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Covetousness in Book 5 of *Confessio Amantis*: A Medieval Precursor to Neoliberalism

It may seem odd to most readers and critics of medieval literature to see the term neoliberalism appear in the title of an article dealing with John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. After all, neoliberalism does not develop until the twentieth century whereas Gower writes his poem nearly six hundred years earlier in the fourteenth century. The political context is also starkly different: democracy versus monarchy. Remarkably, though, the ways in which Gower discusses Covetousness could be found in any of the myriad studies, articles, and books that discuss the negative effects of neoliberalism, particularly since the 1980s. Covetousness is a minister of Avarice, which is the poet's focus for Book 5 of the *Confessio*. His meditation on Covetousness in the tales that Genius tells to Amans demonstrates how this sin exists in every station of society — from emperor to beggar — and how it fundamentally alters and, in the end, destroys the social bonds that had once existed among the actors involved. Using Actor-Network-Theory, this essay demonstrates that Gower presents his readers with the dire consequences of misunderstanding the structure of and relationships in society when Covetousness governs actions and the market overtakes the moral.¹ The negative effects of the tales associated with Covetousness within Book 5 reveal the dependence of each perpetrator of Covetousness on a network of actors that includes material objects rather than monolithic social structures. Furthermore, Gower's critique of Covetousness in showing us its dissolution of the bonds and relationships that make up the collectives of society foreshadows both the rise and lasting negative impact of neoliberalism.

¹ My use of "moral" here is not to appeal to the tired "moral Gower" legend, but rather to point out that Gower rejects the notion that the market is a positive force in the collectives that make up society.

In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour explains that there are two distinct approaches in sociology. “The first solution,” he writes, “has been to posit the existence of a specific sort of phenomenon variously called ‘society’, ‘social order’, ‘social practice’, ‘social dimension’, or ‘societal structure’.”² When most people think of the social, this definition is probably the first that comes to mind: society exists and the pieces that make it up merely fit within the existing hierarchy. “The other approach,” continues Latour, “does not take for granted the basic tenet of the first. It claims that there is nothing specific to social order; that there is no social dimension of any sort, no ‘social context’, no distinct domain of reality to which the label ‘social’ or ‘society’ could be attributed.”³ Such an approach is the starting point for Actor-Network-Theory: it is what Latour refers to as the “tracing of associations.”⁴ This process of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT hereafter) is essentially a close reading of the relationships among various actors in order to understand how they interact with each other to form a relationship. Rather than assuming that they exist within an overarching system about which we draw conclusions or make assumptions, we instead figure out the system by its actors — we see the connections that create the network. Latour calls these networks of associations not societies, but rather collectives,⁵ and it is through identifying these collectives that we may fundamentally rethink what social means and how something social is constructed.

Focusing on collectives rather than societies fundamentally revises the old understanding of social order, which creates a body politic that is antithetical to the reality of the collective

² Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14

nature of politics. Latour demonstrates how the problematic understanding of the body politic depends on a mistaken elision of the public with society:

The body politic transmogrified into a society is supposed to hold up under its own force *even in the absence of any* political activity. Although it remains invisible, the giant body politic is now said to have had its feet solidly fastened to a sturdy pedestal. All the difficulties of grasping the social start from such an impossible feat of metallurgical fiction: the moving shape of the Phantom Public now cast in bronze.⁶

Such a problematic understanding of the body politic makes it impossible for us to assess accurately and critique the actors within it; in other words, our focus on the monolith undermines the actions of the particular pieces that make it. Latour adds,

But it does not require much effort to see that a virtual and always present entity is exactly the opposite of what is needed for the collective to be assembled: if it's already there, the practical means to *compose* it are no longer traceable; if it's total, the practical means to *totalize* it are no longer visible; if it's virtual, the practical means to *realize, visualize, and collect* it have disappeared from view.⁷

Latour convinces us here that the traditional understanding of society contradicts the very tasks that sociologists (or, in my case, literary critics analyzing literature through its social implications) purportedly engage. If society and/or politics already exist as fully materialized and

⁶ Ibid., 162-63. Emphasis author's.

⁷ Ibid., 163. Emphasis author's.

consistent bodies, what, then, is the use of talking about them at all? Such bodies would lack motion and any sense of dynamism to make them worthy of study. By reframing our understanding of these bodies as collectives of actors, however, Latour helps us see the traces that make up associations of actors who *do* change and who *are* dynamic—actors whose actions fundamentally determine the collectives they create.

John Gower, *I posit*, works from a similar understanding of society as a collective of actors in the *Confessio Amantis*. Gower traces associations to show us the collectives that these relationships create and how then these collectives function in both social and political ways. At first, Gower's concern about the fate of his work obscures this focus, but as we read the tales and Genius's careful explication of them in relation to a particular sin, it becomes clear that the *Confessio* explores collectives in each of its stories, creating a network of associated tales as it grows. We never see the full picture until the end — until we have read the whole poem.⁸ And then it becomes apparent that *our* reading of the poem, too, forges an association: we participate in the ever-changing collective that is made up of the poem and its readers. Like Gower's work in the *Confessio*, “ANT claims to be able to find order much better *after* having let the actors deploy the full range of controversies in which they are immersed”; furthermore, “[t]he search for order, rigor, and pattern is by no means abandoned. It is simply relocated one step further into abstraction so that actors are allowed to unfold their own differing cosmos, no matter how counter-intuitive they appear.”⁹ This approach forgoes forcing actors into what has come to be understood as monolithic “society” and instead allows them to create the society in which they

⁸ I present this argument at length elsewhere. See Jeffery G. Stoyanoff, “Beginnings and Endings: Narrative Framing in *Confessio Amantis*,” *South Atlantic Review* 79, no. 3-4 (2016): 51-64, accessed August 12, 2016, https://samla.memberclicks.net/assets/SAR/toc_79.3-4.pdf.

⁹ Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 23.

exist. After we allow the actors to reveal their network to us, *then* we ask how the relationships work. Whereas Genius first seems to do the latter in the *Confessio*, the poem's end reveals that he, too, is another actor within a collective larger than we had expected.

