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Introduction


Georgiana Donavin

Westminster College, gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu

Eve Salisbury

Western Michigan University, eve.salisbury@wmich.edu

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Introduction

In these pages, we celebrate the inaugural issue of *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media*, a peer-reviewed, electronic publication dedicated to providing access to discoveries about early literatures and cultures through new media. As our title suggests, *Accessus* is a journal that invites authors to share their ideas freely and all interested readers to benefit from the timely publication of scholarly work.¹ We seek to retain the medieval notion of *accessus* as commentary on works for contemplation and study, commentary that challenges academic borderlines, binaries, and traditional ways of thinking. While the articles published by *Accessus* may be expected to address Western European literatures composed before 1660 in the innovative formats that such online publications allow (hyperlinks, video streaming, word clouds, and experimental media), the variety of theoretical perspectives offered by our authors are certain to generate fresh inquiries and new mediations of premodern writings.²

A biannual publication of The Gower Project, *Accessus* will focus in large part on the trilingual oeuvre of the fourteenth-century poet John Gower, including manuscripts, editions, adaptations, and revisions. With its many links to biblical, classical, and early medieval

1. The author retains copyright privileges that would otherwise be relinquished to a corporate publisher.

2. We see 1660 as a soft border between periods that utilized different structures and genres for expressing thoughts on reason, science, and technology. At the same time, we acknowledge that premodern writings, especially Gower's, also privilege the rational and new learning. We recognize that 1660 is an Anglocentric boundary marking "The Restoration" of the English monarchy after the rule of the Commonwealth, a convenient date inaugurating an "Age of Reason" that precedes or merges with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Although this serviceable date reflects British political structures, we encourage submissions concerning premodern literatures written across Western Europe.

literatures, Gower's poetry provides a fourteenth-century prototype for hypertextuality that we seek to extend and update in increasingly interactive forms as technologies develop and change.

While many articles on Gower will appear in conjunction with the work of other premodern writers, for this inaugural issue we are pleased to showcase the sort of pioneering research that The Gower Project has encouraged over the past decade, with discoveries arising from emerging theories and technologies. As is true for many academic working groups, The Gower Project began with a series of animated conversations, in this case focused on the potential impact of hypertext on medieval scholarship. These early meetings soon crystallized into a movement that gained momentum with a symposium entitled "Towards a Gower Hypertext," organized by Diane Watt in July of 2003. At the Senate House at University College, London, during which the state of editions of Gower's poems and the possibilities represented by electronic texts were discussed, it soon became apparent that another meeting would be necessary to map out our initial objectives and strategize about how best to accomplish them. Three years later, at the International Congress on Medieval Studies in Leeds, The Gower Project began to take on a more definitive shape and a clearer direction. Our three-pronged purpose—to build and maintain a website of resources on Gower's oeuvre, to catalyze electronic exchanges on scholarship and teaching, and to sponsor conference sessions addressing the practices and implications of digitizing Gower—emerged. Now, several years later, an enterprise launched by preliminary inquiries into the use of hypertext in research has evolved into interconnected and individually designed websites offering (among other things) current bibliographic references, a wiki for translations of Gower's poems, a repository for electronic editions and digitized

manuscripts, and up-to-date news on conference presentations.³ From the latest research to color photos of both exemplary and understudied Gowerian manuscripts, these websites provide the kinds of information that contribute to what we know and continue to discover about the past.

Rendering scholarship on Gower's oeuvre available through interactive hyperlinked texts with pathways to related repositories of information, The Gower Project along with *Accessus* is both a digital humanities and a new media endeavor. Like many digital humanities efforts, The Gower Project puts evolving web technologies to the service of electronic preservation and dissemination of humanities texts. For *Accessus*, the capacity for digital storage means the ability to publish or link numerous images from recent discoveries and extended translations or commentaries. With the advent of hyperlinked texts and web images, research previously reliant on time-consuming *in situ* library searches expands into a network that fosters intellectual exchange among scholars and students across boundaries both global and disciplinary. In this sense, *Accessus* announces itself not only as an open access e-journal dedicated to the study of premodern literatures, but also as a philosophy of knowledge distribution and sharing. Like the poet who inspired this project, we consider *Accessus* to be part of a forward-thinking initiative dedicated to enabling the exploration of ways in which writings "in olde daies passed" may be enfolded into our present-day vision(s) for the future.

