encyclopaedic poems dealing with kingly matters. However, there is some debate as to the real audience of such works. On the one hand, Richard Firth Green argues that *specula* have the central function of advising the prince to whom they are dedicated, who then is the only primary reader of the text as intended by the author. On the other hand, Daniel Wakelin offers a different view of the readers of *specula*: “the prince who

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<sup>6</sup> In the third recension, after establishing the scope of the *Confessio* in the Prologue, Gower writes, “Bot for my wittes ben to smale / To tellen every man his tale” (Prologue 81-82). Although this literary move is part of the dedication to Henry IV, alluding to the modesty *topos* of deference to the patron in all three recensions, Gower directly presents himself as a mentor to a young king.

<sup>7</sup> For more on public poetry, see section “On Public Poetry.”

<sup>8</sup> John Fisher was the first to criticize the *Confessio*'s didactic tradition, arguing that Gower's real significance is in his role as a social and moral critic. For discussions of the *Confessio* as a *speculum principis* and of Gower's efforts to blend the roles of poet and counsellor (and, perhaps, political critic), see George Coffman's “John Gower, Mentor for Royalty: Richard II;” Elizabeth Porter's “Gower's Ethical Microcosm;” Judith Ferster's *Fictions of Advice* (108–146); Lynn Staley's “Gower, Richard II, Henry of Derby, and the Business of Making Culture;” Frank Grady's “Gower's Boat, Richard's Barge, and the True Story of the *Confessio Amantis*: Text and Gloss;” and Michael Hanrahan's “Speaking of Sodomy: Gower's Advice to Princes in the *Confessio Amantis*.”

is the implied reader is not the only real reader; the real readers are the wider ‘comounte’ of political society” (38).<sup>9</sup> “Yet,” Amanda Gerber argues, “this genre does not account for the flexible framework and the harmonizing of multiple types of lore, source materials, and character voices that come to characterize works such as Gower’s *Confessio*” (5).

According to his claims in the first recension, Gower decided to compose his *Confessio* as a result of his fortuitous meeting with Richard II. In this version, Gower explains that King Richard asks him to take on the charge of writing this English book, that “Som newe thing I scholde booke, / That he himself it mighte looke / After the forme of my writyng” (Prologue \*51-53). This scene, along with many others throughout the *Confessio* in which politics (or political perception) is clearly at the forefront of Gower’s concerns, suggests that Gower’s motivations for writing the book show his sustained political engagement, which was shaped by his anxiety over the political unrest of his time. Jeffery Stoyanoff argues, “the beginning of the *Prologus* demonstrates the tension between the instability of the world outside of the poem and the ways in which Gower’s poem attempts to temper such instability by teaching wisdom to its reader. The reader acquires wisdom, then, through reading the poem” (53). It follows that wisdom is not simply a set of prudent maxims but insight that is acquired through the process of reading. Gower’s reverence for the king, as someone who might judge the form of his writing, positions the poet favourably to then take on the role of instructor, for the king could learn from the poet’s written “wisdom.”

Whether the intended reader is the king or the educated elite of the nation, the reader ought to have or develop a serious sense responsibility. Speaking to this evocation of responsibility, Rosemarie McGerr contends that the *Confessio* “highlight[s] the role of reading as

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<sup>9</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* defines “comounte” as “the people of a country, city, etc.; nation, citizenry; commonwealth, community”—a fitting definition for the audience of a didactic text.

a means of developing good judgment, whether by princes or by other readers whose self-government contributed to creating a just society” (167). According to McGerr, Gower advises that reading can be a valuable tool for inquiry and analysis, which can assist individuals, including kings, in enhancing their ethical judgment (186). This establishment of reading as inquiry lays down the foundation for the didactic purposes of the *Confessio*—reading is the means to reasoned judgement and to a just society. By placing the king as his ideal audience, and by reminding us that the king judges over matters of importance, Gower subtly presents a model in which a king ought to be a reader. As McGerr argues, the *Confessio* addresses the king as the nation’s judge, “for whom reading skills are essential” (186). By educating the king, Gower takes his literary endeavour to the political realm. In other words, by claiming to focus his efforts toward reading materials for the education of Richard II, Gower thus bridges the gap between the theories of wisdom literature and the practical education of an informed youth, bringing his literary creation into the sociopolitical realm, and emphasizing the role of moral literature in the development of conscious civil behaviour.

## Poetics and Politics

Gower’s concern with the *res publica* is the basis for Anne Middleton’s understanding of Gower as a public poet, someone who “presents himself as, like his audience, a layman of good will, one worker among others, with a talent to be used for the common good” (99).<sup>10</sup> This public role allows Gower to begin his critique of the current state of the nation, the reason behind his need to come forth as the voice of reason to educate the political leaders. The political situation

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<sup>10</sup> For a full discussion of Anne Middleton’s essay on Ricardian public poetry, see section “On Public Poetry” below.

in England during the time Gower was writing the *Confessio* was unstable, and this instability contributed to the poet's approach to his educational project.

When we consider the situation in the 1380s, during which decade Gower both completed his *Vox* and compiled his *Confessio*, we can understand why he was concerned with division and why he worked to establish that the actions of the individual affects the body politic. The parallels that Gower establishes between the individual soul and the body politic, of which the individual is part, suggest that the two are facsimiles of one another, the individual being both one's own introspection and a social member (Peck, *Kingship* xxi). Although Gower would not name particular contributors to the political instability of the kingdom, his project for the *Confessio* is based on the premise that, if a person's mind is divided and therefore unbalanced, we cannot expect him or her to demonstrate cohesive behaviour. When we cannot find the right balance between Reason and our own volitions, our will, we deviate from a path of morality and moderation. This imbalance is reflected in the figure of Amans when he is first introduced in Book I. Gower insists on the "middel weie" (Prologue 17) because it brings predictable, stable behaviour and social engagement. What causes both social and personal division and therefore instability is selfishness, a corruption of the will.

It is noteworthy that the first time Gower introduces "division" is in the discussion of the State, in a reference to how the kingdom has been divided—a likely reference to the parliamentary disputes of the second half of the 1380s. Indeed, the 1380s was a volatile decade in England. The population remained entangled in the aftermath of a tumultuous era, as the reverberations of the plague still echoed through the late 1370s. Furthermore, they grappled with burdensome levies enforced by the government in order to sustain the protracted conflict with France—the Hundred Years' War. Compounded by an unstable leadership in London, the people

found themselves navigating treacherous waters of political and financial uncertainty. As a result, the Great Rising of 1381, which was instigated by royal intervention in the collection of taxes, reflected enduring issues with local and national governance. As a result, the Rising not only expressed popular discontent with the king, but it also furthered hostility toward the young monarch's reign and politics, partially for the ways in which he dealt with the rebels and re-established order.

Prominent writers of the day placed the blame elsewhere. Steven Justice argues that writers during the end the fourteenth century tried to “forget” the Rising, not by forgetting the events or their violence, but by focusing on the violence and noise as indiscernible cacophony (207). This “erasure” of the Rising, and of the factors leading up to the confrontations, was a measured gesture of conservative politics. In fact, Justice claims that these writers (i.e. Walsingham, Chaucer, and Gower) used depictions of the violence of the Rising to “forget something that more urgently threatened clerical authority and lordly privilege” and turn it into “a commonplace of clangorous disorder” (207). Gower, in particular, responded to the Rising by incorporating a vision of disorder into the opening of his encyclopaedic *Vox*; the vision now comprises the first book of all extant manuscripts of the text. By introducing this vision of a divided and chaotic nation, Gower removed himself from potential associations of his poetic voice with the instability and “disorder” of those involved in the Rising, thus protecting his image as a poet of the court.

The voice Gower claims in the *Vox* is the voice of the public: the voice both speaking for the public and telling the public its duty, the *vox populi* (Prologue 2). According to Kimberly L. Fonzo, the concept of the voice of the people can be traced back to “the Gregorian Reform of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries, which clarified that kings were laymen rather than priestly

rulers” and “had a profound influence on the ways in which state authority represented itself. In the absence of clear divine sanction, kings invoked the authority of ‘the people’” (14). Fonzo then goes on to explain this authority:

Because “the people” had symbolically supplanted divinely sanctioned legal authority, claiming to be the voice of the people was much like claiming to be a prophet, the voice of God. Because the people are the symbolic source of legislative power, the voice of the people is a voice that checks, warns, and even threatens those who hold it. After the English Parliament had deposed Edward II, Thomas Walsingham reports that the Archbishop of Canterbury articulated the increasing power of the Commons over the monarchy as God’s own intention by preaching on the text *Vox populi, vox Dei* at Edward III’s coronation. Regardless of whether “the public” actually demanded the deposition of a king, the notion of popular sovereignty could still be exploited to justify it. In this way, the *vox populi* bore an immediate kind of authority that the *vox Dei* alone had lacked—judgment on Earth rather than judgment in Heaven. (15)

According to Fonzo, by blending the opinions of the public with religious beliefs, Gower effectively presents his societal criticisms with the support of two authoritative sources (16). He denies that his personal grievances influence his complaints and instead portrays himself as a messenger of the public, driven by a divine calling to speak the truth (16). In addition to being inspired by the public, Gower also draws inspiration from various biblical prophets to condemn the Church, the State, and society as a whole (16).

However, Gower’s voice is also an isolated voice that speaks for the nation, to defend certain political interests and rewrite political dissidence. In the early 1380s, Gower did not

possess the required authority in the court of Richard II to criticize political decisions or have his own voice in matters of national politics. His depiction of the Rising in the *Vox's visio* sought to reconcile his views and frustration with his limited political power. Thus, Gower claims the voice of the Commons because, in representing this group, he earns a moral credit for himself and his clientele, which, aligned with the authority of the Latin text, projects his voice as the voice of authoritative reason. As Justice explains, “the *Vox* speaks to those who can read [Gower’s] Latin, but for a much wider group altogether” (211). Moreover, by writing in Latin, Gower distances himself and his text from the popular voice of the Rising, though many of their political critiques were similar (Justice 211). The Latin also separates the “vernacular names of rustic rebels” (212) from the poetic discourse to which they do not belong, by turning them into beasts incapable of speech (213). The *visio* in *Vox* describes scenes of the Rising as a nightmare dream-vision of the events in London in which animals are causing noise and chaos:

*Quidam sternutant asinorum more ferino,  
Mugitus quidam personuere boum;  
Quidam porcorum grunnitus horridiores  
Emittunt, que suo murmure terra tremit:  
Frendet aper spumans, magnos facit atque tumultus,  
Et quiritat verres auget et ipse sonos.*

[Some (rebels) bray in the wild manner of asses, some sound the bellows of cattle, some let out the horrid grunts of pigs, at which the earth trembles, the boar froths and makes great tumult, and the wild pig cries out, increasing their noise.]

(I. 799-804)

This description of the events carries on for many more lines. The *Vox* then continues on to describe the Rising's turn to destruction, the execution of then Archbishop of Canterbury, Simon Sudbury, Gower's own attempt to escape the violence, and God's intervention to save both Gower and the nation. Justice explains that "whatever else the king, his counselor, magnates, gentry in and out of parliament, religious houses, higher clergy, scribes, and civil servants might have disagreed on, they agreed that the Rising was a bad thing" (213). Gower thus benefited by claiming the *Vox* as the voice of the Commons, but making it the common voice of the Rising's "victims."

#### The Political Tensions of the 1380s

Political tension between the estates and the king continued to rise after 1381. Although it is the general consensus that the Rising "was sparked off by the activities of the poll-tax collectors in south Essex in late May and early June [of] 1381, the demands which the [rebels] put forward during the [Rising], notably the emancipation of serfs, had their roots in the growing tensions between landlords and peasants that followed the widespread mortality from successive outbreaks of plague" (Tuck). In fact, the rebels were neither serfs nor peasants; they came from the upper echelons of village society. They were only "peasants" in the eyes of outsiders (Hilton 31-32). However, though often quite prosperous, the rebels were not landowners. To counteract the rising wages of labourers during a period of worker shortage, the government had passed the first Ordinance in 1349 and the Statute of Labourers in 1351 pegging wages at their pre-Black Death levels. Despite maintaining their standing with relatively little difficulty after the plague, "landowners bemoaned their plight and asked for further restrictions on the movement of unfree labour" (Saul 59). Landlords continued to abuse jurisdictional power by invoking manorial

courts and establishing a “second serfdom” (Dyer 424), in which labourers who had left their manors to seek better opportunities had to return, take up vacant tenements, and be ready to serve whenever it pleased their lords to have them.<sup>11</sup> Despite earlier promises, on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1381, Richard revoked the charter of manumission and pardons he promised to the rebels. According to Anthony Tuck, “it seems likely that the promises of freedom he had made at Mile End were empty, designed to placate the rebels and make it easier to disperse them. Serfs were the property of their lords and, as was pointed out in the subsequent parliament, manumission was a matter for individual lords rather than the king.” Thus, in the mid 1380s, the rural population was still oppressed by unfair taxation and punitive labour laws because neither of these issues had been resolved with the movement, and the ongoing war with France continued to cause a large hole in the king’s treasury.

In the city, the Commons were appalled by the lack of control that the royal authorities had over London during the uprising, a fact that caused further distrust of Richard and his ability to govern. In fact, the Commons had grown increasingly restive about the state of public order since the early years of Richard’s reign. The violence of the Rising had unnerved them, and they felt uneasy about the continuing high level of lawlessness in the shires. According to Nigel Saul, the Commons

saw lawlessness as a consequence of the breakdown of the social hierarchy and the failure of the estates to perform their appointed roles. The lower orders, they believed, were aping the manners and lifestyle of the magnates, while the

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<sup>11</sup> Saul notes that some of the Commons’ complaints and requests had already been made during the Rising and granted by Richard in his first meeting with their leadership in June of 1381. When the king first met with the insurgents from the Risings, the rebels made two requests: the first was the execution of those they deemed as traitors, and the second was the abolition of serfdom and a standard measure of rent (68). Saul goes on to write that “Richard, whether genuinely or otherwise, gave way to their demands. There at Mile End he had proclaimed that ‘he would confirm and grant that they should be free’” (68).

magnates themselves were aggravating the problem by practising unlawful maintenance and failing to preserve the peace. (200)

Gower's voice of the Commons from *Vox* expressed similar complaints.

Meanwhile, the nobles, who already were in disputes with the Commons, were also seeking retribution for the events of the Rising. However, because the king offered pardons even during the Rising in an effort to offer conciliation and quell the rebellion, several nobles were angered for they would not see the "justice" they were seeking (Saul 67, 166). Richard Dobson writes that, in his first meeting with the rebel forces in London in 1381, at Mile End, Richard "had it proclaimed to [the rebels] that they should all go peaceably to their homes, and he would pardon them all their different offences" (159). Richard sent dozens of these letters with his signet seal to appease the rebels in London during the Rising (Dobson 159-60)—and he did the same later in Essex (Dobson 75-76). As Charles Oman puts it, during the three years after 1381, "the King was pardoning a few rebels almost every week" (152). Dobson observes that several trials relating to the events of 1381 were interrupted and concluded when the accused provided royal pardons, which forced the proceedings to come to a close. In some cases, it was even uncertain whether the "rebels" were actually even guilty of all crimes for which they were accused. For instance, the trial of John Hermare and Nicholas Gromond from Essex saw the two accused go free after they presented royal letters of pardon, yet it is uncertain whether all accusations against them were legitimate (Dobson 148). Richard's decision to offer conciliation and pardons, no doubt influenced by his council, gained him some favour with the peasants and labourers, but caused some friction with Lords who sought more punitive measures against the rebels (Saul 67).

The Hundred Years' War was also contributing to the rising tensions of the 1380s. According to Tuck, "murmurings of hostility against Richard's advisers had surfaced in parliament in 1384," and in 1385 "the Commons complained about the king's extravagance and his misuse of patronage." The population was fed up with the government's military and strategic decisions, especially the continued raises in taxes due to the ongoing war. In 1386, the threat of French invasion was causing the people of London to behave "like frightened hares" (Saul 155), and "the entire population of the southern counties indulged in a frenetic spending spree in an effort to enjoy their worldly goods before they were stripped of them by the French" (Saul 156). Yet, in preparation for conflict, the government increased taxes on counties and towns to strengthen their military defences. According to Saul, the dubious legality of the increased taxes "added to the unpopularity which the government was already incurring as a result of its seemingly never-ending demands for manpower and money" (156). This matter brought the House of Commons and the House of Lords together in their dissatisfaction with Richard's government (in particular with his chancellor, Michael de la Pole) during the Wonderful Parliament of 1386. This session of the English Parliament was supposed to address King Richard II's need for money, but it quickly shaped into an effort to reform his administration. Despite Richard's resistance and reluctance, the Commons and Lords were united in seeking the impeachment of de la Pole, reducing taxation, and limiting the king's royal prerogative in terms of his rule over the law and in relation to parliament itself.

The Church, as the one estate left in this discussion, was not in a favourable position itself, and it also had a challenging time dealing with Richard. In 1378, the Great Schism jeopardized the Church's political power. England supported Pope Urban VI mostly as a means to continue their hostility against the French, who supported Pope Clement VII. The English

Church, however, felt the weight of this support in the burden of taxation and contributions to the war effort. Richard supported the Church, so, while the Church could protest the government's increasing demands for more assistance during the 1380s, ecclesiastical authorities could not openly defy Richard. Yet, tension continued to build between the Church and Richard. Following a series of taxes implemented by Parliament on the Church, Archbishop of Canterbury, William Courteney, declared in the 1383 Parliament that "the church was free and could not be taxed by the laity" (Dahmus 412). This declaration caused uproar, and the Commons retaliated. Richard intervened, and the Church offered further subsidy to the king, but that was not enough to cover the large expenses of Richard's reign. Within a month, Richard asked for a further subsidy, only to be denied by Archbishop Courteney. Richard then asked a second time, and was refused a second time, though this time through a vote of the convocation. Instead, Richard asked for the subsidy that had already been decided on and allocated to him, contingent on his leading an army against the French forces. Archbishop Courteney was displeased with the irregular nature of the king's request, but the grant was eventually paid.

Archbishop Courteney also had to deal with the political plays between the Lords and Richard II from 1386 to 1388, and he had attended the Merciless Parliament, though he excused himself from proceedings. There were also a series of disputes between Pope Urban and Richard regarding subsidies and money orders, as the king had forbidden the shipment of silver and gold out of the realm in 1388. The Pope ordered the Church of England to pay and endeavoured to replace the senior ecclesiastics, opposing the leaders voted in by the English clergy or appointed by Richard himself. In 1390, although Pope Boniface IX and Richard began attempts to

reconcile, these attempts incensed members of Parliament, and both Houses raised concerns about Rome's request for subsidies from the English Church.<sup>12</sup>

In the late 1380s, tensions persisted even within the House of Lords because Richard continued to oppose and ignore the decisions of the Wonderful Parliament of 1386. In 1387, as dissension grew, a conflict broke out between the Crown and the Nobility. Particularly opposed to the king were the Lords Appellant, the five major contributors of the House of Lords behind the Wonderful Parliament. The Lords Appellant were five representatives from the traditional noble families who had always opposed Richard, and against whom Richard stood firmly. Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, youngest son of Edward III, brother to John of Gaunt, and one of Richard II's uncles, was the Appellants' de facto leader.<sup>13</sup> Between 1386 and 1388, the Lords Appellant actively sought to undermine Richard and his council through restrictive parliamentary acts and a series of impeachments. Through these political maneuvers, the Lords Appellant were successful in establishing a commission to rule England for one year, starting in November of 1386. Later, through an armed rebellion, they seized the throne. Favoured for their more aggressive policy towards France, the Lords Appellant maintained power with support from the Commons until 1388. By then, the Commons had given up on the promise of lower taxes and began to complain about the abuse of power from the House of

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed account of these events, see Joseph Dahmus's "Richard II and the Church."

<sup>13</sup> Despite his title as Duke of Gloucester, Woodstock was falling short in income and land; he also had an established rivalry with Robert de Vere, who was one of Richard II's closest supporters, regarding land disputes as well as authority over Essex. The other Lords Appellant were also prominent political figures. Thomas Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, was from the family who had by then (the 1380s) controlled the West Midlands for over a century. However, Richard II had successfully undermined their authority and began encroaching on their lands. Richard Fitzalan, known as the Fourth Earl of Arundel, was the head of an affluent family, second only to John of Gaunt, Richard II's uncle. Thomas Mowbray, then Earl of Nottingham, was the head of northern house that controlled the northern lands; like Woodstock, Mowbray shared the personal rivalry with de Vere over lands and authority. Lastly, Henry Bolingbroke, then Earl of Derby, was the son of John of Gaunt, and thus cousin to Richard II; he would later take the throne as Henry IV. For more information on the Lords Appellant, see Saul.

Lords.<sup>14</sup> The Lords Appellant kept Richard II as the figurehead of the state during their effective reign, but the king had little power. This dynamic that was plainly displayed during the infamous Merciless Parliament of 1388 when several of Richard's supporters were convicted of treason and either executed or exiled by the Lords Appellant. It was not until 1389, with the return of John of Gaunt from Spain, as well as renewed support from the Commons, that Richard was able to slowly begin to regain his control over England.<sup>15</sup>

What particularly interested Gower in these political issues and disputes was their legal dimensions and implications. I would like to quickly illustrate the political waters that Gower and his contemporaries were navigating. Let us consider a controversial document: the parliamentary act 13 Richard II, Statute 2, Chapter 1 (regarding the pardon of offences) from 1390 (which was only officially repealed in the 1969 Statute Laws Repeals Act, Chapter 52, under Queen Elizabeth II). In 1389, in the first parliament after the end of the rule of the Lords Appellant, the Commons (composed mostly of burgesses and knights) petitioned the king against the abuse of the charters of pardon for crimes of murder, treason and rape for the sake of the offenders (especially lords and the clergy). The objective of the petition was to prevent the Church and the House of Lords from abusing their positions of power to control and threaten the Commons into paying higher taxes and surrendering lands—retribution for the losses from the Rising of 1381. Although it was the king's right to decide on these cases, Richard went on to modify the legislation (resulting in the aforementioned act) to allow for more severe punishment

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<sup>14</sup> Saul writes, "the Commons had expected the Appellants to pay for the renewal of the war out of the crown's own resources without burdening the people with further imposts. That expectation, like the expectation of military success, was disappointed, and by autumn there was evidence that disillusionment with the regime was setting in" (199-200). With the gradual weakening of the alliance between the Appellants and their supporters in the Commons, Richard found his political prospects significantly improved.

<sup>15</sup> Richard II was only fully able to reclaim his power in 1397 when he ordered the execution of the three major leaders of the Lords Appellant. In 1398, he exiled the other two—Mowbray and Bolingbroke.

of the offenders as the petitioners had requested. According to Conrad van Dijk, “one area in which the king’s powers were limited was statute law” as he “relied heavily on the assent and involvement of Parliament in the legislation of statutes” (98). This dynamic prevented the king from abusing his own power. In cases of extraordinary justice, however, such as pardons, the English king “retained his prerogative to dispense with the law” (102). Considering the political instability of the years prior to the petition and the king’s disputes with prominent members of Parliament, Richard’s consent to a slightly revised version of the act exemplifies the balancing act between justice in legal matters and the limits of the king’s power. While the king was expected to assert himself as the ruler, and especially so after being a figurehead of his own state without much authority, he was expected to do so carefully in order to avoid yet another civil conflict. The tensions between the Commons and Lords made it simultaneously easier for Richard to control both groups but more difficult to regain political stability.

Without a doubt, Gower’s portrayal of the political manoeuvres that eventually led to Richard’s dethronement is more clearly laid out in the poet’s *Cronica Tripertita* (composed c.1400) than in the *Confessio*. The *Cronica* pays heed to nuances of the historical imbalances in parliamentary power—especially in the 1380s—and lays out the political case for Henry IV’s ascension to the throne.<sup>16</sup> However, what I am arguing is that Gower did not wait until 1400 to discuss these issues, but he could not be as open addressing them in 1390 as he was ten years

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<sup>16</sup> This poem is one of many which attempt to contextualize Henry’s rise to power and legitimize his reign (Fonzo 61). As Paul Strohm argues, the Lancastrians launched a campaign to justify Richard II’s dethroning, including “perjuries, sacrileges, sodomies, insanity, the impoverishment of his subjects and their reduction to servitude, and the feebleness of his rule” (*England’s Empty Throne* 5; Fonzo 61). Conversely, regarding Henry IV’s ascension, Strohm notes that “[it] was accompanied by a blizzard of prophecy, most newly generated, but all presented as matter already known, the pertinence of which is suddenly recollected under incentive of emergent events” (7; Fonzo 61).

later.<sup>17</sup> In the time when the *Confessio* was being compiled, Richard II regained control of Parliament and the throne was no longer facing immediate internal threat. If Gower had expressed then the same ideas that he did ten years later with the *Cronica*, he would have been openly criticizing the ruling king—a decision that would have undermined any attempt to obtain the status of poet laureate in Richard’s court. Instead, Gower criticized Richard covertly: the Prologue addresses the division of the State and these matters of instability, and the tales of Books I through VIII address matters of kingship, including questions about the limits of the king’s power over his subjects and in relation to the law.<sup>18</sup>

#### On Matters of the State

The first subject that Gower addresses as part of the book that he is writing for Richard (Prologue \*89-92) is the State. In the glosses that precedes the discussion of the flaws of the state, Gower explains that he shall write “*de statu regnorum, vt dicunt, secundum temporalia, videlicet tempore regis Ricardi secundi anno regni sui sexto decimo* [concerning the state of the kingdoms, as they say, according to temporal things, namely, in the time of King Richard II in the sixteenth year of his reign].” This note, which introduces this new section, indicates that Gower is going to address the current state of affairs in England. The Lancastrian version has a similar tone. As Stoyanoff puts it,

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<sup>17</sup> For a reading of Gower’s *Confessio* in relation to the events of the late 1380s, especially the Merciless Parliament and the encroachment of the king’s powers, see Galloway’s “The Literature of 1388.”

<sup>18</sup> An example would be the Tale of Orestes from Book III and the discussion that follows about lawful ways of killing a man (i.e. capital punishment). This discussion is in tandem with the complaint and petition from the Commons from 1389, which reveals their plea to king to stop pardoning perpetrators of murder and other violent crimes. For a comprehensive study of the *Confessio*’s tales that deal with kingly politics, see Van Dijk’s *John Gower and the Limits of the Law*.

If, as Pearsall has convincingly argued, Gower is obsessed with controlling the interpretation of his work, this moment [“So woll I now this werk embrace/ With hol trust and with hol believe./ God grante I mot it wel achieve” (Prologue 90–92)] speaks to that obsession. Gower’s embrace of his text through the circular frame attempts to guide the reader to read the poem correctly, and his appeal to God, conventional as it may be, reinforces the stakes, to Gower’s mind, of leading the reader to interpret his poem in the correct way. (55)

Stoyanoff’s interpretation of this passage in the Lancastrian version of the text serves as a reminder that Gower’s guide for reading his poem is already developed through the frame characters.

In the Latin incipit that precedes the English verses in this section on the State, Gower denounces the division of the nation. He writes that, in the past, when Fortune was harmonious,

*Legibus vnicolor tunc temporis aura refulsit,  
Iusticie plane tuncque fuere vie.  
Nuncque latens odium vultum depingit amoris,  
Paceque sub ficta tempus ad arma tegit;  
Instar et ex variis mutabile Cameliontis  
Lex gerit, et regnis sunt noua iura nouis.*

[The unicoloured air of the times was aglow with laws, and then the paths of justice were broad and even. But now hidden hatred presents a painted face of love, and clothes under false peace an age at arms. The law carries itself like the chameleon, changeable with every varied thing.] (Prologue, Latin verses before line 93)

At first, Gower's poetics seem to portray a generalized contrast between an ideal and idyllic world and a decayed and chaotic one—an image that is mirrored in other passages of the *Confessio*. Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the crumbling statue also reference this contrast between an orderly past and a disordered present. Even the figure of Arion, whom Gower evokes in the conclusion of the Prologue as a potential symbol for himself, plays with this balance of harmony and chaos.<sup>19</sup> The reference to Fortune or, more specifically, to the wheel of Fortune in the opening of the Latin passage (i.e. "Tempus preteritum presens fortuna beatum"), as well as the understanding that, as the wheel spins or as world turns, Fortune leaves behind harmony and descends into chaos, reveals Gower's nostalgia for the days of old. According to Gower's model, the adjectives "hidden," "painted," "false," and "changeable" thus reference a collapse of the morals behind the qualities of "laws," "justice" and "peace" as Fortune spins her wheel. In light of the parliamentary commotions of the mid to late 1380s, these verses might be taken as a reflection of Gower's discontent with the changes in government between 1386 and 1389. The idea that hatred "clothes under false peace an age of arms" may be an allusion to the internal disputes of Richard's court, including Gower's accusations against the Lords Appellant, the many parliamentary acts from 1389, introduced as Richard reclaimed the throne, the brewing rivalry between Richard himself and Henry of Bolingbroke, John of Gaunt's son, as well as the war with France (which was another familial dispute). Regardless of the potential references here, what this passage does show is that Gower casts political issues in legal terms and considered a system "aglow with laws" to be a just and good one. These Latin verses thus reveal the first association between moral qualities and the body politic, or, more specifically, the link

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion on variations of this theme in the *Confessio*, see Yeager's *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion*.

between the lack of moral qualities and consequent perversion of the laws and foundations of the nation.

To further depict how far from righteousness contemporary politics had fallen and to remind his readers of the examples of recorded history (i.e. books), in the English verses that open the section on the State, Gower mentions the “welthe,” “helthe,” “richesse,” and “prouesse” (Prologue 94-97) of the olden days, “whereof the wyde worldes fame – write in cronique – is yit withholde” (99-100). He then offers a picture of the golden days that parallels yet is opposite to the reality of the English court in the 1380s:

Justice of lawe tho was holde,  
The privilege of regalie  
Was sauf, and al the baronie  
Worschiped was in his astat;  
The citees knewen no debat,  
The poeple stod in obeissance  
Under the reule of governance,  
And pes, which ryhtwisnesse keste,  
With charité tho stod in reste. (102-10)

In Gower’s version of the golden age, this utopian society is defined in terms of a stable political hierarchy. The opposite, of course, was true in England in the 1380s. The phrases “justice of lawe” and “privilege of regalie” allude to the disputes over parliamentary law and the king’s power: the Lords Appellant’s commission and Merciless Parliament as well as Richard II’s decreased political role from 1386 to 1389. The verses describing the “worship” that “the baronie” enjoyed have two implications: that the Nobility is no longer respected and that the

Nobility is no longer honourable. The reference to “citees” and “poeple” and “the reule of governance” remind us of the Rising of 1381, the violent confrontations in London, and the general unrest of the Commons. The concepts of “obeissance,” “pes” and “reste” are opposite to the instability that Gower condemns in relation to the contemporary state of affairs regarding kingly matters. Although the political critique is veiled in figurative language, Gower clearly indicates his discontent with the political division of the 1380s.

The decline into instability culminates with a corruption of love. When Gower describes the state of worldly matters, he laments that “The world is changed overal, / And therof most in special / That love is falle into discord” (Prologue 119-21). The emphasis on the change that love has gone through as the most significant (for it has fallen into discord) brings the political and legal discussion to the level of the individual—assigning a potential cause to the division Gower goes on to examine. This lament over the corruption of a higher form of love not only introduces the key of Gower’s concerns, i.e. (re)educating readers on the matters of universal love, but it also sets up the possibility for courtly love narrative in the *Confessio* later, bridging love and politics, each with their own set of laws.<sup>20</sup> If we are to agree with Van Dijk, who argues that “law and love turn out to be inseparable concepts” in the *Confessio* (49),<sup>21</sup> this observation that love has fallen into discord means that laws (or politics) have fallen into discord as well. Gower goes on to explain that “the regnes ben divided” (Prologue 127) and that “lawe hath take hire double face, / So that justice out of the weie / With ryhtwisnesse is gon aweie” (130-32). The *division* of

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<sup>20</sup> I revisit this discussion in Chapter 4 and the Conclusion.

<sup>21</sup> Van Dijk writes, “the *Confessio* Prologue’s broad political vision – covering the three estates, the abuses of the Church, the history of the empire, and the eschatological lessons of social ‘division’ – sets up the *Confessio* as an encyclopedic work that situates courtly love within a grand intellectual framework” (52). Later in his book, Van Dijk argues that “Gower’s frequent recourse to such analogies [comparing the lover to political figures and love to kingdoms] reveals an interest in tying his legal and political interests directly to the concerns of the lover” (69). For further comparisons between love and law, see Chapter 3 of Van Dijk’s *John Gower and the Limits of the Law*.

the kingdom—a crucial concept for Gower—the double face of the law, or, to put it simply, the changeability of the law, which disrupts justice and righteousness, are all signs a broken state, much like England was at the time Gower was writing the *Confessio*. When Gower moves on to discuss the powers that govern nations, he strengthens the connection between love and law, writing “of love, whiche is al the chief / To kepe a regne out of mischief” (149-50). It stands to reason that Amans’s confession and the tales can serve as metaphors for a political examination of the state of the nation, not in terms of courtly love, but as Truth, Justice, Mercy and Peace—the godly virtues at the centre of the tales and at the end of Amans’s journey.

Having established the image of the divided kingdom, Gower moves on to discuss the role of the king. Referring to a gloss that reads “*Regem honorificate*” or “honouring the king,” Gower writes in English:

For alle resoun wolde this,  
That unto him which the heved is  
The membres buxom scholden bowe,  
And he scholde ek her trowthe allowe,  
With al his herte and make hem chiere  
For good consail is good to hier. (151-56)

The picture of the king as the head of the State to whom its members should bow obediently is a commonplace but powerful during a time when the king’s absolute rule over his subjects was being questioned by the Commons and severely challenged by the Lords. The two following lines, however, draw a limit to the king’s rule, indicating that he, too, ought to accept the members’ oath to him and welcome them. The phrasing of the king’s need to accept the members’ “troth,” or their “loyalty” in Andrew Galloway’s translation, reveals a need for

cooperation between the king and his subjects and for these subjects to respect his authority. The claim that a medieval king is above the law but ought to make himself subject to it explains why such mutual respect between the king and his subjects is necessary for avoiding tyrannical rule. When Richard is “banished from the third recension,” as Robert Epstein puts it, he is replaced not by Henry, but by an “‘Engelond’ that emerges in the imaginative absence of Richard II”—a “resistance to royal authority, sacral in reaction to claims of divinity, emerging as sovereign statehood” (68), and, just possibly, a “modern moment—the supplanting of a sacral king by the state apparatus originally invented to contain him” (70).<sup>22</sup> Once more examining his own political context, Gower concludes his discussion of worldly politics indicating that good counsel is not only expected but also biblically recommended.<sup>23</sup>

Gower’s section on the division of the State thus criticizes Richard II’s unstable reign, without directly criticizing the king, the Parliament, or the Houses of Lords and Commons. In this opening section, the poet offers his reasoning for writing a political book (i.e. the need for unity, for a correction of the nation’s division) but circumscribes it within the paradigms of literature, the same way he parallels discussions of law with matters of love. Exemplifying political concerns, Gower exhibits his rationale for taking on the role of a poet who takes on the voice of the public, one who will lead the nation back to the glory of the golden days through

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<sup>22</sup> Epstein points out that Gower critics have widely accepted that changes made between the first and third recensions of the *Confessio* reflect changes in Gower’s view of royal authority from absolutist (Ricardian) to constitutionalist (Lancastrian). Epstein questions neither the recensions nor their sequencing, but argues that their differences “might best be understood not as the conflict between absolutism and constitutionalism, but rather as the tension between ‘divine’ and ‘sacred’ kingship” (61). Epstein’s argument may be understood as the “divine” right of rule as absolute being substituted by the sanctity of kingship; Gower thus did not agree with the absolute authority of the king to rule, but he reinforced instead the sacredness of the king’s role, moving the locus of authority from the person (the king) to the station (the throne), which in turn needs to be fulfilled honorably and respectfully. This understanding is particularly relevant when we recall that Parliament was able to curtail Richard’s power by invoking limitations of the king’s divine power to reign.

<sup>23</sup> According to a Latin gloss to line 156, “good counsel” alludes to God’s advice to Solomon (i.e. “do nothing without counsel” from Ecclesiasticus 32:24).

moral education and an appeal to civil duty.<sup>24</sup> In order to move on from this issue of division, Gower must appeal to divine grace for the future is unknown. He claims that, although man is wise, only God can end the war (“conflict” or “uncertainty”) which mars the nation (Prologue 157-61). Specifically, Gower refers to the need of God’s grace (161), repentance (164), reconciliation (185) and guidance (190) in order that “that the world may stonde appesed” (191). Only a turn to religion and common law can guarantee that the morality Gower preaches in relation to sociopolitical matters will follow.

### On Public Poetry

The kind of literature that Gower writes in the *Confessio*, a poem which concerns itself with contemporary social politics and the future of the nation, and depicts the poet’s views of contemporary society, became prominent in the late fourteenth century. As Jill Mann has established, behind this new kind of poetry was a tradition of estates satire—a genre which set forth the functions of each estate (the Church, the Nobility, and the Commons) and satirized each’s failures to uphold their roles. Mann notes, “working definition of estates satire is therefore less rigid; it comprises any literary treatments of social classes which allow or encourage a generalized application” (3). Mann later explains that “in estates satire, the estates are not described in order to inform us about their work, but in order to present moral criticism” (198). Consequently, the tradition was influential even when poets were not necessarily following the typical structure of that genre.<sup>25</sup> In the case of Chaucer, Mann explains, “if Chaucer was thinking of writing an estates piece, it is surely likely that he would have consulted *Piers Plowman*, the

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<sup>24</sup> The poetic vision that Gower begins here culminates with his depiction of the new Arion, a figure he creates for himself as a poet of the public sphere, in the conclusion of the Prologue.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed analysis of Chaucer’s Prologue as estates literature, see Mann’s *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*.

*Vox Clamantis* and the *Mirour de l'Omme* to see how their authors handled estates material” (207).

