Ethics, Rhetorical Accommodation, and Vernacularity
in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*

by

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Abstract

Many critics have seen Confessio Amantis as a work of reformist rhetoric that, drawing deeply on medieval Aristotelian conflations of ethics and politics, urges readers toward personal moral reform as the crucial means by which to heal the body politic. In such a view, the moral and public interests on full display in Mirour de l’Omme, Vox Clamantis, and elsewhere remain central to Gower’s purpose in Confessio. However, while Mirour and Vox also foreground religious concerns, Confessio is often seen as “secular” in a modern sense.

I argue in this dissertation that Confessio indeed bears strong affinities to Gower’s other religious-ethical-political works, and that the main differences that set it apart from them must be understood in connection with Gower’s decision to write this work “in oure Englissh.” Notwithstanding its debt to aristocratic culture, Confessio imagines a broader and more popular audience than do Vox and Mirour. Gower’s novel language choice has major implications especially for Confessio’s uncharacteristically delicate handling of religion.

Chapter 1 examines Confessio’s Ovidian debt and suggests that Confessio’s many invocations of Metamorphoses, given that poem’s fourteenth-century reception, align Confessio with Ovidian universal satire in a way that suggests totalizing religious-ethical-political synthesis. However, Confessio departs from the mainstream of fourteenth-century commented Ovids by stripping Metamorphoses of its clerical patina and, crucially, adopting a markedly lay stance.

Investigating Gower’s attitude to English vernacularity, chapter 2 notes Confessio’s
association of translation with decay and demonstrates that scientific and theological passages in Gower’s English works adopt a lower register than analogous passages in his Latin works.

Chapter 3 investigates the probable causes of these downward modulations, comparing Gower’s sense of linguistic decorum to those discernible in contemporary English vernacular theology.

Chapters 4 and 5—on metamorphosis and art, respectively—argue that Gower finds in Ovidian writing rich resources particularly adaptable to the most delicate of Gower’s rhetorical tasks in Confessio: to address, as layman, a lay audience on matters that are unavoidably, and indeed largely, religious. The dissertation concludes by suggesting that Gower’s voice of lay religious critique plays an important role in the histories of laicization and secularization.
Acknowledgments

It would be hard to find a PhD supervisor who more perfectly combines judgment, curiosity, knowledge, energy, and generosity than Professor Suzanne Akbari, whose eagerness to discuss new possibilities for research on medieval literature is already legendary; I am extremely grateful for her guidance through every stage of my doctoral studies. I am also very grateful to Professor Ruth Harvey and Professor Will Robins for offering criticism and support without which I could not have written this thesis. I thank Professor Nicholas Watson of Harvard University for invaluable criticism, encouragement, and suggestions for future research. Although unfortunate circumstances prevented her from being present at my defense, I am grateful to Professor Alex Gillespie for serving as my internal examiner and offering insightful comments. Thanks are also due to the Ontario Graduate Scholarship, the University of Toronto Fellowship, the Colin Chase Memorial Award, and the John Leyerle Scholarship for financial support. With joy, I thank my colleagues at Ambrose University College, especially Tim Heath and Rita Dirks Heath, for graciously easing my way as I adjusted to life in Calgary and assumed full teaching responsibilities during 2008-2009. Nick, Max, and of course Dad and Mom especially, have blessed me in countless ways throughout my long education, and I am deeply grateful. As for Holly, the love of my life, she has suffered more on account of this project and done more to support it than words can tell. Clearly the God of love and peace is more than kynde.
Note on Abbreviations and Editions

All references to the *Confessio Amantis* are from John Gower, *The English Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS e.s. 81-82 (1900-1901; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1969). The tales of the *Confessio* are referred to by the titles assigned by Macaulay, though with occasional modifications. Quotations of Gower’s other works are from *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1901), unless otherwise noted. 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, A.D. 1609: Rheims, A.D. 1582)*. London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956. The following abbreviations are used in the text. 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BD</td>
<td>Chaucer, <em>Book of the Duchess</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>EETS e.s.</td>
<td>Early English Text Society, Extra Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>EETS o.s.</td>
<td>Early English Text Society, Original Series</td>
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<td>ELN</td>
<td><em>English Language Notes</em></td>
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<td>JGN</td>
<td><em>John Gower Newsletter</em></td>
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<td>LGW</td>
<td>Chaucer, <em>Legend of Good Women</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>MED</td>
<td><em>Middle English Dictionary</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Met.</td>
<td>Ovid, <em>Metamorphoses</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NPT</td>
<td>Chaucer, Nun’s Priest’s Tale</td>
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<tr>
<td>OED</td>
<td><em>Oxford English Dictionary</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PF</td>
<td>Chaucer, <em>Parliament of Fowls</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>PriT</td>
<td>Chaucer, The Prioress’ Tale</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAC</td>
<td><em>Studies in the Age of Chaucer</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ST</td>
<td>Aquinas, <em>Summa Theologica</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>SumT</td>
<td>Chaucer, <em>The Summoner’s Tale</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

Abstract ii  
Acknowledgements iv  
Note on Abbreviations and Editions v  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Ovidian Indirection and the Voice of the <em>Confessio</em></td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 “Upon a weer”: The Shape of the <em>Confessio</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Division at the Centre: Equivocations about Love</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Going Public With Ovid</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2 Clerical Discourse and the Problem of the Vernacular | 100 |
| Introduction | 100 |
| 2.1 The Idea of Vernacular Translation | 101 |
| 2.2 Theology in English and Latin | 115 |
| Conclusion | 140 |

| 3 At the Limits of Clerical Discourse: Gower and “lewed clergie” | 141 |
| Introduction | 141 |
| 3.1 Genius and “lewed clergie” | 142 |
| 3.2 Gower’s “burel clerk” and Other Lay Voices | 159 |
| 3.3 Incarnation and the Vernacular: “The Three Questions” and “Constantine and Silvester” | 170 |
| Conclusion | 192 |

| 4 *Kinde* Grace: Metamorphosis and Accommodation | 195 |
| Introduction | 195 |
| 4.1 Metamorphosis and Accommodation | 196 |
| 4.2 *Unkynde* Punishments, *Kynde* Equivocations | 206 |
| 4.3 Metamorphosis as Reward: Between Nature and Grace | 235 |
| Conclusion | 264 |

| 5 Art, Ethics, and Grace | 266 |
| Introduction | 266 |
| 5.1 Ethics, Art, and Textual “Experience” | 266 |
| 5.2 Chance, Art, and Grace: “Apollonius of Tyre” | 280 |
| 5.3 The Laughter of Venus | 296 |
| Conclusion | 309 |

| Conclusion: Gower, Vernacularity, and Lay Religion | 311 |

| Bibliography | 322 |
Introduction

Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (1390-92) begins with a Prologue of more than one thousand lines meditating on the world’s present state of moral disarray.\(^1\) This comes as no surprise from the poet whose earlier works include the *Mirour de l’Omme* (complete c. 1379), a long poem that combines Christian psychomachy, estates satire, and meditation on the life of Mary, and the *Vox Clamantis* (substantially complete c. 1386), a voluminous estates satire, both of which treat questions of public and private morality that were current in late fourteenth-century England.\(^2\) Indeed, Gower advertises the *Confessio*’s continuity with his earlier works. He represents his major works as a kind of trilogy, since the three are described together in the “Quia vnusquisque” colophon, which appears as a kind of literary autobiography in enough manuscripts to be generally accepted as authoritative.\(^3\) The three works also appear together as the three books supporting the head of the poet’s effigy on his tomb in Southwark Cathedral, which was probably made according to Gower’s own design,\(^4\) and, largely for this reason, John H. Fisher judged Gower’s three main books to be “one continuous work.”\(^5\) But the *Confessio*
itself registers important discontinuities which set it apart from Gower’s earlier works. At the beginning of Book I, Gower suddenly pushes aside the political themes of the Prologue. Since he cannot of his own will “setten al in evene,” he announces he will change the “stile”—and, he implies, the matter—of his writing, and turn from the matter of contemporary mores to the matter of love (1-15). The poem that follows is indeed a change from the two earlier estates satires, especially in Gower’s choice of English (the Mirour and the Vox were written in the more prestigious languages, French and Latin, respectively), in the poem’s greater use of the narrative mode (as opposed to didactic predication, which the earlier poems relied on more heavily), in its commitment to a new subject, love, and in its more elaborate use of speaking personae.

I argue in this thesis that the Confessio does indeed bear strong affinities to Gower’s earlier Mirour and Vox, and that the main differences that set the Confessio apart from these works should be understood in connection with Gower’s decision—for him a novel one—to write a work on this scale in English. Notwithstanding its exalted dedications to Richard II and later to Henry of Lancaster (Pr.23*-75*; 86-89), and the unmistakable “de luxe” quality of the poem’s first manuscripts, the Confessio imagines an audience that is on the whole less aristocratic than that of the Mirour and less learned than that of the Vox. Gower’s imagined English audience may be elitist in the limited sense that it celebrates courtliness and gentility more prominently than did the earlier works, although, as we will see in 1.3, even these values

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6 For the fullest argument to-date for the fundamental distinctiveness of the Confessio, see Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 3-40; this is discussed below and in 1.1.
7 While some recent accounts, and esp. Echard, “With Carmen’s Help,” emphasize the poem’s bilingualism, I insist on its Englishness for reasons given below.
8 See below.
9 For an argument that Gower intended the Mirour initially for an aristocratic and later for a monastic audience, see Yeager, “Gower’s French Audience”; but see also Fisher, John Gower, 92. For the aristocratic audience of portions of the Vox, see Yeager, “Politics and the French Language, 138-46; and Carlson, “Early Latin Poetry,” 294-97. The public quality of the audience of the Confessio is discussed below.
were undergoing a popularization among England’s upwardly mobile “merchant class” at this time. More importantly, however, Gower’s English audience encompasses a much wider public, and thus is far more popular than the audiences of the two earlier poems. Gower’s decision to write “in oure englissh” (Pr.23; cf. VIII.3108) is important in two ways. To the extent—greater, I believe, than some recent accounts have allowed—that Gower’s poem can be said to convey a “message” of public moral reform, Gower’s employment of the vernacular shapes this “message” by causing a shift in register downwards, and other rhetorical accommodations, as befit a broader, more populist and lay audience. My interest in this dynamic accounts for the “ethics” and “rhetorical accommodation” in the title of this thesis. But the third term in the title, “vernacularity,” testifies to profounder currents in Gower’s thought that complicate the poem’s “ethics” far beyond the status of a “message,” and “rhetorical accommodation” far beyond a matter of packaging. Medieval definitions of the “vernacular” stress openness, publicity, and access, things which Gower associates with “englisssh,” as we will see. Accordingly, Gower’s adoption of the vernacular for literary purposes is caught up with profound reflections, not only on the practicalities of how he might transmit knowledge, and especially moral wisdom, to a broad English audience without violating linguistic and social decorum, but also on the very necessity and meaning of mediation, and on the implications of this for lay experience.

I speak of the poem’s “message” cautiously, and with quotation marks, since the poem is by no means reducible to a message. Criticism during the last twenty five years has emphasized the poem’s diversity, incoherence, and even tendency to disintegration. Peter Nicholson has thoroughly documented the “breadth and comprehensiveness of its examination of love” and the complexity and “ingenuity” of its form. More disquietingly, Hugh White sees Gower’s

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10 For discussion, see esp. Minnis, Translations of Authority, 1-16; and Watson, “Cultural Changes,” 131-32.
11 Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 69, 71.
sensitivity to the division that characterizes fallen human experience physically, psychosomatically, and socially as “find[ing] expression in the design and development of the poem.” But while the *Confessio* attempts to resolve the fundamental division between the soul and the body, it “relapses finally into an acknowledgement of failure.”

A number of more recent readings share White’s sense of how division registers itself in the structure of the poem. Larry Scanlon suggests that a “fascination with disruption [is] itself a part of the poem’s point.” Winthrop Wetherbee calls attention to the differences between Gower’s English verses and Latin prose “glosses” and suggests that they struggle against each other in a way that recalls Boethian dialogue. Sián Echard emphasizes this conflict still more strongly, suggesting that it is a key means by which Gower “problematizes the question of reading ... by presenting the reader with several competing voices.” Diane Watt points to contradictions in the poem’s representation of language and gender, and argues that, for all Gower’s intentions of affirming traditional authority structures and sexual morality, his didactic program is frequently frustrated by the intractable nature of Genius’s tales and of language itself. Deanne Williams likewise finds the poem ultimately as “unassimilable” as its representation of Nebuchadnezzar, located “between the heinous Other of apocalyptic discourse and the endlessly mutable, interpretative (and interpreting) self of the medieval dream vision.”

Not all of these readings are convincing, especially insofar as they judge the poem incapable of, or uninterested in, moral instruction. Watt, for example, is surely wrong to conclude from her demonstration that the poem contains no “straightforward and coherent”

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12 White, “Division and Failure,” 607, 615.
13 Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority, and Power*, 249.
17 Williams, “Gower’s Monster,” 145.
moral guidance that the poem is “not ethical.” As J. Allan Mitchell’s recent account has shown, discursive incoherence, far from destroying ethics, constitutes the very means by which late-medieval ethics, a discourse highly sensitive to moral complexity and diversity, most often proceeds. Far from proving that Gower is uninterested in morals, many of the poem’s anomalies underscore Gower’s sensitivity to moral complexity. Several important accounts of the poem stress Gower’s interest in the ways that truth is mediated through the contingencies of human experience. Wetherbee suggests that Gower deeply implicates both the narrator and Genius, his guide, in the vernacular world of the poem, a situation remote from the comparatively secure edifices of Latin learning. Ellen Shaw Bakalian sees the Confessio as negotiating a “‘middel weie’ between kinde and reason” (cf. Pr.17) that requires not the suppression of man’s natural urges but rather their harmonization with reason. Anne Middleton suggests that the qualities of lability and process that pervade the poem are directly attributable to what is, in Gower’s maturest view, the inherently mediating nature of poetry; in his most “public” poem, Gower adopts a “middel weie” both stylistically, between lust and lore, earnest and game (Pr.17-19, *84-5), and also temporally, in its self-conscious position as mediator between the stories of the past and present experience. James Simpson likewise appeals to the medial nature of poetry, finding the Confessio an allegory describing how the imagination (represented by Genius) “mediates between the body of the text and its moralization.” Russell Peck concurs that the idea of mediation—between texts and readers, between counselors and kings—is central to the poem. Finally, studies of Gower’s use of exemplary narrative have

18 Amoral Gower, xviii; cf. 34.
19 Mitchell, Ethics and Exemplary Narrative. For discussion, see chapter 5.
23 Sciences and the Self, 271.
24 Peck, ed., Confessio, 1:7-15; and idem, “Politics and Psychology,” 216; cf. the discussion of mediation, idem, Kingship, 105.
emphasized the problems inherent in the exemplum’s aspirations to mediate truth. Elizabeth
Allen finds that Gower’s “appeals to emotion tend to call attention to moral questions rather than
simply confirming moral statements.”\textsuperscript{25} William Robins describes how Gower, like other
exponents of Aristotelian ethics, calls upon its reader to “negotiat[e] between options which
show their truth only ‘roughly and in outline.’”\textsuperscript{26} None of these accounts reveal Gower as inept
or inattentive in teaching moral doctrine; insofar as they stress Gower’s awareness of the
inherent complexity of moral instruction, such studies furnish evidence of Gower’s sincere
commitment to the task of imparting moral doctrine. Gower’s interest in the ways doctrine is
mediated is foundational to the argument, which I will advance here, that the English language
and English audience of the \textit{Confessio} are themselves major determining influences on the shape
of the poem.

Ethics

But Gower’s evident interest in the dynamics of mediation necessarily complicates the
question of what is being mediated. While there remains a strong consensus that the \textit{Confessio} is
committed to ethics in a meaningful sense, critics disagree over the nature of this ethics, and
particularly, the extent to which it constitutes a unified moral vision. One body of criticism,
pioneered by George R. Coffman and developed by Fisher in his definitive study on Gower,
stresses that Gower’s thought assumes the reciprocity of private and public wellbeing and rests
both on a spiritual foundation.\textsuperscript{27} Coffman and Fisher both saw the moral and public commitment
that Gower’s other writings—not only the \textit{Mirour} and \textit{Vox}, already mentioned, but also the two

\textsuperscript{25} Allen, \textit{False Fables}, 14.
\textsuperscript{26} Robins, “Romance, Exemplum,” 180. For the related accounts in Mitchell, \textit{Ethics and Exemplary Narrative}, and Runacres, “Art and Ethics,” see below, chapter 5. Other readings of Gower’s exemplary narrative, notably those in Scanlon, \textit{Narrative} and Nicholson, \textit{Love and Ethics} are discussed below.
\textsuperscript{27} Coffman, “John Gower in his Most Significant Role”; and Fisher, \textit{John Gower}. 
balade collections, *Cinkante Balades* and *Traité Pour Essampler les Amantz Marietz*, the *Cronica Tripertita* and elsewhere—all evince in different ways as foundational also to the *Confessio*. Accordingly, Fisher emphasized the “singlemindedness” of Gower’s writings, which are united by common spiritual, moral, and public themes. In different ways, not only Coffman and Fisher but also J. A. W. Bennett, Peck, Yeager, and Bakalian all stress the unity in Gower’s vision for public moral renewal, a renewal which ultimately rests on a spiritual basis. The integrity of the spiritual, amatory, and political is made possible by the principle, articulated by Bennett but implicit in all these readings, that “‘Honeste love’ in wedlock, *caritas* in the commonwealth, are wholly compatible ideals.”

My sympathies lie with this broad approach for reasons that will become plain. But the main alternatives deserve notice here. While the readings last mentioned all seem more or less supportive of the Coffman’s suggestion that the *Confessio* constitutes Gower’s “*summa moralis*,” with the strong synthetic impulse that this designation implies, two other broad approaches resist the impulse to all-embracing synthesis by stressing the poem’s secular orientation. The first does this by pointing up the *Confessio*’s affinities with the mirrors of princes genre and with other ethical and political texts in a strongly “humanist,” Aristotelian vein. Thus, while Elizabeth Porter follows Fisher in seeing Gower’s achievement as above all one of synthesis, she stresses that its main debts are to the Aristotelian tradition—to Aegidius Romanus’ *De regimine principum* and to the pseudo-Aristotelian *Secreta secretorum*—rather than to Christian writers. Though Porter does not deny the poem’s Christian affinity, and

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31 Coffman, “Most Significant Role,” 46-47.


33 The term is applied to Gower and his intellectual allies by Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, e.g. 273.

34 Porter, “Ethical Microcosm”; for Porter’s synthesizing interests see ibid., 135. Cf. Manzalaoui, “Nighth in the
indeed she suggests briefly that Gower’s final words on “charite” constitute “the culmination of the ethical teaching that Gower has been putting forward throughout” (162), her insistence on Aristotelian rather than scriptural or patristic sources (see esp. 141) makes it hard to see how this is possible. Similarly, Scanlon interprets the poem as forging an alliance between secular regime and secular poet: Gower validates princely power and occludes the Church by wresting ecclesiastical discursive strategies to his secular purpose.\textsuperscript{35} More comprehensively, Simpson argues that “the ethics ... of the \textit{Confessio} are not specifically Christian” but rather classical and secular.\textsuperscript{36} Simpson pointedly rejects those interpretations (see below) that find Gower “promoting a religious and personal transcendence from worldly life” (202), replacing this with a firm emphasis on “the secular science of politics” (273). One problem with Simpson’s account is the massive learning, and sheer indefatigability, it presumes in the readers of Gower’s poem—qualities which seem unlikely in light of recent work on the reading practices implied by the \textit{Confessio} manuscripts.\textsuperscript{37} In the absence of a Simpson-like reader, the progression he finds from amorous disorder to political order may appear less pervasive, and spiritual interests may be seen to coexist alongside amatory and political ones.\textsuperscript{38} As Porter’s coda on the ultimately spiritual trajectory of the \textit{Confessio} bears witness, many readers of the poem are indeed struck by Gower’s belief in the compatibility of spiritual and secular ends.

Other accounts likewise represent the \textit{Confessio} as bound by a secular field of view, but, rather differently, they argue this by emphasizing the poem’s affinity with vernacular love poetry and seeing the poem’s thematic center as earthly love. Lewis took this approach in his great

\textsuperscript{35} Narrative, Authority, and Power, 245-97.
\textsuperscript{36} Sciences and the Self, 196n.
\textsuperscript{38} It is notable that Amans remains in a state of passion, even as late as VIII.2149-2170.
reappraisal of the *Confessio*’s literary quality in 1936, which judges the passages treating non-
amatory concerns, including the Prologue’s interest in what he deems “Empedoclean love,” as
“digressions.”³⁹ Important accounts that share Lewis’ disregard for Gower’s political and
spiritual thought include those of Derek Pearsall and, especially, Peter Nicholson.⁴⁰ In
Nicholson’s reading, the poem is emphatically not about politics or charity, but about the
difference between “sinful love and virtuous love,” humanly considered.⁴¹ Nicholson writes
insightfully about the “larger order” that prescribes both the “physical order of the universe” and
the “moral order” and that finally calls Gower to spiritual transformation (387-89), but he
clarifies that this last movement is “not the conclusion to the poem” but rather “the poet’s leave-
taking” after treating his proper subject (394).

Although, as I contend, the poem gives much more importance to spiritual allegiances
than this reading admits, Nicholson’s account is invaluable for showing to what extent Gower
regards earthly love as good. In several passages already cited, Nicholson defines his own
reading in opposition to those that see the poem as an argument against earthly and for spiritual
love. This group, which includes readings by Kathryn Lynch, Theresa Tinkle, and Kurt Olsson,
allows the final revelation of Amans’ age to obscure the earlier representation of love as good.
Such readings privilege the revelation, late in the poem, that Amans is old and his love
unreasonable; in this clearer light, Amans’ love is “concupiscence.”⁴² But as Nicholson points
out, the revelation of Amans’ age comes as a surprise, and, ultimately, “it leaves intact all of the
moral lessons of the poem as Genius has just summarized them for Amans at the end of

of the poem’s “political messages” in his review of *Love and Ethics* (9). Burrow’s “Portrayal of Amans,” though an
important influence on Nicholson’s reading, does not obviously fit here because it notes penitential themes in the
tradition of the *dit amoreux* (see esp. 19, 24).
⁴¹ *Love and Ethics*, qt. 382; cf. e.g. vi, 236-37, 386, 394.
⁴² E.g. Lynch, *Dream Vision*, 186; Tinkle, *Venuses and Cupids*, 179; Olsson, *John Gower*, 242; Kinneavy,
“Penitentials,” 160. For a flagrant example of this last tendency, see Hatton, “Gower’s Use of Ovid,” 267.
‘Apollonius of Tyre,’” the poem’s final tale (386).

