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Blind Advocacy:

Blind Readers, Disability Theory, and Accessing John Gower

Jonathan Hsy

Reorienting Blindness

This essay recuperates a little known aspect of the literary reception of medieval poet John Gower (d. 1408): nineteenth-century anthologies created for the benefit of the blind, including James Wilson’s *Biography of the Blind* (1838) and William Hanks Levy’s *Blindness and the Blind* (1872). Compiled by advocates seeking to confront the social marginalization of people with disabilities and transform attitudes toward blind people in particular, these collections situate Gower—a poet who self-identifies as blind in his later writings—as part of an illustrious history of accomplished disabled artists. In an effort to advocate for the blind and to foreground the power of education to help fulfill one’s intellectual, social, and creative potential, these writers assembled stories by and about blind people who accomplished great feats as scholars, poets, and musicians. Such publications also resonated with a range of nineteenth-century reform movements that

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educational historian John Oliphant has aptly characterized as earnest efforts to “change the general perceptions of the educability of the blind” and to offer up “a new vision of their academic potential.”

In an introduction to his compilation of blind lives—which incorporates Gower’s poetry about his own postnatal blindness—anthologist and autobiographical writer James Wilson reveals on the title page that he (the compiler) “has been blind from his infancy,” and this claim confers greater authority to his textual compilation as an important Blind cultural accomplishment in its own right. Presenting itself as the product of a blind person’s extensive labor, this wide-ranging anthology offers much more than an unprecedented comprehensive history of blind people. Wilson’s collection mobilizes the historical figure of blind Gower (and many others) to showcase the living blind person’s capacity to communicate, create, and advocate on his own behalf—and, by extension, the text calls into being a much broader, socially engaged Blind community.

When we recognize that Blind readers have played an active role in a rich history of literary reception and anthology making, Gower’s Latin poetry concerning his own blindness gains new urgency and profound power. It is precisely the testimonial character of Gower’s verse that earns him the status as the first historically verifiable blind English poet. Displacing Ossian (a legendary blind poet) and Geoffrey Chaucer (the conventional


3. I follow the convention of the authors themselves by capitalizing the word “Blind” when it refers to a modern (post medieval) self-identified community of nonsighted people; this capitalized term not only denotes an emergent identity category in the nineteenth century, but also has the potential to implicate a present day community of disabled activists and allies.
non-blind “father” of English poetry)—not to mention blind John Milton—“our own
English poet” John Gower assumes a rather unexpected role: he emerges as a
foundational figure in a newly configured English canon of blind writers and artists.4
Such anthologies of blind vitae, urging the reform of educational policies and structures
to include the full participation of blind people, served a particular purpose in their own
time and place, but such textual productions also, quite unexpectedly, launch new modes
of approaching literary history. These texts approach an entire Western artistic tradition
through a new point of access: the lived experiences and cultural contributions of
disabled people.

This essay explores this remarkable moment in literary reception history to pursue
three interrelated arguments. First, I demonstrate that Blind reader reception of Gower
enacts a key step in modern (nineteenth-century) disability activism.5 Compilations
narrating the lives of blind people fostered a community of self-identified Blind people
and their allies, and anthologies of blind lives sought to improve both the material and
social conditions of people with disabilities. Second, I examine how Gower’s blindness
poetry gives modern readers new access to the wide flexibility of medieval perceptions of
visual impairment. Gower’s poems—composed in Latin and revised over time—rework
longstanding literary conventions regarding blindness, disassociating social stigma that

4. This epithet for Gower comes from Levy, Blindness and the Blind, 187. I
discuss Levy’s anthology in greater detail below.

5. For the purposes of this essay, I limit my discussion of advocacy for the Blind
to nineteenth-century Anglophone contexts. On the rise of educational and charitable
institutions as a response to the increased statisticalization of blind people in English and
Scottish legislation, see John Oliphant, The Early Education of the Blind in Britain, c.
1790-1900: Institutional Experience in England and Scotland (Lewiston, NY: Edwin
Mellen Press, 2007); see also Gordon Phillips, The Blind in British Society: Charity, State,
attaches to certain types of embodied difference in medieval culture and stressing instead the potential to thrive and create with one’s blindness. Third, I explore how the transformative ethos of Gower’s blindness poetry reorients social attitudes toward blindness in the past and in the present. The medieval poet’s blindness poetry anticipates and readily engages with activist oriented modes of contemporary literary criticism and media theory, and Gower’s verses about composing as a blind writer open up new ways of acknowledging the ethical valence of aesthetics and poetic form within the field of disability studies.

**Gower’s Blindness and Blind Reception History**

An initial examination of a few important Blind-oriented anthologies readily reveals how Gower enters into larger narratives of literary tradition and disability history. In his preface to *Blindness and the Blind: or, A Treatise on the Science of Typhology* (1872), physician William Hanks Levy stresses the transformative intent of his corpus, conspicuously offering his work as if it were a living body. The materials that Levy gathers together in the text—such as a guide to the relatively new technology of the Braille writing system (at the time enjoying more widespread use in France than in Britain) and narratives about accomplished people who were blind—are deemed “likely to be of use to the Blind and their friends,” and Levy “[feels] it desirable to embody the same [assorted materials] in the volume now offered to the public.”

By presenting this compilation of useful texts as an act of textual embodiment, Levy expresses a desire to

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transform the English speaking body politic: to unify and to mobilize an increasingly prominent activist community of the Blind and their allies.