Once we see Gower's process of crafting his poem, we might better be able to understand the particulars of his critiques of the sins against love of which Amans seems to be guilty. In Book 5, Avarice comes under Gower's gaze, and so the collectives that Gower creates within his tales demonstrate to us the importance of each actor in the process of such sinning. ANT is particularly useful to readers of this book because of the nature of the sin it explores. Avarice places the benefit of the individual above the welfare of the collective, but beyond that, Gower's tales (as discussed below) demonstrate how the networks are broken by this sin. An actor committing this sin does not simply harm the collective of which they are a part; rather, they irrevocably break it. Gower's opening lines in Book 5 make this point clear:

Ferst whan the hyhe God began
 This world, and that the kinde of man
 Was falle into no gret encress,
 For worldes good tho was no press,
 Bot al was set to the comune,
 Thei spieken thanne of no fortune
 Or for to lese or for to winne,
 Til Avarice broghte it inne (5.1-8)¹⁰

¹⁰ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Vol. 3, Middle English Texts Series, ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), 5.1-8. <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/peck-confession-amantis-volume-3>. Subsequent citations are from this edition.

These lines make the point that all goods were originally shared—they were “common.” Having more or less goods was not a concept until Avarice leads to the dissolution of the community at the expense of the individual. Gower emphasizes this idea by juxtaposing the world as a whole with categories “Of man, of hors, of schep, of oxe” (5.10). The introduction of money only further exacerbates this decay: “And of comun his propre made” (5.15). Individuals take what once was owned by all and make it their property alone. All of these moments demonstrate that avarice is the altering of existing bonds, and ANT provides us the most optimum framework to investigate these moments, especially in this book’s section on Covetousness, because the tales about it demonstrate the actions that result from this sin. Furthermore, ANT allows us to focus on the economic bonds that Gower depicts within these tales, illustrating that individuals’ actions drive the creation and destruction of collectives within any given network.

The economic bonds that Gower investigates appeal to two important elements of trade in the Middle Ages: community and equilibrium. Lianna Farber discusses the former in *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community*, and Joel Kaye discusses the latter in *A History of Balance, 1250-1375: The Emergence of a New Model of Equilibrium and its Impact on Thought*.¹¹ Farber brilliantly explains that trade arises when value, consent, and community interact with one another. She writes, “At each stage of the process, then, value, consent, and community must not only take place but be recognizable and straightforward so that we can distinguish between a trade that partakes of proportionate equality

¹¹ I would like to take this opportunity to thank the anonymous reviewer at *Accessus* who suggested I consult these texts. See Lianna Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). See also Joel Kaye, *A History of Balance, 1250-1375: The Emergence of a New Model of Equilibrium and its Impact on Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

and one that does not, so that we can distinguish between coercion and exchange.”¹² Farber’s situating of trade, then, is much like the collective of ANT compared to traditional understandings of society. The actors must be equally situated, which suggests the same interdependence that Gower reveals in his tales and that Latour posits in ANT. In applying her argument to literature, Farber analyzes two tales from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*: “The Shipman’s Tale” and “The Franklin’s Tale.” For each tale, the “world” in which the tale takes place directly determines the tripartite formula of value, consent, and community.¹³ Joel Kaye traces at length the changing definition of economic equilibrium in his book. In chapter 7, he uses Nicholas Oresme’s *De moneta* and *Politiques* as bellwethers for these changing ideas. Kaye observes that Oresme “argues that money is rightly the property of the *community as a whole*, and of the individuals who comprise the whole, not the private property of the king.”¹⁴ Interestingly, Kaye points out that Oresme’s opinion changes in the later *Politiques*¹⁵ because of “two broad areas of collapse,” namely “loss of faith in the viability of communal self-government and loss of faith in the self-ordering and self-equalizing capacities of the marketplace.”¹⁶ Oresme’s loss of faith in the marketplace’s ability to bring itself back into

¹² Lianna Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing*, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 69-83.

¹⁴ Joel Kaye, *A History of Balance, 1250-1375*, 351.

¹⁵ Kaye notes that Oresme “has replaced the potentialities of the self-ordering multitude with the commanding will of the ordering ruler informed by the small coterie of his advisors (386-87).”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 387. What really interests me about this information is that it reminds me of Roger Ladd’s comment on Gower’s *Mirour* being the last time he seems to speak directly to merchants. See Roger A. Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New

equilibrium (to ensure equity for all, in other words) also points to the same composition of the collectives of networks seen in Gower's tales. These ideas in combination with ANT allow us to see how Gower's argument against Covetousness is, in essence, an economic argument that puts the good of the many (collectives and networks) above the good of the few.

A number of critics have spoken to the economics of this book, querying the relationship Gower depicts among capital, trade, material goods, and the self. Brian Gastle identifies a "mercantile undercurrent" first made clear in the Prologue's recensions and further proposes that this undercurrent indicates "Gower's own changing position on the role of business."¹⁷ Like Gastle, María Bullón-Fernández sees an economic motive behind the *Confessio*'s structure. "The length of Book V and its central placement," she argues, "suggest that the poem is intensely interested in the relation between material things and the self (whether the self is rich or poor)."¹⁸ In Gower's portrayal of capital and commerce, both Ethan Knapp and Robert Epstein depict the poet as a conservative anti-capitalist,¹⁹ and Epstein in particular demonstrates at length Gower's

York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). It is as if Gower, like Oresme, somehow lost faith in the ability of the many to work toward common profit and instead, like Oresme, turns to a monarch with his complaints in hopes that he can somehow effect change.

¹⁷ Brian Gastle, "Gower's Business: Artistic Production of Cultural Capital and The Tale of Florent," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 183.

¹⁸ María Bullón-Fernández, "Goods and the Good in *Confessio Amantis*," in *John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception*, ed. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 183.

