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The Community of the Realm: Gower's Account of the Commons in Book V of the *Vox Clamantis*

Late medieval commentators, as W. M. Ormrod remarks in his study of English politics of the late Middle Ages, “still inevitably liked to think in terms of a tripartite society of lords (the secular rulers), clergy (the guardians of the spiritual) and labourers (the passive majority), but the changes in both the rural and the urban economies during the century following the Black Death created many new groupings—merchants, gentlemen-lawyers, yeomen farmers and so on—that could not easily be accommodated in this simplistic scheme.”¹ David Rollison notes that by the late Middle Ages the lay component of England’s emerging socio-political structure “was constituted by a monarch’s court and the households of nobles, gentry, great merchants, yeomen and urban burgesses, and a smallholding and landless class of artisans, labourers, and servants.”² When, therefore, the headnote at the beginning of Book III of the *Vox Clamantis* informs the reader that “here he discusses how the status and order of the world consists in three degrees, which are as he says the Clerics, Knights, and Farmers,”³ we should hardly be surprised that the analysis that follows does not conform to the antiquated framework that has been announced.

1. W. M. Ormrod, *Political Life in Medieval England, 1300–1450* (London: Macmillan, 1995; New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), 131.

2. David Rollison, *A Commonwealth of the People: Popular Politics and England’s Long Social Revolution, 1066–1649* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 456.

3. *Hic tractat qualiter status et ordo mundi in tribus consistit gradibus, sunt enim vt dicit, Clerus, Milicies, et Agricultores*. Latin text in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1899–1902), 4: 105. This and all subsequent translations from Gower are my own, taken from my translation of Book V of the *Vox Clamantis*, available in the Gower Project Translations at <https://gowertranslation.pbworks.com/w/page/53715438/Vox%20Clamantis%20Translations>.

Nevertheless, in a subsequent headnote at the beginning of Book VI, the poet expresses his satisfaction that he is by this point in the text on the verge of fulfilling the intent announced at the beginning of Book III.⁴ An extensive discussion of the clergy, the first estate, has been delivered as promised, comprising Books III (secular clerics) and IV (the cloistered), and an analysis of the titled nobility and peerage, the second estate, will be a major component of a thorough account of the law in Book VI. But Book V, whose subject matter according to Gower's announced program should be the *agricultores*, actually critiques secular society below royalty and peerage, the third estate, which was sometimes called the community of the realm. This community, i.e. the commons, characterizes both those eligible for selection to serve in the lower house of parliament and all those who comprise the socio-economic category represented there.⁵ While Gower professes the time-honored trinity of estates satire—the division of the human world into those who pray, fight, and labor—in his subsequent discussion he re-configures that world into clergy, commons, and governing class to account for the sociological realities of late fourteenth-century English society. This essay clarifies Gower's authorial strategies and contemporary references in Book V to show how his discussion of those who labor

4. The prose headnote to Book VI announces the poet's intention to move on to a discussion of the law and government, "since the fault existing in all the degrees of the temporal world has been discussed" [*exquo de errore in singulis temporalium gradibus existente tractatum est*]. Book VI concerns itself with the ruling class that administers, structures, and originates the law on behalf of the nation's various communities and ranges from the legal functionaries at its bottom to the king who surmounts it.

5. For a discussion of the origins of parliament, the emergence of the commons as a component, and the use of the phrase *communitas regni* to designate those lay persons who were not members of the peerage, see G. O. Sayles, *The Functions of the Medieval Parliament of England* (London and Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1988), 3–58, esp. 36.

actually comprises an accurate (though harsh) account of the commons as it had emerged by his day.

An outline of Book V reveals the components of the commons:

- I. ***Milites***: The knightly class / gentry (chapters 1–8, ll. 1–556).
- II. ***Status agrestis***: The peasantry (chapters 9–10, ll. 557–654).
 - A. ***Cultores***: Plowmen.
 - B. ***Ingenui***: Freeborn peasants (franklins / yeomen).
 - C. ***Laborarii***: Laborers.
- III. ***Urbanes***: The urban populace (chapters 11–16, ll. 655–948).
 - A. ***Mercatores***: Merchants, designated *maiores*.
 - B. ***Artifices***: Artisans / craftsmen, designated *minores*.
 - C. ***Plebs***: The urban underclass.

Readers are invited to follow my [translation](#) of Book V as we discuss these categories.

Let us begin with the first category, the *milites*, the identification of which requires some deliberation. At the end of their critique, Gower concludes his analysis with the remark that, paradoxically, the number of those serving as *milites* has increased while their deeds on the contrary have decreased, with the result that their honor, dependent upon the charge given them by the ancient order, the *ordo vetus*, has become empty.⁶ Now modern historians have shown conclusively that the numbers of those identified as dubbed knights were by no means increasing in the late fourteenth century. They had in fact been declining steadily due to the extinction of

6. *Milicie numerus crescit, decrescit et actus; / Sic honor est vacuus, dum vacuatur onus* (V, 555–6).

knightly families caused by their failure to produce male heirs.⁷ Moreover, it is, as Chris Given-Wilson concludes, “the steady decline in the number of knights (which continued throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries) [that] led to a corresponding rise in the status of the esquires.”⁸ The situation was resolved over time by the gradual transformation of the lesser nobility into what comes to be called the gentry, which was accomplished by social mobility from both above and below. Cadet lines of noble families drifted downwards and newly-wealthy members of the legal and merchant classes rose until by the end of the fourteenth century a class comprised of knights, squires, and gentlemen (the leading figures / landholders of county and parish), had replaced the simpler knightly estate of an earlier time. The gentry is, of course, the social category that Gower himself belonged to and which he refers to now as the *militia* in order to claim for it the heritage of privilege and obligation associated with chivalrous knighthood.⁹

7. See K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England: The Ford Lectures for 1953 and Related Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), esp. 142–67. Although McFarlane’s conclusions have been adjusted by later analysts who have taken issue with some of his terminology and definitions, his basic generalizations still hold up. Chris Given-Wilson remarks of the peerage, for instance, after a review of scholarship since McFarlane, that “the great majority of extinctions occurred simply for lack of male heirs.” See *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages: The Fourteenth–Century Political Community* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987; rpt. 1996), 55–68. The quote is on 64. While the data for the upper nobility is far more extensive than that for the gentry, the lack of male heirs afflicts both groups and the extinction rates seem to be about the same.

8. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages*, 71.

9. For what is known about Gower’s status, see John Hines, Nathalie Cohen and Simon Roffey, “*Johannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta: Records and Memorials of his Life and Death*,” in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Brewer, 2004), 23–42; Sebastian Sobocki, “A Southwark Tale: Gower, the 1381 Poll Tax, and Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*,” *Speculum* 92, no.3 (July 2017), 630–61, esp. 647–8; and Martha Carlin, “Gower’s Life,” in Stephen H. Rigby, ed. with Siân Echard, *Historians on John Gower* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 22–120.

Only if we recognize that Gower's *milites* are the gentry does his remark about increasing numbers make sense.

Let us clarify as well that the term does not designate the titled nobility and others who comprise the peerage, those who attend the upper parliamentary house, in time to be designated the House of Lords.¹⁰ Nor does it designate the nobility in general, a category which, through a shared commitment to the ideals of knighthood, would include all those from the lords at its upper extreme to the gentlemen at its bottom. To characterize the *maiores barones*, some of them members of the king's own family, as *milites* would be a gaffe of the first order. To make clear the distinction between lords and knights, those members of the upper gentry who were occasionally admitted to the peerage but couldn't yet be characterized as *barones* were then designated knights banneret to distinguish them from bachelors, the lesser belted knights who ranked politically and socially with the commons. The title of knight banneret then slowly disappears as the title of baron becomes applied more generally in the sense of *barones minores* to designate peers who weren't titled nobility.

The emergence of the gentry in the thirteenth century as experienced participators in government is studied by Jean Scammel, who locates the origins of the class in the reign of

10. The lords and peers are a small group at the time Gower writes. There were but ten titled lords when Richard ascended the throne in 1377, upon which occasion he created five more. He will add several in the course of the 1380s, but the number of titled nobility rarely exceeds twenty at any time in the late Middle Ages. The peerage of the same time consisted of "about sixty to seventy families distinguished from the rest of the landholding class by their more or less hereditary right to receive individual summonses to parliament." See the discussion in Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages*, 29–55, esp. 47. The peers are discussed on 55–68. The quote is on 55. The distinction between lord and peer will disappear during the course of the fifteenth century and all those who are summoned are then assumed to be lords. As McFarlane puts it, "Lords were peers and if they possessed no higher title they were barons." *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, 124. See also 268–78 for an essential discussion of the titled nobility.

