Introducing Gower Shorts

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The articles in this special issue of *Accessus* were initially presented in conference sessions sponsored by The Gower Project as well as the John Gower Society at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo in 2018-2019 and the Modern Language Association Conference held in Chicago in 2019. Authors were invited to submit moderately expanded versions of their presentations (along with bibliography and footnotes) for conversion into the more durable and transmittable form that electronic publication offers. In academic settings such as those noted above wherein conversations begin to take shape only to be interrupted by time constraints, memories of the topics at hand can be forgotten all-too-often and too soon. "Gower Shorts" are thus intended to preserve such moments by transposing texts vocalized and delivered with the energy of personal performance into a fixed form hyperlinked to relevant sources and commentary for enriched contextualization. This issue offers audiences both local and worldwide an opportunity to participate in the exchanges that occurred in those conference rooms over a year ago.

Joyce Coleman's "Global Gower: The Archer Aiming at the World" seems especially appropriate to lead this issue of *Accessus* since it focuses on an image that has become an iconic representation of Gower's social critique. In her brilliantly illustrated article of what is perhaps the "first image of an English author in an English language manuscript" (aside from Layamon in the *Brut*), Coleman argues that Gower not only assumes the role of preacher shooting his barbs at corrupt individuals and estates, but also takes on the dual identity of philosopher/prophet whose strategies for unveiling top-to-bottom corruption are far more complex than they appear to be. Bringing both text and image to bear on her reading of the poet/archer, Coleman envisions

John the Baptist presciently signaling the need for change in fourteenth-century England. Since there is no known antecedent for Gower's archer portrait, Coleman suggests that this may be read as an indication of a "highly self-aware creator deploying multiple strategies to ensure ongoing recognition of his authorial presence and pretensions." This is a reading that encourages an expanded understanding of the extent of the poet's self-authorization and agency.

In his contribution to new ways of thinking about Gower, Roger Ladd's article undoes the commonplace idea that estates satire is a backdrop for all of the poet's work. Not so for the *Confessio Amantis*, he says. Instead "the vast majority of the poem steps away from that model to create an encyclopedic vision of the Seven Deadly Sins as articulated through (love) story." This is not to say that Gower's penchant for estates satire has given way to "an obsession with love" but rather that his concerns are enfolded into attention-getting narratives cast within this framework, "transformed from a conventional critique of a single estate or sub-estate (like merchants or grocers) to an analysis of people's pervasive susceptibility to, among other things, the sins of materialism and avarice." Ladd shifts the conventional argument for Gower's pacifist fantasies of sociopolitical concord to one focused on materialistic interests. So aptly subtitled "Harmonious Materialism in the *Confessio Amantis*," Ladd demonstrates how Gower's finger-pointing critique is transformed into "a more comprehensive sense of how our economic interactions need to be part of how we all get along, in large part by making extensive use of royalty and similarly prominent figures as main protagonists, so that their concerns map directly to those of the communities they are supposed to rule."

In descriptions that resonate with our current historical moment, Craig Bertolet's "Dark Money: Gower, Echo, and 'Blinde Avarice'" reminds us that some things never change. In a reading that compares the allegorical characters of the *Mirour de l'omme* with Echo of the

Confessio Amantis, the problem of an economy in which coinage has been replaced by paper takes on a sinister aspect. Mercantile exchange is no longer to be trusted when the "darkness and deceit that comes with Avarice" supersedes honest brokerage. Duplicitous brokers greedy for gain without the accountability that comes with it are exposed in Bertolet's cross-textual reading. For Gower there are consequences for those who engage in dishonest exchange: "Echo is a useful example of Gower's consistent understanding of Avarice. It is only self-serving and works in darkness to deceive people." In foregrounding these interrelated issues Bertolet reveals a consistency in worldview made more apparent in this perceptive reading.

