GOWER'S
VULGAR TONGUE

*Ovid, Lay Religion, and English Poetry
in the Confessio Amantis*

T. MATTHEW N. McCABE

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OVID, LAY RELIGION, AND ENGLISH POETRY IN THE *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

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This series aims to provide a forum for critical studies of the poetry of John Gower and its influence on English and continental literatures during the late Middle Ages and into the present day. Although its main focus is on the single poet, comparative studies which throw new light on Gower, his work and his historical and cultural context are also welcomed.

Proposals or queries should be sent in the first instance to the editors or to the publisher, at the addresses given below; all submissions will receive prompt and informed consideration.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTE ON ABBREVIATIONS AND EDITIONS

Unless otherwise stated, all references to the *Confessio Amantis* and *In Praise of Peace* are taken from *The English Works*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81–2 (repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1969); and references to Gower's other works are taken from *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899–1901). For both the *Confessio* and the *Vox*, I follow Macaulay's practice of marking with an asterisk line numbers of passages not found in his base manuscripts. The tales of the *Confessio* are referred to by the titles assigned by Macaulay, though with slight modifications.

Unless otherwise stated, translations of the Latin verses of the *Confessio* are taken from *The Latin Verses in the* Confessio Amantis: *An Annotated Translation*, trans. Siân Echard and Claire Fanger (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1991); translations of Gower's Latin are from *The Major Latin Works*, trans. Eric W. Stockton (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962); and translations of the *Mirour* are from *Mirour de l'Omme (The Mirror of Mankind)*, trans. William Burton Wilson, rev. Nancy Wilson Van Baak (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992).

All citations of the Latin Bible are from Biblia Sacra Vulgatae Editionis Sixti V Pontificis Maximi Jussu Recognita et Clementis VIII Auctoritate Edita, Nova Editio Accuratissime Emendata (Paris: Garnier Fratres, 1868), translated as The Holy Bible Translated from the Latin Vulgate (Douay, AD 1609: Rheims, AD 1582) (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956).

For classical and medieval texts, in cases where only one edition was consulted, full bibliographical information not given in the text may be found in the Bibliography.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CHMEL	*The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace. Cambridge: CUP, 1999
EETS e.s.	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
EETS o.s.	Early English Text Society, Original Series
IPP	"In Praise of Peace"
Macaulay-*Complete*	John Gower, *The Complete Works*, ed. G.C. Macaulay. 4 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899–1901.
Macaulay-*English*	John Gower, *The English Works*, ed. G.C. Macaulay. EETS e.s. 81–2. Repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
MED	*Middle English Dictionary*
Met.	Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
OED	*Oxford English Dictionary*
OLD	*Oxford Latin Dictionary*
Peck-TEAMS	John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, ed. Russell A. Peck, with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway. 3 vols. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 2000–4.
PL	*Migne, J.-P., ed. Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina.* Paris, 1844–64.
ST	Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*
VC	*Vox Clamantis*

VERNACULARITY AND PUBLIC POETRY

> Forthi good is that we also
> In oure tyme among ous hiere
> Do wryte of newe som matiere …
>
> He hath this charge upon me leyde, …
> That to his hihe worthinesse
> Som newe thing I scholde booke …
>
> I thenke for to touche also
> The world which neweth every dai …
>
> Forthi the stile of my writings
> Fro this day forth I thenke change
> And speke of thing is noght so strange …
> And that is love.[1]

To consider English vernacularity as such is no "newe thing" in Middle English literary studies. Some might say this train has not only left the station but also finished its journey and been reassigned a branch line.[2] But even when the construct "English vernacularity" was in its heyday[3]—as before and since—scholars have for the most part shown a surprising disinclination to explore the rhetorical significance of English vernacularity for John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*: very few studies give sustained attention to what Gower's

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[1] Confessio Amantis Prol. 4–6, 48–51*, 58–9; I.8–15.
[2] For important critical engagements with Middle English vernacularity, see Sarah Stanbury, "Vernacular Nostalgia and the *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44 (2002): 92–107; and the cluster of papers on vernacular theology in *English Language Notes* 44 (2006): 77–126.
[3] A plausible date is 1999, the year which saw both Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) and David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). More recent accounts present a more complex picture of the changing relationships implied by "vernacularity"; see for example the essays in Fiona Somerset and Nicholas Watson, eds., *The Vulgar Tongue: Medieval and Postmedieval Vernacularity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); Alastair Minnis, *Translations of Authority in Medieval English Literature: Valuing the Vernacular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Katharine Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public, 1150–1400* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

adoption of English language in this work meant for his role as a public poet and advocate of reform.[4] There are of course good reasons for this reticence. Because he wrote French, Latin, and English in roughly equal proportions, scholars who work on Gower have perhaps always been more favorably positioned than their non-Gowerian counterparts to recognize that various forms of multilingualism, not monolingualism, were normative among most fourteenth-century audiences of English literature, and thus to resist viewing Middle English through the lens of a reductive English/Latin binary.[5] Indeed, if *vernacularity* stands for the diversification of textual cultures that occurs when writers intentionally accommodate their modes of writing to enhance accessibility for new kinds of readers, as I use it to mean here,[6] the term applies extremely well to Gower's Latin *Vox Clamantis*, as well as to his works in French and English.[7] But the *Confessio* is an *English* poem,[8] whose author

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[4]   One important study that in some ways anticipates my interest in Gower's public poetics is Elizabeth Allen, "Newfangled Readers in Gower's 'Apollonius of Tyre,'" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 419–64. See also Tim William Machan's comparative account of Gower's sense of the integrity and distinctiveness of each of his three languages ("Medieval Multilingualism and Gower's Literary Practice," *Studies in Philology* 103 [2006]: 1–25). A study that continues to inspire productive approaches to the laicizing and secularizing tendencies of the *Confessio* is Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chap. 9; Diane Watt also writes suggestively of how Gower positions himself in the *Confessio* "as a patriotic vernacular poet and as a bluff, honest adviser" ("John Gower," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Literature 1100–1500*, ed. Larry Scanlon [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 156).