Gower’s description of the three estates in the Prologue follows the estate satire model, and it also parallels the themes of corruption from the statue from Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, which culminates in an apocalyptic conclusion. The scene, as Gower portrays it, highlights the interconnected destinies of a nation and its citizens—a theme he already began developing in *Vox* (Fonzo 17, 35, 50). Following the biblical story from the Book of Daniel, Gower provides an account in the *Confessio* of how Nebuchadnezzar is taken by a vision of a resplendent statue—its head adorned with precious gold, its arms and chest fashioned from shimmering silver, its stomach and thighs crafted with lustrous bronze, and its legs composed of unyielding iron, leading down to feet made of a delicate blend of iron and clay. Yet, this unique figure meets its demise when struck by a stone, crumbling into fragments (Prologue 585-624; Fonzo 50). Seeking enlightenment, Nebuchadnezzar beseeches the wise seers of Babylon to unravel the enigma of his dream, only to find solace in the understanding of Daniel. It is Daniel who discerns that Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon will eventually give rise to kingdoms of diminishing splendor, ultimately leading to its demise (Prologue 625-56; Fonzo 50). Then, as Fonzo argues, “Gower steps into the role of a present-day Daniel, drawing a metaphorical connection between the cracks in the statue and the divisions among the people” (50). As the Prologue continues, Gower begins to insert his own reading of division into his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream: the “lond divided” (Prologue 893) is caused by “The werees [that] ben so general / Among the cristene overall” (897-98; Fonzo 50-51). According to Gower’s account, “The bodi and the Soule also / Among hem ben divided so, / That what thing that the body hateth / The soule loveth and debateth” (995-98; Fonzo 51). As the individual becomes corrupted, so does the body politic. In

this exposition of division “nought only of the temporal / Bot of the spiritual also” (Prologue 855-56), “Gower connects the macrocosm of history and the microcosm of individuals: the statue is at once a representation of the various troubled empires of history and an individual human form” (Fonzo 51). Specifically, in the context already established in the Prologue, this scenario explains the unrest in England. England, much like Babylon, has fallen due to the corruption of its people. Insofar as a soul is divided by sin, “For Senne of his condicioun/ Is moder of divisioun” (Prologue 1029-30), “all of Gower’s potential readers are equally responsible for the fate of England, and his advice is therefore equally pertinent to all of them” (Fonzo 51).

Not all literature of the time is as explicit in its social critique as the Prologue of the *Confessio*. For example, the General Prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* offers a cross-section of society through allegorical characters that represent not only members of the three estates (e.g. the Knight, the Parson, and the Miller) but also the growing class of professionals (e.g. the Physician or the Wife of Bath). However, unlike Gower, who depicts the flaws with each estate, Chaucer’s narrator makes no judgment, seemingly leaving the moralizing to the readers’ interpretation. Yet, as Mann insists, “the form of the estate genre and the form of the Prologue are one and the same” (4), and the tradition of estates satire, which would have been familiar to Chaucer’s readers, makes the moral objections clear (at least for an initial reading).<sup>26</sup> Despite Chaucer’s “consistent removal of the possibility of moral judgement” (Mann 197), Chaucer still openly criticizes institutions that tolerate hypocrites and deceivers through the depiction of corrupted clergymen (e.g. the Pardoner and the Friar)—a topic that Gower hints at from the opening lines of the *Confessio* and inveighs against in his discussion of the Church in the Prologue. Chaucer’s depiction of a contemporary medieval society is in this manner similar to

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<sup>26</sup> Mann’s argument is that Chaucer’s Prologue draws on a “conspectus of medieval English society” as it covers “the elements of social anatomization made familiar by estates literature” (4).

Gower's moral traditional depiction of the three estates in the *Confessio's* Prologue, as both are ultimately a comment on the state of the nation.

These categories (i.e. estates satire and mirror-for-princes), however, do not fully capture how Gower and Chaucer compose more multilayered narratives “than their forebears, bringing new forms of literature to vernacular audiences as well as blending formerly divided forms of composition, sources of lore, and character perspectives into revised and updated frame narratives” (Gerber 103). Gower and Chaucer both “push the political impulses of the frame narrative further,” reflecting “the interests of patrons, lords, and supplicants into a unified and continuous text that embraces the inevitable variances involved with interrelating diverse source texts and interest groups” (Gerber 104). This new form of poetry, focused on social critique and the public sphere, was defined by Anne Middleton in her 1978 survey of Ricardian poetry as *public poetry*: this “public poetry is, as a literary mode, simply an extension of the incipient realism in these Ricardian writers' views of what poetry is: like man himself ‘a creature of a middle state,’ and serving its highest function as a peacemaker, and as an interpreter of the common world” (113). Middleton proposes that the critical quality of this literature is, in fact, its purpose “to be a ‘common voice’ to serve the ‘common good’” (95). Thus “public poetry” and “public poets” reveal a new form of poetic engagement that diverged from the already established literary traditions. In relation to the *Confessio*, Middleton explains that the fact the dedication change, from a book for Richard's sake to a book for England's sake required little adjustment proves that “the mode of address” she is describing, i.e. public poetry, “is not a matter

of deferential politeness to a ruler, but of rising to sufficient largeness of mind and of reference for a public occasion, and a broad common appeal” (107).<sup>27</sup>

According to Middleton, this “public poetry” is characterized by “a constant relation of speaker to audience within an ideally conceived worldly community, a relation which has become the poetic subject” (95). However, this constant relation is based on a common experience shared by the poets and their audiences that binds them together. For instance, Will in *Piers Plowman* is the “every man” figure who navigates the dream-vision in a way expected to encapsulate and be agreeable to Langland’s readers. This understanding of public poetry brings Gower and Langland closer as writers. As Middleton suggests, both are “essentially ‘one-poem’ writers” who responded to the Rising of 1381 by revising their works to capture their own social critiques (98).<sup>28</sup> In addition, their poems address their reading communities as a whole rather than a specific reader or patron. Middleton explains that, when Gower presents the *Confessio* to Richard II, the king “is not the main imagined audience, but an occasion for gathering and formulating what is on the common mind,” thus making its subjects public (107). In the *Confessio*, the Prologue’s opening lines, which discuss the books that have been left as examples and place the poem in the public tradition Middleton discusses, are then a trait of this new kind of poetry. The opening locates the acts of writing and reading as the subject of poem, thus suggesting an intellectual community to which Gower belonged through the practice of writing and reading and with whom he sought to find commonalities in his representation as a public

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<sup>27</sup> As McCabe explains, “the dedications of the *Confessio* and *Vox* to Richard II, Henry Bolingbroke, and Thomas Arundel exist alongside the passages... in which Gower reflects on the possibility of a much more general readership extending into posterity” (“Vernacular Authorship” 568-9).

<sup>28</sup> Middleton’s assessment of Langland and Gower as “one-poem writers” refers to the idea that their works are revisions of the same topics, presented differently. *Piers* has recensions the same way the *Confessio* does; and, in both cases, Middleton implies that the poets reworked their poems to navigate aspects of public perception and politics rather than literary matters.

poet. This self-referential introduction aims to link the poet with his audience by providing both with moral examples, books that should be left for future generations, and the values implicit in this kind of moral reading.

Contrary to the ecclesiastical treatises and clerical writings, such as those I will discuss in Chapter 3, and despite the turn to God's grace at the end of the critique of the State, the public poetry that Middleton refers to and of which Gower takes part is secular, and "its central pieties are worldly felicity and peaceful, harmonious communal existence" (95). The *Confessio* differs even from the *Vox* in its treatment of religious subjects. McCabe argues that Gower's handling of scriptural matters in the *Confessio*, in contrast to *Mirour* and *Vox*, is not so much concerned with the nuances of doctrine, sprung from clerical discourse, but much more focused, instead, on the liturgy (or religious rites), emphasizing "good works and due observance of traditional church practices" and "the core of lay religious experience" (*Gower's Vulgar Tongue* 95). In fact, in all three of his long poems, Gower not only calls on the *vox populi*, but he also chastises the clergy, showcasing himself eager "to revitalize Christian doctrines of the self and society" by proposing lay alternatives to clerical scholarship (116, 121). Gower's portrayal of division also alludes to this hope for reunification or coexistence. Integral to Amans's journey in the *Confessio* is his reintegration to his social world, a reengagement in civil duty—the same process Gower hopes for his readers.<sup>29</sup> This civic reengagement depends on avoiding extremes. Middleton goes on to explain that public poetry "speaks for bourgeois moderation, a course between the rigorous

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<sup>29</sup> McCabe expresses this idea well when he writes, "One of the most remarkable features of Gower's writings, then, is their invitation of readers to practise public criticism and their equipping such readers for this practice" ("Vernacular Authorship" 572). The further into the confession Amans goes, the more he engages with Genius and the topics they discuss. For more details about Amans's journey and his newfound focus into social politics, see Chapter 4.

absolutes of religious rule on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhetorical hyperboles and emotional vanities of the courtly style” (95).<sup>30</sup>

Middleton’s discussion of the voice of the public poet has led to myriad studies about Gower’s function as a public poet, and the broad social value of his moral writings, a more positive vision of Chaucer’s “moral Gower.” Following Middleton, we can see that, in the Prologue and the conclusion of Book VIII, Gower takes on this role of the public poet to embody “a representative voice that speaks with the collective wisdom of centuries’ worth of mythologies and of the medieval period’s sensibilities regarding self-governance” (Gerber 128).

In the beginning of the Prologue, Gower claims that he

wolde go the middel weie  
And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,  
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,  
That of the lasse or of the more  
Som man mai lyke of that [he] wryte. (17-21)

This “middle way” is the central organizing principle for the *Confessio*. Here “middle way” and “moderation” ought to be understood as synonyms; at the core of those lines, Gower establishes that the “middle way” of his book is one that will both please and instruct whoever might read it. Gower’s oblique didacticism written in a rhetorically low, plain style confirms his commitment to this “middel weie.” The “middle way” is also a means of taking the voice of the poem to the public sphere by standing for a moderate view of reason. This attempt to speak for all citizens

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<sup>30</sup> According to McCabe, this balanced style was well received by Gower’s readers: “Although by the late fourteenth century the potential readership of secular literature comprised non-gentles from the middle strata of society, a large part of the appeal of this literature for such groups seems to have resided in the access to courtliness that it was perceived to offer. In any case, it is clear that the public which Gower seems to have felt most naturally inclined toward is an elite public, one of gentle affiliation if not precisely identifiable with a particular gentle social sector” (“Vernacular Authorship” 569).

brings with it a unique style. Middleton explains that Gower's plain style is "socially and psychologically well suited to the presentation of lay morality and large experiential truths" (98). The voice that Gower takes on in the *Confessio* (at least in the English verses, and in particular in Genius's preaching) is therefore attuned to this moderation.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Genius preaches on the importance of plain style in Book VII during his explanation of the art of good rhetoric.<sup>32</sup>

According to Middleton, this plain style of public poetry, such as Gower's, is fitting to an understanding of poetry as "a mediating activity" (101), one concerned with the common good or common profit, and led by a poet speaking for his nation. This mediation brings balance to the critiques of public poetry by making them more accessible to the reading public. Middleton claims that Gower's play of the words "lust" and "lore" "define[s] the range and shape of [Gower's] thought on the subject [of making his book]" (103). Because of its balance between "earnest and game," "somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore" (Prologue 19), public poetry is just as playful as it is serious, just as entertaining as it is informational. As a result, Middleton argues, the *exempla* Gower uses act as "a 'middle weie' between past and future, between truth and our need for it" (102).

The glosses reveal a similar understanding of the function of this plain style in relation to Gower's middle way by placing it "*inter labores et ocia*" [between work and leisure] (Prologue, note to line 17). In the Prologue, when Gower "yearns for a glorified past in which cities existed without debate, unlike the inverted present that is characterized by disparities" (Gerber 108), he adds

And that I take to record  
Of every lond, for his partie,

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<sup>31</sup> Even the figure of Genius has to balance a kind of middle way "between the clerical and the lay" (Scanlon 256).

<sup>32</sup> For more on rhetoric and plain style, see Chapter 4.

The comune vois which mai noght lie;  
Noght upon on, bot upon alle  
It is that men now clepe and calle,  
And sein the regnes ben divided. (122–27)

Peck argues that the inherent didacticism of those lines, along with Gower's emphasis on "ensamples" and the famous claim that he writes his "booke for Engelondes sake," allude to "the public dimensions of Gower's methodological agenda" in his mediation between the social realm and individual morality.

For Gower, the common voice of public poetry delivers "a perspective less exclusively detached and cosmic, more implicated in, and circumscribed by, the mortal world" (Middleton 102). Gower asserts that the "commune vois" cannot lie; it is, after all, a voice that speaks not for one but for all. Just as Gower does by placing meaning in the totality of the voices of the *Confessio* (and particularly the dialogue between Amans and Genius), so does the common voice focus on totality rather than uniformity. Gerber explains that, "despite being discussed in the singular, the voice Gower mentions is plural in that it collates diverse people with divergent perspectives" (108). Therefore, when Gower claims the "common vois" for his poem, this voice seeks, above all, social harmony and moral regeneration.

This search for a voice for the nation as a whole also justifies Gower's choice for the poem's structure. In fact, Gower chooses confession because it is an experience shared by all members of society (at least in a rudimentary form) and it aims at moral purgation. As Simpson argues, in order to fix politics, Gower must first address the corruption of the soul (202-03). The confessional structure thus provides the right measure of moderation in balancing the values of the Church and those of the court to allow him to set the rules for this harmonious coexistence in

his literary warnings about the sins against Love.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, even love<sup>34</sup> has a plainly public dimension.<sup>35</sup>

While the Prologue presents Gower as a political writer, it is usually, and wrongly, assumed that this public poet persona either disappears from the poem or is transferred to the figure of Genius in Book I. I argue for an understanding of the framework of the *Confessio* in which the integration of its composite and diverse voices becomes the public poet's perspective.<sup>36</sup> The shift in the book's subject matter from politics to love, from the assertiveness of the Prologue to the instructiveness of the tales, also indicates a transformation of its initially central narrator, the voice of Gower himself.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Gower's voice as a public poet neither leaves the poem nor becomes assigned to one character, but instead it is transposed to the totality of tales and dialogues that his book encompasses.

## Conclusion

If we try to separate Gower's political purpose from the content of the *Confessio*, we will never appreciate the work's literary power. Indeed, if we analyze the structure of the *Confessio* and its cryptic turns, we can observe that it is not a product of careless writing, but instead purposeful and deliberate. The leap from the fall of empires and prophetic salvation of England in the Prologue to a discussion of Amans's non-reciprocal love life in Book I is too extreme not

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<sup>33</sup> Peck writes in the note to line 17 of the Prologue that "The 'middel weie' is both a rhetorical and an ethical proposition. Gower would see his poem as a mediator between social issues and personal moral choices."

<sup>34</sup> According to Middleton, in Gower's *Confessio*, love is "a communal and historical bond" (97), not *agape* or *eros*.

<sup>35</sup> I have already referenced the way in which love takes on a legal dimension in the *Confessio*, following the work of Van Dijk. Love also takes on a more general social perspective, bridging the individual and the body politic, and creating a stronger connection between the Prologue and Amans's confession. I return to this point in Chapter 4.

<sup>36</sup> For further discussion of the voices of the *Confessio*, see The Conclusion.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Stegner shares this understanding of the poem's shift of perspective, claiming that Gower uses the stylistic and structural parallels between the Prologue's concerns and the remainder of the book "to advance the shared goals of Amans's private confession and the broader political vision of the poem" (495).

to have been planned and accounted for in the larger picture of the poem. According to Peck, Gower's "notion of social structure is thus interwoven with his theory of ethics, psychology, and theology" (*Kingship* xxi). Even though Gower critiques the three estates, lamenting the fall of the kingdom, as seen in his portrayal of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, the Prologue ends with the presentation of Arion, a figure to bring harmony to an otherwise divided nation. In this last scene, Gower concludes his political chastising by indicating that individual reform may yet lead toward common profit.

It is because Gower begins with such a political discussion of the state of the nations through time that all of Genius and Amans's dialogue become intrinsic to the poem's political framework. The odd shift in perspective is not a disruption of the expected logical progression of the subject matters Gower treats in the Prologue, but rather an expansion of the political necessities that he wants to explore in more detail. Therefore, from Amans's journey and his relationship with Genius, Gower demonstrates the effect of the public poet's instructions on the individual soul, both regarding the mending of Will and the reintegration of the faculties of Will and Reason. Precisely, this reshaping of the individual is the fulfilment of the prophecy of harmony that Gower inscribes in the Prologue with Arion's mediation: the corruption of the individual soul leads to the corruption of politics, so the salvation of soul should lead to the salvation of the body politics.

### Chapter 3 - The Structure of the *Confessio*: Love and the Confessional Frame

In the introductory section of Book I, Gower explains that love, a natural law, affects all human beings. He then brings this discussion of love to the political realm to further advance the discussion about division in the Prologue. As love acts as the intermediary between politics and the individual, Gower then introduces the necessity for confession, as a potential remedy to the sickness of unruly desire. This section also presents the three main characters of the *Confessio*—Amans, Genius, and Venus—and their dynamics. In the interaction between Amans and Genius, Gower sees the necessity of confession for Amans, specifically remembering and forgetting his sins. In addition, through Genius’s priestly role and his presentation of tales, Gower establishes the structure of “ensamples” for his “little book.” Gower thus creates an additional moralizing frame for the confession beyond the discussion of sins against love. The introduction of confession also brings Amans and Genius together in an examination of conscience, highlighting their dynamics as penitent and priest, setting up the psychological frame Gower develops for his model of the human psyche.

For us to fully appreciate the role of the confessional frame, we need to know a little about actual confessional practice in the Middle Ages. Therefore, in this Chapter, I study the (often misunderstood) role of confession in structuring the *Confessio*, focusing on how it is introduced into the narrative; the influence of the Fourth Lateran Council on confession and literary production; how confession helps explore and structure the psyche, both in the *Confessio* and in the lived realities of medieval life; and how Gower deviates and adds onto confessional models of his day.

## Introducing Love and Amans

In the opening of Book I of the *Confessio*, Gower explains that because he cannot write about heavenly matters, instead, he will focus his little book on the subject of love, specifically the kind of love that every being is subject to (1-16). These heavenly matters are likely a reference to the prophetic tone of the Prologue, linked to the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream and the figure of the new Arion. Gower is using a modesty *topos* here again to shift the discussion, this time from potentially controversial theological debates into a subject that is more appropriate for his position as a poet: love.

Gower's manoeuvre concerning the subject of his book, from politics to love, invites us to consider the link between the two concepts and to pay close attention to the kind of love he means: a universal love. According to a gloss to this opening section, having already explained in the Prologue the political division he condemns, the poet now sets out to address the division of the kingdom and of the individual, as well as the interplay between the two, in this book about matters of love. The gloss at line 9 reads,

*Postquam in Prologo tractatum hactenus existit, qualiter hodiernae condicionis diuisio caritatis dilectionem superauit, intendit auctor ad presens suum libellum, cuius nomen Confessio Amantis nuncupatur, componere de illo amore, a quo non solum humanum genus, sed etiam cuncta animantia naturaliter subiciuntur. Et quia nonnulli amantes ultra quam expedit desiderii passionibus crebro stimulantur, materia libri per totum super hiis specialius diffunditur.*

[After he has set forth the Prologue's treatment up to this point, of how the division of today's condition has overcome the love of charity, the author now

intends to compose his little book, whose name is “The Confession of a Lover,” concerning that love by which not only the human species but indeed every living thing is naturally subjected. And since some lovers are often goaded by the passions of desire beyond what is appropriate, the matter of the book throughout is set forth especially for these.]

Here, love of charity is the reciprocal love between God and man, manifested as in the love for one’s neighbours. This love is what is missing in the division we see earlier with the corruption of the individual. In Gower’s view, the selfishness from the Prologue stands in contrast to charity. In this gloss, Gower also reveals that his book is particularly intended for those “lovers” who are overtaken by desire, individuals who fail to maintain the middle way of moderation that he advises in the Prologue. Imbalance or lack of moderation, opposed to the middle way, the central idea behind the writing of the *Confessio*, becomes the focus of Gower’s attention.

The idea that desire or unruly passion—as a perversion of universal love—causes disorder is repeated in the English verses that follow, which contextualize the Gower’s view of love:

In [love] ther can no man him reule,  
For loves lawe is out of reule,  
That of to moche or of to lite  
Wel nyh is every man to wyte,  
And natheles ther is no man  
In al this world so wys, that can  
Of love tempre the mesure,  
Bot as it falth in aventure. (17-24)

In this passage, Gower draws from the Aristotelian idea that desire affects balance and good measure to comment on the universality of love's laws and rules in relation to human experience. He also indicates that love, in this way, falls by chance, and cannot be ruled. By commenting on how every individual is subject to either too much or too little love, and providing the caveat that love cannot be controlled in its "aventure," Gower establishes a link between his writing and all of his potential readers through what he is claiming is a universal experience in regards to love and natural law (or the "lawe of kinde" in line 31). Because Amans represents the individual who requires confession and instruction, and because he is the literary device through which Gower depicts his vision of moral behaviour, it is crucial for the project of the *Confessio* that love come to signify this universal experience.

Gower concludes this section by complicating the relationship between love and fortune, indicating that this dynamic cannot be understood by reason:

For if ther evere was balance  
Which of fortune stant governed,  
I may wel lieve as I am lerned  
That love hath that balance on honde,  
Which wol no reson understonde. (42-46)

These verses expand on the idea that love cannot be measured, explaining that Love has a balance that is subject to fortune, and that this dynamic is incompatible with reason.

Consequently, the verses place love and reason as inherently incompatible—a premise that stands in sharp contrast to the treatment of love as an exclusively rational concept by Genius during Amans's confession.<sup>1</sup> By the end of this opening section, Gower has established the

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<sup>1</sup> I explore this failed view of love as a concept that can be exclusively rationalized or reasoned in Chapter 4 when I discuss Genius's shortcomings as a priest of Venus.

central role of love in both the *Confessio* and human experience, the effect of desire in misshaping love, and the limits of reason in understanding love or its relation to fortune. This understanding of love is the canvas Gower requires in order to begin painting his portrait: the case for civil duty and morality in a corrupted society.

The verses that follow this introduction of the concept of love as the guiding drive for the *Confessio* reveal an aspect of Gower's storytelling that is not always considered in analyses of the poem's structure: the links between the political frame, the structure of the confession, and the conclusion of the poem in Book VIII. Gower writes, "And for to proven it is so, / I am miselven on of tho, / Which to this scole am underfonge" (l. 61-63). At this stage in the poem, Gower, in his writer persona, takes on the veil of Amans. The corresponding Latin note (to line 59) reads, "*Hic quasi in persona aliorum, quos amor alligat, fingens se auctor esse Amantem, varias eorum passiones variis huius libri distinccionibus per singula scribere proponit* [Here the author, fashioning himself as a Lover, as if in the role of those others whom love binds, proposes to write about their various passions one by one in the various sections of this book]." What the English verses imply and the Latin note specifies is that Gower becomes Amans for the purposes of storytelling: to provide examples of the kind of love that is not balanced, and to move from a political and philosophical discussion to a literary one while maintaining the same topics at the core of discussion. From this point on, the narrator takes on a new persona "who is not simply a moral commentator on society" (as is the narrator of the Prologue) but an embodiment of human passions, which, in turn, cause disharmony in matters of love (Peck, note to line 62). Introducing Amans allows Gower to preach his views on morality and the laws of a universal kind of love while focusing on one particular character who serves as a focal point for the poet's moralizing.

In the verses that immediately follow, Gower-Amans says he will tell a tale, “a wonder hap which me befell” (I. 66), about love and his fortune. He then directs his audience, “to hem that ben lovers aboute” (72), to read and take remembrance of his “ensample” (79). The language here is similar to the language used in the opening of the Prologue (1-11), when Gower discusses the roles of books in providing moral education. This passage mirrors the earlier one, drawing the reader’s attention to the wisdom that can be gained by taking Gower-Amans’s tale seriously. It also invites us to consider the wonder of Gower-Amans’s own example when it comes to our own experience of love, the illusive universal constant to which we are all equally subject.

#### Introducing the Court of Love: Genius and the Healing of Confession

As the structure of the poem changes, so does the type of love on which it focuses. As the tale begins, Amans describes how, being far away from his lady (I. 105-06), he is afflicted by his lovesickness to such degree, that, finding a “grene pleine,” “ther [he] gan [his] wo compleigne” (113-14). Here, Gower shifts the universal love that he introduced in the previous lines into Amans’s perception of courtly love, and, specifically, his own unrequited love. Amans, afflicted by his malady, begins to seek a remedy.

Directing his complaint to Cupid and Venus, Amans asks them to let him live plainly or die, for he can no longer endure his lovesickness (127-31). Much to Amans’s surprise, both Cupid and Venus answer his call and appear before him. However, these two figures do not respond kindly to being summoned. Cupid reacts first and immediately dismisses Amans with angry eyes, pierces him with a fiery dart, and leaves, no longer wishing to dwell on the matter of Amans’s complaint (140-47). Although Gower offers no explanation for Cupid’s unsympathetic behaviour, it is possible that Cupid dismisses Amans because he knows that the lover’s

infatuation is unrequited and unproductive (as the lover himself comes to realize at the conclusion of Book VIII). Amans, an old man, has no business in Cupid's Court of Love. Venus seems just as uncaring as Cupid in her demeanour, but she at least offers Amans a means to explain and redeem himself when she asks, "What art thou, sone" (154). Here, Amans has a chance to come forth and reveal himself as the old Gower (as Venus makes him realize in Book VIII),<sup>2</sup> but he chooses to describe himself as "a caitif" of love (161) and put himself at her mercy, asking her to decide whether he lives or dies (162). Venus answers that Amans must tell her his malady and be truthful in his reply, else she may not be able to offer him any kind of "medicine" for his condition (164-67). As we walk through how the relations between Amans and Venus and Amans and Genius are established, healing becomes a key metaphor for confession.<sup>3</sup>

Venus's comment about medicine is important both in relation to love and in relation to sin. Gower had already touched on medicine in relation to love (29-33). When Genius is introduced as the priest who shall listen to Amans's confession, a gloss refers to confession itself as a remedy for Amans's lovesickness.<sup>4</sup> The correlation between spiritual and physical healing is not one of Gower's original ideas, or even a recent discovery. As far back as the early eleventh century, Burchard of Worms presented a comprehensive guide for confessors, highlighting the inquiries they should pose to individuals seeking repentance; the book, originally part of his

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<sup>2</sup> Venus asks a similar question to Amans in Book VIII, hoping that now he will have learned who and what he is. The passage reads, "And as it were halvinge a game / Sche axeth me what is mi name. / 'Ma dame,' I seide, 'John Gower'" (2319-21). The acknowledgement of Amans as Gower is the first step in curing him of his so-claimed lovesickness. I study this moment more carefully in The Conclusion.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of Gower's medical metaphors in the context of Lateran IV, see Joe Stadolnik's "Gower's Bedside Manner."

<sup>4</sup> The note reads, "*Confessus Genio si sit medicina salutis / Experiar morbis, quos tulit ipsa Venus. / Lesa quidem ferro medicantur membra salutis, / Raro tamen medicum vulnus amoris habet* [Having confessed to Genius, I will try to discover whether that is the healing medicine for the diseases that Venus herself has transmitted. Even limbs wounded by the knife may be brought to health by treatment; yet rarely does the wound of love have a physician]."

*Decretum*, was entitled *Corrector sive Medicus (Edifier or Physician)*.<sup>5</sup> The idea of confession as medicine works particularly well for the structure of the *Confessio* because it establishes an ailment (i.e. Amans's lovesickness) that it seeks to cure, and this cure then emphasizes the importance of memory and remembrance for Amans (i.e. remembering himself as an old man as the cure to the lovesickness). Thus, Gower explores the connections between confession and medicine, especially in the figure of the physician-priest and the potential of healing through storytelling—particularly relevant for Amans's case.

Amans asks Venus for health, after having served for years in her court (of love) and suffering from his lingering woe (168-71). Venus scowls in response to Amans and says that he may be an impostor, challenging his claim that he worked in her court (172-76), yet she bids him tell her of his malady. Once again Amans exaggerates his situation and replies that, while he hopes to explain his sickness, he might not be able to continue living because of his condition (186-87). Twice Amans has a chance to come forward to Venus, and twice he insists that he is a captive of love, and that such captivity has laid a claim on his ability to continue living. Venus obliges him both times.

However, instead of continuing the unfruitful conversation with Amans, Venus decides to take control of how they proceed by choosing to agree to Amans's delusions about his lovesickness. She replies,

“In aunter if thou live,  
Mi will is ferst that thou be schrive;  
And natheles how that it is

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<sup>5</sup> This book “provides prefatory instructions (*ordo*) to priests on confessions. It then includes questions and prescribed penances for affirmative answers” (Hamilton 39). For further discussion, see Ludger Körntgen's “Canon Law and the Practice of Penance.”

I wot miself, bot for al this  
Unto my prest, which comth anon,  
I woll thou telle it on and on,  
Bothe all thi thocht and al thi werk.  
O Genius myn oghne clerk,  
Com forth and hier this mannes schrifte.” (189-97)

Suggesting doubt over whether Amans might live, Venus instructs him to confess, calling for one of her priests, Genius, to come and hear his confession in full. In these verses, as Venus highlights the importance of Amans’s confession as a condition for his peaceful death (likely alluding to deathbed confessions), she indicates that she already knows what Amans will confess in the matters of love—perhaps because she is the goddess of Love, perhaps because she can plainly see that the man standing before her is old. Nonetheless, she encourages Amans to go through the confession, item by item, with her clerk Genius, who, as a priest, may be able to offer him absolution. As Amans raises his head, Genius is already by his side, sitting down to hear his confession. In this simple scene, we move back from Amans’s complaint against love—in a courtly sense—to the confession of his sins against love—in a universal sense. Having set up a process for Amans to explain his lovesickness, confess, be absolved, and possibly be allowed to die without being tarnished by his unconfessed sins, Venus exits the poem and lets Genius take on the confessional practice and instructional mode. It is noteworthy that, by introducing Amans’s confession as the means for his salvation, however odd this may seem coming from Venus, Gower is bringing an element of religious piety from the intellectual elite to all of his readers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> I expand on this analysis in the section “Medieval Confessions and the Examination of Conscience.”

## The Criticism of the Confessional Frame

Throughout the *Confessio*, we can see confession take on several roles and uses in Genius's tales. As Jenny Lee writes,

Generally, acts of confession lead to ameliorative outcomes, whether in love (e.g. Pygmalion in Book IV; Nectanabus, VI), in family relations (Ulysses and Telegonus, VI), in politics (Demetrius, II), or in the restoration of true identities, particularly through confessional letter-writing (Constance, II; False Bachelor, II; Apollonius, VIII). In one case, forgiveness is proffered where it seems puzzlingly unnecessary but paves the way for a happy marriage nonetheless (Tale of Three Questions, I. 3067-3402). But the language of confession can also be used to represent darker realities, as in the tale of Mundus and Paulina, where the collusion of Isis's priests with the treacherous soon-to-be rapist Mundus is described as a "schrifte" (I. 818), or in the story of Lucrece, who will have none of her husband's and father's supposedly magnanimous offers to "forgive" her for being raped (VII. 4753-5130). Complex and often shockingly unexpected relationships between confession and the forces of human desire thus emerge from their juxtapositions. (74)

In the deliberate structure that Gower creates for the frame narrative, confession becomes the guiding factor, being the focal point of Genius's and Amans's interactions. Here Gower draws on the penitential manuals of the period, in particular Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*, as Gerald Kinneavy has shown. Kinneavy reminds us that Gower's poem is structured first and foremost as a confession: "What is significant about the close parallels between the penitentials and the

*Confessio* is that we see the confession device as a massive working principle in the poem. The poet may not have had actual penitentials in hand as he composed, but he certainly had the tradition in mind” (156; Tracy 56). Confession, as the rule governing the behaviour of both Amans and Genius, parallels its own working principle as an examination and reshaping of behaviour under a moral and ethical code. Both this examination and this reshaping, in turn, are reflected in the understanding of the *Confessio* as a public poem. Therefore, the confessional structure is just as political as Genius’s discussion of Aristotle’s education in Book VII, and it sets Gower’s moralizing apparatus in order.

As Peter Nicholson notes, apart from the attempts (which are often illuminating) to trace common moral themes in the tales and the story of the narrator’s instruction, critics, more often than not, study Gower’s exempla in isolation from the dialogue in which they occur. Nicholson argues that the

confession device is just as important both to the moral and to the imaginative dimensions of the work, as the pilgrimage that serves as the setting for Chaucer’s collection of tales. Amans provides not merely the occasion for the poem but also the anchor for all of the confessor’s teaching, and his presence allowed Gower to shift the emphasis from purely abstract moralizing to the difficulties of the individual sinner’s real experience...The result is a genuine exploration rather than a mere set of moral assertions, and a more complex and more sophisticated analysis of the morality of human love than Gower has been given credit for.

(“The ‘Confession’” 193)

To account for this complex analysis of a moral system, we must consider the confession of the lover with more attention because confession lends itself well to public poetry by providing

structure and inviting discussions of social behaviour and moral judgement. Amans's confession works by means of questioning his sins against love. This examination of Amans's past behaviour allows for a nuanced dive into an individual's motivations, and it gives Gower occasion to explore the ways in which the division he denounces earlier is manifested in an individual. Katherine C. Little allows that "the lover's confession may be a retreat from the world of the Prologue," yet she insists that "it is still a response [to it]" (108). Because confession requires a structured examination of Amans's behaviour (and sins), the choice of a confessional frame is logical and perhaps even expected for the kind of project Gower lays out in the Prologue—one of reunifying a divided kingdom by addressing division in the individual. Along with the earlier theme of medicine, confession offers the means to cure the division of the individual and, consequently, of the nation, thus bridging the gap between politics and love.

Nonetheless, many readers have objected specifically to Gower's choice of confessional discourse for the frame narrative. The role of confession and its correlation to the work's themes has long been a topic of discussion (Lee 72). On the one hand, since C. S. Lewis's remark that confession is the "master-stroke which organizes the whole of Gower's material" (168), critics have recognized the *Confessio's* debts to penitentials (Lee 72). For example, Derek Pearsall writes that "the poem as a whole gains enormously from the dramatic scheme [of confession], just as Gower himself gained from the freedom it gave him" ("Gower's Narrative Art" 477). On the other hand, as discussed in Chapter 1, and as Nicholson argues, many critics—including Lewis and other supporters of the originality of Gower's confessional frame—have refuted any kind of "dramatic' unity to the poem, and treated Amans' life, the stories, and [Genius's] moral instruction as separable components of Gower's design" ("The 'Confession'" 193; Lee 72-73). For example, Katherine R. Chandler writes that "the confession provides more the skeleton than

the focus of the *Confessio Amantis*; it does not constitute the majority of the poem” (18), agreeing with James J. Murphy’s reading of the tales as “loosely tied together through the device of a lover confessing to Genius, a priest of Venus” (402). These critics are reluctant to accept the confession as anything more than a plot device that allows Genius to tell his tales.

In particular, readers have objected to the choice of a confessional frame for a narrative centred on unrequited courtly love, and the juxtaposition of these two genres is at the crux of many of the poem’s critiques. For instance, Karma Lochrie finds the juxtaposition of courtly love and the confessional narrative both “absurd” and humorous:

the moralizing structure that critics continue to take seriously is as absurd as Amans’s love and Genius’s hermeneutics. *Yet the very application of the penitential format to love renders the format itself absurd, even meaningless, as Genius warps it to fit everything from the petty infractions to the grand tragedies of love and in the process does violence to its stories. The sheer incongruity of story and penitential moral produces a range of effects from humorous to unsettling.* There is hardly a clear moral trajectory to the entire work, much less a clear moral condemnation of courtly love. (221, emphasis mine)

The implication of this argument is that the confessional frame is not only flawed because it fails to bring the moral lessons and the courtly love context into a rational conversation, but also irrelevant because its only purpose is to bring together distinct elements of Gower’s narrative—as we see in Lewis’s argument for instance.

The issue with this kind of reading of the *Confessio* and the structures and traditions Gower sets up is that it fails to consider the reasoning for the book that Gower establishes in the Prologue. Little argues that critics have underemphasized the relationship between the

confessional frame of the *Confessio* and confession as an examination of conscience “quite simply because Amans’s confession is not sacramental or even particularly religious and instead, as John Fisher once noted, has to do with courtly love” (104). According to Little’s argument, the seemingly confusing integration of courtly love and confession into the same poem’s structure causes critics to dismiss the language of confession and, instead, focus on courtly love, thus favouring analyses of Gower’s indebtedness to love poetry. Similarly, Stephanie L. Batkie argues that “our critical difficulty with the form of confession in the poem, particularly as it relates to erotic love, stems from our misreading of how confession [in a medieval sense] structures subjectivity and desire” (100-01). As I discuss later in this Chapter, confession allows for a detailed interrogation of the penitent’s behaviour and judgment of his or her sins. Through this meticulous questioning, priests are able to assess the penitents’ desires and correct them according to their guided instruction. Confession acts in tandem with courtly love because it allows for a discussion of subjectivity (both active and passive) and desire—two key elements of courtly love narratives—and in particular of Amans’s courtship of his lady. Amans must answer to Genius’s questions and identify his reasoning for his past behaviour, examining himself and his motivations in the process. The reasonable reader may find Amans’s justifications for the sins he commits naïve and marred by infatuation; Genius’s task is to make the lover come to this realization himself.

Likewise, John J. McNally argues that Gower’s *Confessio* does not “mix water and oil” in combining the penitential tradition with the poetry of courtly love. He points out, for example, that there are some significant similarities between the penitent and the lover. Both have a desire to receive the “grace” of the beloved and both suffer from sickness, one caused by sin and the other by love (82). It follows that the confession and the Prologue are connected by similar and

overarching themes. Indeed, the confessional frame offers the opportunity for the dialogue between Amans and Genius to transcend the matters of love they superficially discuss and transform into a two-way examination of conscience through which both penitent and priest benefit from a wide-ranging discussion that eventually harkens back to the current affairs of English politics established in the Prologue. If the division of the individual soul causes the division of the nation, then unifying the individual, i.e. bringing Amans to recognize himself as an old man through his confession (and in the process acknowledge the errors of his way), can reunify the nation.

We should also be careful not to conflate the confessional frame with the moralizing direction of the tales. Although the tales Genius tells arise from Amans's confession, as *exempla*, to help the priest illustrate the sins they investigate, their tenor and subject matters are much more overtly political than they are amatory, often dealing with matters of governance and kingship, and somewhat removed from Amans's instructional requirements. For example, in explaining the sin of Ire, and in particular the emotional distress associated with fury (i.e. "malencolie"), Genius tells Amans the Tale of Canace and Machaire. The tale deals with complex familial relationships and incest. Genius, however, does not address the incest even though it is the theme of the last tale he tells, the Tale of Apollonius in Book VIII, in which he overtly condemns incestuous relationships. Instead, the priest focuses on the father's lack of control over his emotions once he discovers his daughter's incestuous relationship with her brother. Genius explains, "he which ladde his wrathe so / Hath knowe of love bot a lite" (III. 332-33). The tale might fit the umbrella of Ire, but in a confession that should be focused on the sins against love (and consequently the natural order), the overlooking of the incest is puzzling. However, when we look at the tale from the perspective of advice to princes, of a writer

concerned with kingly behaviour in light of recent political turmoil, we begin to see how Genius simultaneously inhabits this liminal space as Amans's priest and Gower's political campaigner. In the Tale of Canace and Machaire, the father figure is King Eolus; he is condemned by Genius for failing to act with the moderation and temperament a king should exhibit. In contrast, in the Tale of Apollonius, when Genius does denounce incest, it is King Antiochus who commits the act; Genius's focus is once again on appropriate kingly behaviour.