Will Rogers takes us down another path in his short piece on "One Voice, Ancient and Resigned" in which he addresses not only Gower's presumed old age in the *Confessio Amantis*, but also the *sounds* of an aging voice or, more accurately, the means by which it is *made to sound*. After citing a contemporary study on the elderly voice's physical aspects, Rogers focuses on Gower's construction of vocalization based on the Ciceronian and Maximianus texts, *De Senectute* and the *Elegies*, respectively. Rogers is interested in "what Gower seems to imagine old people sound like, and how this old voice, a kind of vocal articulation of the *puer senex*, operates in opposition to some of the youthful voices in late fourteenth-century England." Situated within a context of Latin lyrics, the Middle English "In Praise of Peace" and *Confessio*, and Shakespeare's *Pericles*, Rogers' paper tracks "how this poetic voice has lost bodily strength but has gained a magnificent 'resonance'." We can almost hear the poet speaking aloud, gesticulating pointedly, and delivering his message with gusto and auctoritas.

Lacey M. Wolfer's reading of Gower's "Tale of Narcissus" and queer temporality underscores the matter of time in the poet's adaptation of his sources, especially the stories re-told from Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Wolfer reads the Narcissus story as "a transgender

narrative of self-recognition and identity that ultimately cannot be sustained in a hostile environment." Located in Book I of the *Confessio Amantis*, the tale is told as a caution against s*urquiderie*, a term used to indicate "presumption, arrogance [and] self-importance. . . . Those who presume believe confidently in things that are not true, believing themselves to be not only more intelligent, more beautiful than their peers, and generally better, but attaining a level of self-absorption that finally renders them unable to worship God." In Wolfer's reading, tales such as this "imagine temporal possibilities outside of the heteronormative ideal . . . . The ability to look beyond realism, beyond the seen, to other connected pasts which are somehow queerly present, can help reshape our ideas of how time and temporality can function."

In "Standing in the Dark: Sloth and Stability, Paralysis and Perseverance in Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*,"Andrea Schutz reads the "other" Iphis story, not the "Iphis and Iante" that has captured the attention of so many Gowerians of late, but the Iphis whose tale addresses a youth's love for a maiden named Araxarathen. Found in Book IV on Sloth, Gower's reworking of this Ovidian narrative recounts what happens when the lady falls asleep while her would-be lover suffers from a bout of love sickness so severe as to drive him to suicide. "All parts of Sloth restrict movement, action, or thought. . . . The end stage of Sloth—*Tristesse*, that is, despair, obduracy—signals the awareness of lost time and self, and locks the sufferer into the conviction that no action is possible, neither repentance nor redemption. There are no second chances." Both players in this game of love are turned to stone: he into a monument; she into a statue. Schutz's poignant rendering and revelatory reading underscore the very Aristotelian point that ultimately Genius the Confessor will make to Amans: be neither too hard nor too soft when it comes to love.

In their tech-savvy presentation on "Gower as Data: Exploring the Application of Machine Learning to Gower's Middle English Corpus," Kara McShane and Alvin Grissom bring computer technology and linguistics to bear on a reading of select words in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. By applying machine learning to Gower's English poetic, they are able to demonstrate how certain words—*rage*, *vice*, *love*, *lust*—generate different meanings when read in various verbal contexts. Their collaboration shows how the digital humanities can be used to reveal something about a text that would otherwise go unnoticed. The examples they provide show us, for instance, how "emotive terms" can be embedded within a cluster of words that produce unexpected outcomes. "Word embeddings are based on the principle that 'You shall know a word by the company it keeps'." This kind of word search has produced some surprises, as have other computer-generated techniques, such as Long Short-term Memory models that have the ability to predict language sequences. The examples that McShane and Grissom provide open up other ways of thinking about Gower's poetic.

Needless to say, there is something new and significant in each of these short articles on Gowerian texts and contexts, whether it focuses on the poet's concerns for harmonious economics, his awareness of the signifying value of an "old" persona and voice, his juxtaposition of image and text, his comprehending stance on the need for compassion and humanity, or his understanding of the meaning of words and the workings of time. In short, the authors of Gower Shorts remind us once again that the poet/prophet speaks not only to the sophistication of creative techniques and technologies of the past but also points to the applications that such innovations may have on the hermeneutics of the future.

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