Also aligned with new media studies, The Gower Project foregrounds the intersections between medium and meaning. We agree with Benjamin Peters that while some new media scholars eschew historical investigation in favor of emphasizing the transformative effects of cutting-edge technologies, at some point, all forms of media were new, and today even the digital

3. Currently, our main websites are www.gowerproject.org and www.gowerproject.com. These sites interlink with those constructed by a number of Gower scholars such as [Siân Echard](#) and [Jonathan Hsy](#).

is taken for granted.⁴ We benefit from a long historical view of communications media and the flexibility to enfold newly launched media into an ever-expanding scholarly network. In premodern literary studies, especially since the work of Walter Ong, our views of texts and their audiences have been enriched through considerations of how the medium, whether scroll, codex, printed book, or electronic edition, fosters or circumscribes meaning.⁵ For Gower Project members, this awareness has increased since the 1990s when the new philology, finding value in divergent manuscripts, and the material turn, focusing on the artifacts constituting medieval culture, happily collided, encouraging literary critics to articulate interpretations localized in individual codices.⁶ In addition, the groundbreaking work of Gower scholars such as Siân Echard on how manuscript or print layout privileges certain readings and Martha Dana Rust on affinities between the medieval manuscript folio and web pages, demonstrates the adaptation of preexistent media to newer technologies and delivery systems.⁷ The Gower Project web pages offer re-mediations of prior writing technologies in digital forms, and *Accessus* invites submissions on new media's recasting of premodern literatures.

Inventive theoretical approaches and the use of current technologies in interpreting Gower's poems have been part of The Gower Project since its inception. To en-vision, re-vision,

4. Benjamin Peters, "And Lead Us Not into Thinking the New is New: A Bibliographic Case for New Media History," *New Media & Society* 11, no. 13 (2009): 13–30.

5. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: Technologizing the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

6. For an introduction to the place of new philology in medieval studies, see Steven G. Nichols, "Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture," *Speculum* 65, no. 1 (1990): 1–10.

7. On manuscript layout, see for instance, Siân Echard, "Designs for Reading Some Manuscripts of Gower's 'Confessio Amantis'," *Trivium* 31 (1999): 59–72. Also, see Siân Echard, *Printing the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Martha Dana Rust, *Imaginary Worlds in Medieval Books* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

and see things anew is something of a leitmotif among the several essays presented here, all of which enable us to engage actively in contemporary concerns and at the same time recognize how the writings of the past encourage us to embrace such opportunities. Three articles in this issue bring disability studies to bear upon Gower's poems and in so doing, offer another way that this journal can focus on "access." In his consideration of the poet's blindness and subsequent "Blind readers," Jonathan Hsy demonstrates how we, as politically engaged activist-scholars, may "advocate for changed perceptions and opportunities for the blind and other people with disabilities." In anticipation of "modern disability activism and critical theory," and in his self-identified stances as a blind poet, Gower "adopts highly innovative formal and rhetorical strategies for representing visual impairment." Tory Vandeventer Pearman's discussion of two tales in the *Confessio Amantis*—the "Tale of Medusa" and the "Tale of Constance"—implicitly furthers the call to advocacy by foregrounding the "role that the (dis)abled body plays in the poem's struggle with fragmentation and integration" and by her reading of the therapeutic effect of confession in its "ability to restore the fragmentary natures of social and spiritual bodies." When Candace Barrington turns our attention to MS Trentham, a collection of Gower's poems in French, Latin, and Middle English likely inscribed around the time of Henry IV's coronation, she urges us to think about the manuscript as a "prosthesis" with the ability "to compensate, even cure" Henry IV's "illegitimate claim to the throne." In Barrington's reading, MS Trentham functions as a means by which we might better understand how less-than-premier manuscripts alter our understanding of history and how certain "editorial decisions" mark such documents as "deformed." In the fourth and final essay, Lynn Arner shifts the focus to the social body in her reading of the *Visio Anglie* and the (dis)ordered bodies of the insurgents of 1381 to argue that by "deploying conventions from medieval courtesy manuals, Gower's *Visio Anglie* assigned varied

degrees of authority to Englishmen and women at the bodily level [in] a system of signification in which food, physical appearances, and overall comportment were key elements.”Arner sees Gower’s rebels as occupying a “queer position—not unlike that articulated by Lee Edelman—that imperiled both health and futurity, ultimately demonstrating the need to further disenfranchise and control the non-ruling classes in the wake of the English Rising of 1381.” As this and the accompanying essays in this inaugural issue suggest, the vision of this “blind” poet opens our eyes to the integral correspondences between now and then. As Gower himself says, the “writings of the past contain examples for the future.”⁸

Many thanks go to the Advisory Board who shepherded The Gower Project through its early phases and who continue to support its efforts.⁹ At Westminster College, Ariane Dupaix, Ben Neiswender, and Jordyn Page contributed substantially to the design and implementation of The Gower Project’s home website and translation wiki. We would also like to thank those who encouraged the establishment of an e-journal and provided the tech support necessary to maintain the site, especially Justin Gibson (who also designed the logo) and the folks at Bepress and ScholarWorks. We would also like to thank the English Department at Western Michigan University for support and encouragement, and the College of Arts and Sciences for fostering a collegial atmosphere in which collaborative and innovative thinking are valued. Finally, neither The Gower Project nor *Accessus* would be possible without the generosity of The Gore Endowment at Westminster College.

8. The Latin quotation, “Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri,” is from the *Visio Anglie* introducing the *Vox Clamantis*. See G. C. Macaulay, ed., *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), Pro. 1.1.

9. See our "[Contacts](#)" page for the Advisory Board listing.

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Western Michigan University
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