Henry II, its emergence due to the effect of the petty assizes and an emphasis on possession rather than ownership of land (the concept of the *statuliber* or freeholder).¹¹ For Robert C. Palmer, the transition from the knightly class to the gentry was a consequence of the requirements of the law in post-plague England.¹² Enforcement of the Ordinance (1349) and Statute (1351) of Labourers and subsequent legislation required an extension of central judicial authority throughout the country, occasioning thereby in the shires the proliferation of commissions of the peace. Overseen and conducted by the leading landowners of every region, these commissions accordingly required the establishment of a more extensive class capable of administering the law in the localities.¹³ Christine Carpenter sees the 1413 Statute of Additions as the final act in the emergence of the gentry.¹⁴ According to Ormrod, a linguistic consequence of the gentry's emergence as the key component in the commissions of the peace is the crown's recognition that law French will not work in the localities and the issuance of the statute of 1362 to establish English, with reservations and exceptions, as the appropriate language of pleading.¹⁵

The new class that is thus established is large and diverse enough that it becomes further divided into groupings according to wealth. "By the end of the fourteenth century," says Given-

11. Jean Scammell, "The Formation of the English Social Structure: Freedom, Knights, and Gentry, 1066–1300," *Speculum* 68, no. 3 (July 1993): 591–618.

12. Robert C. Palmer, *English Law in the Age of the Black Death, 1348–1381* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 14–27.

13. Palmer, *English Law in the Age of the Black Death*, 22.

14. Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity, A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401–1499* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 44–46.

15. W. M. Ormrod, "The Use of English: Language, Law, and Political Culture in Fourteenth-Century England," *Speculum* 78, no. 3 (July 2003): 750–87.

Wilson, “English landholders below the peerage now styled themselves as knights, esquires, or gentlemen, in that order.”¹⁶ Concluding that the political role of the gentry is “one of the key themes of fourteenth-century English history,” Given-Wilson argues that their wealth and control of local institutions gave them a power “that is reflected . . . in the striking development in the influence wielded by the knights of the shire in parliament.”¹⁷ There is a clear consensus among modern historians that by 1381 the gentry had absorbed and supplanted the knightly class. As Palmer puts it, “‘the gentry,’ substantial local people whose position is strongly related to the exercise of state authority, replaces the ‘knightly classes’ as the appropriate, if amorphous, designation of the lower ranks of the upper orders.”¹⁸

So why does Gower talk about those *in statu militie*? Beyond the lack of a readily acceptable equivalent term (that has yet to come into widespread use), Gower generally tends to conceive the present in terms of the past. I would suggest that he wishes to connect the emergent new social reality to the philosophical structures of the old and legitimate its standing by specifying the source of its privileges and obligations. As a country gentleman probably living in London on and off at the time of writing, one who will be an armiger in the service of John of Gaunt by the time of his death, Gower well knew where he stood in his world and would no doubt have been eager to certify his own place in the society that was emerging from the

16. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages*, 70.

17. Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Late Middle Ages*, 83.

18. Palmer, *English Law in the Age of the Black Death*, 24.

tumultuous events of his day.¹⁹ The coat of arms on his tomb and the effigy that surmounts it both indicate that the poet considered himself among the *milites*. Moreover, he possessed an annual income that could have easily caused him to be distrained to knighthood. By the end of his life, knighthood would have been his for the asking, but, like many others, he was likely dissuaded from taking that step because of the substantial expenses and inconveniences that were perceived to come along with it. Nevertheless, in writing about his own class, now more properly described as the gentry, Gower claims for it, perhaps in the light of the new obligations it has incurred with respect to an emerging justice system, the heritage of chivalric knighthood.

The prose headnote to Book V establishes the poet's intent, now that he has concluded with the clerics who govern spiritual affairs, to discuss "those in knightly status who are obligated to protect and uphold temporal matters."²⁰ The opening distich specifies that he intends to show how the *ordo vetus* pertains to the *milites*. The *militia*, distinguished from the outset with high honor, was established specifically for three reasons: to defend the *iura* of the church, to foster the *commune bonum*, and to protect the orphan and widow (ll. 3–8). The *lex* obligates the *miles in armis* to come to its aid, as indeed in the past he did, whereby he enjoys his status in the present (ll. 9–12). However, the *miles* fought not for fame but for justice, and, although the knight who supports the ancient *ordo* deserves praise, he who fights expressly for such a reward doesn't deserve it because, presumably, his motivation is improper (ll. 13–18).

19. The first-person commentary at ll. 517–18 indicates that the author considers himself among the *milites*: "It's nothing to me to vanquish all the world's hosts, / If I, unarmed, lose to a single vice."

20. *De hiis qui in statu milicie temporalia defendere et supportare tenentur.*

Later, in the prose headnote to chapter 4, Gower collectively terms the knight's three obligations the *milicia probitatis* (the knightly service of righteousness). Obligated by the law, the knight fulfills duties both institutional and individual. In the first instance he must defend the church and foster the community served by the polity, and in the second stand up for the rights of deserving individuals, here given biblically as, but certainly not limited to, the orphan and widow.²¹ By performing these functions in the service of the ancient *ordo*, by activating his status on behalf of church, community, and deserving individuals, motivated *pro iusticia*, the *miles* in the past conquered his enemies and garnered *laudes*. If, however, his motivation should now be *pro laude inani*, his praise will be undeserved. This matter will be taken up again later (ll. 251–72), at which point it becomes clear that Gower is criticizing those whose actions are designed not to serve the cause of righteousness but expressly to build an affinity.

Since the *lex* requires the *miles* to come quickly to its *bellum* in the service of Christendom, commonweal,²² and deserving individuals, it is accordingly inappropriate for him to come to Venus's wars (in which he stands in any case no chance of victory) in a personal pursuit of sexual gratification that distracts him from his legal duties. He who desires honor should earn it by performing the deeds that his task urges upon him (*opus suadet sibi* [l. 24]). The second stanza (ll. 19–36) will discuss the folly of the knight who is motivated instead to

21. The *bonum commune* is something like a medieval version of the *res publica*, a starting point for a progression through common weal to commonwealth without yet any suggestion of an ultimate destination in republic. It stands for a community distinct from the clerical or aristocratic, together with which it comprises the national entity. For a discussion of the terminology as it develops, see Rollison, *A Commonwealth of the People*, 13–21.

22. Rollison shows that the word has appeared already in the fourteenth century to signify “the greater community that the state was supposed to serve.” *A Commonwealth of the People*, 208.

serve Venus, and it will establish freedom as the essential prerequisite for knightly service. Such freedom excludes the passionate service of women, for a man “who is first free and then willingly subordinates himself is more foolish than a fool” (ll. 31–2).²³ Later we learn that when a *miles* pursues romantic love, his reason “enters service, and scarce a handmaid’s place maintains” (l. 240).²⁴ Freedom is the essential prerequisite for membership in the *status militie*.²⁵

Having established that the pursuit of honor in the service of Venus is contrary to logic and violates the ancient *ordo*, Gower goes on to specify his charges against the *milites* of his day: they waste their energies in the pursuit of beautiful young women or wealthy dowagers, and they throw away their resources chasing after earthly reputation. In the first instance, the knightly *amans* fails to stabilize the family by contracting the right marriage with the right woman—who in the course of the commentary will receive (ll. 293–332) her due. In the second, he wastes his wealth on earthly vanities. Gower’s lengthy diatribe against romantic love is accordingly not simply a rebuke to those engaged in inappropriate behavior but a major component of the poet’s analysis of the gentry. By detailed study of surviving records, modern historians have established beyond doubt that the primary problem faced by both noble and gentry families in England was extinction caused not by plague and war but by failure to produce male heirs to carry on family lines and manage the estates. These estates had been accumulated through marriages arranged for the purpose of allying families and ensuring their continued prominence in their localities and, as

23. *Reputandus homo, qui prius est liber et sponte se subactum facit, sic est stulcior stulto.*

24 *Hominis ratio . . . / Servat, et ancile vix tenet ipsa locum.*

25. See the discussion in Matthew W. Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 168–78.

circumstances dictated, on the national scene. The counterpoint to the poet's lengthy diatribe is the praise of the good woman, who, imitating ideals represented by the mother of Christ, should manage properly the domestic needs of the knightly household.