[5]   On the ubiquity of multilingualism and its implications, see D.A. Trotter's introduction to *Medievalism in Later Medieval Britain*, ed. D.A. Trotter (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 1–5; see also Mary Catherine Davidson, *Medievalism, Multilingualism, and Chaucer* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[6]   I adapt this expansive, baseline definition of *vernacularity* from Minnis, *Translations of Authority*, 11, cf. 16.

[7]   See Siân Echard's account of how Gower wields multiple languages to address "a nation that is mixed" in Echard, "Gower's 'Bokes of Latin': Language, Politics, and Poetry," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 25 (2003): 123–56, at 155; for medieval Latin as a "vernacular," see Minnis, *Translations of Authority*, 11, 16; see further below, chapter 3.

[8]   Cf. Allen, "Newfangled Readers," 425. Although scholars have sometimes emphasized the importance of the excellently attested Latin prose glosses and Latin verses so far as to describe the poem as bilingual, for all the insights such Latin-centered approaches have produced, the basic claim is an exaggeration. Many readers and listeners would have had no access to the Latin as such; see Joyce Coleman, "Lay Readers and Hard Latin: How Gower May Have Intended the *Confessio Amantis* To Be Read," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2005): 209–35. See also Siân Echard's discussion of the Ashmole MS, in which the poem's Latin has been translated into English in ways that show the scribe misunderstood the Latin; "Glossing Gower: In Latin, in English, and *in Absentia*: The Case of Bodleian Ashmole 35" in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus, 1998), 237–56, at 243. Nevertheless, it should be noted that I regard the Latin of the *Confessio* to be authorial; cf. Derek Pearsall, "Gower's Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*," in *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late-Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. A.J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1989), 13–25.

manifestly regarded his adoption of this language as a new departure (cf. Prol. 23; VIII.3108).[9] There can be no doubt but that English vernacular poetry was an extraordinarily dynamic medium in the 1380s. Accordingly, just as it is a mistake to assume that the English vernacular belongs always to "the people" and thus to the march towards liberal democracy,[10] so it is a mistake to resist asking the question: What was at stake when a London-area intellectual, who was certainly prosperous, probably a lawyer, had taken up English as the primary language of a major work of public poetry by 1385?[11]

The central contention of this book is that a great deal was at stake in this choice—not only for Gower, whose social position and disposition seem to have made writing in French and Latin his natural first choices,[12] but also for public rhetoric and for English poetry. Indeed, Gower's *Confessio* provides an unusually good testing ground for these developments. As the series of epigraphs to this chapter serve to illustrate, Gower is conscious not only of the newness of his own undertaking—that is, the newness of the poetic enterprise of the *Confessio*[13]—but also of the changing nature of the "world which neweth every dai" (58–9; cf. 91–2*), to which his poem responds. In many ways, Gower represents the leading edge of English vernacular rhetoric and English poetry alike.

Accordingly, a second goal of this book is to complicate the term "public poetry," which, for all its usefulness in underscoring important affinities among Gower, Langland, Usk, and other late fourteenth-century writers, has also proven astonishingly inert since its first appearance in 1978.[14] Despite its

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9 See further below.
10 The tendency to "romanticize the vernacular" in this fashion is the main object of critique in Stanbury, "Vernacular Nostalgia," and also, with reference to Gower, in Echard, "Gower's Bokes of Latin" (cf. 145).
11 For Gower's connections to Southwark and London, see John Hines, Nathalie Cohen, and Simon Roffey, "*Iohannes Gower, Armiger, Poeta*: Records and Memorials of his Life and Death," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 23–41; for his probable legal background, see ibid., 25; and John H. Fisher, *John Gower, Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 55–8. For the date of the *Confessio*, see Fisher, *John Gower*, 116–27, and R.F. Yeager, "Gower's Lancastrian Affinity: The Iberian Connection," *Viator* 35 (2004): 483–515 at 496 ff.
12 Gower's French *Mirour de l'Omme* was complete *c*. 1379; Fisher, *John Gower*, 95; cf. R.F. Yeager, "Gower's French Audience: The *Mirour de l'Omme*," *Chaucer Review* 41 (2006): 111–37 at 126. An early version of his Latin *Vox Clamantis* was complete by 1381, and a fuller one by 1386; see Fisher, *John Gower*, 99–108.
13 See the first two epigraphs, and the last, above. Appropriately, the *Confessio* marks several significant Gowerian firsts: its intended equilibrium of "lust" and "lore," its sustained preoccupation with love, its exploitation of narrative, its dialogism, its habit of speaking through ethically flawed personae, and its being in English.
14 Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 (1978): 94–114. Middleton's term has undergone important modulations in fifteenth-century studies that give it direct significance for poetry (e.g. Maura Nolan, *John Lydgate and the Making of Public Culture* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005]), but this is much less the case in fourteenth-century studies.

suggestive conjunction of two intriguingly disparate parts, the term has added little to our understanding of the aesthetics of late medieval "poetry." In Anne Middleton's original account, *Piers Plowman* and the *Confessio Amantis* are "baggy monsters," and the *public*, rhetorical orientation of these texts greatly eclipses their status as *poetry*.[15] Certainly Middleton's term did nothing to alleviate the polarization that long beset *Confessio Amantis* criticism on the (misguided) question of whether Gower should be seen as political writer or poet.[16] *Confessio* criticism has now moved beyond this stalemate, but often by means of rarefied, intellectually elitist readings that lose sight of Gower's publicist intentions.[17] While numerous studies illuminate various ways in which the poem joins didactic "wisdom" and poetic "pley" (cf. Prol. 84–5*), precious few give sustained attention to how the *Confessio* unites a specifically *public* didacticism to *poetry*. It is time we explored what is poetic about "public poetry."

