John Gower's Magical Rhetoric

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John Gower’s Magical Rhetoric

“He was a gret rethorien / He was a gret magicien,” John Gower declares of Ulysses in Book VI of the *Confessio Amantis*, thereby capturing deep connections between rhetoric and magic.¹ Rhetoric depends upon verbal spellbinding while magic relies on compelling figures of speech, and both embrace a mystical concept of words.² Rhetoric and magic each admit of “white” and “black” practices, benign expressions such as fact-based argumentation or agricultural fertility charms that serve the community as well as malign manifestations such as deceitful persuasions and sexually manipulative enchantments that benefit only the perverse speaker. Throughout the *Confessio Amantis* references to magic abound. They occur when Genius compares love’s labors to alchemy, provides *exempla* of necromancers who trick their lovers, or lists authorities such as Zoroaster whom the priest believes Amans should know. Reciprocally, discussions of rhetoric recur throughout the *Confessio*: they surface in multiple allusions to Cicero, discussions of verbal style, and sermons on “trouthe” in language. Because enchantments are often performed through formulaic utterances, magic can be classified as a type of elocutio and thus brought into rhetoric’s sphere.³ For Gower, this sphere is governed by

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the almighty Word, imbuing verbal magic with divine creative force and modeling a benevolent speech act to which rhetoric can aspire.

In the *Confessio Amantis* magic enters into rhetorical lore not only in the description of Ulysses and the various references mentioned above, but also—and most importantly—in Book VII’s definition of the art of “Rethorique,” which James J. Murphy identified long ago as the first discussion of rhetoric in the English language. Book VII’s lecture on “Rethorique” draws explicit connections between rhetoric and magic by identifying the W/word as an influence common to both fields. Murphy’s work inaugurates a distinguished body of scholarship situating Gower’s poetry within the history of rhetoric, and Gower critics have contributed observations on the poet’s innovations within that history, uses of figures of speech, and philosophies concerning language. Although this criticism has, with a few exceptions, emphasized secular

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viewpoints such as gendered or political readings of Book VII. I wish to highlight rhetoric’s links in the Confessio to charms, alchemy, and the celestial capacities of the Christian Word. Certainly, interpretations of gendered or political contexts for Gower’s “Rhetorique” inform this article and represent significant aspects of the text: since Book VII constitutes a speculum principum based on Brunetto Latini’s Trésor, the commentary on rhetoric occurs during instruction in masculine rulership. In addition to investigating the magical rhetoric of male

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rulers and scholars, I rely on the nuanced readings of gender critics in Gower studies when connecting abusive speech to sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to observe the prominent supernaturalism in Gower’s rhetorical theory. A mystical concept of rhetoric explains why Gower credits the discipline with such transformative power.

To investigate John Gower’s magical rhetoric, this article begins with the Confessio’s negative exempla of necromancers whose charms crush, degrade, and facilitate the rape of women. The male domination reinscribed in their incantations figures for the wide range of personal and political abuses perpetrated by those who pervert speech. These necromancers, including Ulysses and Nectanabus, prove the power of magical eloquence but also demonstrate its need for moral and ethical recuperation—for a rhetorical theory that exposes how enchanting speech can serve evil ends and outlines strategies for speaking up for the good. In answer to the malevolent verbal maneuverings of those like Ulysses and Nectanabus, Gower recovers a benevolent rhetoric of enchantment from classical theories on a reiterative plain style and an Augustinian concept of the Word. While conjurors and orators might intone compelling phrases for good or for ill, the truth plainly and repeatedly stated works a persuasive magic for both the individual and the common good. Constructing the truth and adding spiritual impetus to mesmerizing figures of speech, the Word—the core of all creation (including rhetorical invention)—invests any oration with divine influence. More potent than the stars, stones, and

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herbs manipulated by magicians but classified with them in necromancy, the Word, manifested in human speech, has the ultimate suasive influence. It is at once the basis of all incantations and the channel for Christian purpose in rhetoric.

Before Gower epitomizes the field of rhetoric in the *Confessio*’s Book VII, he offers complex characterizations of magicians whose cunning language gives them malign influence over others but no defense against punishments for their own sins. The “Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus,” declaring the former both “rethorien” and “magicien” and casting him as both wise man and imprudent lover of witches, is a case in point. In this tale Ulysses is conversant in all the liberal arts and master over spells woven by Calypso and Circe to bring him into sexual thralldom. “Thei couthe moche,” Genius declares of Circe’s and Calypso’s capacities, but “he couthe more” (They knew much, but he knew more). In this comparison, “more” is constituted by advanced training in subjects that are catalogued below, by and large texts that are written by men for men.

He was a worthy knight and king
And clerk knowende of every thing . . . .
Of Tullius the rethorique,
Of King Zorastes the magique,
Of Tholomé th’astronomie,
Of Plato the philosophie,
Of Daniel the slepi dremes,

He was a worthy knight and king
And a clerk who knew everything.
Of Tullius the rhetoric
Of King Zoroaster the magic
Of Ptolemy the astronomy
Of Plato the philosophy
Of Daniel the interpretation of dreams

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8 CA, VI. 1391–1788.