Despite the disconnect between the confession and the tales, the confessional frame as a whole brings the specific relationship between Genius as the confessor priest and Amans as the penitent to the foreground. The confessional frame provides the tales the possibility of being told and analyzed from the perspective of love in relation to the seven deadly sins, which Genius ought to respect as both the priest in charge of Amans's full confession and a priest of Venus. We ought to be careful not to conflate Gower's own moralizing voice with the practice of confession as a means of instruction—or even Genius's role as a storyteller (in the genre of *exempla*) with his role as a confessor priest of Venus's court.<sup>7</sup> Because Genius's moral lessons are an added element to the confessional frame, they are not essential to Amans's development. What is essential is the relationship between Genius and Amans as equally invested in the confession and their examination of conscience. As a result, the confessional frame also foregrounds the development of the two frame characters and what they come to represent in Gower's educational project.

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<sup>7</sup> Lochrie's reading also does little to acknowledge Venus's role as the goddess of love in relation to the confessional frame since it is the interaction between Venus and Amans that sets off the confession of the lover. Venus is also the only one capable of providing Amans with absolution (and resolution for that matter) with the matters regarding his confession, bringing a conclusion to the courtly love narrative. I investigate the conclusion of the poem in more detail in The Conclusion.

At the end of her paragraph, Lochrie concludes that there is no clear condemnation of courtly love, and she notes this lack of condemnation as one of the reasons why the *Confessio* has no clear “moral trajectory.” Even if we agree with the position that the old man Gower’s rejection is only a “game,” or not taken as seriously as it should be by the character, the entire narrative shifts at his self-acknowledgement. In fact, Gower in his old age agrees not to continue pursuing the lady of his courtship, and Venus outright declares that his foolishness must stop. If the goal of confession is self-knowledge (Gallacher 13), then Amans here finally completes his journey.<sup>8</sup> While Lochrie sees this sudden shift as almost “humorous” because she claims it is an “abandonment” of the poem’s predominant discourse over the past eight books, the shift is not only appropriate for the frame characters, but might also be expected by the audience since it is compatible with similar models of courtly love literature during Gower’s time that have the protagonists turn to God as the only being worthy of the unconditional love (or surrender) required by the unachievable courtly love.<sup>9</sup> Lochrie’s claim that the poem’s shift from the courtly love of the lover’s confession to the more political ending of Book VIII is disjointed dismisses the political frame of the Prologue or the opening of Book I, both of which set the tone and purpose of the confession. In fact, the Prologue’s critique of the three estates is mirrored at the end of the poem, when Gower goes on to write about the Commons, the Church, and the Nobility again. The confessional model acts as the bridge between the political aspects of the poem and the morals on matters of love (or, more directly, Genius’s morals on public behavior and civil duty). Gower’s interest is in love as a universal concept. Amans reduces that focus to his complaint against love in a courtly love setting. In Genius, we see that the focus for Gower’s

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<sup>8</sup> I return to this section of the text for further analysis in The Conclusion.

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Tristram in the quest for the holy grail, during which his religious devotion leads him to heaven instead.

“little book” remains on the topic of universal love through Amans’s specific confession. Aiming at what torments Amans the most, Genius is able to begin a conversation about how Amans’s desires control his behaviour, leaving him a subject of his own desires and not an agent of his will—an aspect of the narrative that is paramount for our understanding of Gower’s poem as a mirror-for-princes.<sup>10</sup>

Contrary to the view that the confessional and the courtly love aspects of the frame are separate and dysfunctional, Gower’s use of confession in his poem is what allows for a discussion of courtly love, which, in turn, reveals Amans’s sinful and shameful behaviour in the narrative. What Gower shows is that confession had become a means of structuring subjectivity, desire and motivation, and, therefore, of relating the individual conscience to the body politic. Gower’s confessional frame is evidently influenced by the writer’s sophisticated understanding of late-medieval penitential practice—one that was pushed ahead significantly by the Fourth Lateran Council, an ecumenical council called by Pope Innocent III in 1215, which called for all Christians to confess at least once a year.

#### Confessions in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourth Lateran Council

Penance and confession had been in practice since the beginnings of Christianity, and literature on penance was already being written much before its annual prescription in 1215. For example, as Lee writes, “the literature of penitential manuals was first produced in Ireland in the sixth century and was eventually spread to the continent by Anglo-Saxon monks; these early manuals served as guides for priests on the classification of sins and the calculation of penitential

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<sup>10</sup> Here we begin to see the full set up of the text—the courtly love narrative, the confessional frame, the frame characters’ development, and the moralizing structure of the tales—working together to provide Gower with the necessary tools to craft his response to the country’s state of chaos in the mirror-for-princes he mentions in the Prologue.

‘tariffs’” (13, note 7). Moreover, “Augustine, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Athanasius were among many of the Church Fathers who advocated and defended the practice of confession” (Lee 13, note 7). In later centuries, the twelfth-century Paris theologian Peter the Chanter was especially significant for the development of the theology of confession with his *Summa de sacramentis et animae consiliis* (Lee 13, note 7).

The act of confessing sins before partaking in communion had been firmly ingrained in religious practice before Lateran IV. Numerous decrees from bishops emphasized the importance of confessing to a priest at least once, if not thrice, annually (Tentler, *Sin and Confession* 21). In the twelfth century, Richard of St. Victor unequivocally denounced those who received communion without first confessing, regardless of their contrition, deeming it sacrilegious (Tentler, *Sin and Confession* 21). Thus, it is evident that a tradition of priestly confession existed, which would serve as a formidable deterrent against any hypothetical attempt to undermine this customary practice (Tentler, *Sin and Confession* 21).

However, most considerations of penance and confession in the late Middle Ages still focus on the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and its repercussions for the development of private confession.<sup>11</sup> Often cited in these discussions are the opening words of Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*: “All the faithful of either sex, after they have reached the age of discernment, should individually confess all their sins in a faithful manner to their own priest at least once a year, and let them take care to do what they can to perform the penance imposed on them” (Tanner I. 245). This particular decree defined the practice of universal private confession for all Christendom and directed efforts from the Church and the laity to fulfill this requirement.

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<sup>11</sup> As Thomas Tentler explains, Lateran IV “has often been seen by historians as a radical turning point. H. C. Lea called it ‘perhaps the most important legislative act in the history of the Church.’ In more pejorative language, its effects have been summarized as a victory for pure legalism” (*Sin and Confession* 21).

However, the full influence of the Council remains controversial. Critics who examine Lateran IV are divided into those who see it as a defining cultural moment both in terms of religion and literature for the late Middle Ages, affecting nobles and peasants alike, and those who see the Council as the culmination of earlier confessional practices and the changes resulting from its decrees as a movement of the cultural and intellectual elite, having no particular position on the Council's influence on literature. I will begin with the first group.

Colin Morris, in his popular introduction to the High Middle Ages, *The Discovery of the Individual 1050-1200*, envisions the council as the determining factor that caused a shift from a focus on community to a focus on the individual. Morris explains this perspective as he discusses how pervasive Lateran IV's decree was: "The interesting feature of this development [the imposition of annual confession in *Omnis utriusque sexus*] is that it was an attempt to introduce the idea of self-examination throughout society; at this point, at least, the pursuit of an interior religion did not remain the property of a small elite, but entered every castle and every hovel in Western Europe" (73). This sweeping statement voices Morris's understanding of how the universal private confession of *Omnis utriusque sexus* influenced the social and cultural developments of the following centuries. Continuing this emphasis on the individual, Morris goes on to argue that this decree from the council, which was guided by theologians of the time (e.g. Pope Innocent III), specifically focused on contrition and intention, and not priestly absolution, to incite the idea of confession to laymen as "permissible, and indeed desirable, if there was no priest available"—an idea that could be seen as proto-Protestant (73-74). In order for the penitent to make a proper confession, he or she must be remorseful for his or her past actions and willing to reflect on these actions, repent, and learn from them—only then is the

priest's absolution actually granted. What we see in Morris is one of the most emphatic claims that Lateran IV was a turning point in social, cultural, and religious history.

Other critics have echoed Morris's insistence on the social implications of *Omnis utriusque sexus*. According to Sarah Hamilton, the major change imposed with universal confession (as opposed to canonical penance) was that "[its] focus appeared to be on the individual's relationship with God rather than his role within the wider community" (4). In Hamilton's view, universal private confession was a move away from a communal practice to individual contrition and devotion. In this reformulation, the practice of confession went beyond the performance of the confessional act: confession became an instructional device for self-reflection. Entry into the internal penitential forum—that of conscience and penance—depended exclusively on the initiative of the penitent, and so did the giving of testimony (Goering, "The Internal Forum" 191). According to Goering, "no outside evidence was admissible in the internal forum; only the free, full, and truthful confession of the penitent was acceptable" ("The Internal Forum" 191). *Omnis utriusque sexus* became the fundamental charter of the Church's internal forum of conscience and penance (opposed to the external forum of the ecclesiastical courts). The decree thus invited "all Christian people, laity as well as clergy, at every level of society, [to] be at least nominal participants in the penitential forum, and by extension, in the moral and juridical life of the Church" (Goering, "The Internal Forum" 178). In the following centuries, this internal forum became "the training ground for Christian conscience and a school where both clergy and laity would learn the Church's canon law" (178). If the practice of confession was to become universal, so too would its structure.

When we look at the history of sacramental penance, it becomes evident that changes to the rites of absolution have arisen gradually, prompted by the inherent necessity or fervent desire

for a more adaptable discipline (Tentler, “The Summa” 113). As Richard W. Southern has noted, in the twelfth century, following the religious influence of Anselm of Canterbury and Bernard de Clairvaux, there was a shift in devotional practice that reflected an “urge towards a greater measure of solitude, of introspection, and self-knowledge” (221). This new devotional mood, affective piety, was reflected in increased interest in the Passion of Christ and a particular emphasis on interiority, self-examination, and doctrines concerning salvation from sin (232-34).<sup>12</sup> Looked at from that perspective, the institutional response to lay pressure was astute: in the long run, private confession helped the Church influence behaviour (Tentler, “The Summa” 113).

Thomas Tentler also sees the literature that develops from Lateran IV as having broader social implications, but of a different kind. In particular, discussing the *summas* for confessors, Tentler argues that they helped achieve the social control implied in *Omnis utriusque sexus* (“The Summa” 109), they “controlled behaviour” (114), and “their task was to represent law in the forum of penance and make conformity to the regulations of the hierarchy a strict matter of conscience” (117). Tentler explains that confession is predicated upon “the priest’s power to examine penitents and try to change their behaviour” (105). According to Tentler, “to understand the *summa* for confessors is to understand one of the principal contributions of intellectuals to control by the hierarchical, sacramental church” (106). Tentler lays out his argument regarding confession (and the literature associated with it) as social control as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> There have been objections to Southern’s theory on affective piety. Among these, F. J. E. Raby and David L. Jeffrey have defended the theory that affective piety is essentially a Franciscan mediation, with St. Francis Assisi being at the centre of the transformation of religious sensibility into the devotion of the humanity of Christ, while Caroline Walker Bynum, Clarissa Atkinson and Sarah McNamer have defended the theory that affective piety is essentially linked to female spirituality and the body of Christ. For further discussion, see Raby’s *History of Christian-Latin Poetry*, Jeffrey’s *English Spirituality*, Bynum’s *Jesus as Mother*, Atkinson’s *Mystic and Pilgrim*, McNamer’s *Affective Mediation*, and Aers’s “The Humanity of Christ.”

The penitential institutions, developed in the first centuries of the ancient and medieval church, performed social functions. They existed first of all to insure discipline, to exercise control. In ecclesiastical or theological terms this discipline insured the purity of those who associated in the mystical body of Christ and received, on the great feasts, the consecrated Body of Christ. In secular terms, these institutions worked to enforce or maintain obedience to a society. The willing recourse to excommunication; the public nature of exclusion, retribution, and reconciliation; concentration on the most serious crimes against marriage, property, and life; and the punitive nature of the system's sanctions: all of these harsh characteristics point to the prominent role played by the church in the maintenance of social order. (*Sin and Confession* 12)

Tentler specifically argues that these summas taught “that morality was definable; that human authorities could define it; that all men were responsible for knowing and practicing it; that those who did not were guilty and should feel guilt and remorse; and that sinners were accountable not only to God, but also to men” (“The Summa” 122-23). According to Tentler, the summas thus contributed to the internal forum of conscience and the reinforcement of a Catholic culture of guilt. He concludes that, in defining what behaviour is forbidden, “the great winner in this literature is the system of social control” (122).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, with the development of the

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<sup>13</sup> Leonard Boyle disagreed with Tentler's position regarding the enforcement of social control through summas for confessors. Boyle, instead, argued that the manuals and summas for confessors provided points of contact between parish priests and the writings of teachings of popes and theologians (“The Summa” 128). Specifically, Boyle claimed that “the authors of these manuals and summae aimed at nothing less than the formation of an educated clergy,” spreading knowledge of the laws of the church (128). Despite Boyle's critiques, Tentler's focused not on the intentions of specific groups, but rather on the integral role that summas play within a societal framework. His fundamental argument suggests that ideas, institutions, and even literary works possess the ability to fulfill distinct functions or purposes, irrespective of the original intentions harbored by their creators. Yet even Tentler acknowledges that these summas for confessors “were the creation of an intellectual elite, who were aware of the seriousness of the obligation to hear confessions and equally conscious of the complexity of the legal and moral

treatises and manuals on penance, Lateran IV contributed to another a significant change to the practice of Christianity: the “sinner” became a new figure in the Western collective imagination, one who ought to reflect on past sins and actions and accurately articulate them in the process of confession, thereby repenting from earlier behaviour and (optimistically) changing patterns for the future. This “sinner” figure thus moved from religious texts into secular literature.

R. I. Moore takes Tentler’s analysis of *Omnis utriusque sexus* as social control even further. Moore argues that, by imposing universal private confession at least once a year, Lateran IV provided a more rigorous *definition* for members of the Christian community in Western Europe. This definition would come to provide a foundation for creating both an inclusive (Christian) and exclusive (non-Christian) social order. Moore notes that *Omnis utriusque sexus* determined that those who did not follow their annual duty to confess to their parish priest and perform penance would be cut off from the Church and denied a Christian burial (6). Consequently, in order to remain a member of the Church and be considered Christian, every person had to confess. Lateran IV was different from previous councils because, while those occupied themselves with the clergy and clerical reform, this was the first attempt in a council to legislate Christian life for layfolk. Although Moore acknowledges that there was “an immensurable chasm between enactment and implementation” of the decrees from Lateran IV, he argues that the council’s decisions “reshaped the institutional and spiritual framework of European society” for the next three centuries (7). In his investigation of Lateran IV’s canons relating to social control, Moore notes that some of the Council’s decrees also regarded the persecution of Jews and heretics. Specifically, he writes that the Council “laid down a machinery of persecution for Western Christendom, and especially a range of sanctions against those

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prescriptions that had to be honoured if the confessional were to fulfill its role as the principal place for the forgiveness of sins” (“The Summa” 107-8). Boyle and Tentler are not as far apart in their arguments as it may seem.

convicted” (10). This view of the council’s decrees as instruments of social order, prejudiced as some may be, gives us further insight into how the politics of religion affected social control—in a much darker manner than that portrayed by Tentler. While the canons on the persecution of Jews that become the focus of Moore’s work are not presently relevant for this study, we have a clear sense of Moore’s view of Lateran IV as a defining moment for the social and religious politics of the late Middle Ages.<sup>14</sup>

More recent criticism tends to disrupt the notion that Lateran IV was the defining moment in the history and practice of confession. One of the major challenges comes from Abigail Firey. In *A New History of Penance*, she calls for a historical investigation of what has become the widely received history of confession, specifically the history of private confession (2).<sup>15</sup> Firey and other scholars have offered a more moderate assessment of Lateran IV and its influence. For instance, Wietse de Boer attributes the focus on *Omnis utriusque sexus* in scholarship from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to Protestant attacks on private confession. R. Emmet McLaughlin uncovers the “mythic importance” of Lateran IV in Catholic debates of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Firey 2). Both McLaughlin and Robert Meens argue that Jean Morin, a prominent seventeenth-century Protestant, in fact defined succeeding histories of penance (Firey 6). McLaughlin specifically notes Morin’s interest in the more traditional and public forms of penance in the Middle Ages as suitably rigorous practices, which were then compromised by casuistry and indulgences (Firey 6-7). Even though Meens

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<sup>14</sup> The Fourth Lateran Council was also responsible for officially establishing inquisitorial confession alongside the sacrament of penance. According to Finbarr McAuley, as a result of Lateran IV, “trial by inquisition eventually came to occupy the space vacated by the [unilateral judicial] ordeal in all of the precociously centralized polities of Western Europe apart from England, where appeal to the *judicium Dei* was replaced by the verdict of one’s peers... the precursor of the trial jury” (474). For a full account of judicial confession in the thirteenth century, see McAuley’s “Canon Law and End of the Ordeal” and Dyan Elliott’s *Proving Woman*.

<sup>15</sup> For more information and examples of this reconstruction of the history of confession, see Firey’s *A New History of Penance*; Hamilton’s *The Practice of Penance, 900-1050*; and Biller and Minnis’s *Handling Sin*.

understands Morin as someone “untainted by confessional prejudice” (82) and McLaughlin states that Morin is “the first true scholarly historian of penance” (26), both read the theologian’s writing not in a medieval context, but in relation to the religious debates of his own times (Firey 7).

Working to meet Firey’s call for a more nuanced historical investigation of the development of private confession, Hamilton argues that centuries before Lateran IV “the practice of secret or tariff penance, often termed in modern scholarship private penance, developed to meet the need, posed by the decline of canonical penance, for atonement and restitution after sin” (3).<sup>16</sup> Hamilton’s analysis of the development of the sacrament of penance and confession from the seventh to the thirteenth century reveals a much more complex progression from “the early medieval emphasis on the external performance of penance, the penitential tariff, as necessary for reconciliation with the Almighty, to more emphasis being placed on the contrition felt by the individual” (7). These readings thus invite us to consider the earlier history of (medieval) confession and the movements that led the Fourth Lateran Council to establish universal private confession rather than the council as the defining factor that established universal private confession for the population at large.

However, the hypothesis that annual confession led to a widespread examination of conscience is based on clerical aspirations, not reality. Firey argues that “A linear history that depicts an initial era of penance administered by bishops and bishops alone, followed by an era of transition resulting in penitential confession to parish priests and leading to an era of controversy, reform, and—except for Catholics—rejection of sacerdotal directions to penitents is

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<sup>16</sup> Popularized through the penitential book attributed to the Archbishop Theodore of Canterbury, canonical penance was a prescribed penance given by confessors to reconcile the individual with the nature and seriousness of their sin. Canonical penance typically focuses on the performance of temporal punishment due to sin. According to Hamilton, the decline of canonical penance here is related, in particular, to one’s deathbed (209).

flawed in almost every respect” (14). I add that this understanding of the history of penance specifically fails to account for the gradual development and implementation of universal private confession as a result of earlier movements or the response to affective piety. A concern raised by social historians is that “there is a danger in mistaking the opinions of intellectuals for the understanding of ordinary curates and laymen” (Tentler, *Sin and Confession* 51). Firey notes, instead, that an overview of the history of penance as it developed in the late Middle Ages must allow for “an extraordinary range of penitential encounters between confessants and confessors” (14).

Moreover, the recorded history of confession in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries provided ideal examples of confession rather than factual accounts of its common practice. The little we do know about the practice of private confession in late medieval England comes from penitential accounts of great aristocrats and penitential manuals written both for priests and the educated laity. The insistence on universal confession in the wake of Lateran IV and the introduction of these newer practices of confession as instructional moments of self-scrutiny are reflected in several manuscripts containing manuals for penitents and scattered accounts of individual confessions from members of the intellectual elite.<sup>17</sup> These records parallel the “ensamples” of the books written before us that Gower mentions in the opening of his Prologue—examples of books left to guide future generations on moral behaviour. While the new penitential movement takes shape at the level of the elite, in the circles where private confession to a personal chaplain is possible, for the majority of the population (i.e. the peasants) the declaration of 1215 did not signify a substantial change in the process of confession, and it did not become an exercise in self-reflection.

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<sup>17</sup> For an overview of surviving manuscripts, see Murchison’s *Manuals for Penitents in Medieval England*, 2-5.

Hamilton alerts us that “medieval historians nowadays, whatever period of the Middle Ages they study, use penance as an entrée into the morals, attitudes and habits of lay people as well as the clergy and see the interaction of clergy and laity as centrally important” (14). As Hamilton puts it, “historians still know very little about how penance was practised in the medieval period or about the way in which penitentials were used” (16). The surviving texts from the period do not allow for a dynamic view of the lived realities of confessional practice, and especially not for the average person in the Middle Ages. Confession for the lower strata of society was likely hasty and superficial. It certainly was not an intellectual or didactic exercise, as Hamilton indicates. And yet, it is perhaps worth noting that this objection, however legitimate, is of little relevance for literary history, which, for this period, is the history of the reading of the elites.

#### The Fourth Lateran Council and Literary Production

While the impact of the Fourth Lateran Council on the religious life of the average Christian remains debated, its impact on literary production in broader terms is clear. In tandem with the declaration of universal confession, “Lateran IV launched an unprecedented campaign for lay education across Europe that prompted the production of instructional manuals on confession in the form of penitential treatises for scholars, pastoral handbooks for priests, popular guides for laypeople, and even rhetorical primers for schoolboys” (Lee 13). As William Pantin argues, Lateran IV’s declaration of universal confession brought forth the need for “properly trained confessors” (156), which promoted treatises and manuals for confessors.<sup>18</sup> In

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<sup>18</sup> Canon 21 was not the only one to trigger major changes to European educational practices. For example, Canon 10 (“On Preaching”) emphasizes the importance of preaching. It acknowledges preaching as a vital aspect of a bishop’s duties and a cornerstone of religious instruction for the laity—providing moral guidance and a deeper understanding of the faith, and leading parishioners towards confession. The canon specifically states that bishops

England, Archbishop Pecham furthered the potential uses of these manuals during the Lambeth Council of 1281, in which he declared that parish priests “Openly on Inglis opon sononndaies / Teche and preche thaim, that thai haue cure of, / The lawe and the lore to knawe god all-mighten” (Thoresby 6; Lee 13). The Lambeth Constitutions also documented a curriculum to be taught in English four times per year (Lee 13). These declarations resulted in an increase in pastoral literature specifically aimed at educating lay people on the basic points of religious instruction, with a significant stress on penance (Lee 13).<sup>19</sup> This was both a popular and practical literature.

Seventy years later, in its broad outlines, Pantin’s argument remains convincing when he explains that “in the realm of religious literature we can see, in the clearest and most satisfactory way, the achievement of the fourteenth century as the logical outcome of the forces at work in the thirteenth century and earlier” (189).<sup>20</sup> As Tentler notes, the discourse of the “sinner” that

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who are unable to preach themselves must appoint suitable replacements. This decree sought to ensure that preaching would continue even if a bishop lacked the necessary skills, time, or fluency in the local language. Moreover, this emphasis on preachers who could communicate effectively with the local population suggests a growing recognition of the importance of vernacular languages in religious instruction. Similarly, Canon 11 (“On Schoolmasters for the Poor”) renewed an ordinance from the Third Lateran Council (1179) that mandated the establishment of schools for the clergy in connection with every cathedral. This emphasis on education for priests sought to ensure a more literate and knowledgeable clergy, potentially improving the quality of religious instruction and leadership. While not directly focused on the laity, Canon 11 indirectly contributed to a broader educational climate, for the emphasis on clerical education within the Church structure also inspired the establishment of more schools and a renewed appreciation for learning in some regions. It is noteworthy here, too, that the educational angle was not the only drive behind these canons. The thirteenth century saw the rise of heretical movements that challenged the Church’s authority. Thus, Canons 10 and 11 can also be seen as an effort to strengthen orthodoxy by ensuring proper religious instruction and combating heretical ideas through effective preaching.

<sup>19</sup> According to Pantin, this literature “provided, among other things, an elaborate program of religious instruction for the laity” (189). It follows that, for Pantin, the vernacular religious treatises that developed from this need of religious instruction “carry the purpose of the manuals for parish priests a stage further, by diffusing religious knowledge among the laity” (191).

<sup>20</sup> There has been significant critical interest in the form of confession in Middle English manuscripts, particularly in relation to pastoralia. See P. S. Jolliffe’s *Check-list of Middle English Prose Writings of Spiritual Guidance*, Robert R. Raymo’s as well as Thomas J. Heffernan and Patrick J. Horner’s works in the *Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, respectively “Works of Religious and Philosophical Instruction” in vol 7 and “Sermons and Homilies” in vol 11, as well as Anthony Ian Doyle’s dissertation, “A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological

emerged with Lateran IV, began to affect society at large through widespread education: this new literature would allow the laity to learn the ways of confession and confessors to better educate the consciences of their penitents.<sup>21</sup> According to Pantin, the vernacular treatises and religious discourses of the fourteenth century are all connected to the changes imposed by Lateran IV. Pantin even argues that “the correct use of the sacrament of penance is a theme which dominates or underlies most of the religious literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries” (192). Pantin here sees the secular literature either about confession and penance or involving these topics, including Gower’s *Confessio*, as logical developments from the individual performance of confession and penance. Pantin explains that “we can see fourteenth-century religion in its most intensely personal aspect, in the minute care, integrity and sympathy with which each individual conscience was approached” (261). The emphasis on “each individual conscience” reflects Pantin’s view of universal private confession as a major change for all of medieval society.

If we follow Pantin’s perspective, the vernacular religious literature that came after the manuals providing training for priests as confessors, a literature that was available to a larger public, provided the practice of contemplation to the laity. In other words, Pantin sees a defined trajectory from Lateran IV to a literature focused on the individual and the examination of his or

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Writings in English in the 14th, 15th, and Early 16th Centuries, with Special Consideration of the Part of the Clergy therein.” On this topic, see also Alexandra’s Barratt’s “Works of Religious Instruction,” Michael G. Sargent’s “Minor Devotional Writings” and Heffernan’s “Sermon Literature” in A. S. G. Edwards’s *Middle English Prose: A Critical Guide to Major Authors and Genres*, and Vincent Gillespie’s “Anonymous Devotional Writings” in Edwards’s *Companion to Middle English Prose*. Michael E. Cornett, in “The Form of Confession: A Later Medieval Genre for Examining Conscience,” goes to great lengths to compile and categorize these manuscripts, and Krista A. Murchison’s *Manuals for Penitents in Medieval England* provides a masterful overview of the field and analysis of this history of penitential writings.

<sup>21</sup> It is of note that this field has mostly confined itself to works in Middle English in its definition of vernacular religiosity. Much was written in Anglo-Norman during the twelfth and thirteen centuries in the British Isles and European Continent. See Ruth Dean and Maureen Boulton’s *Anglo-Norman Literature: A Guide to Texts and Manuscripts*, and Nicholas Watson’s *Balaam’s Ass: Vernacular Theology before the English Reformation*.

her conscience. The penitent's "examination of conscience" during confession is a moment of instruction; this new literature sought to explain and recreate this process for readers, both the clergy and the laity alike. According to Pierre Machaud-Quantin, this moment of instruction derives from the examination of the seven capital sins through a process of interrogation; in particular, for the purpose of this dissertation, this interrogation is the most relevant aspect of penitential literature introduced by the works of Robert de Flamborough and Thomas de Chobham in the early thirteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Machaud-Quantin argues that "par l'innovation qu'introduisent Robert et Thomas les manuels du confesseur deviennent le livre d'éducation morale du pénitent, et dans la majorité des cas il ne recevra guère d'autre enseignement pour lui apprendre à former sa conscience [through the innovation introduced by Robert and Thomas, the confessor's manuals become the book of moral education of the penitent, and in the majority of cases he will receive hardly any other instruction to teach him to form his conscience]" (23). The *Confessio* is therefore indebted to Lateran IV, the discourse of the "sinner," and the examination of conscience that both have brought to the West.

This development of penitential literature occurred in stages. First, we see a new system for educating the clergy. In "The Fourth Lateran Council," Leonard Boyle argues that

it was through *Omnis utriusque sexus* and the consequent change of relationship between priest and penitent that the teaching of theologians and others on interiority reached every level of Christian life—in sermons, in collections of

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<sup>22</sup> Robert de Flamborough was a canon penitentiary at the Abbey of St. Victor in Paris and wrote *Liber Poenitentialis* (completed circa 1213). Thomas de Chobham, an English theologian, subdean of Salisbury, wrote *Cum miserationes domini sint super omnia* (completed circa 1215). Both works are considered the first of the new models of penitential literature: the interrogation type. On the importance of this innovation, see Machaud-Quantin's *À propos des premiers Summae confessorum* and Robertson's "The Cultural Tradition of *Handlyng Synne*."

exempla, in pastoralia in general, and particularly in vernacular expositions of penance and penitence and of virtues and vices. (36)

The movement towards the provision of pastoralia for the generality of the clergy (and laity) has its beginnings before 1215, but the council, and without even a word on the subject, gave it urgency. As Boyle puts it, “within fifty years of the council there was a profusion of episcopal or synodal constitutions all over Europe and a remarkable array of manuals of confession, summa of moral teaching, expositions of the Ten Commandments, compendia of vices and virtues, collections of sermons and sermon exempla, and general manuals of the pastoral care, in Latin and in various vernaculars” (31). Boyle also contends that “the authors of these manuals and summae aimed at nothing less than the formation of an educated clergy” (“The Summa” 128). This is not to say that every single parish priest was reading instructional manuals at this time—we are well aware that at least in some cases the priest would get this instruction through Church masters. Still, in the period immediately after Lateran IV, the first wave of manuals of confession was largely concerned with educating priests to be the “prudent and discreet” confessors specified by the constitution (Boyle, “The Fourth Lateran” 34).

The second wave of penitential pastoralia, coming around “1260, has a broader basis and is more directly concerned with the penitent as such and with the education of the penitent” (Boyle, “The Fourth Lateran” 35). According to Boyle, where the second wave is most evident is in the production in the vernaculars of manuals of virtues and vices (35). These manuals and summae served as a valuable resource for priests, providing them with easy access to the wisdom of popes, councils, theologians, and canonists on matters pertaining to domestic, social, and economic aspects of life (35). In this sense, these manuals and summae proved particularly beneficial for priests who may find themselves removed from scholarly circles (35). Boyle

explains: “Written, as their prefaces often explicitly state, ‘*ad informationem simplicium sacerdotum,*’ these manuals and summae contributed in no small way to the spread of the latest theological positions on the sacraments and pastoral practice in general, as well as to a spread of a knowledge of the universal law of the church” (“The Summa” 128). Although initially directed towards priests, the vernacular versions of these manuals soon became popular with lay readers. This was scarcely surprising. As Goering puts it, “the art of producing [an informed] confession was one of the most important skills to be learned by both priest and penitent in the late Middle Ages” as these new discourses on confession and sin began to provide the theoretical grounds for understanding human behaviour and social order, or social control, in Tentler’s view (“The Internal Forum” 191). Gower finds himself playing with and expanding on this concept with the figure of Genius, who is ultimately responsible for Amans’s religious and moral education.

The intrinsic connection of universal confession and social control, to borrow from Tentler, leads us to the didacticism inherent in this new model of the “sinner,” who must learn from confessing, repenting, and being absolved. For instance, Marjorie Curry Woods and Rita Copeland explain:

The assimilation of pedagogical to confessional practices has been remarked by scholars of penitential traditions, most recently Jean Delumeau, as well as by historians of *mentalités* and social institutions, notably Michel Foucault, and social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu. In his study of Anglo-Saxon penitential literature, Allen Frantzen notes that the new system of private penance after the seventh century turned the individual confessional encounter into an opportunity for correction and instruction, in which the confessor became a teacher and in

which the catechizing of penitents reproduced the structure of examining pupils.  
(377)

According to Joseph Goering, the significant advancement in the history of penitential thought between 1100 and 1500 is not the rejection of inflexible penitential tariffs, or “the discovery of the individual” or the “rebirth of conscience” (“Scholastic Turn” 219). Rather, Goering supports this suspicion of a history of the “rise of the individual” indirectly, by focusing, instead, on the creation of schools and universities throughout Europe, “where students were introduced to a common tradition through a common curriculum of study, and where they developed common methods of thinking about and teaching about penance”—in particular, private penance (“Scholastic Turn” 219). In these schools and universities, the decrees of Lateran IV were met with a pre-existing interest from monastic orders in the development of penitential treatises and manuals.<sup>23</sup> In spite of this knowledge production, however, the average English parish priest would have had little interest or capacity to read these texts, however simplified, and would have instead depended upon intermediaries, the *clerici*, or students who had attended the cathedral schools or universities (*William* 65). As Firey explains, “Goering’s reading of *Omnis utriusque* [*sexus*] places penitential desire among the laity as the impetus for ensuring that there are institutional means of delivering the sacrament of penitential confession” (8).

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<sup>23</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum investigates monastic and canonical literature from the twelfth century on spiritual guidance and on teaching others by word and example. Turning to treatises written by monks and regular canons for themselves and to each other, Bynum writes, “The nature of these treatises makes them peculiarly suited to reveal the assumptions not merely of their authors but also of the groups for which they were written. Treatises of advice were composed *by* monks and canons *for* monks and canons *about* what it means to be a monk or canon. They were not written to defend special privileges or to impress outsiders; rather they explicitly addressed the question of what a monk *qua* monk or regular canon *qua* regular canon felt himself vowed to do and be” (5). Monks and canons saw themselves as teachers to each other, *verbo et exemplo*, which became the motto for new religious orders, such as the Franciscan, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (5). For more on the penitential writing in universities prior to Lateran IV, see Bynum’s *Docere Verbo et Exemplo*.

Woods and Copeland present a condensed analysis of this link between confessional literature and education. They begin by arguing that “the examination of the individual conscience through confession found a ready program for pedagogical practice in the systems already used in classrooms” (390). Specifically, they state that “confession is an opportunity not only to examine the penitent’s conscience, but also to determine his or her knowledge of the basic elements of the faith and instruct adults when, ‘as often happens,’ they are ignorant. Confession is thus an occasion to send—or return—adults to ‘school’” (390-91). It follows that “the decree does more than make universal confession compulsory: it invests broad social power and profound spiritual authority in the individual priest, powers that occupy both public and secret spaces; indeed, the severity of the penalties imposed on priests for betraying the confidentiality of the confessional marks not the limits of their authority but rather the totality of their control over the individual conscience” (392). Woods and Copeland then argue that “the discourse of penance is an elaborate system of power, despite the protests of some of its historians that it is a benign response to the new requirements of pastoral care. This is not to argue that individual priests necessarily experienced the role of confessor as aggrandized personal power or that practice always conformed perfectly to the discourses of moral enforcement” (400). Woods and Copeland clarify that “priests performed assigned roles in this highly articulated system of enquiry and in the larger culture of guilt,” evoked earlier by Tentler, “that the literature of confession simultaneously produced, reflected, and sustained” (400). And they add that “priests had to be instructed in the exercise and negotiation of their pastoral power. The template which could provide the pattern for their role was often to be found in the situational context of the classroom” (400). Woods and Copeland conclude that “the pedagogical affiliations of confessional writings and practices, the relationships between teacher and pupil

that reappear in the ‘pedagogical’ conventions of confession, give us further historical insight into the ways in which the sacramentally ordained dominance of the priest was experienced” (406).

Richard Mannyng’s *Handlyng Synne* (c. 1303) as well as the anonymous *Jacob’s Well* (c. 1400-1425), treatises on matters of sin and confession, were inspired by the influx of penitential materials in the continent (Lee 14). Similarly, literary works began to be influenced by confessional themes and models. Among these is Gower’s own *Confessio*, which is concerned with private and public behaviours as they relate to matters of sins against “love” (Lee 14). George Kane notes that “almost all the significant fourteenth-century literature is seriously concerned about human behaviour, about the private or public consequence of sin for the individual or through him the community or the realm or the Church” (5; Lee 14). As a result, works such as the *Confessio* can only be understood in light of the developing interest in these matters, as it interacts with and transforms confessional structure and doctrine (Lee 14).

### Confession as a Model for Literary Subjectivity

Universal private confession did not just lead to a major expansion of catechetical material; it also provided a new model for literature while literature tried to serve as a form of confession. Scholars have long noted the relationship between private confession and an individual conscience, on the one hand, and literary interiority, on the other.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Marc Bloch writes: “The whole tendency of the new literature was towards the rehabilitation of the individual; it encouraged the growth of a more introspective habit of mind, reinforcing in this

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<sup>24</sup> See Bloch’s *Feudal Society*; Bloomfield’s *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept*; Morris’s *The Discovery of the Individual: 1050-1200*; and Hopkins’s *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance*.

direction the influence of the religious practice of auricular confession” (113). Confessional literary genres allow for an exploration of a subject’s thoughts, feelings, reactions, and inner struggles regarding matters of sin. Although universal private confession would come to shape the literature of the late Middle Ages, earlier modes and models, such as the *retractatio*, *apologia*, and *confessio* laid the grounds for the development of this new interest in individual behaviour and social interactions (Lee 28). The struggles of man against sin and with contrition lead to insightful views of social and political thought in the enclosed space of confession.

The prime example of early medieval literary confession, which explored the subject’s interiority, is Augustine’s *Confessions* (c. 397-400). Commenting on the autobiographical quality of *Confessions*, Charles Taylor argues that it “introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition,” by moving through the stages of confession, from the penitent’s acknowledgment of sins, through self-imposed penance, and to the reiteration of the penitent’s faith (131; Lee 28). In combining Scripture with his own personal experiences, Augustine proved the potential of spiritual examination through autobiography, a textual exposition of his own life and sins (Lee 28). In fact, Augustine, once a student of rhetoric, specified his spiritual devotion as an act of writing: “*egerim in litteris iam quidem servientibus tibi* [I began at last to serve you by writing]” (IX.4; Lee 28). Consequently, *Confessions* provided a compelling example of the potential between *confessio* and literature, a model that would be copied for many centuries, including the autobiographies of Guibert of Nogent (*Monodiae*, c. 1115) and Peter Abelard (*Historia calamitatum*, c. 1132) (Lee 29).

Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae* or *On the Consolation of Philosophy* (c. 523) was even more influential on later confessional literature (Lee 29). Boethius’s book introduced not only Lady Philosophy as a stern figure of authority overseeing the penitent’s confession, a

model that would become commonplace for literary confessional literature, but also, through this authoritative figure, detailed interrogation of the penitent on matters of sin (Lee 29). In fact, Lady Philosophy questions the penitent's behaviour and sins through a series of moral and theological lessons, bridging the gap between classical philosophical tradition and Christianity. Beyond reflecting Boethius's experiences and thoughts, the *Consolation* thus acknowledges the divide between the author and the readers, but strives to bridge this gap through humble rhetoric, as it navigates through various forms of confession, including defense, repentance, apology, and self-justification (Lee 29). One of the most significant aspects of the *Consolation* is the reflection on the author's life after his interactions with Lady Philosophy, which, in itself, serves as a powerful defense of the book's authority. In other words, Boethius offers his own confession and growth as the justification for his own authority in matters of confession—a literary move that Gower copies centuries later. Furthermore, the *Consolation* introduces a unique literary convention by featuring an internal narrative representation of a confessor priest (Lady Philosophy) and her penitent (the prisoner Boethius) (Lee 29). While drawing inspiration from existing genres such as Platonic dialogue, debate, and personal letters of counsel, the specific relationship between the narrator and Lady Philosophy is characterized by penitence. This relationship is further characterized as depicting a penitent soul and a firm counselor, a curious student and a wise teacher, or a troubled patient and a skilled physician. These depictions would later become common themes in post-Lateran IV penitential treatises that discuss sinners and their priests (Lee 30).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For more on Boethius and medieval confessions, see Howard Rolin Patch's *The Tradition of Boethius: A Study of His Importance in Medieval Culture*, and Marteen Hoenen and Lodi Nauta's *Boethius in the Middle Ages: Latin and Vernacular Traditions of the Consolatio philosophiae*.

Winthrop Wetherbee points out that “recognizing Gower’s debt to this Boethian tradition is essential to understanding the poetics of the *Confessio*” (“Classical” 182). Wetherbee in fact argues that Gower owes to the *Consolations* his instinctive sense of a providential universe of hierarchically ordered powers, unified and sustained by the binding force of love; his conception of Fortune; and his formulations of a number of classic questions about the human condition (“Classical” 182). Gower raises the essential concerns of the whole poem in the first two words of Book I: “*Naturatus amor*” [love in the service of nature] or universal love, which is essentially the topic of Boethius’ *Consolation*, with its penetrating analyses of choice, determinism, existential doubt, semantics, and the calling of things of nature and the world by the wrong names—all questions that Gower would have us think upon as we contemplate his poem. Similarly, at the *Confessio*’s end, where the protagonist attempts to pull together the many “longe moevynges” of his thoughtful narrative, he finds himself alone. The principal voices—Amans, Genius, Cupid, Venus, and all the voices of the courtly love confession—have disappeared. All that is left is the old “Gower,” who, as death approaches, can only pray for the welfare of England. He remains as far removed from what Boethius refers to as his “true country,” as he was at the outset of his *Confessio*, though he does, now, at least have his poem—his little book, with all its questions—to send along after he’s gone, in hope of finding a reader to whom it might make a difference. Gower’s structure of confession as well as concepts of healing, therapy, senses and cognition, and the fundamental dislocation of the present world with its divisiveness and fragmentation of love, all owe a substantial debt to Boethian tradition.

Private Confession and the Examination of Conscience among the Elite

While the Church's promotion of confession during Lateran IV has often been regarded, negatively, as an imposition from above, or, positively, simply as a fulfillment of pastoral reasonability, confession was also clearly a response to pressure from below, and one that often provided psychological comfort. Even Tentler's argument's about the usefulness of confession, specifically "summas for confessors, as an instrument of social control" begins with his admission that the penitent should "derive psychological benefits from the ministrations of his confessors" ("The Summa" 105). In fact, *Omnis utriusque sexus* indirectly promised comfort and healing to penitents:

Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of one injured after the manner of a skilful physician, carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and sin, from the nature of which he may understand what kind of advice to give and what remedy to apply, making use of different experiments to heal the sick one. (Schroeder 260)

According to Tentler, "this psychological function is indispensable to the success of confession" ("The Summa" 113). What the "sinner" requires is an interlocutor, likely a priest, to question and guide him or her toward repentance and absolution. Thus, as Tentler puts it, "exalting the power of absolution—the 'Sacrament of Absolution' as the Scotists called it—means that the institution itself is better able to offer that comfort" ("The Summa" 113). According to Tentler, while "the first function of ecclesiastical penance then is discipline, or social control," "the second function is directed more to the individual: it is the cure of a guilty conscience" or "reconciliation with the self and with those social norms that the penitent has internalized" (*Sin and Confession* 13). In these two functions we have a clear explanation of the task and role Venus assigns to Genius.

The idea of psychological comfort derives from what Pope Francis has recently referred to as “*l’esame di coscienza*,” or an examination of conscience, a necessary step in the rite of confession (“*Celebrazione della Penitenza*” 11, 23-26). Pope Francis’s “examination of conscience” stresses the penitent’s self-scrutiny and mindset as he or she goes through the confessional process in order to achieve absolution—the comfort from being absolved of sin. This examination of conscience Pope Francis calls upon was much more in line with the sort of confession from members of the upper strata, such as that portrayed by Henry of Grosmont, first Duke of Lancaster, in his substantial Anglo-Norman treatise, *Le Livre de seyntz medicines*. Completed in 1354, the work was a likely influence on both Gower’s *Mirour* and *Confessio* (Yeager, “Gower’s French Audience” 113).

Although Duke Henry was one of the wealthiest men in England due to his successes in the Hundred Years War, his *Livre* and the posture he takes in writing it still suggest the broad influence of penitential practice, at least among the elite. In *Le Livre*, Duke Henry narrates his private and pious confessional prayers, which he organizes as centred on an allegory likening a patient who needs the physician to apply remedies to a sinner who needs Christ to treat the wounds of sin (Pantin 231). As Jean Gerson (1363-1429), Chancellor of the University of Paris, notes, central to various contemporary discourses on penitential practice is the medicinal analogy. Gerson writes: “Let the confessor know all the varieties and species of sins, as a most learned doctor of spiritual illnesses” (367), and “confessors must secretly learn about those matters that it is their concern to know, just as for doctors it is important to know the different types of illnesses” (367).<sup>26</sup> In *Le Livre*, we see the use of the medical metaphor, and (in the dissemination of the text) the connection between the individual and the social sphere. Thus, we

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<sup>26</sup> We see references to this analogy in the *Confessio* in Venus’s dialogue with Amans, discussed earlier in this Chapter.

have here a serious account of personal piety written by a member of the aristocracy. It is worth noting that, although the book follows the order of personal confession by which the penitent is supposed to remember and confess his sins, organizing them in likeness and asking for forgiveness in prayer, *Le Livre* does not include the confessional practice of absolution, which must be granted by a priest. *Le Livre*, therefore, emphasizes not so much the full sacrament of confession as the initial process of self-scrutiny. This process, though accompanied by floods of tears, becomes a source of psychological comfort for Duke Henry, as Pope Francis holds that it should be.

As Pantin observes, *Le Livre* is innovative because it “seems to be based on personal feelings and on the experience of courtly life” (231-32) rather than theoretical treatises. Pantin finds the book remarkable “as having been written from the point of view of the layman, the self-examining penitent, the amateur, so to speak, rather than that of the professional, the moral theologian and confessor” (233). Catherine Batt, editor and translator of *Le Livre*, notes that one of the obstacles to understanding the book is that Duke Henry mentions “he is not qualified to write in spiritual matters,” so his account may not be clear or instructive enough to another reader (44). Despite this observation and Duke Henry’s self-depiction as a stranger to French (having learned to write late in life), Batt suggests that he is following the modesty *topos* to further showcase his piety and that the text is indeed his own work and not that of a spiritual advisor or confessor priest. She argues “that in Henry’s case not only did he write his own prose,” but “his active engagement with, and account of, all aspects of writing the treatise” is imperative “both to his penitential engagement with his book and to his communication of its spiritual nature and value” (45). Pantin’s and Batt’s studies highlight that private confession was an important part of the spiritual life of the intellectual elite, including those who were not part of

a religious order or professional theologians. Batt makes a convincing case that Duke Henry's account can be read as a personal, understandably private, exercise in devotion and morality. Pantin does acknowledge, however, that Duke Henry expressing himself "so finely and spontaneously would not have been possible without an army of ecclesiastical technicians, bishops and canonists, confessors and preachers, at work for the previous century and a half" (233). The reference to the religious work of the previous century and a half not only places *Le Livre* in the penitential tradition promoted by the Fourth Lateran Council, but it also locates the book in the larger history of private confession.

According to R. F. Yeager, "because *Le Livre* is shaped as a 'private' confession, Duke Henry is able to exploit the medicinal as his primary metaphor, directly anatomizing his own behavior and actual body" ("Gower's French Audience" 114). Batt concurs and argues that, although the medical metaphors are obvious and "endemic to Henry's devotional experience" (42), they indicate that *Le Livre* is a serious and personal examination of conscience as they allow Duke Henry to "construct and explore the penitent's sense of selfhood and his relation to the divine" (43)—a perspective we must not take for granted. However, the work is not just an act of personal spiritual examination, nor a search for a personal cure, nor are its medical metaphors causal: it is a manual to help heal potential readers. This anatomizing of sin and confession produces a manual to help readers identify sin and seek divine help through confession and penance to cleanse themselves. This point is also one we cannot take for granted: Duke Henry, having written a highly personal work, now reaches out to others.

Building on this reading, Yeager argues that Duke Henry's model for private confession likely influenced Gower's writing of his *Mirour*: "whether Gower's significant associations with the Lancastrian house began so early as to put him in the way of Duke Henry's book we cannot

presume beyond possibility, but assuredly he would have known the duke himself, by reputation at least (no less, certainly, than Hoccleve did) as the foremost knight and baron of England” (“Gower’s French Audience” 113). Yeager adds that “[Gower] may have found an inspiration close to home, in the extraordinary *Livre de seyntz medicines*” and that the two books “resemble each other” in their goals and several other interesting ways (113). Both works arrange the major sins and their subsidiary vices in a fashion that is designed to facilitate penitential study: sins of a kind are grouped together, their relationships discussed, and their corresponding virtues enumerated. Similarly, both texts end with extensive, personal prayers invoking the Virgin Mary in “essentially the same voice—that of a sinner blackened beyond all other hope and deprived of all other appeal” (“Gower’s French Audience” 115). As Yeager puts it, Duke Henry’s *Livre* “was clearly intended for an open readership” (113) and it was meant to “engage and morally awaken members of his class” (113). Yeager here reinforces Pantin’s argument that *Le Livre* is halfway between didactic literature and the more devotional and mystical literature of its time (233). Duke Henry’s *Livre* is hence a model for private confession written by a member of the intellectual elite for his fellow laymen in this same literary and social circle. And we likely find in Gower someone who is inspired by Duke Henry’s confessions. Like Henry, Gower is not so much concerned with the common people as his larger claims for the future of England may indicate. His models are derived from ideals of the practice of confession and are far removed from broader social practices.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Yeager concludes that, although Gower’s “subject is macrocosmic for most of the *Mirour*,” in contrast with Henry’s microcosmic approach to

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<sup>27</sup> Gower’s vision of the confessional process was far from the lived realities (if we can even make such a claim in relation to medieval studies) of even the cultured elite of his time; instead, he focused on idealized confessions. One example of this distinction is the length of Amans’s confession. In his treatise on confession, Gerson goes as far as to indicate that “it would be better for [a penitent] to depart unconfessed than to make an incomplete confession” (372). Priests working local churches simply did not have the liberty to take this minute approach; however, Genius has all the time required to bring Amans to confess in front of the Court of Love.

private confession, both writers intend their “work eventually to be read by—and hence ‘cure’—others, friends and countrymen alike” (“Gower’s French Audience” 114).

Duke Henry’s elaborate exercise of self-reflection, as I have noted, remains closely tied to the elite. Conversely, Gower’s take on confession as the means for Amans to find absolution and himself (as the old man), as this moment of contrition, self-reflection, and instruction, aims at a wider readership, and it is this that makes it radical. Gower’s audience would not experience confession in the same introspective and reflective manner that Amans does. Amans’s plea to be heard by Venus (and, consequently, Genius) in the account of his lovesickness, for he might die otherwise without having confessed, places him within a cultural elite and makes confession as an examination of conscience more accessible to the general public.

#### Amans and Memory

According to Woods and Copeland, Gower’s *Confessio* exemplifies the interconnectedness of classroom and confession in medieval mentalities (377). Specifically, in Book VII, Genius departs from the established structure of Amans’s confession in order to embark on a pedagogical project: a quasi-scientific survey of medieval sciences and knowledge, a microcosmos of Gower’s own *speculum principis*, based, in turn, on Aristotle’s education of Alexander the Great (377). Yet, this departure from the more traditional examination of Amans’s conscience and the discourse of the Seven Deadly sins still stems from the interests Amans develops during his confession and is the result of Genius’s entertaining of Amans’s request for further information on the topic (377). In this respect, Gower follows a general pattern, as we have already seen. Woods and Copeland conclude that “the confessional also operates in the

manner of the classroom: the priest-confessor, as teacher, instructs and examines the penitent, to produce in him or her an internalized system of self-regulation” (377).

The process of Amans’s confession begins with Genius inviting Amans to confess both love and his woe, but with the lover refusing to provide a direct answer. Instead, Amans answers with an apology and indicates some apprehension about the confession he is about to begin: “for I am destourbed / In al myn herte, and so contourbed, / That I ne may my wittes gete, / So schal I moche thing forgete” (I. 221-24). Amans’s concern with forgetting, that his memory may be flawed, starts another theme of the *Confessio*: remembrance. This version of remembrance or memory is connected to Gower’s larger educational purpose, described in the opening of the Prologue as learning from history (or “ensamples”) as they are “remembered” in old books. The *Confessio* establishes Amans’s flawed memory for Gower to set the confessional frame as a detailed account of sins and quest for absolution. The issue with Amans’s love is not that it is inherently evil, but that it is undeniably irrational. This irrationality, in turn, is an example of the division a corrupted soul experiences: Amans’s infatuation, or unruly desire, has put his will in conflict with his reason (Chandler 16-17). Amans needs to remember all of his sins in order to confess them fully, and he needs to remember himself in order to complete his confession to Genius, who, as a proxy of Venus, is still waiting for the answer of what Amans actually is—i.e. his own realization that he is an old man and, therefore, does not belong in the court of Venus. As Chandler argues, remembrance is ultimately the means of reaching unity for the self, for the kingdom, and for the *Confessio* (16-17).

What Amans must remember is his true self as an old man; as he remembers his sins, he remembers himself. This act of remembering might also be seen as an act of rewriting. As he

engages in confession and self-reflection, regaining his own sense of self as the old Gower, Amans effectively writes himself anew through the dialogue with Genius.

Confession has been recognized as a narrative act. Specifically, literary confession, such as Duke Henry's *Livre* and Augustine's *Confessions*, has been recognized as alternate model of self-representation. According to Little, "to read the self in this way [i.e. in a model of medieval self-representation, as seen in the process of confession] is to understand it as subject to the possibilities and limitations inherent in the language into which one is born; one does not preexist that language and shape it to reflect oneself" (4). This notion of self-representation and self-reflection complicates the relationship between language and memory and between language and the self. What it further emphasizes, in turn, is the connection between the act of confession and an expression of the self that is effectively rewritten through the confessional process.

According to Batkie, Gower's *Mirour* explores the concept of confessional subjectivity, which emerges from the act of narration and plays a crucial role in shaping confessional history. This process helps situate the subject within time, by re-evaluating the past through confession and looking forward to a salvific future (114). To put it simply, the creation of the confessional history is instrumental in establishing the confessing subject. I argue that the same holds true for the *Confessio*, but in this poem, Gower complicates this process of producing the self through memory: Amans's agency (to shape his history through the act of remembering) and his desire (both the unrequited love and his spiritual quest toward absolution) both inform and distress him as subject. Amans, the lover, can only accept himself as Gower, the old poet, through a process by which he transforms himself. For Amans, that is the goal of confession. Even if Amans is unaware of his own need to rewrite himself, Venus knows better; her interactions with Amans prior to his confession confirm that she is aware of his *division* (the split between his desire and

his reason, as well as the split between the lover and the poet) before he is. Through Amans's journey, Gower forges a chasmic relationship between confession and the sort of courtly love of which Amans is guilty: the failures Amans experiences in his courtly love become successes in his confession. As Tory Pearman puts it, the *Confessio* asserts that "poetic narration, represented by Amans's ongoing confession, has the ability to restore the fragmentary natures of social, physical, and spiritual bodies" (1). "It is Amans's disabling illness," the division of his self, Pearman posits, "that inaugurates the poem and provides Gower with the vehicle through which to critique the fractured body politic of fourteenth-century England, and it is only through the act of narration that both bodies may be 'cured'" (2).

### Genius and Memory

Although the *Confessio* is centered on Amans's confession, it is Genius in his priestly role who has to lead him through his remembrance of sins, his examination of conscience, his actual confession, and (though failed initially) his absolution. In the structure of Amans's confession, Gower is following the developments of the penitential manuals of his time as Kinneavy suggests, i.e. following the priest's responsibility to bring the penitent into confession through a series of questions and prompts, a process by which the penitent remembers his sins and himself. The priest is therefore an active listener and inquisitor and must be educated to ensure the penitents perform a complete and accurate confession.

According to manuals from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, confessor priests were expected to actively engage with their penitents' confessions, skillfully posing thought-provoking questions and gently encouraging penitents to reflect upon any overlooked sins and

actions that they may not have even recognized as sinful (Tracy 56). Alexander Murray, for instance, highlights the following:

Priests often found penitents ignorant and careless about their moral life, and hence needful of instruction. The priest had to draw out the events in the life of a penitent who may, to quote Giordano of Rivalto, have taken no thought of it beforehand. There were questionnaires a priest could use, questionnaires which both got the necessary information and put it in a systematic order—as distinct from the vague chronological order in which some penitents told their story, according to a complaint by Robert of Flamborough. (Murray 74; Tracy 56)

What Murray describes as “questionnaires” were lists of potential questions that could aid a penitent in providing a full and complete confession, often found in these medieval confession manuals (Tracy 57). As Kisha G. Tracy notes, the *Speculum Christiani*, a Middle English religious treatise from the fourteenth century, and which remained popular well into the fifteenth, in fact, illustrates the responsibility bestowed on the confessor priest in guiding the penitent’s confession through this series of questions (57):

When any man schal passe oute of this lyfe, fyue thynges be necessarye to hym, wuth which his soule schal go surely fro the body [...] Thyrde is that he confesse nakedly and openly al his synnes, that is to wyten hou ofte, in hou many maneres, and what he has synnede, or at leste the synnes *that he remembry may or reduce to mynde by askynge of the confessour*. (Holmstedt 206; Tracy 57)

The phrase “reduce to mynde” [lead back to the mind/memory] is a Middle English reskinning of the Latin *reduce ad memoriam*. However, in the case of these medieval confessions, or at least according to these manuals for confessor priests, it is the priest who is responsible to “bring to

the penitent's mind" through his serious questioning "how often, in how many manners, and in what he has sinned" (Tracy 57). In regard to the penitent's memory, thus the confessor priest's responsibility is to ensure that the penitent has a full recollection of sinful actions and behaviours so that the sins may be confessed (Tracy 57). Similarly, in the *Somme le Roi*, Dominican Friar Lorens d'Orléans writes that confession is both holy activity and contemplative labour, and it depends on the diligence of the will as pertains to memory. As a popular Middle English translation puts it: "After, he that tarieth to longe to schryue hyn forgeteth ofte his synnes. So vnnethe falleth it that he may be wel y-schryue, for he forgeteth many of his synnes whiche he may neuere bithenke hym of, and so schal he neuere repente hym ne neuere be schryue ther-of, and thus it is wel gret perele" (Francis 176).<sup>28</sup>

According to these treatises and manuals, the confessor ought to offer ample and precise prompts and examples to the penitent so that the confession may be full (Tracy 58). Commenting on this process, J. Allan Mitchell writes, "in medieval practical ethics, as Mary Carruthers has shown, the trained memory, which is what she rightly calls 'a condition of prudence', cultivates 'moral habit' through repeated exposure to the evidence of examples from the past (...). Just so, Amans is taught by his confessor to hold exemplary tales close in remembrance and 'to be wartherby'" (70; Tracy 58). It is, therefore, Genius's responsibility to provide Amans tales through which the lover may become more aware of his condition, himself, and his place in society. Kinneavy also holds Genius's responsibilities in high regard: "[a]nother responsibility stressed over and over again in the confessional manuals is the necessity of the confessor's knowing fully

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<sup>28</sup> Known in English as *The Book of Vices and Virtues*, *Somme le Roi* was originally written in French by d'Orléans in the late thirteenth century. This was a popular work on theology and vernacular instruction which followed the decree by the Archbishop of Canterbury on the requirements for priestly teachings from the Council of Lambeth of 1281. This book was so popular in the continent that it was still being translated in Portuguese and Catalan in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

and in detail the circumstances of the sin committed and of the penitent himself [...] We find this same sort of questioning at work in the *Confessio*” (148; Tracy 58). Because Genius is unaware of what sins Amans has committed, his priestly duty forces him to question the penitent about all potential infractions against love, even those that Amans reveals he has not committed (Tracy 58).

In both the *Confessio* and the earlier *Mirour*, memory plays a central role in confession. This model of confession and penance as tied to memory and remembering, in fact, is one of Gower’s themes in *Mirour*, and his more focused approach in the *Confessio* is informed by the ideas explored in his French work. Peter Biller argues that by the mid-thirteenth century, “much of a confessor’s summa or manual would consist of interrogations under the seven deadly sins or the Ten Commandments” (14). It stands to reason that Gower found this model useful for his depiction of confession in both his French and English works. In fact, the early discussion of sin in the *Mirour* establishes that the union of Devil and Sin produces the seven deadly sins: Pride, Envy, Ire, Avarice, Sloth, Gluttony and Lechery (I. 240-64)—almost the exact order of the books in the *Confessio*, only distinct by the change of the fourth and fifth sins.<sup>29</sup>

This connection between confession and memory is also seen in the structure of Gower’s two poems, and, in both, forgetfulness takes a central role not only structurally but also in the sacrament of penance. Batkie in fact traces these similarities between the two poems. She notes that Gower’s treatise on confessional practice in his Anglo-Norman text comes as part of his discussion of knowledge—the virtue that serves as the counterpoint to the sin of negligence, a subspecies of sloth. The *Mirour*, spanning approximately 30,000 lines, locates the discussion of negligence, knowledge, and confession almost at the exact center of the poem (lines 14803ff.).

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<sup>29</sup> All references to the *Mirour* are from Macaulay’s *Complete Works*. All translations are from William Burton Wilson, unless noted otherwise.

Similarly, in the *Confessio*, Sloth appears as the fourth of seven sins and as the fifth of nine books of the *Confessio* (taking the Prologue as its own entity), being similarly situated, thereby, at the formal mid-point of the text. Forgetfulness in the *Confessio*, moreover, appears third out of the eight forms of sloth, making it more or less centrally located in the discussion of this central sin. In this way, if attention to memory and forgetting form the doctrinal center of the treatment of confession in a text such as the *Mirour*, memory and forgetting likewise form the poetic center of the *Confessio*. In both the *Confessio* and the *Mirour* not only is confession tied to both memory as the key element of confession and Sloth as the central deadly sin, but the formal positioning of the sin of Sloth within the larger arrangement of the text likewise depicts the critical relationship between this particular sin and the confessional structure. Sloth's unique position in the grouping is noteworthy because the sin is depicted as a deficiency, rather than a perversion, of love. Similarly, forgetting is a deficiency of the very memory required to initiate confession. Batkie's observations reveal that we cannot understand the treatment of Amans's confession in Gower's text unless we consider its relationship with memory and forgetting.

The scene I discussed earlier, in which Amans, just before undertaking his confessional journey, expresses his fear that his memory will be insufficient to provide an accurate account of his lovesickness, parallels a scene from the conclusion of the confessional process when Genius tells Amans to "Forget it thou and so wol I" (VIII. 2894-97). At that point in the narrative, Amans, after using Venus's mirror to look upon himself, finally realizes the reality of his old age, and, through this realization, becomes capable of regaining control over himself (Tracy 63). Genius's advice (i.e. "forget it") indicates that, after Amans's sins are remembered and confessed, they can be forgotten during the process of absolution. The implications of this scene are twofold. First, it solidifies the role of forgetfulness in confession. Noticing Genius's

comment, Paul Stegner writes that “spiritual transformation cannot occur without the appropriate remembering of sin, but the process can only be completed through the productive forgetting of the desire to sin” (489). This idea that forgetting sin is actually crucial to remembering the self in the confessional process comes directly from Gower and not medieval theology. In fact, this is one of the places where Gower is modifying or moving beyond the penitential structures that he inherited. Second, the scene acts as a conclusion to the role of memory in the enclosed space of Amans’s confession.<sup>30</sup> The proper remembering of sin is required to complete the confessional process, which ends with proper forgetting—the ability to move on. As a result, Gower defines the last step of confession proper as forgetting past sins while remembering personal experiences (Tracy 63). Amans returns to his position as old Gower when he is done confessing and forgetting his sins, i.e. when he is being absolved.

In a more traditional account of medieval theology, the act of remembering one’s sins is only the first step of the sacrament of confession; the next is the reshaping of oneself according to the confession, moving away from sin. According to St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, the causes of sin in are the will (in completing the sinful act), the reason (in failing to exercise due rule), and the appetite (as inclining to sin) (I-II q. 75 art. 3, co).<sup>31</sup> Here we see how theological discussions of confession are generating (or at least contributing to) complex models of the human psyche. Desire and appetite move the will through distraction or through the misunderstood good of the object, thereby leading to the sinful action the confessant recalls for the confessor (I-II, q. 77 art. 1, co). For Aquinas, “it is impossible that God pardon a man for an offense, *without his will being changed*” (III, q. 86 art. 2, co, emphasis mine). The move to

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the associations of memory with enclosed spaces, including figurative ones such as seen in Amans’s confession, see Mary Carruthers’s *The Book of Memory* and *The Craft of Thought*.

<sup>31</sup> All references to the *Summa* are taken from Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

contrition in confession is thus grounded in the temporal, emotional revisiting of the recalled sin. No longer evidence of a disordered (and disordering) appetite, the actions remembered must now be remembered with guilt, sorrow, and a contrite heart. St. Augustine of Hippo famously “insists” on the flexibility of emotional recall when it comes to describing past events: memories in the *Confessions* become “modified images” that are necessarily changed through the act of remembering them.<sup>32</sup> Augustine describes the ability to recall different aspects of a memory, expanding some and minimizing others, depending on the reason the memory is sought out. In the same way, emotions surrounding memory are likewise mutable inasmuch as one might remember with distaste a past joy, or take delight in events that previously caused grief. Emotions are part of memory, but in confession, they are distinct from the initial experience of the action.<sup>33</sup> The transformation of the will is therefore both induced by recollection and followed by contrition.

Gower’s confessional structure follows the confessional model described by Aquinas in both the *Mirour* and the *Confessio*.<sup>34</sup> As Gower explains in the *Mirour*, the application of the will not only gives the subject his or her own history, but also brings him or her into the historical frame. In the *Mirour*, *Scientia* (“Knowledge”) is the appropriate answer to the sin of negligence, the forgetting of the self. *Scientia* is therefore the virtue that controls confession in its close association with both memory and prudence, the quality of those who think before they act:

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<sup>32</sup> Augustine writes, “in my mind alone I experienced being happy, and the knowledge of it stuck fast in my memory, so that I am able to remember it, sometimes with contempt and at other times with longing for the various things which I recall having enjoyed. I was formerly flooded with a kind of joy in depraved actions which I now recollect with loathing and disgust” (258).

<sup>33</sup> Larry Scanlon argues that any narrativized acts in confessional discourse “cease to exist as action, and they become entirely superseded by the now sanctified language which describes them” (78). Carolyn Dinshaw reminds us of how central this idea of separating the act from the actor is in Foucault’s notion of sexual identity in the Middle Ages (200–05).

<sup>34</sup> In the *Confessio*, we have Amans’s entire journey through encouraged contrite recollection (as he is aided by Genius in confessing his sins) leading to his contrition after Venus offers her judgement.

Celle est de l'alme droit Priour,  
Q'el cloister de sa Conscience  
Le cuer du fine intelligence  
Et le voloir sanz nul errour  
Defent et guart par nuyt et jour.  
Du Reson est remembrançour,  
Que tout remeine en sa presence;  
Du temps passé et recordour,  
Et le present voit tout entour,  
Et le future pourvoit et pense.

[She is the right prior of the soul; day and night in the cloister of her conscience, she guards and defends the heart with complete intelligence and the will without any error. She is the remembrancer of Reason, in whose presence she brings back everything. She is the recorder of the past, the present she sees all around, and the future she foresees and thinks about.] (*Mirour* 14595–604)

*Scientia*'s defense against sin rests on her ability, as Reason's memory, to act with multitemporal effect. This is more than memory intruding into the present as a goad to either action or inaction; rather, it is the ability of *Scientia* to order responses to events according to a correct and prudent will. Whether she is acting as the "prior of the soul" or as the "remembrancer of reason," *Scientia* assumes a supervisory position.

Gower goes on to define the effect of gaining knowledge through confession, and he outlines a progression from tale telling, to memory, to desire, to the process of revision through self-narration that is familiar from other penitential sources:

Molt est apris du bonne escole  
Cil q'a sa discipline tire;  
Bien dist, bien pense et bien desire,  
Bien sciet, bien fait, bien se remire,  
Du fine resoun se rigole,  
Fole ignorance fait despire,  
Bien sciet la meene voie eslire  
Parentre dure chose et mole.

[He who follows her teaching is taught in a very good school. He speaks well, thinks well, desires well, knows well, does well, looks well about himself, delights himself in good reason, despises foolish ignorance, and knows well how to choose the middle way between what is hard and what is soft.] (*Mirour* 14609–16)

Here we find the “meene voie” that echoes the “middle way” of the *Confessio* in the voice of the penitent. *Scientia*, as pertains to memory and reason, facilitates a kind of self-narration that, while looking inward to desire, also turns its gaze outward: “Bien dist, bien pense et bien desire, / Bien sciet, bien fait, bien se remire.” The triads of “speaking, thinking, desiring” and “knowing, doing, looking” in this passage outline a progression from an isolated subject who speaks his desires without much thought to a prudent speaker who is able to “revise” his desires in his past, present, and future behaviours. In other words, this process should create a subject with and within history. The process of speaking (“dire”) one’s memories of sin, and thus altering one’s memory of desire (“desire”) through careful thought (“penser”), leads to knowledge (“scire”), prudent action (“faire”), and a new understanding of one’s place in relation to God and the world

(“remire”). Confession, therefore, is a process of self-narration and self-discovery that seeks to “to make the confessant legible to himself” (Batkie 114).

### Amans, Genius, and the Examination of Conscience

As a solution for his potential forgetfulness, Amans solicits Genius to question him item by item in his confession: “if thou wolt my schrifte oppose fro point to point” (I. 225). Genius not only agrees, but he also explains that this was already his role as the priest assigned to hear Amans’s confession (233-35). It is important for both characters in this moment that the confession be complete and that no sin in the matter of love be overlooked. This emphasis goes beyond a concern with memory, and Amans’s comment about being questioned “from point to point” touches on the close examination of sin and conscience associated with an ideal confession, as detailed in the confessional process shown by penitential manuals of Gower’s time. Whether Gower is commenting on the general practice of confession, or simply creating an ideal example for his readers, the precision Amans and Genius agree on for Amans’s examination of conscience determines the structure of the *Confessio* from Books I through VIII.

Moreover, Genius declares his responsibility to hear Amans’s confession beyond his service to Venus, but simply as a priest:

Bot natheles for certein skile  
I mot algate and nedes wile  
Noght only make my spekynges  
Of love, bot of othre thinges,  
That touchen to the cause of vice.  
For that belongeth to th’office

Of prest, whos ordre that I bere,  
So that I wol nothing forbere,  
That I the vices on and on  
Ne schal thee schewen everychon;  
Wherof thou myht take evidence  
To reule with thi conscience. (237-48)

In this section, Genius establishes his responsibility to hear a full confession from Amans beyond the matters of courtly love, which are Amans's focus. He also indicates the structure of the interaction that is about to take place: he shall show Amans the sins, one at a time, so Amans may have the evidence necessary to determine whether he is guilty of each sin.<sup>35</sup> Genius then emphasizes the importance of plain language in the confession for the priest so that Amans understands the points he makes and confesses (281-84). A gloss to this passage further emphasizes the dynamic of confession and the clerical code Gower is alluding to: "*Hic dicit qualiter Genio pro Confessore sedenti prouolutus Amans ad confitendum se flexis genibus incuruatur, supplicans tamen, vt ad sui sensus informacionem confessor ille in dicendis opponere sibi benignius dignaretur* [Here he tells how the Lover, bowled over, kneels on bent knees to confess to Genius seated as a confessor, beseeching nonetheless that, to inform his understanding, the Confessor would graciously deign to question him in matters that ought to be said]." In this brief initial exchange, Amans and Genius agree on a full and detailed confession, and Genius determines that he shall provide examples for Amans to consider during his

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<sup>35</sup> Genius does offer a series of caveats regarding his knowledge of vices outside the scope of love, claiming that he is a priest of Venus, that he is bound by love and has learned little of other matters, and that it is not common for him to discuss vices and virtues (I. 249-71). However, he contradicts this position as he also explains that it is duty as a priest to be well learned and that confession must be complete (272-84). Genius then presents a middle way between his two roles as a priest of Venus and as a confessor priest by bringing forward a discussion of vices but subjugating them to matters of love (as a universal concept, as seen in the opening of the poem).

examination of conscience—language that is also tied to penitential manuals and religious treatises on the subjects of penance and confession.<sup>36</sup>

According to penitential writings, the role of the confessor extends beyond aiding the process of remembering; it also includes the second step of confession, which is bringing the penitents to repentance and contrition by questioning their behaviour and judging their sins. Biller writes that materials about confession became more detailed and sophisticated “after the penitential developments which occurred around 1400, some of which are associated with the work of Jean Gerson” (15). Yet, if there was a strong drive for a more sophisticated discussion of penance around 1400, there may well have been a similar drive a few years earlier. Gerson took a sustained interest in lay spirituality and wrote a treatise on the art of hearing private confessions, a guide for an ideal (perhaps successful in his view) confession. A prominent figure during Gower’s writing of the *Confessio*, Gerson was a pathbreaker, labouring for the “reform within” and exhorting his parishioners in both Latin and French to penance (Salembier). Gerson tackles several concerns about the practice of confession during his time and exemplifies the type of careful “examination of conscience” required for a full confession, in the same vein of Genius’s questioning of Amans. In “On the Art of Hearing Confessions,” Gerson writes that he had “discovered only a few persons who ever made complete and full confessions. The cause of this condition lies in many cases either in the negligence or the ignorance of the confessors” (365). Gerson indicates that, while widespread, the practice of confession was often either curtailed by the large number of parishioners under a priest’s responsibility, which led priests to be negligent in their duties, or hindered by the priest’s ignorance of how to bring their parishioners to a full

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<sup>36</sup> For more on Gower’s commentary and the clerical tradition see Pearsall’s “Gower’s Latin.” For more on Genius’s strategies to question Amans, who is so far a deviant speaker, see Edwin David Craun’s *Lies, Slander, and Obscenity*.

confession. Gerson goes on to write that during the confessional process a priest is “not to rush or pass over anything in a superficial manner. With watchful care he is to examine and discern all matters” (366). Gerson’s description of the confessional process here is far from the reality of peasants and parish priests who did not have time to engage in such detailed examination of conscience, and much closer to the realm of the aristocratic elite—as seen with Duke Henry. But in Gerson’s description of the structure of this ideal confession, we find similarities to the detailed approach of Gower’s *Genius*.

In his treatise, Gerson writes that it is the priest’s duty to bring a penitent to his or her confession: “Through careful repetition [the priest] is to instill in the memory of the penitent what needs to be said and what actions are to be carried out” (366); in other words, the priest should “be able to question and instruct with care and prudence those who confessed to him in recalling their sinful acts” (367). Gerson even provides a failsafe in case the process of confession fails to bring penitents to confess particular sins, as he writes that penitents “can be made to do so by such questions as: are you aware of this or that sin, for such an age, and in such company?” (368). This depiction of the confessional process places the priest as a judge of the matters of sin, discerning whether particular behaviors are sinful. This responsibility to oversee the confession places a lot of responsibility on the priest’s knowledge and discernment; hence, Gerson’s complaint against priests’ ignorance has both practical and theological grounds. As Hamilton puts it, the practice of private confession “further corresponds to the development of a one-stop procedure in which the penitent is both given his penance and reconciled, for what is

now important in the rite is not the performance of penance but an internal change of heart” (9).<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the priest must be able to guide the penitent to and through contrition.

As the recognition of the psychological complexity of confession for the penitent increased, there was also some recognition that the confessor was psychologically implicated as well. According to Murray, “as the idea of inner contrition—being distinct from external penance—gained ground in confession, the priest’s role became increasingly a matter of judgment” (“Counselling” 68). Murray goes on to clarify that in an ideal confession, “the priest had to judge whether an act was sinful at all, how bad it was, the circumstances, and how far the penitent’s contrition had excused him from an external act of penance” (“Counselling” 68). Both the penitent and the priest became more active and engaged parties during the confessional process, both working for the same goal of remembrance, confession, contrition, and absolution. As Firey explains, “tempering [the priests’] role as judges, however great or reduced their discretion, are frequent references across the centuries to their duty to engage in the sorrow and remorse of the penitent themselves” (15). Confession can only happen through the kind of dialogue in which both participants are active listeners and speakers. In the observation and judgement of the penitent’s sins, priests engage in their own right with an examination of their own conscience and faith. Confessor priests, much like Genius, ought to engage with their penitents in the act of confession.

In modern Catholicism, the impact of confession on the priests has been made much more evident. In a speech to confessor priests on March 12, 2015, Pope Francis openly addressed the impact of confession on the priests: “Ed è proprio a voi confessori che dico: *lasciatevi*

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<sup>37</sup> It is important to note that this reading of the history of confession presupposes or presumes the idea that self-consciousness as a concept only emerged in the twelfth century. For example, see Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050-1200*.