In a section on “Poets, Philosophers, and Men of Letters” (beginning with Homer), Levy’s first English figure is John Gower. Bypassing Ossian on lack of evidence, “we come to our own English poet, Sir John Gower.”7 Identifying Gower as a “celebrated scholar” learned in “Latin, French and English,” Levy offers a catalog of the poet’s major works in these three languages, and notes that “[a]fter his blindness he republished some of his works, and among other pieces wrote some Latin verses deploring his loss of sight.”8 As for Gower’s literary skill, Levy declares “his works exhibit more learning than genius” and the poet was “friend of Chaucer, but was much inferior to him in ability.”9 In Levy’s account, Gower serves as a point of origin and pride—he is “our own English poet”—and Gower’s linguistic acuity is conspicuously marked, linked to (or provided as if a social corrective to) his blindness. Curiously, the blind medieval poet is not ascribed any of the transcendent genius we might associate with Homer or blind prophets; rather, Gower models a worldly persistence and commitment to learning. While he is praised as an accomplished blind scholar and writer, Gower is nonetheless disparaged precisely in terms of his poetic (dis)ability vis à vis the normative English “father figure” of Chaucer.

In a more fully affirmative account of Gower’s life and works, James Wilson, a man “blind from his infancy,” praises the medieval poet as a forefather to later self-

7. Ibid., 187.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
identified Blind poets and artists. In *Biography of the Blind: or, the Lives of Such as Have Distinguished Themselves as Poets, Philosophers, Artists, &c.* (1838), Wilson offers an engaging account of own life, including a moving discussion of his loss of sight due to infant small pox,\(^\text{10}\) his early exposure to literature by having texts read aloud,\(^\text{11}\) and his program of oral grammar instruction in English and later in French.\(^\text{12}\) Wilson’s story of social advancement gains its power through the narrator’s ability to speak for the Blind as one of them. As Wilson states: “[This] history of the blind, by a blind man, excited a good deal of curiosity among the reading portion of the public, and called forth the sympathy of several benevolent individuals in favour of its afflicted author.”\(^\text{13}\) This affect laden prose resonates with contemporaneous evangelical and humanitarian discourses urging charity toward people who are less privileged, but Wilson’s carefully crafted narrative does not simply call upon audiences to pity an “afflicted” blind author; rather, this invocation of benevolence and “sympathy” urges an earnest cross identification among blind and sighted people, stressing how collective effort across abilities can drive social change.

Hewing closely to Gower’s work, Wilson notes that “in the first year of Henry the 4th, he [Gower] became blind, a misfortune which he laments in one of his Latin Poems.”\(^\text{14}\) This description readily evokes Gower’s own words as transcribed in the

\(^\text{10}\) Wilson, *Biography of the Blind*, xvii.

\(^\text{11}\) Ibid., xxvii–xxviii.

\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., lviii.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., lxi.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid, 253.
Trentham manuscript (London, British Library, Additional MS 59495): “Henrici quarti primus regni fuit annus / Quo mihi defecit visus” [It was in the first year of the reign of King Henry IV when my sight failed].

Hailing Gower as “[o]ne of our most ancient English poets,” Wilson remarks that critical assessments of his work have shifted over time: “With regard to his poetical talents, he was certainly admired at the time when he wrote, though a modern reader may find it difficult to discover much harmony or genius in any of his compositions.”

While such an assessment might strike Gowerians as faint praise, Wilson’s statement suggests how Gower’s status as blind poet provides a model for self-identified Blind authorship. Wilson’s anthology of blind artists begins with an autobiographical narrative relating how he composed diverse genres of poetry in youth: “epigrams, love songs, epistles and acrostics,” verses “[c]omposed by one destitute of sight” and “stand[ing] very low in the scale of merit.” Wilson’s critical assessment of Gower—coupled with Wilson’s rejection of his own youthful compositions—seemingly aligns the persona of blind Wilson and Gower. At the end of the Confessio, Gower identifies the fictive first person narrator by name as an aged “John Gower” with “yhen dymme” who


17. Ibid., xxxiv.

18. Ibid., xxxix.
now bids farewell to the court of Venus, implicitly disavowing his earlier poetic endeavors which included the composition of “[r]ondeal, balade, virelai / For hire on whym myn herte lai.” Insofar as Wilson replicates Gower’s own gesture of disavowing youthful compositions, this modern first person narrative by a modern Blind author and poet-compiler finds support in the work of another (medieval) blind author and poet-compiler (i.e., Gower). Wilson’s most conspicuous authorizing trope, however, is his observation that he is blind from infancy and the product of a poor, illiterate household—a set of social disadvantages that ultimately “out Gowers” Gower (who was wealthy and became blind only late in life). By configuring his relationship to blind Gower in such a nuanced way, self-identified Blind writer Wilson lends even greater authority to his text.

Attending to the careful strategies that Blind readers and writers employ as they appropriate blind Gower has the potential to reroute important critical approaches to literary texts via disability theory. In an influential reading of disability as “narrative


20. Ibid., 1.2727–8.

21. It may be surprising—in this context of Blind reader reception of Gower—to note that these Blind compilers did not explicitly engage with pervasive (albeit conventional) references to “blind love” in Gower’s *Confessio* (1.47 *et passim*); nor did these compilers dwell much upon Gower’s self-representation as an aged man with fading sight (“yhen dymme”) in this particular text and his earlier works. Instead, they focused on his later works in which the poet directly discusses lived blindness in a form set apart from a figurative frame narrative. For the dramatic irony of Gower’s aged fictive persona and “inability to see” in the *Confessio*, see Robert Levine, “Gower as Gerontion: Oneiric Autobiography in the Confessio Amantis,” *Mediaevistik* 5 (1992): 79–94.
prosthesis,” David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder note how “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytic insight.” In other words, a disabled body can act as “crutch” (tool, prop, device) to advance a narrator’s own ends, and stories do not so much invest in relating the lived experiences and social conditions of disabled people themselves, but stress what a disabled person represents. In many cases, the disabled person in a fictional literary work is cured or simply vanishes from the narrative once his or her function has been served.