It is notable that, while each of these last three general approaches privileges a different thematic aspect of the *Confessio*—secular rule and self-rule, earthly love, and spiritual love, respectively—they all assume a stricter distinction between secular and spiritual than, as I believe, either fourteenth-century public discourse in general, or the poem itself, can sustain. One of the intentions of this thesis is to heed Nicholas Watson’s call to Middle English scholars to come more fully to terms with the “public Christianity” of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Gower is a natural fit here, especially given the readings by Bennett, Fisher, and Peck. In light of Bennett’s insight on the validity of “Honeste love” politically and spiritually, as well as amatorily, the *Confessio* seems to urge the reconciliation of all these ends, however disparate they may appear. One advantage of the general approach advocated by Bennett, Fisher, and Peck, then, is its sensitivity to Gower’s apparent eagerness to harmonize these ends in a way that seems to prove modern assumptions about secularism anachronistic. Gower yearns for a harmony of the amatory and the political, for example, in the Prologue’s lament,

The world is changed overall,
And therof most in special
That love is falle into discord. (Pr.119-21)

Even if, in its most immediate context, the primary sense of this “love” is “charite” (110), shortly before Gower confirmed the obvious implication of the poem’s title by revealing his plan to treat earthly love (75-76), and this suggests that both senses of “love” are in play. As Bennett, Peck, Bakalian, and others have shown, similar convergences of earthly and spiritual love occur throughout the confession, and this thesis will add further evidence of this.

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43 In a lecture given to the Canada Chaucer Seminar, Toronto, April 26, 2008. See also idem, “Chaucer’s Public Christianity”; idem, “Cultural Changes”; and below.
44 Cf. Watson, “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” 100.
45 Key passages include the Arion passage (Pr.1053-88), the opening to Book I, the epigram beginning “Naturatus amor” (I.i), and VIII.3162-72. But, as I will argue, many of Genius’ lessons are just as important in complicating the
Of course, the passage we just glanced at does not itself prove that Gower believes a reconciliation of earthly and spiritual love is possible; the passage might actually be taken to affirm a fundamental opposition between “charite” and the love that “many a wys man hath put under” (76). But, while I believe the weight of evidence does show Gower striving for a harmonization of the poem’s various themes, the ambiguity in the above passage serves to illustrate that this effort is never wholly successful. At this point my allegiance to what I have called the “synthesizing” approach of Fisher, Bennett, and Peck needs qualification. I share with their readings a commitment to the quality of “impassioned direct address” that Middleton found central to the idea of “public poetry”:  

46  Gower really does mean to spur his readers on to love and good works, in ways that do not bifurcate the spiritual and the secular nor are limited to a single category but involve political, amatory, and spiritual life together. But to the extent that “synthesizing” readings seek to resolve every anomaly in the Confessio into a unified program, I advocate a different approach. Mitchell’s account of “casuistic ethics”—even if it, like many critical accounts, errs in circumscribing Gower’s concerns in the secular—is useful here because it provides a historically viable paradigm for a real, usable ethics that is not resolvable into one goal but remains essentially diverse.  

47  Mitchell notes that Gower smuggles several different ethical discourses under the heading of the “scole of gentil lore” (I.2665): the poem’s “general conception ... is of the way courtly love, personal virtue, and public policy or common profit overlap.... [I]f the poem is not just an ars amandi, neither is it entirely a speculum regale.”  

48  Importantly, although Mitchell finds the roots of Gower’s casuistic approach in scholastic ethics,  

sacred/profane dichotomy.  

46  Middleton, “Idea of Public Poetry,” 94. Middleton sees the poem in more secularist terms than do Fisher et al., however: see her comment on Gower’s “high-minded secularism,” ibid., 112.  

47  It must be noted, however, that Mitchell’s account, another secularizing reading, is inattentive to the poem’s spiritual dimension; cf. the following quotation.  

48  Mitchell, Ethics and Exemplary Narrative, 46n. For “casuistic ethics,” see below, chapter 5.
he notes the diffusion of these notions throughout late-medieval culture: compilations of ethical cases existed not only in academic discourse but also “in the form of books, pulpit oratory, popular drama,” and “suffus[ed] the ambient culture at large.” Thus, it is possible to find a kind of ethical seriousness without subjecting the poem to implausibly rarefied reading practices. What we find is a poem characterized by paradox: it is ethically ambitious, yet popular; it aspires to a unified ethical vision, yet it fails to achieve total unity. As we will see, the causes of this failure are caught up in problems of mediation.

Rhetorical Accommodation and Vernacularity

One of the tasks of this thesis is to demonstrate that the *Confessio* advocates an ethics that has important amatory, political, and spiritual dimensions without privileging any one dimension to the exclusion of the others. But, as the difficulty we have experienced in merely describing this ethics serves to show, the poem’s ethics is not a “message” but a moral sensibility that seems to exist only within the very processes of its mediation. Gower’s fascination with the vagaries of ethical mediation, noted above in our survey of *Confessio* criticism, is clearly visible in a number of passages. In the Prologue, Gower laments not only the fact of moral disorder but also its seeming irremediableness:

The hevene wot what is to done,  
Bot we that duelle under the mone  
Stonde in this world upon a weer. doubt (Pr.141-43)

Although this passage proceeds to discuss the special burden incumbent on “hem that ben the worldes guides” (145), other passages diffuse the guilt “plenerliche upon ous alle,” each time provoking Gower nearly to despair at the problem of how to reform the body politic (527; cf. 540-71, 905-09). Almost to the same extent that the Prologue centers on the problem of how to

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49 *Ethics and Exemplary Narrative*, 49.
motivate the macrocosm to goodness, finally reducing Gower to wish forlornly for “An other such as Arion” (1054), the confession foregrounds the problem of motivating the individual to goodness. Several commentators note how Gower, adopting an Augustinian insight, represents reason as inconsequential unless it can motivate the will. As Amans confesses at one point,

The tales sounen in myn ere,
Bot yit myn herte is elleswhere,
I mai miselve noght restreigne,
That I nam evere in loves peine (VII.5411-14),

and similar passages occur at IV.2678-79 and VIII.2189-95. As I argue in chapter 1, two passages near the beginning of the poem—Gower’s discussion of the “middel weie” in the Prologue, and his ostensible renunciation of public discourse at the beginning of Book I—are crucial announcements of the interest in ethical mediation Gower will sustain throughout the poem.

In light of the poem’s sensitivity to the dynamics of mediation, it is worth asking what kinds of mediatory considerations inspired Gower’s decision to write in English, and, in turn, what kinds of rhetorical accommodations this language choice constrained him to make. Yeager reflects on the first question when he writes that Gower’s reflections on the “middel weie” convey a “sense of his native language as appropriately a ‘median tongue,’ neither as lofty as Latin nor as courtly as French” but rather “the mode ... of frank parlance,” and elsewhere, when he suggests that Gower chose English out of a “concern for effectiveness”—yet he does not investigate the poem’s vernacularity as far as seems warranted. Judith Ferster offers further evidence that Gower perceived his English writing to be more public than his writing in Latin, arguing that the language of the Confessio constrained him to make “his criticism of the king ... not quite so insolent” as it is in

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51 “Text as ‘Other,’” 256; “Oure englisshe,” 42.
the Latin Vox.\textsuperscript{52} If recent work on the multilingual writing of medieval England has raised doubts about the tendency of “English vernacular studies” to objectify “vernacularity” by assuming the “Otherness” of English,\textsuperscript{53} Gower’s \textit{Confessio} is to a considerable degree exempt from these problems. As we have seen, Gower manifestly regarded this language choice as a novelty (cf. Pr.23; VIII.3108; and see below, chapter 2). In addition, the poem assigns English and Latin very different roles, accentuating the opposition implied by \textit{mise-en-page} with differences in erudition and content that strongly suggest Gower expected many of his readers would have access to the English only.\textsuperscript{54} Further evidence of Gower’s self-consciousness about his work’s English vernacularity comes from Wetherbee’s argument that Gower’s English poem uses the opposition between the Latin apparatus and English verse to create the “vernacular space” which, in dialogue with the Latin authority located outside and above it, enables the poem’s peculiar mode of ethical exploration.\textsuperscript{55}

But apart from Yeager’s and Ferster’s comments, noted above, and Wetherbee’s article, which we will return to, very little work exists on the vernacularity of the \textit{Confessio} as such. Tim Machan demonstrates similarities in Gower’s expression across Latin, French, and English, in a study that occludes the interesting question of what differences might be attributed to language choice.\textsuperscript{56} Echard argues for the \textit{Confessio}’s irreducible bilingualism, apparently presupposing the equal accessibility of both languages and again occluding the question of vernacularity.\textsuperscript{57} The same tendency is visible in Rita Copeland’s important account of the poem,\textsuperscript{58} and, whereas the

\textsuperscript{52} Ferster, \textit{Fictions of Advice}, 111-12. See further below, 3.3.
\textsuperscript{54} For differences in erudition, see Coleman, “Lay Readers”; and see also Echard’s discussion of the Ashmole MS, in which the poem’s Latin has been translated into English in ways that he simply misunderstood the Latin (“Glossing Gower,” 243). For differences in content, see e.g. Echard, “With Carmen’s Help”; and Wetherbee, “Latin Structure.”
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Machan, “Medieval Multilingualism.”
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation}, 202-20; this is discussed below in 2.1.
editors of *The Idea of the Vernacular* make frequent references to Gower and even anthologize passages from the *Confessio* Prologue under the rubric “Addressing and Positioning the Audience,” the volume, laboring under the influence of Copeland’s account, consistently depicts Gower’s English as vying to effect Latin’s displacement. Pearsall gives the fullest account of the vernacular character of Gower’s English, claiming that “English at this time would retain much of its oral and performative character in relation to Latin,” and quoting to this effect Walter Ong’s description of how medieval Latin “effects ... objectivity by establishing knowledge in a medium insulated from the emotion-charged depths of one’s mother-tongue.” In addition to these commonplaces about Latin’s distance from the vernacular, Pearsall also points to specific differences which separate Latin from English in Gower’s usage. When Gower puts on or takes off the *persona* of Amans, or when he depicts Actaeon’s problematic transformation into the stag, Gower’s English leaves “teasingly and suggestively complicated” what his Latin prose “simplifies to the point of clinical abstraction.” In Pearsall’s judgment, the Latin and English of the *Confessio* are so mutually distinctive as to lead Pearsall to suggest the differences are “in some way inherent in the two languages, or at the very least in Gower’s use of them” (21-22).

The extensive body of scholarship on English vernacular culture that has arisen since the mid-1990s makes it possible to take Pearsall’s essential insight—what we might call the vernacularity of the *Confessio*—considerably further. This scholarship predominantly concerns vernacular religious writing, though it has major implications elsewhere. While earlier scholarship tended to view religious writing in English with condescension, judging it a highly

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59 Wogan-Browne, eds., *Idea of the Vernacular*, e.g. 6, 7, 317, 320, 328, 367, and 368.
61 For summaries of these developments see Watson, “Gawain-poet,” 294-96; and Gillespie, “Vernacular Theology.” For important critical engagements with historiography of Middle English see Stanbury, “Vernacular Nostalgia”; and the cluster of papers in *ELN* 44 (2006): 77-126. For similar developments in continental studies, see the essays by Watson, Poor, Waters, and Angelo, in Somerset and Watson, eds., *Vulgar Tongue*. 
derivative bastardization of Latin learning, recent accounts have emphasized its distinctiveness and cultural significance. Many scholars now see this literature as, in Watson’s words, “us[ing] the vernacular not only in the way we would anticipate, as an instrument for conveying already formulated teachings, but also as a tool for exploring Christian truths from the often distinct perspective of the ‘mother tongue.’”\textsuperscript{62} Theological writing was of course more highly politicized than non-theological writing. Some time after Wyclif’s condemnation at Oxford in 1381 and certainly by 1384, when the orthodoxy of the devotional treatise \textit{Speculum vitae} became the subject of an inquiry at Cambridge “whose main concern must have been the vernacular language of this doctrinally mainstream text,” the mere fact of that theology was being treated in English became a sufficient cause for suspicion.\textsuperscript{63} Importantly, however, even non-theological writing in the vernacular becomes politicized in the second half of the fourteenth century: even before 1380 and the rise of Lollardy, “writing in the ‘mother tongue’ increasingly implied writing” not for a highly specific, localized audience as thirteenth-century English writing had implied, but “for an indeterminate and socially mixed group who had in common only the fact that they were not \textit{litterati}.”\textsuperscript{64} As Watson has emphasized, between approximately 1370 and 1400, English becomes a “language of universal access” that also “symbolize[s] such access,” as is seen in the “images of community related to th[e] Lollard vision” that “haunt the literature of this period”—Langland’s “field full of folk,” Chaucer’s parliament of fowls and Canterbury pilgrimage, and the banquet for rich and poor in \textit{Cleanness}.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{62} Watson, “\textit{Gawain}-poet,” 296. See also idem, “Conceptions of the Word”; McGinn, “Introduction”; Evans et al., “Vernacular Theory”; and below, chaps. 2 and 3.

\textsuperscript{63} Watson, “Politics,” 338.

\textsuperscript{64} Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 838; and idem, “Politics of Middle English Writing,” 334-35. For critical discussion of Watson’s interpretation of this period, see Georgianna, “Vernacular Theologies,” 89-91.

\textsuperscript{65} I conflate two similar passages from Watson: “\textit{Gawain}-poet,” 296; and “Politics,” 342. On vernacularity and access, see also Minnis, \textit{Translations of Authority}, 1.
This politicization of the vernacular has major implications for the *Confessio*, even apart from the question of the poem’s theological dimension, for, like the writers Watson discusses, Gower identifies English with access. At least in the revised, Henrician version of the Prologue, Gower conceives of his English-speaking audience as coterminous with England itself—

*And for that fewe men endite*
*In oure englissh, I thenke make*
*A bok for Engelondes sake*  
(Pr.22-23, 24*)

—and, as I argue in chapter 2, Gower’s stylistic adoption of the “middel weie” (Pr.17) must be understood in connection with his reference to language choice merely six lines later. Although Gower could address a national audience in French as well as English—

*O gentile Engleterre, a toi j’escrits,*  
*Pour remembrer ta joie q’est novelle,*  
*Qe te servient du noble Roi Henris*  

—these lines, and the ballade sequence as a whole, are much more narrowly aristocratic than the *Confessio*, which not only covers a broader field of topics but also imagines a broader public.°° Middleton’s account of the poem’s voice, though it understates the importance of the *Confessio*’s vernacularity per se, ably captures its public nature: the voice of “public poetry” is “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.”°°° Middleton undoubtedly was correct to emphasize the public character of the *Confessio*’s voice, for, although Gower addressed his poem to Richard II and later to Henry—even if he in some sense primarily intended his poem to “speak truth to power”°°°°—it is

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67 It is notable that Butterfield’s argument that Gower does *not* imagine a uniquely “English” perspective limits its investigations to aristocratic culture (“French Culture,” 113-20). In fact Gower’s concerns are not (especially in the *Confessio*) exclusively aristocratic.
68 “Idea of Public Poetry,” 95, 98.
69 Mitchell, “Rhetorical Culture,” 569. Similarly, Fisher contrasts Gower to the “demagogue[s]” Langland and the Lollards: “He was adopting the opposite role, that of transmitting popular complaints to influential authority” (*John Gower*, 105). Yet the *Confessio* demonstrates a much subtler understanding of the body politic.
unreasonable to deny he could anticipate the wider circulation which his poem 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, at around this same time. While the audience implied by the deluxe and “economy de luxe” quality of most early manuscripts is hardly populist, even to the degree that that of Piers Plowman was, Gower clearly intended to lend his “Bok for Engelondes sake” a strong public dimension, and this dimension seems to have been well received. Thus it is appropriate to bring to the Confessio the kinds of questions the recent emphasis on English vernacularity has raised in other contexts. Merely by vulgarizing as much ethical learning as it does the poem entails the hybrid that Fiona Somerset (taking a phrase from Langland) has called “lewed clergie,” and thus, potentially at least, a degree of radicalism. But by vulgarizing its brand of spiritually charged, sacralized ethics, the Confessio does something very remarkable indeed, as I hope to show.

Central to Gower’s project of ethical mediation is a commandeering of Ovid. Although the depth of Gower’s Ovidian borrowing in the Confessio and elsewhere (especially in the Vox) has received considerable attention, Wetherbee in particular deserves credit for noting the importance of Ovidian narrative to Gowerian vernacularity. Wetherbee describes the

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70 See Pearsall’s account of the movement of manuscripts “down the social chain”: “Manuscripts and Illustrations,” 82, 96-97. For discussion of Chaucer’s socio-poetic position around 1390, see Olson, “Chaucer,” 584.
71 Pearsall, “Manuscripts and Illustrations,” 82.
72 The relationship between gentle and populist audiences at this time is discussed below, 1.3 and especially 3.1.
73 Excellent coverage of the issues, together with a salutary critique, is found in Stanbury, “Vernacular Nostalgia.”
74 Somerset, Clerical Discourse, esp. 13. See also below, chap. 3.
76 Wetherbee, “Latin Structure.” Minnis, “De Vulgari Auctoritate,” similarly places Ovid at the center of his discussion of the vernacular invention of the “auctor amans” (qt. 39) but concludes, rather differently from Wetherbee and from what I argue here, that, for Gower, Ovid is less a poetic than a clerkly authority. For discussion,
“interplay” between the poem’s wayward English and stable Latin in terms reminiscent of Pearsall’s, but he argues that this “dialogue” is driven by a Boethian fascination with the ways auctoritas is mediated to the world of vernacular experience (9-10). Gower’s representation of vernacular experience is strongly Ovidian. Wetherbee notes crossovers in Gower’s version of “Acteon.” On the one hand, by modifying Ovid’s story, Gower “assert[s] the autonomy of his vernacular fictional world.” But on the other hand, Ovidian narrative is itself a source of richly vernacular qualities: Gower “distanc[es] ... 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” (27). Ovidian myth is important because it furnishes Gower’s chief resource for describing the highly ambiguous principle, “Naturatus amor” (I.i.1)—the “Love” that is both the cause of Amans’ difficulty and the necessary means for its solution, and that constitutes the poem’s central concern (see below, 1.2). Wetherbee describes how the shocking arbitrariness of stories such as “Narcissus” and “Acteon”

point to the need for a cultural system capable of controlling the relationship between the sexes and, by implication, neutralizing the tensions that pervade social and political life in a world ruled by naturatus amor. The construction of such a system out of the resources provided by courtly-chivalric culture is the project that gives coherence to ... Gower’s penitential dialogue. (28)

This thesis takes Wetherbee’s insight that Ovid provides the basis for the Confessio’s depiction of “Naturatus amor” in a somewhat different direction, arguing that Ovid’s ability to convey the unruliness of Nature inspired Gower to appropriate Ovidian myth to his project of affecting a vernacular, lay, and extraclerical voice in his “bok for Engelondes sake.” Chapter 1, “Ovidian Indirection and the Voice of the Confessio,” lays the foundation for a unified reading of the more narrowly amatory confession together with the more broadly moral-political-

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see below, 2.1.
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 un glossed 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 investigate the poem’s degree of clerisy further. 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 recent accounts by Rita Copeland and Larry Scanlon have made them. 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, “The 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 suggests that myths of love, and also the Ovidian *ars amatoria*, also contribute to the poem’s approach to ethical mediation. Whereas casuistic ethics, as represented by Mitchell, offers itself as scientific wisdom effectively mediated by texts, Gowerian ethics, I argue, by its very nature eludes textual capture. The *Confessio* tries less to
transmit knowledge than to instill a particular disposition of eager expectation for grace.
1. Ovidian Indirection and the Voice of the *Confessio*

Introduction

The *Confessio* remains, like the *Mirour* and the *Vox*, a rhetorical 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 *summae* in French and Latin. This chapter develops both these claims. It seeks first to establish that the *Confessio* is in an important sense a rhetorical poem, fundamentally concerned with moral and public goodness. I will argue this 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. As we will see in sections 1 and 2, both kinds of writing are darkly colored by an Ovidian concern with division and changeability. Just as Gower shows a penchant for Ovidian metamorphosis in the Prologue, as well as in the tales of the confession, so conversely do we find a strong tendency towards political writing and satire 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.

The second purpose of this chapter is to investigate the *Confessio’s* register and projected audience in light of these Ovidian affinities. I argue in 1.3 that, paradoxically, the same qualities that lend the poem its aristocratic aura also help the poem affect a common voice. As I hope to show, 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.
1.1 “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 amoreux, 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, 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.\(^2\) Of course, generic indeterminacy is not itself unique, for medieval literature repeatedly proves the inadequacy of quasi-scientific, classicizing theories of genre.\(^3\)

But, while shifts of genre are frequent in medieval literature, 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 in his descriptions of the courtly forms in Confessio I.2708-09, 2727-31.\(^4\) 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

\(^1\) For discussion of the genre of the Confessio, see esp. Scala, Absent Narratives, 135-43. For the poem’s generic affiliations to the dream vision, see Lynch, High Medieval Dream Vision, 163-67, Peck, Kingship, 25-26, and Cherniss, Boethian Apocalypse, 99-118; to the dit amoreux, see Burrow, “Representation of Amans,” and Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 3-40; to the mirror of princes, see Ferster, Fictions of Advice, 108-36; Porter, “Ethical Microcosm”; and Manzalaoui, “Noush in the Registre”; to scholastic writing, see e.g. Minnis, “Moral Gower,” idem, “John Gower Sapiens,” and Olsson, John Gower, 1-15; to penitential treatises, see Kinneavy, “Gower’s Confessio Amantis”; and Braswell, Medieval Sinner, 81-87.

\(^2\) Olsson, John Gower, 5, 11; cf. Pearsall, “Gower’s Latin,” 20. For the importance of compilatio and ordinatio as organizing principles throughout the poem, see also Copeland, Rhetoric, 206-19.

\(^3\) For the problems of genre with reference to medieval literature, see Jauss, “Theory of Genres”; for discussion of the problems of genre in Middle English literature, see Hiatt, “Genre without System."

\(^4\) I.e. Confessio I. 2708-09, 2727-31. For Gower’s Machauvian sense of genre, see also Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, 101-07.
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*. 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 lurch from the Prologue to Book I calls the poem’s unity into serious doubt, and, in light of studies by White, Williams, and, especially, Nicholson, some older accounts of the unity of the poem’s form and moral vision seem simplistic.