9 CA, VI. 1441.
Of Neptune ek the water stremes, Of Neptune the ocean streams,
Of Salomon and the proverbs, Of Solomon the proverbs,
Of Macer al the strengthe of herbes, Of Macer the strength of herbs,
And the phisique of Ypocras, And the physic of Hippocrates
And lich unto Pictagoras And just like Pythagoras
Of surgerie he knew the cures. Of surgery he knew the cures.10

Ulysses’s twin expertise in rhetoric and magic is noted first in references to Tullius and
Zoroaster above, while his mastery over the other disciplines could be said to sustain rhetorical
and magical acts. Proficiency in Judaic commonplaces and methods of construal serve rhetorical
studies, while astronomy, medicine, and herbal lore inform enchantments. In addition, Ulysses is
a navigator, whose skills will finally bring him home, and a philosopher capable of synthesizing
his vast learning into a coherent worldview. The breadth of his education is astonishing,
encompassing the most famous writings from various religious and cultural traditions.
Mysteriously, Ulysses is privy to discoveries from both before and after his own lifetime. While
Kurt Olsson observes that “Ulysses’ knowledge lacks an ordinatio, or a field of topics to
organize remembrance,” it is actually rhetoric with its offices of dispositio and memoria that can
aid the hero in categorizing, digesting, and recalling the authors above and their famous
contributions.11 In the contests with Circe and Calypso, Ulysses relies on a masculine body of
knowledge that clearly enhances his spells and abilities to ward off predation. Specifically,

10 CA, VI. 1397–8, 1401–11.
11 Kurt Olsson, John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio
Ulysses’s command of rhetoric and magic (and related disciplines) protects him from bestial lust and metamorphosis into a beast, the fate met by his shipmates.

Instead of merely extricating himself, however, from the clutches of those who would detain him from Penelope, Ulysses turns the threat of besotted degradation back upon Calypso and Circe, their struggle to resist the itinerant hero described in the following lines:

But they could not discover any art
Through which Ulysses might be deceived

Or be prevented from trapping them

And bringing them into such a condition

That they were both with him besotted;

And through the knowledge of his art

He played with them so well his part

That he begat with Circes a child.

He kept himself sober and made them wild,

He set himself so far above

That, retaining their goods and their love,

Ignoring what anyone might think,

Free from their power, to his ship he goes.

The two women languish because they could not discover the male-centric arts available to Ulysses. Winning the gendered contest of sexual-magical manipulation through his privileged education, Ulysses might seem from a masculinist point of view to emerge as a “sober,” superior,

\[12\] CA, VI. 1454–66.
and rational hero whose education paves the way for his escape. As Claire Fanger points out, however, Ulysses has cheapened his liberal arts education in this engagement with Calypso and Circe;\textsuperscript{13} he has deployed higher learning to sway bodies instead of minds, to serve himself rather than a community. He is in the end no better than the witches: all of them use spellbinding words to control and demean others, but Ulysses has more resources in accomplishing debased ends. What Gower aims to supply in Book VII’s “Rethorique” lecture, in contrast, are verbal tools for achieving admirable aims.

Ulysses’s degradation of rhetoric and women on his journey home is consistent with his culminating act in Troy of wheedling Antenor into betraying Ilium. In the “Rethorique” lecture, Gower emphasizes and deplores the latter incident of Ulysses’s treachery and deceitful argumentation. For Ulysses, anyone considered other (whether the counselor to an enemy king or a nymph on a magical island) is subject to the enticements of enchanting oratory and the violence that attends cruel persuasions. As the “Rethorique” lecture maintains, however, others deserve the plain truth, and in dealing ethically and accurately with adversaries, the orator has an excellent chance of prevailing. Instead, Ulysses’s magical-verbal victories involve obfuscation and devastation. Vitiated by disgraceful behavior and having impeded the understanding of those he wishes to dominate, Ulysses’s own mental powers grow dim. He cannot understand a dream foreshadowing his punishment for the liaison with Circe: “Uluxes, thogh that he be wys, / With al his wit in his avis, / The mor that he his swevene acompteth, / The lasse he wot what it amonteth” (Ulysses, though he be wise, / With all his wit to advise him, / The more he tries to

account for the dream, / The less he understood its significance). Neither his magical powers nor the hermeneutic skills learned from the Book of Daniel and honed in rhetoric studies could illuminate the prophetic dream concerning Telegonus’s fatal advance. Here, as elsewhere, Gower heavily weights the intentions of the rhetorical interpreter and speaker, and though malevolent purposes are often realized, the truthful, straightforward rhetorician can hope (unlike Ulysses) to triumph in the long run.

While Gower’s flawed Ulysses maintains some heroic qualities—the fortitude to defeat superhuman threats and the prudence to choose the queenly wife Penelope—in the “Tale of Nectanabus” that immediately follows, the necromancer whose persuasions and enchantments deceive Olympias offers an even more negative exemplum. Whereas Ulysses sometimes deploys charms and blandishments in the service of larger purposes like preserving the Greeks—revealing a slice of the Word’s full potential, as Gower will argue later, to master the world—Nectanabus operates for his private satisfactions alone. Nectanabus’s actions and words are so reprehensible that Genius speculates in the beginning of the tale about why God allowed such trickery to “slyden under His suffrance” (slide under his watch). Nectanabus, a former king of Egypt whose magic could not prevent the loss of his realm to enemies, enters Macedonia, where he finds the beautiful Queen Olympias alone while her husband is away at war. His inability to rule his kingdom indicates a lack of self-regulation, and in contrast with Ulysses, the former

14 CA, VI. 1575–79.

15 CA, VI. 1789–2366.

monarch of Egypt is already controlled by base emotions before he attempts the magical control of Olympias. Overcome with lust, Nectanabus dupes the faithful and innocent woman into having sex with him through a combination of mystifying speech, mysterious invasion of her dreams, and shapeshifting.