In Wilson’s appropriation of Gower, though, we must revise the thesis considerably. The blind man “deployed” in this narrative (i.e., Gower) is never “cured,” and if anything the persistence of his blindness throughout his later life is exactly the point. If the “lesson” the narrator seeks to convey is that blind people can be full participants in cultural life, then Gower’s ability to thrive creatively authorizes and legitimates the work of self-identified Blind author Wilson. Establishing a historical lineage of—or cross temporal affinity among—blind authors, Wilson radically reorients normative approaches to literary history.


23. Wilson’s activist agenda is made even clearer in a 1856 republication of Wilson’s Autobiography; this edition includes an additional treatise by John Bird, a Blind surgeon, regarding the “present state of the blind,” and a notice above the table of contents mobilizes disability as an authorizing trope: “The Writer of the following Essay begs to inform the reader that the cause of many errors and imperfections of style must be attributed to his being blind, and his only assistant being a young man, a novice at writing and correcting for the press” (v). Bird clarifies the political objectives for reprinting Wilson’s life narrative: “My chief motive in attempting this analysis of the life and labours of Wilson, is the hope that it may be the means of rescuing from that state of obscurity into which at present it appears doomed to lapse, a volume of such essential
it is the eccentric, impaired, trilingual Gower—not Chaucer, nor even Milton—who sets
in motion a Blind-oriented English literary history.

More profoundly, this discussion invites the question of whether narrative
prosthesis—which Mitchell and Snyder apply to works of fiction—can extend to these
compilations of brief biographical narratives. In Wilson’s work, the desire to narrate a
biography attending specifically to Gower’s blindness provokes some creative literary
strategies in Wilson’s own authorial self-construction. Since all these biographical
narratives are ascribed to a self-identified Blind narrator, disability does not function here
as a mere “opportunistic metaphoric device” (as Mitchell and Snyder might assert); the
narrator’s own blindness actively resonates through an intertextual network across time.24
Instead of a prosthetic substitution of one disabled figure for another, Wilson’s narration
establishes an affective connective circuit: a layered tissue of allusions that implicates
both the literary persona of the modern compiler and the medieval poet.

Analyzing discourses of the disabled body in narrative only begins to address the
full complexity of the hybrid literary form that this particular biographical anthology
adopts. Wilson’s autobiographical narrative interpolates disparate poetic works such as

importance to the welfare of the blind, by proving, not only to relatives and friends, but to
the country at large, if the blind have done so much hitherto by unsuspected talent and
individual effort, that a more general recognition of their capacity and right ought to lay
the foundation of a more general scheme for the rescue from the low philozoic treatment
which too many attempt to defend as sufficient” (xviii). In the wider context of this text’s
publication history, Blind writers engage with and build upon the work of other Blind
writers (in backward progression): Bird, Wilson, and Gower. John Bird, The
Autobiography of the Blind James Wilson, Author of the “Lives of the Useful Blind”;
with a Preliminary Essay on His Life, Character, and Writings, as well as on the Present
State of the Blind, by John Bird (Blind), Member of the College of Surgeons, England,

24. Mitchell and Snyder, Narrative Prosthesis, 42.
his own early lyric address to the sun in rhyming couplets and a dream vision in blank
verse. In her work on lyric insertions and so called autocitations in the work of late
medieval composer Guillaume de Machaut—whose first person narrator identifies as
visually impaired—Julie Singer identifies a process of “lyric prosthesis,” or the
“replacement of the [poetic] lover’s missing or defective eye with a verbal structure”
through a literary strategy “by which poetic form compensates for the insufficient
narratorial body.” Lyric prosthesis, I would add, exploits poetic form to construct a
literary persona. Gower’s narrator with “yhen dymme” bids adieu to the Court of Venus
after presenting an unsuccessful supplication that is conspicuously presented as a lyric
poem in rhyme royal stanzas—a poetic form that is not employed elsewhere in Gower’s
work. Centuries later, Wilson—a Blind narrator who retroactively interpolates and
rejects lyrics of his own creation—provocatively evokes Gower’s complex form of poetic
self-composition.

In the next section, I will pivot from Wilson’s appropriation of Gower to examine
the work of the medieval poet himself, and I also transition from notions of narrative
prosthesis to a detailed formal analysis of Gower’s blindness poetry. Attending to literary
form in the context of Gower’s lived blindness grants renewed ethical valence to his
blindness poetry, and I posit that an earnest engagement with biographical criticism
offers rich opportunities for reassessing the aesthetic qualities of the medieval poet’s
work.

26. Julie Singer, Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian
27. Gower, Confessio Amantis, 8.2217–2300.
Reaccessing Gower: Blind Persona, Blind Poetics

At this point, we can now turn to Gower’s poetry, recognizing how the medieval poet—in his own time and place—also engages in retroactive modes of critical assessment and artistic self-construction. In “Eneidos Bucolis,” Gower famously models himself after Virgil, casting his major works across three languages as key features of a unified corpus—and it is only retroactively, much later in life, that Gower’s seemingly “unharmonious” works (as Wilson would characterize them) gain full coherence. 28 Throughout his later works, Gower’s literary figuration of blind experience exceeds a mere index for his spiritual status. As Edward Wheatley has observed in his work on the social construction of the meanings of blindness in the later Middle Ages, both medical and religious discourses could “construct disability as a spiritually pathological site of absence” where the divine makes itself manifest, positing “the promise of cure through freedom from sin and increased personal faith.” 29 While spiritual metaphors can often structure medieval representations of nonsighted people—with blindness presented as a discursive index for one’s spiritual state, or as an indication of one’s lack of spiritual awareness—Gower asserts throughout his work that he is physically living as blind and is much more invested in exploring how this particular form of physical impairment affects his earthly modes of literary production. Most strikingly, Gower diverges from


conventional discursive constructions of blindness by incorporating concurrent aspects of his own physical impairment—his advanced age and progressively low vision—into a fully embodied authorial persona. In my reading of his later Latin blindness poetry, I maintain that Gower employs lyric expression to craft a literary authority that embraces and incorporates physical impairment, or—more precisely—activates a cluster of somatic features we might later collapse into the term “disability.” The apparent rhetorical trope of blindness for Gower is—to appropriate the provocative metaphor of Mitchell and Snyder—a “crutch” that is never cast off. For Gower, blindness exceeds a mere function as a discursive device; it is a pervasive feature that animates the verse composition and formal characteristics of his poetry.