¹⁹ Ethan Knapp, "John Gower: Balzac of the Fourteenth Century" in *John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception*, ed. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 216. In an earlier piece, Knapp demonstrates how Gower depicts gold as some sort of volatile force that needs to be contained "as though the very presence of coinage now meant that the form of economic pressure derived not from competition over scarce valuables but rather from some aspect of gold that threatens to burst beyond any suitable constraints." See Ethan Knapp, "The Place of Egypt in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," in

distrust of money via coinage.²⁰ Similarly, Jessica Rosenfeld remarks upon the “zero-sum world in which goods are finite . . . [and] must be closely guarded” that Gower creates in Book 5,²¹ which suggests that avarice and the goods that foment it are antithetical to any sort of mutually beneficial relationships. Speaking to trade practices depicted in fourteenth-century literature more broadly beyond Gower, Craig E. Bertolet posits, “Gower argues consistently that commerce causes buyers and sellers to choose private over public good.”²² Roger A. Ladd and Jonathan Hsy both address related mercantile issues, especially the ways in which Gower’s

John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 28. Roger Ladd offers an alternative viewpoint on this issue, but moves the focus from coinage to gifts: “These gifts reinforce aristocratic values, but read as forms of economic exchange they also provide a window into the subtle economics of the *Confessio*; in particular, kings’ gifts reveal a political economy of honorable donation throughout the poem.” See Roger Ladd, “Gower’s Gifts” in *John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception*, ed. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 230.

²⁰ Epstein attributes the fallenness of Book V to the shift “from commonality into private property through money.” Robert Epstein, “Dismal Science: Chaucer and Gower on Alchemy and Economy,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 36 (2014): 209-48 (223). Clare Fletcher offers a different take on the relationship between alchemy and gold in the *Confessio*, however, arguing the “alchemical blueprint of extracting the vice and retaining the virtue thus additionally provides Gower with a conceptual model for the alchemy of self. See Clare Fletcher, “‘The science of himself is trewe’: Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” *South Atlantic Review* 79, no. 3-4 (2015): 118-31 (119), accessed March 29, 2017, https://samla.memberclicks.net/assets/SAR/toc_79.3-4.pdf.

²¹ Jessica Rosenfeld, “Compassionate Conversions: Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and the Problem of Envy,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 42, no. 1 (2012): 83-105 (90).

²² Craig E. Bertolet, *Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve and the Commercial Practices of Late Fourteenth-Century London* (London: Ashgate, 2013). Bertolet later adds, “Commerce emphasizes competition rather than cooperation. It rewards the person with the greatest wealth, not the greatest virtue” (40).

oeuvre speaks directly to the merchant class.²³ These critics all essentially analyze the collectives Gower creates within the network of market economy. In order to get a sense of the economics of the *Confessio*, we must understand how the actors of the poem form various collectives based upon economics — both good and bad. Often, as many of the critics just discussed suggest, capital, materialism, and trade within a collective create unproductive hierarchies in which one actor exploits another for gain. The networks of market economy in no way create common profit; rather, they foment selfish individualism. And Gower, as I will demonstrate, treats the market with great reprehension.

Covetousness in the *Confessio Amantis* and the economic policy known as neoliberalism both arise from placing the needs of the individual over the needs of society, and both result in dissolving productive collectives of society.²⁴ Gower defines Covetousness as one of Avarice's "servantz manyon":

²³ See Jonathan Hsy, *Trading Tongues: Merchants, Multilingualism, and Medieval Literature* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013). Apropos of this article, Hsy posits, "By launching his first major endeavor [*Mirour*] in a specialized register of French—the *lingua franca* of law courts, guilds, and business affairs—Gower crafts a social critique with the potential to resonate with an urban professional audience" (94). See also Ladd, *Antimerchantism in Late Medieval English Literature*. Ladd argues at length for Gower's sophisticated satire of merchants in *Mirour* (see chapter 3). A particular comment he makes toward the end of the chapter is useful to consider here: "That he [Gower] did not continue in this vein [critiquing merchants] could mean that his message fell on deaf ears or simply that he lost interest in mercantile sins, moving through them stereotypically in the *Vox* and avoiding them entirely in the *Confessio*" (75). To Ladd's point here I would humbly suggest that Gower may not critique merchant per se in the *Confessio*, but he critiques the same type of avarice at the heart of this satire in *Mirour*. Rather than speak to merchants, however, it seems Gower has moved to speaking to his monarch (or any person in power, I suppose); rather than addressing trade in the *Confessio*, he addresses policy.

²⁴ Even though Gower's critique of Covetousness could indeed be considered a critique of any market economy, using it as an examination of Neoliberalism is especially relevant for readers in 2018. In other words, I am not arguing that Gower's appraisal could not just as easily

Which goth the large world aboute,
 To seche th'avantages oute,
 Wher that he mai the profit winne
 To Avarice, and bringth it inne. (5.1977-80)

Covetousness is an active agent of greed: it brings profit back into the service of Avarice.

Covetousness is the act of taking whatever we think will improve upon our current situation and / or status. Rather than focus on the relationships that exist between individual persons and entities that make up society, Covetousness instead uses those relationships to find whatever will benefit a person the most. It is highly selfish and thinks so little of the needs of others that it will exploit them for its own gain.²⁵

Neoliberalism is precisely this process made into economic policy. David Harvey writes: “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state

be used in a discussion of these other economic philosophies; rather, the applicability of this critique to Neoliberalism is particularly timely and necessary.

²⁵ See Farber, *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing*, 25. She observes, “Reading the *Politics* and the [*Nichomachean*] *Ethics* emphasized that money was a measure that enables trade, that society ‘holds together’ through exchange, and that for exchange to continue it must be fair.” Covetousness and any exploitative activities it would motivate clearly remove fairness from this process. Farber later cites Robert of Courson, an English cardinal who wrote a *Summa* on the ethics of trade: “Robert clearly worries that such an objective set of criteria can give way to manipulation by emotion (greed), which would cause mismeasurement” (47). Covetousness, then, muddies an individual’s ability to follow these moral precepts in making decisions about trade, and I will demonstrate how Gower’s tales show us just that.

is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.”²⁶ The keywords in this definition are individual and private property. Neoliberalism, by focusing on the individuals and their rights, neglects to realize that every individual actively creates his / her society by interacting with other persons and entities. Fairness is entirely removed from the equation. It is state-sanctioned Covetousness that values the profit of the few over the welfare of the many.

