



**Accessus:**

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

**Accessus**

---

Volume 5  
Issue 2 *Gower Shorts*

Article 2

---

2019

## Global Gower: The Archer Aiming at the World

Joyce Coleman

*University of Oklahoma*, [joyce.coleman@ou.edu](mailto:joyce.coleman@ou.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus>



Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Coleman, Joyce (2019) "Global Gower: The Archer Aiming at the World," *Accessus*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

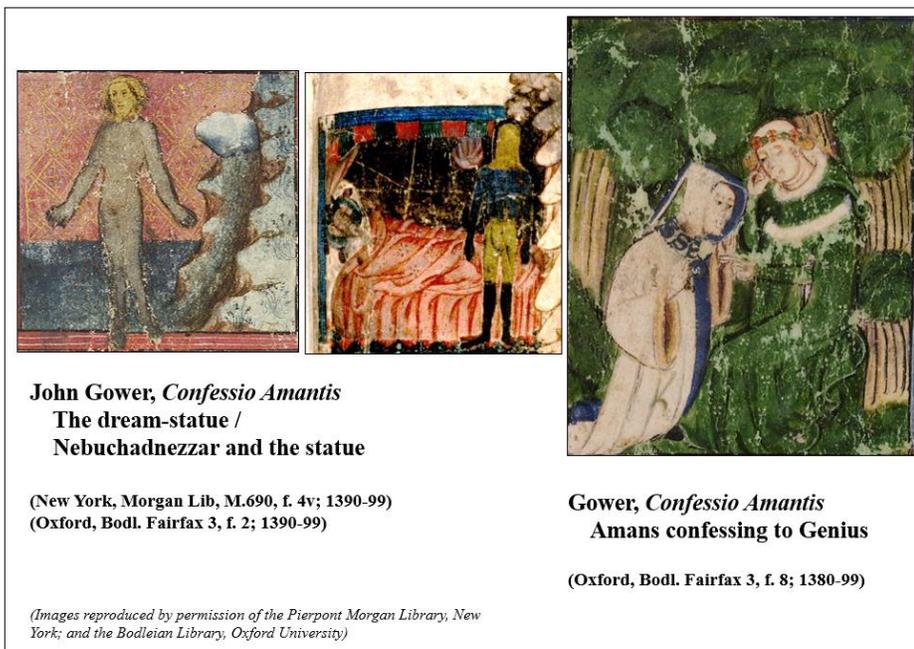
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol5/iss2/2>

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Accessus by the editorial board of the journal and administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



## Global Gower: The Archer Aiming at the World

Admired for the range of languages and genres he employed, John Gower has been less recognized for his iconographic innovations. It seems very probable that he designed the original pictorial program of the *Confessio Amantis*.<sup>1</sup> Though comprising only two images—the dream of Nebuchadnezzar (in two versions) and Amans' confession—this is the first such program in a work of English-language literature, and as such contributed to the dignifying of the vernacular as a medium of literature.



<sup>1</sup> For more discussion, see Joyce Coleman, “Illuminations in Gower's Manuscripts,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to John Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager, Brian Gastle, and Ana Sáez-Hidalgo (New York: Routledge, 2017), 117-31.

For viewers aware that Amans was Gower “pretending to be a lover,”<sup>2</sup> the picture of Amans confessing is also one of the first—and perhaps *the* first—image of an English author in an English-language manuscript since the small picture of Layamon in British Library, Cotton Caligula A.ix, about a hundred years before.



Gower’s originality was derivative, in that the Nebuchadnezzar image was borrowed from the *Bible historiale*, perhaps by way of Guillaume de Machaut’s recycling of the iconography in his *Remède de Fortune*. Gower might have had the opportunity to see the latter image in an anthology of Machaut’s

<sup>2</sup> John Gower, *Complete Works*, vols. 2-3: *Confessio Amantis*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), Prol.: gloss to line 59.

work that possibly accompanied the French king Jean II into English captivity, after his defeat in the Battle of Poitiers (1356).

<p><b>John Gower, <i>Confessio Amantis</i></b></p>	<p><b>Guiard des Moulins, <i>Bible historiale</i></b></p>	<p><b>Guillaume de Machaut, <i>Remède de Fortune</i></b></p>
<p>(San Marino, Huntington EL 26 A 17, f. 1; 1390-99)</p>	<p>(Paris, BnF fr. 157, f. 106v; 1<sup>st</sup> half 14<sup>th</sup> c.)</p>	<p>(Paris, BnF fr. 1586, f. 31v; 1350-56)</p>
<p><i>(Images reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino; and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris)</i></p>		