But the *Confessio* remains strongly committed to moral advocacy, and—*pace* White’s conclusion that that the poem ends in failure—it is possible to reconcile this commitment with the poem’s formal and structural incongruities, even the lurch between the Prologue and Book I. Simpson’s account of the poem in *Sciences and the Self* 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 “earnest” moral “lore” (cf. Pr. 13, 67; 464; 19)—as fundamental to the poem as a whole.

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6 White, “Division and Failure”; Williams, “Gower’s Monster”; and Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*. See also above, introduction.

7 This is certainly true of Coffman, “John Gower”; other studies that point up unifying elements in ways that may compromise the poem’s tendencies to disunity include Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury*, and Minnis, “John Gower, Sapiens.”

To be sure, the Prologue is incongruous in important respects, and the transition to Book I involves a lurch. Gower’s own account of the poem’s structure initially contrasts the Prologue with 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 (Pr.1-11). Since often it dulls a man’s wit to read “wisdom” (13) unrelentingly, however, he will compromise and go the middel weie
And wryte a bok betwen the tweie,
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
That of the lasse or of the more
Som man mai lyke of that I wryte. (Pr.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 (22-24). 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 section concludes with the only statement in the first version 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. (Pr.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, as I think Nicholson does. Nicholson contends that critics such as 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 that Macaulay privileges.\(^9\) 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

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\(^10\) *Love and Ethics*, 124.
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 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 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, 54-59), concerning especially the virtues and vices of great men insofar as these constitute examples for the present (41-47; 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
Towares hem that now be grete,
Betwen the vertu and the vice
Which longeth unto this office. (Pr.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, 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, just cited, judge Gower’s claim to change his “stile” disingenuous and emphasize that political concerns remain important, if not central, in Amans’s confession. As these critics point out, Gower discusses the overall shape of the Confessio not only in the Prologue but also in the “Quia vnu squisque” account mentioned in the introduction, and this account draws continuities between the Prologue and the rest of the poem. The account points up three elements in the Confessio:

secundum Danielis propheciam super huius mundi regnorum mutacione a tempore regis Nabugodonosor vsque nunc tempora distinguuit. 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 amantium 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.

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12 In addition to the reference in the last note, see especially Fisher, John Gower, 187-89, 191; Peck, Kingship, 22; Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, 265-71; and Simpson, Sciences and the Self, 139-66.
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* (Pr.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.” 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 (*VC* VII.4-5). 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. Elizabeth Porter, similarly, claims that the Prologue’s use of Nebuchadnezzar’s image establishes the poem’s affiliations with satire and mirrors of princes.

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.

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17 Ibid. 190.

18 Porter, “Gower’s Ethical Microcosm,” 143.
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. 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.”19 In his systematic study of the poem, Peck emphasizes the degree to which these strands all function together:

for Gower the broad social criticism and the personal woes of the lover are part of one and the same plot. ... [M]an is the cause of his own dilemmas.... It is the kernel of truth out of which the whole Prologue and subsequent poem spring. Because of the interconnectedness of God’s creation, no creaturely act is totally private. A crime against oneself is a social crime, and a crime against society is a deprivation of self.20

Because of these interrelationships, Gower in the Confessio can appeal “not to the officers of the land but to the officers of the soul. He would reform society not by laws but by reshaping the hearts of men.”21 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.22

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19 Fisher, John Gower, 188-89.
20 Peck, Kingship, xxiv-xxv.
22 Simpson, Sciences and the Self, 194-95; 205-06.
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.\(^{23}\) Following the suggestion of several recent critics that a large part of the interest of the *Confessio* is precisely its placement of division and mutability at the center,\(^{24}\) 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,\(^{25}\) I contend that Ovidian influence saturates the *Confessio* in such a way that its relationship to the *Metamorphoses* provides an instance of what Robert Alter calls “global allusion.” As Alter explains, 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 .... 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.\(^{26}\)

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, 

\(^{23}\) For a survey of recent critical accounts that emphasize the competing tendencies at work in the *Confessio*, see above, introduction. For criticism of the “totalizing” tendency in Simpson’s *Sciences and the Self*, see below.  
\(^{24}\) See above, introduction.  
\(^{26}\) Alter, *Pleasures of Reading*, 134-35.
the particular theme he makes his focus, “forms changed into new bodies,” provides only the sketchiest unity (Met. 1.1-4). 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, in section 1.2 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 Latin headverses in keeping with Gower’s practice throughout the poem. The first (1-92) describes Gower’s intentions in writing the poem, and announces that he will adopt a “middel weie” and write “Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore” for the benefit of those coming after him. In most versions, which Macaulay called the first and second recensions, this section also gives a lengthy dedication to Richard (24*-92*); what Macaulay called the third recension replaces this dedication with a passage of equal length which continues Gower’s reflections on literary pleasure and moral profit. The next three sections concern the three estates in turn—the temporal rulers (93-192), the church officials (193-498), and the commons (499-584). In these sections, Gower’s usual practice is to measure...

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27 This tension, inherent in the Metamorphoses, was only exaggerated by its medieval manuscripts. See Wetherbee, “Latin Structure,” 27; and Hexter, “Medieval Articulations,” esp. 63. For discussion of medieval readings of the poem, see below, 1.3.
present shortcomings against the virtuous conduct of past generations. Finally, the fifth and longest section (585-1088) takes a broader view of historical decline itself, using Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the image in Daniel 2 as its basis.

Any schematic account of the Prologue gives an exaggerated sense of its formal consistency, however. Inconsistencies appear in the middle sections on the three estates. While the treatments of the temporal rulers and the church officials emphasize the extent to which these estates have declined in recent times, the chapter on the commons not only abandons this practice but seems to undermine the logic of the two previous chapters since it imputes the guilt for the present unrest to human nature itself. As Nicholson notes, Gower’s treatment of the commons breaks off after only thirty lines, and the chapter shifts into general ruminations on fortune, vanity, and mutability which occupy the remainder of the chapter (529-84). Gower’s doctrine, “Of that the regnes be muable / The man himself hath be coupable” (581-82), serves not only to introduce the final, long chapter on Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the image (cf. 572), but also anticipates more serious formal disruptions which will occur when Gower reveals the problem of “divisioun” as endemic to human nature.

The Confessio’s treatment of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream departs both from biblical/exegetical tradition and from Gower’s treatment in the Vox. Daniel 2 tells how Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by a dream in which he saw a statue in human form, having a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron, and feet partly of iron and partly of clay. Finally, a stone cut without hands out of the mountain came and broke the statue into pieces. After God revealed the dream to him, Daniel interpreted the golden head as

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28 For analysis of the problems in this section, and speculation that “Gower may simply have failed to write everything that he planned about the commons,” see Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 117-18.
Nebuchadnezzar and the subsequent parts as the kingdoms which would come after him in time and in the glory of their kingdoms. The last kingdom, partly of clay and partly of iron, would be a kingdom divided. After it God would set up a kingdom, signified by the stone, which would break in pieces all previous kingdoms, itself never to be destroyed (vv. 31-45). In Christian exegesis, the passage’s historical sense prophesied the succession of the Babylonian empire by the Medes and Persians, the Macedonians, the Romans at the height of their power, and then the divided, weakened empire; the rock which finally would smash these empires is Christ.²⁹

Gower uses Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the statue in both the *Vox* and the *Confessio* Prologue.³⁰ In both cases he departs from exegetical tradition by taking the arrival of the rock, which Jerome and other Christian exegetes had identified with Christ’s First Coming, as the end of the world. In the *Vox* Gower makes relatively brief use of the image as he reduces it to its first and last terms, the golden head and the clay/iron feet, which he understands to be figurative of the present:

    Nunc caput a statua Nabugod prescinditur auri,
    Fictilis et ferri stant duo iamque pedes: (VII.i.5-6)

    Now the golden head is cut from the statue of Nebuchadnezzar,
    Now stand the two feet of clay and iron.

Gower lets the reference to golden age pass without further comment, but he goes on to explicate the feet of clay and iron as slack *luxuria* and cruel *auaricia*, which he names as the prevailing

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³⁰ For analysis of how this figure establishes Gower as an “apocalyptically-minded poet,” see Peck, “Book of Daniel.” Fisher, who believes that “in a very real sense, Gower’s three major poems are one continuous work,” suggests that the figure of the statue is one of the “bridges” between the *Vox* and the *Confessio* (*John Gower*, 135, 187).
sins of the present day (19-56). Gower’s identification of the feet of clay and iron is somewhat hesitant—especially in the heading to chapter 1, where he identifies the present day as “quodammodo in fine seculi”\(^{31}\)—and apparently he did not believe the biblical prophecy had exclusive application to his own day. As Fisher notes, medieval exegesis interpreted Daniel 2 with respect to its moral as well as its historical sense, and this could offer considerably more space for interpretive freedom. Gower relies more heavily on this moral tradition.\(^{32}\)

The instance in the *Confessio* is fuller and more persistent in its use of historical narrative, and this produces an anomaly. As in the *Vox*, it is the feet made partly of clay and partly of iron that ultimately interest Gower the most: this feature will give him opportunity to comment on the division of the present day, and to meditate on division as the cause of moral degeneracy. But more is at issue. The passage is much more expansive than its counterpart in the *Vox*, and he narrates the *translatio imperii* sequence through three times—first giving the king’s own account of the dream (602-24), then Daniel’s prophetic interpretation (625-62), and finally Gower’s own longer, retrospective interpretation (663-880). Here the golden age is not a vague gesture to a past time when men were happy (as in the bucolic golden age of classical tradition and in Boethius, Jean de Meun, or the equally ahistorical, though more starkly moral golden age of Gower’s *Vox*); it is specifically identified (following Daniel’s own interpretation) as the time when a large part of the world was subject to the king of Babylon (670-75)—a period which would not seem to offer the clearest foil to Gower’s morally degenerate present, but he glosses over this. The golden head and neck signify “A worthi world, a noble, a riche, / To which non

\(^{31}\) These headings are found in the four copies of the *Vox* that Macaulay took to be overseen by Gower. See Macaulay, ed., *Latin Works*, lix-lx.
after schal be liche” (633-34). Following the traditional exegesis, Gower takes the silver kingdom, “a world of lasse worth” (636), to be the Persian empire, and the bronze, “werse world” (638), as the Greek empire of Alexander. The fourth kingdom, of “stiel,” is the Roman Empire, which is understood broadly to include the reigns of Charlemagne and his heirs in France. But the fifth and last era he takes to be the unruly period which began with the partition of the Roman imperium among the “Alemaine Princes sevne” (804), the seven electors of the Holy Roman Empire, and has continued to Gower’s own time:

Upon the feet of Erthe and Stiel
So stant this world now everydiel
Departed; which began riht tho,
Whan Rome was divided so:
And that is forto rewe sore,
For alway sithth more and more
The world empeireth every day. (Pr.827-33)

Beyond the pointed, satirical contrast of present vice with golden age virtue, Gower is concerned to show that past empires failed because of sin and division: this pattern is repeated at least three times, in reference to the Greeks (710 ff.), the Romans (738 ff.), and the Lombards (790 ff.) (the reference to the notorious “Baltazar” at the time of Babylon’s fall, l. 685, might be counted as a fourth instance). For this pattern, Gower draws on the “fall of princes” tradition exemplified in the Roman de la rose (5829-6901), Boccaccio’s De casibus virorum illustrium, and Chaucer’s Monk’s Tale. But other features of this section suggest a debt to Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Gower’s interpretation of the arrival of the stone in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream not as the Incarnation but as an event still future constitutes a departure from exegetical tradition, as we noted above. Gower’s departure from the mainstream of Christian historiography is worth emphasizing. Although Ernst Breisach writes that the sequence of kingdoms in Daniel 2 “reverberates through Western historiography well into the seventeenth century” as various
regimes vie for the mantle of Roman authority, such “reverberations” generally occur in histories that draw on Daniel 2 in far more subtle ways, and in ways less directly contrary to the exegetical tradition established by Jerome, than Gower’s does. Orosius did not explicitly “group his rather topsy-turvy account” of world history in *Seven Books of Histories against the Pagans* “according to the four empires” of Daniel, and, to the extent that his work alludes to Daniel 2, it implicitly fuses the coming of the stone with the renewal of Rome under Christian rule. Otto of Freising, similarly, celebrates the becoming visible of the City of God in the “Roman Empire of Christians,” although he laments that this new order has declined drastically since the investiture conflict. It is rare for medieval historians to found their narratives on Daniel 2 so firmly as Gower does his; Breisach emphasizes that sequences involving five or—subsequent to Augustine—six world ages were “[e]ven more frequent” than schemes loosely based on Daniel 2. In Gower’s own country and century, Ranulf Higden follows the exegetical tradition in listing the sequence of the four “regna principalia” (“principal kingdoms”)—Assyria, Persia, Greece, Rome—as one of eight things “Satagentibus igitur plenam historiae notitam apprehendere utile foret” (“To hem þat will haue ful knowlche of stories nedeþ eyþte þinges...”), thereby demoting its status in comparison to the Augustinian six ages scheme, which becomes the basic organizing principle for the work as a whole. For Higden, as for many narrators of

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33 Breisach, *Historiography*, 83.
34 Ibid., 86.
35 See, for example, the polemical account of Christian peace in recent times in *Seven Books of Histories*, tr. Deferrari, 362-63.
world history, the six ages correspond to the six days of creation.\(^{39}\)

Given the remoteness of Gower’s unique rendering of Daniel 2 from Christian historiography, several considerations show the passage to be specifically Ovidian. First, the prominent placement of the history of decline at the beginning of the poem makes it analogous to Ovid’s. Moreover, whereas Daniel refers to successive kingdoms by ordinal numbers, Gower, like Ovid, but unlike Orosius, Otto of Freising, and Ranulf Higden, uses the names of the metals to specify ages (“worlds”). The metal names accumulate massively (606, 608, 610, 611, 614, 622, 670, 688-89, 699-700, 730-31, 733, 735, etc.) and thus suggest an allusion to *Metamorphoses* I. Both the replacement of numeric with metallic names, and the enduring interest in the historical process itself, not merely for its utility in moralizing the present, make this passage more similar to Ovid’s world history than to either Christian meditations on this passage or Christian historiography.

Is Bruce Harbert justified, then, in asserting that Gower interprets Nebuchadnezzar’s statue “after Ovid”?\(^{40}\) There are no clear verbal echoes, and Gower’s content differs from Ovid’s at various points. Whereas Ovid’s golden age, in keeping with classical tradition, was a time of bucolic simplicity, Gower’s “is instead a more prosperous and more virtuous mirror of the poet’s own time, with kings, barons, knights, and cities.”\(^{41}\) Unlike Ovid’s account, Gower’s makes no reference to changing agricultural and architectural practices, or to Saturn, Jupiter, and Gigantomachy (cf. *Met.* 1.89-160). But Gower’s description of the age of steel as a “world ... more hard,” characterized by “comun strif, “coveitise” and “envie” (640, 790, 791) may reflect

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\(^{39}\) Polychronicon, I.iii, ed. Babington, 26.

\(^{40}\) Harbert, “Lessons from the Great Clerk,” 87; see also Bennett, Middle English Literature, 417; Dimmick, “Ovid in the Middle Ages,” 281.

\(^{41}\) Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 114.
Ovid’s account of age of iron as “de duro ... ferro,” characterized by “fraudesque dolusque / insidiaque et vis et amor sceleratus” (1.127-31). This similarity may seem less remarkable in view of the fact that exegetical tradition also commonly associates the statue’s iron with moral hardness. On the other hand, it is significant that, according to Fisher, Ovid has already strongly influenced the medieval commentary tradition on Daniel 2; this reinforces the notion that Gower read the passage with Ovid also in mind on some level.

What makes Gower’s meditation on historical change more clearly and specifically Ovidian is its relationship to the next passage, which considers change no longer from a social perspective but from the perspectives of nature and human physiology. This passage on the physical basis of mutability, I argue, is modeled on Ovid’s account of matter in *Metamorphoses* 1.5-88. Gower’s argument proceeds in a strangely shifting manner, but the overall thrust is plain: man’s sin is the cause of all strife, especially in the civic sphere. Gower has already considered the question of where to place the blame for the instability which we find in human affairs. The blame should not be placed on God, but on man:

Nought only upon ten ne twelve,  
Bot pleinerliche upon ous alle,  
For man is cause of all that schal falle. (Pr.526-28)

Some people blame the stars or Fortune, but in fact “That we fortune clepe so / Out of the man himself it groweth” (544-49). The same principle is illustrated from the Old Testament, where the Israelites’ fortunes clearly depended on their moral condition (551-55). As we have seen, Gower attributes the failure of empires to sin, especially the sin of division, several more times during his account of *translatio imperii*. When Gower’s history reaches the present, man is once

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42 For example, Richard of St. Victor interprets the statue’s iron legs as “crudelitas,” PL 196, col. 1269.  
again named as the cause of “al this wo,” and it is for this reason that the metal image is in the shape of a man and not a beast (905-9). Gower’s argument that sin is the cause of all evil continues to the end of the Prologue.

The natural world first enters into Gower’s argument in a passage illustrating the corrosive effects of man’s sin, no longer on civic affairs, but on nature (910-66). All creatures were made to obey man’s commands, but sin has “restreigned” them from obedience:

Whan that he fell, thei fellen eke,
Whan he wax sek, thei woxen seke;
For as a man hath passioun
Of seknesse, in comparisoun
So soffren othre creatures. (Pr.913-17)

Solar and lunar eclipses, corrupt air, and changing winds and skies all prove “A mannes senne is for to hate” (918-28). Tides, seasons, day and night all reflect the condition of man because man is himself a microcosm, a “lasse world” that corresponds to the totality of all other creatures.

Citing Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in Job*, Gower says man resembles the angels in reason, the beasts in “fielinge,” the trees in the capacity for growth, and stones in existence. 44 Because of his interrelatedness with the creation, when he “mistorneth” the larger world “overtorneth” (945-58). Here it should be noted how drastically Gower refashions Gregory’s doctrine by giving it a new context. While Gregory is concerned to show man’s interconnectedness to all of creation, higher creatures as well as lower, in his exposition of the verse, “Qui dat pluviam super faciem terrae, et irrigat aquis universa” (Job 16:10), Gower clearly has only the lower orders of creation in view, since the fall of angels preceded man’s sin and it would be absurd to charge man with this.

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44 Macaulay notes that “this is one of Gower’s favourite citations,” and that Gower quotes here from *Moralia* 6.16, PL 75, col. 740 (*Works*, n. ll. 945ff.).
elsewhere in the *Confessio*, Gower adopts a far more earth-bound attitude than the theologians he
draws on. Nature cries out for judgment against man, and the strife within Nature amounts to a
war against man himself, making his earthly surroundings discordant, divided and inhospitable:

> The Lond, the See, the firmament,
> Thei axen alle jugement
> Ayein the man and make him werre:
> Therwhile himself stant out of herre,
> The remenant wol noght acorde:
> And in this wise, as I recorde,
> The man is cause of alle wo,
> Why this world is divided so. (Pr.959-66)

Although Nature is the victim of man’s sin, at the same time man is himself victimized
by his corporeal nature. Gower turns now from theological to medical doctrines, noting that the
corruption of the human body is the result of the war of its humors. Man’s complexion

> Is made upon divisoun
> Of cold, of hot, of moist, of drye,
> He mot be verray kynde dye,
> For the contraire of his astat
> Stant evermor in such debat,
> Til that o part be overcome,
> Ther may no final pes be nome.
> Both otherwise, if a man were
> Mad al togedre of o matiere
> Withouten interrupcioun
> Ther scholde no corruptioun
> Engendre upon that unite.
> Bot for ther is diversite
> Withinne himself, he may noght laste,
> That he ne deieth ate laste. (Pr.976-90)

Drawing ultimately on Hippocratic medicine, perhaps via Averroës, Gower does not say man’s
physical nature makes his *sin* inevitable, only his physical corruption and death. His immediate
purpose in this passage is to illustrate the fundamental principle that “Division . . . / On hous

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upon another leith” (967-68), in this case the house of the body. But Gower’s moral doctrine here can be easily mistaken for fatalism,\textsuperscript{46} given his concern in the surrounding context with civil and cosmic strife, especially since in the next lines Gower further compounds the problem of man’s nature by describing the war of man’s body against the soul. Tragically, it is often seen that the flesh, though weaker, wins the victory (991-1001). Gower’s transition from the war of the humors to the war between the body and the soul elides the difference of what is at stake in each—bodily and spiritual health, respectively. As a result, the passage on human nature (974-1001) reinforces the lesson of the earlier misquotation from Gregory’s doctrine \textit{Moralia in Job}.

Man is intimately related to the rest of creation, but, as before, Gower represents a creation characterized more by discord than by harmony. The entire nature section (910-1001) works to obscure the distinctions between elemental strife, humoral strife, and spiritual conflict, creating a world united only in its disorder.

Each of these nature passages is based on theological or medical commonplaces, but the composite picture of cosmic strife is remarkable in that the disorderliness that is Gower’s subject is reflected in a certain disorderliness of Gower’s argument. Nicholson characterizes the Prologue as a whole as “somewhat difficult to assimilate” and observes that “it depends more on its imagery than on its logic, and it tends to move in waves rather than step by step.”\textsuperscript{47} Nicholson’s suggestion that the method of the Prologue contrasts to that of Gower’s other moral writings is easily substantiated, for we have an analogous argument on human sin as the origin of strife in \textit{Mirour} 26605-27240. Gower’s argument in the \textit{Mirour} proceeds methodically and stepwise. Having complained at length of the evil that is in the world, manifested in the estates

\textsuperscript{46} E.g. Williams, “Gower’s Monster,” 142-43.
\textsuperscript{47} Nicholson, \textit{Love and Ethics}, 114.
running awry, Gower turns, at line 26605, to address the world itself and ask where this evil has come from. In the beginning, God made the world good and clothed it fittingly with the four elements (26617-628). Gower then considers earth, water, air and fire in turn, to examine if any is the cause of evil, and finds, on the contrary, that each is a source of many good things for man (26629-700). He then considers other possible sources of world’s evil, examining in turn the sun, the moon, Saturn, comets, stars, trees, and the beasts that lack reason, and finds that these are not evil but good (26701-773). Finally, Gower turns to the one remaining beast, to whom God has given reason, and for whom all the elements and beasts were created. Appealing to Scripture, Gower writes that, since all the other creatures have been put under him, “qant il son dieu fait coroucer, / Par son pecché devient inmonde / La proprete du tout le monde” (“When he angers his God, the quality of all the world is defiled through his sin,” 26811-26813). There are no accidents without a cause, and Scripture identifies man as the cause, saying that all the world will suffer because of man’s evil (26857-26868). As in the Confessio Prologue, Gower then cites Gregory’s teaching on man’s multi-leveled kinship to angels, beasts, plants, and stones (26869-26928) in order to introduce the doctrine of man as microcosm, which he now attributes to Aristotle (26929-26940). Because man has all of the elements within himself, it follows that his sin will undo everything—earth, water, sea and fire: “God avenges the misdeed and withdraws their nature so that they are for some time as if lost” (26941-964).