First, he approaches her with a false prophecy that she will conceive a powerful child by the god Hammon of Lybia, and although Olympias wants stronger proof, she is spiritually affected and confused by his strange predictions: “Sche wiste littel what he mente, / For it was guile and sorcerie, / Al that sche tok for prophecie” (She understood little of what he meant, / For it was guile and sorcery, / All that she took for prophecy). It is specifically Nectanabus’s enchanting rhetoric that disorients Olympias and forces her to place it in a verbal category with which she is familiar (prophecy). Exploiting her befuddlement concerning his oratorical genre, Nectanabus turns to occult calculations in order to effect what he has “foretold.” Although prophecies announce matters that have been foreordained, the sorcerer deploys magic to transform his false words into a divination:

His chambre be himselve tok,
And overtorneth many a bok,
And thurgh the craft of artemage
Of wex he forgeth an ymage.
He loketh his equacions
And ek the constellacions,
He loketh the conjuncions,
He took himself alone to his chamber,
And turned the pages of many a book,
And through the craft of magic
He forges an image of wax.
He looks into his equations
And also the constellations,
He looks into planetary conjunctions,

\[\text{17 CA VI. 1950–52.}\]
He loketh the recepcions, And reciprocal alignments,  
His signe, his houre, his ascendent, His sign, his hour, his ascendant,  
And drawth fortune of his assent: And draws a good fortune:  
The name of queene Olimpias The name of Queen Olympias  
In thilke ymage write was Was written on the wax image  
Amiddles in the front above. Front and center.  
And thus to winne his lust of love And thus to win his love’s lust  
Nectanabus this werk hath diht;¹⁸ Nectanabus accomplished this work.

The wax figure functions as a simulacrum of Olympias, which the sorcerer can literally hold in his own hands, while the elaborate calculations yield the time most fortunate for Nectanabus’s groping. Nectanabus sends her a dream of sexual union with Hammon to provide proof for his statements, and the next night he appears in her chamber as a divine dragon that converts into a man for a sexual encounter. He has objectified Olympias in a figurine that will influence her body and assumed divinity only to “win his love’s lust”: the multiple imitations and reduplications that he oversees—the creation of the wax figure in Olympias’s image and of the dragon-man from Hammon’s legend—are debased versions of the creative iterations of the Word, which lovingly manifests aspects of the godhead in plenitude.

Ironically, part of Nectanabus’s prophetic invention is unwittingly prescient: the sorcerer had promised that an invincible child would emerge from Olympias’s union with “Hammon,” and indeed Alexander the Great was born from Nectanabus’s deceit. Nectanabus’s knowledge of

¹⁸ CA, VI. 1955–69.
the stars allowed him a window onto human destiny. Seb Falk observes that the figure of Nectanabus represents both the sophistication of Gower’s astronomical sources and the most corrupt abuses of what the stars can reveal.\(^\text{19}\) While Ulysses rely on unspecified verbal arts to countermand and redirect the enchantments of Calypso and Circes, Nectanabus employs one specific kind of astrologically dependent spell for his wicked ends: a “carecte.”\(^\text{20}\) As Tamara F. O’Callaghan has demonstrated, Gower alludes to “carectes” throughout the *Confessio Amantis* to signify a charm invoking astrological alignments, and Nectanabus deploys this kind of incantation in a self-interested display of image magic in which the simulacrum of Olympias assumes great power over the woman herself.\(^\text{21}\) In the context of the *Confessio Amantis*, both Ulysses’s magical eloquence and Nectanabus’s charms constitute immoral speech acts proceeding from evil, self-interested intentions—*exempla*, Genius explains, of “the vice of Sorcerie” showing how the abuse of enchanted language debases the lover, betrays the beloved, and in the case of Ulysses’s deceit of Antenor, even destroys civilizations.\(^\text{22}\)


\(^\text{20}\) CA, VI. 2006, 2340.


\(^\text{22}\) CA, VI. 1386.
In the *Confessio Amantis*’s rhetoric lecture in Book VII, however, Genius moves toward a more positive view of verbal magic by connecting spells and “carectes” to the holy and inventive Word. All charms and rhetorical genres depend upon God’s original speech act; it is the speaker’s intention that establishes whether the Word’s creative inspiration is used in the service of goodness. Already in Book VI, Genius comments that incantations might be used for “good entente,” and a recuperation of verbal magic in Book VII depends upon *exempla* rejecting the models of Ulysses and Nectanabus. As a confessor, Genius is well-positioned to identify infractions of speech and suitable restitutions. The rhetoric lecture argues openly against Ulysses’s fraudulent persuasions and outlines benign forms of elocution for countermanding evil speech that are not practiced by the Greek hero. It deplores Ulysses’s deceitful language in persuading Antenor to betray Ilium and proposes that a “facounde / Of goodly wordes” (capaciousness of goodly words) such as the hero possessed be used only to advance the truth. It pits Cicero’s straightforward speech in the Roman Senate against the obfuscations of corrupt magicians and disingenuous orators. In Book VII, Nectanabus’s astrological lore and devious spells are supplanted by Aristotelian knowledge and ethical discourse, bodies of learning that are also allied with occult practices in Gower’s source texts, but there the occult aids good government rather than dupes leaders and their wives. Having been told that Aristotle joined Nectanabus in tutoring the young Alexander the Great, Amans, just digesting the tale of the magician, successfully entreats Genius for an address that might have issued from the philosopher, a thinker better prepared to assess, theorize, and manage the mystical properties of language.

23 CA, VI. 1305.

24 CA, VII. 1550–63.
Genius responds to Amans’s request by delivering a treatise in Book VII on all seven liberal arts, including rhetoric, and their practical applications. Relating both ancient and contemporary perspectives on all the disciplines, Genius’s ethos is transformed through his own discursive magic from a purveyor of romance tales, mythologies, and historical lore to an academic authority. Book VII represents Genius as a knowledgeable speaker much closer to John Gower in propria persona than the dutiful priest trailing behind Venus.25 At first, in subservience to the goddess, the confessor hesitates to assume a scholarly mantle, saying:

I am somdel therof destraught,  
For it is noght to the matière  
Of love, why we sitten hiere  
To schryve, so as Venus bad.  
Bot natheles, for it is glad  
So as thou seist, for thin apprise  
To hiere of suche thinges wise,

I am somewhat distraught about this  
Because it does not pertain to material  
Concerning love, the very reason we sit here  
In confession, as Venus bade us.  
But nevertheless, because it is good  
As you say, for your own understanding  
To hear of such wise things