Middleton defines public poetry in terms of its voice, interest, and implied audience. Public poetry utilizes "impassioned direct address"; its interests are "neither courtly, nor spiritual, nor popular. … It speaks for bourgeois moderation"; it speaks "'as if' to the entire community—as a whole, and all at once rather than severally—rather than 'as if' to a coterie or patron."[18] For Middleton, then, the *Confessio* is public not only in the sense that it addresses the public figures of Richard II and Henry of Derby,[19] but also in the sense that it imagines a broader audience that stands in—in various ways, many of which would have seemed radically new—for the nation as a whole.

More than thirty years later, we are in a better position to understand that Gower's mode of public address was not wholly symbolic. We know more about the reading habits of various sectors of late fourteenth-century English society and thus better understand in what ways Gower's English could, and

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[15] Middleton, "Idea," 95. The same tendency exists in Emily Steiner's argument that Langland "invents public poetry from the materials of documentary culture" (Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 143).

[16] In the former camp, for example, are Fisher, *John Gower*, and Russell A. Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978). In the latter are C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), 198–222; and J.A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the* Gawain *Poet* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); cf. Peter Nicholson, *Love and Ethics in Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[17] A chief culprit is the powerful and influential study by James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's* Anticlaudianus *and John Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[18] Middleton, "Idea," 94, 95, 98.

[19] Cf. Scanlon's comment that "Gower was more concerned with the general public and institutional aspect of kingship, and less interested … with any particular king" (*Narrative*, 252).

could not, extend access down the social scale.[20] We also better understand the ways in which Gower's decision to adopt an aristocratically inflected amatory mode of writing, far from restricting his reach to the households of great men, was a sure way to attract socially ambitious readers from among the middle echelons of society. The late medieval proliferation of conduct books and other trappings of aristocratic culture among the lower gentry and middle estates attests the extent to which socially ambitious readers from the merchant, civil servant, small landowning, and other middle groups found these materials useful as means to upward mobility.[21] Gower was no stranger to these phenomena, and if we judge by his land purchases, his career may attest that the rapid social advancements that ambitious lawyers often achieved during the fifteenth century[22] had precedent in the late fourteenth. While the audience implied by the deluxe and "economy de luxe" quality of most early manuscripts[23] is hardly populist, even to the degree that *Piers Plowman* may be thought so, it is unreasonable to deny Gower could anticipate the wider circulation which his "Bok for Engelondes sake" soon enjoyed among gentry and mercantile families, much as Chaucer seems to have envisaged his works reaching an audience beyond the circles of the court, around this same time.[24] Beyond the specially targeted nobles Richard, John of Gaunt, and Henry of Derby, I suggest that Gower imagined his audience to include, *at a minimum*, the "emergent upper middle strata of society" with whom Emma Lipton has recently associated Gower's *Traitié pour ensampler les amantz marietz*,[25] and, *at a maximum*, those aspiring to rise into this group.[26]

   Wider accessibility is a mixed blessing. For a socially conservative writer such as Gower, Lollardy brought one set of liabilities, and the Rising of 1381

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[20] For an introduction to these developments, see Wogan-Browne *et al.*, *Idea of the Vernacular*, 107–205; as well as the excellent overview by Nicholas Watson, "The Politics of Middle English Writing," in ibid., 331–52.

[21] Jonathan Nicholls presents evidence that associates conduct books with a grocer and with a freemason (*The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain-Poet* [Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1985], 71). See also Mark Addison Amos, "'For Manners Make Man': Bourdieu, de Certeau, and the Common Appropriation of Noble Manners in the *Book of Courtesy*," in *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Robert L.A. Clark (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 23–48. For a recent account of the emergent ideologies of the middle echelons, see Emma Lipton, introduction to *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), esp. 1–15.

[22] E.W. Ives, *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England: Thomas Kebell, A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 32. On Gower's land transactions, see Fisher, *John Gower*, 50, 58, 64, 67; and Hines *et al.*, "Iohannes Gower," 24–5.

[23] Derek Pearsall, "The Manuscripts and Illustrations of Gower's Works," in *Companion to Gower*, ed. Echard, 82.

[24] See Pearsall's account of the movement of manuscripts "down the social chain" ("Manuscripts and Illustrations," 82, 96–7). For discussion of Chaucer's socio-poetic position around 1390, see Glending Olson, "Geoffrey Chaucer," in *CHMEL*, 584.

[25] Lipton, Affections of the Mind, 55.

[26] I leave this formulation vague, for reasons give below.

brought another. Noting Fiona Somerset's work on vernacular "clergie,"[27] Katharine Breen suggests that the situation was especially acute after rebels of 1381 appropriated Langland's public writing in support of their cause:

> English authors had to confront the fact that their texts were potentially available to anyone who could read or even speak the mother tongue. Though they could still understand themselves as primarily in conversation with coteries, they also had to make provision for those vernacular readers whom Fiona Somerset, paraphrasing John Trevisa, calls "the poor, the stupid, the old, and those without leisure."[28]

As we will see, one way Gower's *Confessio* makes such a provision is by exercising considerable caution in his treatments of theology.

Although the argument of this book at times foregrounds the lay and vernacular constitution of the audience of Gower's *Confessio*, my argument is not predicated on any particular account of who could and who could not have read the poem. A second aspect of Gower's self-presentation as a public poet, at least as important as any actual broadening of Gower's audience, was the broadening of his audience symbolically. In Nicholas Watson's account, English came to *imply* inclusiveness even before Lollardy. Whereas earlier English writers targeted highly specific, localized audiences, from about the 1350s, "writing in the 'mother tongue' increasingly implied writing for an indeterminate and socially mixed group who had in common only the fact that they were not *literati*."[29] This politicization of the vernacular has major implications for the *Confessio*, for, like other late fourteenth-century writers, Gower uses English "to *symbolise* … access."[30]At least in the revised, Henrician version of the Prologue, Gower conceives of his English-speaking audience as coterminous with England itself:[31]

> And for that fewe men endite
> In oure englissh, I thenke make
> A bok for Engelondes sake. (Prol. 22–3, 24*)

[27] Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); see further below, chapter 3.
[28] Ibid., 64–5; quoted in Breen, *English Reading Public*, 10.
[29] Nicholas Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 822–64 at 838.
[30] So Nicholas Watson characterizes tendencies visible in Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain*-poet in Watson, "The *Gawain*-Poet as a Vernacular Theologian," in *A Companion to the* Gawain-*Poet*, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 296; and in "The Politics of Middle English Writing," in *Idea of the Vernacular*, ed. Wogan-Browne *et al.*, 342.
[31] Even in the original Ricardian version of the Prologue, context strongly associates "oure englissh" (23) with Gower's ideas about his public. See below, chapter 2.