In comparison to this orderly presentation of the traditional doctrine of sin, the Confessio Prologue lacks focus and order. The greater freedom offered by the couplet form of

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48 “Saturne et ... commete” are minor exceptions, since Gower says they are not good but indifferent, and thus should be disregarded: “Nous n’avons garde du plane te” (26748).
49 A similar, orderly argument is found in Vox II.1-348; see below, 2.2.
the English poem, compared to the more structured twelve-line stanzas of the *Mirour*, can explain this only in part. Rather than a sustained argument showing clearly the relationships among sin, strife, and division, and among man, nature, and society, the Prologue, especially in lines 881-1052, offers a lurching series of vignettes, rehashing these themes from various shifting perspectives. As Nicholson comments on lines 905-1040, “This entire passage is clearly more a poetic than either a philosophical or a theological construct, a meditation on the nature of the world rather than an argument, and it is not hard to pick out the inconsistencies that result from the clash among the competing tropes that Gower draws upon.”

Man is the cause of civil strife (905-9), the strife in nature (910-17), and also the world’s division (965-66); but then, with a shift of direction, division becomes the cause “which makth the world to falle” (967-72), and this phenomenon is explained by the analogy of man’s divided body (974-90), which leads Gower to digress on the war between man’s body and soul (991-1001). The grimness of man’s warring condition makes us sorely rue the first war that began in Paradise and ushered in sin, which in turn is the cause of all division (1002-11; cf. 1029-30). Coherent meaning is not altogether absent, but sustained argumentation is. The lurching, fragmented style is symptomatic of the Prologue’s greater reliance on imagery than on argument, which Nicholson has noted. Needless to say, as the text amasses images of strife and failure the overall picture becomes very bleak. More significantly, the text loses the clear focus on man’s guilt that is found in the *Mirour* and in other theological discussions. While the *Mirour* repeatedly affirms the goodness of the creation, the wild imagery of in the Prologue seems to implicate nature itself, and human physiology, in the unfortunate condition of things.

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The Prologue’s picture of strife resembles the primal strife in *Metamorphoses* 1. Whereas Gower discusses the complicity of the elements and the humors in causing mutability after his discussion of historical decline, Ovid treats the mutability of matter in his account of creation, before turning to human history. Ovid begins with an account of the primal matter from which the world was created. All nature was in a state

\[
\text{quem dixere chaos: rudis indigestaque moles}
\]
\[
nec quicquam nisi pondus iners congestaque eodem
\]
\[
\text{non bene iunctarum discordia semina rerum.}
\]

well named

Chaos, a raw and undivided mass,
Naught but a lifeless bulk, with warring seeds
Of ill-joined elements compressed together. (1.7-9, tr. Melville 1)

Ovid develops this idea of warring principles a few lines later:

\[
\text{nulli sua forma manebat,}
\]
\[
\text{obstatabque aliis aliud, quia corpore in uno}
\]
\[
\text{frigida pugnabant calidis, umentia siccis,}
\]
\[
\text{mollia cum duris, sine pondere, habentia pondus.}
\]

nothing kept its form,

All objects were at odds, since in one mass
Cold essence fought with hot, and moist with dry,
And hard with soft and light with things of weight. (1.16-20, tr. Melville 1)

Then a god established order out of this strife, dividing the earth from the sky and the sea from the land, and organizing the world into separate forms (21-75). Certainly, the emphasis of this passage is on the transformation of chaos into order; but even ordered matter retains vestiges of the primal chaos:

\[
\text{His quoque non passim mundi fabricator habendum}
\]
\[
aera permisit; vix nunc obsistitur illis,
\]
\[
cum sua quisque regat diverso flamina tractu,
\]
\[
\text{quin lanient mundum; tanta est discordia fratum.}
\]

The world’s Creator did not grant the winds
Full freedom of the sky; who, even so,
Though each in separate regions rules his blasts,
Can well nigh tear the world apart, so fierce
Is brothers’ strife. (57-60, tr. Melville 2)

Chaotic tendencies remain even in human nature. Human beings are distinct from other creatures in their resemblance to the heavenly ether (80-81). They are superior to other animals in being “sanctius” and “mentis . . . capacius altae,” and in their ability to rule (76-77); they are made “in likeness of the gods that govern the world” (83, tr. Melville 3), and they alone look up to the heavens, while other animals look down at the ground (84-86). Humanity is the creator’s greatest achievement, but even so, Ovid reminds us of our relationship to the formless matter from which we are derived:

Sic, modo quae fuerat rudis et sine imagine, tellus
induit ignotas hominum conversa figuras.

Thus earth, once crude and featureless, now changed
Put on the unknown form of humankind. (87-88, tr. Melville 3)

The instability inherent in human nature, here only implicit, comes to predominate in Ovid’s account of the sequence of ages in the lines that follow, and then the tales of mutatas formas throughout the poem. In Leonard Barkan’s phrase, chaos is “cosmological metamorphosis”: the blurring of categories which Ovid shows present in primal matter, and again in the chaos of the flood (293-305) and once more in Phaethon’s disastrous ride (2.1-328), represents on a grand scale the pattern of “skewed travels” across boundaries that the stories of magical transformation will repeat again and again on a smaller scale.51

An English equivalent to Ovid’s chaos (Met. 1.7) did not exist in Gower’s time.52 The

51 For Barkan’s analysis of these three sections, see Gods Made Flesh, 27-37.
52 See OED s.v. “chaos, 1.” For the single attested medieval use of the word, see below.
first French instance of “chaos” given by the *Grand Larousse* is in Christine de Pizan’s *Avisio-
Christine*, but this instance was likely inspired by the account of “chaos” in the opening of the
*Ovide Moralisé*. While Gower, who knew the *Ovide Moralisé*, could likewise have found
encouragement there to import the word into English, it is telling that the only contemporary
English calque “chaos,” in Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection*, comes shrouded in confusion;
very possibly, Gower found the word too foreign for facile importation into English.
Nevertheless, Gower’s portrayal of the world, so rich in *ruine, decas, confusioun, meschief, peril,
werre, seknese, debat, strif*, and *wo* (837, 852, 888, 897, 904, 916, 928, 961, 980, 993, 998 etc.),
achieves an effect closely similar to Ovid’s primal chaos. Like Ovid’s account of matter’s origin
in warring seeds, Gower’s account of post-lapsarian nature shows that disorder extends to every
feature of the world. All things are subject to “passioun / Of seknesse” (915-16). Of course,
Gower’s strife differs from Ovid’s in that it is the result not of a property of matter itself, but of
the Fall.

But another potential source of the sense of chaos in Gower’s Prologue may be Boethius’
*Consolation of Philosophy*. As we saw in the introduction, Wetherbee suggests that Gower’s
dialogical approach in the *Confessio Amantis* depends ultimately on this highly influential work.
In addition, a quotation from *Consolation* II pr. 4, 66-67, opposite Prologue line 567 (“The world

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53 See *Grand Larousse* s.v. “chaos.”
55 See *OED* s.v. “chaos, 1.” Thomas Bestul, the editor of the *Scale of Perfection*, dates this work between 1380 and
1396; see “Introduction” in *Scale of Perfection*, 1-2. “Chaos” is a term left untranslated in Hilton’s translation of a
garbled version of Luke 16:26 which has “chaos” instead of “chasma”). Thinking the word needed explanation
Hilton (or possibly, a scribe) glossed it as “myrknness” (i.e. darkness). In the story of Lazarus and the rich man,
Lazarus says, “There is a gret chaos (that is a grete myrkenesse to sai) is bitwix us and yow, that we moun not come
to you ne yee to us. This myrke image in thi soule and in myn also mai be callid a greet chaos, for it letteth us that
we moun not come to Abraham, whiche is Jhesu, and it letteth him that he wole not come to us” (119).
stant ever upon debat") suggests a particular Boethian debt in this passage. It is worth noting, then, that Gower’s conception of the chaos inherent in nature is not derived from the Consolatio. The closest Boethius comes to the ideas of this passage is in his contrast of human lawlessness to the order of the rest of creation in Book I m. 5. The metrum presents a cosmology starkly different from Ovid’s (and from Gower’s), because Boethius addresses the metrum as a hymn to the Creator and strongly affirms the Creator’s responsibility for the order that exists in the heavens (2-13) and in the changing seasons (14-22). In sum, Boethius hymns, “Nothing escapes your ancient ordering / Or fails its proper office to fulfil”; 23-24, tr. Tester 161). But human affairs are a very different matter:

Omnia certo fine gubernans  
Hominum solos respuis actus 
Merito rector cohibere modo.  
Nam cur tantas lubrica versat 
Fortuna vices?

With a sure purpose ruling and guiding all,  
Man’s acts alone  
You will not, though you rightly could, constrain.  
Why else does slippery fortune change so much?  
(I m. 5.25-29; tr. Tester 161)

This metrum emphasizes the order of creation, making no mention of the catastrophes we saw in Ovid’s creation stories. Preoccupied with the injustice which Boethius has suffered, the metrum associates “slippery fortune” with human abuses of power (in 29-33 and 35-36), but not, as Ovid and Gower, with a harshness intrinsic to nature. The previous metrum, sung by Philosophy, however, shows that nature also is complicit in the caprices of fortune. Philosophy describes raging seas, volcanos, and thunderbolts as threats to human prosperity (I m. 4, ll. 5-10). Even here, however, Philosophy’s cosmos has little in common with Ovid’s cosmogony: though natural shocks occur, the virtuous man is immune to them because he has “ground proud fate
beneath his heel” (1-2; tr. Tester 145). Similarly, when Philosophy sings about the harsh effects brought about by the changing seasons in Book I, metrum 6, her point is to celebrate the “sure design” of God’s creation. In the *Consolation*, nature simply does not constitute the threatening, disaster-prone force displayed by her counterparts in Ovid and Gower.

The placement of the portrait of chaos in the *Confessio*, so closely analogous to the originary chaos in the *Metamorphoses*, suggests strongly that Gower is following Ovid here as elsewhere. But Gower, unlike Ovid, subordinates the chaos theme to his larger concern for moral and social reform. We have already seen that one of Gower’s favorite techniques is to lament how far things have declined from past prosperity: “Now stant the crop under the rote. / The world is changed overal” (Pr.118-19, etc.). Gower proclaims that the world, from empires down to the elements and the bodily humors, is a place of inconstancy and uncertainty, and that rest may be found only in heaven and in the love of God (cf. v.5-6):

```
The hevene wot what is to done,
Bot we that duelle under the mone
Stonde in this world upon a weer doubt, difficulty (Pr.141-43)
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For all his debt to Ovid, Gower is neither detached nor fatalistic, and the next lines explain the nature of the *weer* of line 143:

```
And namely bot the pouer
Of hem that ben the worldes guides
With good consail on alle sides
Be kept upriht in such a wyse,
That hate breke noght thassise
Of love, which is al the chief
To kepe a regne out of meschief. (Pr.144-50)
```

This is not the last time in the Prologue that Gower appeals, albeit indirectly, to God and to the magistrates, to correct present ills (cf. 180-92, 484-94, 534). The conclusion of the Prologue focuses these themes with Gower’s plea for a new Arion, which, however interpreted, reaffirms
not only God’s providence but also the possibility of a restoration of social peace (cf. 1053, 1088). Gower’s appropriation of the *Metamorphoses* to political and reformist ends may seem ironic, given Ovid’s political aloofness. But it is not unprecedented, for Ovid’s medieval readers often did this, as we will see below.

It is noteworthy that Gower’s poem draws on Ovid, not only in the myth-laden confession but also in the more satirical, didactic, and overtly political Prologue. Ovidian mutability is a primary concern of the entire poem, from its account of macrocosmic decline, through countless microcosmic transformations in the stories told by Genius, to John Gower’s metamorphosis first into Amans and then into a pious old man. For Gower, all exists “upon a weer,” not only because England is at war, racked by fiscal problems, shepherded by a corrupt clergy, and governed by power-mongering lords and a potentially tyrannical king, but more elementally because we “duelle under the mone” (142). On one level, this phrase may allude to the special situation of England, a nation held to be astrologically dominated by the moon (cf. VII.750-54). But as we have seen, the Prologue sets mutability in a larger context of world history, emphatically representing it as universal. Williams draws a similar conclusion in her study of the monstrous hybrids in Gower’s Prologue and in Book I, where she argues that Gower’s hybrids present instability as endemic to human endeavor, and especially to imperialist aspiration, and that this instability is registered on the level of the form of the poem. While her account of the Prologue’s *translatio imperii* sequence does not connect Gower’s notion of mutability with the opening of the *Metamorphoses*, Williams suggests an analogy to Pythagoras’s words in *Metamorphoses* 15: “nec perit in tot quicquam, mihi credite, mundo / sed

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56 Williams, “Gower’s Monster,” 132, 142-43, 129.
variat faciemque novat” (“There is no death—no death, but only change / And innovation”; 15.254-55, tr. Melville 359). In my view, this is too extreme for Gower, who in fact shows confusion about “Pictagoras” elsewhere, calling him a great surgeon (cf. VI.1410f.); Gower need not have had *Metamorphoses* 15 specifically in view since other passages from Ovid’s poem serve at least as well. But other aspects of Williams’ analogy are very apt. Because Ovidian mutability joins the Prologue to the confession—certainly not seamlessly but in a combination of continuity and rupture highly typical of the poem—the suggestion of Harbert, Bennett, and Dimmick that the *Confessio* as a whole constitutes something of structural allusion to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* appears well founded. In the next section I hope to show that the poem’s lurch from the political and satirical Prologue to the more intimate discourse of the confession, far from an anomaly in the poem, is typical of the continuities and ruptures which occur everywhere in the poem’s treatment of love.

### 1.2 Division at the Center: Equivocations about Love

According to Leonard Barkan, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* assigns a key role to Bacchus, who appears regularly as a “partial incarnation” of the mysterious forces of divine immanence which underlie metamorphosis and pervade the world of the poem. Bacchus brings men and women into a “state of half-prophetic, half-destructive madness” which, paradoxically, combines a return to nature and to “primitive animal impulses” with a supernatural state of ecstasy in

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57 Ibid. 140.
58 It should be noted though that Dimmick likewise finds an allusion to Ovid’s Pythagoras in Gower, though somewhat differently, in the Aristotelian exposition in *Confessio* VII (“Ovid in the Middle Ages,” 281).
which “the victims of the frenzy seem to be possessed with a god.” Although Bacchus appears in Gower’s Confessio, his roles are small and incidental, and if there is a counterpart to Ovid’s Bacchus here it is the equally mysterious god of love. Like Bacchus, who symbolizes the mysterious powers that underlie all the transformations in Ovid’s poem, Love is behind every metamorphosis in Gower’s poem, often very directly. Together with his surrogates, Venus and Cupid, and his kindred spirit, Nature, Love is a powerful agent of transformation, who, like Ovid’s Bacchus, blurs the distinctions between divine and animal, and greatly complicates man’s place in the universe. Like Bacchus, Love works against the norms of reason and renders man’s nature essentially animalistic. Love is a kind of frenzy, incapable of resistance: “love is maister wher he wile, / Ther can no lif make other skile” (i.e. “no creature can do otherwise”; I.35-36). Love, like fortune, often appears as a hostile force. In the first epigram of Book I, and repeatedly in the poem, Love’s wheel frequently turns to man’s disadvantage (cf. I.50, 3490-94, III.1137, VIII.2880): “Sunt in agone pares amor et fortuna, que cecas / Plebis ad insidias vertit vterque rotas” (“In combat Love and Fortune equal are: / As snares for mankind both revolve blind wheels”; I.i.5-6, tr. Echard and Fanger 15). Love is paradoxical at heart: it is a “jolif wo” (I.88, cf. III.279-85, VI.84, VII.1910, VIII.2360) which alternately brings gladness and grief (I.90). Love is “egra salus, vexata quies, pius error, / Be llica pax, vulnus dulce, suaue malum” (“Sick health, vexed rest is love, a warlike peace, / A wound most sweet, fair ill, a pious fault”; I.i.7-8). In the face of Love, even wise men are frequently undone—

ther is no man
In al this world so wys, that can
Of love tempre the mesure,

59 Barkan, Gods Made Flesh, 37-38.
60 On Love’s connection to Nature, see below, and also chapters 4 and 5.
Bot as it falth in aventure (I.21-24)

—an idea that Gower anticipates in the Prologue (75-76) and dramatizes at the very end of the confession (VIII.2689-2722). Like Ovid’s Bacchus, Love is a wildcard in human experience.

Just as Love plays havoc with human emotion and reason, so also with the generic integrity of Gower’s poem. Though as we saw in the last section it is by no means the first significant rupture within the *Confessio*, the transition at the beginning of Book I from the explicitly political discourse of the Prologue to the more introspective love-confession, by establishing the central conceit, effects the founding disruption of the poem that becomes paradigmatic for the metamorphic disruptions which characterize the whole, as I show in the present section. But as with other disruptions in the poem, the transition from Prologue to Book I is marked by continuity as well as rupture. One factor mitigating the disruptiveness of this transition is Minnis’s observation that the “prologues” to Gower’s *Confessio* find a model in the double prologues, “extrinsic” and “intrinsic,” with which medieval scholars sometimes prefaced commentaries: like the “extrinsic” prologue, Gower’s Prologue sketches the *Confessio*’s relationships to other fields of knowledge, whereas the body of the work treats a particular branch of human knowledge, that is, love.62 While Minnis and others take this observation as support for their emphasis on the structural integrity of the *Confessio*, seeing the poem as the scholastic, synthesizing, and ordered product of a self-styled moral and political philosopher, this is not the only direction in which Minnis’s insight might lead. Nicholson cites Minnis’s observation in support of his thesis that the Prologue is essentially “separable” from the *Confessio* proper: “the analogy does suggest that we need not expect too specific a connection

between the Prologue and what follows.” Simpson develops Minnis’s idea in still another direction. Stressing the ways in which Gower’s text “actively resists the kind of ‘scientific’ subordination” which Minnis describes in his account of the academic prologues, Simpson argues that, with the appearance of love themes in Book I, the *Confessio*’s ultimate concern with political instruction becomes deeply submerged, to fully resurface only much later in the poem. While he accepts the influence of the academic prologues, Simpson contends that Gower’s opening moves in Book I are at least as strongly influenced by a classical model, namely Ovid’s *Amores* 1.1. Because it convincingly demonstrates the extent to which the opening of Book I subverts the political discourse of the Prologue, Simpson’s account deserves fuller attention.

In Simpson’s account, confessional dialogue represents an allegory of the soul centered on the appetitive faculty, or will (Amans), and imaginative faculty (Genius). Both faculties are disordered and in need of education and reformation, or “enformacioun,” which is the poem’s main concern. According to Simpson, Gower’s representation of the initially disordered psyche is underwritten by subversive strategies borrowed from Ovid, and in particular, by the struggle between competing genres which runs throughout the *Amores*. As we saw in the introduction, there are good reasons to expect an intertextual relationship with Ovid: Gower’s poetry shows extensive familiarity with nearly the entire range of Ovid’s writings, including, not least in importance, the amatory poems. In the *Confessio*, Genius refers to the *Remedia amoris* directly while discussing Latin writers in his digression on the uses of labor in Book IV, using this advice to bring the digression to a close:

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63 *Love and Ethics*, 124.
64 *Sciences and the Self*, qt. 141. Condensed forms of the same argument are found in idem, “Breaking the Vacuum,” which is reworked as *Reform and Cultural Revolution*, chap. 4.
65 *Sciences and the Self*, chap. 6.
mi Sone, if that thou fiele
That love wringe thee to sore,
Behold Ovide and take his lore. (IV.2672-74)

As several writers have suggested, the citation of the *Remedia* is structurally significant, since the *Confessio* itself will ultimately offer a kind of *remedia amoris*. But the *Confessio*’s debt to Ovid’s amatory works runs deeper than a merely thematic resemblance to the *Remedia* alone. Simpson argues that the opening of Book I, in turning from the political themes of the Prologue to amatory themes, reenacts the struggle between competing genres highlighted at the beginning of the *Amores*. There, Ovid complains that his original intention to write an epic was thwarted when Cupid “laughed and stole one foot away” (1.1.1-4), thus changing his meter from epic dactyls to elegiacs, and requiring him to adopt a subject more suited to this “slighter meter” (1.1.19), and so he writes about love. This “comic subversion of tragedy ... recurs as a metatextual leitmotif,” reappearing in the openings of Books 2 and 3. A similar aversion to the gravity of political themes is seen, not only in the *recusatio* at the beginning of *Confessio* I, but throughout much of the dialogue between Amans and Genius. Simpson argues that the *Confessio*’s two main personae both have Ovidian, and morally suspect, models: just as Amans is in a sense based on the narrator of the *Amores*, so Genius closely resembles the morally dubious *praecceptor Amoris* of the didactic poems. Like Ovid’s *praecceptor*, Genius is an “ironic persona,” often, at least in the first half of the poem, “blind to the political implications of his stories” and complicit in the love-delusion which prevents Amans from having a rational and

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67 *Sciences and the Self*, 142.
68 *Sciences and the Self*, 134-66; Simpson’s observation that Gower’s notion of “experience” resembles Ovid’s “usus” is discussed below in chapter 5.
publicly responsible view of himself.\textsuperscript{69} Using these Ovidian materials, the \textit{Confessio} establishes an uneasy relationship between the political and the amatory.

Simpson’s account of the generic strife in the \textit{Confessio} is compelling in many ways, for Gower’s change of matter and “Stile” in Book I lines 1-16 is not merely a momentary adjustment in the genre of the \textit{Confessio}, but a decision which makes shifts of matter and style part of the very fabric of the poem: Love is that disruptive. Genius’s didactic verse frequently shifts into love narratives that contradict the poem’s moral doctrine. Most notoriously, in “Canace and Machaire” Genius depicts the brother and sister’s incestuous love for one another as inevitable, and therefore excusable, at least in part:

\begin{quote}
For whom that love hath under cure,
As he is blind himself, riht so
He makth his client blind also.

\ldots
This brother mihte it noght asterte escape
That he with al his hole herte
His love upon his Soster caste.
\end{quote}

(III.158-60, 163-65)

When Nature takes them “into lore,” brother and sister are “enchaunted” and there is no escape (175, 178). Genius’ final moralization on the tale is still more explicit about the need to mitigate one’s judgment of those who sin in love: considering love’s irresistibility, one should temper accordingly one’s censure of the lover who “mot to nature obeie” (50). This story is told ostensibly to illustrate the sin of Anger, by showing the wrath of Eolus, the siblings’ father, and, arguably, Genius must soften his attitude toward the brother and sister in order to highlight Eolus’ cruelty. But elsewhere there is no such need. Genius illustrates the sin of hypocrisy in love using the example of

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Sciences and the Self}, 154, 158.
“Mundus and Paulina,” and, although Mundus perpetrates this vice, Genius handles him with clemency nevertheless. Genius introduces the duke sympathetically, as the commander of the Roman cavalry and a “worthi knyht” (I.785). His love/lust (cf. 787, 821) for Paulina comes on him irresistibly:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{he was noght of such myht} \\
& \text{The strengthe of love to withstonde}, \\
& \text{That he ne was so broght to honde}, \\
& \text{That malgre wher he wole or no,} \\
& \text{This yonge wif he loveth so.} \\
& (I.786-90)
\end{align*}
\]

The priests who agree to help Mundus, by contrast, are unambiguously “false” and without excuse (871, 880, 1015), and when the emperor administers judgment at the end of the tale, he condemns them to death for their “prive tricherie” (1033), and imputes the “horrible Sinne” of the whole affair more to them than to Mundus (cf. 1044-48). The emperor acquits Mundus of the death penalty, since “Love put reson aweie,” and sentences him instead to exile (1051). To the extent that he shows them overcome by passion, Genius represents even his arch-villains sympathetically.\(^70\) In “Tereus,” the account of the tyrant’s “love” (cf. V.5618) for his wife’s sister balances the action of his corrupted, vicious will against his passion in the face of an unstoppable desire. Alone with Philomene and unable to help himself, Tereus

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Assoteth of hire love so,} \\
& \text{His yhe myhte he noght withholde,} \\
& \text{That he ne moste on hir beholde.} \\
& (V.5618-20)
\end{align*}
\]

While Genius’s narrative leaves no doubt about the heinousness of the crime, and the full engagement of Tereus’s corrupted will in it, the account also depicts Tereus as helpless. Fire—albeit kindled by himself—engulfs him like a flame set to tow, and “he was so wod / That he no

\(^{70}\) Cf. White, “Sympathetic Villains.”
reson understod” (5639-40). In the end, Tereus is literally incapable of stopping himself. The villains of “The Rape of Lucrece” and “Apollonius of Tyre” are likewise sympathetically described as victims of love’s assault (cf. VII.48-57; VIII.288-89, 293-97 etc.).

While Gower certainly engages Ovid directly, there are problems with the particular intertextual relationship that Simpson posits. Most basically, it is important to recall that by Gower’s time many other poets had long since entered into “creative rivalry with the Roman master,” to borrow a phrase from Robert W. Hanning’s account of twelfth-century engagements of Ovid, which stresses comparable dynamics of generic hybridity and disruption together with uneasy juxtapositions of the political and amatory.\(^\text{71}\) Uneasy juxtapositions of amatory and political, of amatory and ethical, abound in medieval love literature, all of which are in some sense “Ovidian” and many of which are potential models for Gower.\(^\text{72}\) Simpson’s suggestion that the personae of Genius and Amans depend ultimately on Ovidian models is of course true, but somewhat less remarkable in light of the ubiquity of Ovidian personae throughout medieval literature.\(^\text{73}\) In particular, Ovidian tendencies underlie the Genius figure in Jean de Meun’s portion of the *Rose*, a figure who is surely a much more immediate model for Gower’s Genius than Bernard of Chartres’s *ingenium*, which Simpson discusses.\(^\text{74}\)

While the opening of Book I certainly has an intertextual relationship to Ovid’s *recusatio* in *Amores* 1.1, it is not clear that Gower is alluding to this poem directly, in light of other

\(^{71}\) Hanning, “Courtly Contexts,” 39.


\(^{73}\) For discussion of Ovid’s influence on medieval characterization generally, see Ginsberg, *Cast of Character*.

instances of (ultimately Ovidian) erotic recusatio in medieval poetry; and it is even less clear that the generic strife of the Amores remains in view throughout the Confessio. Simpson takes the Ovidian reflexes of the Confessio as evidence that Gower, like Ovid, identifies the amatory with apolitical and even politically subversive tendencies: “If Gower is aligning Amans with the Ovidian voice of the Amores, then he would seem to be quite deliberately aligning Amans with the Ovidian erotic tradition.” But as Simpson himself notes, the rigorist, hostile view of Ovid’s erotic works that Simpson cites by reference to John Ridevall was by no means universal, and Gower’s invocation of the erotic tradition itself need not be seen as morally dubious. Simpson acknowledges that, among the multiplicity of ways in which Ovid was understood in the Middle Ages, some of these saw him as at least potentially edifying.

Medieval literature abounds with precedent for the subversion of political by amorous discourse, and, given the nature of the medieval discourse of love, the subversion of the political is in fact an occupational hazard of the love poet. Gower’s insistence on the disruptive power of the “blinde maladie” of love (VII.4855) is highly conventional. Alan of Lille and Jean de Meun describe the paradoxes of love in ways similar to Gower. The topos comparing love to fortune as alike in treacherousness also has a long ancestry. Further, the ambivalence of sexual love, as

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75 On these, see Haahr, “Justifying Love.”
76 “Gower ... in the persona of Amans, would seem to have aligned himself with this tradition [i.e. the Ovidian erotic tradition, which, according to Ridevall, promoted sexual pleasures], the tradition radically opposed to the political satire of the Prologue both philosophically and generically” (Sciences and the Self, 146-48, qt. p. 148).
77 Simpson refers to the “medieval Ovid ... of the moralizers” (Sciences and the Self, 149). It should be noted that there is variety even within moralizing approaches to Ovid: while many commentators see Ovid’s Ars, for example, moral in intention (see e.g. Jaeger, Ennobling Love, 79-81), commentators such as the Ovide Moralisé author appear conscious that their moralizations are modern, Christian impositions on the text of the Metamorphoses. See below, section 1.3.
78 For accounts of these doctrines in medieval medical discourse and literature, see Lowes, “Loveres Maladye of Hereos,” and Wack, Lovesickness in the Middle Ages.
79 Alan, De Planctu Naturae, met. 5; Roman de la Rose, ed. Langlois, 4293 ff.
80 Patch, Goddess Fortuna, 95-98.
lawless and animalistic, on the one hand, and as natural and intimately human, on the other, is itself a well-worked theme in medieval literature and legal discussions alike. By choosing to write about the “various passions of lovers” (cf. I.60, margin), Gower undertakes to treat a subject matter heavily freighted with implications for genre, even in the absence of a strong allusion to the *Amores*. While all of these features could be said to undermine the significance of the *Confessio*’s moral and political discourse, by no means do they render the poem, or even sustained passages, apolitical.

Even if his reading depends too heavily on a specific, doubtful allusion to *Amores* 1.1, Simpson’s determination to save Gower’s political program seems motivated by instincts directly inspired by the text: it is hard to believe Gower stumbled unwittingly into this generic strife, witnessing the didactic mission of the poem unravel against his will. One way to save face for Gower, and see the didactic program as remaining valid during the long passages of amatory discourse, is to see the *Confessio*’s interest in love as part of a “bait-and-switch” strategy, in which amorous themes ultimately give way to more serious moral purposes. Love themes and love *topoi* were immensely popular in the court culture for which Gower wrote (see below, 1.3), and contemporary literary fashions offer a partial explanation of Gower’s decision to write about love, and of many features of his representation of love. By invoking the same themes and *topoi* as such writers as Chaucer, Froissart, and Machaut, Gower greatly enhanced his chances of winning prestige and success for his “bok for king Richardes sake,” as he originally described the poem (Pr.24*). Arguably, the main function of the love themes is to lure readers into the more serious concerns of the poem.

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81 The quoted phrase is from Yeager, “Gower’s French Audience,” 113. Cf. the suggestion, rejected by Fisher, that “the allegory of love is merely a sugar coating” to the poem’s political instruction (*John Gower*, 189).
While I am wary of the totalizing interpretations of the *Confessio* advanced by Peck and Simpson, which attribute more control to Gower than I believe is warranted,\(^{82}\) I want to credit Gower with rather more than this bare formulation does. Gower does not run lightly through the *topoi* of love’s destabilizing power and fickleness; he places them prominently at the start of the confession and elaborates them through considerable repetition. Further, many instances of these *topoi* implicate love’s destabilizing power and fickleness in the political as well as the amatory order in ways that are clearly deliberate. In the first epigram of Book I Gower writes,

Naturatus amor nature legibus orbem  
Subdit, et vnanimes concitat esse feras  
Huius enim mundi Princeps amor esse videtur,  
Cuius eget diues, pauper et omnis ope. \(^{82}\) (I.i.1-4)

Created love to Nature’s laws subdues  
This orb, and causes beasts to share one mind.  
For Love appears to rule this world as prince,  
Whose help by all is needed, rich and poor.

Echard and Fanger’s translation of the opening couplet loses an important ambiguity in Gower’s Latin. As Wetherbee notes, these lines might be understood to mean either that love “bring[s] wild things into unanimity” or that it “compel[s] peaceful beings to grow wild.... The syntax of the final phrase is fundamentally ambiguous.”\(^{83}\) Gower’s belief in Love’s socially restorative capacity is not unique—Eustache Deschamps writes, “par l’amoureuse estincelle / se puet ly mondes reformer” (“the world can be reformed by the spark of love”)\(^{84}\)—but Gower expresses Love’s paradox in a singularly acute way. Ambiguity does not affect only love affairs. The reference to love’s “legibus” and, in the next couplet, the rather ominous naming of love “mundi

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\(^{82}\) For Peck, see above, introduction.  
\(^{83}\) Wetherbee, “Boethian Tradition,” 181.  
\(^{84}\) Deschamps, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:319-20; cf. C. S. Lewis’s suggestion that the Prologue’s opposition of love and strife is inspired by Empedocles (*Allegory of Love*, 200 n. 1).
Princeps” suggest that political themes are still in view. This is more evident in context: the headverses echo the description of Arion, just encountered at the end of the Prologue. Arion, a mythological figure Gower seems to have taken from Ovid’s *Fasti*, had such musical skill that his harp and voice could pacify wild beasts, bring the wolf and sheep into concord, dispel melancholy and cause all men to laugh together, and even bring lord and commons together in love (1055-71). These transformations are contrasted with the paradoxical reversals which characterize the present: “pes” is turned to “hate” as

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  wisdom waxeth wod,
  And reson torneth into rage,
  So that mesure upon oultrage
  Hath set his world...
```  
*(Pr.1075, 1078-81)*