Gower's disparagement of romantic love follows familiar lines. Love is first of all a conventional file of oxymorons (ll. 37–78), then a capitulation of reason to desire and sensuality (ll. 79–224), and finally the loss of freedom (ll. 225–250). Then Gower adds (ll. 251–292) to the pursuit of romantic love the other failing of the *milites* that was mentioned at the outset of Book V: the desire for the world's empty praise (ll. 13–18). Giving expensive gifts in the hope that reputation can be thus purchased is not the proper way to fame, which is acquired by deeds executed in accordance with the requirements of the ancient *ordo* that were specified at the outset of Book V. An unwise *miles* seeks the harvest of human praise by sowing gold, garments, jewels, and horses among his followers, but he will find that for all his efforts the world's treacherous fame will fail him, just as the *miles* who seeks fulfillment in romantic love will be even more catastrophically disappointed when his efforts prove likewise fruitless. Only God's praise and love are the true sources of happiness, not the fawning adulation of an affinity.²⁶

Chapter 6 (ll. 293–467) commends the good woman who should be the object of the *miles'* romantic attentions and condemns the evil women, presented as seductresses and

26. Affinities, basically outgrowths of households, are notoriously employed by ambitious aristocrats for the purposes of extending their sway over their localities by establishing bodies of retainers who wear their livery, both identifying garments and such devices as pins and collars, and appear when required in support of their lords. Gower himself became a member of John of Gaunt's affinity and proudly wore his collar. Royal affinities are studied by Chris Given-Wilson in *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England 1360–1413* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986). The legal problems caused by affinities are the subject of Jonathan Rose's *Maintenance in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Prominent gentrymen, some as wealthy as the peerage, were likewise eager to extend their influence by amassing what in an earlier day were called *clientes*.

dowagers, that he too often pursues for sex and wealth. The prose headnote asserts that the “proven virtue” of a good woman “transcends all the world’s delights.” The model for such a woman is provided by the Virgin Mary, whose praise is the subject of the chapter’s opening lines. From her flesh God became flesh himself (l. 294) and by her example there are many good women deserving of praise (ll. 295–6). The good woman is the source of all good and her honest (i.e. proper) love is the true strength of love (ll. 297–98). She cannot be had for silver or gold and both tongue and pen are incapable of describing her worth (ll. 299–302). Her husband dwells revered in a proper household that contains every good, including clothing, complete with linings, sewn by her own hand (ll. 303–6). Modesty, which earns her praise and fends off wicked gossip, restrains her senses (ll. 307–10).²⁷

Such a relationship, however idealized, was typically the result of an arranged marriage, the norm in late medieval England, its purpose to satisfy the practical concerns of family and inheritance. According to Jennifer Ward, “marriage was seen by noble families as a way of augmenting and consolidating their land and rising in political power and social influence. It was essential to try to ensure that there would be heirs to whom the inheritance would pass and who would safeguard it for future generations.”²⁸ When individuals opposed the practical approach of parents and family, romantic love often resulted in clandestine marriages and disruptive

27. The life of the proper married noblewoman is described in 1405 by Christine de Pisan in *Le trésor de la cité des dames* (*The Treasure of the City of Ladies*). Although the work’s concern is women of the uppermost social level, its descriptions of the proper life are applicable, with the necessary adjustments in scale, to gentrywomen as well. A wife’s principal concerns should be loving God, obeying her husband and maintaining his reputation, running the household, and rearing the children. See the translation by Sarah Lawson (London: Penguin, 2003).

28. Jennifer C. Ward, *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1992), 15.

abductions with all their consequent legal issues. Since the Catholic Church held that consent was necessary to a valid wedding, it was possible for lovers to reject arranged marriages and pursue their desires. Joan of Kent's clandestine first marriage to Thomas Holland resulted in years of legal turmoil occasioned by an arranged marriage she was constrained to enter into while Holland was on crusade in Prussia. Her subsequent marriage, after Holland's death, to the Black Prince was likewise an affair of the heart, although it is hard to imagine her family would have had any issues with it. Political connections through marriage were a major goal of noble families and were reflected in the similar pursuit of local connections by the gentry.²⁹

The second stanza of chapter six (ll. 311–32) assures us that the goodness of good women is untouched by the misbehavior of evil women, young and old, who then become the subject of the remainder of the chapter (ll. 333–467). The sensual temptress is guided by the example of Eve (l. 333 and ll. 449–50), the Virgin's Old Testament counterpart who lures men from rational conduct by her deceits and snares. The young woman's manipulation of clothing, jewelry, affected language, and cosmetics is presented and condemned for two paragraphs (ll. 333–84), and the old woman's cosmetic deceits become the subject of another (ll. 385–428). Since old age has plundered her beauty, the old woman uses craft to hide her wrinkles and enhance her complexion. She artfully employs lotions and blushes, dyes her grey hairs or wears a blonde wig, even lets blood to achieve a fashionably pale hue. However, Gower's negative portrait of old women pursuing sensual gratification is not simply an abstract rejection of what was widely considered inappropriate behavior, but a component of his critique of the gentry.

29. See the discussion of marriage in Ward, *English Noblewomen*, 12–33. Ward concludes that if love existed in a late medieval marriage, it was likely the result of affection that developed over time.

Gower's old women are not the loathly ladies of romance tradition, but the "dreadful dowagers" of medieval history, widows who could have a disruptive effect on the bequest of estates to heirs by the nature of their inheritances and the romantic pursuit of whom could interfere with dynastic marriage-making.³⁰ Wives who survived their husbands kept at the least their dowers—legally established initially as a third of a man's holdings on the wedding day but then extended to a third of the entire estate at the time of death—as well as their marriage gifts and, if they had joint title with their husbands, even entire estates. Such properties as fell to widows were beyond the control of heirs until returned to the estate by death. If, however, a widow remarried, her new husband took control of her properties, which could then find their way permanently outside a family's possession, although they were supposedly to be returned, even if generally much diminished, to minor children upon the occasion of their majorities. Accordingly, when young heiresses proved to be in short supply, young men sought fortune through marriage to rich widows, many of whom were willing to give up the independence they had enjoyed as *femmes sole* since their husbands' deaths and again accept legal disparagement for a relationship with a young man that often could not result in children.³¹

30. For a full discussion, see Rowena E. Archer, "Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers," in *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*, ed. Tony Pollard (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 15–35.

31. In their defense, Ward notes that "dowagers generally acted constructively in the support of their children, the running of their estates and the building up of their affinity. They were important figures in their own locality and in noble society." *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages*, 39. See 34–49 for a discussion of the late medieval widow and her position that provides a valuable counterpoint to Gower's presentation. Colin Platt concludes that "the crime of the rich old ladies of late-medieval England was not that they lived badly but too long." See his discussion in *King Death: The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 49–62. The quote is on 62.

After two paragraphs (ll. 429–67) decrying the infidelity and duplicity of women, Gower concludes chapter six, leaves the topic of romantic love, and returns to the subject matter of chapter one, that is, the duties and responsibilities of the *milites*, now with an emphasis on the implications for society when they do (chapter 7) or do not (chapter 8) fulfill their roles. According to their respective headnotes, chapter seven discusses “how a well-ordered knighthood guarantees the advantage of common security to all the other classes,” and chapter eight “how knighthood’s wickedness harms and offends all the other degrees of society.” These chapters conclude the analysis of the gentry and, along with chapter one, bookend Gower’s discussion of romantic love as it impacts the class negatively.

With that, having “spoken about those in the knightly estate who “ought to serve the *rem publicam*,” Gower leaves off his discussion of the gentry and turns to his second category, “those who are obligated to endure the tasks of agriculture, necessary to the food and drink required for the sustenance of human kind,” as the headnote puts it. Chapter 9 (ll. 557–628) then deals with the plowmen and chapter 10 (ll. 629–54) the laborers who, along with the freeborn peasants (*ingenui*), comprise the *status agrestis*. R. H. Hilton defines these two common social types, often presented together in the literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as “the husbandman who possesses a plough-team as well as a more or less substantial holding of land” and, hierarchically lesser, “the hynd, the swain, a landless wage-labourer or a cottar.”³² Gower criticizes both harshly for their perceived failures, that is, their unwillingness to accept their inferior status with hearty cheer and their subsequent efforts to avoid its imposed requirements, which impinge upon the *libertas* of the freeborn.

32. R. H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages: The Ford Lectures for 1973 and Related Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 21.

The class of agrarian workers here labeled the *status agrestis* (l. 559) is composed of those who cultivate grain and the vine (l. 560). They produce food “for us” by the sweat of their labor, as God commanded (ll. 561–62). Theirs is the *regula* of our first father, Adam, which he received from God himself, who said to him after his fall from paradise (ll. 567–68): “O sinner, the labor and the sweat of the world are yours, in which you will earn your bread.” Accordingly, if God’s plowman, the *cultor dei*, observes that *regula* and performs his task of cultivation (ll. 569–70),³³ then the fertile fields will bring forth their crops and the vineyards abundant grapes (ll. 571–72). However, the stanza concludes, nowadays the *colonus* avoids his obligations and devotes himself to vices (ll. 573–74).