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25 For an in depth and nuanced reading of the various personae in the Confessio Amantis, see Matthew W. Irvin, The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2014). Irvin’s analysis concentrates on the tensions between the thoughts and utterances of Amans and those of Gower the author / narrator. Since the beginning of modern scholarship on Gower, many critics have described dissonances, as well, between Genius’s moralizing and Gower’s direction of the Confessio’s tales. The best explanation of how Genius comes to approximate the poet’s voice is by James Simpson (Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s Anticlaudianus and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 167-97), who argues that Genius “enforms” himself (gives form to an authorial self) through the educational treatise of Book VII. In Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower’s Confessio Amantis (Victoria, B.C.: ELS, 1993), I argue that Genius’s development is spurred by his increasing disgust with consanguineous relationships and thus his rejection of Venus and Cupid as spiritual models.
Wherof thou myht the time lisse,       By which you might pass the time,
So as I can, I schal thee wisse.       As best I can, I will instruct you.

Doing the best he can—which turns out to be very good, indeed—Genius gains confidence and
seems to rise above his station as Venus’s priest. This is a leap he has made before (for instance,
when discoursing on Christ’s peace and just wars in Book III), but the presentation on rhetoric
and the liberal arts seriously and permanently expands the scope of his expertise.26 James
Simpson and others explain how the priest’s understanding outruns Venus’s realm in Book VII
and prepares the way for his own persona and that of Amans to recombine in the narrator “John
Gower,” who concludes the poem.27 Constructing a compendium on the liberal arts improves the
teacher (Genius) as much as it edifies the student (Amans).

The complex tripartite organization of the liberal arts lecture in Book VII, reflecting
Genius’s emerging position as an encyclopedic instructor, places each of the seven arts in one of
three epistemic categories—theory, rhetoric, or practice—with Latin glosses to guide the reader
in the order of and hierarchies inherent in the disciplines. Derived from Aristotle’s classification
of the theoretical, practical, and productive sciences, these categories of learning were loosely
available to Gower in the Trésor; however, while the Trésor divides philosophy into Theory,
Practice, and Logic, with rhetoric comprising the final discipline of the practical arts and
dialectic being the chief subject under logic, Gower creates an elevated place for rhetoric in

26 CA, III. 2251–2362.

27 Simpson, Sciences and the Self, 167–97. See also Georgiana Donavin, “Rhetorical Gower:
Aristotelianism in the Confessio Amantis’s Treatment of ‘Rethorique’,” in John Gower:
Book VII’s academic triad. Rita Copeland calls Gower’s reconfiguration of the disciplines a “most radical revision of the place of rhetoric in the system of the sciences,” even in an age of shifting concepts of the discipline, and Götz Schmitz emphasizes the moral imperative given to rhetoric in Gower’s schema. “Rethorique” takes its place between “Theorique” and “Practique,” a disciplinary fulcrum that allows for the conveyance of theology and science and the working out of practical knowledge in truthful and artful speech. Uplifting “Rethorique” to an epistemological category announces the importance of the field in understanding the compositional strategies for the *Confessio Amantis*, especially Gower’s pervasive practice of deploying repetitive figures of speech in a plain style. In the complex and learned Book VII, Genius amends Nectanabus’s necromantic lore with Aristotelian philosophy; the priest expounds upon astronomical and geometrical concepts that go beyond Nectanabus’s calculations and supplies principles for a veracious rhetoric that surpasses the sorcerer’s duplicitous “carectes.”

Even while transitioning from Nectanabus’s instructions to Aristotle’s, the poem maintains an interest in necromancy, partly because Aristotle was believed to be the author of the mystical *Secretum Secretorum*. The *Secretum Secretorum* is based on the ninth-century Arabic

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28 Schmitz points out that in Gower’s rearrangement of the disciplines of the *trivium*, rhetoric occupies “a higher, philosophical plane.” See Schmitz, “Rhetoric and Fiction,” 126.


30 Robert Steele, ed., *Secretum Secretorum, Opera hactenus inedita Roger Baconi V*
Sirr al-asrār purporting to be Aristotle’s book of advice to Alexander and to contain personal letters sent between the famous philosopher and his mighty pupil.  

Although the Secretum Secretorum was sometimes valued more as a medical than an ethical treatise because of its scientific content (both occult and otherwise), its reputation as a book of privileged information passed from a great philosopher to a great king guaranteed that copies were prepared in the manner of a speculum principum. It is not known what version of the Secretum Gower read and used for his own speculum principum in the Confessio’s Book VII, but as Mahmoud A. Manzalaouï has shown, the Secretum underwent additions and reorganizations, and by the fourteenth century it was readily available in a Short Form and a Long Form, both versions demonstrating that the secret of secrets is wisdom. 

Ostensibly a ruby ring made potent by


33 Mahmoud A. Manzalaouï, Introduction, in Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions, ed. Mahmoud A. Manzalaouï (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), xi. On various additions and subtractions to Philip of Tripoli’s translation of the Secretum Secretorum, see Williams, The Secret of Secrets, 142–47. Maria Wickert argues that Gower used a manuscript of the Secretum with a Christian inflection, although she does not suggest a manuscript to which the medieval poet might have had access. See Maria Wickert, Studies in John Gower, trans. Robert J. Meindl, 2nd ed. (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2016), 216–17, n. 69.
planetary dust and guaranteed to set the wearer at the top of society and far from mortal danger, the secret of secrets may be impossible to obtain; lacking this ring, the ruler’s talisman is merit, and the text that teaches virtue through which merit is won—the *Secretum Secretorum*—substitutes for the ring.34 Good advice, then, issuing from a *speculum principum*, teaches leaders to protect themselves (and therefore their people) when the magical ruby is unattainable. This cluster of ideas—the power in charms and stones infusing the noble person and existing parallel to prudent words—presents itself also in the *Confessio*’s treatment of rhetoric.35

The Latin head verses to Book VII’s section on rhetoric, comparing the powers of “sermo” (speech) to those of mystical stones and herbs, ensure that the reader attends to the connections among magic, the perception of truth, and persuasive oratory:

Compositi pulcra sermonis verba placere
Principio poterunt, veraque fine placent.
Herba, lapis, sermo, tria sunt virtute repleta,
Vis tamen ex verbi pondere plura facit.