It is in this context that epigram I.i describe the paradoxes of love (cf. I.i.7-8, quoted above).

Consistent with this epigram, the English verses near the beginning of Book I implicate political and erotic instability together. Even as he ostensibly sets aside the theme of political rule, Gower reverts to the language of rule: “In [love] ... ther can noman him reule / For loves lawe is out of reule” (17-18). Cupid and Venus act tyrannically as “kyng” and “queene,” who in their displeasure command the poem’s change of course (139-40); as Simpson suggests, these monarchs recall the behavior of Richard himself. Gower expresses the theme of amatory uncertainty in language which closely resembles the political unrest described in the Prologue.

```
  For love is blind and may noght se,
  Forthi may no certeinete
  Be set upon his jugement
  ...
  And therupon what schal befalle
  He [the lover] not, til that the chance falle,   knows not
  Wher he schal lese or he schal winne.  
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*(I.47-49, 55-57)*

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Specifically, the references to blindness, uncertainty, and the difficulty of judgment recall Gower’s complaint, in the Prologue, that every kingdom

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{blinde fortune overthroweth;} \\
\text{Wherof the certain noman knoweth:} \\
\text{The hevene wot what is to done,} \\
\text{Bot we that duelle under the mone} \\
\text{Stonde in this world upon a weer} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(Pr.139-43)

The importance Gower attaches to the analogy between the self and the kingdom is clear at the end of the confession, where the analogy becomes explicit:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Conseil passeth alle thing} \\
\text{To him which thenkth to ben a king;} \\
\text{And every man for his partie} \\
\text{A kingdom hath to justefie,} \\
\text{That is to sein his oghne dom.} \\
\text{If he misrule that kingdom,} \\
\text{He lest himself, and that is more} \\
\text{Than if he loste Schip and Ore} \\
\text{And al the worldes good withal.} \\
\end{align*}
\]  

(VIII.2109-17)

Although Gower seems hopeful for reform in this passage, throughout the *Confessio* Gower shows anxiety about the forces which threaten good rule. Many of Genius’s stories enact the subversion of political order by erotic disorder (e.g. “Tereus,” “Paris and Helen,” and “Apollonius of Tyre”) and this is a major theme of Book VII (e.g. in “King, Wine, Woman and Truth,” and in the tales exemplifying Chastity, VII.4215-5397).

Like love, metamorphosis plays an ambivalent role in this economy. Sometimes metamorphosis makes literal the dire consequences of misrule: as if to show the obliteration of humanity, Tereus and his victims are transformed into birds, Acteon into a hart, and Lychaon into a wolf. But alongside these punitive transformations there are a number of metamorphoses which occur as signs of divine pity. Nicholson notes the diversity among this group of stories:
Those who win the pity of the gods do so in no single way: they may be victims of their own rashness (Araxarathen’s Iphis, IV.3515-3684), of another’s betrayal (Phillis, IV.731-878), or in the case of couples, of another’s malice (“Acis and Galatea,” II.97-200), of an apparently irremediable loss (“Ceix and Alceone,” IV.2927-3123), or of an apparently insurmountable natural obstacle (“Pygmaleon,” IV.371-436; “Iphis and Iante,” IV.451-505).

As Nicholson points out, this kind of transformation is intimately connected to love: “such sympathy is reserved ... for those who have merited it by their virtue in love.” Even those metamorphoses which relate to love less directly, however, mirror Love’s disruptive incursion into the Confessio’s stable political and ethical discourse. Just as Love destabilizes Gower and Genius’s moral instruction, so metamorphosis destabilizes Genius’s exempla against particular vices by introducing potentially troublesome surplus narrative elements.

Why would a moralist like Gower take such pains to represent man’s nature as essentially labile, advertising mutability even at the cost of the generic integrity of his poem? Gower’s depiction of Love as a powerful, frequently destructive force immanent within all human affairs may seem to undermine the whole enterprise of moralist poetry, especially since his tales of metamorphosis often convey a sense that human volition finally has little consequence in the face of divine caprice. But chance and lability appear less contrary to Gower’s moral and political program when we realize that Gower’s account of this moral program is likewise punctuated with references to “(un)certeinetet,” “chance,” and “weer,” as in the passages quoted above. As Wetherbee has shown, Gower takes “love” for the theme of his English poem because this theme epitomizes the vagaries of Natura, which Gower, an eager student both of the Boethian tradition and its vernacular appropriation by Jean de Meun, was eager to inscribe in the

87 Love and Ethics, 90-91.
vernacular world of his poem.\textsuperscript{88}

In view of Wetherbee’s insight, our earlier discussion of the constant incursions of the divine or quasi-divine in both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Confessio* immediately suggests one reason why Ovid’s poem appealed so strongly to Gower as a structural model. While Barkan emphasizes the role of Bacchus in creating the dynamic of disruption in the *Metamorphoses*, the distance separating Ovid’s Bacchus from Gower’s Love is finally small. Indeed, Gower likely understood Love to be the predominant cause of disruption in the world of the *Metamorphoses*, for, with good reason, Gower considered Ovid the poetic authority on Love’s incursions. Amans attributes this world-view to Ovid:

\begin{verbatim}
I singe a song,  
Which Ovide in his bokes made,  
And seide, “O whiche sorwes glade,  
O which wofull prosperité  
Belongeth to the propreté  
Of love, whoso wole him serve!  
And yit therfro mai no man swerve,  
That he ne mot his lawe obeie.”
\end{verbatim}  

(IV.1210-18)

In the next section I want to follow up Wetherbee’s insight that Gower chose his theme expressly because of its suitability for vernacular literature by exploring further the poem’s engagement with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

1.3 Going Public with Ovid: The Voice of the *Confessio*

To answer the question—what did Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* contribute to the moral and political didactic program of the *Confessio*?—we must consider the reception of Ovid’s poem in vernacular, as well as academic, contexts. Ovid’s stature in aristocratic European vernacular

\textsuperscript{88} Wetherbee, “Latin Structure.” For further discussion, see above, introduction.
literature contributes greatly to the aristocratic aura that Gower’s poem—dedicated first to Richard II and later to Henry, Duke of Lancaster—undoubtedly aspires to.\textsuperscript{89} Yet this literature was not solely the possession of aristocratic readers, and, by the late fourteenth century, courtly literature and the courtly virtues it celebrates had drawn intense interest from the “merchant class.”\textsuperscript{90} Eager for acceptance among the gentle, the “turbulent and ill-defined middle ranks of society” sought out whatever cultural accoutrements, literature included, might serve this social ambition.\textsuperscript{91} I argue here that Ovid’s courtly associations via vernacular literary culture play a key role in making Ovid, and the \textit{Metamorphoses} in particular, an important resource for the public voice Gower fashions in the \textit{Confessio}: courtliness represents an alternative source of cultural power capable of rivaling clerical learning. This is not to detach Gower completely from the clerical culture that recent critical accounts of the \textit{Confessio} have emphasized so strongly, but to qualify it. Although I share Scanlon’s and Copeland’s interest in the way Gower affects a distinctively “lay” voice in the \textit{Confessio}, I dispute that this voice is fashioned from academic discourse.\textsuperscript{92} For this reason, after considering Ovid’s reception in vernacular literature, it will be necessary to consider Ovid’s academic reception, in order to show that Gower, though well versed in the academic commentary tradition on the \textit{Metamorphoses}, departs significantly from clerical appropriations of Ovidian myth.\textsuperscript{93}

Arguably, the \textit{Confessio} bears witness of Ovid’s stature in courtly literature whenever

\begin{flushright}
89 Yeager, \textit{Gower’s Poetic}, 275.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
90 On this process, see Cannon, “Lives of Geoffrey Chaucer,” 44-45; Nichols, \textit{Matter of Courtesy}, 73; and Williams, \textit{French Fetish}, 37. The classic account on this social is Thrupp, \textit{Merchant Class}.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
92 See Scanlon, \textit{Narrative, Authority, and Power}, ch. 9; and Copeland, \textit{Rhetoric}, 202-20. These are discussed below in chh. 2 and 3.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
93 Obviously, clerical and vernacular are not mutually exclusive, as is shown for example by the hybrid poem/treatise \textit{Ovide Moralisé}. See below for discussion.
\end{flushright}
Gower refers to his works as “Poesie” and the poet himself, not by name—although he frequently mentions Ovid by name as well (e.g. I.333, 386, 2274, II.106, 2297, III.361, 381)—but, more familiarly, as “the Poete” (IV.1038, 2668, V.6806; I.386, II.121, VIII.2719). It is in any case certain Ovid occupies an exalted position in courtly literature. English poets commonly looked to French courtly models,⁹⁴ which, from the twelfth century, made extensive use of the Ovidian myth⁹⁵—a tendency that if anything became stronger in the wake of the influential appearances of Pygmalion and Narcissus in Le Roman de la Rose.⁹⁶ Ovid’s rise in popularity during the twelfth century is in large part attributable to social changes that led eventually to the formation of what C. Stephen Jaeger describes as the “grand amatory mode,” and the rise of Ovidian myth is caught up with the rise of Ovidian amatory discourse.⁹⁷ Ambitious English poets, notably Chaucer and Gower, were keen students not only of French traditions of courtly love but also of Ovid himself.⁹⁸ By Gower’s time, love poetry and love myths had long since become the very fabric of aristocratic literature, and Ovid could justly be called “the Poete.”

Yet the late-medieval alignment of Ovid with aristocratic sensibilities seems ironic in light of the Augustan poet’s uneasy relationship to power. Simpson argues that Chaucer found Ovid to be an especially congenial model for his own writing because the two poets shared a sense of marginality. Conscious of his position as an English writer peripheral to the dominant French literary culture, Chaucer found in Ovid “a model of ‘subsidiary’ writing from within the

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⁹⁴ Salter, English and International, 75-76; Burrow, Medieval Writers, 7; and Butterfield, “French Culture and the Ricardian Court,” 83-84.
⁹⁵ For an account of myth in twelfth-century French romance, see Heinrichs, Myths of Love.
⁹⁷ Jaeger, Ennobling Love, 198. For the social changes that led to a rise in Ovid’s popularity in the twelfth century, see also Kay, “Courts, Clerks and Courtly Love.”
⁹⁸ For Chaucer’s Ovidianism, see especially Simpson, “Chaucer as a European Writer,” which is discussed below.
corpus of classical poetry.” Simpson concentrates on Ovid’s amatory verse in particular, which he describes as “parasitic in fundamental ways, even borrowing yet deliberately deforming the verse form of ‘tragic’ verse.” In such poetry, “The large, powerful ‘responsible’ voice is always (apparently) somewhere else.” The “frequently female voice” of Ovid’s elegiac verse, “[o]ften the victim and relic of empire, is invested, via small but immensely significant shifting of perspective, with the power to unsettle and even undo the impersonal solidities of epic, and the assurance of accepted, masculine, imperial ideals.” Ovid’s poetic entails “a fundamentally skeptical viewpoint with regard to large-scale civic endeavor. There is always another perspective.” While Simpson concentrates on Ovid’s amatory verse, the *Metamorphoses* can be seen as an extension of these same tendencies: a long poem that was both “belated” in relation to Virgil’s momentous epic and marginalized in relation to earlier epic by its tendencies to fragmentation and individualized psychologizing, the *Metamorphoses* may even adopt a highly ironic perspective on the grand civic vision of Augustan Rome.

Simpson’s account of Ovid as the “the great poet of the ‘lesser’ and the belated” is as important for Gower’s English voice as it is for Chaucer’s. Although Simpson himself has called attention to the Ovidian character of Genius (see above), my interest here is in Gower’s own personae, Amans and, at a still more basic level, the speaker who is at once so morally insistent and so self-effacing as to reveal himself “on of tho” who have foolishly been overtaken by love (I.61-63). Minnis has argued that, while Chaucer found Ovid’s example liberating for his

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100 For a reading of the amatory poems that similarly emphasizes political subversion, see Davis, *Ovid and Augustus*.
101 For the poem’s tendency to rewrite scenes from Virgilian epic with a renewed interest in psychology, see Solodow, *World of Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, 143. For the political subversiveness of the *Metamorphoses*, see e.g. Mack, *Ovid*, 135, 143; and Barkan, *Gods Made Flesh*, 85, 87-88.
creation of a vernacular love poetry, Gower, equally dependent on Ovid for the creation of his vernacular voice, preferred to revere Ovid not as poet but as a clerk whose text was to be subjected to academic commentary in just the same way that Gower subjected his own text.\footnote{Minnis, “De vulgari auctoritate.”}

But Minnis’ reading presents the \textit{Confessio} as more stodgily clerical, for example, when he calls the often comically irrelevant glosses a “brake imposed on meaning” (52), than seems plausible in light of recent accounts of the unruliness of Gower’s English verse. While the bulk of my argument against a clerical reading must await chapters 2 and 3, it is important to note that “clerk” is itself capable of ambivalence in Gower’s usage, as is seen in Gower’s self-description as “burel clerk” (Pr.52). This phrase, which has been variously glossed “a man of simple learning,” a “layman,” and “lay clerk,”\footnote{Macaulay, \textit{English Works}, n. Pr.52; Scanlon, \textit{Narrative, Authority, and Power}, 251. For the definition of “burel” as “lay,” see MED s.v. “burel (n.(1)),” def. 1b.} might be thought mere affected modesty, but Gower’s treatment of moral, political, and other varieties of science—topics that traditionally were exclusively the domain of ecclesiastics—not merely in the vernacular but in the lowly voice of a besotted lover, greatly complicates the situation.\footnote{For further discussion of the phrase “burel clerk,” see below, chapter 3.}

I want to follow Scanlon’s suggestion that “burel clerk” captures a fundamental paradox in Gower’s persona in the \textit{Confessio}, but whereas Scanlon sees Gower’s project as resolutely secular and presents him as engaged in a project to appropriate clerical authority so far as to “clericalize the vernacular,” I contend that Gower’s project is much more modest in its “appropriation” of clerical learning and much less secular in its outlook. Postponing my critique of Copeland’s and Scanlon’s clericalizing readings of the \textit{Confessio} until chapters 2 and 3, respectively, in the remainder of this chapter I offer a preliminary investigation of why Gower may have turned to Ovid as a source of authority.
outside of clerical culture.

Ovid’s paradoxical status in the late fourteenth century as both the quintessential aristocratic poet and “the great poet of the ‘lesser’ and the belated” would seem to fill Gower’s need for such an alternative authority very well. The idea that civil authorities might provide a necessary corrective to a hopelessly corrupt Church seems to have been a turn of thought common to many writers, orthodox as well as heterodox, in the second half of the fourteenth century. ¹⁰⁶ Certainly Gower would shudder at disendowment. Even had he been inclined to radical opinions (he was not), Gower, writing well after Wyclif’s condemnation, could not have enjoyed the ideological freedom of William Fitzralph and William Langland in the 1350s and 1370s respectively. But this habit of looking to the civil authority for the remedy to problems in the Church was characteristic of many figures in the period, and Gower’s hope for a quasi-aristocratic, and more importantly a lay, remedy was more subtle.

Far from urging a radical public agenda upon the aristocracy, the Confessio advances a message of individual reform, addressing this to the English generally. ¹⁰⁷ In pursuing this end, there are good reasons why Gower should seek to imbue his poem with aristocratic sensibilities. As I suggested above, this would appeal to an audience that encompassed significant portions of the middle, as well as aristocratic, ranks of society. Even apart from those intent on social climbing, the pursuit of gentle and courtly virtues would be fully natural for non-gentle audiences, since aristocratic values by this time were deeply conflated with Christian values, and were thus, in theory at least, made available to men and women of all estates. ¹⁰⁸ Langland speaks

¹⁰⁶ Baldwin, “Historical Context,” 75-76.
¹⁰⁷ Middleton, “Idea of Public Poetry”; and see above, introduction.
¹⁰⁸ Burnley, Chaucer’s Language, 152-53; and idem, Courtliness and Literature, 176-99.
of Christ’s “curteisie” (e.g. *Piers Plowman* B.XII.77); the *Pearl*-poet makes this virtue the means by which believers are joined to Christ (*Pearl* 457); and Chaucer’s Parson explicates the “gentrie of the soule” (*Canterbury Tales* X.460). Gower shows this same conflation when he argues for the wide accessibility of aristocratic virtues in his Book IV digression on “gentilesse.” Following such writers as Jean de Meun, Dante, and Chaucer, Genius argues that this quality depends not on lineage or money but on inner moral goodness. Whereas money and even lineage are subject to fortune, “Vertu set in the corage” remains firm (2257-68).

The passage represents true *gentilesse* in a surprisingly elevated manner. Stemming from “resonable entencion,” *gentilesse* manifests itself in virtue and even in charity. After establishing the true source of *gentilesse*, Genius proceeds to discuss how this relates to love in a passage that elaborates on the idea that *gentilesse* “makth curteis of the vilein” (2300). The prose gloss on the passage suggests that Gower has charity in view: “Nota de amore caritatis, vbi dicit, Qui non diligit, manet in morte” (2321, margin). Genius quotes this statement, from 1 John 3:14, again in the English verses, in a passage of great importance in illuminating Genius’s lay perspective on the contents of “holi bokes”:

> After the vertu moral eke  
> To speke of love if I schal seke,  
> Among the holi bokes wise  
> I finde write in such a wise,  
> ‘Who loveth noght is hier as ded’;  
> For love above alle othre is hed,  
> Which hath the vertus forto lede  
> Of al that unto mannes dede  
> Belongeth: for of ydelschipe  
> He hateth all the felaschipe.  

(IV.2321-30)

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Genius’s thought is diffuse, and the *gentilesse* theme is present here only implicitly, established by the preceding discussion: *gentilesse* resides not in money or lineage, but in virtuous *besinesse*, and is thus opposed to “ydelschipe” (cf. 2285-91). In context then, immediately following the discussion of how *gentilesse* answers *ydelenese*, the passage effectively elevates the discourse of *gentilesse* to the status of a lay counterpart to the *caritas* preached in “holi bokes.”

This conflation of *gentilesse* with Christian virtue needs qualification, however. Genius’s advocacy of *gentil* love at this point in the poem has often been seen as aberrant, and indeed, retrospectively, in the clearer light of the end of Amans’s confession, it becomes evident that Amans must retreat from this kind of love. Olsson notes two opposing tendencies in the poem’s representation of *gentilesse*: in addition to the *gentilesse* based on true virtue and thus compatible with Christianity, the poem depicts another species of *gentilesse* “that prevails in love’s court and is championed by Venus, called the goddess not only of love, ‘worldes lust,’ and ‘plesance,’ but ‘ek of gentilesse’ (V.1442-43).” Undoubtedly, this passage places *gentilesse* in a much less auspicious light, virtually identifying it with sexual love, but, as has often been noticed, the Book V digression on “misbelieve” is notable for its condemnation of Venus in a poem that takes a generally favorable view of her. It is less clear Olsson is right to judge this bad Venus to be the same Venus who abandons Amans at the end of the poem because of his impotence:

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For al onliche of gentil love
Mi court stant alle courtz above
And takth noght into retenue
Bot thing which is to kinde due.           (VIII.2345-48)
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Venus’s disclaimer of everything beyond the reach of “kinde” clarifies that this Venus and the “gentil love” she patronizes both have limits; this problematizes the earlier conflation of

\[111\] Ibid.
gentilesse with Christian virtue. But as we will see in chapters 4 and 5, Gower frequently obscurcs the boundary between nature and grace, and there are good reasons to see even “gentil love” represented finally in a positive light.

If such an elevation of gentilesse is seen as basic to Gower’s mindset, the Confessio’s strong aristocratic and amatory biases appear strategies for a lay rhetoric advocating a moral and political vision that still finds its basis in Christian caritas. There are good reasons why Gower might have turned to the profane counterpart of caritas in the formation of a vernacular rhetoric—even if he is in many ways distant from the thirteenth-century vernacular theologians, who, according to Bernard McGinn, invoke more strongly corporeal “bridal and courtly motifs” than those found in contemporary Latin theology. Kinde love is inherently—even by definition—available to everyone’s experience; whatever its limitations, it is a species of goodness emphatically within reach of the laity. We will see in chapter 4 that appeals to kinde are basic throughout Gower’s poem for the same reason. Further, with only slight exaggeration we can say that love is the quintessential vernacular subject. Late-medieval writers discern an affinity between vernacular literature and human love. Dante makes this connection in the De vulgari eloquentia. A well-known passage found at the beginning of both the English Lai le Freine and Sir Orfeo invites its early fourteenth-century audience to imagine a pure state of vernacular literature in songs that took love as their theme: “Of al thinges that men seth [relate, i.e. about the lays sung by men of the past] / Mest o love for sothe thai beth.” The author of the Cursor Mundi offers his work as a substitute for popular songs on various topics tending to