Up to this point husbandmen have been characterized as cultivators / tillers (*cultores*) and planters / sowers (*coloni*). Now, however, Gower comes specifically to their faults as plowmen, as servants of the furrows (*famuli sulcorum* [l. 576]). As such they are late, scarce, and greedy (*tardi, rari, and avari* [l. 577]), faults which are then discussed in reverse order. They are greedy because nowadays each wants a greater wage than two formerly received and it takes three to do the work of one (ll. 578–82); they are scarce because they flee like hunted foxes from lair to lair when sought to perform obligated services (ll. 583–86); and they are late because they want to live leisurely lives like magnates although service is the only way they can feed themselves (ll. 587–88). Both God and Nature have decreed that they should serve although neither can control

33. *Opus* has a technical value as Gower employs it here. According to M. M. Postan, by the end of the twelfth century those who held villein tenure “were subject to alternative sets of dues, either rent or work (*ad opus* or *ad censum*).” See M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin, 1972), 167. *Ad opus* designates the status of villeins obligated to labor services (*operarii*) and *ad censum* that of those who paid a fee in lieu of services (*censuarii*). Thirteenth-century landlords were less than eager to accept rent in lieu of service, but commutation of labor obligations became more and more common in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

them (ll. 589–90). Every landholder complains about them but has to put up with their misbehavior because they are necessary evils (ll. 591–92). *Coloni* in the good old days knew and accepted their servility (ll. 593–94), which God imposed upon the rural commoners (*rusticitas*) to curb their proud hearts (ll. 595–96). When the serfs (*servi*) were ruled by the law, freedom remained safe (*libertas mansit salua*) for the freeborn (*ingenuii* [ll. 597–98]).

The manner in which the unruly serfs corrupt the entire peasantry is the subject of the next paragraph (ll. 599–612). The past teaches the wickedness of the villein (ll. 599–600), who grieves honest men as nettles the grain (ll. 601–2). Like nettles, which are not only a painful nuisance but medicine for gout, villeins prick the soothed but also, presumably when they perform their necessary duties, soothe the pricked (l. 603). The *ordo vetus* teaches the *regula* that the *lex* must cut down the villeins before the *rustica proles* infects the grain, that is, the *ingenui* (ll. 604–8). Its conduct reveals the baseness of this *rusticitas vilis* and its disrespect for peasant decency (ll. 609–10). Accordingly, the savage rustic (*rusticus ferus*) must be burdened with the tasks of his obligated service, lest, without a proper load (*iusto sine pondere*) he heel over like a badly laden ship.

The last stanza of the critique (ll. 613–28) certifies the truth of this harsh figure by addressing the nature of the villein, which responds not to love but only to discipline. God and work are the sources of a man's wages (ll. 613–14) and, accordingly, the villein should toil and postpone leisure (ll. 615–16). As a barren field when planted returns no autumnal yield, so the peasant, when seeded with love, ruins his lord (ll. 617–20). Serfs do not perform their rightful services willingly, nor have any regard for the law of goodness (*pro lege bonitatis* [ll. 621–22]). Even when his body is compelled to serve, the villein's mind inclines toward evil (ll. 623–24).

Since miracles are contrary to nature, villeins should not be presumed capable of governing themselves (ll. 625–28).

Gower's critique turns in chapter ten to the laborers, another *gens communis* who, associated with plowmen, belong to the rural labor force whose refusal to accept its place so concerns him. He begins by noting (l. 630) that they lack a place in the *ordo*, later remarking (ll. 649–50) that there is no *regula* for such sorts (*regula nulla talibus est*). Plowmen by contrast are accounted for in the *ordo*, having inherited the *regula* of Adam (ll. 563–64). Having clarified their total lack of status, Gower then attacks laborers for their violations of the Ordinance (1349) and Statute (1351) of Laborers. They refuse to serve by the year as the legislation required (l. 631), and, indeed, a man can scarcely hire them by the month (l. 632). Speaking in his own person, Gower says, "I hire" such people by daily contracts (*conventiciis dietis*). Of these, "who work now here, now there, now for me and now for you" (l. 634), scarcely one *operarius* in a thousand keeps his agreement (*is pacto fidus suo* [ll. 635–36]).

The behavior of these laborers when once engaged likewise leaves much to be desired. They misbehave in their employer's hall and, when his food is gone, depart (ll. 637–38). They scorn food appropriate to their station (ll. 639–40), complain about preserved and freshly prepared dishes alike (l. 641), demand roast meats (l. 642), and disparage the quality of beer and cider (l. 643) served them.³⁴ Unless an employer improves their fare, they simply disappear (l.

34. "Manorial 'famuli' were frequently paid in 'liveries,' quantities of grain to take away, and were also given meals on the manor while at work. Similarly labourers working for other villagers were as a rule fed by their employers. These payments in kind did not, however, cover the entire needs of the rural wage-earners, and in most cases they were also paid money wages in addition to liveries." Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 225. For an account of complaints about and improvements in workers' diets in the late Middle Ages, see Christopher Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, 3rd. ed. (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000), 77–100, esp. 85–87.

644). Although raised on well water, they now require *potum deliciosum* (ll. 645–46). Although mired through the generations in poverty, they now demand a lord’s fare for their bellies (ll. 647–48). *Lex posita* has no meaning for or effect upon them because there is no *regula* for such (ll. 649–50). The ending of chapter ten delivers a harsh assessment of the rural working class: like beasts they lack reason (l. 651), love for their fellow man, and belief in God (l. 652). Unless *iustitia* deals harshly with them, Gower concludes, “I believe the lords will succumb to them in a short time” (*credo domini succumbent hiis brevi tempore* [ll. 653–54]).³⁵

Gower’s account of the rural situation is delivered from a conservative, by modern standards a reactionary, position, but read *mutatis mutandis* supports the conclusions of R. H. Hilton, the foremost scholar on the subject, that the century after the first visitation of the plague

was a period of considerable self-confidence, even assertiveness among tenants and laborers alike, an assertiveness which was not checked by the defeat of the 1381 rising. In this period the grip of traditional forms of lordly power over tenants was faltering and was not yet adequately replaced by newer forms of domination, for example through the Justices of the Peace. The faltering grip was not only reflected in the withering away, however uneven, of

35. Wickert suggests that “the time reference, *tempore brevi*, points clearly to the future, and indeed to the near future. The situation is still exactly the same as at the time of the *Mirour*, strained to the utmost, the eruption immediately at hand. This part of the *VC* was obviously written before 1381. Gower’s attitude toward the peasant question agrees in all respects with that of the *Mirour*, as does his gaze into the political future. The tone has become somewhat sharper, but the catastrophe of 1381 is still to come.” See Maria Wickert, *Studies in John Gower*, trans. Robert J. Meindl, 2nd ed. (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2016), 19.

villeinage but in the general decline in the level of customary rents and other obligations.³⁶

Gower's dire perspective and prediction is his response to a changing rural reality that is not at all to his liking but will prove to be, as he himself recognizes, irresistible. "In the end," Postan concludes, "economic forces asserted themselves, and the lords and employers found that the most effective way of retaining labour was to pay higher wages, just as the most effective way of retaining tenants was to lower rents and release servile obligations."³⁷

The third and last social element to be dealt with in Book V occupies chapters eleven through sixteen (ll. 655–1016) and considers the positions and issues associated with the urban dwellers who have become important components of an emergent capitalist economy. The ethics and motivations of this relatively recent class, now dominating life in the cities and towns, have aroused the ire of social critics like Gower who look to the past for guidance. Most medieval trade, as Postan puts it,

came to be conducted by professional whole-time merchants operating throughout the year from their places of business in towns. Within the towns trade was more highly regulated and controlled by organizations of every kind than it was to be in any subsequent epoch. Indeed so characteristically medieval were the urban concentration and control of trade, that the actual history of medieval commerce and industry is inextricably bound

36. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*, 18.

37. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 170.

up with the history of the town, its rise and development, its characteristic systems of government and its economic policies.³⁸

“To be a merchant,” Sylvia Thrupp says in her ground-breaking study of the class, “in the particular occupational sense in which that term was used, was to be known, wherever one went, as belonging to a group with a distinctive economic position, referring to the conduct of wholesale trade, and with a distinctive political position, that of controlling municipal government.”³⁹ All merchants were citizens (*cives*) of their city, as opposed to foreigners (native-born non-citizens) and aliens (residents subject to foreign rulers). In addition, merchants were craft members, either men “of mixed enterprise, who primarily represented wholesale trade but combined with it one or more of a number of other interests” or those who were primarily retailers or artisans.⁴⁰ Gower designates these two divisions of the *nobiles urbanes* as *mercatores* and *artifices* (l. 664) and presents their commitment to usury and fraud, together with their failure to work for the common good, as the major problems of city life and government. A third class, the *plebs*, is mentioned from time to time in the context of various issues (see ll. 957–60 and ll. 989–92, for instance), invariably with a negative shading since the class as a whole is prone to turn into a mob (*turba*) with the slightest provocation.