(Beautiful words of a speech will please
In the beginning, and true words please in the end.
Herb, gem, speech: these three are full of power,
Though the force from the weight of the word is greater.)

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34 Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 42–43.

35 For an analysis of connections during the English Renaissance between numinous materials such as herbs and stones and the prudent or curative word, see, Louise M. Bishop *Words, Stones, and Herbs: The Healing Word in Early Modern England.* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007).
The Latin verses’ first two lines announce their indebtedness to Aristotle by echoing the *Rhetoric*, I. i. 12–14, which states that “that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove and more likely to persuade” than false but beautifully adorned ideas. The tales of Ulysses and Nectanabus have already demonstrated how well-wrought words please and deceive the innocent, while the narrator’s perspicacious judgments of their oratory please in the end. The Middle English lecture following the Latin verses repeats the attribution of Gower’s rhetorical theory to Aristotle: “The Philosophre amonges alle / Forthi commendeth this science, / Which hath the reule of eloquence” (Among all [the liberal arts] the Philosopher / Therefore commends this science [rhetoric], / Which oversees eloquence). Genius will lecture on the kind of rhetoric that Aristotle recommends: an accurate, perpetually efficacious argument in a plain style. The Latin verses’ last two lines, in their reference to magical substances, allude to the *Secretum Secretorum*’s mystical ruby that parallels the word of wisdom; they also hint, as I will argue later, at the trinitarian Word. The final lines declare the potency of enchanted stones and plants such as the *Secretum*’s ruby, the Philosopher’s Stone, or medicinal herbs and claim that the “W/word” is mightier than even these numinous objects. While the Stone must emerge in alchemical procedures and herbs may be concocted into medicines, the W/word itself—without scientific or culinary intervention—functions as the principle of all invention and transformation, verbal and otherwise, and is therefore more influential than any other mystical properties. Herbal charms and stones engraved with patterns connected to the astrological *decans* accrue power

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37 CA, VII. 1542–44.
through association with the zodiac, but the W/word creates change independently without necessarily aligning with or making explicit reference to the stars. It is the supernatural W/word that becomes the cornerstone of Gower’s definition of rhetoric, the W/word with which the orator enchants the audience into an unshakeable belief in what is right (not merely an ephemeral persuasion in what is satisfying). The mystical W/word, necessary for all incantations, renders the magical Christological.

The syncretic Aristotelian context of the Confessio’s rhetoric section, framed by the Latin head verses, relies not only on the Secretum Secretorum, but also on a host of Aristotelian texts sweeping across Western Europe by the fourteenth century. Aristotle’s Rhetoric had been available in Latin translation and commentary since the thirteenth century, and those without exposure to the primary text might access tables concerning the main Aristotelian rhetorical concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos. In “Pathos and Pastoralism: Aristotle’s Rhetoric in Medieval England,” Rita Copeland does so much to clarify both the transmission of Aristotle’s Rhetoric and the medieval English uses of it. In “Rhetorical Gower,” I explain the likelihood of the poet’s having participated in some of the traditions that Copeland traces and his awareness of the teachings on the Rhetoric in Giles of Rome’s popular De regimine principum (a mirror for princes so well-liked that John Trevisa translated it into Middle English around 1400). Gower had probably seen the ubiquitous tables summarizing Aristotelian thought and understood Giles’s commentary on the Rhetoric based on William of Moerbeke’s Latin translation.

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addition to the *Rhetoric* and related tables and commentaries, the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, a Greek text translated into Latin and inscribed in Western manuscripts in the fourteenth century, reinforces the idea that the Philosopher conveyed his rhetorical theory to the great conqueror and prompts Genius to report to Amans that “Rethorique” is among the subjects taught to Alexander by Aristotle.\(^{41}\) Although significant questions remain concerning Gower’s means of obtaining a Latin translation of and commentaries on the *Rhetoric* and concerning the combination of popular Pseudo-Aristotelian lore, summary tables of Aristotelian texts, and serious scholarship that informed Gower’s view of Aristotelian rhetorical studies, scholars generally agree that some type of legal education allowed the poet access to sophisticated academic texts.\(^{42}\)

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Gower thus approaches the Confessio’s rhetoric lecture as an Aristotelian who is learned in both the convincing construction of legal documents and the mysterious associations between persuasion and enchantment. He funnels this preparation into the lecture of Genius, whose persona is becoming more knowledgeable and credible. Following the Latin verses that introduce Genius’s treatment of rhetoric, the Middle English discussion covers a wide range of topics concerning rhetoric’s origins and applications while still emphasizing verbal sorcery. I will now briefly summarize those topics before returning to the supernatural W/word, its potential to reverse the evil spells of Ulysses and Nectanabus, and the most ethical and effective rhetorical strategies taught in the “Rethorique” lecture.