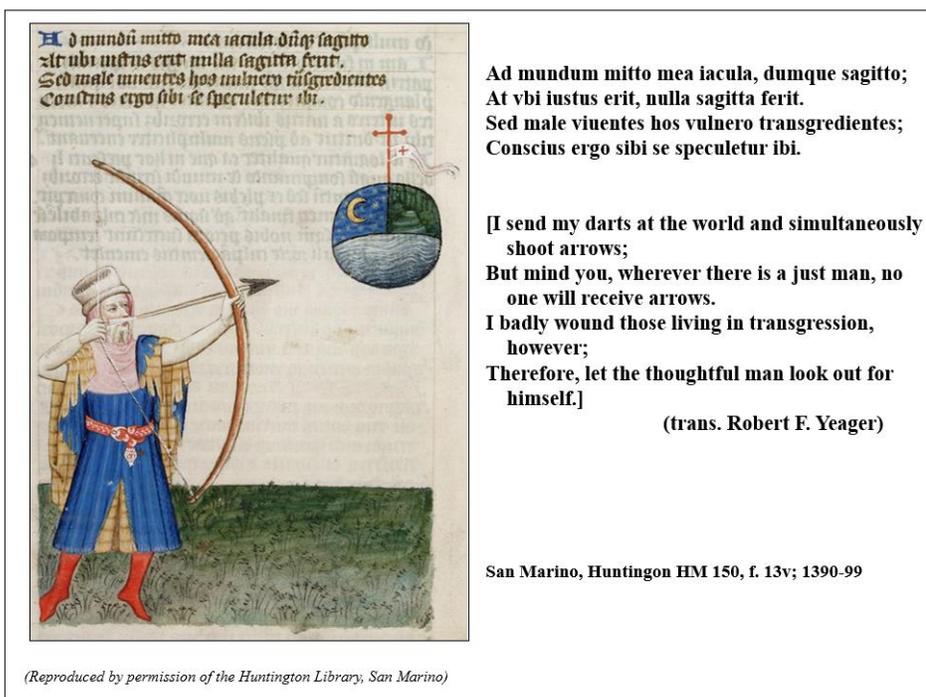
<p>= +</p>	
<p><b>Gower, <i>Confessio Amantis</i></b> (Oxford, Bodl. Fairfax 3, f. 8; 1380-99)</p>	
<p><i>(Images reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University; and the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris)</i></p>	

Meanwhile, the Amans picture combines two scenes from the *Romance of the Rose*: the Lover before the Garden of Delight, and Nature confessing to Genius.

In the same

way, there are sources and analogues for all aspects of the *Vox Clamantis*'

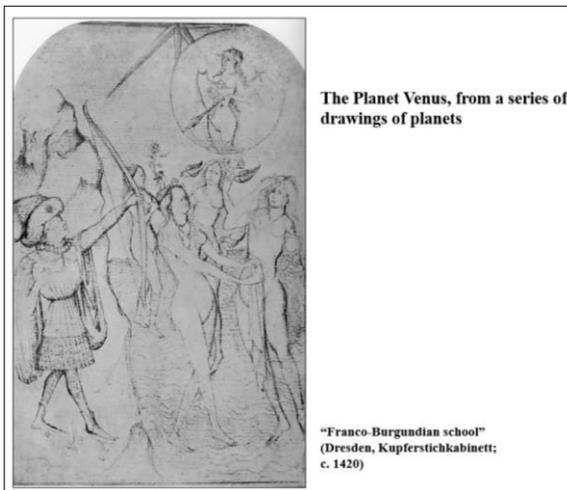
archer picture, but the combination and reinvention of these elements produced a unique iconography, far more complex than the *Confessio* images. Gower's *Vox Clamantis* laments the calamities of England in the period leading up to and during the Peasants' Revolt. The voice crying in the wilderness is both John Gower and John the Baptist, both philosopher and prophet. As the Latin epigraph that accompanies each miniature explains, Gower's intent was to rebuke the unjust men of his time:



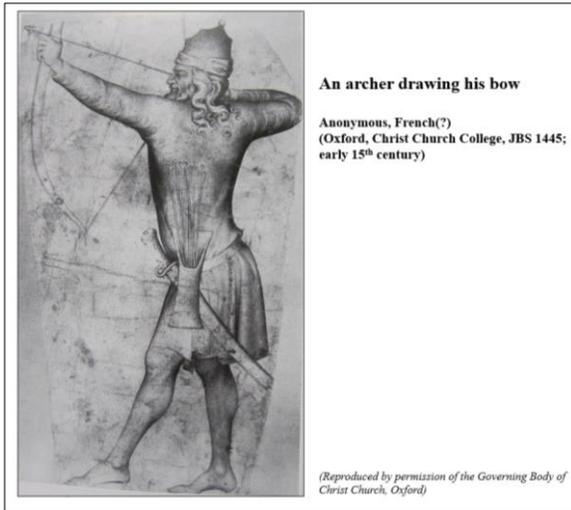
The image of an archer shooting at the world conveys this idea so elegantly that one hardly stops to wonder about it. It introduces the text in three surviving manuscripts; plus, in a fourth manuscript, an obviously amateur artist inserted their own version into an empty space at the start of Book 3.