Chapter eleven is a civics lesson in municipal privilege and responsibility, beginning with a prose headnote that provides the economic rationale for the existence of the *cives* who dominate urban existence. Because no *provincia* by itself can produce all of life’s necessities,

38. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, 235.

39. Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London [1300–1500]* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1948; repr. 1962), ix.

40. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 6.

merchants arose as auxiliaries of the world's *cives* (*mundi coadiutores Ciuium*), through whom the goods of each region are distributed from one to another in turn (*per quos singularum bona regionum alternatim communicantur*), presumably from those enjoying a surplus to those experiencing scarcity. Those who control trade are designated as *nobiles urbanes* (l. 655) who comprise an *urbs communis* (l. 663) consisting of *mercatores* and *artifices* (l. 664). These are labeled, respectively, *maiores* and *minores* (l. 669) in a distinction suggesting wholesalers versus retailers (staplers versus franchisers) and also the masters of a guild entitled to wear the livery versus the yeomen who were not.⁴¹ Each of these is, however, a *civis*, i.e. a burgess of a town enjoying full citizenship and its consequent right to participate in the franchise (l. 657), and as such enjoys *honor* and bears *onus* (l. 660). One of the *maiores* will, of course, be the *maior* of London, a term, however, that also applies to other organizations, for instance, the staple.

If we recall that the older form of *onus* was *honus*, we will better see how the pairing and contrasting of *honor* and [*h*]onus works poetically as well as thematically and gives Gower room for the play of words and the density of expression that are so typical of his Latin poetry. The first *honor* of the *civis* is that he should have great wealth (*teneat sibi tantas gasas* [l. 657]), although this wealth becomes an *onus* when it is employed to wicked ends (l. 658). The second *honor* of the *civis* is to hold the office of mayor (*officium maioris prendere* [l. 659]), which brings with it the obligation to uphold the laws of his office (*onus officii iura tenere sui* [l. 660]). The *honor* will be transitory, but the *onus* will endure, because if he does badly (l. 661), this I know says Gower, substituting the mercantile *pondus* for *onus*, the honor will not relieve the burden (*honor non leuiabit pondus* [l. 662]). The *urbs communis* consists of *mercatores* and

41. See Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 12–13.

artifices (ll. 663–64), each of whom needs to have the assistance (*iuuamen*) of the other so that there will be *communis amor* between them (ll. 665–66). Chains forcibly bind the two and, when they are *in amore*, they are good comrades (*socii probi* [ll. 667–68]). When Christian love exists between *maiores* and *minores*, the city rejoices and the polity flourishes (*vrbs gaudet et policia viget* [ll. 669–70]). *Concordia* is necessary to further the peoples' least significant affair (*rem minimam*), whereas *discors* will reduce the greatest matter (*maxima res*) to nothing (ll. 671–72). When the union of the people endures, so also will *mutua iusticia* (ll. 673–74), and everyone will approve. If not, *mutua dampna* will afflict the city and profits will be very scarce (*magis rara* [ll. 675–76]).

But the current situation is far from satisfactory, since, as the poet himself has heard and is able to witness (l. 677), nowadays a just *regula* scarcely sits on the bench (*vix sedet in Banco regula iusta* [l. 678]). The bench referred to, given the present context, would be the courts of London, that is, the Husting, the Sheriff's and Mayor's courts, the various city assizes, and the wardmoots when they functioned judicially, not the royal court system that Gower will deal with in Book VI. The city's courts are presided over by the city's officials, who are *cives* from the mercantile community that is under scrutiny in this chapter. It is they who fail to provide *regula iusta* on the bench because anyone who clings to the trappings of the world to increase his name (*qui totus inheret has pompas mundi, nomen vt addat ei*) will not understand that God must be considered (*deum habendum* [ll. 679–80]). Specifically (*in specie*), Gower continues, I designate nor blame none but those who have neglected God on account of the world (*nullos statuo neque culpo, set illos qui propter mundum preteriere deum* [ll. 681–82]). Moreover, he adds, I believe that anyone who acknowledges the truth of the matter will admit his own guilt (ll. 683–84), for we all chase after profits at all times (*omnes lucris tendimus omnibus horis*) so that scarcely the

one day remains reserved for God (ll. 685–86). By contrast, the Jews rigorously maintain their Sabbath, neither buying nor selling nor seeking profits (ll. 687–88). God has designated the Sabbath as a sacred day reserved for worshipping him (ll. 689–90), the proof of which is in the biblical account of the manna that God sent upon the world, for on the sixth day the people gathered twice as much so that they wouldn't have to work on the seventh (ll. 691–94). But nowadays all things are permitted us by modern law (*lege moderna* [l. 695]). What are sacred occasions to me, the poet asks, with respect to profits (l. 696)? No one cares how someone profits as long as he's making money (ll. 697–98). Friends are chosen for their usefulness in turning a profit (ll. 699–700) and no *civis* is free of fraud, or if there is one, says Gower, London (*urbs mea*) doesn't know him (ll. 701–2).

The headnote to chapter twelve charges Usury and Fraud with providing a secret office for the transactions of burgesses arising in the city (*secretum obsequium ad ciuium negociaciones in ciuitate orientes* [l. 703]). Those same *cives*, styled *urbani* at the chapter's outset, have ceded their rights (*sua jura* [l. 704]) to the two crimes. Usury and Fraud are identified as sly sisters (*subtiles sorores*) and, while they are daughters of *mater Auaricia*, they have been sired by diverse city fathers (*diuersis patribus vrbe* [ll. 705–6]). The father of Usury is a great man rich in coin (*magnus diuesque monete*), but Fraud has been bred by the rabble in illicit intercourse (*degenerata vulgro stupro* [ll. 707–10]). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to Usury, *nobilior genitura*, whom the rich man proclaims as his daughter. Although the two are commonly found working together, Usury will be consistently identified with the merchant elite and Fraud with the artisans.

Usury is characterized by her constant efforts to stash away large sums of money (*magnas sub clauē recondere summas*) with which she can subsequently accomplish her *insidias*,

that is, the injurious loans by which she flourishes. Her gains are the consequence of the nefarious economic activities of the alien (*ex alieno dampno viget*) and the losses suffered by others (*dampna alterius*) that force them to borrow (ll. 711–14). Her transactions result in the construction of great halls in the city but the destruction of country estates (ll. 715–16), enriching the burgess but impoverishing the gentryman, whose lands the burgess then sells to satisfy the loans and fund his construction (ll. 717–18). The Lord has forbidden usury, as Scripture plainly states (ll. 719–20), but the *mercator civis* cleverly explains away the scriptural texts to prove his usury can be allowed (ll. 721–24). He clothes his deceit in guile to hide its nakedness and paints Usury's face with Fraud's blush to make her seem fair (ll. 725–28). However, even if the merchant trickster (*dolosus*) does succeed in changing Usury's *genus* by fraud, her *species* remains the same (ll. 729–30), and the huckster (*institor*) cannot deceive God, who recognizes his tricks, sees through Usury's false exterior, and hates her (ll. 731–34).

Although merchants are common in England's more important trade centers, such as York, Bristol, Coventry and Norwich, the *urbs* (l. 701) Gower intends is no doubt London, whose merchants, unlike those of other major cities, do not have their own guild but are essentially a class of wholesalers distributed among a number of crafts and their guilds.⁴² Gower's complaint is that the merchant elite is usurious in its dealings, deriving profits from the losses inflicted upon others and the ruinous loans to rural estates whose lands are then sold off to satisfy debt and make possible the construction of luxurious town houses (ll. 714–18).⁴³ This

42. Caroline M. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200–1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201.

43. Thrupp's definition of a medieval merchant, as "a man of mixed enterprise, who primarily represented wholesale trade but combined with it one or more of a number of other interests" pertains to this discussion. See Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 6.

elite acts not only in an international capacity on the national scene but also participates in the hands-on aspects of trade in the city. Its members are entrepreneurs whose interests “fanned out widely in many . . . directions, into investment in real estate of all kinds, into finance, shipping, and government service. Wherever there was gain to be had, there were merchants to bid for it or intrigue for it.”⁴⁴ Gower designates this figure first simply as *mercator civis* (merchant citizen [l. 723]) but quickly disparages him as *dolosus* (trickster [l. 729]) and *institor* (huckster [l. 731]).