Elsewhere, Gower can employ a similar trope in French, as in the envoy to the *Cinkante Balades*:

> O gentile Engleterre, a toi j'escrits,
> Pour remembrer ta joie q'est novelle,
> Qe te survient du noble Roi Henris,
> Par qui dieus ad redrescé ta querele.[32]

> O gentle England, to you I write, to call to mind the
> newfound joy which has come upon you from noble King
> Henry, through whom God has answered your complaint.

But the differences between the two passages are revealing. First, the envoy to the *Balades* restricts its public to those who are "gentle," apostrophizing, in essence, the "gentry of England," whereas the lines from the *Confessio* Prologue imagine a less restricted "Engelond[]." Second, the envoy to the *Balades* addresses its public directly, while the *Confessio* speaks of England, more obliquely, in the third person. Thus, while Gower's wording suggests that the intended readership is England in general ("oure Englissh … for Engelondes sake"), the passage also registers Gower's awareness that this intention is more symbolic than actual—Gower likely writes in English to many of the same *gentils* he addressed in French in the *balade* envoy. What then did Gower gain rhetorically by his pretense of adopting English for the benefit of the nation as a whole?

Three areas of scholarly advance since Middleton's 1978 article on "public poetry" can help us better understand these rhetorical advantages, and how they contribute to the public-poetic qualities of the *Confessio*. First, we now better understand the ideologies of access that the late fourteenth century associated with English. If Gower's *Confessio* effects a "subtle sidelining of lordship" in favor of a version of constitutional monarchy,[33] we can now investigate how Gower is not only placing a check on potential tyrants, but doing so in ways that would have been charged with significance by virtue of their very visibility in "rude wordis and … pleyne" (VIII.3122*)—a warning to Richard, indeed,[34] but also a quality calculated powerfully to attract readers beyond the royal court.

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[32] Ed. in Macaulay-*Complete*, 1:378. See also *Traitié* XVIII, 22, and rubric (Macaulay-*Complete*, 1:379 and 378).

[33] Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 32.

[34] Especially since English was already being wielded as a populist political instrument, in Parliamentary proceedings against Richard, in 1388 and 1397, and English literature (in the form of the pre-1399 Stafford MS of the *Confessio*) may have been as well; see John H. Fisher, "A Language Policy for Lancastrian England," *PMLA* 107 (1992): 1168–80, at 1170–1.

A second related area of scholarship concerns vernacular theology. While it is well known that writing theology in English was an exhilarating experience in the fertile climate that existed during Richard's reign,[35] it is less well known that Gower belongs among the many writers who gained from these conditions. This book explores both the theology of the *Confessio* and its vernacular mediation, and argues that Gower's public poetry is less *secular*, at least in the usual sense of that word, than *lay*, dependent on a very remarkable, pointedly extra-ecclesiastical voice for its power.

Finally, the critical literature on Gower's *Confessio* has grown extraordinarily in the last three decades, and this sophisticated literature opens many possibilities for understanding the poem's public poetics. While many powerful readings of the poem do not consider vernacularity as such, they nevertheless highlight aspects of the poem's explorations of marginality, rupture, shock, poetic authority, and persuasion that are highly relevant to the *Confessio*'s work—both political and aesthetic—as public poetry. In addition, several important readings do foreground the poem's vernacularity in various ways which this book brings into dialogue with the *Confessio*'s publicizing intentions.[36]

Central to Gower's project of ethical mediation is a commandeering of Ovid. Although many critics have explored the depth of Gower's borrowing in the *Confessio* and elsewhere (especially in the *Vox*) from across virtually the whole body of Ovid's work,[37] Winthrop Wetherbee deserves special mention for showing that Gower's poetic representation of vernacular experience, the "vernacularized" Boethian world of *Naturatus amor* (I.i.1), has a strongly Ovidian inspiration.[38] Ovid lends Gower's English poetry an authority capable of resisting the clergializing glosses: Gower "distanc[es] …

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[35] See Watson, "Censorship"; Vincent Gillespie, "Vernacular Theology," in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 401–20; and the cluster of papers in *English Language Notes* 44 (2006): 77–126.

[36] In addition to Allen, "Newfangled Readers," these include Pearsall, "Gower's Latin," 13–25; and both Winthrop Wetherbee, "Latin Structure and Vernacular Space: Gower, Chaucer and the Boethian Tradition," and Alastair Minnis, "*De Vulgari Auctoritate*: Chaucer, Gower and the Men of Great Authority," in *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Press, 1991), 7–35, 36–74.

[37] The extensive body of scholarship on Gower's use of Ovid in the *Confessio* will be discussed throughout this book, but Simpson, *Sciences*, deserves special notice here. For the *Vox*, see R.F. Yeager, "Did Gower Write *Cento*?" in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 113–32; Eve Salisbury, "Remembering Origins: Gower's Monstrous Body Poetic," in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. Yeager, 159–84; and A.G. Rigg and Edward S. Moore, "The Latin Works: Politics, Lament and Praise," in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Echard, 153–64.