Gower’s blindness poems, first of all, comprise a problematic corpus. Surviving variants—which could be read as three different works, or one—suggest several waves of revision. In his metrical and rhyme analysis of Gower’s blindness poems, David Carlson carefully attends to how closely the lines correspond across these versions, and he posits a provisional chronology of composition. Although these verses were not necessarily created and reworked in a tidy sequence, two of the variants are effectively “time stamped.” The 1 Henry VI poem (which begins “Henrici quarti primus fuit annus” [It was in the first year of the reign of King Henry IV]) is twelve lines, the 2 Henry IV poem (beginning “Henrici regis annus fuit ille secundus” [That was the second year of King Henry IV]) is fifteen lines, and the poem beginning “Quicquid homo scribat” [Whoever wishes to write] is seventeen lines. The fact that three existing variants of this work survive—and that each subsequent variant grows in length—could suggest a process of

poetic expansion and revision that accompanied the poet’s progressive blindness.

In the 2 Henry IV verses, for instance, Gower, makes a few remarkable assertions. He states he has stopped writing due to his blindness, or in his words “quia sum cecus ego” [because I am blind].31 The poet emphasizes his ongoing lived experience of blindness: “vivens ego cecus” [I am living blind; i.e., I am living as a blind man].32 Most strikingly, he claims from this point forth “manus et mea penna silent” [my hand and my pen will be silent].33 The longest version of this poem, “Quicquid homo scribat,” offers the most expanded discussion of his compositional practice as a blind poet, carefully distinguishing a physical capacity to write from an ability to compose in the mind:

“Quamvis exterius scribendi defecit actus, / Mens tamen interius scribit et ornat opus” [Although the act of writing externally now fails me, / Still my mind writes within me and adorns the work].34 While the poet claims in each version of these verses that he will write no more, the varied manifestations of these lines over time suggest a capacity to think, and rethink, shifting embodied strategies of composition. In other words, Gower’s Latin poetry enacts not so much a narrative prosthesis but rather (as I have suggested above) a lyric prosthesis: Gower’s poetry confronts some of the significant representational challenges posed by visual impairment while provoking flexible transformations in literary form.

Much of Gower’s poetry seems conventional. As if striking a penitential posture,

32. Ibid., line 13.
33. Ibid., line 10.
Gower suggests in his first-person poetry that blindness might enact divine punishment for his own sins or misdeeds. In the 1 Henry IV verses, Gower laments: “michi defecit visus ad acta mea” [My sight failed because of my deeds]. But throughout these verses, Gower reroutes the discussion from expected discursive norms, not so much holding out for a cure to his sightlessness, but using his embodiment as a venue for rethinking the poet’s relationship to the prosthetic technologies of writing. He carefully differentiates between prior acts of writing through the body (sight, hand, and pen) to stress other modes of composing mentally—showcasing how he creates now in lieu of external graphic (textual) prosthetics. The fact that verses manifest themselves in multiple forms—none more authoritative than another—makes this compositional endeavor even more provocative. If these variants, in other words, are approached as acts of rewriting (or revision), then the poet’s re-coding of blindness comprises a nonlinear process of self-translation: a perpetual reinvention of embodied poetic subjectivity. Such a process is best discerned through Gower’s versification. As Carlson demonstrates, some lines are constant across iterations, but Gower’s verses trend toward chronological increase in end-rhyme. Carlson suggests Gower’s revision process is “recursive or cumulative”; for instance, one line migrates in position among variants, and the final line in two

35. Gower, 1 Henry IV, line 2.


37. “Prospera quod statuas regna futura, Deus” [That God make our kingdoms prosperous in the future] is line 12 in the 1 Henry IV verses, line 14 in the 2 Henry IV verses, and line 16 in “Quicquid homo scribat.” More verbatim lines carry over in the same position across the 1 Henry IV and 2 Henry IV verses (lines 9, 10, and 12).
corresponds to line 14 in another; other lines are stable only across two.38

The mobility and malleability of Gowerian verses suggest a process of rethinking the poet’s relationship to blindness itself. For instance, the Latin “cecus” (which translates into modern English as an adjective or nominalization, “a blind person”) is disambiguated when Gower refers to himself as “ego, vir cecus” [I, a blind man] in line 15 of “Quicquid.” In the 2 Henry IV poem, “cecus” gains sonic resonance through an increased proximity to rhyme words: “laboris onus” [burden of my toil], “deus” [God], “vivens ego cecus” [I living blind].39 By reshuffling such rhymes, the poet reshapes understandings of his blindness over time.40 These rearranged rhyme words place shifting emphasis on “cecus” as a key term, only at times stressing the latent identitarian potential of the Latin word. This dynamic experimentation in rhyme structure—and the entanglement of form and content—is more than incidental. As Mitchell and Snyder observe: “The disabled body occupies a crossroads in the age-old literary debate about the relationship of form to content,” and while the “‘unmarred’ surface enjoys its cultural anonymity and promises little more than a confirmation of the adage of a ‘healthy’ mind in a ‘healthy’ body, disability signifies a more variegated and sordid series of

38. “Daque michi sanctum lumen habere tuum” [And grant that I receive Your holy light] (15) in the 2 Henry IV verses and “Quicquid homo scribat.”


40. This process of rethinking his relationship to his disabled body can be seen across other versions of the poem. While the 1 Henry IV verses emphasizes “acta” [deeds] and laments that his “visus” [sight] is lost and “manus” [hand] can no longer physically write, the 2 Henry IV verses differentiate between “meus actus” [my physical ability] (3) and “michi velle” [my will] (3). The “Quicquid homo scribat” verses further differentiate between external writing (“exterius scribendi”) (11) and more fully realized process of internal poetic composition (“Mens . . . interius scribit”) (12).
assumptions and experiences.”  