Gower levels two charges against the merchant elite: the first is that through the machinations of its daughter Usury it prospers *dampno ex alieno* (from alien damage / loss) and derives profits from *alterius dampna* (another’s losses), and the second is that it enriches itself at the expense of the gentry and ruins country estates (ll. 713–18). In the first instance, Gower has good reason to disparage the merchants, several of whom had been prominent in recent affairs that reflected no credit upon the class. Loans to the king at exorbitant rates are subjects of great interest in London at the time he writes and had led to the condemnation of such prominent individuals as William Latimer, Richard Lyons, and John Pyel by the Good Parliament of 1376. Usurious loans to the Crown that were to be repaid by royal revenues typically intended for other purposes were a major cause of their disgrace, although subsequent actions by the king and a *magnum concilium* quickly relieved them of most of the penalties assessed by parliament.⁴⁵ Usury’s gain *dampno ex alieno* is puzzling at first glance, for there is no reason why Gower would sympathize with loss experienced by the foreign trader, who was widely despised by Londoners. Accordingly, I read the phrase to mean that Usury profits through loss / damage

44. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 12.

45. See the discussion in George Holmes, *The Good Parliament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 108–25.

inflicted by the alien, which accords with what is known about the financial scene in late fourteenth-century London. One prominent instance would be the above-mentioned Richard Lyons, an illegitimate Fleming by birth who had subsequently risen to prominence as sheriff and alderman.⁴⁶ Lyons was subsequently taken and killed by the mob in Cheapside in June of 1381 along with many other Flemish during the Rising. The Lombard financiers were likewise hated for their profiteering loans to the crown. In addition, the efforts of the Genoese to make Southampton their port of entry for imports from the far east via the Mediterranean—efforts that threatened the status of London and the Calais Staple—were a major concern for London’s wholesalers and retailers throughout the 1370s. Given the pervasive presence of xenophobia in the city, we should hardly be surprised when we find that the murder of aliens was a persistent feature of the London scene.⁴⁷

Gower’s second charge addresses the agricultural crisis. The spike in labor costs occasioned by the plague was compounded in 1375 by an exceptional harvest, the best in a

46. On the life and career of Lyons, see A. R. Myers, “The Wealth of Richard Lyons,” in *Essays in Medieval History Presented to Bertie Wilkinson*, eds. T. A. Sandquist and M. R. Powicke (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 301–29 and Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King’s Affinity*, 149 and *passim*. Lyons’s partnership with Alice Perrers had given him a special notoriety.

47. See the discussion in Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers’ Company & the Politics & Trade of London 1000–1485* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 258–62. The slaying on 27 August 1379 of Janus Imperiale, a Genoese merchant who had been granted a royal letter of safe conduct, came to trial in February 1380, whereupon the killer was exonerated by a London jury. The verdict was overthrown by the crown, the case reheard by the Northampton parliament in November, and the perpetrator hanged. On the hatred of Flemings and Lombards, see Craig E. Bertolet, *Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve and the Commercial Practices of Late Fourteenth-Century London* (London: Routledge, 2013), 20–21 and the same author’s “‘The slyeste of alle’: The Lombard Problem in John Gower’s London,” in *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Malte Urban (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 197–218.

quarter century, that drove down wheat prices and began an era of declining income for the gentry. “The result of these dramatic changes in the relationships of wages to prices was to ruin demesne farming,” concludes one prominent economic historian, and “the big demesne farmers who had weathered so many storms could not weather this one. For them it was the end.”⁴⁸ Strapped for ready cash, they took loans whose consequences were disastrous for them and extremely profitable for the lenders, who commonly took interest at rates of one-third and even one-half of the loan. The titled aristocracy and the largest estate owners had enough wealth and opportunity (for instance, the option of sheep and cattle pasturing on a large scale) to avoid the worst effects of the economic downturn. Therefore, the disaster largely affected the middle and lower gentry whose gold is transferred from the country to the town (ll. 717–18) in the creation of urban *aulas* out of the destruction of rural *domos* (ll. 717–18).⁴⁹

Having devoted chapter twelve to a condemnation of the merchant financier’s usury, Gower turns in chapter thirteen to the artisan’s fraud, which will likewise be the subject of chapter fourteen, the extra attention devoted to the subject because its ubiquitousness causes graver consequences (ll. 735–36). However, in transitioning to Fraud, he levels a third charge at the *maiores*, namely that Usury, their particular sin, is *sociata* only in those cities, especially London, whose exchequer has no peers (ll. 739–40). A contemporary reader might well have found this an interesting choice of words, perhaps a reference to such an organization as the *Societas Stapule*, the society of the merchants of the Staple. Prominent among contemporary

48. A. R. Bridbury, “The Black Death,” *Economic History Review* 26 (1973): 577–92. The quoted material is on 586.

49. See McFarlane’s discussion of the comital elite’s able financial management in *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*, 48–49, and Colin Platt’s account of agricultural transition in *King Death*, 49–53.

maiores was William Walworth, *maior* of the wool staple from 1369 to his death in perhaps 1386, and also *maior* of London in 1380 / 81.⁵⁰ Fraud, on the other hand, is common to all *civiles*, here apparently a noun for polities on a lesser scale than *urbes*, in all of which she schemes (*consulit*) with all her strengths (ll. 741–2). Moreover, she acts surreptitiously (*clam*), for those whom she deceives first know they’ve been had when they see the resulting *malum*.

Gower’s analysis of the *artifices* and their fraudulent practices begins with a Langland-like account of Fraud junior portrayed as an apprentice loudly and energetically proclaiming the master’s diverse wares outside a shop (ll. 745–50) and tugging all the while at a prospective customer to draw him inside for a sale. This, we are told, is how an apprentice cajoles a pleb with guileful words (*componit verba dolosa*) while the master is away on some furtive deception (*ad secreta doli . . . adest*) (ll. 751–54). Even a wise man who enters Fraud’s shop will find he’s not as smart as Fraud, and the fool (*stultus*) will depart yet *stulcior* (ll. 755–56). The point of this passage is, of course, to amuse, but the real purpose is to broach the topic of *honestitas* (what we would call “transparency”) versus *falsus* (duplicity) in market transactions. These exchanges were supposed to be conducted only in designated places and during designated times in order to ensure that royal, parliamentary, and local regulations and ordinances were being followed. As one recent analyst remarks,

Plague, a shrinking population and labour legislation had
severe consequences for the city administration if it wished

50. Bertolet, *Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve and the Commercial Practices of Late Fourteenth-Century London*, 9.

to cling to transparency as a norm, for the cases of falsity and secrecy expanded both quantitatively and qualitatively. The wage and price ceilings that king and parliaments so vehemently demanded unleashed a mighty potential for secret action, since servants, craftsmen and traders were reluctant to observe them If one wanted more money for one's wares and found a customer willing to pay it, one had to proceed very discreetly indeed—leaving one's market stall for a moment in the hands of an assistant and taking a short walk with the customer, for example to the nearest church, where one could quickly come to terms.⁵¹

Gower's apprentice is precisely such an assistant, left to mind the store while the wily master closes just such a shady deal.

Inside the shop Fraud attempts to double the established rates by pitching the going prices in Paris and Flanders (ll. 757–8). Deficiencies in the goods are blustered away with testamentary oaths in the course of which God is wounded and Christ dismembered for the sake of profits (ll. 759–62). At this point Gower's focus shifts from the fraudulent practices of the shopkeeper to the customer who is his mark. Newly rich, this shopper is eager to fill his house with ostentatious displays of newly acquired possessions that are not *proprium* (one's own), not having been passed down through time and accordingly having acquired a respectable sheen (ll. 763–4). In this way, a *civis* seeks *honor* through hypocrisy (*per ypocrisim*, i.e. false semblant), entitling him to obsequious public recognition from the *plebs* (ll. 765–6). This is how someone who is *minor*

51. Frank Rexroth, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 98.

than all rises in his city to become *maior* (ll. 767–8). But when the time comes that everything is stripped bare, the perversion of honor will be revealed (ll. 769–70), for when all accounts are settled, the bird dressed in another’s feathers will fly naked as before (ll. 771–2). A crow decked out as a peacock is still but a crow.

Let us pause for a moment and consider the target of Gower’s disfavor at this point in the text. While the possibility exists that he might be targeting a specific *maior*, that is, a mayor of London, we would do well to remember that the focus of this last section of Book V, which began with chapter eleven, promised a discussion of the *mercatores* and *artifices* of the mercantile community. Cooperation between their *maiores* and *minores* is necessary to the prosperity of the polity (ll. 669–70). We are once again in the presence of that medieval propensity to describe categories of the population through comparative adjectives, as Sylvia Thrupp describes it:

The more sufficient and more able were at the same time the better people The better people were the more honest, the wiser, the more prudent, and the more discreet. All these qualities were assumed to be present in maximum strength in the richest of the citizens, the best, the most sufficient, and to be at a low ebb among the poorer citizens. On occasions of political disturbances the latter were sometimes called the plebs or the lower people (*de plebeis, inferiores*).⁵²

52. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, 14–15.