*educare dal Sacramento della Riconciliazione! ....* Quante volte ci capita di ascoltare confessioni che ci edificano! [It is precisely to you confessors that I say: *let yourselves learn from the Sacrament of Reconciliation! ....* How many times does it happen to us that hearing confessions edifies us!]” (“Discorso del Santo Padre”). He goes on to add, “Quanto possiamo imparare dalla conversione e dal pentimento dei nostri fratelli! Essi ci spingono a fare anche noi un esame di coscienza [How much we can learn from the conversion and from the repentance of our brothers and sisters! They urge us too to perform an examination of conscience].” According to Pope Francis, confession is then a learning instrument for both the penitent and the priest; consequently, the examination of conscience Pope Francis refers to applies both to the penitents who confess their sins and to the priests who hear these confessions and may grow in their own faith through them.<sup>38</sup>

I must note here that the idea of the priest being able to learn and grow from performing the rite of confession for a penitent would be borderline heretical in medieval Catholicism. The theological implication of the fallibility of priests, that they, too, have to something to learn from the confession of a penitent, could lead to a challenge of the priests’ position as God’s mediators during the confession. The result of such thinking could even lead to challenges regarding the necessity of the priest for the confessional process in the first place—an idea aligned with Lollard thinking. For example, Karen Wagner points out that penance was both sacramental and didactic because confession offered an occasion for the examination of the penitent’s conscience and creed (201-02). While the possibility of reflecting on doctrine could lead to a more complete confession, as late medieval English politics became more volatile, even this notion could be considered heresy and a Lollard ideal. Little notes some of these concerns as she explains that in

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<sup>38</sup> In Chapter 4, I argue that Genius also grows from interacting with Amans, especially as Amans comes to question the priest’s contradicting rationale.

the 1380s “debates over modes of lay instruction could still take place largely without consequences” (102), but she quickly adds that at the turn of the fifteenth century, the concern about the Lollards made these debates no longer possible (102). Firey notes that the education of penance “was an education in soul-searching, yet it also contained the seeds of volatile debates that would ultimately lead to violence. As Goering points out, ideas that were unproblematic, academic ventures in the classroom became, when transposed to the streets, highly problematic” (11). Therefore, while medieval penitential manuals reinforce the priest’s role in actively engaging with their penitents to obtain a full confession, they do not explore the possibility that the priest, too, may experience an “examination of conscience” during a penitent’s confession.

Yet, in *Genius*, we find some clues to Gower’s view on the matter: that *Genius*, too, has the potential to learn from Amans’s confession. Many readers have brought up the incongruities of *Genius*’s moral lessons. As Batkie puts it, “our critical desire for harmonious complement (mirrored conveniently enough in Gower’s own aspirations for his poem) has shaped our approach to the relationship among confession, desire, and the erotic in ways that inevitably cannot and should not hold across the span of the text” (100). Several critics—Batkie, Van Dijk, and Astell, among others—thus suggest that we must look at *Genius*’s individual moral lessons separately since their incongruities would render the moralizing structure of text meaningless. *Genius*’s interpretations are at times “absurd” (Lochrie 221) because *Genius* fails to bring unity to the lessons he teaches, focusing on individual lessons rather than a whole collection of morals, and Amans himself addresses some of these incongruities. For example, Amans’s questioning of *Genius* in Book V regarding capital punishment indicates that Gower, the writer, is aware of *Genius*’s shortcomings, and I would go as far as to suggest that these inconsistencies are intentional on Gower’s part. If nothing else, *Genius* has the potential here to learn how to

navigate being one of Venus's priest and acting as a Catholic one when it comes to Amans's confession; however, Genius is unable to reconcile his dual role.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Genius has the potential to learn from Amans's development and adapt the confession to the penitent's growing level of engagement with his examination of conscience; instead, he keeps relying on the same formula he introduces in Book I—confession moves from larger claims to more specific ones, from ones that are less base to those that are worse. With the example from Book V, Genius has to acknowledge his inconsistency, but he refuses to do so. All in all, Genius's fallibility does not detract from Amans's confession or Genius's political moralizing, but, instead, adds to their complexities. In the confessional process, "the penitent reaches understanding not through events but through conversations about events" (Gallacher 13), and my suggestion here is that Gower believes that perhaps so does the priest.<sup>40</sup> Certainly, an open acknowledgment of the priest's humanity and potential flaws would be a dangerous one; nonetheless, the implications of Genius's fallibility remain for the readers' consideration. Thus, this interaction, when Amans questions Genius and his moral authority, reveals the importance of their dialogue as a means to showcase growth and learning. It also allows us as readers to question Genius more openly because it becomes clear that his character alone may not hold all the answers.

## Conclusion

Few are the critics who have taken the *Confessio's* confessional frame seriously. Little suggests that "perhaps this neglect of confession springs from the assumption that confession is a known entity, a traditional language, and therefore that the author's use of it is unproblematic"

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<sup>39</sup> I return to this specific exchange between Amans and Genius concerning capital punishment, as well as Genius's dilemma, in Chapter 4.

<sup>40</sup> Gallacher's emphasis on the dialogue of confession carries the implication that it is through the dialogue that Amans and Genius are able to learn and grow as people.

(101). Little's suggestion is striking because not only was confession a highly contested practice during the end of the fourteenth century—being at the centre of many Lollard critiques—but, in Gower's poem, it becomes a powerful literary tool.

According to Wetherbee, Gower not only “saw his major poems as part of a single project,” but also “took pains to emphasize their continuity” in their colophons (“John Gower” 592). This view of Gower's major poems as variations on the same topics corroborates an understanding of his moral purpose as the guiding principle for his choice of penitential material. However, when we observe the progression of his writing from the *Mirour* to the *Confessio*, we are reminded that Gower's “concern with social order and just rule has at its heart the moral and psychological issues of penitential discourse” (Wetherbee, “John Gower” 592). While the *Mirour* makes use of the penitential model as a theme, the *Confessio* takes the model a step further and makes use of it as a unified narrative strategy (Lee 71). In the *Mirour*, Gower, already inhabiting his self-proclaimed role of the new Arion, urges his readers to repent and confess their sins, mainly using the penitential model to extend traditional teaching into political commentary. In the *Confessio*, confession happens in “real” narrative time and involves a careful examination of the penitent's behaviour through the dialogue between the priest and the penitent (Lee 71). The confession is thus the process designed to enable Amans to “discover, indeed recreate adequate likeness of [himself]” (Olsson, *John Gower* 74).

However, the role of confession in the *Confessio* goes beyond structure. The lover's confession is not just a structural device for critical analyses of sins and sinful behaviour, or even more simply as a literary theme, but it is an exercise in the examination of conscience, in probing the penitent, and, as a result, in bringing social order. Gower's writing is concerned with an idealized reader—he even guides us to look at King Richard II as the recipient of the text as a

stand in or model for the whole of the nation. The confession he lays out in the frame of the text is, in the same manner, one that is concerned with an idealized priest and an idealized penitent. The structure of the ideal confession in which Genius as the priest investigates an exhaustive list of Amans's potential sins offers Gower an organizational device through which he could link and liken his educational goals (the development of Amans and Genius's interactions) and his social politics (the concern with civil behaviour after the Uprising of 1381 and the contentious national politics of the late 1380s). The emphasis on confession comes from Gower's need of a particular, established and respected didactic structure through which he could explore social and political matters. Although Gower's civil concerns are the primary driving force for the *Confessio*, his model of confession is not only a continuation of the themes developed in the earlier *Mirour*, but also valid as an instructive guide for self-reflection, to address and correct the division of the self.

Confession allows for the examination of conscience that both Amans undergoes, which ultimately leads to Amans's acknowledgement of his old age. As Nicholson puts it, "the confession device is just as important, however, both to the moral and to the imaginative dimensions of the work, as the pilgrimage that serves as the setting for Chaucer's collection of tales" ("The 'Confession'" 193). Unlike what we see in Gower's *Vox* and *Mirour*, the moralizing in the *Confessio* is presented not directly to the reader but, instead, in the dialogue between Genius and Amans—one layer in Genius's preaching, another in Gower's Latin exposition, and a third in the sum of its parts. Amans's presence as the penitent (and pupil) allows Gower to focus on the struggles of an individual sinner with and within the confessional process (193). As a result of this focus on the individual sinner, the poem is able to explore and bridge the gap in the relationship between abstract morality and the realities of human experience.

Patrick J. Gallacher argues that “the sacrament of confession can be looked upon as an attempt to penetrate inwardly to the principle of a man’s being by clearing away the dishonesties and hypocrisies standing in the way of self-knowledge and of achieving the virtue of truth” (12-13). Without the confessional frame, the tales serve little function in the larger structure of the poem; the context of the confession is needed for the moralizing structure Gower employs through Genius and for the connection between these morals, the Prologue, and Gower’s social aspirations. We can only understand Amans and Genius and what they come to represent for the readers when we see them in light of their positions as penitent and confessor priest.

## Chapter 4 - Amans and Genius as Will and Wit:

### A Mirror for the Readers' Education

In Chapter 3, I investigated how the exchange between Amans and Genius happens within a confessional frame, and argued that this frame acts as a mean of instruction, education, and self-reflection, and that both the penitent and the priest can benefit from the process of confession. In this Chapter, I argue that, when we consider Amans and Genius and their interactions as the focus of the poem rather than just a convenient framing device, the educational function of the *Confessio* becomes more nuanced, inviting a reading of the poem that allows the text to exemplify its own educational goals through these two characters, bringing their allegorical function to the foreground. Specifically, I explain how Gower works with complex allegorical characters in both Amans and Genius, as representations of Will and Wit, to develop his model of the human psyche.

By analyzing Amans's development from Books I through VII, I trace how, as Amans begins to take an interest in the confession, in his own journey of self-discovery, and show a willingness to change his behaviour, he demonstrates his potential to become an engaged citizen. I argue that, in learning from the confessional process, and moving from uncontrolled desire to reasoned will, Amans and Genius stand as a models for the readers as they, too, learn from the *Confessio*. "The real meaning of the poem," Simpson explains, "is to be located not so much in its represented action as in the experience it provokes in its reader" (203). This depiction of the lover's journey parallels what Gower envisions for the readers' own psychological experience of

the text, one that addresses the political concerns of the Prologue and culminates in the political discussion of Book VII—a microcosm of the *Confessio*.

### Medieval Psychology

According to Peter King, in *On the Free Choice of the Will*, St. Augustine of Hippo offers an influential statement on the human psyche when he argues that “the key to moral action is found in the individual’s possession and exercise of free will—the psychological faculty of choice and volition” (“Introduction” xviii). First, Augustine establishes that freedom of choice is “a necessary condition for the ascription of moral responsibility” (King, “Introduction” xix). Based on this freedom, he determines that any desire is equivalent to lust (King 8, 1.4.9.22), which, in turn, “dominates in all sins insofar as they are evil” (King 8, 1.4.9.24). Augustine also establishes that human beings possess a capacity for reason that distinguishes us from wild animals (King 14, 1.7.16.55), and that when reason “commands the rest of what a human consists in, then that human is completely in order” (King 15, 1.8.18.61). Lust or desire contradicts this order because it disrupts the command of reason. However, according to Augustine, desire is necessarily subject to the powers of the mind (which encompasses the will and reason): “the mind must be more powerful than desire for the very reason that it rightly and justly dominates desire” (King 18, 1.10.20.71). Augustine repudiates desire and maintains that any corruption of the will, and consequently of the mind, should be expunged: “Thus a human being should be called ‘in order’ when these selfsame impulses of the soul are dominated by reason” (King 16, 1.8.18.64). It follows that the mind only falls to desire by its own choice: “since (a) anything equal or superior to a governing mind possessed of virtue does not make it the servant of lust, on account of justice, and since in addition (b) anything inferior to it could not

do this, on account of weakness... we are left with this conclusion: nothing makes the mind a devotee of desire but its own will and free choice” (King 19, 1.11.21.76). Augustine concludes that the will is completely self-determining: “what is so much in the power of the will as the will itself?” (King 21, 1.12.26.86). In short, Augustine reflects on our freedom of choice: if it so happens that we fall to desire, then we ought to be responsible since it is well within our power to have and exercise a good will.

After Augustine, the theologian who provides the most influential discourse on matters of the will and thus reshapes Western thought on free will is Thomas Aquinas. In particular, Aquinas expands on the distinction between different faculties of the mind, in particular between our capacity for reason, which he calls the intellect, and our capacity for choice and volition, the will. Drawing upon Aristotle, he argues that, in universal terms, the intellect is a higher power than the will: “If therefore the intellect and will be considered with regard to themselves, then the intellect is the higher power.... since the proper nature of a power is in its order to its object, it follows that the intellect in itself and absolutely is higher and nobler than the will” (*Summa* I q. 82 art. 3). Aquinas acknowledges that this hierarchy is blurred at times. For instance, while “the intellect moves the will” towards the good or the knowledge of truth, “the will moves the intellect and all the powers of the soul” when “the will as agent moves all the powers of the soul to their respective acts” (*Summa* I q. 82 art. 4). Aquinas also clarifies the order of the psyche: “every movement of the will must be preceded by apprehension, whereas every apprehension is not preceded by an act of the will” (*Summa* I q. 82 art. 4). The significant distinction here is that the intellect in its proper functioning may alter the course of the will towards the good; the will in its proper functioning, however, may not contradict the intellect, only carry it to its respective act. Referencing Aristotle’s *De anima*, Aquinas concludes that “the will is in reason while in the

irrational part of the soul are concupiscence and anger, or ‘desire and animus’” (*Summa* I q. 82 art. 5). Put simply, when the will is corrupted by irascible and concupiscible parts, it is no longer a part of the superior intellect (*Summa* I q. 82 art. 5). For Aquinas, “the will is characterized as the sort of appetite that follows upon rational cognition” (Gallagher 560); conversely, appetites beyond reason are categorized as desire instead. In Aquinas’s model the intellect and the will ought to work together towards the good—often recognized as the knowledge of God.

When we consider Augustine’s and Aquinas’s interpretations together, we end up with a psychological model in which, unsurprisingly, morality is tied to free will, and this free will can and should be governed by the intellect (or reason) towards the good. More precisely this governance by reason is to be favoured whenever possible. As Augustine puts it, “when anyone has a good will, he surely has something to be put far ahead of all earthly kingdoms and all bodily pleasures” (King 21, 1.12.26.86). This “good will” is the opposite of “desire” as the former is aligned with reason and the latter is against it. Thus, it is every person’s Christian duty to follow a good will, to seek to live honorably and justly, and to ensure that the forces that move his or her will are always aligned with the reasoned intellect. The process of following the good will thereby naturally eclipses a person’s irrational desires before he or she acts, and this good will can only be exercised when the intellect moves it toward the knowledge of truth.

### Psychological Models in Late Medieval English Literature

According to Nicolette Zeeman, in Middle English debates about free will, writers adapted the psychological models from medieval theologians, including Augustine and Aquinas, often using the term “Wit” as a close synonym for Aquinas’s “Intellect” and “Will” to represent what Augustine would call both “Desire” (when corrupted) and “Good Will” (when restored)

(*Piers* 74). Among these vernacular adaptations, we find *Piers Plowman*, with the allegorical figures of Wit and Will, and John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, with the figures of Amans and Genius.

Langland and Gower offer accounts of the will's turn from carnal desires and towards moral responsibility. Langland's Will, much like Gower's Amans, starts as a representation of desire and must learn how to embody the "good will," the one subject to reason. Although this specification is only put into a note, Britton J. Harwood explains that "the word 'wille' [in *Piers*] seems to name the rational appetite" (168). Zeeman takes this understanding further as she argues that Langland's bias towards the will as the "faculty of desire" reflects "broader tendencies of contemporary affective piety, even late medieval scholastic voluntarism—the tendency to see the will as the dominant and free power of the soul" (*Piers* 64). In his portrayal of the psyche, Langland foregrounds the hierarchy between wit and will that is only implied in Augustine's and Aquinas's accounts, favouring the control offered by Wit while also acknowledging that the power of choice lies with Will.

In *Piers*, Wit operates through Thought and Imaginatyf to offer Will the power of choice, a dynamic that follows the Augustinian "*liberum arbitrium*" (i.e. free will), while simultaneously orienting Will to make the right choice(s).<sup>1</sup> Drawing from Anne Middleton's, Leo Spitzer's, and Alastair J. Minnis's analyses of Will in *Piers*, Harwood notes that the transformative space that Will inhabits is defined by his dual role both as an allegorical figure in itself/himself and as a representation of the author:

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<sup>1</sup> For a full explanation of this model of wit and will in Langland's poem, see Zeeman's *Piers Plowman and the Discourse of Desire*, especially Chapter 2; Middleton's "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*" and "William Langland's 'Kynde Name,'" Spitzer's "Note on the Poetic and Empirical 'I,'" Minnis's "Langland's Ymaginatif and Late-Medieval Theories of Imagination;" and Harwood's *Piers Plowman and the Problem of Belief*, especially Chapter 1.

The poetic “I” in *Piers* both allegorizes an appetitive power (Will the “voluntas”) satiable by nothing short of a certain kind of mental object, and, more broadly, represents all human beings so far as they are moved by this “God-seeking quality.” Will’s interlocutors demonstrate the inability of such powers as Wit and Reason to satisfy “wille” in this sense. Nevertheless, these are all rooted within Will the empirical “I,” the persona assimilate to the implied author, such self-knowledge as he can proceed with; for they are all points of view taken by a living, limited person. (26)

The poem thus portrays Will’s growth as he learns from Wit, showcasing to its readers the value of a will governed by reason, and emphasizing the figure of the author as the embodiment of the living transformed Will.

The same trajectory holds true for the rebellious and impulsive Amans, who must learn from and through his interactions with Genius, the figure of reason in Gower’s poem. According to Andrea Schutz, beyond listening to Genius, “Amans is required to take [Genius’s] stories as more than metaphors; he must *find* himself in them” (114, emphasis mine). In other words, Amans has to will himself to apply Genius’s tales and morals to his own life and understanding of the world, and through this process rediscover his own sense of self in relation to his social context. Thus, the focus of the *Confessio* lies in the progressive act of correction of Amans’s (free) will through his confession and education: the lover must find his appropriate place as a functional member of society, no longer bound by his carnal desires. However, as I have suggested earlier, Genius has the potential to also learn from Amans even though he refuses to do so; as a result, the relationship between Gower’s versions of Wit and Will is more complex. Aquinas explains that the will may move all the powers of the soul to their respective acts. When

Amans becomes the “Good Will,” he has the power to redirect Genius towards proper reason whenever Genius fails in his rationale. I shall return to this dynamic in the discussion of Amans’s and Genius’s interactions in Books IV through VI of the *Confessio*, but for now it suffices to note that, much like in Aquinas’s model of the intellect and the will, Genius and Amans are supposed to operate in a mutually beneficial relationship.

Reiterating the importance of these allegorical interpretations, Middleton advises us not to dismiss the figure of the poet-persona in these late medieval texts (i.e. the lover and the truth-seeker) as a purely fictional character and one that is therefore confined to a purely dramatic characterization. Although this persona might not fully embody the author’s views, Middleton argues that we should consider him “seriously” as a representation of a social identity (108). In the case of the *Confessio*, the suggestion that Gower offers through Amans is that, even in matters of the soul, we are bound to worldly experience. As such, Amans embodies a heroic effort on Gower’s part to portray a common vantage point for his readers. The link between Amans’s emphatic love and universal love serves to remind us readers of how we, too, can find a little of our own selves in Amans. According to Middleton, this reality of our own empirical knowledge is also confirmed by the fact that the instructional figures in the *Confessio* and in *Piers* “are on the whole a remarkably inept lot and not especially well disposed to help” their pupils (110). Middleton argues that, while Genius might have reservations about his position as a priest in the court of Venus, Study, Wit, and Scripture are not on the same page when it comes to teaching and instructing Will (110). In both cases, these instructors refuse to listen to their pupils. In return, the pupils exhibit the same human limitation in their lack of an ascension to a higher realm. According to Middleton, these limits are thus evident in the conclusion of both poems, which do not end “in world-transcendence, but in some form of return to the world” (111)

instead. Both poems rehabilitate their main characters, just as, in the public forum, these writers worked to rehabilitate their readers.

### Psychological Models and Reading

Gower's depiction of the psyche is perhaps more nuanced than Langland's because Gower assigns three separate layers of meaning to the frame characters of Amans and Genius. First, Amans and Genius are the lover and priest of Venus who take on the roles of penitent and confessor priest. Second, they are dynamic allegories who embody the psychological faculties of Will and Wit in their full range. Amans, as a version of the will, spans all psychological conditions ranging from an Augustinian "desire" to an Aquinian "will," and Genius, as a version of wit (or the intellect), from unrestrained to controlled Reason. And third, as embodiments of Will and Wit, Amans and Genius are also allegories for these same psychological faculties in a single individual—in particular, the reader of the *Confessio*.<sup>2</sup>

In creating these multilayered characters, Gower conscripts the many traditions of allegory he engages in his writing "to his own purposes, embedding within his responses new and always productive ambiguities about the capacities and limitations of allegory as literary form" (Kamath and Copeland 143). Jeremy Tambling writes that "allegorical personification

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<sup>2</sup> The personification embodied by Amans and Genius as representations of the human psyche, and therefore as representations of the readers of the *Confessio*, finds its origins linked to the pivotal allegory of the thirteen-century: *The Romance of the Rose*. Stephanie Gibbs Kamath and Rita Copeland explain that "the *Roman de la Rose* and the allegories that followed it" showcase how "not only the beginning of love but its ending, through age or loss of the beloved, becomes a subject for figuration" (136). The general consensus among literary historians is that the poem ignited a revolutionary practice in the late medieval era, where authors assumed a multifaceted first-person perspective, merging the roles of narrator and protagonist, and thereby weaving intricate allegorical narratives. Writers influenced by this new authorial self-representation within the allegorical tradition include Guillaume de Machaut, Guillaume de Deguileville, Eustache Deschamps, Jean Froissart, Christine de Pizan, Evrart de Conty, and Laurent Premierfait on the French side, as well as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, Thomas Hoccleve, and John Lydgate on the English side.

presupposes that there can be neither change nor development in people” (58). However, this clearly does not apply to the *Confessio*. Instead, what we see in Amans and Genius is that allegorical personification “turns out to support and suggest plural and highly realist meanings” (53). Both Amans and Genius have the potential to develop and learn from the confessional process, and both have to face their own limitations—Amans as an old man and Genius as a priest who also serves the Court of Love. Tambling insists that “if personification is nothing more than a representation, and its point of reference is an allegorical abstraction, then neither can claim to offer direct access to a reality beyond these representations” (42). Tambling implies that in any allegory there must always be a single one-to-one connection between sign and signifier or between allegory and its meaning (or the representation and its object). However, Tambling does not account for layered allegories, like the ones Gower creates. Amans and Gower as characters prove that representation and reality can be merged when allegorical meanings are stacked and interdependent.

As James Simpson puts it, the *Confessio* presents “the *bildungsroman* of a single soul” (135) through Amans and Genius—this “single soul” being the totality of an individual, which allows him or her to think and act according to a particular balance of his or her cognitive powers.<sup>3</sup> Simpson’s anachronistic and somewhat liberal use of the term *bildungsroman* to describe the *Confessio* appeals to an understanding of Gower’s political and public reach insofar as the project seeks to “*enform* Amans” or give him form, much like the more traditional novels and stories that deal with a sense of emerging identity and an increased role in public life

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<sup>3</sup> The main principles of *bildungsroman*, which characterize the genre, involve the growth and societal shaping of a typically young man. This journey ultimately leads to his acceptance of a restricted social position within the prevailing social structure, and it often entails giving up certain ideals or passions and embracing traditional social norms. Clearly, Simpson has a slightly different employment of the word in mind when he classifies the *Confessio* as a *bildungsroman*: he means that, in portraying the education and integration of the faculties of the human mind, the *Confessio* can be seen as a coming-of-age for the readers, inspired by Amans and Genius’s own growth.

(Simpson 7). By appealing to the *bildungsroman*, Simpson implies the conclusion that the interactions of will and wit ought to culminate in a discussion about free will and morality in relation to social roles and duties.

In relation to Gower's depiction of the psyche in Amans and Genius, Simpson offers a different reading: "Genius represents the imagination and Amans represents the will of the same soul" (167). Simpson's claim that Genius represents the faculty of imagination relies on an understanding of Genius as structural device for the narration of the tales rather than a psychologically rich character on his own. What Simpson fails to acknowledge is Genius's role in the poem as Amans's counterpart—both in the confessional journey and in the allegorical representation of the soul, which suggests the possibility of growth for both entities. Moreover, if we were to consider Genius as a simple mouthpiece for the tales or morals during Amans's confession, acting as the ultimate authority in the poem, we would be unable to explain the incongruities of his moral lessons. In my reading, Genius more closely represents a version of what Simpson refers to as "the intellect," the faculty capable of "joining disparate things," of extracting meaning from encyclopaedic entries (73). This is exactly what Genius does whenever he tells a tale, and we can see from his explanations that the moral lessons often matter more than the tales themselves because at times the tales and lessons do not match. Simpson later claims that "because Genius is not locked into the realm of sensual desire, he can participate in a process of informing Amans as the will into conformity with reason" (196). This function, I argue, is that of the intellect. As Genius operates as the priest of Venus's court, his is the voice of reason to which Amans must listen.

The psychological interplay in the allegory and the other layers of the *Confessio* are all interrelated and invite readers to engage in a careful reading not only of the poem but of

themselves. For instance, the confessional layer is linked both to psychology and didacticism in and of itself. As Aquinas suggests, the will must be changed through confession, a process of self-discovery, because one's moral decisions depend on how reason interacts with the will (*Summa* I q. 82 art. 4-5). In addition, both confession and reading involve reflecting on and evaluating life. Consequently, the mode of confession operates here as Peck puts it as "a kind of psychoanalysis" (*Kingship* 30), for it shows the human psyche as a site of conflict and contradiction that ought to be brought back to balance.<sup>4</sup> The interactions between Amans and Genius become a dialogue between Reason and Desire/Will through Imagination—the literary setting of the book itself and of the tales. As Amans confesses to Genius, and as both characters interact, so do Will and Wit interact and conform to each other, molding the soul towards the good, the knowledge of truth, and, as I have argued, moral and civic behaviour. This representation of the soul through Amans and Genius then acts as an extended metaphor for Gower's readers as they, too, receive the education provided in the *Confessio*. This process, comprising Genius's teaching didactics, Amans's progressing political interests, and the representation of the human mind that Gower endeavours to educate through his compendium, is a psychic one—one that accounts for the psychology of Amans and Genius, both internal (their own) and external (the representation of Will and Wit).

Based on this understanding of Gower's psychological and educational models, the *Confessio*'s innovation comes from the fact that Gower writes a *speculum*, which teaches civil behaviour and political engagement, while simultaneously mapping out his readers' internal learning process through the interactions of the frame characters. Through Amans and Genius,

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<sup>4</sup> "The king of England is akin to the king of the soul; the state of England is linked to one's sense of personal domain; and right rule is mirrored simultaneously through both sides of the equation" (Peck, "Politics and Psychology" 216).

Gower is able to offer a psychological depiction of literature's influence on motivation and action, not only mirroring the reader's subconscious in the dialogue between the Will and Wit, but also raising himself as a voice of authority in a political realm.<sup>5</sup> Regarding Langland's didactic efforts in *Piers*, John Lawlor writes that "the method of the poet is not so much to develop an argument as to make us undergo its development. He gives us thinking rather than thought" (13). I argue the same holds true for Gower: he focuses on his readers' process of education rather than the individual tales that the frame characters tell and discuss. Annika Farber writes that "the moral Genius provides is not a normative prescription. He is not giving Amans strict rules to follow, but rather, offering him exemplary scenarios that highlight specific ethical issues. If Amans is going to find relief from his love, he must learn to read his own situation in terms of its broader ethical implications" ("Genius" 148). Therefore, the poem endorses "the very process of reading" Gower anticipates for his audience as well ("Genius" 151).

This understanding of the frame narrative as Will and Wit and of their interactions as a gradual process of formation for a socially aware and politically engaged citizen, mirroring the readers' own, requires a closer analysis of key moments from the *Confessio* in which both Amans and Genius exhibit behavioural changes. I begin by pointing out how Amans and Genius are introduced to the readers, for these first moments showcase their initial behaviours. I then go through the Books of the *Confessio* in order to demonstrate how the characters' interactions transform their behaviours, bringing them closer together as the confession progresses.

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<sup>5</sup> The value of Amans's and Genius's interactions can only be fully understood in their many layers, i.e. the courtly love tradition, the confession, the psychological model, and the reflection of the reader's education, working together to form a whole that is more cohesive and meaningful than the sum of its parts.

## Introducing Amans and Genius

Amans's introduction is defined by his desires and his mistaken view of his infatuation as lovesickness—his state of delusion. In the beginning of Book I, Amans comments that, concerning the school of love, “I wol declare / And wryten of mi woful care, / Mi wofull day, mi wofull chance” (I. 73-75). Before the narrative even fully reveals his plight, Amans declares his sorrowful love as he complains that even in May, in the height of spring, “I was further fro mi love / Than erthe is fro the hevne above” (105-06). In this opening section, we learn that Amans has wants, needs, and motivations of his own, some of which go against his age and supposed natural dispositions.<sup>6</sup> Other than narrating his failed relationship with his lady and setting up a scene of unrequited love, the only self-introduction Amans provides is to call himself love's “caitif” (161). Amans's use of the word “caitif” suggests that he sees himself tied, enslaved even, in his unrequited courtly love. When he asks Venus for help in winning his lady's favour, he claims he has fought in her (Venus's) court for a long time unsuccessfully (168-71), implying his old age. However, under the false pretense of being a lover, he insists on his lovesickness. Instead of abiding by Amans's request, Venus calls on Genius to obtain Amans's full confession. Realizing Amans's delusion, Venus is more concerned with his confession, i.e. a fuller understanding of his infatuation and wrongdoing in the Court of Love.<sup>7</sup> As an old man, Amans does not belong in this setting he creates.

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<sup>6</sup> A number of critics hold that the love of the protagonist of Gower's *Confessio* is “unnatural.” E. C. Knowlton wrote: “According to the tradition, Nature must be obeyed. To love when old, as Gower imagines he does, would be contrary to Nature and thus against Reason” (89 n.4). Kurt Olsson writes that the love of Amans, senex that he is, is *unkynde* (“Rhetoric” 140), while Donald Schueler finds it unnatural because it is unproductive (253).

<sup>7</sup> Schutz comments on Amans's lack of understanding or self-knowledge, by stating that “Amans does not perceive himself to have committed any sins against love until asked direct questions” (114). This is why the figure of Genius is necessary.

In this opening section, Amans is a representation of self-centred Desire, and, based on his own presentation, the central figure to understand him and his lovesickness is the lady of his courtly romance. The issue, however, is that the lady is an absent character. According to Zeeman, “the framing narrative, therefore, casts the illusion that the object of Amans’s desire is real and attainable; and it appears that, despite constant disappointment and deprivation, Amans will always love her” (“Verse” 227). Amans’s lady is the object of an illusion, and, thus, presently absent. The readers, who know Amans to be an old man, a persona of Gower, can thus realize that the lady is only a secondary aspect of Amans’s delusion—the first being his depiction of himself as the Lover. Amans has lost himself to the concept of Desire, the most salient aspect of which is his own feigning to be lover.

Genius thus enters the narrative to correct Amans’s path and allow Amans to perceive and respond to his own flaws. To help Amans confess, Genius offers moral *exempla* to allow Amans to absorb and understand civil behaviour through a description (and solicited confession) of the Seven Deadly Sins against Love. In his treatise on hearing confessions, Jean Gerson notes that a priest ought to be approachable before the confession begins: “the priest’s speech should at first be affable, and if the situation sometimes requires it, he can show a certain familiarity concerning matters that are not sinful” (369). By placing Genius as a servant of Venus, Gower already allows him to address the matters of love that preoccupy Amans’s thoughts at the beginning of the confessional process and, in fact, pull Amans into the matters of a full confession. Gerson’s manual also offers a suggested structure for approaching the topics of confession: “The confessor is to proceed, as we have said, from more general questions to more specific ones, from what is less base to what is base or worse, and thus, as it were, from general cases to their specific results” (372). Genius thus enters the scene asking for Amans’s confession in the matters of love

and all other woes that befall or have once befallen him (I. 207). Gerson adds that if penitents wish to be wholly purged from all their misdeeds, “they can do so no better and no more quickly than by answering in complete truth the questions posed” (369). Amans replies that his heart is so perturbed that he cannot quite remember it all (I. 221-24), so he asks that Genius question him “fro point to point” (226) in order that they address all matters regarding his confession. Thus begins the confession of the lover—Genius’s investigation of Amans’s sins through a series of tales and moral lessons that lasts until halfway through Book VIII.<sup>8</sup>

Critics (Lewis, Wetherbee, and Economou among them) have been quick to identify Genius’s literary sources in Jean de Meun’s *Romance of the Rose* and Alain de Lille’s *Anticlaudianus* and *De Planctu Naturae*.<sup>9</sup> However, these earlier literary versions of Genius differ in their traditional priestly functions: de Meun’s Genius emphasizes the laws of nature, being apt to discuss the amatory laws that derive from nature, while de Lille’s Genius emphasizes the laws of reason, linking the idea of morality to universal principles. According to Denise N. Baker, Gower merges these two versions of Genius, but “[he] distinguishes between the law of *kinde* and the law of *reson*,<sup>10</sup> between the values of Genius in the *Roman de la Rose* and those of his precursor in *De Planctu Naturae*” (290).<sup>11</sup> Baker argues that when Gower’s Genius embodies the voice of de Lille’s Genius, he is restoring the literary figure of the priest’s

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<sup>8</sup> Genius’s tales have this exact function of investigation; while they offer an external example to be studied, they probe Amans to consider his own situation. According to this logic, Genius’s stories are useless until Amans perceives that he behaves in ways similar to the tales’ protagonists. As Schutz puts it, “it is not that he sees the Other [the characters from the tales] as something external to himself, but that he must recognize that this otherness exists within him” (114).

<sup>9</sup> Not all source materials were represented by earlier Geniuses; some of Gower’s Genius is also drawn from figures of Reason (in the *Romance of the Rose*, for example).

<sup>10</sup> In Baker’s definition, the law of *kynde* is akin to natural law, represented in Venus, and the law of *reson* is based on civil morality.

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that Genius introduces himself claiming that “I am assigned hier / Be Venus the godesse above, / Whos prest I am touchende of love” (I. 234-36), which could mean that he answers to Venus in matters relating to love, but that he is not exclusively studied in that subject.

“moral authority” and correcting the “unorthodox position” of de Meun’s “false priest” (290). Baker views de Meun’s Genius’s focus on love as somewhat contrary to the reasonable mind that de Lille attempts to inspire. Similarly, when Gower’s Genius embodies the voice of de Meun’s Genius, he is acting in accordance to his service to Venus, who is “analogous to the amoral Natura in the *Romance of the Rose*” (290), and whose law can be “morally ambiguous” because of its potential to become corrupt, as in Amans’s lust (291).<sup>12</sup> In other words, Gower validates civil morality and places it above natural law despite being grounded in both, and his depiction of Genius favours his priestly authority and determined tutelary spirit. Genius as Reason is simultaneously philosophical Reason (in the line of de Lille and Aristotle), religious Reason (the priest of the confession), the voice of natural law (as a priest of Venus), and psychological Reason (Wit).

#### Book I: A Corrupted Will

As Peck puts it, “Book I begins the Boethian journey of self-discovery” (*Kingship* 30). The first significant moment after the characters establish the frame and process of Amans’s confession under Genius comes in the scene after the tale of the Sirens (I. 481-549). Here Amans reveals that his relationship with his lady is of (unrequited) infatuation as he says “mi lady therupon mi herte / Hath such a priente of love grave, / That I can noght myselve save,” and “whanne I may mi lady hiere, / Mi wit with that hath lost his stiere” (554-56, 559-60). If we agree that Amans’s journey is one of finding himself through his confession, we have here an

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<sup>12</sup> Responding to critics who see Genius inhabiting a liminal space between courtly love and Christian morality, Donald G. Schueler argues that priest is not actually a spokesman for the courtly tradition. According to Schueler, “the priest’s most compelling purpose is to draw these parallels between the laws governing human passion and those governing other aspects of moral behavior” (248). As a result, Schueler concludes that Genius “contradicts a set of scholarly preconceptions about what allegorical love poetry should be,” but not himself (248).

indication that Amans has “lost his direction” due to his infatuation with the absent lady. He goes as far as to say that he cannot save himself from his affliction because of the hold that his lady has on him. In this depiction of his being “lost,” Amans reveals himself to be bound by his earthly desires; his focus on the physical connection and aspect of love, *eros*, is such that simply hearing his lady causes his wit to lose direction. This loss of direction serves to strengthen the link between the lover figure that is bound by lust and an unreasoned mind, one that needs guidance. In his description of his condition in this scene, Amans is beginning to expose and question his sinful behaviour. When Genius asks him if he has misused his senses, in particular his sight and hearing, Amans pleads guilty: “Mi fader, ye, I am beknowe” (550) and “Mi fader, I am gultyf there” (558). Amans realizes that his delusion that he could be a courtly lover has caused him to act unreasonably and lose his senses in the manner described above (554-60). He is no longer simply lamenting his situation, but he is beginning to accept his own responsibility in allowing himself to become “lost.”

Genius thus comes in to offer the “stiere” that Amans has lost, as the priest is appalled by Amans’s reply: “For as me thenketh be thi speche / Thi wittes ben riht feer to seche” (569-70). Schutz argues that, since “Amans does not realize how much he is projecting himself upon his beloved, how much he is seeing what he wants to see, rather than what is, he must be led into this realization gradually” (109). And so Genius continues his confessional inquiry. At this stage, Amans’s psychological state is unbalanced, his self-understanding is flawed, and his desire rules his will, overpowering reason—he needs Genius to bring him back to reasonable and reasoned behaviour. This is Amans in the beginning of the *Confessio*, a lover so infatuated with his delusional perception of love that he is unaware of his own reality: he is too old for the kind of love he is pursuing, and his lady does not even know of his efforts.

Amans's engagement continues to grow as the dialogue progresses. As Genius moves on to discuss the sin of pride, initially in relation to hypocrisy, and asks Amans if he has anything to confess (l. 586-87), Amans asks for further explanation:

I wot noght, fader, what ye mene:

Bot this I wolde you beseche,

That ye me be som weie teche

What is to ben an ypocrite;

And thanne if I be for to wyte,

I wol beknowen, as it is. (588-93)

Amans's admission of his lack of knowledge indicates his willingness to learn in more detail, and it is almost an expansion of his earlier request that Genius question him "fro point to point" so that he may complete his confession. In asking for further explanation, he is asking for new tales for the first time: this is the first noticeable change in his character, for it is a sign of willed choice that goes against his selfish desires.