Yet as far as I know, there is nothing equivalent in French art, the source of the *Confessio* imagery and where one would naturally look for an antecedent.



Kathleen Scott, the premier historian of English manuscript art, offered two analogues. One is a rather grisly drawing of the planet Venus and her children, in which an archer has transfixed Venus with his arrow. The other



simply shows a yeoman archer—  
 well drawn, but without any  
 visible target for his arrow.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, both images postdate  
 the earliest *Vox* archer miniatures.

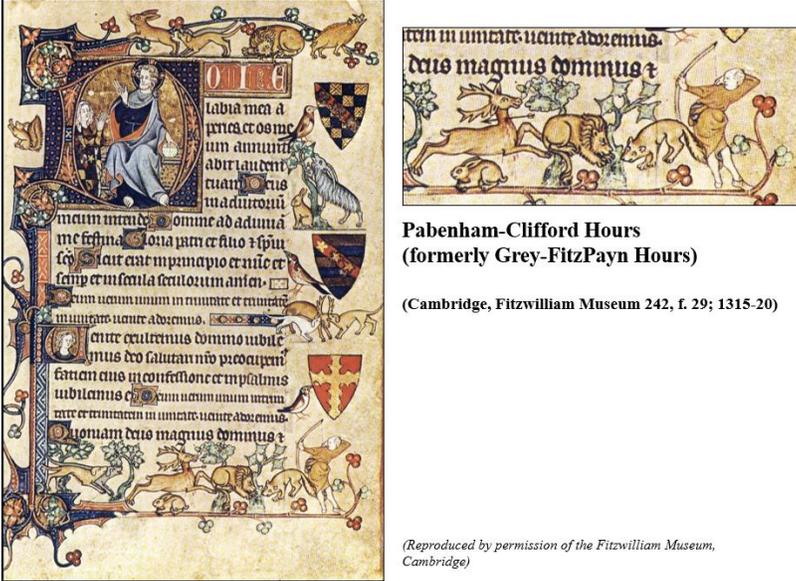
Archers—without floating  
 planets—are of course easy to  
 find, in many contexts: whether

it's the Sagittarius figure in a devotional work,



<sup>3</sup> Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*, vol. 2 (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1996), 66.

or the hunts pursued through the margins of many texts,

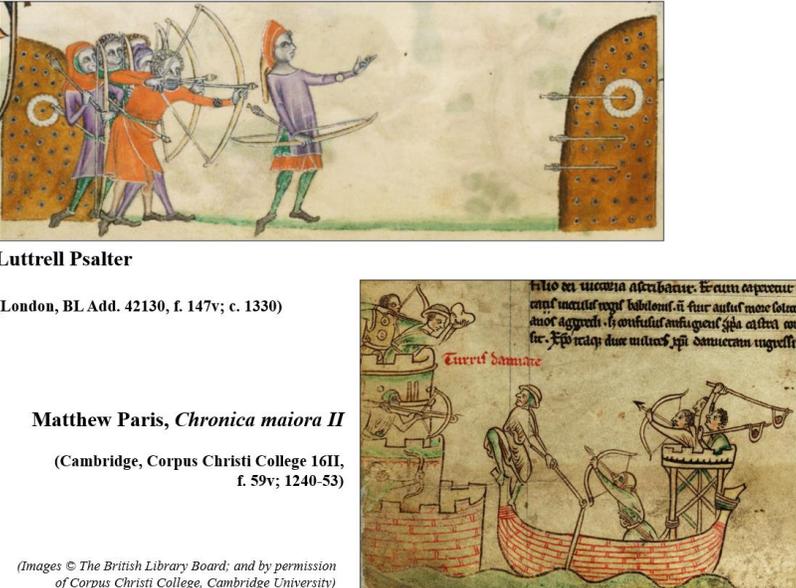


**Pabenhams-Clifford Hours**  
(formerly Grey-FitzPayn Hours)

(Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum 242, f. 29; 1315-20)

*(Reproduced by permission of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)*

or the depictions of archery practice or actual battle.



**Luttrell Psalter**

(London, BL Add. 42130, f. 147v; c. 1330)

**Matthew Paris, *Chronica maiora II***

(Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 16II, f. 59v; 1240-53)

*(Images © The British Library Board; and by permission of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge University)*

But no one that I know of ever thought of depicting a philosopher or prophet as an archer. Before, during, and after Gower's time, the standard way to depict such figures was to show an older or old man in a robe, teaching, preaching, sitting with a book, or holding a scroll. But the designer of the *Vox* image decided to create a much more dynamic visualization.

His choice of an archer figure very likely responds, as Maria Wickert suggested, to a homiletic tradition that equated archers with preachers and arrows with sermons. Pope Gregory the Great, for example, explicated a passage in Habakkuk by explaining that "[t]he arrows of the Lord are the words of the saints, which strike the hearts of sinners."<sup>4</sup> Gower's archer combines athletic vigor and prophetic power in corporealizing this biblical imagery.