Gower's scorn for the man who, *minor* than everybody else, rises *per ypocrisim* to the status of *maior* is directed at those from the least people (*de populo minuto*) who have risen by economic success above the station in life they were meant to occupy. He has in mind such persons of low birth as the above-mentioned Richard Lyons and others of the same sort whose fraudulently successful financial dealings had become a national scandal.

The final stanza of chapter thirteen presents in rapid-fire succession thumbnail accounts of the transgressions of the wool staplers, vintners, drapers, and spicers (i.e. grocers), the latter probably intended as a figure for all those who dealt in *avoirdupois*. Fraud goes out from the city to check out the sheep enclosures so that she can make her arrangements *in stapula* (ll. 773–4). She seeks out the wines of Gascony, which the people find is detrimental to them (ll. 775–6), for fraud will be in the wines themselves as well as in their serving and pricing (ll. 777–8). Fraud also sells cloth, which she will offer in poor lighting, whereby the purchaser must trust to the sense of touch to avoid being cheated by the clothmaker (*pannificus*) with goods of lesser quality (ll. 779–82). And God forbid that anyone should deny Fraud when selling spices, for she mixes the old in with the new and loads the scales to at least tithes the seller if not take a sixth (ll. 783–6).

Chapter fourteen is devoted to *singula artificia necnon et urbis victualia*, the city's crafts and victuals outlets which, the prose headnote informs us, Fraud governs everywhere with her sly regulation. The opening lines assure us that the craftsmen do not wish to set aside the laws of Fraud to whose arbitration they nowadays give their products (ll. 787–8). The chapter indicts in rapid-fire succession various of the artisans and their deceits. The goldsmiths fabricate cups from their clients' gold and silver but cheat them of the purest metals in the refining process (ll. 789–90). The jewelers create fake gems from glass and give them a fanciful name that enhances the

deception (ll. 791–2). The drapers steal cloth when they fashion it into clothes and charge more for the labor than the finished product is worth (ll. 793–6). The furriers likewise help themselves to a piece of the furs so that the resulting garment is short and bares the feet (ll. 797–800). Armorers sell shoddy arms and products that make squire-bearing horses buckle (ll. 801–2). Waxchandlers add fat to their candles so that they melt faster and accordingly return greater profits (ll. 803–4).⁵³ Leather workers, too, turn out their saddles, greaves, and shoes under Fraud’s supervision (ll. 805–6).

The crafts responsible for food production, likewise dominated by Fraud, are the subject of the next stanza. Fraud sells meats and fish to the people and cares about how it tastes only on those occasions when she samples it first (ll. 807–8). Because of her influence, bakers are punished on the gratings when, Gower opines, the gallows would be more appropriate for their thefts (ll. 809–10). She sells watery beer (ll. 811–12), prepares cooked dishes and roasts that she hawks in the marketplace (ll. 813–14) with the clamorous insistency of hell’s demons (ll. 815–16). Fraud is both the hostess at the inn, whose customers groan when they receive their padded bills, and the stabler who feeds their horses grain by the light peck and hay that’s been cut short but presented to look long, diminishing the product but enhancing the profit (ll. 817–20).

The last stanza of chapter fourteen stresses Fraud’s ubiquity and adds a few more charges against her that apparently grow out of her mercantile activities. Extending her sway even to the sale of chickens and eggs, Fraud rules everything in the forum with her guile (ll. 821–2). She is charged with being a common proctor in the city and inevitably brings fines down upon one side

53. Defective candles could be produced in various ways. Discussing a London case from March 1358, Rexroth remarks that “the waxchandlers . . . melted down used and new wax in the same pot, producing candles that burned poorly.” See *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*, 99.

in cases she enjoins (ll. 823–4).⁵⁴ Her deceits are as infinite as the shores of the sea (ll. 825–6). As the author of libels, she invents and peddles information, passes misleading judgment on events, and stands convicted of flattery (ll. 827–8). When she is *rector* of a guild, she neglects the common good and sees instead to her own profit (ll. 829–30). Since faithfulness (*fides*) has been banished from the city, Fraud begets ever more offspring (ll. 831–2). However, she does not yet rule over all, for the *civis iustus* resists her blandishments (ll. 832–3).

Chapter fifteen, in which Gower criticizes a power-hungry *civis* who climbs above his plebian origins to high office, is one of the most intriguing passages in all of the *Vox Clamantis*. There can be little doubt that he has a specific politician in mind, almost certainly the controversial John Northampton, who dislocated London politics throughout the 1360s and well into the 1380s in a spectacular career that ended when the disfavor of the royal party led to his condemnation and exile from the city in 1385 after impressive early successes. Northampton was an energetic man of respectable but lesser origins, one of the *cives populares* (ordinary citizens) rather than a member of the *maiores* (the better class of burgesses), who became wealthy through marriage. Already by 1361 he was a leader of the drapers' guild, in 1375 an alderman, in 1376 sheriff, and in 1378 MP for London. He is credited with being the driving force behind the reconstitution of the city council in 1376 that took power from the aldermen and gave it to the guilds, as well as with securing the return of the franchise to London merchants. As a result of his success, he became allied with John of Gaunt against the staplers led by William Walworth

54. A *procurator* is generally a lawyer who brings suits before an ecclesiastical court but can also designate the steward of a guild or the proxy sent in his place by an ecclesiastical representative to both houses of parliament. See *Proctors for Parliament: Clergy, Community and Politics c. 1248–1539*, eds. Phil Bradford and Alison McHardy. The National Archives, Series SCIO. Vol. II: 1377–1539 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press for the Canterbury and York Society, 2018).

and Nicholas Brembre. He was a turbulent force in city politics, as evidenced by the fact that he was bound over to keep the peace at least three times, in 1365, 1367, and 1371. Although Northampton will not become mayor until soon after completion of the *Vox* (for two terms, from 1381–83), it must have been plain to all at the time Gower was writing Book V sometime in the late 1370s that it would be just a matter of time before he held that office too.⁵⁵

Gower's portrayal opens with the bird that fouls the nest whose *custos* he will be (ll. 835–6). This aspiring keeper is from low birth, and dishonor attaches when such a *civis* takes *honor* from his associates so that a peasant (*campestris*) has *priora loca* over a *civis* (ll. 837–8). He is a raging man (*furiosus*) whom the people should fear, at least when he has a sword in his hand (ll. 839–40). He is most to be feared, however, when he acts—as aldermen, sheriffs, and mayors all did—in his capacity as judge (ll. 841–2). As a single spark can destroy a house, so one evil man can ruin his city (ll. 843–4). Nature abhors sudden change, especially the unexpected novelty occasioned when chance elevates a *pauper* in the city and allows an *indignus* to gain high office (ll. 845–8). Then the *nobilitas* can fear *dampna* when the *nova gloria* of fools exalts such a one (ll. 849–50). Fools delight in fools and wicked men in wicked men, but a sensible man takes delight in a wise man (ll. 851–2). Nothing is more nettlesome than a commoner risen above his class, especially when he was born a *servus* (ll. 853–4). He will continue to think like a serf even if *sors* has granted him a high status (ll. 855–6). Just as a racing saddle on an ass won't improve its performance, a man untaught and crude (*indoctus que rudis*) is not changed by *honor*, since

55. For Northampton's role in London politics, see especially Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community*, 228–91 and Rexroth, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*, 126–88. A more favorable view of this controversial figure is offered by James Davis, "Towns and Trade," in *Historians on John Gower*, ed. Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard (Woodbridge: Brewer, 2019), 206–11.

his *rusticitas* will make him all the more difficult (ll. 857–60). All living things condemn the crow for his treachery and also the evil man who arises in the city (ll. 861–2). Even if fate may favor such a man without proper morals (*homo sine moribus*), *fama* will in the end reveal who he is (ll. 863–4).

The final stanza of chapter fifteen assures us that the wicked urban politician will not prevail. He may be a disruption in the city and the scourge of many, but God allows at times such a one to stir up many things (ll. 865–6). In the end, however, all the evil he visits upon the people will come back upon his own head (ll. 867–8). An ounce of poison ruins a thousand jars of oil and one evil man, a thousand good ones (ll. 869–70). One lit coal fires many others, just as an evil man ignites much wickedness (ll. 871–2). But when such a man has barely achieved the heights of power, the wheel turns and he is cast down (ll. 873–76). Fraud may flower, but it cannot bear fruit, and its branches will not take root (ll. 877–8). In the end the wicked politician's greed will lead him to sell himself for petty gain (ll. 879–80), and all will be clearly revealed in the *speculum modernum*, even if few will have the wisdom to draw the proper conclusions upon observing events (ll. 881–2).