114 Dante, De vulgari eloquentia, 2.2; cf. Convivio 1.10.
115 See Lais le Fresne, in Middle English Breton Lays, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, ll. 1-22.
dissolution, but he shows a special concern with works taken up with “foly love” and “paramours,” so much so that these provide a segue into an account of the holy “paramour,” the Virgin Mary. Gower seems to follow a similar train of thought in the *Mirour*, addressing that poem to “every lover who seems so desirous of Sin, whose love is false” (1-36).

The love theme of Gower’s English poem contributes to a vernacular rhetoric in part, then, simply because it is vernacularly fashionable—both because it is a gentle subject that powerfully suggests a kind of virtue that is no less virtuous for its essentially lay character, and because kinde love is the vernacular theme par excellence. Ovidian myths of love might seem to serve this tendency merely as ornaments: a part of the furniture of courtly writing, Ovid enhances the fashionableness of Gower’s writing. But the deep allusion to the *Metamorphoses* that we explored earlier in this chapter brings something more powerful to Gower’s rhetoric. Irruptions of love, often with metamorphic consequences, describe the “existential doubt” that “punctuate[s]” the vernacular spaces outside, and in a real sense beyond the reach, of the structures of Latinate learning, to quote Wetherbee. Gower resorts to Ovid because, as the extra-ecclesiastical authority on lability and flux, Ovid is the great authority on vernacular experience.

This may seem unlikely in view of Ovid’s Latinity and, even more, given the foundational role of his poems in medieval education, his centrality to clerical culture. Indeed, there can be no question that the commentary tradition colored Gower’s perception of the *Metamorphoses*. Nearly all copies of the *Metamorphoses* from the thirteenth and fourteenth

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116 *Cursor Mundi*, ed. Wogan-Browne et al., 31-52.
centuries have glosses or commentaries of some kind. 118 Although Mainzer demonstrated
Gower’s knowledge of this commentary tradition some years ago, the derivative and
conservative character of this tradition makes it impossible to know in precisely what form
Gower encountered this commentary. 119 Examining manuscripts of French provenance, Paule
Demats attested not only the frequency of commentary in the extant manuscripts of the
Metamorphoses but also its basically conservative nature. Demats noted that many manuscripts
of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries combine the commentaries of Arnulf of Orléans and
John of Garland into a kind of glossa ordinaria like that found in copies of the Bible and of
Gratian’s Decretum. 120 More recently, Frank Coulson has found that the commentaries in the
margins of the poem recycle annotations found in earlier manuscripts, even as the commentary
tradition grows increasingly sophisticated during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. 121 The
surviving evidence for the provenance of Ovid manuscripts in England offers little help in
determining which commentaries Gower could have known. Kathryn McKinley has completed a
survey of “Manuscripts of Ovid in England, 1100-1500,” but it is often impossible to determine
from surviving library catalogues what kind of commentary was included in the manuscripts they
list. McKinley notes, however, that the fourteenth century saw “a pronounced increase in the
number of [listed] commentaries.” 122 Gower may well have had access to a glossed copy of the

118 Ghisalberti emphasizes the ubiquity of commentary in his introduction to Giovanni di Garlandia, Integumenta
Ovidii, 9-10; cf. Robson, “Dante’s Use,” 8. The vast majority of the 405 manuscripts catalogued by Franco Munari
include glosses; see Munari, Catalogue of the MSS; see also the addenda to Munari’s list in Coulson and Roy,
Incipitariam, 148-49.
119 Mainzer, “John Gower’s Use of the ‘Medieval Ovid.’”
120 Demats, Fabula, 142.
122 McKinley, “Manuscripts of Ovid,” qt. 45. For the period 1100-1500, McKinley finds evidence for 4 copies of
John of Garland’s commentary on the Metamorphoses, 11 copies of Pierre Bersuire’s Ovidius Moralizatus, 1 copy
of William of Orléans’s commentary on the Metamorphoses, and 9 other sets of glosses on the Metamorphoses;
although some of these postdate 1400, a portion of the copies, attested in the fifteenth century but no longer extant,
may well have been produced earlier (80). A portion of the 27 Metamorphoses copies McKinley lists likely
Metamorphoses when he was writing the Confessio while at the Priory of St. Mary Overeys, where he had resided since about 1377. Although no library catalogue survives, at the Dissolution in 1548, the parish redeemed from the crown “xxx great bookes and small,” which probably represented only a portion of the library; in such a collection, a commented Metamorphoses would not have been exceptional.

Unsurprisingly, it is impossible to prove that Gower had access to any particular copy of the Metamorphoses, but his knowledge of the commentary tradition is assured even without this. Gower’s first contact with the Metamorphoses would likely have been in grammar school, and would certainly have involved a glossed text. For this reason it is necessary to take a somewhat broad view of the late-medieval academic reception of the Metamorphoses by looking at four versions of what, for convenience, we will call the Ovidius Maior: Arnulf of Orléans’ Allegoriae, c. 1175; the Vulgate Commentary, c. 1250; the anonymous verse Ovide Moralisé, c. 1316-1328; and Pierre Bersuire’s Ovidius Moralizatus, c. 1348. A fifth commentary, Thomas Walsingham’s De archana deorum, also gets brief mention below, but, although this text is both contemporary and proximate to Gower, it is somewhat less important to Gower’s reading since it survives in only a single copy, St. John’s College, Oxford, MS 124. The following account explores similarities and differences between Gower’s Confessio and the late-medieval

\[\text{\textsuperscript{123}}\text{See Fisher, John Gower, 58-60, and Yeager, “French Audience,” 117-21, 125-26.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{124}}\text{Yeager, “French Audience,” 122, and n. 64.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{125}}\text{McKinley finds that three secular houses in London possessed copies of Ovid’s works in the late fourteenth century; of these, St. Paul’s Almonry had a Metamorphoses, and London Hospital had a copy of Bersuire’s Ovidius moralizatus (“Manuscripts of Ovid,” 45; cf. 82).}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{126}}\text{I use this common medieval designation of the Metamorphoses (see e.g. Hexter, “Ovid in the Middle Ages,” 424) to refer to medieval versions of the poem together with any appended commentary.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{127}}\text{For an overview of the late-medieval commentary tradition that discusses the importance of the three Latin commentaries see Coulson, Vulgate Commentary, 4-16. The importance of the Ovide Moralisé to Gower and Chaucer is well known (see below).}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{128}}\text{De archana deorum, ed. van Kluwe.}\]
Metamorphoses, first, in order to show that the late-medieval reception of Ovid’s poem lends further proof of the Confessio’s global allusion to the Metamorphoses; and second, given this global allusion, to use this fact as a barometer of the degree of clerisy of Gower’s English poem—that is, to assess the extent to which Gower’s allusive practice can be seen to ally his poem with learned culture.

For all the differences among these commentaries, several common features have great relevance to the Confessio’s global allusion to the Metamorphoses. One immediately striking feature of all these commentaries is the astonishingly wide scope they attribute to Ovid’s poem. This is not without basis in Ovid’s own text. The Metamorphoses is a universal history not only in time (“ab origine mundi / ad mea ... tempora,” 1.3-4), but also in the breadth of its subject matter. It records not only the actions of gods and human beings but the entire history of the natural world (plants, animals, land forms, celestial bodies, the cosmos); it opens with a cosmogony and concludes with an exposition of universal philosophy in the voice of Pythagoras. Ovid seems to have fashioned his role as poet of the created universe after the model of Homer, to whom generations of readers had attributed virtually omniscient powers as a writer of allegory. Whatever Ovid’s intentions, his medieval readers had good reason to consider him a philosopher, finding him cited as a scientific authority by Seneca, Pliny, the writers of the Physiologus, and the Church Fathers. Medieval writers continued to cite Ovid as an authority on natural science; Vincent of Beauvais (d. 1264), for example, cites Ovid more frequently than any other poet in his Speculum Mundi.

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129 Barkan, Gods Made Flesh, 111-12. For Homer’s and Hesiod’s critical receptions in antiquity, see also Feeney, Gods in Epic, 5-56.
130 See Demats, Fabula, 132, and Viarre, La Survie d’Ovide.
131 Wilkinson, Ovid Recalled, 380.
The commentaries circulating in the fourteenth century carry this tendency further by bringing the interpretations of earlier mythographers to bear directly and systematically on Ovid’s poem. According to Arnulf of Orléans and the author or authors of the “Vulgate” commentary, Ovid’s poem is about change (*mutatio*), and this encompasses everything in creation. Arnulf writes, “The subject matter is indicated by this title, for Ovid is concerned with three kinds of transformations, that is natural, magical, and spiritual.” This classification of the three kinds of *mutatio* “will be found subsisting, almost unaltered, in later ‘accessus.’” The “Vulgate” commentator divides *mutatio* into four types—natural, moral, magical and spiritual. This breadth of matter demands considerable versatility on the part of the poet, who writes as a historian in the heroic meter, but is also a *physicus* in that he marks out the generation of the elements, and an *ethicus* in relating transformations back to morals. The commentator etymologizes “Ovidius Naso” in a memorable way that underscores Ovid’s virtual omnicompetence: he is called Naso, either because he happened to have a long nose, or because he tracked down “rhetorical words” and the “sentences of physics and philosophy alike” to color his works, just as a bloodhound tracks its prey. The etymology of Ovidius needs quoting:

He is called *Ovidius* as if to say *ouum diuidens*, that is, opening up to us what is hidden and unknown, since he discusses the primordial matter, in the place where he treats the creation of the world. The world is compared to an egg; for it has the roundness of an egg and, like an egg, carries in itself the number four. An egg has externally a shell, followed within by a membrane; the white comes third in order.

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134 Ghisalberti, “Medieval Biographies of Ovid,” 18. For evidence that Arnulf’s *accessus* was not wholly original, but itself derived from earlier versions, see Coulson, “Sources of the *Accessus* of Arnoul d’Orléans.”
135 “Vulgate” Commentary, ed. Coulson, 27.
136 Ibid. 28-29.
137 Ed. Coulson, 25. Demats notes that these etymologies on Ovid’s name are very widespread in the commentaries. The etymology of “Naso” is already present in Arnulf’s *accessus* to the *Epistulae ex Ponto*; see Demats, *Fabula*, 161.
and the yoke fourth. By the outer shell we figure the firmament, by the membrane the air, by the white the water, by the yoke the earth. The firmament resembles the shell of the egg in firmness, and in that it covers the other things; the air resembles the membrane in thinness; the water resembles the white in transparency; the earth resembles the yoke in its centrality and also in its creation of things, since, as the chick is born from the yoke, so all things are brought forth from the organs of the earth.

Ouidius enim dicitur quasi ‘ouum diuidens,’ id est occultum nobis et incognitum aperiens, quoniam de primordiali materia, in qua de creacione mundi agitur, pertractauit. Mundus enim ouo comparatur; oui enim rotunditatem exprimit et, sicut ouum, quatuor in se gerit. Ouum habet exxtrinsecus testam quam tela sequitur intus, tercio albumen ordinatur, quarto uero meditullium; per testam extrinseccam firmamentum figuramus, per telam aera, per albumen aquam, per meditullium terram. Firmamentum teste oui in firmitate conuenit et in tegendo cetera, aer tele in tenuitate, aqua albumini in limpiditate, terra meditullio in mediacione nec non in rerum creatione quoniam, sicut pullus nascitur ex meditullio, ita ex terre uisceribus omnia procreantur.\(^{138}\)

This interest in the natural knowledge contained in the *Metamorphoses* persists in the bodies of both these commentaries. According to Arnulf,\(^{139}\) the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha represents the truth of human reproduction that when the man’s sperm predominates a boy is conceived and when the woman’s sperm predominates, a girl. The union of the Sun and Clymene resulting in the birth of Phaethon represents the union of warmth and moisture which results in wheat crops. Tiresias’ change from male to female and back is interpreted as an allegory of the changing seasons.\(^{140}\) A similar interest in natural knowledge is found in the “Vulgate” Commentary, although “[m]ost of the scientific information in the commentary is contained in the first two hundred lines of the poem.”\(^{141}\) In the *accessus*, at least, Ovid appears virtually omni-competent,

\(^{138}\) *Vulgate Commentary*, ed. Coulson, 25.

\(^{139}\) Arnulf’s commentary consists of two main parts: the *accessus* followed by a series of philological glosses on the entire poem, and the *Allegoriae*. These are generally considered to be separate works (e.g. by Ghisalberti, “Arnolfo d’Orléans”; Coulson, *Vulgate Commentary*, 4), but in one manuscript, Munich MS clm 7205, they are arranged as a continuous work which Ralph Hexter takes as authorial (“Medieval Articulations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” 65).

\(^{140}\) Ed. Ghisalberti, “Arnolfo,” 202, 204, 208. Although Ghisalberti’s cites only 14 occurrences of natural interpretations in the *Allegoriae*, his count is incomplete. See Demats, *Fabula*, 151.

though the “Vulgate” Commentary may show the decadence of the interest in natural allegory visible in the earlier tradition.

Ovid’s knowledge of the physical world is far less prominent in the fourteenth-century moralized Ovids, but the authors of these works still acknowledge Ovid’s stature as an expert on the natural world. The *Ovide Moralisé* author repeats the traditional notion that Ovid “l’oeuf devisa” in the *Metamorphoses*.\(^{142}\) Bersuire in his *De formis figurisque*, the treatise immediately before the *Ovidius Moralizatus* in the *Reductorium Morale* that serves as a kind of prologue to that book, likewise acknowledges Ovid’s knowledge of the natural world.\(^{143}\) It is also worth noting that the *De archana deorum*, a paraphrase and allegorical exposition of the *Metamorphoses* by Gower’s contemporary Londoner and near neighbor Thomas Walsingham, conjoins euhemerism and natural philosophy in the traditional manner.\(^{144}\) But the main concern of the moralized Ovids is with the *Metamorphoses*’s utility in moral and theological matters. This concern had not been lacking in the earlier commentaries: for Arnulf, at least, there is a close relationship between the physical and theological lore on display in the *Metamorphoses*, since all *mutaciones* can be understood to symbolize how the soul wanders from and must be called back to God.\(^{145}\) As Demats has shown, Arnulf borrows from Chartrian Platonism and ultimately from the *Timaeus* the doctrine that the movements of the heavens correspond to the movements of the human soul.\(^ {146}\) But, while Arnulf’s gymnastics are useful in illustrating the

\(^{142}\) Ed. de Boer, I.204.
\(^{144}\) *De archana deorum*, ed. van Kluwe.
\(^{146}\) On Arnulf’s connection to the school of Chartres, and specifically to William of Conches’s commentaries on the *Timaeus* and on Boethius’ *De consolatione Philosophiae*, see Demats, *Fabula*, 143 ff. On the school of Chartres, see Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century*. 
breadth of scope that medieval readers may attribute to Ovid’s poem, Arnulf’s particular brand of humanism has little to do with Gower. The same is not so obviously true of the moralized Ovids, which appear closer to Gower’s own in both time and method.

As Mainzer notes, it is difficult to prove Gower’s knowledge of these texts with certainty, since “[d]etails common to Gower’s stories and the moralizing interpretations could well have been common also to the glosses and commentaries of this time.” Nevertheless, Gower, like Chaucer, seems to have used the *Ovide Moralisé.* Mainzer notes several strong parallels between Gower’s and the *Ovide Moralisé*’s versions of a number of tales, including apparent verbal echoes in “Pyramus and Thisbe,” “Ceyx and Alcyone,” “Phrixus and Helle,” and “Theseus and Ariadne.” As for Bersuire, it is virtually certain that Gower used his *De formis figurisque deorum* in the description of the Greek pantheon in Book V; although this text, the first book of the *Ovidius moralizatus*, sometimes circulated separately, it seems that Gower had the remainder as well. In addition to the parallels which Mainzer cites, which often involve verbal parallels to Gower’s Latin marginalia, we can add a detail from the Tale of Phebus and Cornide. While Gower mentions that the raven is a harbinger of misfortune, Ovid does not mention this (cf. *Metamorphoses* 2.612-32). Bersuire, however, says that part of the raven’s punishment was to be “condemned... to be the bearer of bad news forever.” Mainzer’s conclusion that Gower very likely knew and used both the *Ovide Moralisé* and the *Ovidius moralizatus* is well founded.

If, in the moralized Ovids, the natural allegories so abundant in the ancient

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147 Mainzer, “Gower’s Use of the ‘Mediaeval Ovid,’” 215-16.
148 For Chaucer’s use see Minnis, “Chaucer and the *Ovide Moralisé.*”
150 Mainzer, “Medieval Ovid”; see also Ito, “Gower’s Use of *Vita Barlaam,*” 10-17, and below, chapter 2.
mythographers and in Arnulf of Orléans but scarcer in the “Vulgate” Commentary had fallen still further out of fashion, the encyclopedic quality found in the thirteenth-century commentaries persists here just as abundantly.\(^{152}\) While the earlier commentaries may boast greater overall scope, the moralized Ovids give the impression of moral and satirical summae encompassing the whole of society. Even the earlier, less insistently moralizing commentaries often “use Ovid’s fables as convenient structural metaphors for cultural and intellectual features of their own society.”\(^{153}\) But this tendency grows stronger in the moralized Ovids. Ann Moss notes that Pierre Bersuire’s determination to make Ovid’s poem “relevant to Christian theology and to the contemporary social scene” leads him, in his *Ovidius moralizatus*, to tropological interpretations “which often turn into social satire, where the gods and heroes become rich men and poor men, good and bad priests, usurers and temptresses, in short the whole pageant of late medieval society, enacting the moral fables appropriate to a particular vice or social class.”\(^{154}\) In addition to the prelates and false flatterers which we noted in the Bersuire’s treatment of the myth of Io, Bersuire glosses Proteus as “false and vain men like hypocrites, false friends, and flatterers” within the Church.\(^{155}\) In the myth of Phaethon, Phaethon “signifies evil judges and prelates, to whom the direction of the chariot—that is of the church or state—is entrusted”; he is also “a young and imprudent prelate who ... presses himself forward because of ambition.”\(^{156}\) Topical concerns are especially evident in Bersuire’s interpretation of the myth of Callisto: “The son,
Arcas, can signify carnal and worldly friends intent on hunting—that is acquiring—because it is today’s way of doing things that when a man has been changed into a beast—that is made poor—his own son—that is his false, carnal friends—forgets him and disdains to know him."\textsuperscript{157}

Gower’s handling of Ovidian myth resembles that of the medieval commentaries sufficiently closely to constitute further proof of the global allusion thesis. Gower seems to have found the encyclopedic vision so strongly emphasized by the \textit{Metamorphoses} commentaries congenial. The \textit{Confessio} similarly turns myth to encyclopedic ends, for in the course of his love myths Genius tries on all the roles—\textit{physicus, ethicus}, and, implicitly \textit{medicus} and \textit{historicus}—noted in the “Vulgate” Commentary.\textsuperscript{158} The \textit{Confessio}’s combination of estates satire and myth is also comparable in breadth to the similar dynamic of the \textit{Ovide Moralisé} and the \textit{Ovidius moralizatus}, although certain qualifications are needed here, as we will see shortly.

But for all the commentaries’ usefulness in showing how Gower may have been conditioned to read the \textit{Metamorphoses}, the \textit{Confessio} and the academic commentary differ in important ways, and especially in how they initiate readers to the text of myth. The commentary tradition establishes a much greater hermeneutical distance between the reader and the myth than the \textit{Confessio} does. In the case of the earlier commentaries—Arnulf’s \textit{Allegoriae} and the “Vulgate” Commentary—this distancing of the reader is immediately evident. With their compendious scholarly apparatus and unalloyed clerisy, these commentaries erect fences shepherding the reader away from certain readings and toward others. Even if critics have emphasized the ostentatious clerisy of the \textit{Confessio}’s Latin apparatus and academic prologues,

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., ed. Engels, 53; tr. Reynolds, 163-64.
\textsuperscript{158} Cf. “Vulgate” Commentary, ed. Coulson, 28-29. The last two roles are implicit in the discussion of Ovid’s powers of healing and his chronicling of history from creation; ibid. 28.
and of the insistent interpretive frame provided by Genius’s self-exegesis, the immediate accessibility of Gower’s English stories puts the Confessio in a very different category from heavily glossed and commented early academic versions of the poem.