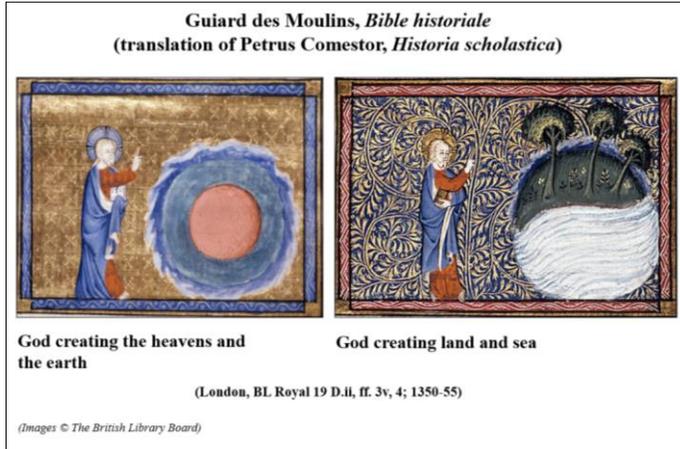
Having taken this iconographic leap, the designer of the *Vox* archer then further defined and intensified the image's cultural impact by attaching it to several other motifs from texts of clerical, mostly scientific origins: the floating globe, representations of the elements, and a T-O map.

The artistic motif of floating globes was popularized from the early fourteenth century, illustrating the Book of Genesis in manuscripts of the *Bible historiale*. King Jean had a copy of the text (now British Library Royal 19 D.ii),

---

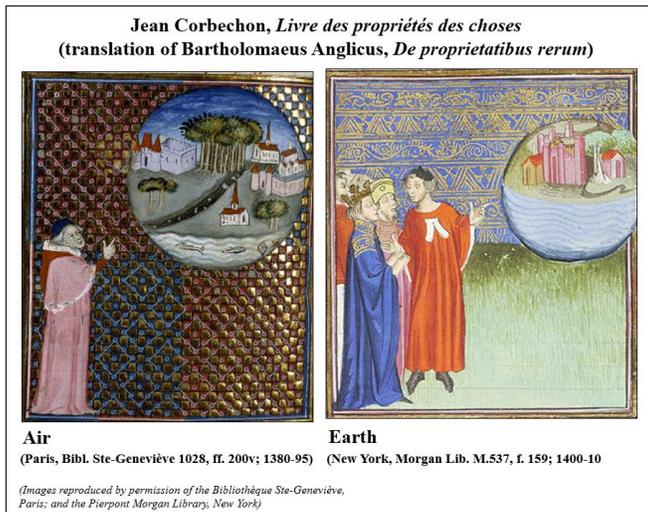
<sup>4</sup> Maria Wickert, *Studien zu John Gower* (Cologne: Kolner Universitäts Verlag, 1953), quoted in John Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press), 146. The Gregory quote is from Gregorius I, "Homiliarium in Ezechielem prophetam," Homilia V, par. 14 (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. 76, col. 0785).

which was seized from him at Poitiers and brought back to England. Thus it too



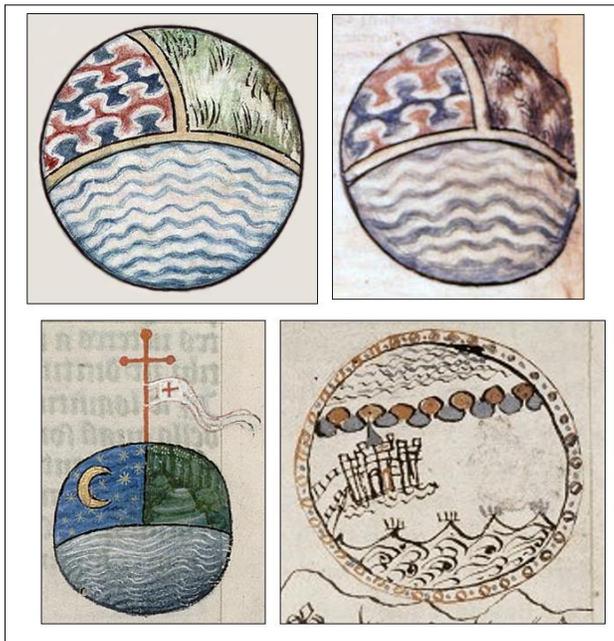
might have been seen by Gower. Its miniatures trace the creation of the universe by standing God next to a series of globes, in which are pictured, progressively, the

creation of the heavens and the earth, land and sea, sun and moon, etc.