With that, Gower moves on to the sixteenth and final chapter of Book V, in which he condemns the sort of person responsible for the slanders and libels that inflame the city's political scene and appeals to a proper *rector urbis* to ensure peace and concord by just administration. The chapter's opening attack upon the *vir linguosus*, the opposite of the *homo probus* who should lead the city, points to such biblical texts as Ecclesiasticus 9:25 (*terribilis est in civitate sua homo linguosus*) and Psalm 139:12 (*vir linguosus non dirigitur in terra*). This “man full of tongue,” as the Douay translation has it, is the source of many difficulties in the city (ll. 883–4). He afflicts others like another plague and, like a whirlwind, often strikes suddenly (ll.

885–6). A wicked tongue (metonymy for *vir cum lingua mala*, i.e. *vir linguosus*) is responsible for wrongdoing in all the world and has grave powers (ll. 887–8). It causes lawsuits that create conflicts that stir the plebs to take up swords and inflict wounds that cause death (ll. 889–90). It takes leaders from a realm, puts estates to the flames, and lays waste homes (ll. 891–2). It wrecks marriages and divides what God has joined together (ll. 893–4) so that, asserting in legal suits the commission of malicious deeds, husbands and wives quarrel and separate (ll. 895–6). Nobody is spared the harm done by the tongue, which misrepresents *fas et nefas* so that they are indistinguishable (ll. 897–8). Just as a small amount of spoilage corrupts an entire mass, so a tongue by stirring the mind moves all the other members (ll. 899–900). Accordingly, Nature gave it a double guard of teeth and lips to edit its excesses and soften its words (ll. 900–10). Nevertheless, it constantly escapes and rushes forth in irrevocable words that occasion disaster on the one hand and consume success on the other (ll. 911–14).

Gower continues in this same vein for another long paragraph. Even the man who can number the stars in the sky and the grains of dust on the earth cannot count the seeds sown by an evil tongue (ll. 915–18). Nobody can tell all the wickedness the *linguosus* causes in the city and all the deceits provoked by his duplicitous mouth (ll. 919–20). His busy tongue is the worst thing for a city for, although it has no bones, it nevertheless—in the words of Proverbs 25:15—grinds those of others (ll. 921–2). There is no peace and thus no God nor hope of salvation where the man of evil tongue governs (ll. 923–7). The discord he creates destroys Christian love so that God will be absent (ll. 928–30). His *garrula lingua* weighs more than lead and sinks a city's *honor* (ll. 931–2). He who wishes evil to his fellow burgesses should be excluded from the city and its gates barred against him (ll. 933–4). Even when he seems to sing the city's *honor*, he strews the seeds of deceit (ll. 935–6). Such a wicked man takes pleasure in the sufferings of

others (ll. 937–8), poisons the common *fons* so that the plebs die and a great plague ensues (ll. 939–40). Such a *civis* should be executed or exiled (ll. 941–2), for an infected tooth must be extracted to still pain throughout the head (ll. 943–4). Just so the wicked burgess must be taken from the city lest *civilis honor* perish (ll. 945–6). It is expedient that the wicked one should die lest all the people waste from the seriousness of the injury he causes (ll. 947–8).

And finally, with the last three paragraphs of Book V, Gower addresses the mayor of London, who is *urbis rector* (another of the nation’s mighty forces) and parallel in a way to the king but a servant certainly because the keeper of the king’s peace, with the same direct address that he reserves for judges and the king himself in Book VI.⁵⁶ “Act that there be concord, and grant peace” (*Age quod sit concordia, que dat pacem*), he begins, clearly setting the mark for the governance of London, “for peace births everything prosperous” (*pax etenim prospera cuncta parit* [ll. 949–50]). Let your voice not sound angrily upon the people but nourish their love with soothing words (ll. 951–2), for proud aristocratic lions and tigers are tamed by being coaxed to comply and the lowly ox submits but slowly to the plow (ll. 953–4). Prudence, not force, adjusts a burden within bearable limits (ll. 955–6). A practical consideration teaches that just as one anchor cannot hold a ship in tumultuous waters or fast currents, so one man cannot by sheer strength manage all the city’s concerns without the cooperation of the plebs (ll. 957–60). The wise mayor will devote his primary energies to the worst problems and seek adjustment over time rather than attempt major change (ll. 961–2). He should steer clear of old political quarrels, which can inflame old wounds best left alone to heal themselves over time (ll. 963–6). Just as

56. There is an extensive discussion of keeping the king’s peace in London in Rexroth, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*, 27–67. Oaths for various city offices specify the office holder’s responsibility in this regard.

mighty rivers arise from small springs whose waters converge, so wounds that could have been healed at one time can rage out of control (ll. 967–70). An old sore revisited again and again becomes a dangerously renewed wound (ll. 971–2). If an initial cure is unsuccessful, a badly healed scar can open up again (ll. 973–4).

The danger of renewing ancient political quarrels continues as the subject of the penultimate paragraph of Book V, reflecting the contemporary circumstances in which Gower writes. The bitterness of the city's politics in the 1370s and 80s can hardly be exaggerated, as evidenced by the prohibition against referencing the contentious relationships between the supporters of John Northampton and Nicholas Brembre that are enacted after 1385. Just as an extinct ember will flare up when brought into contact with sulphur, Gower begins, so a great fire will erupt from a small one (ll. 975–6). Just so does one who rekindles an old anger provoke great consequences (ll. 977–80). Wrath, perverse evil, and greed for profit will supplant love and the city will experience every wickedness (ll. 981–2). Offenses are then rehashed, the sky echos with shouts, and everyone invokes an angry God on his behalf (ll. 983–4). Accordingly, *cives* must learn to forego savagery, for anger suits beasts whereas peace pertains to humans (ll. 985–6). The lesson Gower draws from the consequences of such behavior is conventional and prophetic at the same time, pointing in a general way to the looming circumstances of June 1381. Where *amor* is absent so will *fides* be also, and consequently all in the city will be free to ignore their *proprium gradum* (ll. 987–8). The *plebs*, without a proper example set by the *sapientes* (i.e. the *cives*), will concoct some cunning scheme (*consilium multe calliditatis* [ll. 989–90]) of their own that will have dreadful consequences, for, as merciless as raging water and fire may be, they are not as destructive as the *vulgus indomitus* (ll. 991–2). Events will shortly underscore the poet's conclusion.

The final paragraph opens with a lamentation for the good old days when justice, peace, and concord guided the *cives* in their *rebus et causis* (ll. 993–4). But those qualities have disappeared in the corrupt present because of spite and money (ll. 995–6). However, what has been acquired by guile will not be lasting profit, for love cannot endure in the city when it is the companion of envy (ll. 997–8). The poet prays the *urbis rector*, the addressee of Book V’s conclusion, to perform ablution upon both the perjuries of the past and the perfidious words of the present (ll. 999–1000). In that way the city’s *fortuna* will be revived and what nowadays falls *vile* will rise *in precium* (ll. 1001–2). Sometimes *numen* proves to be *placabile*, and the day will be *clarior* when the mist clears up (ll. 1003–4). Peace is granted to lands in which good will prevails, although an evil man drives all peace from a city (ll. 1005–6). Rome was the head of all the world while *communis amor* reigned in the city’s forum (ll. 1007–8), but it declined as soon as it became bereft of honor and the empire followed suit (ll. 1009–10). Similarly, the honor of Athens did not decline as long as a united citizenry steered clear of hatred (ll. 1011–12). When grave division later split the city, it no longer retained anything of its ancient honor (ll. 1013–14). May our city, which has shone so long with great honor, avoid such a fate by God’s intercession (ll. 1015–16).

With that, Gower concludes his review of the rural and urban commons, which, although broached initially in terms of a long-outmoded traditional way of viewing the medieval world, has been conducted as a coherent piece of late fourteenth-century political and sociological analysis. Dividing its components into rural and urban halves, Gower has discussed them hierarchically from the gentry to the serfs and from the merchants to the urban working class. He has scrutinized each group in relationship to an ancient order according to which it supposedly is meant to function and found each failing to perform per the divine plan. He has urged each to

remember that salvation, not terrestrial power and prosperity, is the goal of human existence, which, when conducted in the spirit of Christian love, can transpire in the spirit of peace most conducive to the achievement of that goal. It is the same message Gower delivers throughout his work, presented with the same earnest intensity we find everywhere in his poetry.

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