If, as Mitchell and Snyder suggest, “form leads to content or ‘embodies’ meaning,” then Gower’s conspicuous alterations in verse form signal concurrently malleable conceptions of his own embodiment.

The formal shifts that transpire throughout Gower’s poetry are most provocative in the way they register Gower’s sensory orientation toward an increasingly nonvisual world. Most conspicuously, aspects of meter and increased rhyme put more prominence on auditory features as opposed to graphic or textual ones. That such qualities might register in his poetry makes some practical sense, as the poet is presumably dictating and not writing with his own hand. As the poet states in the “Quicquid” verses, what cannot be written physically with the hand is composed by the mind: “[E]xterius scribendi defecit actus” [the act of writing externally fails me] and “de manibus nichil amodo scribe valoris” [I can write nothing further with my hands], yet “[m]ens tamen interius scribit et ornat opus” [my mind nevertheless writes within me and adorns the work]. In this adaptive rerouting of discursive norms, Gower enacts a somatic shift in orientation from the writing hand to the composing mind (and listening ear).

Gower’s poetic re-coding of somatic experience informs, and performs, more than a reworking of blindness as spiritual metaphor (mark of sin, desire for cure, or other similar formulation). Gower composes as an author whose visual impairment is expected to persist throughout life, and in his overt claiming of a lived blind subjectivity he enacts


42. Ibid.

43. Gower, “Quicquid,” lines 12, 14, and 11–12.
a culturally marked performance of identity that might later be identified as “crip.” As Edward Wheatley has observed, “the term cripple, shorted to crip,” is in some ways analogous to “gay activists’ adoption and reinvention of the term queer as a sign of power,” with the term crip “adopted by people with disabilities (and those who engage in disability studies) to represent the inversion of earlier disempowerment as they engage in both political and scholarly activism.” Contemporary “crip poetry” composed by living disability activists and artists has been characterized by Jennifer Bartlett as poetry that “emphasizes embodiment, especially atypical embodiment and the alternative poetics generated from that perspective, which challenges stereotypes and insists on self definition.” The “alternative poetics” of Gower’s blindness poetry—which employs rhyme and meter in ways that unpredictably veer from available classical and medieval conventions of Latinity—cannot be disentangled from the “atypical embodiment” that his poetry seeks to convey. Gower adopts, in this sense, a “crip” mode of composition that enacts a literary posture disassociated from the writing hand and its conventional prosthetic extension (the writing implement).

Gower’s inventive reworking of literary form gains extra resonance in the context of his trilingual literary output. In “Eneidos Bucolis,” Gower articulates a trilingual

44. For a modern example of a poetic mode that overtly claims a “crip” positionality, see Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus, with photos by Lisa Steichmann, Cripple Poetics: A Love Story (Ypsilanti, MI: Homofactus Press, 2008). On “crip” as a critical (theoretical) orientation, see Robert McRuer, Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability (New York: New York University Press, 2006).


corpus in retrospect. Surpassing Virgil (who composed the *Aeneid*, *Bucolics*, and the *Georgics*), Gower creates works—but across three different tongues: “Gallica lingua prius, Latina secunda / Lingua . . . Anglica complet opus” [first the French tongue, Latin second, then English completes the work].

The fully polyglot character of his literary persona adds yet another layer to the complexity of his blindness poetry. Most conspicuously, the idiosyncratic end rhymes throughout these verses diverge from the norm of Gower’s own Latin compositional practice, and imbue his late Latinity with a peculiar taste of the vernacular. Incorporating innovative formal and discursive features into his verse, Gower claims his status as an aging, progressively blind writer while also showcasing the linguistic and compositional skills that accrue with poetic maturity.

Perhaps in the case of Gower it is not so much that “form leads to content or ‘embodies’ meaning” but that literary form and embodiment are intimately entangled. Polyglot and recursive compositional practice (to reshape Gower’s own words) complete the *opus*, but they also materialize the poet’s very *corpus*.

In later life Gower effectively mobilized blindness and age as “added features” of his authorial brand, refashioning prior works to more consciously foreground his dual status as blind and old. Created soon after Gower’s death (completed sometime after 1414), the Bedford Psalter-Hours (London, British Library, Additional MS 42131)

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47. Gower, “Eneidos Bucolis,” lines 1–12.

features a detailed portrait of John Gower next to the opening of one of the Psalms.\textsuperscript{49} The multilingual gold inscription in the initial at fol. 209v reads “effigies GOWER un esquier” (“effigy of Gower, a squire,” a formal designation that corresponds with existing historical records), and this visual representation—which includes a patterned garment, high collar, and distinctive nose, hairstyle, and facial hair—is consistent with Gower’s tomb effigy which survives in Southwark Cathedral.\textsuperscript{50} This is not to say such portraits were made directly from life but their features are consistent enough to suggest a conventionalized mode of representing Gower already circulated in visual culture soon after his death; indeed, Gower appears in a strikingly similar form throughout the manuscript, even across the illustrations created by different artists.\textsuperscript{51}

The first placement of Gower in the Bedford Psalter is provocative. The poet appears next to Psalm 141: “Voce mea ad Dominum clamavi / Effundo in conspectus eius”


\textsuperscript{51} For a reproduction of the other nine Gower portraits, see Wright, “Author Portraits,” 198.
[I cried to the Lord with my voice / In his sight I pour out my prayer]. This conspicuous placement of the author’s portrait cannot help but recall the poet’s major Latin work, the *Vox Clamantis*: a text whose Dedicatory Epistle figures the author Gower as a blind supplicant appealing to a higher power. In the Epistle, Gower, “senex et cecus” [old and blind], praises Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury, as “Tu noster Phebus” [you, our Phoebus] who shines light like the new sun (“Sol de luce nouella”); the poet, truly blind (“Cecus ego mere”). While Gower deploys this discourse of blindness and light to metaphorically express the status differential between poet and patron, the poet goes out of his way to explain that physical blindness does not interfere with his intellectual vigor (“mentem . . . manentem”). At Psalm 141, the Bedford Hours employ simultaneously graphic and textual strategies of allusion, thereby multiplying Gower and imbuing the Psalms with a cross-temporal literary resonance. This program of illustrations points, in other words, in two concurrent directions: back to the penitential utterances of King David, and forward to the lyric posture of blind Gower.