The reading practices encouraged by the Confessio bear a much closer relationship to the moralized Ovids. It is notable in this connection that both of these, like the Confessio, take a strong interest in the processes of vernacularization: both were written by Franciscan friars (although Bersuire later joined the Benedictines), probably during the second quarter of the fourteenth century, and intended as preaching aids.159 But this fact points up just as much dissimilarity as similarity, for, as preaching aids, the moralized Ovids—whether Bersuire’s in Latin or the Ovide Moralisé in French, and however much they may seek to foster vulgarization—belong still to strongly clerical discourse since they are primarily intended to meet the laity only by means of a preacher’s mediation. Yet, especially since we know that vernacular readers made use of these books directly—at least we know that courtly readers and courtly poets used the Ovide Moralisé160—it is necessary to investigate further to what extent the clerical qualities of the moralized Ovids are likewise visible in the Confessio.

Together the moralized Ovids mark a new departure for Metamorphoses commentary. Unlike earlier commentary tradition, which had credited the poem’s auctor with prodigious literary, historical, moral and scientific wisdom, these works appropriate Ovid’s text not because of its intrinsic merit but because of its serviceability as a platform for Christian doctrine. Demats emphasizes the Ovide Moralisé’s break with the traditional notion of Ovidius philosophus.

Whereas Arnulf of Orléans believed that moral, historical and physical truth were in a strong sense present in Ovid’s text, the *Ovide Moralisé* author decries all the vain fantasies of the pagan poets, Ovid included (5.2689-704).\(^{161}\) The author proudly declares that his own interpretations salvage what Ovid has “crudely” (“grossement”) written by revealing its hidden truth:

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\begin{align*}
&\text{Voirs est, qui Ovide prendroit} \\
&a \text{ la lettre, et n’i entendroit} \\
&\text{autre sen, autre entendement} \\
&\text{que tel com l’auctors grossement} \\
&\text{i met en racontant la fable,} \\
&\text{tout seroit chose mençognable,} \\
&\text{poi profitable et trop obscure ...} \\
&\text{Mes sous la fable gist couverte} \\
&\text{la sentence plus profitable.}
\end{align*}
\]

Indeed, whoever takes Ovid literally and does not see any other meaning or intention there other than the one that the author has crudely put into telling the story, then all would be misleading or mendacious (to him), of little profit and too obscure.... But under the fable lies covered the more useful moral.\(^{162}\)

Although both the *Ovide Moralisé* writer and Bersuire claim that truth is already present in Ovid's text,\(^{163}\) the emphasis has shifted decisively onto the act of reading itself. As Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski has noted, the *Ovide Moralisé* frequently compares its project of interpreting Ovid to Christian exegesis of the Old Testament.\(^{164}\) While it is never possible to exhaust all of the meanings which may be elicited from the Bible or from Ovid’s text—there is always a “sourplus” which the *Ovide Moralisé* leaves to other expositors\(^ {165}\)—this does not mean

\(^{161}\) *Fabula*, 168-69.
\(^{162}\) Ed. de Boer, XI.2525-31, 2536-37; tr. Gillespie, “Twelfth Century,” 201, slightly modified.
\(^{163}\) Cf. the last quotation from the *Ovide Moralisé*, and Bersuire’s comment, “It is evident to anyone reading the books of poets that scarcely or never do they tell a tale which does not contain some truth, either natural or historical. For this reason Rabanus in *De Naturis Rerum*, XVI.2 says that it is the poet’s office to retell actual events in a graceful but oblique manner” (*De Formis Figurisque Deorum*, ed. Engels, 1; tr. Reynolds 32).
\(^{164}\) See Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading Myth*, 91, 102-03, 130.
that all interpretations are valid. What distinguishes correct from incorrect interpretation is the ability to progress beyond the “text,” which kills, to the “mystery that holy Church guards,” which brings life.\footnote{Ibid. 131.}

Bersuire likewise appeals to St. Paul: “‘They will indeed turn away their hearing from the truth, but will be turned to fables.’ From this saying I can conclude that fables, enigmas, and poems must for the most part be read so that some moral sense may be drawn out from them and so that their falsity may be understood in terms of some familiar truth.”\footnote{De Formis Figurisque Deorum, ed. Engels, 1; tr. Reynolds, 32.} No longer is interpretation conceived as a key to unlock the fixed meaning of the text; interpretation now centers on a technique of reading rightly, that is, Christianly. Although Bersuire attributes true meaning to the poets themselves, his description of his project tends to disparage the fables of the poets by contrasting them to the Scriptures:

Therefore, because I have seen that Scripture uses fables to communicate natural or historical truths, it has seemed proper to me that after my moralization of the properties of things and of the works of nature I moralize the fables of poets so that through man-made fictions I may be able to confirm the mysteries of morals and faith. For, if he is able, a man may collect grapes from thorns, suck honey from rocks, take oil from the hardest rock, and build a tabernacle of the Covenant from the treasures of the Egyptians. Ovid says that it is proper to be taught by an enemy.\footnote{De Formis, ed. Engels, 2; tr. Reynolds, 33-34.}

What is only implicit in the variegated, selective reading of Arnulf of Orléans and the compilers of the Vulgate Commentary is now explicit: proper reading, far from a passive process, requires skill, even virtuosity, and a previous knowledge of “familiar truth.”

This shifting of the locus of truth from the classical text to the knowing Christian reader is not wholly unique to the moralized Ovids, and should be situated within new awareness of the
reader visible in commentary writing generally. According to Vincent Gillespie, commentators on classical texts during the period 1150 and 1450 show “a heightened interest in the effects of reading poetry on its audience, ... not just in the ways those effects were created verbally, ... but also in the impact that poetic effects had on the affections, imagination and moral understanding of readers and listeners.”\(^{169}\) This increased awareness of the reading process led commentators to more nuanced reading praxes: “medieval commentators ... recognised how important it was to train their readers to read openly and responsively as well as wisely and ethically.”\(^{170}\) The academic study of Ovid played the key role in these developments.\(^{171}\) As Minnis has shown, Ovid’s resistance to closure challenged medieval academic commentators and vernacular imitators alike to embrace polysemy rather than reduce meaning “to a neat critical aphorism.”\(^{172}\) The “decentering of authorial intention” which Gillespie describes in Ovid commentaries culminates in the commentaries on the *Metamorphoses*, which undergo a “sea change in interpretative attitudes.”\(^{173}\) Commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* are less concerned to elucidate Ovid’s poem in its ancient setting than to self-consciously appropriate it to modern needs; this is seen especially in the moralized Ovids of the fourteenth century, which dispense with *intentio auctoris* completely in favor of Christian moral interpretations, but also in the mid-thirteenth-century Vulgate Commentary’s distinction between the “utilitas auctoris” and “utilitas legendum.”\(^{174}\)

These new developments, visible in both the moralized Ovids and in the *Confessio*,

\(^{169}\) Gillespie, “Twelfth Century,” 147.
\(^{174}\) Ibid. 201, 197.
provide a further affinity between Gower and the *Ovidius Maior*. The moralized Ovids constantly require their readers to choose among various competing interpretations. In one reading of the Actaeon story, the human protagonist stands for Christ, and in another, Diana does. Similarly, Myrrha can represent either the incestuous woman or the Virgin Mary. The *Ovide Moralisé* sometimes orders its competing readings according to an “interpretive hierarchy,” but Pierre Bersuire’s preferred method is simple disjunction. In the fable of Io, for example, Bersuire first makes Argus represent good prelates who guard the Christian people, and Mercury flatterers who try to lull prelates to sleep so they may ensnare those in their charge. But then in a quick reversal (“Or say that ...”), Bersuire makes Argus represent the devil, and Mercury as Christ who recovers souls from his power. Unsurprisingly, these new developments are visible in the *Confessio* as well. After noting the resemblance between the layouts of the *Confessio* and glossed copies of the *Metamorphoses*, Wetherbee argues that the resemblance goes beyond the “merely visual.” The dissonance between the rigorous moralization of Gower’s Latin prose glosses and the diffusive, storial excess of Gower’s English narratives such as “Acteon” likewise place choices before the reader. Although not concerned with the poem’s Ovidian resonances, Yeager and Echard make similar points that are relevant here. According to Yeager, Gower’s Latin verses “insist upon reminding us of the textuality of the experience [of reading], of its unreality, of its craftedness, even as we join in it ... as readers, self-conscious of our distance from the text and its ‘voices.’ The effect is increased participation in an increasingly complex association of self and multiplicitous ‘other.’” While all texts are

178 Yeager, “Text as ‘Other,’” 259-60.
subject to “interpretative instability” and readers’ responses are always conditioned by manuscript context, Echard argues that this is especially true in the Confessio because of the ways discrepancies between Gower’s English and Latin call attention to this instability.\footnote{Pearsall, “Gower’s Latin,” 22, and Echard, “With Carmen’s Help,” 3.} Even though Genius’s lessons are far more univocal than those of the moralized Ovids, like the moralized Ovids, they present a reader with shifting perspectives and the necessity of making choices.\footnote{Yeager similarly calls attention to the way in which Gower’s Latin verses “insist upon reminding us of the textuality of the experience [of reading], of its unreality, of its craftedness, even as we join in it ... as readers, self-conscious of our distance from the text” (“Text as ‘Other,’” 259, original emphasis).}

By emphasizing the importance of “reading Christianly,” the moralized Ovids call attention to the ways in which proper reading depends upon \textit{a priori} knowledge. The same dynamic is found in the Confessio. One very reasonable way to read the Confessio is to privilege the ultimate penitential trajectory of the poem.\footnote{As it is for example by Kinneavy, “Gower’s \textit{Confessio Amantis.}” For criticism of this approach see Scala, “The Lover’s Repression,” 137-39, and 241, n. 12.} But, as Yeager notes, this ultimate trajectory is often not in the forefront of Genius’s instruction: “the salvation Amans seeks, like the absolution Genius may at last provide, is wholly limited to a secular attachment.” Amans confesses to Genius in order to advance his suit; “[r]epentance and moral regeneration, while they occur, ultimately transforming Amans to aged John Gower praying ‘for the pes,’ are not the original goal of the Lover’s confession.”\footnote{Yeager, “Text as ‘Other,’” 257.} To sustain a penitential reading of the poem one must import doctrines frequently omitted from Genius’s teaching. Genius’s lesson on “Ydelvesse,” already noted in the Introduction, offers a particularly striking example: a penitentially minded reader might want to read “Rosiphelee” ironically, since the imperative of procreation contradicts Christianity’s customary privileging of virginity. Nevertheless, the \textit{Confessio} as a whole

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{180} Yeager similarly calls attention to the way in which Gower’s Latin verses “insist upon reminding us of the textuality of the experience [of reading], of its unreality, of its craftedness, even as we join in it ... as readers, self-conscious of our distance from the text” (“Text as ‘Other,’” 259, original emphasis).
\textsuperscript{181} As it is for example by Kinneavy, “Gower’s \textit{Confessio Amantis.}” For criticism of this approach see Scala, “The Lover’s Repression,” 137-39, and 241, n. 12.
\textsuperscript{182} Yeager, “Text as ‘Other,’” 257.
valorizes married love, as well as celibacy, and an ironic reading of “Rosiphelee” is not forced upon the reader, but a choice.

But important differences between the *Confessio* and the moralized Ovids become visible at this point. Although the moralized Ovids can be seen to exercise their readers in ways that are mirrored in the *Confessio*, in a very important sense the moralized Ovids, with their emphasis on the difficulty of reading fable correctly, appear to do something very different. These works are *tours de force*, finished products of virtuosic reading. While the *Confessio*, like many vernacular works influenced by the late-medieval shifting of the interpretive burden onto the reader, requires the reader to find out licit readings, Bersuire and the *Ovide Moralisé* perform this service themselves, ostentatiously laying out all the interpretive options their own prowess as clerkly readers make possible. The resulting “interpretive delirium” sets in high relief the urgent need for clerical mediation. By contrast, Genius’s hermeneutical stage-managing in such remarks as “And forto prove myn entente, / I finde ensample in a Croniqe” (I.759-60), hardly clerically ostentatious, seems downright vernacular. Tales such as “Canace and Machaire” and even “Acteon” elude Genius’ control and the “hermeneutical brake” does not hold. Amans is often not persuaded, but rather prompted to question or even rebel against his priest (e.g. IV.1648-1770, 2675-79; VIII.2149-90), Notwithstanding its sophisticated apparatus, the *Confessio* can be seen to take on an extraclerical position, or at least a liminal stance consistent with the narrator’s self-description as “burel clerk.”

The very different levels of clerisy in the *Confessio* and the moralized Ovids are also seen in the way the two works deploy satire. As already mentioned, both Bersuire’s *Ovidius*
moralizatus and the Ovide Moralisé show strong tendencies towards estates satire. Gower styles himself “satirus poeta” in the epistolary colophon, and the Confessio, as well as the Vox, bears a strong affinity to estates satire. But the medieval academic theory of satire applies to Gower’s works quite differently than to the moralized Ovids. In an article that demonstrates the highly conservative nature of the theory of satire during the Middle Ages, Paul Miller gives numerous examples of medieval commentaries defining satire as the genre concerned to expose the vices of society for purposes of moral correction, by means of a forthright, “naked” (“nudus”) critique which exempted no one from its criticisms. The emphasis on satire’s “nakedness” is important because it points up the extent to which satire must be publicly accessible. We might say, then, that the moralized Ovids enter the satiric mode once paraphrase ends and the heavier hermeneutical labor begins. But these works represent Ovidian myth as emphatically not naked, not publicly accessible, but “couverte” and “obscure,” even “mençognable.” In such accounts of Ovid, the veil of myth could hardly be more opaque.

While exegetical labor is sometimes needed to distil satire from the myths of the Confessio as well, Gower lets this depend to a surprising degree on the reader. Striking paradoxes occur in Genius’s teaching against “Sacrilege,” which Genius defines with reference to specifically Christian formulations of God’s holiness (V.6961-91). The perpetrator of “Sacrilege” steals goods belonging to “holi cherche” (6977). Brazen even in the face of excommunication, he has caused his conscience to cease to function, even taking what is due to Christ himself (6992-7003). Although the perpetrators of sacrilege whom Genius initially cites

185 Macaulay, Complete Works, 2:479.
186 Miller, “John Gower, Satiric Poet,” 82-86. For the “nakedness” of satire, see also Reynolds, Medieval Reading, 144-45.
(Antiochus, Nebuzaradan, Nabuchadnezzar, and Balshazzar) fit easily within this overtly Christian and biblical framework (7007-31), this doctrinal specificity is lost when Genius turns to cases of sacrilege in love. “Lucius and Statue,” which immediately follows Genius’s Christian critique of Sacrilege in several manuscripts, presupposes the sanctity of the statue of Apollo (7086*-7210*).

But often Gower elides the difference between myth and signification altogether, in a way that the signification seems to emerge naturally from within the story; such tales show a radical diminution, though not a total eclipse, of clerical exegesis. The tendency to internalize the moral within the narrative itself, which is visible in all of Gower’s “sin and punishment” tales, clearly marks as extraclerical Gower’s strategy in the series of mythical, Trojan exempla that conclude Gower’s chapter on Sacrilege. The whole of Genius’s teaching on this topic addresses a concern on the part of ecclesiastics and other moralists concerning the profanation of churches, but Genius’s method relies heavily on the reader’s willingness to perceive the message delivered obliquely through myth—stories set in a landscape that is necessarily devoid of Christian churches, and that demands considerable analogical reasoning from the reader. Far from bewildering his reader, however, Gower dramatizes the extent to which truth is plain and publicly accessible. “Paris and Helen,” despite its use of dramatic irony in treating the causes of Troy’s fall, does not represent this fortune as a mystery known only through supernatural means, but as properly visible to all. Whereas in Gower’s probable source for the tale, Benoît de Saint-Maure’s Roman de Troie, Cassandra is an inspired prophetess who knows the “devin segrei”

\[187\] On the abundance of this tale type, see Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 82.
\[188\] Cf. Robert Mannyng, Handlyng Synne, ed. Furnivall, 8583-9492.
(“divine mysteries”),¹⁸⁹ Gower diminishes her status to that of a wise woman. Though Gower calls her “that Sibille,” it is likely, given Gower’s tendency to euhemerism, that this should be taken as a proper name; he also, more simply, calls her sage, and he omits any reference to divination (V.7454-55). Even if all the other Trojans foolishly consider Paris’s successful flight with Helen an occasion for joy, Helenus and Cassandra know better, not because of their supernatural powers of perception but because the affair is overshadowed by its inauspicious beginning in a temple, and because it is adulterous:

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Bot al that merthe is sorwe and peine
To Helenus and to Cassaundre;
For thei it token schame and sklaundre
And lost of al the comun grace, loss
That Paris out of holi place
Be Stelthe hath take a mannes wif,
Wherof that he schal lese his lif
And many a worthi man therto,
And al the Cite be fordo,
Which nevere schal be mad ayein. (V.7568-77)
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The prognostic powers of the brother and sister register here, but, significantly, these are juxtaposed with more commonplace powers of moral perception, as Helenus and Cassandra are revolted that Paris has taken another man’s wife, pillaging the “holi place” of matrimony. The passage thus suggests that Helenus and Cassandra are seeing what should have been evident to all.

To be sure, the tale involves irony and even humor: the temple Paris has committed Sacrilege in belongs to Venus, and it is hard to see why this goddess should disapprove an action she herself encouraged and abetted (cf. 7422-29). Venus in any case is a goddess Genius is very ambivalent about; as a champion of marriage she is unreliable at best (cf. V.1382-1443). But this

does not annihilate the moral value of the tale. As on the level of the Trojan witnesses to the action, so also on the level of the poem’s readers, Gower’s method is to present moral insight as common and publicly accessible. The lines quoted above, though they represent an unmistakable moment of moral clarity in the tale—adulterous love affairs are sacrilegious and inevitably bring disaster—this lesson is crystallized only in Cassandra and Helenus’s interpretation of events, as they perceive Paris’s conquest to be a disaster because it is inherently disgraceful that Paris “out of holi place / Be Stelthe hath take a mannes wif.” Importantly, we must let the tale itself, and these lines in particular, override Genius’s hermeneutical framework for the tale, which privileges the sanctity of temples in a more simplistic fashion (cf. 7037-92, 7190-94, 7603-09).

The brief tales that follow, “Achilles and Polixena” and “Troilus and Criseide,” each tell of a love affair that begins inauspiciously in a temple and thus brings about a tragic conclusion. These are less cases of the tale’s contradiction and subversion of the hermeneutical and clerical frame than of the tale’s absorption of the hermeneutical program. The fact that Achilles began his love affair in the temple of Apollo “is the cause why he [Achilles] died”—significantly, this is announced not in a clerical gloss but seemingly within the narrative (7595). “Troilus and Criseide” makes it even clearer that its moral does not depend on clerical mediation but is inherently accessible. Genius merely outlines the story, assuming that it is already well known to the whole world. Troilus set his love on Criseide

In holi place, and hou it ferde,
As who seith, al the world it herde;
Forsake he was for Diomede,
Such was of love his laste mede.   (V.7599-602)

While on one level, “Achilles and Polixena” and “Troilus and Criseide” attest to the
inescapability of clerical meddling—these stories already depend on a tale-teller, modeled at least in part on a confessor-priest, who bends the stories to his will—the tales do not advertise the presence of the clerical exegete in anything like the way the moralized Ovids do. Virtually the same point could be made about all the “sin and punishment” tales of the Confessio. But in these tales from antiquity, and particularly in the more complex “Paris and Helen,” Gower renders the rich, notoriously opaque genre of classical myth publicly accessible. Where Bersuire and the Ovide Moralisé author use the Metamorphoses as a vehicle for satire, Gower presents myth as already “naked,” in the medieval genre theorists’ sense of the word as forthright and publicly accessible.