[38] Wetherbee's essay is more directly concerned with Gower's place in the Boethian tradition, but Wetherbee also notes that it is Ovid who liberates Gower's poetic authority (see "Latin Structure," esp. 26–30). Alastair Minnis similarly places Ovid at the center of his discussion of the vernacular invention of the "*auctor amans*," but concludes, rather differently from Wetherbee and from what I argue in this book, that, for Gower, Ovid is less a poetic than a clerkly authority ("*De Vulgari Auctoritate*," 52).

his vernacular narrative from the encroaching authority of the marginalia …
[as] a means of renewing contact with Ovid himself, who had declared openly
that his version of the tale had no moral, and questioned the harshness of
Diana's treatment of Acteon."[39]

This book brings Wetherbee's insight about the Ovidian basis of the
vernacular poetic authority of the *Confessio* into direct contact with public
poetry, by examining how Gower draws on Ovidian myth to fashion the
unique voice—vernacular, lay, and poetic—of his "bok for Engelondes sake."
Chapter 1, "Gower's Ovidian Voice in English," lays the foundation for a
unified reading of the more narrowly amatory confession together with the
more broadly moral-political-theological Prologue by locating the basis of the
poem's unity in its deep engagement with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The last part
of the chapter argues that Gower's open, comparatively unglossed rendering of
Ovid constitutes a lay rhetorical move, presenting the poetic text as openly
accessible in a way that circumvents the usual processes of clerical mediation.
The next two chapters further problematize the poem's much-discussed
dependence on clergial structures of knowledge. Chapter 2 examines Gower's
theory and practice of vernacular translation, arguing that Gower is not nearly
so optimistic about the vernacular's ability to convey Latinate learning as
accounts by Rita Copeland and Larry Scanlon have made him. Comparing
Gower's theological writing in the *Vox* and the *Confessio*, the chapter also
suggests that, while the *Confessio* is just as theological, it prefers affective to
expository modes of instruction. Chapter 3 situates this preference, first within
fourteenth- century English contexts that share with Gower an anxiety
centering on "lewed clergie," and then within broader currents of late medieval
pastoral theology. The last part of chapter 3 brings forward as examples of
vernacular theology two stories in particular, "Three Questions" and
"Constantine and Silvester." The two final chapters resume the question of
Ovid's contribution, now specifically in relation to Gowerian vernacular
rhetoric. Chapter 4 focuses on stories of metamorphosis, reading these as sites
of important equivocations on Nature that present a way for Gower to show
Nature conducing to spiritual as well as earthly goodness. This is important,
not merely because it shows Gower's unwillingness to bifurcate secular and
spiritual ends, but also because it represents goodness as universally accessible,
independent of clerical mediation. Chapter 5 explores what myths of love, and
the Ovidian *ars amatoria*, contribute to the poem's approach to ethical
mediation. Whereas casuistic ethics, as exposited by J. Allan Mitchell, offers
itself as scientific wisdom effectively mediated by texts,[40] Gowerian ethics, I

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39 Wetherbee, "Latin Structure," 27. Cf. idem, "Classical and Boethian Tradition in the
Confessio Amantis," in *Companion to Gower*, ed. Echard, esp. 190–2; and idem, "John
Gower," in *CHMEL*, 606–7.
40 J. Allan Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative in Chaucer and Gower* (Cambridge:
D.S. Brewer, 2004).

argue, by its very nature eludes textual capture.[41] The *Confessio* tries less to transmit knowledge than to instill a particular disposition of eager expectation for grace.

[41] This is quite different from observing that bookish wisdom is not enough to change the will, a claim with which all commentators would agree. For critical discussion of Gower's Augustinian insight into the reason and the will, see Peck, *Kingship*, 2; and Hillary E. Fox, "'Min herte is growen into ston': Ethics and Activity in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 36 (2005): 15–40. Cf. Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the* Confessio Amantis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), 31.

GOWER'S OVIDIAN VOICE IN ENGLISH

The *Confessio* remains, like the *Mirour* and the *Vox*, a public poem, fundamentally concerned with urging a message of moral and political reform, but this English poem adopts a lower, more popular register than do Gower's earlier moral and political compendia in French and Latin. This chapter develops both these claims. It seeks first to establish the *Confessio*'s rhetorical and public basis by exploring the strong affinity that effectively unites the poem's narrative, mythic, and obviously Ovidian portions, on the one hand, with its prescriptive, moral and political portions, on the other. Both kinds of writing are darkly colored by an Ovidian concern with division and changeability. Just as Gower shows a penchant for Ovidian metamorphosis both in the Prologue and in the tales of the confession, so, conversely, do we find a strong tendency towards satire and other forms of political writing in the tales, as well as in the overtly political Prologue. As a result, the Prologue constitutes a fitting prolegomenon to the confession, and the public themes it announces are indeed fundamental to the poem as a whole. This chapter also investigates the *Confessio*'s register and projected audience in light of these Ovidian affinities. As we will see, Gower's fixation on the quintessentially Ovidian themes of division and mutability enables him to address an audience that, truly public and common, escapes the binaries of lay and clerical, demotic and elite.

"Upon a Weer": The Prologue and the Shape of the *Confessio*

Critics have often remarked on the *Confessio*'s indeterminacy of genre. At turns love vision, lyric, exemplum, romance, and *dit amoureux*, the *Confessio* also variously resembles a confessional handbook, an estates satire, a didactic poem, and a mirror of princes.[1] Even the seemingly omnivorous genre,

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1   For discussion of the genre of the *Confessio*, see esp. Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 135–43. For the poem's generic affiliations to the dream vision, see Kathryn L. Lynch, *The High Medieval Dream Vision: Poetry, Philosophy, and Literary Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), 163–7; to the *dit amoreux*, see Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 3–40; to the mirror of princes, see M.A. Manzalaoui, "Noght in the Registre of Venus': Gower's English Mirror for Princes," *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett, Aetatis Suae LXX*, ed. P.L. Heyworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 159–83; to scholastic writing, see Alastair J. Minnis, "John Gower, Sapiens in Ethics and Politics," in *Gower's* Confessio Amantis: *A Critical Anthology*, ed. Peter Nicholson (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 158–80; to penitential treatises, see Gerald Kinneavy, "Gower's *Confessio*