The natural-history encyclopedia *Les propriétés des choses* adapted this motif, with globes displaying world-views or landscapes meant to depict “air,” “earth,” and other concepts. University

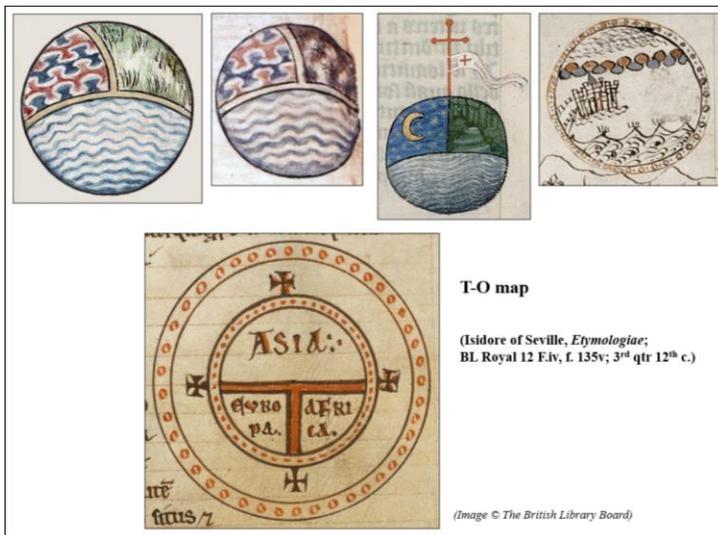
masters stand beneath, lecturing on the given topic—a pose that the *Vox* images switch out for a prophetic archer.



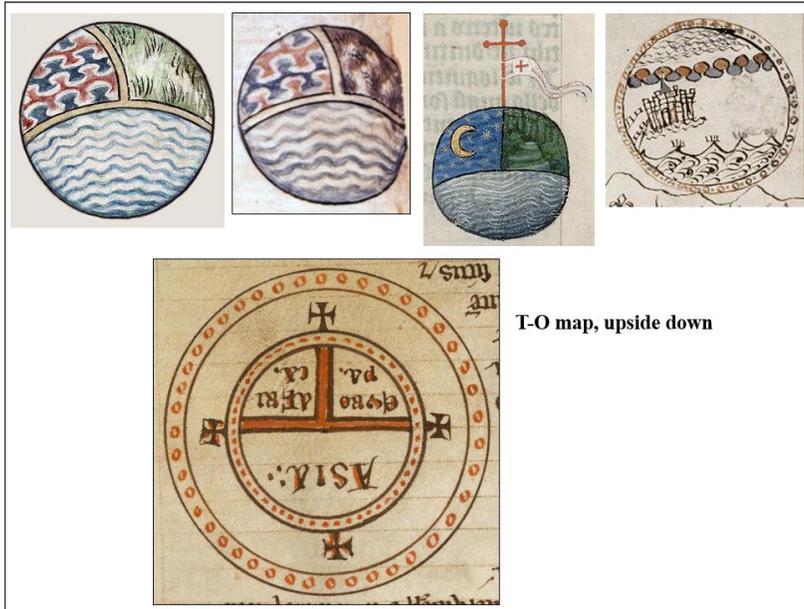
The *Vox* miniatures fill their globes either with stylized representations of air, earth, and water or, in the case of the Huntington *Vox* and the amateur drawing, something like the *Propriétés*' more naturalistic representation.

Finally, with the exception of the amateur

drawing, the *Vox* deploys its elemental imagery not in the logical order of top-to-bottom air–earth–water but in the T-O layout found in many medieval *mappae mundi*.



Gower's globe has flipped the T, however, so that the largest area, for water, is on the bottom.



Since the Latin inscription accompanying the *Vox* image states that the archer is aiming his arrows at unjust men, it has plausibly been suggested that the globe's three elements stand for the three estates of society.<sup>5</sup> Gower could have decided to depict the estates as three sets of men in appropriate clothing, as in the image below, from a later *speculum principum*: clergy in upper left, kings and knights in upper right, and common people below.

<sup>5</sup> Wickert, cited in Fisher, *John Gower*, 145-46.

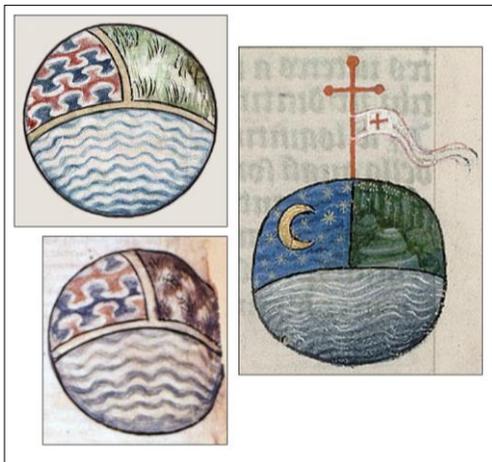
Jacques Legrand, *Livre de bonnes moeurs*



Legrand reads/lectures to different social classes

*(Image reproduced by permission of the Bibliothèque royale Albert 1<sup>er</sup>, Brussels)*