Genius’s rhetoric lecture opens by lauding the W/word’s mystical power and God’s gift of speech to humankind alone before it underscores humanity’s responsibility to use this divine verbal gift wisely: “So scholde he be the more honeste, / To whom God gaf so gret a gifte, / And loke wel that he ne schifte / Hise wordes to no wicked us . . . (So humans must be the more honest, / People to whom God gave so great a gift, / And look well that they do not shift / Their words to any wicked use). The lecture points to rhetoric as the discipline that can aid in the wise exchange of heaven-sent language and prepare the student to rebut speeches constructed to deceive, like Ulysses’s sly urging of Antenor. To practice rhetoric honorably, Genius claims, it is necessary to acknowledge and guard the discipline’s power; “Rethorique” crowns the trivium and controls both grammar and logic through its conveyance of the divinely invested W/word. A concluding section provides a historical exemplum of rhetoric’s influence during a constitutional crisis in Rome. Refashioning material from Brunetto Latini’s Trésor, the conclusion mentions

43 CA, VII. 1516–19.
the debates surrounding Catiline’s rebellion and establishes Cicero as a kind of hero-orator in
exposing a plot against the Roman Republic.\footnote{Discussing the Catilinarian orations, Gower adapts Brunetto Latini, \textit{Trésor}, III, xxxiv-xxxvii.} Cicero, Cato, and Silanus, senators who speak straightforwardly in a time of danger, provide an antidote to Ulysses’s epic deceit. According to Genius, Cicero’s candid statements revealing the perils of a revolt against Rome become a model for a literary plain style that captivates the audience with the power of the truth. Among the various topics in the rhetoric lecture, I will focus in what remains on Genius’s treatment of the magical, alchemical, and holy W/word and the spellbinding Ciceronian style that best deploys it.

Within the rhetoric lecture, Gower emphasizes the supernatural W/word, naming it twenty-nine times in 133 lines and repeating in the Middle English lecture the Latin verses’ dictum on the W/word’s superiority to other numinous objects:

\begin{quote}
In ston and gras vertu ther is, \\
But yet the books tell us this, \\
That word above alle ethrli thinges \\
Is vertuous in his doinges\footnote{CA, VII. 1545–49.}
\end{quote}

The word is more efficacious in its “doinges” than any other charmed substances, but like them, alters or shapes reality. In Gower’s expression, the word “enformes” thought, creating ideations through which humanity perceives both natural and supernatural.\footnote{CA, VII. 1638.} This is one reason why the
poet hinges all the liberal arts on the discipline of rhetoric: such “enformacioun” begins with instruction in speech and literacy, progressing to more advanced topics until orators, wise in the seven arts and ready to practice persuasive skills at level, return to rhetoric for guidance in civic and professional participation. Helen Cooper observes that the rhetoric lecture’s statement on the word’s “vertu” underscores the importance of poetry for Gower, “for words have just such a power of metamorphosis, of transformation for worse or for better.”

Hoping for “better,” Gower’s rhetoric advances a verbal alchemy, with the W/word described as an agent of change, like the Philosopher’s Stone. In this view, oratory, revealing the “enformacioun” of the speaker’s views, transmutes the hearer’s mind in the same way that the stone converts base metals. The Middle English reference to “bokes” that treat the transformations wrought by stones, plants, and words not only recalls the Confessio’s debt to the Secretum Secretorum and the talismanic ruby that fosters prudence, but it also points to hermetic works associated with Hermes Trismegistus, whom Gower lists as the originator of alchemy in the Confessio’s Book IV. Scholars such as Stephanie L. Batkie and Matthew W. Irvin have revived discussions of Gower’s hermeticism, comparing alchemy to rhetoric and recalling the scientific sources that G. C. Macaulay and George G. Fox long ago discovered in the Confessio Amantis. The extended passage in Book IV on Labor that mentions Hermes Trismegistus while


48 CA, IV. 2606–07.

49 Recent discussions of alchemy and language in the CA include Irvin, The Poetic Voices of John Gower, 199–203. See also Batkie, “‘Of the parfite medicine’,” 157–68.

50 CA, VII. 2606, 2457–2605. Macaulay argues that Gower relies on the Liber Hermetis de xv stellis et de xv lapidus et xv herbis, xv figures, etc. or on another unidentified source. See Macaulay, Complete Works. Vol. 1, 522. See also George L. Hamilton, “Some Sources of the
encouraging Amans to counteract amorous sloth inspires this comparison by setting textual and alchemical labor side by side. There, a discourse on the industry dedicated to inventing the means of writing—starting with creating the alphabet and culminating in Ciceronian speeches—immediately follows a passage on the alchemical labor of producing the Philosopher’s Stone. While ancient alchemists or rhetoricians such as Cicero accomplished transformative labors, however, such metamorphosing industry has all but disappeared, according to the Confessio’s Book IV; not willing to endorse alchemy as performed in his own generation, Gower points out that contemporary practitioners do not understand the teachings of the ancient masters or have the experience to arrive at the Philosopher’s Stone. In Steele Nowlin’s estimation, Gower believed that fourteenth-century alchemists and poets fail in the same way: supposed experts go through the forms (whether they follow formulae in alchemical treatises or guides to poetic structures in the artes poetriae), but are missing the force of invention to modify metals or move readers. In Book VII’s rhetoric lecture, Gower promotes a rhetoric, enabled by the potent


51 CA, IV. 2363–95.


W/word, in which speakers invent the most straightforward and compelling ways of conveying a mind-altering truth. As Richard Firth Green has argued, a concept of “trouthe” is central to much fourteenth-century writing, but Gower’s concern with veracious language surpasses the norm to pervade almost all of his poetry. Gower wished to return to a time when “[t]he word was lich to the conceite / Without semblant of deceite” (the word conformed to the thought / with no shadow of deceit). He therefore promoted a syncretic Aristotelian rhetoric in which the W/word enables a turn away from the examples of Ulysses or Nectanabus toward the admirable and honest oratory of Cicero.