compilatio, however fitting it may be, fails to assimilate everything: as Olsson notes, Gower's self-representation evolves from *compilator* to *auctor* over the course of the poem.[2] While shifts of genre are frequent in medieval literature,[3] those of the *Confessio* are noteworthy because of Gower's evident awareness of form. This is seen in Gower's ballade sequences, the *Cinkante Balades* and the *Traitié pour ensampler les amantz marietz*, and in Gower's refined and specifically Machauvian awareness of genre.[4] Gower's earlier long poems display considerably more formal consistency as well: although Gower's intentions in both the *Mirour de l'Omme* and the *Vox Clamantis* underwent changes during composition, neither poem—not even the much-revised *Vox*, after Gower's addition of the Book I "visio"—undergoes a disruption rivaling the movement from public to private concerns advertised in the opening of the *Confessio*.[5] Most importantly, Gower's remarks on form in the Prologue and the opening of Book I of the *Confessio* show his interest in structural unity. Indeed, the poem's movement from the Prologue to Book I may call the poem's unity into doubt, and, in light of studies by Hugh White, Deanne Williams, and, especially, Peter Nicholson,[6] some older accounts of the unity of the poem's form and moral vision seem simplistic.[7]

Amantis and the Penitentials," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1984): 144–61; and Mary Flowers Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner: Characterization and Confession in the Literature of the English Middle Ages* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), 81–7.

2   Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion*, 5, 11; cf. Pearsall, "Gower's Latin," 20. For the importance of *compilatio* and *ordinatio* as organizing principles throughout the poem, see also Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 206–19.

3   For the problems of genre with reference to medieval literature, see Hans Robert Jauss, "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 76–109; for discussion of the problems of genre in Middle English literature, see Alfred Hiatt, "Genre without System," in *Middle English*, ed. Strohm, 277–94.

4   Cf. *Confessio* I. 2708–9, 2727–31. For Gower's Machauvian sense of genre, see also R.F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 101–7.

5   For Gower's changing intentions in the *Mirour*, see R.F. Yeager, "Politics and the French Language in England during the Hundred Years' War: The Case of John Gower," in *Inscribing the Hundred Years' War in French and English Cultures*, ed. Denise N. Baker (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 145–65, and especially Yeager, "Gower's French Audience," 112–13, 120–1, 123–7; for the revisions in the *Vox*, see David R. Carlson, "Gower's Early Latin Poetry: Text-Genetic Hypotheses of an *Epistola ad regem* (ca. 1377–1380) from the Evidence of John Bale," *Mediaeval Studies*, 65 (2003): 293–317 at 294–7.

6   Hugh White, "Division and Failure in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Neophilologus* 72 (1988): 600–16; Deanne Williams, "Gower's Monster," in *Postcolonial Approaches to the European Middle Ages: Translating Cultures*, ed. Ananya Jahanara Kabir and Deanne Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 127–50; and Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*.

7   E.g. George R. Coffman, "John Gower in His Most Significant Role," in *Critical*

But the *Confessio* remains strongly committed to moral advocacy, and—*pace* White's conclusion that that the poem ends in failure[8] —it is possible to reconcile this commitment with the poem's formal and structural incongruities, even the movement between the Prologue and Book I. James Simpson's account of the poem in *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry* is exemplary here, not only because it advances a moral and political reading of the *Confessio* that remains sensitive to the poem's tendencies to disunity, but, more particularly, because it convincingly looks to Ovid's writing for a controlling model of many of the poem's formal qualities. In the present section, following the lead of Simpson and others, I will argue that the *Confessio* does indeed employ several structural maneuvers learned from Ovid; Gower's Ovidian tendencies bind the Prologue very closely to the confession, and thus establish the Prologue's seriousness—its "wisdom" and "ernest" moral "lore" (cf. Prol. 13, 19, 67, 462)—as fundamental to the poem as a whole.

To be sure, the Prologue is incongruous in important respects, and Gower's own account of the poem's structure initially foregrounds the contrast between the Prologue and what follows. Gower claims to be writing because, just as we have benefitted from the writings of our predecessors, we likewise should leave something to posterity (Prol. 1–11). Since often it dulls a man's wit to read unrelentingly of "wisdom" (13), however, he will compromise and

> go the middel weie
> And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
> Somwhat of lust, somwhat of lore,
> That of the lasse or of the more
> Som man mai lyke of that I wryte.   (Prol. 17–21)

Gower's "middel weie" between "lust" and "lore," a principle that is clearly foundational to his project, is a stylistic ideal he will return to. Here he goes on to explain his choice of English on the basis that few men write in that language (22–4). In the first version of the Prologue, Gower then tells how, during a chance meeting while boating on the Thames, King Richard invited Gower onto his barge, spoke with him about various things and then charged him to write "Som newe thing"; he then proceeds to dedicate his finished work to Richard (24*–78*). Despite his intellectual limitations and physical sickness, Gower says, he will carry out his "byheste" to the king and write in a way that "may be wisdom to the wise / And pley to hem that lust to pley" (76*–85*), lines which recall his comments on the "middel weie." The

Anthology, ed. Nicholson, 40–8. Other studies that unified readings include Patrick J. Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower's* Confessio Amantis (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975); and Minnis, "Sapiens."

8   White, "Division and Failure," 615; cf. idem, *Nature, Sex, and Goodness in a Medieval Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218.

section concludes with the first version's only explicit statement on the purpose of the Prologue:

> But in proverbe I have herd seye
> That who that wel his werk begynneth
> The rather a good ende he wynneth;
> And thus the prologe of my bok
> After the world that whilom tok,
> And eek somdel after the new,
> I wol begynne for to newe.   (Prol. 86*–92*)

Following directly on Gower's statement that his poem will offer both "wisdom" and "pley," the contrast implied by "But" (86*) indicates that he will begin his work "wel" by devoting its Prologue to "the world" past and present, that is, to "wisdom" exclusively. Yet it is equally clear that Gower's "middel weie," conjoining "lust" and "lore," applies to the confession as a whole: "wisdom" and "lore" will remain on view throughout the poem, though they will be joined by "lust" and "pley." The revised Prologue indicates the same division: pure wisdom in the Prologue, mixed "lust" and "lore" in the rest of the work (cf. 64–76).