Amans's interactions with Genius for the remainder of the discussion on pride lead to the gradual dynamics that characterize the *Confessio*: Genius questions Amans on the matter of sinful behaviour, providing examples whenever Amans requires further clarification on a topic. For instance, once Genius explains the three types of hypocrisy—religious, ecclesiastic, and secular—he asks Amans to confess (708-11). Amans replies that he is not guilty, but asks Genius to continue his explanation of hypocrisy, claiming that "As touchende other [kinds] seie I noght, / That I nam somdel for to wyte / Of that ye clepe an ypocrite" (742-44). In this interaction two other things are worth considering. First, Amans's full reply (712-44) is much longer than his previous one, so he seems to be more genuinely interested in engaging in the confession. Second,

in regard to maintaining a fake or deceiving countenance to feign humility, he says that, in the courting of his lady, “For in good feith, this lieveth wel, / Mi will was betre a thousandel / Than eny chiere that I cowthe” (727-29). Although it is clear that Amans is declaring that he has had no reason to lie or deceive his lady in order to gain her favour because he believes his feelings are real and better than any deceit he could conjure, his use of the word “will” is revealing that he is not yet able to separate his “desire” from an informed “will.” Galloway, in his notes, even writes “desire” as the appropriate translation for the word in this particular line. Amans is progressing, but his development is slow and gradual. As Genius tells stories about the importance of community, Amans is advised to abandon his selfish pride and greed, which prevent him from reclaiming his true authority over himself, and to strive instead for common profit.

Returning to the absent lady, the first time Amans specifically mentions the recipient of his courtship (1263) is in response to Genius’s opening statement on the vice of disobedience, as the lover acknowledges that he disobeys two of her commands (1264-72). Until this point in the dialogue with Venus and Genius and in his confession, Amans focuses solely on his own perspective; his supplication to Venus (that he has worked long in her court and thus deserves her favour) does not even mention the object of his affection. And “object” is the appropriate term. The lady is objectified by Amans’s gaze, which ignores her own view of the matter: she does not even acknowledge Amans as a courtier because he is old. As Zeeman writes, “when Amans thinks about [himself] for a moment, he knows he is old—that is, he has been deceived about something he has in another sense known all along” (“Verse” 232). Taking Zeeman’s argument one step further: the scene in Book VIII when Amans reveals his old age breaks the spell of Amans’s delusion and own self-deception. Zeeman adds that “if Amans’s love is a deception,

moreover, the narrative in which it occurs is also a textual deception for the reader” (“Verse” 232). I disagree with Zeeman’s assessment here; the readers know the narrative of courtly love to be false because the author is “only pretending” to be a lover. Because of this pretence, the courtly love frame is deliberately exaggerated by Amans’s own machinations: neither is the *Confessio*’s frame a typical unrequited courtly romance, nor is its account credible. Yet the effect of the confession, Amans’s examination of conscience, remains a productive exercise to redirect the will towards the good. Zeeman goes on to argue, Gower “leaves the reader to recognize that, seen from a moral and philosophical perspective, of course courtly love and its lovers are transient, and of course the texts of courtly love are a delusion” (233). This delusion, therefore, must be corrected and addressed through the journey of confession—the process by which Amans writes himself back into coherent and temperate existence.

## Book II: An Engaged Will

While Amans’s active participation in the confession is still somewhat reduced in Book I, mostly consisting of short replies to Genius’s questions or complaints about his courtship, in Book II there is a shift in his conversational interests: instead of simply answering Genius’s questions, Amans begins talking about his own experiences, showing a more grounded curiosity for learning about love’s lore and confessing his sins. For example, Genius’s first question concerning the sin of envy, “As for to speke in loves cas, / If evere yit thin herte was / Sek of another mannes hele?” (II.13-15), is received with some thought on Amans’s part. Not only is his reply much longer than his responses in the previous Book, running from lines 16 to 78, but it also depicts his thought process in answering the question. Even his opening statement is telling of his newfound engagement with his confession:

So God avance my querele,  
Mi fader, ye, a thousand sithe:  
Whanne I have sen another blithe  
Of love, and hadde a goodly chiere,  
Ethna, which brenneth yer be yere  
Was thanne noght so hot as I  
Of thilke sor which prively  
Min hertes thocht withinne brenneth. (16-23)

Amans's "querele" is his own take on his journey through the fracas of the Court of the Love, but it is also, as Peck explains, "a genre in its own right in the later fourteenth century, especially for lovers with their perpetual questions and sallies into arenas of contention" (note to line 16). The connotations of battle and strife as well as the allusion to another literary genre also concerned with the affairs of lovers make Amans's term particularly revealing at this moment of his confession. In these lines, the reference to "Ethna" (the volcanic Mt. Etna) incites an image that is both potentially destructive and passionate—i.e. the eruption. Amans's exaggerated language is much closer to the courtly love literature. Amans is attempting to fashion himself in the same way as the lovers in literature, but this self-fashioning is still delusional. Peck writes that "from the beginning of Book II Amans is more fully developed as a character" (note to line 16). The cause of this change is Amans's own investment in the confession. Once Amans acknowledges the fault of his own ways, which have caused him to become "lost," he begins to take on a more responsive and responsible role in his confession, expressing concerns of his own about his past behaviour, and showing a greater investment in the subject matter (or at least a more heartfelt one than previously seen). As Peck notes, from this moment forward, in Books II

through IV, Amans becomes as thought-provoking in his affected and longwinded responses to Genius's questions as the tales Genius tells for the lover's instruction.

Amans's longer and embellished replies continue throughout the Book; the most noticeable are his reply to the joy for another's sorrow (II. 236-77), his third confession on the sin of envy in matters of love (454-551), and his reply to Genius's further probing on being a customer of *Falssemblant*, or "false seeming" in a modern translation (1957-2076).<sup>13</sup> Although John Burrow emphasizes the orderly manner of Genius's questions and criticizes the lover's stream of conscience, he acknowledges the unpredictability of Amans's replies (9; Peck, note to Latin verses at 224). Burrow goes on to argue that in these replies in Book II we see Gower's "penetrating, but always general, psychological perception" of Amans's "*undisinterested* mind" (10) since Amans is impartial to the matters being confessed but believes he has a stake in "defending" the wellbeing of his lady (II. 513-14) despite his earlier admission that she is fully capable of taking care of herself (471). What Burrow terms "undisinterested" refers to Amans's development as he moves from being disengaged with the confession to being engaged in a biased way—in the matters concerning his lady.

A little further in the discussion of envy, Amans focuses on his lady again, but this time in a manner much more open to his confession. As Amans recalls past schemes he used to win his lady (2401-07) and compares his plight to Alexander's (2414-16), he admits he is guilty of the sin of supplantation: "I wolde as for conclusioun / Worche after Supplantacioun, / So hihe a love for to winne" (2423-25). Although Amans is still idealizing his unrequited love, calling it a "high love," he is able to see that he has sinned. Moreover, what differentiates Amans's behaviour here

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<sup>13</sup> In Amans's flowery replies we see examples of the kind of rhetoric Gower despises—the one Genius argues against in Book VII—which serves only to embellish and conceal meaning, rather than to be direct and clarify meaning.

from previous instances in which he admits to guilt (see II. 274-77) is that he is willing to admit that, if he has sinned, he is ready to address his confession: “Now, fader, if that this be sinne, / I am al redy to redresce / The gilt of which I me confesse” (2426-28). Schutz argues this admittance of guilt signifies a change in Amans’s character: “Amans’s rhetoric is beginning to shift. The honesty that can make this admission—further sign of his unwillingness to usurp the characteristics of Perseus, his ideal image—is obliging him to be a little less proud of his dogged adherence to the conventions of unrequited love” (115). This self-examination is the first step of the lover’s confession that requires Amans’s active, willing participation in applying Genius’s tales and morals to his own circumstances.

Here begins Amans’s quest for understanding, for he is finally demonstrating an interest in the confession, in exposing his own understanding of himself, and in surrendering his delusional pursuit of his lady. In fact, Book II depicts the first instance in which Amans turns his attention to Genius and slowly begins to transform into a more engaged penitent. As love, or his personal uncontrolled desire, occupies a less urgent place in his priorities, he is much more willing to seek dialogue and resolution. Through Genius’s questioning, Amans is being reasoned out of his sick infatuation and into a more productive conversation, even if at first glance it is well hidden behind flowery language. In other words, in Book II we see Wit at work, convincing Will to let go of Desire.

Despite Amans’s stubbornness, as the confession progresses and Amans begins to show an interest of his own in engaging with Genius, he begins to transform into the image of a self-enlightened Will. While the *Confessio* is framed around the figure of Amans as a pupil of Genius, Amans is the character actively connecting the seemingly disjointed narrative aspects: the unrequited (and perhaps “unnatural”) courtly love, the confession, the tales, and, consequently,

Gower's politics. As a result of his role and actions as a character, Amans has agency in shaping the development of the matters Genius discusses as he grows from his confession. Peck argues that the focus of the *Confessio* "is with what goes on inside Amans's head amidst the flux of external phenomena" ("The Phenomenology" 256). The idea that Amans has the ability to change and develop implies that he must be willing to act and respond in particular ways to provoke these changes. If we accept that Amans is an allegory for the will, and that he is free to choose his behaviour the same way Gower's readers are, we begin to see how the choices he makes are not only personal but also political as he reflects the pattern of behaviour the readers should mimic. As Amans's engagement turns to more political matters, so should ours. That observation alone is enough to draw our attention to the fact that, even though he is reluctant at first, he chooses to listen to and engage with Genius, and this engagement is a requirement for the development of the narrative into more complex political topics.

### Book III: A Questioning Will

Amans's investment in the narrative and, therefore, his renouncing of his delusional and sinful behaviour are further developed in Book III. The Amans of Book II, who is learning to see and consider himself and his own behaviour in relation to Genius's stories, grows into a political listener. Rather than simply offering his own stories as replies to Genius's questions, which still happens, for instance, as he discusses his plights against Daunger (III. 1537-1612), Amans now also proves that he is an active listener. After thanking Genius for the tale of Orestes, which discusses ruling powers, authority, and murder, Amans shows the beginning of his transformation, his willingness to grow, as he changes the subject and rhythm of the confession to ask Genius about a topic related to the tale:

Over this now be your leve,  
That ye me wolden telle I preie,  
If ther be lieffull eny weie  
Withoute senne a man to sle. (2206-09)

Up to this moment, Amans has asked only for clarifications of sins, other examples and tales, and Genius's absolution for the sins he confesses. Here, not only is Amans interrupting Genius's discussion of ire and the structure of his confession, but he is also asking Genius whether there are lawful ways to slay a man without sin—a topic unrelated to his lovesickness. This question shows a newly developed interest in political matters: the possibility of moral and religious justification for homicide, or as the Latin gloss indicates, "*hic queritur quibus de causis licet hominem occidere*" or "what causes justify killing a man." Perhaps mimicking the tenor of Genius's political tales, Amans calls for a discussion that does not concern the realm of love he was so infatuated with in Book I. If we agree that Amans must find himself in Genius's tales in order to understand his own social position (Schutz 114), this passage presents a new element in Amans's journey: social engagement and political thought. The connection Amans finds between the tale and his personal circumstances is tangential at best, yet he maintains his curious attitude by asking a question that is not related to his confession. In this scene, Amans experiences psychological growth, as he moves away from unrequited love and towards matters of morality and civic responsibility.

As we move through Book III, we see how Gower demonstrates that the understanding of an individual's social position becomes almost a prerequisite for psychological complexity in terms of his or her capacity to reason. Even if the question about the justification of murder is brought on by Amans due to its novelty, Amans is now seeking information outside the scope of

love and participating in a political discussion that remains relevant outside of his own personal confession. In this scene, Amans depicts a shifting mentality, a transition from his earlier posture as Desire into his newfound more rational and political self, Will. Amans is here proving that he is capable of change if he has a guide to help him will his transformation. In asking whether it is possible to kill without sin, Amans opens himself to an awareness of social norms and seeks to understand their complexity, and this questioning goes beyond simply trying to fit the tales to his situation, the sort of behaviour we see mostly until now. Amans is not presently deciding on the possibility of murdering someone in this scene, but he is concerned with the possibility that some murders might be justified and wonders how. What is important about this discussion is not so much the issue of homicide itself but how it involves thinking about civic responsibility.

Following this initial question about homicide, however, Amans continues to ask questions that are not directly related to his understanding of the sin of wrath or to his confession. After Genius answers the question about when homicide is justified, Amans brings up another scenario:

Now, fader, thanne I you beseche  
Of hem that dedly werres seche  
In worldes cause and scheden blod,  
If such an homicide is good. (III. 2241-44)

Once again, Amans has no direct connection with wars; his question is a speculative one about a highly political topic. Genius's reply here is that homicide is forbidden by the Ten Commandments (2253-54), that war is contrary to the peace of Christ (2288-90) and to Reason (2335-37), and that this kind of killing is only justified by a lack of conscience (2346-49). Genius concludes the topic with an admonition:

Forthi, mi sone, in alle weie  
Be wel avised, I thee preie,  
Of slawhte er that thou be coupable  
Withoute cause reasonable. (2481-84)

Genius's advice here contradicts the longer speech he gives. If homicide is forbidden by the fifth Commandment (Exodus 20:13), contrary to the peace taught by Christ and contrary to Reason, it would be counterintuitive to think of "reasonable causes" for homicide. Amans does not quarrel with Genius's logic as the lover is only beginning to ask these more difficult questions. But here we begin to see a pattern in Genius's lessons—their incongruity—that becomes more prominent in Books IV and V.

Amans is not yet satisfied with the discussion of homicide, and, in fact, he turns to an even more controversial topic:

I prei you tell me 'nay' or 'yee,'  
To passe over the grete see  
To werre and sle the Sarazin,  
Is that the lawe? (III. 2487-90)

Asking whether the Crusades are justified, Amans is inviting a discussion about politics, the Church, and the ethics of medieval Christendom, and once again moving the dialogue away from the topic of lovesickness.<sup>14</sup> It is also noteworthy that Amans asks whether the Crusades are a matter of "law" since Genius was earlier referring to various kinds of biblical authority and

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<sup>14</sup> Genius's reply to this question likely showcases the same dissatisfaction with clerical abuse that Gower discusses in the Prologue: "To preche and soffre for the feith, / That have I herd the Gospell seith; / Bot for to slee, that hie I nocht" (2491-93). For more on Gower's position regarding the Crusades, including the dangerous connections to Lollards and orthodox writers regarding the schismatic "Crusade" against Pope Clement VII, see Peck's *Kingship and Common Profit* (89), Janet Coleman's *Medieval Readers and Writers* (91-92), Anne Hudson and Pamela Gradon's *English Wycliffite Sermons* (146-51), and Galloway's "Literature of 1388."

common law (e.g. the Ten Commandments and Jesus' preaching). This reference proves that Amans is an engaged listener, capable of questioning matters outside his immediate concerns. In addition, this exchange between Amans and Genius reveals more about Gower's understanding of the symbiosis between Will and Wit that is required for an individual to rationalize complex topics. As the dialogue moves forward from Amans's questioning of the legality of homicide, the characters discuss instead an even broader topic: the legality and morality of war and, specifically, "holy wars." Amans's seemingly naïve inquiry about whether it is the law to fight in the Crusades questions the interaction between religious morality and civic responsibility. What begins as this discussion of law in Book III will provide grounds for Amans's questions about justice, governance, and kingship as his confession continues.

When Genius concludes the discussion of the sin of Wrath, Amans says, "And of this point ye have me tawht, / Toward miself the betre sawht / I thenke be, whil that I live" (2741-43). Amans explains that thanks to Genius's explanations, he is more reconciled with himself. This admission is important because Amans recognizes that he is changing through the confession and dialogue with Genius. As Amans becomes more engaged, he also sees himself more fully. Furthermore, in the discussion about homicide, Genius presents several arguments about the absence of wit and reason when the will is moved towards this sin: "Thurgh Will, which is noght wel assised / Whan Wit and Reson ben aweie" (1866-67). He later goes on to explain that wit also requires an active will to avoid sin:

For Wit that is with Will oppressed  
Whan Coveitise him hath adressed  
And alle Resoun put aweie,  
He can wel finde such a weie

To were. (2335-39)

In both of these quotations, Genius is implying that wit and will ought to work in harmony towards the good (and consequently away from sin). If either wit or will is missing, the soul is compromised. On the one hand, Genius advises for cooperation between wit and will. On the other hand, Amans becomes more engaged with Genius. As these two aspects come together, the characters and tales begin to deal with more political topics.

#### Book IV: Genius's Fallibility

By the opening of Book IV, Amans is no longer simply focused on the matters of love as they relate to his lovesickness, but he is willing to engage with Genius at a much more political level, and, in fact, he begins to offer his own tales to match the priest's. As Amans is "informed" by Genius's use of language, he begins to mold himself in the priest's likeness. Throughout Book IV, Amans tells short tales of own in his replies to Genius—for instance, the tales of Moses and Tarbis (645-64) and Achilles and Polyxena (1693-1701)—showing that he is also capable of articulating his ideas through exempla and displaying a more sophisticated use of the literature he begins citing in Book II. In fact, with a precedent now established for questioning matters outside of his own confession, Amans becomes more attentive to the morals and lessons Genius conveys, and just like the priest, he begins to ask some probing questions of his own. If in Book III Amans asks a question about a controversial topic in one of Genius's tales (i.e. homicide), thus demonstrating an active participation in the conversation as the listener, in Book IV Amans notices an inconsistency in Genius's morals and challenges Genius's political inclinations. Amans's attentiveness surprises Genius, who then struggles to offer counterarguments for the

penitent's fitting questions. In particular, Amans confronts Genius about the matter of bearing arms in war (1648-1770).

As the discussion on the sin of sloth progresses, Genius decides to teach Amans about "Decerte" (1618), translated by Galloway as Meritoriousness—the deserving of merit. Explaining that even in the Court of Love, one must be active in order to deserve the love of a lady, Genius says,

I woll thee telle what I thoghte,  
Hou whilom men here loves boghte  
Thurgh gret travaill in strange londes,  
Wher that thei wroghten with here hondes  
Of armes many a worthi dede,  
In sondri place, as men mai rede. (1609-14)

Genius refers to how men once earned their love by adventuring into foreign lands and, through arms, carrying out many a great deed. The sentiment behind this reference is the valour of war and conquest, proving one's worthiness in arms or *probatas armorum*. Genius then expands on this idea by claiming that this valour can grant favour in the Court of Love, and is healthier than giving in to sloth. He adds,

Forthi who secheth loves grace,  
Wher that these worthi wommen are,  
He mai nocht thanne himselve spare  
Upon his travail for to serve,  
Wherof that he mai thonk deserve,  
There as these men of armes be,

Somtime over the grete se. (1620-26)<sup>15</sup>

Genius thus urges his listener to embrace this valour because the “ensamples” from which he draws narrate successful tales in this regard; he goes as far as to distinguish those who think they deserve love’s grace from those who are active, the men of arms who are over the great sea, i.e. the Mediterranean. Genius argues that one’s “worthinesse” (1637) and “prouesce” (1638) can cause a lady to “danger pute out of hire mod” (1641)—a familiar aspect of the code of courtly love, which Galloway translates as “remove standoffishness from her attitude”—yielding more favourable results in the pursuit of love—“the betre unto his love acorde” (1640). In this scene we see a similar contradiction in Genius’s lessons to that of Book III: once again he seems to be condoning homicide after previously explaining that “of homicide [God] hath forbede” (III. 2253).<sup>16</sup>

This time Amans picks up on this contradiction and decides to challenge Genius’s moral lesson. After acknowledging that, in comparison to “men of arms,” he is guilty of idleness, Amans adds a clever observation:

And for to slen the hethen alle,  
I not what good ther mihte falle,  
So mochel blod thogh ther be schad.  
This finde I writen, hou Crist bad  
That no man other scholde sle. (IV. 1659-63)

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<sup>15</sup> The allusions to the Crusades are also prominent when Genius says that he, who may not be spared, “mot travaile for worschipe” (IV. 1628) and then cites places like Old Prussia (near the Baltic Sea), Rhodes (in Greece), and Tartary (in Central Asia), all of which were substantially not Christian when their civilizations were at their height. For a point of comparison, see the Knight’s introduction in the Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>16</sup> Throughout the *Confessio*, Genius’s wisdom, the knowledge he teaches in telling his tales, works almost proverbially: while each individual moral lesson is sensible, there can be no moral gestalt because, when looked at as a whole, each lesson could become contradictory to another. Van Dijk also notices this inconsistency (36).

Although a gloss to IV. 1693 refers to Amans's reply simply as an excuse for laying down arms, Amans often finds justifications for the sins he confesses.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in his previous admission of guilt (1122-1223), Amans offers a long explanation of how he is ready to serve his lady if she calls on him, but he admits that he can at times become idle when she does not ask for his service. This earlier speech is closer aligned to the courtly love Amans of Books I through III. Even though the lover attempts to justify his idleness, he offers no authoritative grounds for his behaviour. However, in the particular scene when Amans rejects homicide, he is able to invoke biblical authority and paraphrase Genius's earlier admonitions against homicide, war, and the Crusades in order to defend himself and question Genius. This move on Amans's part not only adds weight to his position challenging Genius's stance, but it also pre-emptively diminishes whatever counterargument Genius might have to offer by using the priest's own words against him. In addition, not only is Amans returning to a question he asked earlier, but he is also expanding on the discussion about the justification of homicide by providing his position on the topic. Burrow argues that Amans quotes this line to justify his own sheepishness when it comes to being active and eschewing the vice of sloth (6). However, the fact that Amans then adds that these are people who slay others when the Bible tells them they should convert them instead (IV. 1674-76)—another paraphrasing of Genius's earlier speech in Book III—indicates that Amans is considering this debate about homicide in a political rather than personal manner. In other words, even though Amans does try to justify his sinful behaviour through exculpatory notes and remarks throughout the *Confessio*, this instance in which he actually questions Genius and points out an inconsistency to the priest's lessons is more significant than an attempt to simply justify

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<sup>17</sup> The note reads: "*Hic allegat Amans in sui excusacionem, qualiter Achilles apud Troiam propter amorem Polixenen arma sua per aliquod tempus dimisit* [Here the Lover alleges in his excuse, how Achilles at Troy on account of love for Polyxena put away his arms for a certain time]."

his (delusional) behaviour. While the readers might be able to unravel Genius's arguments in Book III, the fact that Amans is able to do it now points to his growth and Genius's fallibility—neither character is perfect on his own. Here we begin to see Gower's veiled critique of the clergy: while Amans is in need of reform, Genius is supposed to embody Reason; yet Genius is not an unimpeachable authority in the poem, for he too is fallible. Gower does not openly criticize Genius's ecclesiastical authority, but he suggests that it is not without its flaws. Insofar as Genius is the agent responsible for producing and controlling knowledge in Amans's confession, the implications here that Genius's interpretations are flawed perhaps suggest a distrust on Gower's part of the Church's production and control of knowledge more broadly speaking—a concern Gower discusses more fully in *Vox*.

Genius is unable to answer Amans's logic. In response to Amans's sudden ability to form a sound argument, Genius attempts to explain to him why the bearing of arms is important (e.g. IV. 1795-1814). However, Genius is trapped here by his own earlier lesson that homicide is a sin and that war is without reason. As a result, Genius is not able to address Amans's rebuttal directly; instead, he focuses on the theme of war and finds circumstantial evidence in tales that run contrary to Amans's to produce a (poor) response to the lover's charge. For instance, when Genius replies, "Bot if so be that ther oght faile" (IV. 1795), he is setting a condition in which Amans's anti-war position does not apply, so that he may offer an argument contrary to Amans's: "Thou schalt another tale knowe, / Which is contraire, as thou schalt wite" (1802-03). From this moment onward, Genius delves into tales in which men take arms either to survive their circumstances or to right a wrongdoing, but he misconstrues these situations as heroic attempts to gain fame and glory (e.g. the Tale of Nauplius and Ulysses, the Example of Protesilaus, the Story of Saul, on so on). Ultimately, Amans is left without a definite answer to his challenge

because Genius avoids the question about homicide by focusing on the glory of war and conquest. As Thomas J. Hatton puts it, Genius offers Amans a limited assessment, being guilty of “doggedly literal handling rich allegorical materials throughout the *Confessio Amantis*” (“The Role of Venus” 36). By the end of Book IV, there is no satisfactory answer to the question of whether homicide can in fact be justified. Amans does not probe this point further, but readers might. The topic does lead to dangerous discussions about religious wars, so it is quite likely that Gower himself avoided a definitive answer.

In terms of the characters’ development, it is noticeable that Amans is the one in this exchange who finds solid arguments in religious authority, and that he actively links this authority to a personal sense of morality. He is able to raise, even if briefly, the same arguments that Genius has been discussing all along and on similar grounds, shifting the dynamics of his confession. Here the penitent is no longer bound to the authority of the priest: the listener has become an arguer as well. Conversely, Genius finds himself trapped by conflicting lessons surrounding the topic of wars and arms and unable to come to a reasonable solution to this debate. Finally, the confession offers a learning moment for Genius, too; however, he refuses to learn from it.

#### Book V: Genius’s Contradictions

Book V is a turning point in the poem. While Amans’s questioning of Genius’s lessons expands to a questioning of the priest’s logic, Genius becomes increasingly more reflective and sober. In fact, Amans challenges the politics of religion by putting in check the figure of Genius himself, both by illuminating the fact that Genius is a priest of the Court of Love and by claiming the authority of Scripture in determining that there is only one God. This challenge to Genius’s

position, which begins with the discussion of the morality of Crusades and religious homicides in Book III, eventually leads Amans to question the veracity and authority of Genius's tales.

Genius, conversely, is embarrassed about his position as a priest of Venus, given the goddess's lascivious nature. For the first time too, Amans acknowledges a problem in his communication with Genius that does not derive from his lack of knowledge on a subject matter, but precisely due to his Christian perspective.

After the tale of Vulcan, Mars, and Venus on jealousy, instead of answering to Genius's admonition not to be jealous in his house (V. 726-28), Amans is more interested in the characters of the tale. Indeed, he is so focused on these characters that he ends up questioning the gods of pagan religions that have been prevalent in Genius's tales: "Mi fader, this ensample is hard, / Hou such thing to the heveneward / Among the goddes myhte falle" (729-31). Although, as Macaulay notices, this discussion comes late, and "indeed if the question of false gods was to be raised at all, it ought to have come in as an explanation of the appearance of Venus and Cupid in the first book" (note to line 729), it is fitting that this realization comes when Amans is beginning to question Genius's authority. Before his previous challenge to the priest's authority, Amans did not have either the ability or reason to question Genius in his role as a priest. However, now, after their previous exchange, which was not resolved, Amans does. The lover says,

Ther is bot o God of alle,  
Which is the Lord of hevene and helle.  
Bot if it like you to telle  
Hou suche goddes come aplace,  
Ye mihten mochel thonk pourchace,  
For I schal be wel tawht withal. (732-37)

In this quick remark, Amans not only questions the veracity of the ancient religions that Genius continually mentions in his tales, but also implicitly undermines the applicability of his examples, suggesting that these tales might not be accurate representations of their Christian society and values. In a way, Amans is also challenging Genius himself, since he is a priest of Venus.

In spite of Amans's probing interruption, Genius does not rebuke his counter-argument, but proceeds to explain these ancient religions (747-1373). This exchange reveals, on the one hand, that Amans is becoming more aware of his position and more interested in subjects other than his unrequited love, thus requesting more informed political discussions, and, on the other hand, that Genius inhabits a dual role as a servant of Venus and the priest in charge of Amans's confession that causes him to contradict himself. As a figure of reason, he is now divided between natural law and common law. Contrary to Macaulay, who holds this discussion to be a random digression, I argue that, given Amans's growing interests in religion and politics, his questioning of the efficacy and applicability of his conversation with Genius is an appropriate logical step for the lover's progression after he establishes himself capable of upholding his own in a matter of intellectual debate. Moreover, if we consider that this is Amans's challenge to Genius himself, we see the will questioning a divided intellect—one that answers pagan and Christian thought at the same time.

After Genius claims "Of goddes in that ilke time / To long it were for to rime" (1369-70), closing the discussion of the ancient religions, Amans puts him on the spot:

Bot yit o thing I you beseche,  
Which stant in alle mennes speche,  
The godd and the goddesse of love,

Of whom ye nothing hier above  
Have told, ne spoken of her fare,  
That ye me wolden now declare  
Hou thei ferst comen to that name. (1375-81)

Not only is Amans once again challenging the provenance of Genius's authority, but he is also placing Genius in a moral conundrum for the first time. As a result, not only does Genius have to reveal his own incongruities as a character (a servant of Venus who is discussing capital sins as understood by the Church), but he is also forced to acknowledge that, in literary and religious spheres, Venus and Cupid often embody the sorts of behaviours concerning matters of love that he is asking Amans to both denounce and renounce (Lewis 219). George D. Economou adds that, in embodying this dual space, Gower's Genius "is the moral agent that bridges the worlds of true religion and the religion of love" (209). Yet it seems that this bridging is under great strain.

Genius answers:

Mi sone, I have it left for schame,  
Because I am here oghne prest;  
Bot for thei stonden nyh thi brest  
Upon the schrifte of thi matiere,  
Thou schalt of hem the sothe hier. (V. 1382-86)

Genius's admittance of his dual role to Amans seems to pain him because his own ability to reason is in the balance. As C. S. Lewis discerns, Gower does not "blunder into [this tension] by an oversight" (219). Rather, to answer Amans's keen line of questioning, Genius "is forced against his will to pass sentence on the very powers that he serves" (219). Although Genius claims to know little outside of his service as a clerk of Venus service in Book I, he is capable of

recounting Aristotle's education of Alexander in Book VII. Moreover, to come to terms with his Christian context, Genius also rejects Venus' divinity in Book V. Unlike the previous discussion about homicide, which is left without an answer, this time Genius has to reconcile the fact that he is providing a Christian confession while working as a priest of Venus. His answer is to denounce Venus (V. 1387-1496) and then advise against idol worship (1497-1604).

What this exchange reveals is that Genius is an inherently flawed character (serving two disparate roles) whose moral teaching is not always consistent. Michael D. Cherniss argues that because Genius is at times opposed to Venus, whom he is supposed to serve, being "more fully the champion of Reason and Christianity," the only way to reconcile these discrepancies is to understand Genius as representing human nature (13). I side with Cherniss insofar as Genius is flawed and at times contradictory, much like all humans. Throughout the *Confessio*, Genius's wisdom, the knowledge he teaches in telling his tales, works almost proverbially: while each individual moral lesson may be sensible, there can be no collective sum of his preaching because one lesson may be contradictory to another. We saw this contradiction with the topic of homicide. Now we see it again with Genius having to pass judgement on Venus while operating in her court. These contradictions and inconsistencies reveal that Gower's Genius is flawed and, like Amans, he, too, has depth and room for growth. Earlier in the poem, Genius is content to focus on the matters of love. Now he has to reconsider his position so as to maintain his priestly authority over Amans's confession. To a certain degree, when Genius chooses to pass judgment on Venus (and Cupid), he is aligning himself with the Christian reasoning Amans uses: "there is but one God of all." Here another element of the frame narrative unfolds as both characters gain

depth in their perspectives, and Amans and Genius become closer counterparts.<sup>18</sup> Just as Amans develops his own ability to argue and challenge opposing arguments, Genius is humanized as more of his flaws become apparent to the readers, and now his listener, too. The implications of having a potentially flawed priest, however, are much more dangerous outside the context of Amans's confession.

#### Book VI: A Reversal of Roles?

Book VI is the best example of the penitent's contrition in the whole *Confessio*. Following the growth of Amans and the questioning of Genius, this Book continues to showcase Amans as a reasoned penitent and Genius as a fallible priest. While Amans has moved beyond the stubborn nature of Desire, Genius is confined by the formal structure of confession he has adopted, being unwilling to change.

The first noticeable difference in the dynamics of the lover's confession is that Amans and Genius begin to break away from the roles and patterns they had previously inhabited. By now Genius and Amans have established a structure for the confession: Genius explains a topic and asks Amans to confess, Amans does not fully understand Genius and asks for more information, Genius then tells a couple of tales to illustrate his meaning, and then Amans, prompted a second (or third or fourth) time, finally confesses. However, this pattern is immediately broken in Book VI. After a brief explanation of the aspect of gluttony that he calls the drunkenness of lovers, Genius delivers his first prompt:

Forthi, mi sone, it is no wonder

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<sup>18</sup> It is also noteworthy that Amans's challenging of the ancient religions also puts in question how he as an individual fits into the structure of his own confession and how Genius as an inherently ambiguous character can act as his confessor.

If thou be drunke of love among,  
Which is above alle othre strong.  
And if so is that thou so be,  
Tell me thi schrifte in privité. (100-04)

According to the pre-established pattern, Amans should be confused and ask for further information. However, perhaps due to his knowledge of the topic or the fact that he has been more attentive, Amans takes on Genius's explanation, articulates his feelings, and immediately confesses:

Thus am I drunke of that I se,  
For tastinge is defended me,  
And I can noght miselven stanche.  
So that, mi fader, of this branche  
I am gultif, to telle trouthe. (301-05)

Amans has previously confessed to a sin before fully comprehending it, so this reaction is not surprising at first. However, at this stage, not only does he indicate in his reply that he understands Genius, but he also never asks for further clarification—the subject of the discussion is over.<sup>19</sup> Genius even accepts Amans's confession as he immediately replies, "Mi sone, that me thinketh routhe; / For lovedrunke is the mischief / Above alle othre the most chief" (306-08). However, Genius still falls back on the pattern of the confession and begins listing example after example of the drunkenness of lovers, totalling five tales Amans never asked for (325-595). It is Genius's job as a priest to obtain Amans's full confession; it is also his job to listen to his

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<sup>19</sup> Contrary to his replies in Book II, which indicate a level of immaturity, Amans is now capable of understanding and accepting the reasoning and descriptions Genius provides for the sins in question.

penitent and respond accordingly, providing guidance to his soul. In this exchange, Amans and Genius are at odds.

Unlike Genius, Amans shows restraint. While the priest becomes a glutton for words, paying little attention to what the penitent is saying, Amans is more polite during this exchange because he is aware of the confessional process. Once Genius is done with his five tales, Amans offers a succinct and intelligent reply:

I schal do, fader, as ye sein,  
Als ferforth as I mai suffise;  
Bot wel I wot that in no wise  
The drunkeschipe of love aweie  
I mai remue be no weie,  
It stant nocht upon my fortune.  
Bot if you liste to comune  
Of the seconde Glotonie,  
Which cleped is Delicacie,  
Wherof ye spieken hier tofore,  
Beseche I wolde you therfore. (600-10)

In this reply Amans demonstrates three notable personal insights: first, he acknowledges that, though he may try to follow Genius's advice, he may still fail; second, he notes that excessive consumption of in love (i.e. his lovesickness) does him no good—an acknowledgement that foreshadows Venus's advice to him in Book VIII; and, finally, he establishes that he is done with the discussion of drunkenness and urges Genius to move on to the next archetype of gluttony, delicacy. During this exchange, Genius is the one overindulging in speech, offering multiple

examples of the possible faults or flaws of gluttony instead of the usual two, even after Amans readily admits his guilt. The fact that Genius almost cannot stop talking as he gives four or five examples for the vice of drunkenness in love almost seems like an admission of the priest's own guilt in overindulgence. Conversely, Amans is more controlled and places himself in charge of moving the confession forward.

These new dynamics continue to punctuate the confession of gluttony. After this initial exchange on the sin of drunkenness, Genius explains the sin of delicacy (VI. 618-86). Once he is done, he asks Amans to tell him if he has sinned in such a way: "Mi sone, if it be with thee so, tell me" (687). Amans's reply is once again direct:

Myn holi fader, no:

For delicat in such a wise

Of love, as ye to me devise

Ne was I nevere yit gultif. (688-91)

Amans's answer is pointed and precise, much like his earlier admission of guilt. He does not ask for further explanation but sees the matter as closed, and, in his subsequent explanation, he actually links his behaviour to the sin of lust (692-739), a topic that they have not reached yet (for it is, in fact, the last sin of Amans's confession). Amans's stern self-judgement once again causes an imbalance in the dynamics of the confession, so the priest warns him to come clean, as though Amans were hiding his guilt (740-42). Here Amans crafts another eloquent reply (743-950), in which he describes how his eyes and ears, established in Book I as the windows of the soul, as well as his thought (a new development in his characterization), the "lustes thre" (939), crave for (the food of) love. However, he explains:

Of that I thenke and hierre and se

I take of love my fiedinge  
Withoute tastinge or fieling:  
And as the plover doth of eir<sup>20</sup>  
I live, and am in good espeir  
That for no such delicacie  
I trowe I do no glotonie. (940-46)

Amans's word choice and emphasis on lust rather than gluttony are significant, and he differentiates his pursuit of love from "tasting" or "feeling" it. Here Amans is directly admitting to Genius that the sin he is guilty of is lust, not gluttony; he is defending his earlier stance in declaring himself "not guilty" regarding the sin of delicacy, though he is opening the debate to the sin of lust, which should be the last one of his confession. Genius responds to Amans's honesty by offering strange advice regarding Amans's behaviour:

For in the bokes thou myht rede,  
If mannes wisdom schal be suied,  
It oghte wel to ben eschued  
In love als wel as other weie. (962-65)

Once again, Amans's point stands, but Genius fails to address it directly. Instead, he argues that Amans's lust for the delicacy of his lady, the objective of Amans's pursuit and the central concern of the confession, ought to be eschewed, and that the examples Amans follows from literature are dangerous. Genius's accusation of books as the source of Amans's delusional behaviour is misplaced, especially in light of how many literary examples Genius has used to aid Amans's confession. More than refuting Amans's stance, Genius contradicts his own authority

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<sup>20</sup> This display of proverbial knowledge from Amans is another indication of the stronger grasp of rhetoric and argumentation he develops through his confession.

again. Finally, although Genius jumps into this discussion of lust to answer Amans's earlier admission of guilt, he continues on with his investigation of gluttony, offering a new series of tales on another topic that does not correspond to Amans's reality.