The W/word, treated morally and ethically, enables this turn but in the discourses of untrustworthy speakers similar to Ulysses and Nectanabus does not guarantee it. Cataloging the many changes that the W/word-as-Philosopher’s Stone catalyzes, Genius notes that the mighty verbum does not always lead to “trouthe.” Says Genius:

With word the wilde beste is daunted,   With the word the wild beast is daunted,  
With word the serpent is enchaunted,   With the word the serpent is enchanted,  
Of word among the men of armes       By a word men in arms have their wounds 
Ben woundes heeled with the charmes,   Healed by means of charms,             
Wher lacketh other medicine;          When other medicine is lacking;        
Word hath under his discipline       The word has under its rule             
Of sorcerie the karectes.            The “karectes” of sorcery.            
The wordes ben of sondri sectes,      Words are of sundry types,

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55 CA, Pro. 113-14.
Of evele and eke of goode also; Of evil and of good also
The wordes maken frend of fo, Words make friend of foe,
And fo of frend, and pes of werre, And foe of friend, and peace of war,
And werre of pes, and out of herre And war of peace, and out of order
The word this worldes cause entriketh, The word this world’s cause betrays,
And reconsileth whan him liketh, And reconciles when it is pleasing.

The W/word can alter health, policy, and diplomacy. It can halt the charging beast and enchant the poisonous snake. It constitutes medicinal charms that close wounds and the “carectes” that fashion human destiny. The mighty W/word can both uplift and crush; it is equally powerful for both good and ill. Here the comparison between rhetoric and alchemy attenuates: while alchemists desire the Philosopher’s Stone to increase the valuation of metals (and a failure to produce the stone does not devalue the metal meant for transformation to gold or silver), a rhetorician like Ulysses might unleash the W/word only to debase the audience, for instance when he convinces Antenor to betray Troy. The possibility of the W/word’s inspiring more enmity, war, and treachery in the world renders an Aristotelian rhetoric that privileges frank argumentation in plain but compelling language even more crucial. The W/word embodies a raw transformative power that must be harnessed by an ethical theory of oratory and as shall be seen, controlled by divine forces. It is “out of order” without rhetorical strategies for consistent content, arrangement, and style. With instruction in ethical and moral speech, however, “Wher

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56 CA, VII. 1565–73.
lacketh good, the word fulfilleth / To make amends for the wrong” (When good fails, the W/word supplies it / To make amends for any wrong.)

In Genius’s description of the W/word’s alchemical influence, Gower shows how to make amends, how to capture attention through sermonic repetition and thus convey a crucial message. Repetition, in fact, supplies the syntax for the W/word’s benign incantations. Genius, Gower’s own priest of the reiterative W/word, conjures his audience with reduplicative figures of speech such as anaphora in “With word the wilde beste is daunted, / With word the serpent is enchaunted.” The next line—“Of word among the men of armes”—continues to intone the opening phrase in a diacope, with a different preposition in the initial position. “And fo of frend, and pes of werre, / And werre of pes, and out of herre” offers a chiasmus in which reduplicated phrases are presented in reverse order. Many of the lines throughout the passage begin with “word” or “wordes,” continuing the overarching pattern of anaphora. As David Rollo explains concerning high medieval historians who emphasize their command of the written word, the “author [is] projected as magician and the written medium he controls designated through a lexicon that collapses the verbal arts with glamorous sorcery (gramaire/grimoire), performative conjuring (praestigia), intoned spells . . . .” Gower intones a spell to portray the power of the W/word and model the reiterative possibilities for binding that power in truthful and persuasive speech. Whereas Rollo finds that twelfth-century historians allude to magic in order to mystify readers and claim a superior authority, Gower builds his magical rhetoric upon a plain style that

57 CA, VII. 1584–85.

58 David Rollo, Glamorous Sorcery: Magic and Literacy in the High Middle Ages (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii.
elucidates obscure matters for the common good. Gower’s diction is lucid, the syntax fairly straightforward, and the figures of speech pared down to meaningful and evocative reiterations.

For Gower, the plain style had roots in Graeco-Roman expectations concerning purity of language and pointed argumentation, dating back to Aristotle’s mandate in Book III of the Rhetoric: “let the virtue of style . . . be defined as ‘to be clear’ . . . .”59 In this statement Aristotle is referring in part to the legal speeches for which the most basic requirements were a simple narrative of the facts and a direct argument for the litigant’s case.60 Expanding greatly upon Aristotle’s sparse commentary on elocution, Cicero and Quintilian valued ratio plane loquendi, native words used in customary ways for the sake of perspicuity.61 For an example of the plain style in reasonable discourse, Gower turns in the finale of the Confessio’s “Rethorique” section to the speeches by Cato, Silanus, and Cicero during the Catilinarian debates. He mentions these orations because they illustrate a form of elocution that is most desirable, “a tale plein withoute frounce.”62 The most ardent speaker against the Catilinarian rebels was Cicero, believed by most medieval students to be the author of the Rhetorica ad Herennium, whose fourth book amplifies on the figures of speech and thought that adorn discourse, and therefore was Cicero considered to

59 Kennedy, trans., Aristotle, III. ii. Schmitz notes that Gower’s preference for clarity and simplicity of language derives from Aristotle and was transmitted in Cicero’s De inventione. See Schmitz, “Rhetoric and Fiction,” 121.


62 CA, VII. 1594. In this line and others, Gower is using the spelling “plein” or “pleine” for the word elsewhere rendered in Middle English as “plain” or “plaine. For the meaning Gower intends here, see MED plain(e adj.) 3.: “plain, simple, unadorned . . . .”
be the arbiter of style. Gower adheres to “Cithero,” not for models of ornate discourse, but for an ability to choose the simple and repetitive figures of speech that will underscore “the pleine trouthe.” Examples of this Ciceronian style came to Gower possibly from Sallust and surely from the study of the Catilinarian orations in Latini.