Moving Gower’s blindness from the margins to the center of his literary output has the potential to revolutionize our understanding of his entire corpus. For instance, the dream vision allegorizing the 1381 Uprising in *Vox Clamantis*—a section appended to a previously completed text—enacts a retroactive reinsertion of the poet’s impaired body.


54. Ibid.
Since the Dedicatory Epistle insists that Gower’s physical blindness is genuine, this framing device recasts the *entire* dream as the lived and recorded experience of a visually impaired dreamer. Indeed, Gower’s narrator makes many internal references to his own impairments all throughout the text: “Est oculus cecus, aurisque manet quasi surda” [My eye is blind, and my ear is almost deaf]. There are a few moments in the dream when disruptive language further resonates with the dreamer’s impaired body. In his famous account, the poet allegorizes rioters as animals who shout to one another—and the Latin erupts with English names: “Watte vocat, cui Thomme venit, neque Symme retardat, / Betteque Gibbe simul Hycke venire iubent” [Watt comes therat when called by Wat, and Simm as forward we find; / Bet calls quick to Gibb and to Hykk, that neither would tarry behind]. This torrent of names flows over ten lines—Colle rages, Geffe helps, Wille contributes, Grigge grabs, and they are soon joined by Hobbe, Hudde, Iudde, Tebbe, Iakke, Hogge, Balle, and Lorkyn; “[s]epius exclamant monstrorum vocibus altis” [they shriek and shout with monster cries]. In this rich Latin allegory, a stream of monosyllabic English names sonically conveys the surging upheaval. Employing consonant clusters “foreign” to Latin yet also incorporating these same sounds into existing structures of elegiac meter, Gower suggests a sensory modality that operates


57. Ibid., lines 785–94.

58. Ibid., line 797.
beyond the allegory itself. That is, the Latin verse transmits in its sonic altenity a hint of a lived vernacular experience outside the text itself. Elsewhere, animal mimicry disrupts the verse: “Vulpis . . . vlulat” [the fox howls], “Bombizant vaspe” [the wasps buzz], “asini . . . geminant . . . hya [asses repeat “hee-haw”]. 59

These vernacular names and nonhuman cries deploy simultaneous sonic phenomena—Latin and vernacular, human and nonhuman—to create a blurred soundscape for the dream vision. Gower’s disruptive transcription of vernacular noise and stylized sonic mimicry of animal sound creates a disorienting aurality, a sensory experience that registers some of the resonance of the poet’s lived blindness. Mobilizing concurrent sensory modalities, Gower’s poetry suggests how aurality intricately shapes compositional practice, and it perhaps limns an ever shifting blind subjectivity.

As I have discussed, the dream vision allegorizing the Uprising in the Vox—a section appended to an already finished work—achieves a retroactive insertion of the poet’s impaired body. The Dedicatory Epistle praising the “light” of Thomas Arundel and foregrounding the poet’s status as “senex et cecus” [blind and old] provides yet another textual prosthesis, a supplementary and detachable device that activates the poet’s concurrent forms of embodied impairment.

More than constructing penitential posture through a suffering body, Gower crafts a literary persona profoundly informed by physical impairment (advanced age and diminished sight). Moreover, the first-person persona he fashions—a lyric voice who speaks as an aged blind man—has consequences for his poetry’s forays into legal advocacy. Candace Barrington persuasively argues that Gower’s late poetry exhibits a

59. Ibid., lines 808, 811, and 189–90.
distinctive “habit of mind” derived from his early training as a man of law; features of his verse include precise legal vocabulary and rhetorical turns of phrase (formulaic verbal doublets such as “null and void,” which yoke together terms derived from both Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Saxon), and a complex set of “elocutionary gestures” positions the poet as an experienced and trusted advisor who speaks effectively on behalf of others.\textsuperscript{60}

In the context of local medieval conventions of legal rhetoric and advocacy, Gower’s deliberate choice to speak in first person as an aged, blind poet does not function merely as an authorizing trope, but as a fully embodied strategy of poetic self-presentation. It is Gower’s use of his own embodied difference that allows the testimonial character of his verse to gain credibility and exert affective power—not only in its own time, but also in the minds of later readers.

This close reading of the stylistic features of Gower’s blindness poetry reveals the ethical resonance of the poet’s blind positionality. In my discussion, I have sought to show how a close formal analysis can engage with biographical criticism in ways that not only resonate with the urgency of contemporary disability studies, but also provide a more nuanced appreciation for the aesthetic features of medieval literary craft. As discussed in the first section of this essay, compilers of biographical narratives of blind lives can readily claim Gower’s lived blindness, but nonetheless disparage the literary merit of the author on aesthetic grounds: Levy claims Gower’s “unharmonious” and disparate works mark him as inferior to Chaucer in poetic “ability.” A more attentive formal analysis of Gower’s work reveals the profound inventiveness of his blindness.

poetry—and the poet’s capacity to engage in a dynamic compositional practice that is transformative in both its ethical and aesthetic domains.