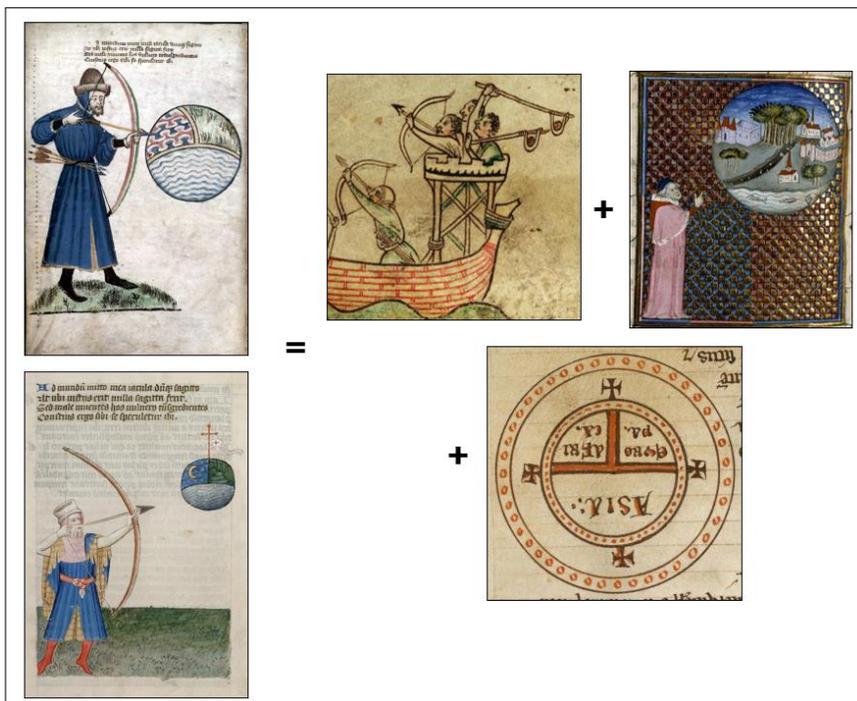
(Brussels, BR 9544, f. 122; c. 1430)



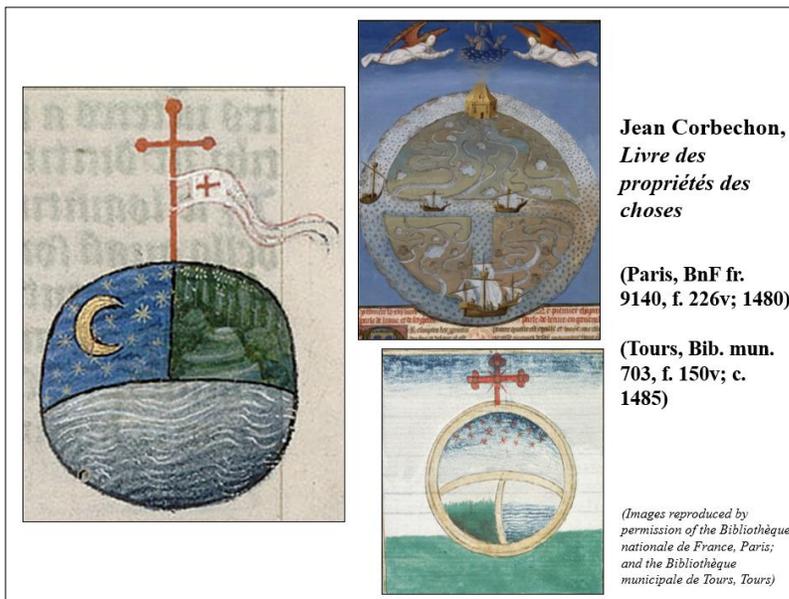
But it might have seemed too violent to show the arrow actually aimed at human beings. Accordingly, people are represented by elements, arranged as an upside-down T-O world map, with the commoners—as in the Legrand version—given the globe’s lower half,

and the clergy (associated with the heavens) and the nobility (associated with the earth) dividing the upper half.