The Confessio’s rhetoric lecture praises the Ciceronian model of a plain reiterative style that clarifies and reinforces accuracy in discourse. Throughout the Confessio Amantis and explicitly in Genius’s lecture on “Rethorique,” Gower demonstrates that a plain style supported by repetition is most appropriate for a rhetoric of the W/word that can move the passions toward intellectual truth and right belief. Maura Nolan’s perceptive observation that a plain style can offer a “vivid rendering of sensory data” helps us to understand this process. Passions arise from sensory appeals inspired by the W/word and move the hearer’s will to rethink a compelling issue. In the passage praising the W/word, the image of the charging beast or the feel of an open wound can inspire fear or pain and the desire to ameliorate them through rhetorical expressions. Gower’s “public poetry of the Ricardian period,” as famously labeled by Anne Middleton, deploys the plain style for affective discourses that are nevertheless reasonable and restrained, discourses that reflect “bourgeois moderation, a course between the rigorous absolutes of religious rule on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhetorical hyperboles and emotional vanities

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64 CA, VII. 1638.

of courtly style.” Genius unlocks the power of the W/word to reveal the great metamorphosing capacity of rhetoric, but also to model the controlled repetitions necessary for goodly speech.

Repetition is key for a moral and ethical exercise of the W/word because it has the potential to enact an *imitatio Christi*. Whereas Nectanabus constructs a mere *imitatio Olympiae* for his “carectes,” the practitioner of the moral rhetoric espoused in the *Confessio’s* Book VII imitates Christ and spreads the W/word. Gower relies on Aristotle for a discursive epistemology and on Cicero for exemplary execution of the *genera dicendi*, but ultimately the medieval poet owns in the rhetoric lecture that speech is a great gift from God. To complete his incantation on the force of the W/word, Gower directly associates the *verbum* with Christ: “The word under the coupe of hevene / Set everything or odde or evene; / With word the hihe God is plesed . . . .” (The Word under the dome of heaven / Puts all in balance; / With the Word the high God is pleased).  It is Jesus who brings the Word to earth from heaven, sets sinful humanity in balance with the creator, and receives God’s approval. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in both the baptism and transfiguration narratives, God the father identifies his son, with whom he is “well pleased.” The final lines of Gower’s encomium on the W/word bring to fruition nine *repetitiones* of “word” and point to the Word’s role in all reproductions. The Word can truthfully reproduce the “conceite,” or the speaker’s thought, because, according to Genesis and the Gospel of John, it is the method of replicating God’s image. While Ulysses’s and Nectanabus’s charmed utterances mask a dangerous “conceite,” Gower’s rhetoric of the W/word can unveil evil

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67 CA, VII. 1565–81.

intentions by spreading abroad an understanding of what is good. Master over all other supernatural substances and expressions, the W/word is the sanctified means of creation enacted in Genesis, proclaimed by the Gospel of John, and theorized by Augustine: a verbal instrument that might be used in honor of God’s making. Gower grants reproductive and transformative agency to the W/word that hermetic sources attribute to the stars, because the W/word comes directly from heaven and multiplies endlessly on earth.

Such multiplications include the healing charms, astrological prognostications, and diplomatic speeches that Genius cites as manifestations of the W/word. While Book VI of the *Confessio Amantis* repudiates the enchanting but deceitful language of the magicians Ulysses and Nectanabus, Book VII’s rhetoric lecture recuperates a practice of moral and ethical conjuration in which the divinely invested W/word is channeled to beneficent ends. Gower’s brand of verbal magic is similar to the benign charms for healing or good fortune that, although the church inveighed against necromancy, were often tolerated and sometimes promoted. Karen Jolley points out that incantations involved in herbal healing gained church acceptance from the Old English period onward, and Genius’s repetitive chanting in Book VII’s lecture might be viewed as a curative for rhetoric. According to Valerie Flint, medieval Catholic appropriations of pre-Christian incantations made magic miraculous, and birth charms or field blessings that combined emblems of the cross with necromantic speech acts revealed God’s presence in all well-intended utterances.


The Word manifests itself fully in enchanting human speech when language advances “trouthe.” Gower followed Augustine in believing that human utterance ought to reflect the divinity and veracity inherent in the Word and that “the truth of valid inference was not instituted by men . . . . [but] by God in the reasonable order of things.” Just as the Word became incarnate without vitiating the godhead, rhetoric, according to Gower, has the capacity to preserve and “enforme” the truth. Augustine remarks on the similarity between the revelatory capacity of words for each person and the incarnation of the Word. In the De Doctrina Christiana, after quoting from 1 Corinthians 1.21 (“the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”), he has this to say:

It is as when we speak. In order that what we are thinking may reach the mind of the listener through the fleshly ears, that which we have in mind is expressed in words and is called speech. But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us.


72 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, 1.13

73 CA, VII. 1637–8.

74 Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, 1.13.
In the *Confessio Amantis’s* Book VII Gower conceptualizes a W/word that preserves thought because the speech was honestly intended and plainly expressed. The *repetitiones* that adorn important insights cast a verbal magic with a W/word that was already redolent with creative power and capable of combating deceit and revealing the truth.

In Gower’s rhetoric lecture in Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, the Word casts a spell and is God’s spell, potentially reinventing the truth for every speaker and transforming the mind of anyone who has an ear. The Word, descending to earth directly from heaven, manifests itself in human words, and although the W/word is like the Philosopher’s Stone—an alchemical catalyst of mental, personal, and political conversions—it nevertheless surpasses the supernatural force of numinous gems and plants. Counteracting the threat of evil conjurers, Gower relies on a complex web of current Aristotelian texts, Ciceronian exempla, and biblical revelations to construct a beneficent and effective theory of oratory that can rebut duplicitous speech and promote honest arguments. Intoning in a plain style redolent with reiterative figures of speech, Genius compels Amans—and all readers of the *Confessio*—to moral and ethical points of view. Like Ulysses, Gower is both “rethorien” and “magicien,” but the medieval poet’s words are “lich to the conceit.”
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