Covetousness in Book 5 exists as the antithesis of the common good, and Gower demonstrates that actions stemming from Covetousness ignore the relationships among individual actors on which the formation of society rests. Because Covetousness is at the heart of neoliberal policy and practice, these, too, are antithetical to the common good. Gower writes that the covetous person “stant out of al assisse / Of resonable mannes fare” (5.1986-87). Acting through Covetousness, then, by definition, is unreasonable — it represents a fundamental misunderstanding of how the individuals within a society must work together for the common good. George Monbiot has recently made a similar observation: “Neoliberalism, far from revealing biological laws, describes a system that creates its own reality.”²⁷ Neoliberalism, like Covetousness, fails to recognize actors, and actors in neoliberal society focus only on themselves at the expense of the collectives of which they are a part. Gower describes the effects of Covetousness as an actively harmful greed:

Bot where it falleth in a lond,
That Covoitise in myhti hond

²⁶ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

²⁷ Geroge Monbiot, *How Did We Get into This Mess?: Politics, Equality, Nature* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2016), 5.

Is set, is is ful hard to fiede;
 For thanne he takth non other hiede,
 Bot that he mai pourchace and gete.
 His conscience hath al forgete,
 And not what thing it mai amonte
 That he schal afterward acompte. (5.2007-14)

When a land's leader practices Covetousness, Gower suggests, the suffering population struggles to support itself. Such a leader thinks only of himself and what he wants without recognizing the cost that his actions have within the collective of which he is a part and, in turn, on society.²⁸ The costs are not immediately clear, as the last line suggests, but Gower later concludes, "His will schal stonde in stede of riht" (5.2022). Such governance places the Covetousness of the ruler at the cost of those he rules. This process is very similar to that of neoliberalism, but rather than one ruler, we instead have multiple entities that preside over the ever-ambiguous market. Monbiot writes: "Far from being a neutral forum, the market is dominated by powerful agents — corporations and oligarchs---who use their position to demand special treatment."²⁹ Noam Chomsky refers to this special treatment as the philosophy of "placing profit over people."³⁰ Both Covetousness and neoliberalism attempt to ignore the relationships that make up society at the expense of the respective societies of which they are a part. Such an ideology fails to see, let

²⁸ See footnote 17 above for Ladd's observation concerning Gower's shifting focus for the audience of such an argument.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁰ Noam Chomsky, *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories, 1999), 26.

alone trace, the associations (as Latour calls them) that make up the market, that make the goods or provide the services upon which the market rests, that purchase these goods and services, etc. In other words, it sees only systems rather than the parts that make them up, and it privileges those individuals who are the wealthiest.

Even though Gower writes in an era when the market economy of capitalism was in its infancy and neoliberalism defines what some have called “capitalist ruins,”³¹ the exempla that Gower provides in Book 5 are steeped within a materialism that has become commonplace under neoliberalism. Gower, particularly in Book 5, seems to be especially wary of capital, namely gold. Knapp quite brilliantly explains: “Under the pressure of gold, Avarice becomes itself a wall, an object that stabilizes division rather than being a motive force for acquisition. The significance of this metaphoric transformation lies in the fact that Avarice forces a perverse transformation in the relation between agents and objects, a transformation that begins to colour the sphere of human agency.”³² Avarice, including Covetousness, not only disregards the relationships that make up the collectives of society, but also inhibits them. Rather than define themselves in relation to each other, people begin to define themselves by their property, which is a bit of a vexed category. Bullón-Fernández explains, “An individual’s ‘property’ is what makes him / her distinguishable from others; indeed, ‘property’ can refer to what one owns, but also to one’s body (or physical properties) or to one’s character or personality traits.”³³

³¹ For example, see Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

³² Ethan Knapp, “The Place of Egypt in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” 28.

³³ María Bullón-Fernández, “Goods and the Good,” 184-85. Bullón-Fernández also includes an excellent discussion of the developing nature of property and identity in this period on pages 185-86.

Ostensibly, one's relationship with things also belongs to the various relationships that make up the collectives of society, and yet Gower suggests that a person's preoccupation with things in forming his or her identity is dangerous because it then determines how he or she forges connections with others. When the poet claims, "Riht so no lawe mai rescowe / Fro him that wol no riht allowe" (5.2019-20), he presents the shift toward materialism and Covetousness as an impediment to society. Monbiot makes the same point about neoliberalism: "The war of every man against every man . . . is the mythology of our time For the most social of creatures, who cannot prosper without love, there is now no such thing as society, only heroic individualism."³⁴ Excuse the pun, but we are seeing two sides of the same coin. Covetousness and neoliberalism fail to see the collectives of relationships that make up society and, in so doing, threaten its very fabric. In the readings that follow, I focus on Covetousness within Gower's poem. And yet Gower's warnings apply to neoliberalism and the inherent problems therein.³⁵

Covetousness and Tales of Broken Networks

The "Tale of Virgil's Mirror" elucidates the characteristics of Covetousness that one takes on that allow such a catastrophic breakdown of collectives within society. In other words, the people who engage in this sin become so selfish and self-centered that they neglect or, as in Crassus's case, are completely oblivious to the collective of relationships in which they are actors. The "Tale of Virgil's Mirror" explores not only how Covetousness breaks these collectives, but also how it causes its practitioners to forget the means of acquiring these items in

³⁴ Monbiot, *How Did We Get into This Mess?*, 10.

³⁵ Even if neoliberalism is merely the latest iteration of a fraudulent economic model of exchange, it is also likely the most exploitative system since the feudalism of Gower's time.

the first place. As Russell Peck observes, “Economic values replace moral values, and the self gets misdefined by goods.”³⁶ Crassus, then, understands his position as Roman Emperor as one who inherently receives riches, an identity which in turn further proves that he deserves to be emperor. Crassus’s Covetousness gives way to equally faulty logic in his understanding that Rome is an invincible nation that has and will continue to exist because of its nature. Rome exists because it is a network of collectives that together act as Rome. Crassus fails to comprehend that Rome exists because of associations among people and objects.

Virgil’s Mirror serves as an apt symbol to demonstrate Crassus’s misunderstanding that the interactions among people and objects have led to Rome’s greatness rather than its wealth. Gower describes how the mirror is a means by which the city defends itself:

That thei be thritty mile aboute
 Be daie and ek also be nyhte
 In that mirour beholde myhte
 Here enemys (5.2036-39)

Using the mirror, Roman soldiers are able to see an enemy force approaching in time to mount defenses. This process effectively demonstrates that the defense system that the mirror allows is a collective that relies on the mirror and the soldiers interacting in order to protect the city from its enemies. Crassus’s Covetousness does not allow him to observe this crucial collective, and so when enemies posing as three philosophers inform him of riches buried beneath the city, including beneath the tower that holds the mirror, he is all too eager to find them. Gower describes how one of the philosophers hoodwinks Crassus:

³⁶ Russell Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 100.