While Gower, in both versions, contrasts his respective tasks in the Prologue and in the rest of the poem, it is possible to overstate this contrast. Peter Nicholson contends that critics such as John H. Fisher have mistakenly allowed the moral-satirical concerns of the Prologue to dominate their perception of the poem because, unduly influenced by Macaulay's presentation of the text, they forget the original dedicatory context that gets occluded in the revised version privileged by Macaulay.[9] Since the poem was originally composed for Richard—if not actually at the king's own bidding, then at least in a context that made Gower confident he would now have Richard's attention—Gower should be seen as taking this opportunity to advise the king prior to getting down to the poem's real business. The Prologue, then, is a holdover from Gower's earlier major works, and "separable" from the rest of the poem: "After all these years as a moralist, the habit of sermonizing is not easily set aside," and Gower made one last attempt to address public issues before embarking on the task of the *Confessio* proper.[10] Accordingly, Nicholson suggests that we can properly discern the shape of the *Confessio* only when we recognize that amatory concerns constitute its center, and that the political concerns of the Prologue are peripheral at best.

In response to this account, we must stress that Gower's programmatic statements point up continuities as well as differences that exist between the Prologue and the confession. As we have seen, Gower indicates that the main difference is that the Prologue's engagement with "wisdom" is direct, its

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9 Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 111; cf. 107–25.
10 Ibid., 124.

manner more concertedly satirical and hortatory. Gower does not want to "dull[] … a mannes wit" (14), so he will move from "wisdom" to "love." But as we have seen, Gower's statement that he will treat "[o]f love," once he has finished treating "wisdom," does not mean he is putting away "wisdom" altogether. Importantly, Gower explains the goals of the confession in language strongly reminiscent of the language of the earlier passages on "wisdom." If the key term, "wisdom," in lines 13 and 67 is allowed to be glossed by its surrounding passages, as surely it must, "wisdom" denotes knowledge of "the world" past and present (90*–91*; cf. 28, 54–9), concerning especially the virtues and vices of great men insofar as these constitute examples for the present (41–7; cf. 1–11). In the fullest explication of his intentions for the work as a whole, all of these concerns—and thus, implicitly, "wisdom"—remain in view. After the Prologue,

> This bok schal afterward ben ended
> Of love, which doth many a wonder
> And many a wys man hath put under.
> And in this wyse I thenke trete
> Towardes hem that now be grete,
> Betwen the vertu and the vice
> Which longeth unto this office.   (Prol. 74–80)

If Gower's observation that love "many a wys man hath put under" is a "donnish joke," referring in part to his book's structural subordination of love,[11] the observation also keeps in view the logic of exemplarity: love has overcome many wise men and Gower intends to relate cases of this for the edification of his reader. In fact, according to Gower's programmatic statements, the only differences that will separate the confession from the Prologue are that it will be designed to give pleasure as well as wisdom, and that, while preserving the Prologue's concern with exemplary virtue and vice, it will confine itself primarily to virtue and vice *in love*.

    Other critics, including Alastair Minnis, judge Gower's claim to change his "stile" disingenuous and emphasize that political concerns remain important, if not central, in Amans's confession.[12] As these critics point out, Gower discusses the overall shape of the *Confessio* not only in the Prologue but also in the "Quia vnusquisque" account mentioned in the introduction, and this account draws continuities between the Prologue and the rest of the poem.[13] The account points up three elements in the *Confessio*:

11 Cf. Minnis, "Sapiens," 173.
12 In addition to the reference in note 11, see especially Fisher, *John Gower*, 187–9, 191; Peck, *Kingship*, 22; Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic*, 265–71; and Simpson, *Sciences*, 139–66.
13 E.g. Elizabeth Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm and Political Macrocosm," in *Gower's* Confessio Amantis: *Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), 143; Russell A. Peck, "John Gower and the Book of Daniel," in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. Yeager, 159–87; and Fisher, *John Gower*, 136.

secundum Danielis propheciam super huius mundi regnorum mutacione a tempore regis Nabugodonosor vsque nunc tempora distinguit. Tractat eciam secundum Aristotilem super hiis quibus rex Alexander tam in sui regimen quam aliter eius disciplina edoctus fuit. Principalis tamen huius operis materia super amorem et infatuatas amantum passiones fundamentum habet.

[The poem] distinguishes historical times according to the prophecy of Daniel concerning the transformation of the kingdoms of this world from the time of King Nebuchadnezzar up until now. It also discourses following Aristotle about those things in which King Alexander was tutored, as much in his governance as in other matters of his instruction. But the principal subject of this work has its basis in love and the infatuated passions of lovers.[14]

Although this account privileges the amatory concerns as the poem's *principalis materia*, it also makes clear the importance of political themes by pointing up the meditation on Daniel's prophecy concerning *translatio imperii* (Prol. 585–1088), and the lessons on Aristotle's doctrine (VII). In addition to the "Quia vnusquisque," critics have also pointed out that Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the image, which dominates the latter half of the Prologue, casts a large shadow over the poem in a way that tends to be lost in Macaulay's edition. In a study of the illuminations in the manuscripts of the *Confessio*, Jeremy Griffith notes that the Nebuchadnezzar story not only furnishes the subject matter of the first large illumination commonly found in the manuscripts, but the picture of Nebuchadnezzar's image "seems to have been the one constant illustration to the text."[15] As a result, readers of the poem in manuscript cannot fail to be impressed by the image. Fisher suggests that the dream of the statue constitutes a bridge between the *Confessio* and the overtly political *Vox*, since this poem recounts the same dream near its conclusion (*Vox* VII.4–5).[16] More importantly, Fisher claims that the account in the *Confessio* Prologue announces the prominence of political themes that is indeed fulfilled by the confession itself.[17]

But note that Pearsall cautions against taking this as an authoritative interpretation of the poem ("Gower's Latin," 24–5).