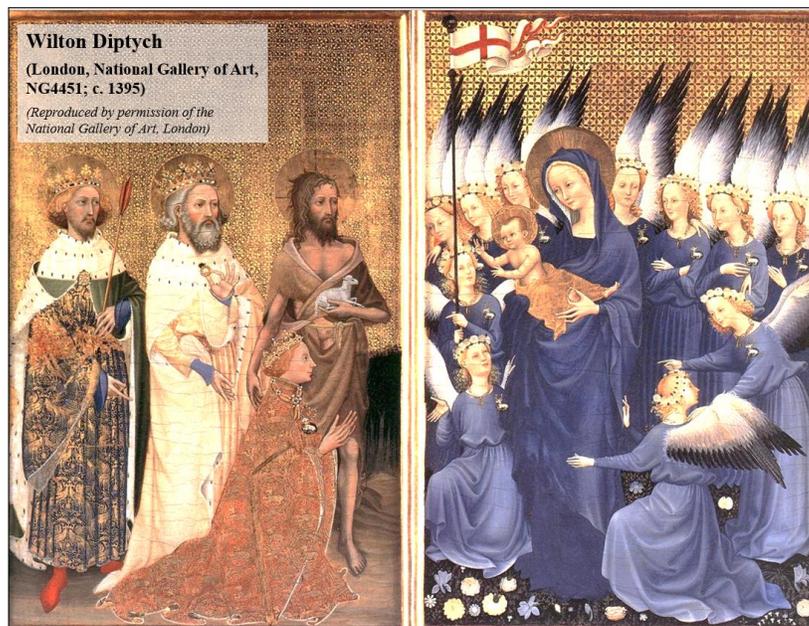
So, the basic *Vox* archer scene seems to be a complex interfolding of three pre-existing iconographic elements, into an image that is at once energetic, visually striking, intellectually forceful, and perfectly adapted to visualize Gower's textual self-representation: the author as secular sermonizer aiming his moral commentary at the world.



The Huntington illumination goes several strides beyond this, however, with its cross and pennon resonating, possibly deliberately, with several key points of contemporary political imagery. First of all, the positioning of the cross and pennon at the top of the globe recalls the standard placement of paradise or Eden at the top of the T-O map.



In doing so, it also recalls the St. George pennon in Richard II's famous Wilton Diptych, which was contemporary with the Huntington *Vox*. One of the angels holds a red-cross pennon.

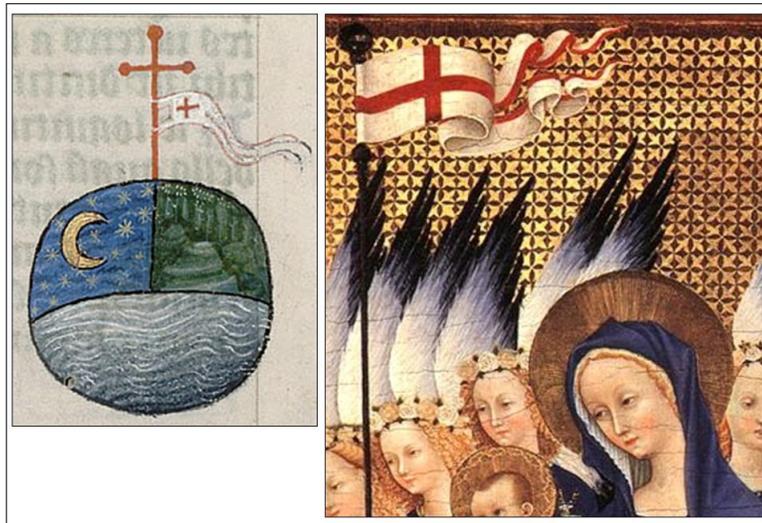




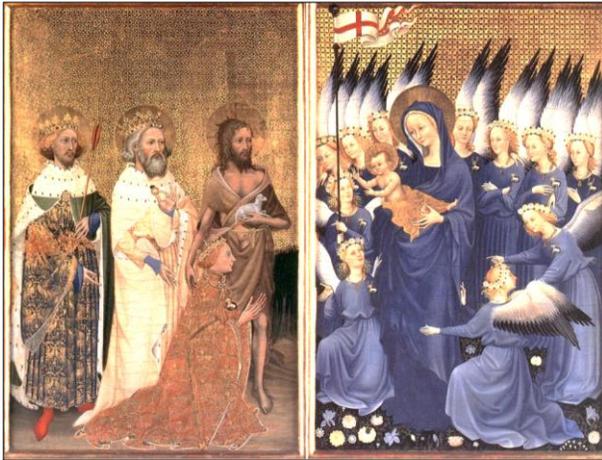
Scientific photographs of the orb at the top of the pennon have allowed us to see that it reflects England from the Channel—as if the Virgin and Child and the assembly of angels

were to be imagined as hovering somewhere above and just south of Dover.<sup>6</sup>

In both the Huntington globe and the Wilton Diptych, therefore, paradise or heaven is associated with England and its patron saint.