Most importantly, this discussion demonstrates how a concerted turn from narrative prosthesis (plot progression) to lyric prosthesis (mode of expression) can be further enriched by examining how literary style (rhetorical effect) of a work is created, and how a text’s aesthetic features operate to convey some sense of lived experience or local understandings of what we would now call disability. In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, disability theorist Ato Quayson—in a wide ranging analysis that encompasses ancient Greek to postcolonial contexts—examines how artistic representations reckon with extraordinary forms of corporeal difference, and his readings reveal moments when the disabled body exceeds available strategies of making meaning. “Aesthetic nervousness,” in Quayson’s words, describes “what ensues and what can be discerned in the suspension, collapse, or general short-circuiting of the hitherto dominant protocols of representation.”61 The formal idiosyncrasies of Gower’s verse—malleable rhyme structure and verse form, recursive shuffling of lines, experimentation with sonic aspects of poetry in conjunction with graphic or textual ones—could very well be employed by a sighted or nonsighted poet. Nonetheless, in the context of Gower’s deliberately crafted blind persona, a boundary between “life” and “work” proves quite illusory. In gesturing toward how artistic productions (including literary works) might effect social change, Quayson asserts that “[d]isability serves to close the gap between representation and ethics, making visible the aesthetic field’s relationship to the social situation of persons

with a disability in the real world."\textsuperscript{62} The poetic effects of formal features in the context of Gower’s actively constructed blind persona reveal how medieval discourses of disability effectively bridge poetic composition in the historical past and political engagement in the modern world.

\textbf{Modern Blind Readers and Digital Access}

In the sections above, I have explored Gower’s blindness as a deliberate component of the poet’s self-presentation and important feature of later reader reception history, and I demonstrate how a formal analysis of the poet’s representations of his own blindness mediates between medieval literary contexts and the social investments of modern readers. In this section, I extend my conjoined approach to Gowerian poetics and modern disability studies by exploring online venues that seek to make the work of Gower accessible to a wider audience that includes visually impaired or blind Internet users. Richard Brodie, an American computer programmer, offers online modern English verse translations of parts of Gower’s \textit{Confessio Amantis} along with audio recordings that he states might be accessed by blind users.\textsuperscript{63} Bookshare, an expanding accessible online library, presents Gower’s work across varied graphic and audio formats for people with

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62. Ibid., 24.
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print disabilities.\textsuperscript{64} Attending to the discursive and formal structures through which digital materials are presented, the final section of this essay offers an analysis of contemporary discourses of disability that surround online access. Through a comparative reading of the rhetoric employed by Brodie, Bookshare, and others, I consider how websites offering access to Gower’s work might engage with theoretical models of digital access that attend to a wide range of abilities and uses.

In order to contextualize this analysis of online rhetoric, I draw upon nuanced notions of access established by media theorists in disability studies. In his extensive work on deafblind Internet users, media scholar Jan van Dijk shows that theorizing access must always incorporate many concurrent and uneven abilities, uses, and motivations.\textsuperscript{65} Elizabeth Ellcessor elegantly characterizes van Dijk’s “model of access as a continuum that addresses motivations, material access, and uses, with individuals taking up various positions that reflect their life circumstances,” and she advocates a nuanced approach to theorizing access that is oriented toward a “relational view of inequality, in which the key factor is not the individual, but ‘the categorical differences between groups of people.’”\textsuperscript{66}

In my analysis of Brodie and Bookshare, I will show how online discourse shapes our thinking about “categorical differences between groups of people” by rhetorically constructing varied communities of Internet users.


One thought-provoking example of a digital endeavor that purports to increase access to John Gower’s works is an online Modern English verse translation of the *Confessio Amantis* by Gower enthusiast Richard Brodie. While Brodie’s efforts seem motivated by a sincere desire to expand the readership of Gower, he frames his project in a way that problematically incorporates readers with disabilities. His online 2005 translation of Book 1 and 2009 translation of Book 8 present the original Middle English text alongside his own rhymed verse translation in Modern English. In addition to these scrolling “facing page” translations, Brodie provides links to voice recordings of his own Modern English translations: ten selections drawn from episodes in Book 1 and Book 8, as well as the Prologue, with almost half of these selections involving the sense modalities of sight and hearing. Above the table of these hyperlinks, Brodie offers this statement: “Audio recordings of selected tales and passages from John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, read by the translator, Richard Brodie, for the benefit of the blind, invalids, or those who would just like to relax and enjoy listening to them.” While one can appreciate this effort to make the works of Gower more accessible to a wider audience via translations and audio recordings, Brodie ambiguously discerns what Van Dijk would identify as “categorical differences between people,” with the “blind” and “invalids” set apart from (apparently healthy and able-bodied) leisurely readers through a form of grammatical coordination. Brodie enacts a lighthearted—or, at its worst,


disingenuous—invocation of a potential audience of blind people and “invalids.” He constructs a hypothetical audience of disabled people that serves not so much to “benefit” these categories of people but to justify his own creative pursuits and propel his ongoing experiments in verse translation and online publishing.

In this context, I do not believe that Brodie’s claim to “benefit” readers who are blind is made entirely in earnest. Nonetheless, I would acknowledge that Brodie’s online voice recordings achieve an important critical intervention in an altogether different front: he reasserts the embodied presence—and extensive labors—of the poetic translator. In his influential analysis of literary translation in modern scholarship, Lawrence Venuti rebukes the “translator’s invisibility” in critical discourse; he maintains that the devaluation of literary translation as a full, legitimate mode of intellectual and artistic endeavor is to a great extent “determined by the individualistic conception of authorship that continues to prevail in British and American cultures.” The online layout of the materials on Brodie’s website draws attention to the physical labor involved in translating, reading aloud, recording, and (in the case of this computer programmer) designing a multimedia website. By foregrounding the role that the modern translator plays in mediating an established author’s text—and recording passages that draw attention to the senses of hearing and sight—Brodie makes his own effort to address the perceived “invisibility” of literary translators in the Anglo-American academy. This hyperlinked table of audio recordings featuring Brodie’s own non-professional translations—and the sound of his own voice—invite the audience to rethink modes of literary engagement that privilege the original text of the medieval author and obscure the creative output of the

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living, laboring translator.