The maister seide, under the glas,
 And tolde him eke, as for the myn,
 And wolde ordeigne such engin
 That thei the werk schull undersette
 With tymber, that withoute lette
 Men mai the tresor saufli delve,
 So that the mirour be himselve
 Withoute empeirment schal stonde. (5.2154-61)

Crassus literally undermines the key actor of the city's defense network in his attempt to increase his wealth. Crassus overlooks a number of relationships here. First, he fails to question the philosopher's motives, and then he fails to understand that others must dig under the mirror in order to retrieve the treasure *for* him. Most significantly, though, he never seems to consider how mining underneath the mirror will indeed weaken it. Peck notes, "He is too blind to see that all the wealth of his kingdom is already his own so long as his kingdom possesses its own wealth."³⁷ Crassus is determined to possess all of his kingdom's wealth, but Rome's collectives create Rome's wealth. Thus Rome, not Crassus, rightfully possesses it. However, he believes that if the wealth is in Rome, it should be his: Crassus "was so coveitous, / That he was evere desirous / Of gold to gete the pilage" (5.2069-71). The tale implies that Crassus believes that he deserves all of Rome's wealth, which shows the reader Crassus's fundamental misinterpretation of the interrelationships of collectives within Rome that create the network of its society as a whole, including its wealth.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

Crassus does not recognize that Rome is a network of collectives, and so his ignorance leads to its destruction. The enemy philosophers burn the timber supports underneath Virgil's Mirror, causing it to collapse (5.2184). Without the mirror, the city's defenses fall, "And thus hath Rome lost his pride / And was defouled overal" (5.2196-97). Genius goes on to describe the aftermath of the collapse of the mirror when Hannibal sacked the city:

For this I finde of Hanybal,
 That he of Romeins in a dai,
 Whan he hem fond out of arai,
 So gret a multitude slowh,
 That of gold ringes, whiche he drowh
 Of gentil handes that ben dede,
 Buisshelles fulle thre, I rede,
 He felde (5.2198-205)

There are two specific points we can take away from Genius's lines here. First, Hannibal finds Rome in disarray. Without Virgil's Mirror, Rome has no defense system, which shows the first instance of a broken association upon which the Eternal City had stood. Second, the rings that Hannibal finds are of interest for both the number of them and also for what rings themselves symbolize. Rings are exchanged between people to signify social bonds. These rings signify the collective composed of the emperor and the nobility because the emperor likely gave these rings to the "gentil handes" — the nobility — as a sign of allegiance. Hannibal, upon sacking the city, takes them from dead hands, which shows us Crassus's destruction of this collective. R. F. Yeager remarks, "Gower however seems to have sensed that, beyond the blunt enormity of the victory, there was a poignancy in so swift a passing away of a national nobility, and he chose to

emphasize this. For him the senators and princes become a light synecdoche: ‘gentil handes,’ viewed even at the moment of despoilage. It is delicate work, as it has to be to catch the tone, which is itself a moral comment on the awful costs of war.”³⁸ Yeager’s point that Gower emphasizes the passing of the national nobility shows us additionally that Gower acknowledges the collectives that made up Rome. In so doing, Gower demonstrates the inherent dangers of ignorance of these collectives — that is, their destruction often results from the refusal of those in power to recognize their existence. In this light, Rome thrived because of the individual networks that functioned together to make up the city, including Virgil’s *Mirror* — not because of its emperor, Crassus, or his wealth. In his covetousness, Crassus has ruined this network.

Crassus, then, serves as a model for how a leader should *not* act: he allows Covetousness to warp his understanding of the collectives that make up the society around him. The rest of the section on Covetousness progresses through lower ranks of individuals — knights and then beggars — before Genius shifts our gaze toward the Covetousness of lovers. Gower gestures toward the infectious nature of Covetousness:

Whan Covoitise hath lost the stiere
 Of resonable governance,
 Ther falleth ofte gret vengeance.
 For ther mai be no worse thing
 Than Covoitise aboute a king.
 If it in his persone be,
 It doth the more adversité;

³⁸R. F. Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 118.

And if it in his conseil stonde,
 It bringth alday meschief to honde
 Of commun harm; and if it growe
 Withinne his court, it wol be knowe,
 For thanne schal the king be piled. (5.2226-37)

This progression suggests that Covetousness modeled by a prince then leads to like behavior by his subjects, and this makes sense considering to whom Gower purportedly writes. In the Henrician recension, he claims to write to Henry IV (Pr.81-92), and in the Ricardian recension, he claims to write “A book for King Richardes sake” (Pr.*24).³⁹ However, such progression also illustrates the collectives that make up society as it simultaneously demonstrates how Covetousness will break these collectives and the society they create. If Covetousness has built the society of which the king is head, it will inevitably lead to its plundering, as the last line suggests. Covetousness presents readers with a relationship between a person and wealth rather than a relationship among people.⁴⁰ That Gower mistrusts the development of the market has been discussed at length.⁴¹ However, Gower’s distrust of the market simultaneously relates to what he considers “a tendency for the operations of exchange to escape their proper

³⁹ Peck includes the Ricardian recension in the notes to his edition, and he uses the asterisk* before the line number to differentiate the lines of this recension from the Henrician in the main body.

⁴⁰ This shift eerily foreshadows the same move at the policy level to which neoliberalism will eventually lead. See discussion later (note 49) on the recent Tax Cut and Jobs Act of 2017.

⁴¹ Ethan Knapp, “John Gower: Balzac of the Fourteenth Century” in *John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception*, ed. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014), 215-27.

boundaries.”⁴² The “Tale of Virgil’s Mirror” serves as an exemplum to probe these boundaries and the results of the transgression thereof, and yet, as Knapp concludes, “[Gower] was also aware of the potentially corrosive impact of growing market forces on traditional social structures.”⁴³ The market is driven by Covetousness in Gower’s mind. The relationships he examines in the remaining tales about this particular sin show how Covetousness undermines the collectives of relationships that make up society in its pursuit of capital over community.