The dynamics of Book VI continue to reveal new developments in Amans's character and a certain insistence on Genius's part that they follow the established method of confession. As Genius continues the unrequested tales on delicacy, Amans resumes his more passive role as the listener. However, even here Amans proves to be more attentive than before. Through some odd turns in the subjects of his tales, Genius eventually discourses on sorcery and witchcraft, which he names the Black Arts (1261-357), and he warns Amans to desist from such practices if he was a part of such teachings before (1358-59). Once again, we are met with a reasoning Amans who states that he does not know of these arts, but that, if he had when he was younger and naïve, "in mi lusti youthe" (1366), he would have resorted to them in order to gain the favour of his lady (1360-73). Amans's admission is refreshing because it shows that he is thinking about his earlier behaviour as lustful and qualifying it as "youthful," which separates him from whatever wisdom he has in the present. Amans has now recognized his own growth and is much closer to admitting his old age. Genius, however, ignores these finer distinctions in Amans's reply and embarks on journey of explaining "gret essamplerie / Agein the vice of Sorcerie, / Wherof non ende mai be good" (1385-87). Genius then offers four tales (the tales of Ulysses and Telegonus, Nectanabus, Zoroaster, and Saul and the Witch) to clarify the dangers of sorcery (1391-2394). During this lengthy monologue, Amans does not speak once. While Amans showcases moderation, Genius remains a glutton for words.

At the end of the section on sorcery, Genius turns to Amans, warning him to pay heed to his advice: "I wolde rede / That thou of these ensamples drede" (2395-96). As Amans is invited

to speak again, he says, “Mi goode fader, grant mercy, / Forevere I schal be war therby” (2401-02). Although the interjection of “grant mercy” is appropriate for Genius’s role as a priest, readers may wonder whether Amans is asking for mercy for himself after such a long tangential digression on Genius’s part (for the second time in this Book).<sup>21</sup> Amans then adds that, now that he has been informed about the perils of sorcery, he would not dare take part in it (2401-07). Thus in the course of a thousand lines, Amans repeatedly and patiently waits for Genius to finish his tales in order to indicate, for a second time, that the confession ought to move on to a new topic.<sup>22</sup>

However, unlike the previous time, Amans does not suggest a discussion of lust. After his acknowledgement of the dangers of sorcery, Amans asks outright for a change of subject:

Bot this I wolde you beseche,  
Beside that me stant of love,  
As I you herde speke above  
Hou Alisandre was betawht  
To Aristotle, and so wel tawht  
Of al that to a king belongeth,  
Wherof min herte sore longeth  
To wite what it wolde mene. (2408-15)

Due to the discussion of sorcery in the tales of Nectanabus and Zoroaster, Amans decides to inquire about Aristotle’s teaching of Alexander the Great. Asking for a change of topics so that

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<sup>21</sup> A similar reaction can be seen in Chauntecleer’s comment “Madame, graunt mercy of youre loore” in the Nun’s Priest’s Tale.

<sup>22</sup> What begins to motivate Amans at this point is his own interest in wisdom, in becoming informed about these matters that concern love, not as eros, but as the basis of his own religious, social and political life.

he may be comforted in his pain concerning the matters of love (2419), Amans directly pleads with Genius to engage in a discussion about education and politics.

Critics tend to dismiss this passage as an obvious literary device for Genius to introduce and discuss his own *speculum principis*, the microcosm of the *Confessio*. For example, Wetherbee argues that the discussion that follows is incongruent with the poem's established poetic and thematic structure, which imparts that "the perfect synthesis of moral self-governance, courtly-chivalric 'gentillesse' and enlightened royal policy may finally be beyond the ordering power of Genius and his poet" ("John Gower" 604). However, I want to emphasize that it is Amans's own interests and request that spark the change in the nature of their conversation. The themes of kingship, self-governance, and moral behaviour in the tales are necessarily tied to the genre of the *speculum principis* of Book VII. However, they are also tied to the progression of Genius and Amans's dialogue. Alastair Minnis argues that Gower uses Amans's desire to be educated by Genius just as Alexander was educated by Aristotle as the *raison d'être* for the encyclopaedic codex of the following Book ("Moral Gower" 74-75). Although I agree with Minnis that the change is inspired by Amans, I argue that it is the development of Amans's personal awareness, the process in which he is to find himself, that leads him to an interest in politics, which becomes a requirement for his psychological development. In fact, he explicitly says that he wants to discuss the philosophies that are taught to a philosopher king—a subject matter that has productive value in a social and political context (VI. 2411-13). For the first time in the poem, Genius listens to Amans's proposal to change topics and agrees to discuss the "schools of philosophy" (2433) even though they might be outside the scope of his knowledge as a priest of Venus (2425-26).

Thus, it is the confessional narrative that leads both in subject and in the plot to the most political Book of the *Confessio*. Amans from Book I is defined by his infatuation with his (absent) lady and with the concept of love itself—an insatiable appetite for physiological love. He is resolute in his ideals and expressively not interested in any lore which does not concern the matters of love. The Amans from the end of Book VI, however, specifically asks Genius to tell him about Aristotle’s teachings to Alexander the Great so that he (Amans) can have some rest from the subject of love. This transition of interests, even if periodical, echoes a shift in Amans’s own psychological state, revealing him to be a more dynamic character than criticism in general allows. Through the process of confession, Amans slowly becomes interested in matters outside the realm of love, and when he sees the possibility of a reprieve from the torture of his unrequited love, mirrored in Alexander’s victory against sorcery, he requests more information on the topic. It is important that Genius concurs with Amans request and that the two characters are seemingly working in harmony again. Now that Genius agrees to leave the confines of the confession and now that Amans has an interest in education and politics, the characters can have a more open discussion about the morals and values an engaged citizen should be upholding.

Morality, for Gower, is inherently social; while the confessional frame and the penitential focus might imply at first an individualizing drive in the *Confessio*, they culminate in a discussion of social duty and responsibility, in which Amans, as an individual, can only find himself in relation to others. As a result, we have a more fluid Reason and more conscious Will debating philosophy and the sciences of the self. The shift in discourses from confession to politics is not altogether unexpected as some critics would have it; rather, it is a step that Amans deliberately takes to further his own interests, no longer revelling in his immature appetite, but acknowledging his yearning for growth and self-control.

## Book VII and Politics

In the first lines of Book VII, Genius admits that he and Amans are moving their dialogue away from matters of love and into a discussion of the cosmos due to Amans's request (1-22). No longer constrained by his role as the priest seeking Amans's confession, but guided by Amans's newly found interests, Genius becomes free to explore what he had referred to previously as Aristotle's education of Alexander the Great (or the education of the philosopher king). If there is one section of the *Confessio* in which Genius acts as a mouthpiece for Gower the writer, this is it. Genius begins with an explanation of the sciences of the cosmos and then delves into an exploration of the humanistic sciences of the self. From this analysis, he turns to the individual soul and its composition, the source of his political discourse. This format parallels the *Confessio* as a whole, which shifts from the Fall of Empires in the Prologue to a discussion of the state of a lover's soul—the confession of Amans's sins against Love. Working from the universal to the individual, Gower slowly moves across subjects in order to address the specific political questions he wants to explore while making them relevant to his audience—Amans in his dialogue with Genius and the readers of the *Confessio*. It is by referring to matters of love and love's dominion in relation to the individual soul that Genius shifts his perspectives in his discussion. First by addressing the four humours as servants to the heart, and later by indicating the social sphere of individual concerns of the lover, Genius uses Amans's desires and interests to guide his education. As the Lover's desires change and become more politically orientated through the confession, so do Genius's explanations—it is in the symbiosis of their dialogue that the *Confessio* finds its logical progression. In fact, the third art of philosophy, i.e. practice, receives the most attention in the Book because it is the one concerned with social integration

through the virtues of the upright citizen—it is the area of the philosopher king’s education that Amans needs most given his own previously shown interests in political matters.

Therefore, Book VII, a mirror of Alexander the Great’s education under Aristotle, becomes an abridged version, a microcosm of Gower’s project for the *Confessio*. Book VII shares the foundation of the social and informational concerns of the *speculum principis* genre: the process of political integration of an individual consciousness into the (ideal) representation of his or her pre-existing culture. While the frame characters recede to the background, the climax of their journey is exposed here. Book VII is about “the governance of will by wit and reason” and is, according to Peck, “an antidote to all the sins discussed in the poem” (*Kingship* 125). Instead of leading his pupil through the confessional process, Genius now delivers a sermon. As the frame characters come together to debate the education of kings and the ruling of nations, the *speculum* reaches its climax. The *speculum principis* genre is after all concerned with the same idea of the reflection of the ideal self that Aristotle defends—it is, in fact, the goal of its political agenda.

### Book VII and Rhetoric

In Books I through VI, as Amans develops a closer relationship with Genius and becomes more engaged both in his confession and matters of civic responsibility, his ability to convey meaning and truth through language evolves. Not only does he begin to ask Genius questions that challenge the priest’s moral lessons and eventually the priest’s authority altogether, but he also learns how to match Genius’s tales, offering exempla and references to authority of his own. Moreover, as Amans’s active engagement with the confession increases, he becomes so familiar with the process that in sections of Book VI he is almost a step ahead of Genius because he no

longer requires Genius's exempla to comprehend the nature of the sin they are discussing. In the journey that Amans undergoes, as he becomes more aware of himself as a penitent, more engaged in the confession, and more concerned with political topics, his ability to communicate plainly and to understand and use language effectively improve. Amans's improved control of his language, and thus of his ability to seek and convey truth, which Augustine claims the Will ought to seek, is reflected in how Genius presents rhetoric in Book VII.

Genius's definition of rhetoric follows that concept of plain language<sup>23</sup> that Amans develops and that Gower defends.<sup>24</sup> In its origins, as Genius explains it, rhetoric comes ready-made; no rules of rhetoric are named, no Chaucerian lament of a laborious "craft so long to lerne" (*Parlement of Foules* 1)—only a statement that rhetoric is a divine gift bestowed on man:

Above alle erthli creatures  
The hihe makere of natures  
The word to man hath yove alone,  
So that the speche of his persone,  
Or forto lese or forto winne,  
The hertes thought which is withinne

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<sup>23</sup> Gower's defence of plain language is implied throughout the *Confessio*; moreover, Genius explicitly advises it once: "Bot for to loke upon the lore / Hou Tullius his Rethorique / Componeth, ther a man mai pike / Hou that he schal hise wordes sette, / Hou he schal lose, hou he schal knette, / And in what wise he schal pronounce / His tale plein withoute frounce" (VII.1588-94). The idea of pronouncing the tale "plain" and without "ambiguity" is aligned with Gower's take on plain style as the better persuasive method.

<sup>24</sup> From the critical debate in the field, "rhetoric" in Gower's work could refer to two distinct possibilities: *ars poetriae*, the art of literary composition (Manly), or, *ars praedicandi*, the art of preaching (Copeland, *Rhetoric* 155). The former reflects a "high style" with attention to figures of speech and compositional techniques, such as the use of *colores*, while the latter reflects instead the sort of persuasion that is appropriate for sermons, or teaching the masses. This second definition, influenced by Augustine's *De Doctrina*, requires plain language to be effective. As Donavin explains, "The Word manifests itself fully in enchanting human speech when language advances 'trouthe'" and "just as the Word became incarnate without vitiating the godhead, rhetoric, according to Gower, has the capacity to preserve and 'enforme' the truth" ("Magical Rhetoric" 33). *Ars dictaminis*, or the composition of letters, has no application to this discussion.

Mai schewe, what it wolde mene;  
And that is noghwhere elles sene  
Of kinde with non other beste. (VII. 1507–15)

This is not only one of the most significant sections of Book VII, but it is also considered to be the first treatise on rhetoric in the English language (Murphy 402).<sup>25</sup> According to Genius, speaking here as a mouthpiece for Gower, rhetoric seems a simple gift, effortlessly acquired: it requires no arduous process or prerequisite knowledge. In Gower's account, rhetoric as this plain language is natural and inevitable, and it draws little attention to itself as it serves as a vehicle for thought.<sup>26</sup> Language sets man above "alle erthli creatures" in a kind of spiritual elevation linking us to God, and, as a civilizing force, linking us to one another. Gower's sense of rhetoric as a

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<sup>25</sup> James J. Murphy, the first critic to discuss this section of Book VII on "rhetoric," judges Gower's knowledge of the discipline "vague" ("John Gower's *Confessio*" 410; Donavin, "Rhetorical Gower" 160). Two years later, Murphy published another article, this time criticizing Manly's "Chaucer and the Rhetoricians" for Manly's assessment of Chaucer's knowledge of formal rhetoric and education. In general, critics tend to side with Manly in this dispute, and most studies after Manly tend to support one or more of three major propositions: first, that Chaucer's use of certain terms proves his knowledge of formal (i.e. classical) rhetoric; second, that he knew and used as guides works of so-called medieval rhetoricians, especially Geoffrey of Vinsauf; and finally, that even if he does not acknowledge them as sources, he relied upon the medieval *artes poetriae*, or verse-writing manuals, for his knowledge of *colores* or figures. Studies since Fisher's *John Gower* have also agreed that Gower, like Chaucer, received some kind of formal education, including knowledge of rhetoric, in his younger years and that this education was broadened due to his legal career. According to Donavin, "since then, other critics have illustrated Gower's expertise in the field, most notably, Götz Schmitz ("Rhetoric and Fiction" 117-42), Rita Copeland (*Rhetoric* 202-20) and Diane Watt (*Amoral Gower* 38-62)" ("Rhetorical Gower" 160). In addition, although Copeland never quotes Manly, his article could be seen as an explanation of her claim that "the study of rhetoric had to be sustained under new conditions" because "rhetoric retained its importance as an academic discipline but not its power of praxis" (*Rhetoric* 153). In other words, while Roman orators were no longer giving speeches at the Senate, rhetoric as a means of persuasion continued to be formally studied.

<sup>26</sup> Gower's definition of rhetoric in Book VII sometimes causes confusion between the meaning of plain, persuasive language and the decorative high style of *ars poetriae*. This discernment is elucidated by Galloway's critique of this ambiguity. He explains that Gower's "poem continually denies its use of rhetoric" (as in high style) and assumes a posture of plain communication, delivering ideas packaged with language much as merchants work behind the scenes, unnoticed, to deliver their goods, and that linguistic transparency is the sense Gower conveys here ("The Account Book" 109). However, at times, Genius's exaggerated displays of rhetoric (e.g. the discussion of sorcery in Book VI) render language as "unnatural" and unreliable, and they expose a practice of rhetorical normalization in the superfluous explanations offered by Genius in matters Amans is not invested ("The Account Book" 109-11). This explanation helps us understand why Genius's overindulgence in speech in Book VI, the sin of gluttony, is such a dark contrast to Amans's moderate approach.

freely given gift that opens the heart to others is foundational to his rhetorical and moral project. According to Donavin, “throughout the *Confessio Amantis* and explicitly in Genius’s lecture on ‘Rethorique,’ Gower demonstrates that a plain style supported by repetition is most appropriate for a rhetoric (...) that can move the passions toward intellectual truth and right belief” (“Magical Rhetoric” 30).<sup>27</sup> Gower’s understanding of rhetoric, then, is deceptively simple: his English poetry is “plain” insofar as it has no rhetorical embellishments, yet he is precise and accurate in its delivery. This simplicity—the modesty *topos* underscoring gift over craft—elides the complexity of Gower’s attitudes toward the theory and practice of rhetoric.

In fact, criticism has pointed out that Gower brings a new emphasis to rhetoric in Genius’s depiction Alexander’s education. In keeping with the conventions of encyclopaedic surveys, Gower imposes a classification of knowledge on his material. But, according to Copeland, his classification is unusual in its epistemological divisions. It resembles the Aristotelian division of sciences into theoretical, practical, and productive. Yet the actual divisions that Gower gives are “theoretical,” “rhetorical,” and “practical.” Here Gower has elevated rhetoric from the status of an individual science to that of a governing category. As the *Confessio* as a whole positions itself in a vernacular literary and political culture, it is significant that here eloquence takes pride of place among the language arts.<sup>28</sup> Both Copeland (“Lydgate,

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<sup>27</sup> As Donavin puts it, “while orators might intone compelling phrases for good or for ill, the truth plainly and repeatedly stated works a persuasive ‘magic’ for both the individual and the common good” (“Magical Rhetoric” 4).

<sup>28</sup> Within this category, Gower’s treatments of grammar and logic are perfunctory. He dedicates two lines to grammar, noting that its role is to ensure that speech is congruent or correct according to the grammatical rules of agreement. Logic also receives an abbreviated account centring on the theme of distinguishing true from false propositions. The bulk of Gower’s attention is reserved for the individual science of rhetoric or eloquence. This inverts the standard emphases in Latin accounts of the *trivium* intended for university audiences where grammar and linguistic logic take priority. See Joseph M. Miller’s introduction to *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric*, especially xiv–xv, and Ernst Robert Curtius’s “Introduction” to his book. Where university texts focus on theoretical aspects of language, Gower’s vernacular encyclopaedia looks towards the practical, persuasive, and literary uses of language in the public sphere.

Hawes” 67) and Schmitz (“Rhetoric and Fiction” 128) remark on Gower’s uplifting of rhetoric to the top of the *trivium*. In Gower’s hands rhetoric bridges the larger treatises on the theoretical sciences such as mathematics and astronomy, connecting them to practical sciences such as politics. The plain style leaves the sphere of the orators in the Senate (Aristotle) to locate itself instead in the sphere of teaching and civic responsibility (Gower). This repositioning of rhetoric underscores its role in transforming theory to practice. In the *Confessio*, the category of rhetoric represents the power of the word, which, according to Gower, is the strongest instrument in human affairs. The “word above alle erthli thinges / Is vertuous in his doinges” (VII. 1547-48), and it is “the science / Appropred to the reverence / Of wordes that ben resonable” (1523-25). As the connection between theoretical knowledge, which concerns immutable principles, and practical knowledge, which considers the contingent matters of human society, “rhetoric” is the category of knowledge that converts theory into practice. All the language arts are subsumed by “rhetoric,” because effective speech, or the powerful word, is the final product of all language study.

If we follow these readings of Gower’s categorization, we can see how the poet sets rhetoric as an architectural principle for medieval thought and composition, and, therefore, a key principle for understanding the *Confessio* itself. Gower thus highlights rhetoric as a discipline in Book VII “in order to underscore his own discursive assumptions for the entire poem” (Donavin, “Rhetorical Gower” 168).<sup>29</sup> As Dovanin puts it, “rhetoric being a loftier discipline than Boethius allows, Genius identifies its end as truth and its means as the plain style” (“Rhetorical Gower” 168). Indeed, Gower cautions against the destructive power of words:

The wordes ben of sondri sectes,

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<sup>29</sup> See Copeland’s *Rhetoric* 202.

Of evele and eke of goode also;  
The wordes maken frend of fo,  
And fo of frend, and pes of werre,  
And werre of pes, and out of herre  
The word this worldes cause entriketh,  
And reconsileth whan him liketh. (1572–78)

Linguistic flux, devoid of philosophic truth and ungrounded by a driving moral principle, thus causes social instability. Gower's distant tone neither condemns nor condones this flux, but it suggests a disconnect between truth and rhetorical embellishment. Donavin concludes that "one purpose of the poem is Amans's self-, moral-, and political-realization, and the process for his discovery involves Genius's tales, told largely in simple, straightforward language" ("Rhetorical Gower" 168).

Book VII embodies the climax of the dialogue between Amans and Genius, and, therefore, it is quite proper that it presents arguments related to logic and rhetoric. According to Gower, the proper use of words (i.e. rhetoric) is the teacher of virtue. In order to function, rhetoric has control of both logic and grammar. For Gower, logic is subordinate to rhetoric:

For word the techer of vertus  
Is cleped in Philosophie.  
Wherof touchende this partie,  
Is Rethorique the science  
Appropred to the reverence  
Of wordes that ben resonable.  
And for this art schal be vailable

With goodli wordes for to like,  
It hath Gramaire, it hath Logiqe,  
That serven bothe unto the speche. (1520-29)

Gower's view of logic is that it is "never simply an abstract intellectual activity or a formal operation that produces stable meanings, which would exist independent of the discursive community in which it is practiced" (Newman 44). Instead, logic is responsible to discern truth from falsehoods (1532-41) and denounce the use of language that is deceitful (1550-57). This approach to logic as inherently contextual, and not intrinsically truthful or "trew and plein" (1731), subordinating it to rhetoric and this discernment of truth, makes it more useful in its rightful place in legal, political, and theological arenas.

Much of Gower's treatment of rhetoric is based on Aristotelian philosophy. As Copeland and Schmitz note, behind Gower's unusual division lies the influence of Brunetto Latini's *Trésor* (written in the 1260s), whose second book translates Aristotle's *Ethics* into French.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, as suggested by Astell, Book VII of Gower's *Confessio* couches the presentation of the art of rhetoric in an account of Aristotelian texts through Ciceronian models, especially the speeches against Catiline (Book VII. 1588-1640).<sup>31</sup> In a note to the opening of this passage, Peck agrees with Astell's reading as he points out that even though Genius refers to "Hou Tullius his

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<sup>30</sup> Donavin explains that, since Book VII is a *speculum principis* based on the *Trésor*, it is fitting that "the commentary on rhetoric occurs during instruction in (...) rulership" ("Magical Rhetoric" 3). Matthew W. Irvin clarifies that "Latini describes rhetoric as integral to the rule of a monarch, but without any sense of an ideal, intellectual truth: 'Rectorique est une science ki nous ensegne bien plainement et parfitement dire es choses communes et es privees, et toute sa entention est a dire paroles en tel maniere que l'en face croire ses dis a ceaus ki les oient' [Rhetoric is a science that teaches us to speak well plainly and correctly about things common and private, and the whole intention is that by speaking words in such a manner, that people might be made to believe the words that they hear; *LT*, III.ii.1]" ("*In Propria Persona*" 15). It is noteworthy that the audience's reception of rhetoric is emphasized in Latini's model; this trait is picked up by Gower in his own model of producing moral speech.

<sup>31</sup> The Latin note to this passage reads, "*Nota de Eloquencia Iulii in causa Cateline contra Cillenium et alios tunc vrbis Rome Conciues* [Note concerning the eloquence of Julius in the case of Cateline against Cillenus and others who were then citizens of the city of Rome]."

Rethorique / Componeth” (1589-90), “Gower is following Brunetto Latini in the *Trésor*, 1.36.5, which also uses the Roman senate’s discussion of the fate of Cataline as a model of right use of rhetoric.” Specifically, Julius’s mode of speech is emphasized in this section:

Bot Julius with wordes wise  
His tale tolde al otherwise,  
As he which wolde her deth respite,  
And fondeth hou he mihte excite  
The jugges thurgh his eloquence  
Fro deth to torne the sentence  
And sette here hertes to pité.  
Nou tolden thei, nou tolde he;  
Thei spieken plein after the lawe,  
Bot he the wordes of his sawe  
Coloureth in another weie  
Spekende, and thus betwen the tweie,  
To trete upon this juggement,  
Made ech of hem his argument. (1615-28)

The *Confessio*’s lecture on rhetoric thus “praises the Ciceronian model of a plain reiterative style that clarifies and reinforces accuracy in discourse” (Donavin, “Magical Rhetoric” 30). In addition, the virtues associated with a kingly education coincide with those Aristotle attributes to the rhetorician (Donavin “Rhetorical Gower” 157-58).

The effect of Aristotle’s model of rhetoric as a branch of ethics, that is, knowing the political will and the psychological capacities of an audience, is here grafted onto the Ciceronian

model of rhetoric as speaking well in civic affairs.<sup>32</sup> According to Donavin, “that the *Rhetoric* is included by itself or beside ethical and political treatises in manuscripts underscores this point” (“Rhetorical Gower” 156). Much like other medieval Aristotelians, Gower’s rhetorical model transforms Aristotle’s analysis in *Rhetoric* of people’s receptiveness to persuasion into a study of political speech.<sup>33</sup> Put in the allegorical terms of the *Confessio*, the rhetorician must balance the mental faculties of “Reason and Imagination in order to move the audience’s Will to accept the speaker’s contentions” (Donavin, *Rhetoric* 50). Janet Coleman explains that political treatises began to be modelled upon these reinvented Aristotelian principles, notably in the works of Robert Grosseteste, Robert Kilwardby, and Giles de Rome (147-53). Donavin adds that, despite critics’ reluctance “to acknowledge the influence of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in fourteenth-century England,” once we take into account the exchanges of the masters of Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge, “common sense dictates that the *Rhetoric* had some influence over intellectual conversations about persuasive language” and that the number of medieval Aristotelians surpasses references to Grosseteste, Kilwardby, de Rome, and even Gower (“Rhetorical Gower” 159). In the *Confessio*, Gower participates in this Aristotelian tradition as he uses rhetoric as a practical means of controlling his audience’s wills and thereby actions and as Genius describes Aristotle’s education of Alexander to Amans. Donavin goes on to claim that “Gower’s section on “Rethorique” in the *Confessio* and the uses of rhetoric by Genius and Amans may be regarded as a popular dramatization of an Aristotelian psychology of persuasion” (“Rhetorical Gower” 162). Donavin thus concludes that Gower “portrays an Aristotelian psychomachia of *inventio*, a scene

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<sup>32</sup> Even without direct contact with Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, vernacular authors (such as Gower and Lydgate) felt the impact of that work through the ubiquitous influence of Giles de Rome’s *De regimine principum*, which was heavily inspired by the *Rhetoric* (Donavin 155-73). Consequently, where the Ciceronian model was invoked, the intellectual sphere in the late fourteenth century had shifted to account for Aristotle’s influence.

<sup>33</sup> It is no surprise that the discussion that follows this rhetorical model is “practice,” or the third part of philosophy, and, in particular, ethics and policy.

in which Reason and Will conjoin to produce morally compelling speech” (“Rhetorical Gower” 162).

Throughout Book VII, Genius plainly praises plain speech and, more problematically, eloquently criticizes the dangers of eloquence. As with Arion’s ideal example, Gower perceives the potential effect of eloquence as socially and spiritually transformative, and portrays rhetoric as the gift that makes humanity more human.<sup>34</sup> According to Donavin, “Gower elevated rhetoric to the top of the trivium in order to demonstrate language’s importance in the concordance of Will and Intellect and the resulting maturity of the soul” (“Rhetorical Gower” 171). “Only then can the Will and the Intellect operate in tandem,” Donavin states, “not only for clearer internal communication and personal growth, but also for better public discourse” (“Rhetorical Gower” 172). When Amans reunites with his Reason in Book VIII, we are presented with Gower, the venerable poet.

## Conclusion

Book VII provides resolution for the underlining political discussions begun by Amans in Book III and offers the most overtly political uses of ensamples by Genius, e.g. his contrast between Ulysses and Cicero (1558-621). The narrative, however, is not yet concluded. By the end of Book VII, considering his implied passive attention throughout Genius’s exposition of the macro and microcosmos, we come to expect that Amans will realize the fruitlessness of his pursuit of an unrequited love in light of a much broader and more meaningful discussion. We expect him to carry forward his new knowledge and to act wiser now that he has a more

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<sup>34</sup> It is noteworthy then that there are inconsistencies between Genius’ exemplary morals, the tales, and Gower’s glosses, and even between the message Genius offers Amans to pursue love when in fact Amans is denied love in the end; in this nexus of apparent contrasts, rhetoric holds a central role.

comprehensive understanding of the self, the body politic, and the cosmos. Specifically, we expect the misguided lover to enter the final stage of the confession: the renunciation of his idealized infatuation. Yet he is drawn once again to the matters of love. And perhaps he should be, as Genius has not yet addressed the last sin, Lust, to which Amans has already pleaded guilty.

In Books I through VII, Amans and Genius develop individually into more balanced versions of the mental faculties they represent and collectively into the individual that is being shaped by the *Confessio*. The uncontrolled Desire for love (or lust) becomes a Will for understanding. The somewhat distant figure of Reason becomes fallible in light of human complexity and requires Will's understanding to function properly. The divided mind becomes integrated, reinstated in its ability to think and decide for itself, guided by a sense of ethics and civil duty. The nation, therefore, can be restored again.

Book VII showcases how Gower favours rhetoric (plain, direct language) over other sciences or philosophies. It is important to notice how Amans's development is grounded on his interaction with literature and language. At first, he listens. Then he listens carefully. Then he begins to ask superficial questions. Then he asks more complex questions. Then he interprets texts. Finally, he enters into dialogue with Genius at the same level of comprehension and understanding, though perhaps showing even more general cohesion in his arguments. Thus, Amans's journey is one that recognizes the art of rhetoric, starting first with critical thinking and culminating in complex debate—the medieval practice of *disputatio*. In proving Amans capable of thinking critically, Gower hopes the same for his readers: that they, too, will be calling for the kind of kingly education Aristotle provides to Alexander; that they, too, will become philosopher kings, focused on temperance and good speech. While Book VII offers no particular element of growth for Amans, there is perhaps a hope of growth for the readers, who should be at least one,

if not two, steps ahead in their educational journey.<sup>35</sup> Amans's psychological development is in his rhetorical and interpretive capacities, and so, Gower suggests, is the readers'.

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<sup>35</sup> One step is the fact that the readers are already reading the *Confessio*, the book that Amans-Gower writes at the end of his confession. The other step is that the readers should already know that Amans's position as a lover is a ruse, for Gower clearly delineates this issue in one of his early glosses: "the poet pretends to be this lover."

## Conclusion - Reconciling Book VIII: The Frames in Perspective

At the end of Genius's exposition of Aristotle's education, Amans has had enough and bursts out: "Do wey, mi fader, I you preie" (VII. 5408). The lover, who remains mostly silent throughout Genius's narration (almost 5400 lines), reveals that, while he appreciates the change in subject matter, he is still afflicted by the matter of his love: "Bot yit myn herte is elleswhere, / I mai miselve nocht restreigne, / That I nam evere in loves peine" (5412-14). And so the characters agree to return to the confession, with no further acknowledgement of the political discussion that has just occurred.

Books I through VI take place mostly within the confessional and psychological frames. Book VII relocates us to the political frame, becoming a microcosmos of Gower's political endeavour for the *Confessio* as a whole. Book VIII then has to bring all three frames to a close while providing guidance on what lies ahead for the reader when the courtly love and the confession are concluded.

### Amans's Regression and the Tale of Apollonius

While Books I through VII can explore the characters' development and growth into the balanced versions of Will and Wit, not requiring resolution, Book VIII has to tie in all loose ends for Gower to finish the *Confessio*—the book he sets out to write in the Prologue, the book that deals with courtly love as per the beginning of Book I, and the book that reveals the inner workings of the human psyche and motivation in the didactic allegories of Amans and Genius. Moreover, unlike the rest of the *Confessio*, Book VIII forces the reader to face the incongruities

caused by the hybridity of Gower's endeavour because it presents the conclusion of all three major threads of the *Confessio*: Amans's confession, Amans's courtly love, and Gower's political interests. These threads can be tied together, but not necessarily always simultaneously. In Book VIII the reader has to pick apart the threads that run through the narrative to make sense of Gower's project as whole.

As Book VIII begins, it is unclear whether the political discourse has been effective; Amans and Genius are back to their previous mode of dialogue and instruction, and the subject matter is the last sin against love: lust. When Genius finally turns to Amans to question him again on the matter of lust, Amans does not plead guilty or innocent. Instead, he simply acknowledges that there is one matter he has not yet overcome (VIII. 169-83). Genius notes that Amans has not fully been reformed (184-85) and then turns to a long discussion of incest (a corrupt form of lust) and its consequences: the tale of Apollonius (271-2008).

Amans's "beau retreat" to his previous behaviour in Book VIII reflects his failure in the court of love and opposes the growth we see during his confession (McCabe 192). Here we see a regression in Amans's thinking, to the lover's state of mind in Book I, when his interest in the confession only extends insofar as he sees it as an opportunity to fulfill his courtly love by learning the correct "art" of love. To remedy this regression, Genius tells the tale of Apollonius of Tyre, the longest in all the *Confessio*, which is also concerned with particular "arts." More specifically, the tale is concerned with the "art" or "how to" of achieving love (responding to Amans's concern, from Book I) and of ruling a kingdom (responding to Gower's concern, from the Prologue) (McCabe 193-97). Fundamentally, the tale shows how rulers (of love and therefore of themselves as well as of nations) may grow wiser as they gain experience. This motif connects to Amans's confessional journey and the incoming self-recognition of his old age.

The tale of Apollonius is also significant to Amans's journey and Gower's educational project because the narrative deals with threads of fate, luck, and unpredictability—which are earlier, in Book I, associated with change, division, and destruction. Yet, the tale presents a happy ending, delivered by divine Providence, which, in turn, reflects the virtuous actions of the characters as a “reward” for overcoming trials and tribulations (McCabe 214-15). This overcoming of fate and re-establishing of order in the tale foreshadows Amans's own transformation and the turn to religion at the end of his own journey, which comes as his “reward” to facing himself and his desires. Amans's failure in love is not condemnation of earthly love by either Genius or Gower; the purpose it serves, instead, is to allow Genius to lead the lover toward a more gratifying kind of love, one governed by Reason and embodied by Apollonius. Moreover, in Apollonius's wanderings, in the nearly final section of the tale, Genius also offers Amans (much as Gower offers the readers) a reminder that we may learn from our mistakes and failures, that our forms of art, as humans, are ultimately fallible (McCabe 215). Apollonius's journey thus provides a model for Amans: the lover's failure in the court of love can yet offer him some form of growth and redemption. Therefore, while Amans's old age is the reason behind his ineptitude and failure in love, it also allows Venus to redirect him towards God's grace, a love that “mai nocht faile” (VIII. 2086).

This last course of Amans's journey, however, is far from graceful. In fact, critics have taken this return to the previous mode of confession of Book I, in which Genius seeks to extort Amans's confession while Amans can barely focus, as retrograde because the passage seems to disregard Amans's political journey of self-discovery up to this point. For instance, Joanna M. Martin claims that the exemplary projects of the *Confessio* and its ambitions to provoke self-scrutiny and moral reflection in its audience fail to have their desired effect because the narrative

reverts to Amans's unrequited love after Genius presents his own *speculum principis* in Book VII. According to Martin, this scene at the beginning of Book VIII reveals that Genius's preaching may be ignored completely and that any sign of progress may be erased as the pupil returns to his sinful behaviour (568-69). Desire is a manifestation of temptation, and, as such, it has the ability to corrupt Will if Will is not willing to listen to Wit. Similarly, Matthew W. Irvin argues that, while Amans is only an avatar for imperfect human love, repeatedly doomed to fall short of higher goals, Genius offers a version of human love that is morally reasonable, as the poem moves "from a state of alienated artificiality to a natural and politically coherent world of moral action" (*Poetic Voices* 276). This particular reading of the *Confessio* presumes that the confessional journey shows us failure in Book VIII: Amans's failure to reform himself and Genius's failure to convert his pupil.

This understanding of the frame's failure is by no means new to criticism of the *Confessio*; Lewis and Minnis both developed such a reading, and many critics since have relied on this assessment to reconcile Amans's behaviour with Gower's political intentions. For instance, Candice Barrington relies on the readers' understanding of Amans's failure in Book VIII to explain the poem's shift towards religion. She argues that Gower turns to prayer as his last appeal to Richard II to act kingly is his response to the earlier failure on Amans's part to recognize his limitations, paralleling Amans's failure to rule his desire with Richard's own failure to rule the nation (433). Overall, those who study the frame characters of the *Confessio* are somewhat dismissive of their dynamics because of Amans's "regression" in the final Book. While critics like Lewis, Minnis, Barrington and even Irvin acknowledge Amans's development, they cannot reconcile his progress with his return to stubbornness in Book VIII. Admittedly, Genius also reverts back to his distanced priestly self as a result of Amans's stubborn behaviour

and we, as readers, are brought back to the teacher-student dynamics of Book I, in which Wit is again trying to shape Desire. However, these critics who point out Amans's incongruity in the final Book tend not to observe that the confessional narrative, which frames most of the *Confessio*, is framed in turn by the failed courtly romance.

We would be remiss to deny that Amans relapses. However, we must remain aware that his stubbornness is being used to return the narrative to the matter of the confession. What Martin and other critics tend not to take into consideration is that the confessional genre in which Book VIII is inscribed requires the fulfilment of a confession for all capital sins, and that Amans's quest for relief after a lifetime of frustration in the Court of Love can only be concluded after the confession is finished. While Amans's political journey might have reached its conclusion in the previous Book, his personal one has not. Although Gower prioritizes Amans's development and free will to explain the progression of the narrative into more and more political matters as we move from Book III through Book VII, in Book VIII the writer has to return the narrative to the matter of the confession and to Amans's unrequited courtly love, a form of corrupted lust, in order to conclude Amans's examination of conscience. It is no coincidence that Genius tells the tale of Apollonius in Book VIII: not only is incest the most distorted form of lust, but it is also an extreme version of the sin Amans most needs to understand and confess. Furthermore, as Paul Stegner argues, Apollonius's tale is not altogether digressive after the political discussion of Book VII because it "requires Amans to interpret and to organize narrative material—the very abilities that he could not perform reliably at the beginning of the poem" (496). Because this is the last tale Genius tells, its applicability in Amans's life is the most direct, though not the most obvious—the exercise of interpretation is Amans's responsibility.

Throughout the *Confessio*, Amans must exercise his memory not only during his examination of conscience, but also in learning from the tales he hears so he may fashion himself after them. The tales thus establish behaviours Amans must learn to emulate or avoid, and through them Amans must re-learn social conventions and prepare himself to re-enter social spaces as a productive and informed citizen (Chandler 19). As Katherine R. Chandler has argued, “memory operates cumulatively in the *Confessio Amantis*, and it conditions Amans’s behavior over the course of his confession—remembering does become a habit... Remembering what he has already done—his confession—therefore, sets Amans’s healing process in motion” (20; Tracy 54). In *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, Kurt Olsson sees Amans’s relationship with memory in a similar light. He writes, “The vices and their species become discrete topoi of discovery, helping the ‘penitent’ Amans remember all that is required for a complete confession” (9; Tracy 64). According to Olsson, Amans’s examination of conscience through the Seven Deadly sins make possible the poem’s turn, in Book VIII, to his repentance and absolution, which in turn explain Gower’s commitment to moral virtue. In this fashion, Olsson further argues that “the memory that Amans recovers is not directed solely toward the past, but comprises the entire width and depth of the mind which learns how to know itself and how to direct its will toward the right kind of love” (236; Tracy 64). What these critics argue is exactly what we see set up by Venus in Book I when she entertains Amans’s request for a confession: the lover must remember himself outside of his own desires. That very memory later returns him to the persona of Gower in the literal moment of self-reflection (i.e. Venus’s mirror).