While the sincerity of Brodie’s desire to provide blind readers with new access to Gower’s poetry is unclear, other multimedia venues are fully committed—in their discourse and in the materials they offer—to extending full access to Gowerian texts and other similar resources to low vision readers. Most noticeably, Bookshare (Accessible Books for Individuals with Print Disabilities) provides links to Gower’s Confessio Amantis in Braille, DAISY (Digital Accessible Info System), and Talking Digital Book format. Such a variety of media formats is consistent with the online library’s mission to make “reading accessible to people with print disabilities” [emphasis in original], a wide conception of users with different capacities and modes of engagement: a user might read “eBooks on computers, tablets, phones, assistive technology, MP3 players and more,” download “free reading tools for PCs, Macs, and Android devices,” and read “multi-modally,” i.e., “see and hear words as they are being read and highlighted.” In its thoughtful mode of presentation—and by offering free and low-cost memberships to its users—this website readily conforms to Ellcessor’s “model of access as a continuum that addresses motivations, material access, and uses.” The stated mission of the online library reinforces its presentation of digital media.

Bookshare casts its net very widely in line with its nuanced multi-modal understanding of user capacities and motivations, and more specialized scholarly venues on blind readership seek to “practice what they preach” when it comes to online access as


well. *The Blind Access Journal*, an online venue and community maintained by a “team of advocates, assistive technology instructors and reporters,” states that the “blog and podcast is about the blind and our quest for the greatest possible access to all the information available in the world around us.” This journal, which does not require any subscription fee and offers free podcasts through the iTunes website, seeks in its own way to address Ellcessor’s “continuum [of] material access,” where “access” is defined not only in terms of a person’s physical capacities but also economic circumstances. Ultimately, the first-person plural mission statement crafted by the creators of *The Blind Access Journal* brings us full circle to the Blind-authored compilations that began this essay: all of these textual creators conceive a socially engaged community that includes the Blind as well as sighted people across a range of different abilities.

My comparative reading of discourses invoking blind readers in the online endeavors of verse translator Brodie and the creators of *The Blind Access Journal* demonstrates how closely intertwined motivations—personal, political, and cultural—shape how people present online materials, as well as how they rhetorically construct their audiences. While it is true that texts in *any* medium—print or digital—have the potential to be accessed by readers with multifaceted desires and orientations toward the world, online media conspicuously invites textual creators to more carefully consider how uneven modes of access might be addressed, and how such materials should actually be presented and delivered to their audiences.


In a special issue of the open access journal *Disability Studies Quarterly* on “Mediated Communication,” editors Jeremy L. Brunson and Mitchell E. Loeb develop Marshall McLuhan’s influential observations on media and human connectivity; they observe that McLuhan’s “axiom ‘the medium is the message’ takes on a different and more potent meaning when explored within disability discourse and in particular with reference to mediated communication” such as “sign language interpreting for deaf people, communication boards and facilitated communication for autistic individuals,” and other such “technological advances that . . . increase the participation of people who experience communication barriers.”

While Brunson and Loeb do not explicitly address technologies for blind users, the online endeavors of Brodie, Bookshare, and the *Blind Access Journal* attest to these editors’ conviction that “the medium [is] a message about society” and the “medium [has] an effect on the message” [italics in original].

In the case of Brodie, an invocation of blind users and “invalids” undercuts the multimedia gesture toward universal access, and the online translator exploits an imagined community of disabled readers as a premise for his own creative endeavors. The online medium, in other words, works in tension with the underlying message that this translator relates. A nod toward universal access enacts a seemingly dismissive categorization of blind people that associates them with “invalids” and others who might be deemed—in contrast to the translator—as passive or uncreative. Bookshare and the *Blind Access Journal*, by contrast, convey through their presentation of digital media a very attentive


75. Ibid.
understanding of multi-modal access and its implications for readers with disabilities.

Putting Gower’s blindness poetry in conversation with contemporary disability studies moves us far beyond the conjoined impulses of “cripping the Middle Ages” and “medievalizing disability theory,” to borrow a formulation popularized by Edward Wheatley in his analysis of blindness in late-medieval England and France. When Gower’s blindness poetry engages in conversation with works by later Blind writers and readers—from nineteenth-century print compilers to present-day Internet users—we can learn to “crip” or critically reassess the uses of any given corpus (somatic, textual, or virtual). Once taken seriously as a self-identified blind author, Gower grants us access to under-acknowledged approaches to artistic tradition and literary historiography. We can attend to blindness in ways that are fully mindful of the lived historical and social circumstances of blind people—in the fourteenth century, the nineteenth century, and the present—and we can adopt narrative orientations that chart more flexible and creative modes of access, not only for literary criticism, but also for disability theory and media studies.

In this essay, I have examined how nineteenth-century compilations of stories of blind authors present Gower as a founding figure in a Blind-oriented English literary tradition, and my close formal analysis of Gower’s own blindness poetry demonstrates how the poet creatively mobilizes his own impairment to craft a complex authorial identity. This final section mediates between the medieval past and the present, showing how a critical approach to contemporary online strategies of making Gower’s poetry

76. Edward Wheatley, Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind, 1. A session with the title “Crippling the Middle Ages: A Roundtable Discussion” was first organized and chaired by Michael O’Rourke and sponsored by The(e)ories: Advanced Seminars for Queer Research (International Medieval Congress in Leeds, 13 July 2004).
accessible can nuance our understandings of the uses of disability in literature from the Middle Ages into the present. This essay not only demonstrates the resonance of Gower’s blindness poetry across discrete moments in time—the fourteenth century, the nineteenth-century, and our contemporary world; it also shows how disability studies can multiply our avenues of access to a single medieval poet and invite us to reassess both the ethical and aesthetic import of Gower’s intricate compositional practice.
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