In the “Tale of the Two Coffers” Gower illustrates that Covetousness empowers people to believe that they deserve more than they actually do. Rather than working within the collectives of relationships of which they are a part, Covetousness leads the disgruntled officers in the tale to seek more than they deserve. Genius describes the court of a king, and observes that some “thoghten that thei have deserved / Avancement, and gon withoute” (5.2278-79). Covetousness, in this case, drives these unpromoted officers to “agein the king / Among hemself compleignen ofte” (5.2284-85). These officers believe that they must be promoted — they covet the promotion because they believe that it will bring them gain of some sort. When the king discovers that these officers are disgruntled, he devises a public test that will reveal the character of the officers. He fills two identical coffers — one “Of fin gold and of fin perrie” and the other “of straw and mull / With stones meind he felde also” (5.2307, 2310-11). The contents of each coffer offer a stark contrast to the reader — there is no doubt which coffer one would rather have. Furthermore, there is little doubt that the coffer full of treasure represents what the officers think they deserve while the coffer full of straw and stones represents what the officers actually deserve. However, the treasure with which the king fills one of the coffers comes “out of his

⁴² *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 227.

tresorie” (5.2308). The king’s treasure represents his understanding of the relationship between him and his subjects. By taking from his own reserves, the king essentially illustrates that he values his relationship with his officers more than he values the gold because it is entirely possible that the undeserving officers could choose the coffer filled with gold. He would rather potentially sacrifice his own treasure than his relationship with his officers.

The king in this tale, unlike Crassus, recognizes the importance of the collective of which he and his officers are a part, particularly concerning its role in the larger network of his kingdom. Genius points out, “He knew the names wel of tho, / The whiche agein him grucche so” (5.2319-20), which could be read in at least two ways. First, the king might know the names simply because of their complaints; however, second, it is also plausible that the king knows their names from their length of service to him. He recognizes the collective of which both officers are a part, and in such recognition, he places himself within the collective too. To impart this message to the two officers, he makes them choose together which coffer they will have:

“Now goth togedre of on assent
 And taketh youre avisement,
 For bot I you this dai avance,
 It stant upon youre oghne chance
 Al only in defalte of grace.
 So schal be schewed in this place
 Upon you alle wel afyn,
 That no defalte schal be myn.” (5.2344-50)

There are a few important observations to be made here. First, by placing the officers together in this choice, the king illustrates that no human exists in isolation. The officers must make their

choice together because they have chosen a relationship of Covetousness — they desire advancement even though there is no evidence they deserve it. Second, the couplet grouped with “avance” and “chance” demonstrates that advancement may indeed be a matter of chance, and yet the line emphasizes that it is the officers’ *own* chance, which leads one to conclude that chance has been somehow created by circumstance. Such circumstance, one assumes, would be placed firmly within the network of collectives that makes up the society of which these officers are a part. Third, the following couplet juxtaposes “grace” with “place.” Such juxtaposition implies fortune or perhaps divine providence in aiding the officers in their decision, yet rather than leaving their failure or success solely in the hands of a higher power, the king redirects our attention to the immediate collective of three: himself and both officers. The “defalte” will not be the king’s — it will not be his actions that bring them bad or good. He has created this test in good faith, and the success or failure of the officers will be determined by acting out their Covetousness. It is beautifully ironic to allow the two officers to doom themselves together when their initial displeasure results from not fostering good relationships in the first place.

Even though the scenario in this tale results from the Covetousness of the officers, the process by which the king insists that the officers conduct their choice demonstrates the importance of collectives within the tale. The officers get their reward from the work that they do together. They choose a knight to cast their choice. When he points a stick at a coffer, the king grants them the coffer he has chosen on their behalf:

The king, which wolde his honour save,
 Whan he hath herd the comun vois,
 Hath granted hem here oghne chois
 And tok hem therupon the keie. (5.2370-73)

The king's actions here indicate his understanding of how collectives work because he allows the actors — the officers — to make a choice that comes out of their working together. He gives them both the choice and then the key to open the coffer that they have collectively worked toward. As it turns out, the officers chose the coffer filled with straw and stones. This result directly demonstrates the effect of Covetousness in society. Not only has it created dissent within the king's officers, but it eventually leads to a coffer that seems to be filled with treasure but is actually filled with worthless matter. The end of the tale reads as somewhat comic. Yet the king's lines demonstrate precisely how Covetousness has warped the officers' ability to discern the collective of which they are a part:

“Lo,” seith the king, ‘nou mai ye se
 That ther is no defalte in me;
 Forthi miself I wole aquyte,
 And bereth ye youre oghne wyte
 Of that fortune hath you refused.” (5.2383-87)

The king absolves himself of any guilt in the fate of the officers. He did not make the choice for the officers; in fact, by allowing them the choice in the first place, he illustrates to them a parallel to their failure to advance at court. These officers through Covetousness have refused to take the opportunity to foster the relationships at court. They are quite literally self-defeating as a result of their Covetousness because they have disregarded how they fit within the greater collective of the court. Their “evele speche” has come back to them in kind (5.2389).

Like the “Tale of the Two Coffers,” the “Tale of the Beggars and the Pastries” involves characters blinded by Covetousness who are unable to ascertain what they need from what they want. The failings of the two beggars, however, lies less in their misrecognition of a collective

than it does in the fact that collectives have already been fundamentally altered by Covetousness. The “Tale of the Beggars and the Pastries” serves as an exemplum of the upside-down nature of a society governed by Covetousness — both literally and figuratively. The initial argument between the two beggars revolves around material wealth as opposed to spiritual wealth:

“Ha lord, wel mai the man be riche
Whom that a king list forto riche.”
That other saide nothing so,
Bot, “He is riche and wel bego,
To whom that god wole sende wele.” (5.2397-401)

Here, the two beggars present the general results of the previous two tales: a rich king (Crassus) and wealth as a result of Fortune and / or God (the officers). These opposed philosophies are both a part of a society in which the collectives had broken down. It would appear from the start, then, that both beggars have no option but failure within a society run by Covetousness. Furthermore, such a society would lead the beggars to act in a manner counter to their own good as we saw with the officers in the “Tale of the Two Coffers.”