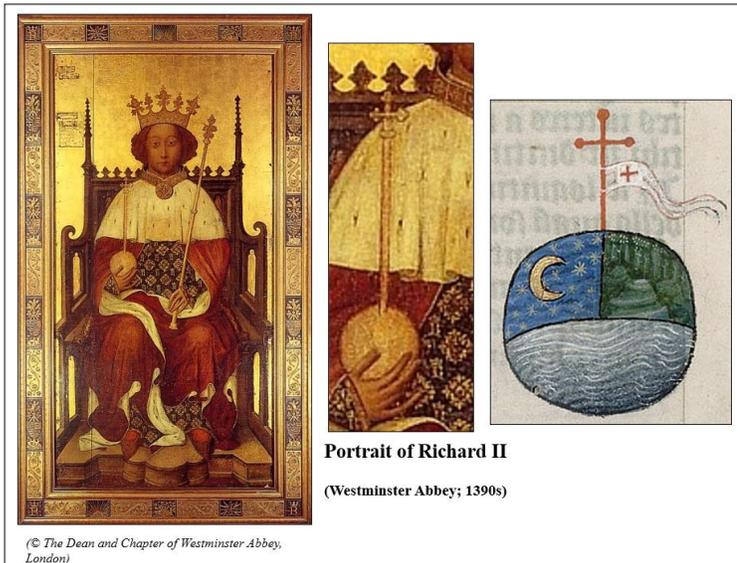
<sup>6</sup> The scans are reproduced from Dillian Gordon, *Making and Meaning: The Wilton Diptych* (London: National Gallery, 1993), 57 (infra-red reflectogram) and 38 (raking light).



Dillian Gordon has hypothesized about the Diptych scene: “The Christ Child has apparently taken [the pennon] and passed it to an attendant angel. The Child is now about to bless Richard who will then

receive back the banner in a reciprocal gesture of feudal exchange. The boy king is to rule England under the protection, and with the blessing, of the Virgin.”<sup>7</sup>

The Huntington’s globe is also quite similar to the orb held in Richard II’s hand in the Westminster Abbey portrait—again, an image contemporary with the *Vox*.



<sup>7</sup> Gordon, *Making and Meaning*, 58.

Finally, although there is no surviving imagery of Richard with St. George, a now-lost polyptych is known to have hung in the English College of Rome. Made c. 1390 but now represented only by two engravings from 1638, the polyptych apparently showed Richard, supported by St. George, presenting the “globe or patterne” of England to Mary. The painting bore the inscription: “This [England] is your dowry, oh holy Virgin, therefore rule over it, oh Mary” (*Dos tua Virgo pia haec est; quare rege Maria*).<sup>8</sup>



Thus the iconography again connected Richard and St. George with political ideology about England being under the Virgin’s guardianship.

It seems very probable that the basic archer iconography, as seen in the Hunterian and British Library manuscripts, was a product of Gower’s own

<sup>8</sup> Selby Whittingham, "The Chronology of the Portraits of Richard II," *The Burlington Magazine* 113 (1971): 12-21, at 12-15.

assertive appropriation and reconfiguration of pre-existing source-imagery. The complex and learned nature of this unique iconography, and its appropriateness to the particular text it is attached to, strongly suggest that the author had a hand in its generation.

It is also likely that the elements added to the Huntington image had a direct connection to Gower himself, since, again, they imply intellectual sophistication, as well as access to Ricardian iconography. The upgrading of the archer's status (as reflected in his courtly apparel) may consort with the upscaling of the imagery's ambitions. By evoking the regal and religious iconography generated in the king's campaign of public self-representation, Gower and his artist made more explicit the critique of the king that is implicit in the other images. Gower's archer had narrowed his aim, to strike specifically at the England of Richard II.



Finally, the archer image, in all its forms, aligns with an obsession visible throughout the corpus of Gowerian text and image, as well as in his tomb: a highly self-

aware creator deploying multiple strategies to ensure ongoing recognition of his authorial presence and pretensions. As a layman creating a Latin text addressed to a clerical audience, Gower did not hesitate to claim high authority in his condemnation of moral failure.

### Bibliography

- Coleman, Joyce. "Illuminations in Gower's Manuscripts." In *The Routledge Research Companion to John Gower*. Edited by R. F. Yeager, Brian Gastle, and Ana Sáez-Hidalgo. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Fisher, John. *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer*. New York: New York University Press, 1964.
- Gordon, Dillian. *Making and Meaning: The Wilton Diptych*. London: National Gallery, 1993.
- Gower, John. *Complete Works*, vols. 2-3: *Confessio Amantis*, ed. G. C. Macaulay. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901.
- Gower, John. *Minor Latin Works*. Edited and translated by R. F. Yeager. Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005.  
<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/yeager-gower-minor-latin-works-introduction>
- Gregorius I. "Homiliarium in Ezechielem prophetam." *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 76, col. 0785.
- Pietrasanta, Silvestro. *Tesserae gentilitiae*. Rome: Corbelletti, 1638.  
<https://archive.org/details/tesseraegentilit00piet/page/n4>.
- Scott, Kathleen L. 1996. *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390-1490*: vol. 1: *Text and Illustrations*; vol. 2: *Catalogue and Indexes*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers.
- Whittingham, Selby. "The Chronology of the Portraits of Richard II." *The Burlington Magazine* 113 (1971): 12-21.
- Wickert, Maria. *Studien zu John Gower*. Cologne: Kölner Universitäts-Verlag, 1953.

Joyce Coleman  
 University of Oklahoma  
[joyce.coleman@ou.edu](mailto:joyce.coleman@ou.edu)