14 Macaulay-*English*, 2:480; trans. Andrew Scott Galloway, in Peck-TEAMS, 1:280 (slightly modified).

15 Jeremy Griffiths, "*Confessio Amantis*: The Poem and its Pictures," in *Responses and Reassessments*, ed. Minnis, 172. Cf. Pearsall, "Manuscripts and Illustrations," 86; and Joel Fredell, "Reading the Dream Miniature in the *Confessio Amantis*." *Medievalia et Humanistica* 22 (1995): 61–93. Illuminations of Nebuchadnezzar's image, from Fairfax 3, fol. 2r., and Bodley 294, fol. 4v., are reproduced in Peck-TEAMS, 1:63, 281.

16 Fisher, *John Gower*, 187.

17 Ibid., 190. Elizabeth Porter, similarly, claims that the Prologue's use of Nebuchadnezzar's image establishes the poem's affiliations with satire and mirrors of princes; Porter, "Gower's Ethical Microcosm," 143.

Several major readings of the *Confessio* confirm the perspective of the poem that the "Quia vnusquisque" and the miniature showing Nebuchadnezzar's image together suggest; according to these readings, the *Confessio* does not abandon the political themes of the Prologue with its transition to Book I, but considers these from a new perspective, that of love. Fisher attempts to illustrate the preponderance of political themes by means of a statistical analysis.[18] In his systematic study of the poem, Russell Peck emphasizes the degree to which these strands all function together. Because of the interrelationships that exist among all members of society, "A crime against oneself is a social crime, and a crime against society is a deprivation of self."[19] Gower's aim is to "reform society not by laws but by reshaping the hearts of men."[20] Simpson likewise emphasizes the *Confessio*'s psychological subtlety in his account of the poem's progress from amatory to political concerns. Genius and Amans, who represent faculties of the same soul, must be weaned from the sexual and poetical fantasies that preoccupy them early in the poem; this weaning must be nearly complete before Amans is prepared to request, and Genius ready to deliver, the *speculum principum* of Book VII.[21]

While I share with these critics an interest in the public dimension of the *Confessio*, I wish to temper the totalizing aspirations common to all these approaches by giving due notice to the centrifugal tendencies that have been stressed in more recent accounts.[22] Following the suggestion of several critics that a large part of the interest of the *Confessio* is precisely its placement of division and mutability at the center, I contend that the Prologue's fascination with psychological and political division finds its inspiration in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, just as the confession finds its most characteristic narrative maneuver in Ovidian transformation. While several critical readings have stressed Ovid's importance to Gower's strategy locally, and even structurally,[23] contend that Ovidian influence saturates the *Confessio* in such a way

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18 Ninety-eight of the poem's 141 tales are "about kings." Tabulating the number of stories in each of three categories of subject—"love," "general morality," and "politics"—Fisher notes that "the subject of the *Confessio* … is moral and political instruction in a ratio of about eight to five," before concluding "we are … entitled to assume that the virtues and vices therein examined pertain quite as much to the governance of a ruler as to that of a courtly lover"; Fisher, *John Gower*, 188–9.

19 Peck, *Kingship*, xxv, xxiv.

20 Ibid., xxiv; cf. Russell A. Peck, "The Politics and Psychology of Governance in Gower: Ideas of Kingship and Real Kings," in *Companion to Gower*, ed. Echard, 216–17.

21 Simpson, *Sciences*, 194–5; 205–6.

22 Critical accounts that emphasize the competing tendencies at work in the *Confessio* include White, "Division and Failure"; Williams, "Gower's Monster"; and Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

23 E.g. Bruce Harbert, "Lessons from the Great Clerk: Ovid and John Gower," in *Ovid Renewed: Ovidian Influences on Literature and Art from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 83–97; David W. Hiscoe, "The Ovidian Comic Strategy of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Philological*

that its relationship to the *Metamorphoses* provides an instance of what Robert Alter calls "global allusion." Alter explains that such "whole to whole" allusions originate from "a sense on the part of the writer that there is something in the nature of things that requires the allusion" and illustrates by way of Milton's use of classical epic:

> Milton recreates classical epic in *Paradise Lost* in part because he is persuaded of a typological relation of the classical to the biblical, the pagan providing an elaborate set of memorable adumbrations of the Christian truths to come. … Thus, behind many global allusions is a perceived structure of history, an assumed grammar of the imagination, that underwrite or even necessitate the wedding of the two texts.[24]

However difficult it may be to determine exactly in what form, and with what specific interests, Gower and his contemporaries might have read the *Metamorphoses*, medieval readers were certainly as conscious as we of the tension at the center: on the one hand, Ovid professes a concern to "draw forth a continuous song from creation to the present," but on the other hand, the particular theme he makes his focus, "forms changed into new bodies," provides only the sketchiest unity (*Met.* 1.1–4).[25] The Ovidian vision, hovering between an exalted historical and philosophical program, on the one hand, and an awareness of disjunction, contradiction, and fracture, on the other, informs the *Confessio* as richly as the Homeric and Virgilian vision informs *Paradise Lost*.

My argument will proceed in two stages. The remainder of this section considers how the Prologue's meditation on Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the image registers division and mutability, not only thematically, but also stylistically, as division and mutability afflict Gower, as they do Ovid, in the very act of writing. After exploring Gower's implication of politics and division in the Prologue, I turn to the confession proper to demonstrate that a similarly Ovidian concern with disruption dominates the rest of the poem.

The Prologue has five sections, each of which is set off by a Latin epigram in keeping with Gower's practice throughout the poem. The first (1–92)

Quarterly 64.3 (1985): 367–85; Anthony Farnham, "The Art of High Prosaic Seriousness: John Gower as Didactic Raconteur," in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 161–73; Minnis, "Sapiens"; idem, "De Vulgari Auctoritate"; and Simpson, *Sciences*, chap. 5. See also below.

24 Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 134–5.

25 This tension, inherent in the *Metamorphoses*, was only exaggerated by its medieval manuscripts. See Wetherbee, "Latin Structure," 27; and Ralph J. Hexter, "Medieval Articulations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: From Lactantian Segmentation to Arnulfian Allegory," *Mediaevalia* 13 (1987): 63–82, esp. 63. For discussion of medieval readings of the poem, see below, pp. 50 ff.