However, unlike the king in the “Tale of the Two Coffers,” the lord in the “Tale of the Beggars and the Pastries” acts unnecessarily cruelly. His cruelty is emblematic of the effect of Covetousness on those who rely upon the help of others, which is a relationship whether or not we wish to acknowledge it. This lord takes food and uses it to mock the beggars’ need and their poverty. Genius describes the pastries:

A capoun in that on was bake,
And in that other forto winne
Of florins al that mai withinne

He let do pute a gret richesse;
 And evene aliche, as man mai gesse,
 Outward thei were both tuo. (5.2408-13)

Food, unlike the coffers in the previous tale, is a necessity to these beggars for survival. In one pastry, the lord places edible food while in the other, he places florins. In the covetous society, the florins are more desired than the capon, and yet it would seem the beggars are in greater need of food than money. Florins cannot be eaten.⁴⁴ One beggar gets the pastry with florins; the other gets the pastry with capon — the one that is edible. The latter, dissatisfied with his fate, remarks:

“Nou have I certainly conceived
 That he mai lihtly be deceived,
 That tristeth unto mannes helpe;
 Bot wel is him whom God wol helpe,
 For he stant on the siker side,
 Which elles scholde go beside:
 I se my fela wel recovere,
 And I mot duelle stille povere.” (5.2423-30)

The beggar here demonstrates a dissatisfaction that may exist only in a society governed by Covetousness, a society where money matters more than food. His lines indicate that he has come to the right moral conclusion: trust in God is greater than trust in humankind. Yet he also insinuates that trusting in God will lead to riches. Gower shows his readers here how

⁴⁴ This moment in the “Tale of the Beggars and the Two Pastries” is reminiscent of the “Tale of Midas” earlier in Book 5. See Bullón-Fernández, “Goods and the Good,” 189, where she argues that Midas’s desire for gold and the stability of things makes him unable to feed himself, nearly resulting in himself becoming a thing. The pastry with florins parallels the situation in the “Tale of Midas” that Bullón-Fernández elucidates as unsustainable.

Covetousness is a self-defeating endeavor that leads to distrust and misguided belief. Genius concludes the tale by explaining that Covetousness misleads people — desiring wealth does not guarantee that one will get it. It remains a matter of chance.

The “Tale of the Beggars and the Two Pastries” is especially disconcerting because of its example of a society in which Covetousness has come to be the norm and, as a result, is a ruined network of broken collectives. This tale makes quite clear the parallel between the effect of Covetousness on society and the neoliberalism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Gower emphasizes the negative effects of Covetousness on the collectives that build the network of society in the final tales of *Covetousness*: The “Covetousness of Lovers” and the “Tale of the King and His Steward’s Wife.” These tales return our attention to the frame of the poem — the lover’s confession—and yet they also include the most damning indictment of Covetousness in matters of both love and politics.⁴⁵ Genius warns Amans about coveting love:

Thogh thou coveite it everemore,
 Thou schalt nocht have o diel the more,
 Bot only that which thee is schape,
 The remenant is bot a jape. (5.2449-52)

Here, Gower focuses on the most intimate of relationships to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Covetousness. No matter how much people covet love, they will not get more of what they want. The second couplet juxtaposes “schape” and “jape,” and in so doing, contrasts directly the love

⁴⁵ See Matthew Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2014). Irvin argues that Gower keeps his readers “in tension” as they attempt to discern whether a clerical or amorous judgment is intended, but he concludes that “Gower stresses the analogous relationship between tales of love and tales of politics,” which “prompts readers to consider not only amorous and penitential possibilities and relationships, but political ones as well” (95).

relationship as it is shaped with the desire outside the relationship — japes, or idle amusement. If we read this comparison politically, the argument suggests that individuals receive their due within the collective in which they act, but disregarding such a collective is fruitless. Gower redirects the aims of Covetousness to gold even within love to emphasize the negative effects of both, noting that if love is driven by profit, “Here love is evere lesse and lesse” (5.2529).

Covetousness, then, is contrary to love. Genius summarizes for Amans: “For such a love mai noght laste” (5.2632), which, perhaps more than any other line in this section of Book 5, sums up the breaking of collectives and therefore the networks of society that result from Covetousness. In the “Tale of the King and His Steward’s Wife,” which Genius provides to illustrate this concept in direct relation to love, the steward serves as the ultimate disciple of Covetousness. First, he marries his wife only “For lucre and noght for loves sake,” and in a lovely moment of irony his wife objects to him selling her to the king because “this thing were noght honeste, / That he for gold hire scholde selle” (5.2696, 5.2742-43). In a marriage based on gold, the objection is about profit rather than fidelity. This relationship reaps what has been sown. When the king realizes his steward’s actions, he exiles him from the kingdom on pain of death (5.2805-13), again indicating that Covetousness leads people to actions detrimental to their relationships and, ultimately, to themselves.

Gower’s Covetous Future: Our Present

We see a clear progression in Gower’s tales on Covetousness that presents a narrative of societal decline, and this narrative of decline has come to fruition under the guise of neoliberalism in our own time. Beginning with Crassus and ending with beggars from an overtly political perspective before discussing the role of Covetousness in personal relationships of love, Gower shows his readers that Covetousness destroys the collectives that make up a functioning

society in the vain pursuit of capital. Like Crassus, our leaders have sold the welfare of society for the monetary benefit of the ruling class. Like the officers choosing between two coffers, our politicians seek wealth only to come up with straw and stones, instead. Like the beggars, we aspire for wealth and are left unsatisfied when we merely achieve stability. Like the lovers, we covet what we do not have rather than appreciating the love we do have. Studies demonstrate that Western cultures have succumbed to what one social psychologist has deemed “Social Darwinism and neo-liberal meritocracy.”⁴⁶ In such an era of heroic individualism, as discussed above with Monbiot, the health of the networks that make up society depends on the collectives of individuals. Individuals, however, seem to have larger problems to worry about in a period of economic decline — namely the corporations that determine their day-to-day lives.⁴⁷ Paul Verhaeghe remarks, “Throughout history, economies have always been embedded in religious, ethical, and social structures. This no longer applies in the case of neo-liberalism. On the contrary, religion, ethics, and society are subservient to ‘the market’. In that sense, neo-liberalism is no longer an economic theory, but a much broader ideology.”⁴⁸ Gower’s distrust of the market perhaps has come to fruition in that a market based on Covetousness now governs us all.