Amans’s Self-Reflection

By now, Amans and Genius are no longer on the same terms. After Apollonius's tale, Genius shifts the dialogue towards Amans, asking for his confession. The lover, focusing on all the instances of rejection he has suffered, admits that "thus am I bot a lewed man" (VIII. 2052). This admission of lewdness, or lack of learning, demonstrates that, while Amans understands how his incessant pursuit of his lady despite her rejection has corrupted his behaviour, he is still unable to move towards forgetting. Acknowledging his flaws in the matter that concerns him the most, Amans shows a more introspective understanding of his condition that had not been developed prior to this scene. He furthers this exposition of his new mindset as he asks Genius "that ye me be som weie teche / What is my beste, as for an ende" (2058-59). Amans wants resolution, but he does not know how to reach it. Genius then outright condemns his infatuation and replies: "For as of this which thou art inne, / Be that thou seist it is a Sinne" (2087-88). Genius cannot comprehend how Amans is still caught up in his prior beliefs after the full confession. Though neither character overtly expresses his agreement with the other, with this exchange both have come to the same conclusion regarding Amans's lovesickness. As Amans recognizes for himself that which Genius is attempting to tell him, he is ready to hear Genius's conclusion that "love, which that blind was evere, / Makth alle his servantz blinde also" (2130-31). Amans's lovesickness is irrational and both Amans and Genius are ready to find an appropriate end to it.

However, what could have been the concluding point of Amans's confession turns sour when Genius denies Amans's will. Summarizing and finalizing his argument, Genius then admonishes Amans to show that he in fact has become wise through his confession, and to "set thin herte under that lawe, / The which of reson is governed / And noight of will" (2134-36). The whole project of the confession is hereby summarized by Genius as a project in which Amans is

supposed to set his heart under the law of Reason. This conclusion is quite opposite to the premise for the confession, which dictates that Will and Reason (or Wit) ought to work together. Although we could consider Genius's use of "will" as a synonym for "desire" in this case, what Amans is lacking here is his own willingness to change, to move on to a different kind of love.

Amans, though wanting to be set free, still feels restrained by his desires (2149-88), and he reacts negatively to Genius's conclusion. As Russel Peck puts it, "Amans's self-determined infatuation insulates him from all remedies" to such a degree that he requires external intervention beyond Genius's help ("The Phenomenology" 262). First, Amans explains that Genius cannot help him any further because Genius does not experience what he does: "Mi wo to you is bot a game, / That fielen nocht of that I fiele" (VIII. 2152-53). He goes on to ask Genius directly to intervene with Cupid and Venus, who set Amans on the confessional journey:

Bot, fader, if ye wolde thus  
Unto Cupide and to Venus  
Be frendlich toward mi querele,  
So that myn herte were in hele  
Of love which is in mi briest,  
I wot wel thanne a betre prest  
Was nevere mad to my behove. (2171-77)

Genius is not able to convince Amans to let go of his amorous desires despite his long confessional journey. At the end of his treatise on confession, Jean Gerson writes that "the confessor is to ask the sinner if he intends with the help of God to abstain in the future from sin... And if he in reality has the will, insofar as he is able, to make restoration. If any of these intentions is missing, the absolution has no validity and cannot be given" (376). As if

recognizing this principle, in order to move on towards his atonement and absolution and reconcile his will with his purpose in life, Amans asks Genius for Cupid's and Venus's direct intervention since the simple motions of the confession have not sufficed.

Some critics view this request as the final proof of Amans's irredeemable stubbornness. For instance, Stegner states that "Amans's resistance to Genius and his insistence on composing the supplication to Venus suggests that the confession has been unable to effect a spiritual rehabilitation" (503).<sup>1</sup> However, considering the progression of the narrative until this point, including the fact that Amans has now been trained to refuse the simpler answers given to him, it is reasonable that he cannot move forward while he feels that he still has questions on the matter of love. In *John Gower's Poetics*, Yeager writes that the *Confessio* is "a love poem designed to outgrow itself" (265). This is exactly what we see in this section of Book VIII, as the characters seek to conclude their narratives. Refusing Genius's advice, Amans sets out to write his second complaint, a supplication with words plain (VIII. 2184-85), that he wishes Genius to deliver to Venus on his behalf.

At this point, the narrative shifts back to the voice that begins Book I—a first-person account of Amans's love-sickness (VIII. 2189), which in turn reveals Amans's inner struggles. According to Peck, although "Amans objects to Genius's looking upon his passions as a game (...) his reason acknowledges that Genius is right. What is most perplexing is the discovery that both sides of the debate [Reason and Will] are occurring within him" (note to Book VIII. 2189-2209). Peck's note reminds us that Amans himself is experiencing growth as this renewed version of the Will, one that functions in cooperation with Wit, and that he, too, needs to

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<sup>1</sup> Stegner's postulates that telling Amans to forget about his confession is contradictory to his examination of conscience (489). However, considering that confession requires the penitent to remember the consequences of sin yet forget the desire to sin, Stegner's view overlooks Amans's request for deliverance, and that a priest is expected to offer absolution to the penitent.

reconcile his own divided self and be made whole. Amans knows he is being unreasonable, yet he finds no solace in Genius's preaching, so he goes on to write his complaint to Venus (2217-2300).

With this return to the lovesickness of Book I, the narrative moves away from the priest of the Court of Love and back to the goddess herself. After reading Amans's complaint and approaching him directly, Venus asks the lover for his name. Critics have long noted that Venus's question is described "as [if she] were halving a game" (2319), lending credence to her earlier assessment of Amans as delusional and irrational, as we have seen in Book I: she is simply entertaining the lover by having Genius hear his confession. More importantly, perhaps, the question of Amans's name reveals a much more intricate concern regarding his identity: who exactly is he, beyond his delusions of courtly love? In this scene, Venus is far from playing games with her question; instead, she is driving Amans towards his full examination of conscience. Amans's reply, "John Gower" (2321), moves the poem towards its natural conclusion: Amans's recognition of his own place in society. Here is Amans's most significant step in his confession: his self-revelation as an old poet. Venus's reply to Amans's second complaint thus begins the resolution of his unnecessary conflicts of love.

Indeed, Venus, Amans's last instructor, tells her own tale on Old Age (2347-433) and informs him that he should consciously acknowledge his advanced age, and, therefore, the limitations that come with it, in particular those related to matters of love (2434-39). The Latin verses that accompany the tale confirm this reading, indicating that "*Qvi cupit id quod habere nequit, sua tempora perdit* [Whoever desires what he cannot have, wastes his time]" (2376).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Latin verses go as far as to detail "*Conueniens igitur foret, vt quos cana senectus / Attigit, vltcrius corpora casta colant* [It would be appropriate, therefore, for those whom white old age touches henceforth to cultivate chaste bodies]" (VIII. 2376).

While the more prevalent critique of Amans's lovesickness is that his pursuit of love is delusional because of his old age, Burrow claims that Amans's love for his lady is "real enough, but involves him in the continual strain of trying to pretend to be what he no longer is—a young man" (22). Venus's intentions, according to Burrow, is to instruct Amans to acknowledge his own circumstances, to see himself for what he is in who he is—in other words, an old man in Gower.<sup>3</sup> Here, we see a shift in the internal dynamics of Gower's allegorical frame. If up to Book VII Amans represents the mental faculty of Will, in Book VIII, in Amans's new self-acknowledgement as Gower, Amans comes to represent a complete individual, one who is struggling with his own faculties of Reason and Will in relation to the possibilities of his Imagination (i.e. Venus's tale of Old Age).

Not quite prepared for the renunciation of his identity as a lover, Amans collapses and enters a state of trance or dream-vision (VIII. 2449) in which various lovers of the many tales told by Genius and Amans appear to him, with the older ones specifically praying to the god and goddess of love to restore his health (2501-744). Here Amans must endure the cruel fate that he depicts in Book I to Cupid and Venus: laid prostrate on the ground and compelled to endure the dissection of his foolishness by the characters of Genius's and his own tales, Amans-Gower becomes a pitiful figure, teetering on the verge of death (Lee 80). As these lovers denounce the foolishness of the pursuit of love at old age (VIII. 2750-79), Cupid intervenes and removes a "firy lancegay" from Amans's chest (2798).<sup>4</sup> Further emphasizing how pathetic Amans-Gower is

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<sup>3</sup> According to Economou, "it is through Venus's appeal to reason that the elderly Amans recognizes that it is futile and senseless for someone of his age to persist" in his foolishness (209). Economou adds that "Gower's Venus, thus, represents an attitude towards love more similar to Alan's than Jean's, and much like that expressed by Chaucer in the *Parlement of Foules*" (209).

<sup>4</sup> Gower's gloss elucidates this passage: *Hic tractat qualiter Cupido Amantis senectute confracti viscera perscrutans, ignita sue concupiscencie tela ab eo penitus extraxit, quem Venus postea absque calore percipiens, vacuum reliquit: et sic tandem prouisa Senectus, racionem inuocans, hominem interiore per prius amore infatuatum mentis sanitati plenius restaurauit.* [Here he describes how Cupid, searching through the internal organs

in his lovesickness, Cupid refuses to look directly at him; instead, Cupid blindly finding his way to the lover, who is writhing on the ground, and thrusts his hand into him in order to pull out the dart, first referenced in Book I (Lee 80). This dart seems to be the culprit for Amans's irresponsible behaviour, and its removal causes Amans to have a revelation about his vision (2805-06). Again, mimicking his earlier behaviour when Amans first appears at the Court of Love, Cupid walks away, exhibiting the same cold demeanour towards Amans as he had before, confirming his lack of patience for the old man's foolish pursuit.

After Cupid leaves, Venus treats Amans's wound and then specifically makes him confront his old age by handing him a mirror and asking him to look upon his own face (2820-31). Having considered the characters from the tales he has heard and now gazing on his own face, Amans realizes he was only pretending to be youthful.<sup>5</sup> As Reason returns to Will, and his own reason returns to him, Amans-Gower realizes the consequences of his amatory delusions. In this moment of self-recognition, both in terms of self-understanding and in terms of returning to a state of cognition, Amans-Gower comes to exemplify the means of unifying the division from the Prologue (Lee 80-81). Specifically, upon seeing his face reflected in Venus' mirror, Amans-Gower begins to restore order to himself. The second Latin rubric prior to the section on the political division of the State reads,

*Progenit veterem concors dileccio pacem,*

*Dum facies hominis nuncia mentis erat:...*

*Nuncque latens odium vultum depingit amoris,*

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of the Lover, shattered by old age, entirely extracted from him the burning darts of his lust; Venus, later perceiving him to be without heat, left him empty. And thus Old Age, finally glimpsed, invoked reason in him, and very fully restored to sanity of mind the interior man who had been previously infatuated by love.] (VIII. 2749 ff)

<sup>5</sup> This realization is perhaps a mirror of Gower's own life for he did not marry until 1400, years after the first recension of the *Confessio*

*Paceque sub ficta tempus ad arma tegit.*

[Harmonious love engendered the old-time peace, when the face was the messenger of a person's thought...But now hidden hatred presents a painted face of love, and clothes under false peace an age at arms.]

Thus, Amans-Gower reverses this process, leaving the "painted face of love" for the harmonious love of earlier times. In relation to his own educational journey, Amans-Gower learns that, in losing his ability to participate in the court of love due to his advanced age, he is also gaining the control of his will through reason, and, in this balanced state of being, he attains truth. At first glance, this truth is humiliating, for the mirror reveals his old age and the foolishness of his infatuation (Lee 81). However, it also makes Amans-Gower ready to be fully restored (not only within himself, but also in society, with a new role to fulfill).

According to Lewis Beer, "by showing Amans the truth of his own transience and mortality, the mirror in the *Confessio* brings to completion his long course of study. Amans finally sees the ephemerality of his own body and of his bodily desires" (241). This "mirror-of-self-awareness," as Andrea Schutz puts it (142), allows Amans to see how he has neglected his Wit (VIII. 2835). In the reflection of his own face, the *speculum* of the confession, Amans sees the months of the year, a condensed version of his own "ensamples" (2837). Now that the dart of Desire has been removed, Amans is able to use his other faculties freely again: "He [Reason] cam to me the rihte weie, / And hath remued the sotie / Of thilke unwise fantasie" (2864-66). Now it is plain to him that he "was mad sobre and hol ynowh" (2869). Wit and Will are no longer artificially separated; they can now work in harmony again, forming a whole person: the persona of John Gower, who functions as a mirror for the reader of the *Confessio*. Amans has finally made himself legible as a penitent; the harmonious recollection of himself is his

absolution. The reconciliation of the estranged Genius and Amans is only possible in the persona of Gower, who offers them some kind of stable coexistence not only in the faculties of the lover's mind, but also in the layers of the poem as a whole.

As Amans begins recollecting his own self, Venus asks him a second probing question, "as it were a game" (2871): what is love (2872). However, Amans cannot answer her question, and, in fact, he admits that in truth he does not know love (2872-77). Here Amans is recognizing that all his pursuit of the lady so far has been misguided, that it is not love. Schutz claims that "when Venus asks him what love is, he has no answer. His cure is complete" (122). While this passage certainly reveals personal growth in Amans's admittance of his lack of emotional and psychological maturity in the pursuit of his lady, Amans is not yet cured, for he needs Genius's absolution while his wisdom lasts (VIII. 2890-93). Amans here is seeking reparation for the divide that he created earlier between himself and the priest. Genius thus absolves Amans and asks him to forget about his sins, since the matter of his confession should no longer preoccupy him (2895-7). This exchange reveals that Genius's and Amans's journeys are interconnected and that, in coming together again, we begin to see the full persona of John Gower, someone whose Wit and Will are realigned.

This reintegration characterizes the nature of Amans's confessional journey, the informational process that Gower wishes to impart on his readers and which finds its resolution due to Amans's self-reflection. In fact, as Jenny Lee argues, after his sobering self-recognition, Amans-Gower asks Genius directly for absolution for his sins (and his behaviour during the confession); the priest then offers him a full pardon, bringing the lover's ambitious confessional journey to an end. Or so it seems (81). It is therefore noteworthy that when Venus addresses the lover for the last time, she calls him by name (VIII. 2908). Paul Strohm argues that this direct

address to John Gower “marks a station on the way to lucidity and reunion of Amans with the broader perspective of the Poet” (“A Note” 297). I argue that it also acknowledges that this Gower persona embodies both Wit and Will in a way that Amans from Book I does not. Jeffery Stoyanoff argues that, “rather than invalidating the eight books of poetry delineating the sins of love, Venus advocates a shift in John Gower’s focus” (60). As Venus asks that Gower recognize that there are matters he should set his mind to other than the arts of love, she is not only requesting that he leave her court, but also that he comprehend the implications of his old age and accept them (VIII. 2908-40).

#### Amans as the Old Gower

Although Amans-Gower has received Genius’s absolution, Venus is not quite done with the old man. As a parting gift, she allots Gower penance. Placing rosary beads on his neck and addressing him directly by his full name, Venus commands Amans-Gower not only to leave her court (implicitly permanently) but also to return home, where “vertu moral duelleth / Wher ben thi bokes, as men telleth, / Whiche of long time thou hast write” (2925-27). There, he may pray for peace, both for himself and for the reunification of the nation. Here we find that Gower, the writer, inserts himself in Venus’s admonition: the reference to “thi bokes” places not only Gower in the literary tradition as an established author (since he has been writing for a long time), but also his works (the *Mirour* and *Vox*) within the domain of moral virtue, with which the *Confessio* is concerned (Lee 81-82). Amans’s self-reflection and recognition as the old Gower thus shifts the narrative from the confession of the lover (*confessio amantis*) to the confession of the author (*confessio auctoris*), who now is charged with praying for England and the writing of this very book. In this scene, Amans-Gower leaves his amatory delusions and returns to the moral and

political realm of the Prologue. Unlike the wanderer from Book I, Amans-Gower is now an informed citizen due to the lessons he learned throughout his confession, from both Genius and Venus, and which have much deeper repercussions than the courtly love narrative at first seems to imply (Lee 81-82).

According to Stoyanoff, “the contemplation that Venus suggests John Gower undertake models the act of interpretation that Gower puts forth for his reader to consider. When old John Gower asks for absolution, Venus directs him to look back on his confession and to contemplate the process” (60). Elizabeth Scala adds to this understanding as she concludes that “writing the poem puts the confession into effect” (166). With the reunion of Amans and Genius, that is Will and Wit, within the persona of Gower, Venus is asking the old poet to realize the process of education he has undergone, the process of recollection and contemplation that has allowed him to become both whole in his mental abilities and, at the same time, a much more informed and moral citizen—the same growth Gower asks of his readers.

Amans’s self-revelation as the old Gower shifts the poem’s focus from the Court of Love or sexual desires (i.e. *cupiditas*) to a love of God, and, by extension, humankind (i.e. *caritas*).<sup>6</sup> As Gower is left to contemplate his actions, he admits that “so wiste I nought wher of to yelpe, / Bot only that y hadde lore / My time, and was sori ther fore” (VIII. 2952-4). Feeling like he has wasted his time with the wrong pursuit of love, he turns to atonement and asks for God’s mercy. It is also noteworthy that, unlike his unrequited “love” for his lady, Amans’s love of God will be met by God’s unconditional love. The life of chastity that Venus offers him instead of his delusion is not to be understood as punishment, but as acceptance of his condition as an old poet

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<sup>6</sup> This is a reflection of the first and second biblical commandments: “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:37-39).

who is now wise: the conclusion of his journey of self-enlightenment. It is from this reformation of his character that comes his prayer for the country (2971-3053).

If Amans's and Genius's tales come into existence as an answer to the issue of Amans's confession, the psychological frame as a whole comes to existence as an answer to the political issues in England that Gower raises in the Prologue. Peck argues that Book VIII is about the "rediscovery of right relationships" (*Kingship* 161). It follows that the conclusion of the confessional journey (and of the poem) is centred on Amans gaining new perspectives, including a new self-understanding, that then enable him to return to a completed version of himself and to return home. The focus of Book VIII is the sin of Incest, which combines narcissism with immoderation and stands in opposition to the common profit and sense of community that Amans's confession promotes. Because of this opposing contrast, Peck argues, the Tale of Apollonius shows both Amans and readers alike we may overcome temptation and sin if we just follow the tenors of kingship and self-governance laid out in Book VII (*Kingship* 168-69). This particular tale provides the *Confessio* with a fitting ending, because Amans (or at least the lover who wanders the fields in search of respite), much like Apollonius, finds himself in exile and must remember and exercise his self-governing kingship to regain his sense of home. Therefore, once Amans leaves "homward" (VIII. 2967), Gower concludes the poem with a prayer for England, linking this ending with the opening of the Prologue and the book for England's sake. This particular choice also "reminds us of Chaucer's Retraction or the conclusion to Troilus and Criseyde" (Peck, *Kingship* 184) because it propels us into a larger community: the spiritual, under God's rule and mercy.

Final Thoughts

In the conclusion of the poem, Gower unifies the frames into one coherent voice, solidifying his layered but monologic meaning. However, this final unity does not erase the dialogue between wit and will, for Amans-Gower must still understand himself in relation to others. What Gower emphasizes with Amans's understanding of his identity as an old man is that identity is social and requires social cognition (and recognition); perception of one self requires recognition by another, making identity inherently dialogic. Even our own psyches, balancing Will and Wit, operate in a dialogic fashion.

Moreover, there is both unity and duality in the way Gower establishes parallels in his text. Gower likens Amans and Genius's journey to that of the readers, bringing them closer and tying their experiences. The interactions between the lover and the priest, or between Will and Wit, come to mirror the readers' own experience of the text; as the readers come to a fuller understanding of the lessons Gower delivers in the *Confessio*, (Gower hopes) they also come to rationalize and embody moral and civil behaviour as a result of reading the poem. The same way Amans and Genius come together, so do the many layers of the text to provide the readers with Gower's message. Nevertheless, in order to achieve this final unity, Gower has to make distinction between Amans and Genius as representations of wit and will, between Amans and the Gower persona as representations of the divided and unified soul, and between the relationships of all these facets of the frame characters (two or three facets depending on how we understand Amans as distinct from the persona of old Gower) to the education of the readers. Yet, through these many facets and layers, the unified educational purpose of the *Confessio* as a *speculum principis* prevails.

Once Amans-Gower is cleared of his frivolous love complaint, he can focus on more serious efforts (Book VIII. 2926-27). In this turn to religion, God tends to represent the "priority

of universality,” the centre of the concept of unity, and perhaps its model through the Trinity (the three-in-one). In this final scene we see how Gower pushes through dialogism, dialogue, the multiplicity of voices, the arguments of a mind, the conflicts between one’s will and wit, in order to establish some semblance of singular order and unity. It is almost as though he is pushing through division to find unity, going against the multiplicity of the world around him, the world that he himself creates and emphasizes, in order to achieve some semblance of “peace.”

As Stoyanoff puts it, “wisdom is found in what is read, yes, but wisdom, *Confessio Amantis* shows its reader, is more often found in how something is read” (62). For Gower it might also be found in how and why something is written. Regardless of Gower’s motivations for writing his *Confessio*, whether to become the poet laureate, or due to self-aggrandizing notions of his own importance, or because of his political views, or even thanks to his moral commitment to common profit, what he achieves in this book is undoubtedly connected to his political perceptions, matters of morality, and the role of literature and poets in public discourse. The political tensions of the 1380s, the questioning of the king’s authority, the growth of the professional classes in London, the examination of the psyche are all central to the project of the *Confessio* and its multilayered structure. The art of teaching and the formation of the individual in matters of civil duty and civic responsibility are driving forces for Gower, who saw value in the didactic genre of *speculum*. What is reflected in his writing? Himself, the human psyche, the faculties of the psyche, readers seeking moral guidance, and the politics of an era. The contemplation of Venus, the several turns towards religion, and the figures of harmony, all point towards a need of introspection and self-reflection.

In the world we live in today, if we are to fight uncertainty and chaos and re-establish some semblance of order, we would do well to reflect on the morality and justice of our laws, our

commitment to civic duty, and the government of our nations. To address the division of the individual, we must produce better readers, who can examine their own consciences and behaviours and seek the common profit. To combat the division of the body politic, we must reign in tyrannical rulers and challenge their mental faculties of Wit and Will to act in cooperation. If we look closely at those in power, perhaps we would find a plethora of Amanses in need of reformation and not enough Geniuses to hear their confessions and offer them moral instruction. We are certain to find very few Gowers.

## Appendix: Case Study of Yale University, Beinecke Library, MS Osborn F.a.1

MS Osborn F.a.1 (c. 1410) is one of the earliest manuscripts of the third recension of the *Confessio*, and it preserves a full copy of the poem likely in a Kentish dialect, its verses following closely other reproductions of the text.<sup>1</sup> MS Osborn was written on vellum, and there is significant water damage to some sections—likely due to the extinguishing of a fire in the Meyrick residence in 1775.<sup>2</sup> Some of the manuscript’s folios are missing, including the entire first quire; the missing quire was put in the R.C. Pearson collection in a shop in Cambridge some time before 1950 and catalogued in 1953 (Shailor 77-78). This missing quire (which contains the Prologue and beginning of Book I) has been identified as belonging to a private collector in Japan, but it has not been made available to the public.<sup>3</sup> MS Osborn has no illustrations (present, sketched, or even planned for). There are, however, some sparse decorative initials throughout the document. For instance, folio 13r has an initial “N” whose branching decorations spread over the whole page and come to frame the text. Other full-page demi-vignettes are found in folios 76r, 125r, 140r and 175v.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Following Macaulay’s stemma, Beinecke dates the manuscript c.1400, citing that it was likely produced “in the same manner as the other surviving manuscripts from this time, presumably under the author’s supervision.” However, Barbara Shailor, based on Griffiths’s earlier work and correspondence with Scott, dates MS Osborn circa 1415.

<sup>2</sup> The manuscript belonged to the Meyrick family, until Sir George Meyrick sold it to the Beinecke Library after his father’s death in 1960.

<sup>3</sup> Toshiyuki Takamiya made his collection of Western medieval manuscripts available to Beinecke as a long-term deposit in 2013, and the missing folio is not in his collection. This fact indicates a different collector has it.

<sup>4</sup> There are two significant marks of readership in Osborn: an explanatory note on the gloss misattributed to Ovid in folio 134va (which I discuss later) and a manicule in folio 114va. The manicule points to passage from the end of Book V and portrays the rape scene from the Tale of Neptune and Cornix. Although this excerpt is graphic in its depiction of the rape, its highlighting is odd. First, it is a section from the second half of the poem, which, as readership studies tend to indicate, is less heavily marked than the first. Moreover, the section is not a particularly pleasing or salacious excerpt, which Pearsall argues tends to appear in marks of early readership of Gower manuscripts (“Manuscripts” 87), because it focuses on Cornix’s pain and fear and her prayers for mercy. There are

MS Osborn F.a.1 also contains some of Gower's minor Latin and French works, including "Explicit iste liber," "Epistola super huius," "Quam cinxere," "Traite," "Carmen de variis in amore passionibus," and "Carmen super multiplici viciorum pestilencia." These minor poems lament the current fallen state of humanity and discourse on matters of love and the power of song (or reading)—themes that are connected to the conclusion of the *Confessio*. What is striking is that the collection is exclusively limited to Gower's works, a factor that is unusual for a well copied but not luxury manuscript like Osborn. This detail could mean that this manuscript was an attempt by Gower to canonize himself, in the manner Huot describes for Machaut and Froissart: "the codices of Machaut and Froissart were almost certainly organized by the authors themselves; Machaut may well also have designed, or at least influenced, programs of illumination for his works" (*From Song to Book* 211). Gower is one of the few self-authorizing manuscript controllers of his time, producing multiple copies of his works and changing political alliances. It is therefore plausible that he might have wanted to provide a definitive collection of his work—a canon of his poems—to stabilize and preserve his image of authority.<sup>5</sup>

Because of Gower's self-authorizing tendencies, one of Osborn's distinct features is the care taken by its scribes. According to Pearsall, based on the hands displayed in the folios, the Trinity scribes—a group of five or six scribes working in London likely under authorial supervision who were responsible for various copies of *The Canterbury Tales* (e.g. MSS Takamiya 24, Trinity R.3.3, Rawlinson Poetry 233, and Harley 7334) and the *Confessio* (e.g.

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other tales in Gower's *Confessio*, such as the Tale of Mundus and Pauline in Book I, that are more salacious in their description. A reading of the manicule as a simple indication of a salacious passage is dismissive of the factors pointing to a careful reading of the text, potentially as a site of early studies of male oppression.

<sup>5</sup> Echard also traces the linguistic display in the last quire of the manuscript to a means Gower employed to demonstrate control of all three major languages of England (Latin, French, and English) in a short selection of poems to the strategy he used in the manuscript he supposedly presented to King Henry IV, MS Trentham. For more details about the Trentham manuscript, see Echard's "Gower in Print" 132.

MSS Trinity R.3.2, Egerton 1991, Plimpton 265, Bodley 294, Christ Church 148, and Taylor 5)—did not take part in the production of MS Osborn F.a.1 (“Manuscripts and Illustrations” 81-82). Yet Osborn’s glosses are properly included and notes are made to correct copying errors; this suggests possible authorial supervision of this manuscript’s copying.

Further evidence that Gower supervised the production of the Osborn manuscript itself is provided by a few scribal notes that are included in the folia in order to correct textual mistakes in copying. For instance, folio 4va presents a marginal note to point out a mistake; in this passage, the scribe moves from line 789 to 792 (of Book I of the *Confessio*), forgetting to copy lines 790-91, which disrupts the ongoing rhyming pattern. The correction is presented at the bottom of the page, with the lines added in front of the same marginal sign in the same hand as the body of the text.

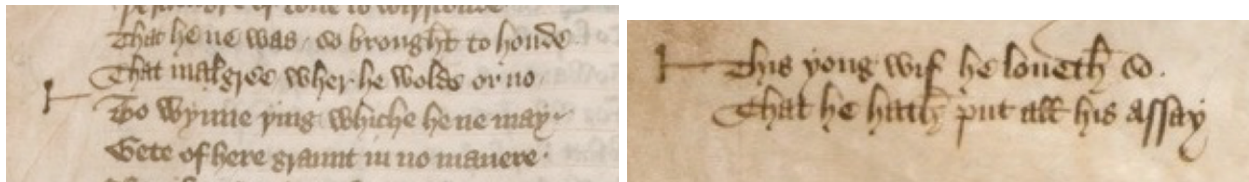
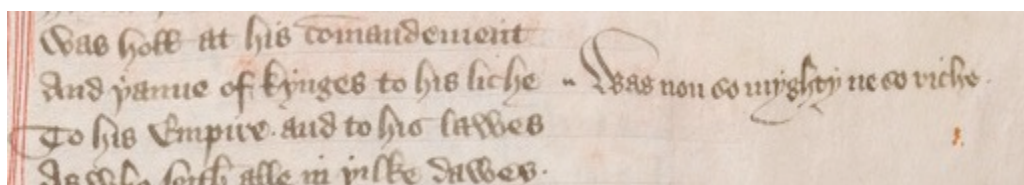


Figure 1: Marginal correction in folio 4va

A similar strategy for corrections can be seen twice in folio 9rb. Because the omissions in folio 9rb were only one-line long each, the scribe revised and included the new lines directly in front of the previous ones, writing past the borders of the actual text and into the marginal space.



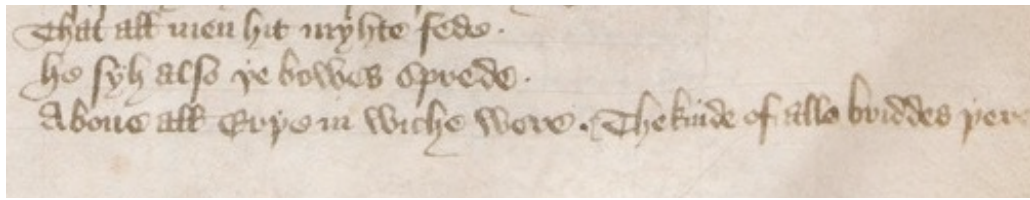


Figure 2: Corrections in folio 9rb

In presenting these types of corrections, the manuscript shows a clear effort from the scribes to preserve the original text they were copying, respecting its rhyming schemes and the placement of textual content. In regard to these corrections and notes, Pearsall goes as far as to state that “there was in fact a complex network of revising scribes, working independently, adding revisions of which at least some must have been in a form authorised by Gower” (“Manuscripts and Illustrations” 86). Although the possibility of a second group of scribes organizing the revision of this manuscript has not been studied, the possibility is unlikely because the hands of the corrections match the hands of the actual text. Pearsall and Mooney in fact suggest that some of these additions were “made after consultation of another MS” (*Descriptive Catalogue* 280).

Moreover, in relation to the careful production of Osborn F.a.1, it is noteworthy that the longer glosses of the *Confessio* become incorporated in the body of the text through rubrication. For instance, folio 2 presents an extensive entry on Aspidis’s tale.

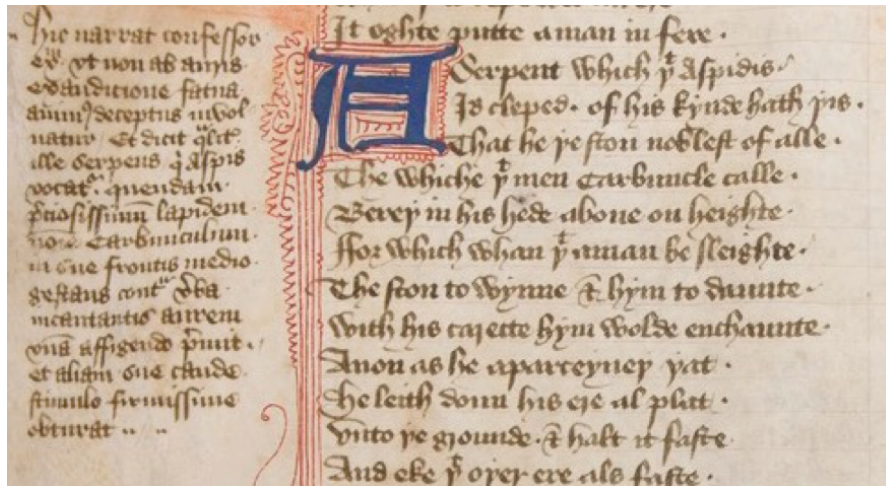


Figure 3: Gloss in folio 2va

In contrast, the turn of folio 8 from recto to verso presents an incorporated gloss that would likely be marginal had it not been too long to run as marginalia.

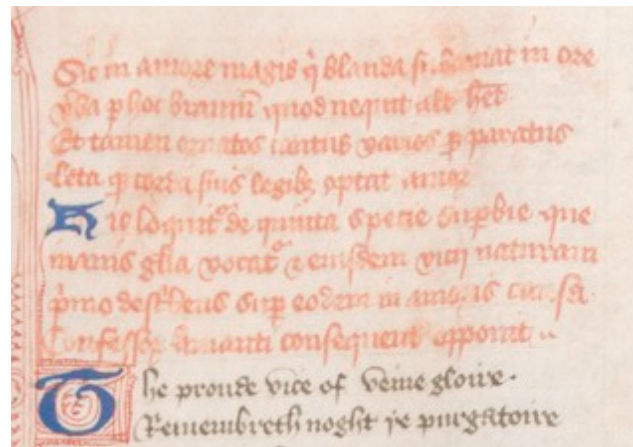
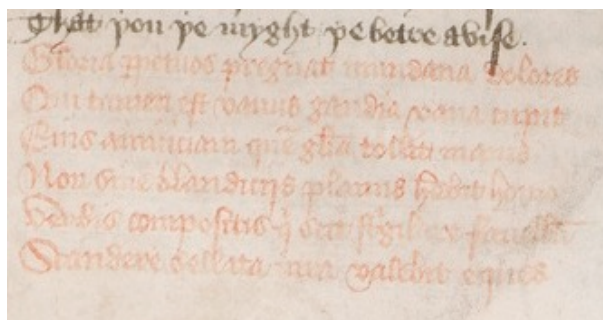


Figure 4: Incorporation of a gloss in the turn of folio 8r to 8v

After folio 9r, it is rare to find marginal glosses, especially ones as long as those from folio 2; instead, glosses longer than 3 lines are incorporated. This suggests that the glosses that would be too long for marginalia had to be incorporated in the body of the text—a process that solves the difficulties of writing in the margins. Contrary to some manuscripts, however, the summaries and glosses in Osborn F.a.1 continue to appear in the body of the text once they are incorporated

(which is not true of Add. 12043, an expensively decorated manuscript that does not possess glosses of any sort after its scribe gave up on writing a long gloss in Book II). It is also noteworthy that these glosses in Osborn, both marginal and integrated, have initial letters in blue, which suggest that they are indeed part of the main textual apparatus and the original layout of the page.

MS Osborn F.a.1 becomes more significant in this study because, despite its lower aesthetic values in relation to other copies of the third recension, its version of the *Confessio* follows the lines of Oxford, Bodleian MS Fairfax 3 quite closely.<sup>6</sup> Due to its more preserved condition and early dating (c. 1399), MS Fairfax 3 is widely accepted as the manuscript used by Macaulay for his own edition of the *Confessio* and has since then (c. 1900) been the basis for most modern editions. Fairfax is physically larger with an average of 46 verses per column of text, or a total of 92 per page, while Osborn has 42 lines per column for a total of 84 per page. Yet, while their features are distinct, their texts are equivalent. This detailed reading of Fairfax and Osborn's similarities is furthered by a one-line gloss entry on folio 134va of Osborn F.a.1 (corresponding to line 1513 of Book VI, quite far into the manuscript) that is also registered in the equivalent passage in Fairfax 3 according to Macaulay and Peck's observations of the marginalia. This Latin gloss, which the two critics argue is Gower's, actually misattributes an Ovidian passage to Horace—a minor detail that becomes significant in its dual appearance. The similarities between Fairfax 3 and Osborn F.a.1 suggest that there is more to be discovered about Gower's control of manuscript production.

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<sup>6</sup> Macaulay and Pearsall both claim that MS Fairfax 3 also had three scribes who likely worked under Gower's supervision given the textual changes made in relation to earlier recensions of the poem. Pearsall goes as far as to claim that the "manuscript obviously derives closely from exemplars meticulously supervised by the author" ("Organization" 100). For more information, see MS. Fairfax 3's entry Pearsall and Mooney's *Descriptive Catalogue of the English Manuscripts of John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (196-201).

If we agree with Pearsall, then the precision of the change in the physical placement of the carefully reproduced glosses in Osborn—from marginalia to the body of the text, a process complicated by the difference in its size from the standard manuscripts of its time—suggests that Osborn, like Pearsall argues for Fairfax, is a copy of an exemplar.<sup>7</sup> In addition, there is also no extra spacing between the Latin and English texts in Osborn, which contributes to this theory. Pearsall confirms that there is evidence of column-for-column copying in Osborn F.a.1 because of its textual completeness (“Manuscripts and Illustrations” 82), but he cannot trace an exemplar that matches Osborn and other early copies of the third recension. What complicates Pearsall’s position is that the number of lines per column in Osborn (at 42) does not match his own theory that manuscripts produced from 1393 to 1408 (i.e. during Gower’s time)—and that could have served as exemplars—were stable at 46 lines of text per column.<sup>8</sup>

Anthony Doyle and Malcolm Parkes do not believe Gower manuscripts were copied from set exemplars, and they emphasize that, despite Gower’s popularity, his manuscripts still would not warrant commercial scribes following the same rules of reproduction as they would for Latin ones (76-78).<sup>9</sup> Jeremy Smith challenges Doyle and Parkes’s hypotheses; he argues that exemplars were in fact also used for the production of Gower manuscripts. He writes:

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<sup>7</sup> Pearsall claims that “the care and consistency with which the Latin marginal apparatus is presented in the earlier manuscripts, and the regularity with which it appears substantially unchanged in content in the later manuscript tradition, argue for a strong presumption that it was in that tradition from the start and derives from the author’s copies” (“Organization” 102). This understanding of set authorial copies, or exemplars, can then be applied to MS Osborn.

<sup>8</sup> This is especially contradictory when one notices that Pearsall argues that the manuscript was copied in a column-for-column format, which implies another early copy existed that had columns of 42 lines and changed the glosses from the marginalia to the body of the text, without loss of content.

<sup>9</sup> In a somewhat contradictory statement, Doyle and Parkes claim that in the case of MS Trinity R.3.2 its production was made by scribes simultaneously copying quires of a Mid-Eastland manuscript, which seems to have been lost (78).

The fact that one non-archetypal text seems to underlie, in part or in whole, so many copies of the *Confessio Amantis* ... causes me to question Doyle and Parkes (1978) when they state that “demand (in the early fifteenth century) was rarely certain enough to make it a commercial proposition for a stationer to retain a single exemplar to serve as a basis for the production of multiple copies.” The evidence of the North-West Midland forms might suggest that one exemplar, at any rate, had a widespread influence. (282)

The fact that the texts of Fairfax and Osborn are so similar thus suggests the possibility of a Kentish exemplar having existed alongside a Mid-Eastland or Cambridge one—given the differing spelling of the pieces (preference for “y” and “re” in Osborn instead of “i” and “er”)<sup>10</sup> and the smaller dimensions of Osborn. This exemplar, however, also seems to have been lost to us.

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on the distinction of the London and Kentish spellings, see Jeremy Smith’s “London English.”

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