Gower, of course, was concerned about the world beyond his immediate context, and the *Confessio* critically reflects even on our own contemporary moment because of its ever-forward-

⁴⁶ Paul Verhaeghe, *What About Me?: The Struggle for Identity in a Market-Based Society* (London: Scribe, 2014), 120.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 170. Verhaeghe explains how neoliberalism has undone the networks of collectives that had previously existed to create society: “Neo-liberal morality has swept that balance of tension aside . . . and replaced it with a state of opposition between individual and organization— an opposition that very rapidly becomes hostile.”

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

looking gaze. In the Prologue, Gower makes it quite clear that he believes history teaches us lessons applicable to the future. His invention process creates material “Essampled of these olde wyse” (Pr.7), and the new matter he creates will, he hopes, “Beleve to the worldes eere / In tyme comende after this” (Pr.10-11). Every time, including our own, is part of this “tyme comende,” and so the narrative of societal decline under neoliberalism we have seen makes the *Confessio* and particularly its treatment of Covetousness vis-à-vis neoliberalism as timely as ever. We have seen the dismantling and dissolution of a number of collectives in recent years around the world.⁴⁹ The wealthiest actors are neglecting to consider the good of the majority of actors within the collective — they are blinded by their Covetousness at worst or simply are no longer able to discern good from evil in a neoliberal system that rewards such greed at best. In either case,

⁴⁹ A particularly glaring recent example is the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 in the United States of America. The Republican congress asserts this bill is “about creating jobs, growing paychecks, and bringing fairer taxes to American families across our country.” See “Understanding the Tax Cuts & Jobs Act,” *GOP.gov*, last modified November 2, 2017, <https://www.gop.gov/understanding-the-tax-cuts-jobs-act/>. However, Steven Greenhouse refutes this claim: “If the tax plan were truly a plan for the middle class and not a plan for the rich, it wouldn’t lavish nearly as many benefits on the wealthiest Americans: phasing out the estate tax, eliminating the alternative minimum tax, cutting the business pass-through tax rate. The GOP plan would also chop the corporate income tax rate from 35% to 20% — a move that heavily favors affluent people because they own a disproportionate share of corporate stocks.” See Steven Greenhouse, “Trump’s tax breaks for the rich won’t trickle down to help working Americans,” *The Guardian*, last modified November 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/nov/14/trumps-tax-breaks-rich-wont-trickle-down-working-americans>. In other words, those who already have the most stand to gain even more from this plan. It is a tax plan that eschews collective economic equality and benefit for the nation at large (a network to be sure) for the profit of the few. See Robert L. Borosage, “Republicans in Congress Think You’re an Idiot,” *The Nation*, last modified November 17, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/republicans-in-congress-think-youre-an-idiot/>. Borosage remarks, “The trees are ugly, but the forest is even worse. At a time when we desperately need to rebuild America, Republicans have ignored real, pressing unmet public needs to shovel more money to the rich and corporations.”

these choices are of the same ilk as those made by Gower's actors in the tales discussed above and will lead to similar disaster in all likelihood.⁵⁰ Gower offers the solution of a benevolent monarch in the *Confessio*, but that is both at once historically unrealistic and politically impossible for most of the world in 2018.⁵¹ The UK continues to struggle with the ramifications of Brexit.⁵² The highly divisive political landscape of the US only worsens.⁵³ And what is coming under these late stages of neoliberalism around the world might be even more dire, as

⁵⁰ See Conor Lynch, "GOP tax bill: 'Heightening the contradictions' of capitalism?," *Salon.com*, last modified December 23, 2017, <https://www.salon.com/2017/12/23/gop-tax-bill-heightening-the-contradictions-of-capitalism/>. Lynch reports, "According to Republican rhetoric, these right-wing policies will unleash the true potential of capitalism and lead to enormous growth and prosperity for all. In reality (and according to most mainstream economists) they will exacerbate inequality, increase the national debt, destabilize the financial system and empower corporate and Wall Street elites, just as the same neoliberal policies did leading up to the 2008 financial crisis."

⁵¹ I should note that there is growing concern that American democracy has itself been brought to its knees under the current administration. For example, see Thomas B. Edsall, "The Self-Destruction of American Democracy," *The New York Times*, last modified November 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/opinion/trump-putin-destruction-democracy.html>. Edsall opines, "The test facing our democracy now is whether the rules of engagement that make the system work can be restored. Trump trampled on those rules and won the presidency. That precedent may, in and of itself, have inflicted irreparable damage." While not a direct result of neoliberalism, Trump's ascent to power has clearly been influenced by such policy and its exacerbation of tensions between those with wealth and those without.

⁵² See, for example, Phillip Inman, "Britain's tired old economy isn't strong enough for Brexit," *The Guardian*, last modified January 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/jan/20/brexit-britain-tired-old-economy-not-strong-enough>.

⁵³ See most recently, Jennifer Rubin, "Most Americans agree: President Trump is divisive," *The Washington Post*, last modified January 17, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2018/01/17/most-americans-agree-president-trump-is-divisive/?utm_term=.addb03ddf072.

David Harvey has recently commented.⁵⁴ Observing the ongoing destructive effects of neoliberalism in the twenty-first century in light of this future-bent poem of the late fourteenth century, I cannot help but think that at least Gower *had* an answer. What's ours?

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⁵⁴ See Daniel Denvir, "Why Marx's *Capital* Still Matters: An Interview with David Harvey," *Jacobin Magazine*, last modified July 12, 2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/07/karl-marx-capital-david-harvey>. Harvey explains, "[W]e're beginning to see the possible emergence of an ethno-nationalist protectionism-autarky, which is a different model. That doesn't sit very well with neoliberal ideals. We could be headed into something which is much less pleasant than neoliberalism, the division of the world into warring and protectionist factions who are fighting each other over trade and everything else."

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