Gower’s deployment of myth, and beyond this, his appropriation of the Metamorphoses as the most pervasive structural model of the Confessio, finally, are direct results of his decision to work for public moral reform by means of poetry. Gower appeals to “Poesie,” to “Ovide,” and even specifically to “Metamor” as lucid vessels of truth. One salient feature of Gower’s Ovidian borrowings is literalism—an approach that might be found less uniquely Gowerian than it is English, as it aligns Gower with Chaucer, rather than his French contemporaries, who took a greater interest in figural interpretation.190 But whereas Deanne Williams regards Chaucer’s literalism in the Book of the Duchess as a sign of an English inferiority complex in the face of the more elaborately figurative literature of France, I suggest that Gower’s literalistic handling of Ovid should be seen, rather differently, as a strategic deployment of a resource especially suited to the kind of vernacular rhetoric Gower aspires to create. One of Genius’s formulas for citing Ovid is especially notable for pointing up the poet’s lucidity—

190 Williams, French Fetish, 27.
Forthi, mi sone, if that thou fiele
That love wringe thee to sore,
Behold Ovide and take his lore (IV.2672-74)

—but this may be less remarkable since the context relates to Ovid’s didactic poems (specifically the *Remedia Amoris*), rather than his more purely mythological poems. Still, Genius’s frequent references in the *Confessio* to “Ovide,” “the clerk Ovide,” “Ovide the Poete,” and “the Poete” have the effect of breaking down any firm separation between Ovid’s capacities as didactic poet and mythological poet—such a separation is untenable anyway in view of the richness of mythological reference in the amatory works and the recurrence of the erotic in the mythological works—and showing all these works to be fundamentally accessible. What is common in all of Genius’s citations of Ovid is the tendency to represent Ovid himself as an effective teacher of truth, accessible on his own terms without clerical mediation. To be sure, the priest Genius qualifies in many ways as a clerical figure and in a real sense he serves as mediator. Like a clerical mediator of texts, Genius draws continually on a rich supply of exempla to illustrate his argument. But unlike most such mediators, and unlike the authors of the moralized Ovids, Genius does not flaunt his learning and his own ability to squeeze meaning from unwieldy texts, but presents “tale[s] of Poesie” (cf. IV.1038) as self-evident, public conduits of truth. Sometimes Genius asserts that Ovid’s tales themselves anticipate his point. Genius warns Amans against exercising Stealth in love, before attributing the same doctrine to the tale of Leucothoë in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

Mi Sone, of him which goth be daie
Be weie of Stelthe to assaie,
In loves cause and takth his preie,
Ovide seide as I schal seie,
And in his Methamor he tolde
A tale, which is good to holde.  (V.6707-12)

Even when Genius passes over the question of Ovid’s intention, he presents the tales as attesting to unchanging moral truths. Thus the tale of Narcissus exemplifies the vice of Surquiderie:

And for thin enformacion,
That thou this vice as I the rede
Eschuie schalt, a tale I rede,
Which fell whilom be daies olde,
So as the clerk Ovide tolde.  (I.2270-74; cf. I.386; V.137, 5546-47, 5570)

All these stories—and many others could be cited—effectively naturalize Gower’s ethics by showing how lessons on virtue and vice are already inscribed in nature. Clerical mediation is sharply discounted, since all readers, cleric and lay alike, have access to this book. The relationship between Ovidian myth and the book of nature will concern us more directly in chapters 4 and 5.

In a similar way, Genius’s insistence on Ovid’s status as clerk (I.2274; II.2297; III.736; V.140, 5570 etc.) tends to overshadow Genius’ own clerisy, and thus, to a degree at least, to dispel the poem’s clerical aura. Though Genius’ priestly and paternal relationship to Amans, seen whenever he addresses him as “son” and is called by him “father” after the manner of sacramental confession, obviously precludes strict equality between the two, and accentuated when Amans protests he is too “lewed” to follow the lessons of his “clerk / Of love (VIII.2052-53), Genius’ authority is seriously compromised by his ambiguous status (“clerk of love”) and the amorphousness of his doctrine. More importantly, insofar as he and Amans have in common direct access to the “clerk Ovide,” Genius condescends to Amans’s own level: they are fellow students at the feet of the master. Yet Ovid’s status as “clerk” requires us to qualify the extent to which Gower’s very Ovidian poem can be said to adopt an extraclerical position. While a great deal of my argument for the extraclerical status of Gower’s voice is yet to come (see chapters 2
and 3), notice of Ovid’s own clerisy here gives us opportunity to note that Gower’s status is in many ways ambivalent, just as Gower’s narrator is an ambivalent “burel” or lay clerk. We have seen in this section that, for all that Gower deploys myth in a resolutely non-clergial way, as a source of authority alternative to clerical authority, nevertheless, clerical strategies richly inform even these stories—as they do the very confessional structure of the poem—and these do not negate Gower’s interest in affecting a voice outside of clerisy. Though this may seem paradoxical, in fact it seems that, while Gower could admit of differing degrees of clerisy, it would not seem to have occurred to him that any authority could be utterly extraclerical.

Gower’s deployment of myth is ambiguous for another reason. Gower’s presentation of myth as something common, forthright, and effectively communicative should not lead us to conclude that Gower thinks the truth will prevail in every case. If myth is forthright and public, it is also rich and strange, just as Paris’ actions were lucid to Cassandra and Helenus but opaque to the rest of the Trojans. This ambivalence seems fundamental to his production of an extraclerical voice from Ovidian myth, and it suggests that the voice of the Confessio is not meant to replace but to supplement clerical discourse. Both these ambiguities of Gower’s extraclerical voice—its partial dependence on clerical discourse, and its keen awareness that clerical and extraclerical discourse are circumscribed in similar ways—will concern us again in our exploration of Gower’s extraclergiality below.

Conclusion

As we noted in the introduction, other structural models besides the Metamorphoses can be seen to inform Gower’s Confessio Amantis. Nevertheless, the influence of the Metamorphoses dominates Gower’s poem. This is evident from the close dependence of Gower’s Prologue on the
Ovidian cosmogony, from the intertextual relationship which joins the metamorphic incursions of Love in the Confessio to those of Bacchus in the Metamorphoses, and from the fascination in both poems with a world of lability and impermanence. The Confessio thus makes a global allusion to the Metamorphoses in the full sense of Alter’s term: the world of the Confessio is everywhere haunted by Gower’s experience of reading the Metamorphoses.

An important rhetorical reason for Gower’s recourse to the Metamorphoses is that experience “under the mone” is always characterized by flux, and Gower sought to inscribe this in his didactic project by drawing deeply on the quintessential poetic treatment of lability and impermanence. But Gower’s deployment of Ovidian myth is notable for another reason: unlike the authors of the moralized Ovids, Gower presents myth as “naked,” forthright and publicly accessible. While the voice of the Confessio is certainly ambivalent, showing both lay and clerical qualities, Ovid becomes not only a superlatively accessible “clerk” but also a superlatively accessible “Poete.” Investigating Gower’s vernacular voice further in the remaining chapters, I hope to demonstrate that this made-over Ovid, who though perhaps not fully extraclerical, renders truth accessible through poetry, informs Gower’s vernacular project in rich ways. But before returning to the Confessio’s Ovidianism in chapters 4 and 5, it is necessary to investigate more fully the extraclerical position of Gower’s poem.
2. English Writing and Lay Theology

Introduction

In 1.3, following Scanlon, we explored the possibility that the narrator’s self-description as a “burel,” or lay, clerk should be seen as fundamental to the vernacular project of the Confessio. As we saw there, Gower’s narrator displays extraclerical tendencies which are attributable in part to his distinctive handling of Ovid’s Metamorphoses. But because criticism has so strongly emphasized the poem’s clerisy—Scanlon in particular sees the poem as undertaking to remedy the marginalized status of English by effecting a “clericalization” of the vernacular—it is necessary to investigate the marginality of Gower’s narrator more fully. In this chapter and the next I follow Scanlon and Copeland in finding that Gower does indeed present his narrator as a cultural outsider, but I argue that Gower’s main strategies for compensating for this marginality are derived not from academic discourse, as Scanlon and Copeland argue, but from qualities intrinsic to, and uniquely present in, lay language and lay experience. The present chapter answers Copeland’s argument that Gower’s poem effects “a transference of academic institutional power to the vernacular,”¹ by documenting the extent to which Gower’s poem remains lesser and belated in relation to Latinate academic discourse. As we will see, Gower’s anxiety over writing in English is most clearly seen in his squeamishness about treating theological topics in the vernacular.

¹ Copeland, Rhetoric, 180.
2.1 The Idea of Vernacular Translation

It is possible to exaggerate the singularity of Gower’s decision to undertake a major work in English in, or a little before, 1390. This decision certainly required less courage in, or a little before, 1390 than it would have decades earlier. English’s profile was on the rise throughout the latter half of the fourteenth century, as is seen from its increased usage in legal proceedings and in schools. There existed a growing literature on popular science and philosophy in English, and the mere fact these were written in the vernacular was in no clear sense politicized and posed no threat to clerical elites. Further, Chaucer had long since finished his *Romaunt of the Rose*, *Book of the Duchess*, *House of Fame*, and *Parliament of Fowls*; by 1387 *Boece* and *Troilus and Criseyde* were in circulation. Nevertheless, Chaucer famously shows anxieties about the “diversitee / In Englissh,” representing English as what Yeager calls a “vernacular-in-process.” More conservative than Chaucer, Gower held on longer to England’s traditional languages of prestige, authoring major works in both French and Latin. English was still by no means the only language in which to address a courtly audience in the late 1380s, for Gower or for any other poet. In addition to this, the *Confessio* needs to be situated not only within the context of the court poets to which it shows an obvious affinity, but also in relation to developments in other English literatures at this time, including both the public poetry which Middleton aligns the *Confessio* with and the vernacular

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2 For the poem’s date, see Fisher, *John Gower*, 116.
3 For a summary of these developments see Baugh and Cable, *History of the English Language*, 138-53.
4 Somerset, *Clerical Discourse*, 12, and references.
7 On the importance of the French language through the end of the fourteenth century, see Scattergood, “Literary Culture”; Salter, *English and International*, 239-44; and Butterfield, “French Culture.”
8 Middleton, “Idea of Public Poetry.”
theology that has so far escaped notice of Gower scholarship. If these other, specifically English cultures are indeed relevant to the Confessio, as I hope to show, these raise further difficulties for the status of English. Recent work on the politics of Middle English writing provides a very complex picture of this period, as we noted in the introduction, and Gower’s Confessio by no means transcends this complicated linguistic situation.

Although we considered Gower’s “middel weie” in a different context in the last chapter, it is useful to return to the passage here in order to see how it shows Gower keenly sensitive to the exigencies of rhetorical accommodation. At the beginning of the Prologue, Gower declares that he writes in order to leave “som matiere” for future generations, just as writers in times past left books to posterity (1-11). Gower explains the kind of “matiere” he intends is primarily a moral one, a record of the exemplary deeds of those who were good, and of the “tirannie and cruelte” of those who did evil (36-55). Significantly, Gower’s famous account of his stylistic “middel weie” (17) comes within his description of the general project. The Confessio is to be

    a bok betwen the tweie,
    Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore,
    That of the lasse or of the more
    Som man mai lyke of that I wryte.        (Pr.18-21)

These lines show that Gower’s concerns in the Confessio are not solely didactic: Gower means to please those readers primarily interested in “lust,” or literary enjoyment, as well as those seeking “lore,” or knowledge and moral profit. But Gower’s interlacing of his remarks on style with his discussion of the moral and didactic function of his poem suggests that he conceives his “middel weie” as a rhetorical strategy in service to his larger didactic purpose. Immediately after declaring his intention to leave a record for “the worldes eere / In tyme comende after this” (10-11), Gower takes up the question of style:
Bot for men sein, and soth it is,
That who that al of wisdom writ
It dulleth ofte a mannes wit
To him that schal it aldai rede,
For thilke cause, if that ye rede,
I wolde go the middel weie ...

(Pr.12-17)

By Gower’s own account, then, the *Confessio* seeks to instruct a group of readers whose limitations as recipients of “wisdom” demands certain accommodations.

By way of contrast, an analogous passage in the *Vox* points up important departures in this passage. Book I of the *Vox* begins, “Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri” (“Writings of the past contain fit examples for the future”; 1.1), but here Gower rests confident in the inherent efficacy of his Latin text, without calling attention to the need to accommodate it to an unlearned audience. Gower writes for an audience capable of reading difficult Latin, a group imagined, at least in this first book, as utterly different from the subhuman, peasant rebels whom he famously imagines transformed into beasts. Andrew Galloway notes that Gower’s account of the Revolt distances itself from the beastly peasants by the very high level of learning it displays and by its valorization of tradition. Gower’s centoist technique is “deliberately tradition-heavy and ostentatiously bookish,” because the rebels are outside of this culture not only “naturally,” by virtue of their peasant status, but also because “they deliberately deny any value in following tradition or history.”

Galloway suggests that “The *stultitia* of peasants is expressed even in their vernacular names—jarringly intruding into his Latin couplets in a kind of parody of the historic and stylistic dissonance of cento” (cf. I.783-84). In general in the *Vox*, Gower claims an authority conferred, though not by office, by expert knowledge and by Latinity (333, 336).

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9 Galloway, “Gower in his Most Learned Role,” 332.
In contrast to the *Vox*, the *Confessio* takes a much more problematic view of textuality as Gower grapples with a richly problematic literary mode, translation. Translation is implicit in Gower’s notion that the essential function of the writer is to supply a remedy against the ravages of time. More than a simple reiteration of the lessons of the past, writing must negotiate historical process itself, which, in a typically medieval though by no means inevitable turn of mind, Gower understands as essentially degenerative:

What schal befalle hierafterward
God wot, for now upon this tyde
Men se the world on every syde
In sondry wyse so diversed,
That it welnyh stant al reversed,
As forto speke of tyme ago. (Pr.26-31)

The changing circumstances of the present call for new books, but, far from *ex nihilo* creations, these books are essentially a renewal of traditional materials: Gower aspires to write “of newe som matiere, / Essampled of these olde wyse” (6-7). This is an instance of what Copeland calls “secondary translation,” the products of which “give precedence to rhetorical motives, defining themselves as independent productive acts: characteristically they suppress any sign of exegetical service to a specific source, even though they produce themselves through such exegetical techniques.” Although Gower very often suppresses his specific textual debts, he wrote within a culture that assumed translation to be an essential technique of all writers, and his remarks on old books show not at all embarrassed by the fact of his indebtedness to textual authorities.

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10 On the idea of decline, see Fyler, *Language and the Declining World*. Gower’s conceptualization of progress as a return to origins is itself traditional; see especially Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies*, 52-61. The conventional nature of Gower’s sentiments here is seen by comparison to John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, tr. Nederman, 3. Minnis contrasts English views on the limits of vernacular translation to more optimistic continental views; *Translations of Authority*, 1-10.

11 Copeland, *Rhetoric*, 177; cf. 6-7.

12 E.g., according to Rita Copeland, Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme both “show hermeneutical moves transforming themselves into rhetorical performances ... they both locate invention within the operations of
But if all texts partake of translation, the *Confessio* does this in the more interesting and potentially problematic sense that it makes authoritative writings available for the first time “in oure Englissh.” Gower’s presentation of the *Confessio* as a work of vernacular translation is unmistakable, even ostentatious. This important phrase occurs in both versions of the Prologue immediately after Gower’s discussion of the “middel weie”:

> And for that fewe men endite
> In oure englissh, I thenke make
> A bok for king Richardes sake.  (Pr.22-23, 24*)

These lines demonstrate Gower’s self-consciousness as he embarks on a major poem in English, a personal first that puts him in the company of only a “fewe men.” Since Gower has just described his desire to accommodate a broad audience, intending his poem for seekers after “lust” as well as “lore,” this context suggests Gower consciously adopted English as part of the same strategy of accommodation. Although it is possible that Richard stipulated what language Gower should write in when he commissioned the poem, this was not necessarily the case.\(^{13}\) Nor is English the obvious choice for addressing the king: Richard seems to have been highly literate, and he is known to have commissioned books in Latin as well as French.\(^{14}\) As Yeager points out, Gower had earlier chosen Latin as the language in which to address the young king in portions of the *Vox*.\(^{15}\) If Gower’s adoption of English in the *Confessio* was an accommodation to Richard’s linguistic taste at the time of commission, as is very likely, it is nonetheless evident that Gower wrote with other audiences besides Richard in view. The ease with which Gower changed the last of the three lines, quoted above, to “A bok for Engelondes sake” in the altered version of the Prologue (24) shows how closely

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\(^{13}\) Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 110.

\(^{14}\) For Richard’s books and appraisals of his reading habits, see Green, *Poets and Princepleasers*, 90-96; Scattergood, “Literary Culture”; and Butterfield, “French Culture,” esp. 108.

associated in Gower’s mind were writing in English, and writing for England. It is even possible to view Gower’s language choice and his humble persona as “burel clerk” as twin aspects at the center of his campaign to remedy present ills, although, as we will see in chapter 3, the extraclerical implications of Gower’s “burel clerk” need to be compared to similar personae in the Latin Vox and French Mirour.

Gower chose English as the language of the Confessio, then, at least partly in order to appeal to a wider audience than a French or Latin poem could hope for. Arguably, the same purpose motivated Gower’s more or less conscious decision to adopt a written English approximating a Midlands, as opposed to strongly Eastern or Kentish, dialect. Even if Richard’s commission strongly influenced Gower’s decision to write in English, it would not have predetermined the poem’s dialect because no standard English yet existed.16 Further, it is by no means certain that Richard found the Midlands varieties of English from which standard English would emerge especially congenial, given John M. Bowers’s suggestion that Richard’s Cheshire connections make him a good candidate as the intended audience of the poems in the Pearl manuscript.17 However, if Gower wanted to write in an English as widely accessible as possible, he needed a variety that would appeal directly to the growing London audience for literature in English; and the English of the Confessio suggests he may have actively cultivated one. Unlike the Pearl-poet, who wrote in a dialect and style tailored to the exclusive tastes of a localized provincial aristocracy, Gower not only adopts a simpler style but also a much closer approximation of the Englishes of Langland and Chaucer. Now it is true Gower’s English shows a number of dialectical features characteristic of Kent and Suffolk—Macaulay and, more recently, Jeremy J. Smith point to, for example, the use of ie for Old English ēo, ē, ē (e.g.

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17 Bowers, “Pearl in its Royal Setting.”
hiere, whiel), typical of Kentish texts, and or... or for “either ... or” and bothen for “both,” typical of south-west Suffolk\textsuperscript{18}—two regions with which Gower is associated.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, Smith emphasizes the “cosmopolitan atmosphere” and high degree of linguistic variety in late-medieval London, and judges that Gower’s English “could have been fairly easily accommodated within the London linguistic community.” Comparing Gower’s English in the Fairfax Manuscript to a Kentish document of the same date, Smith argues that Gower’s written English “has been bleached of more ‘grossly provincial forms,’” and concludes “There is no evidence that Gower’s language would have been stigmatised in late medieval London.”\textsuperscript{20} It is possible, then, that Gower’s English might have been more strongly dialectically marked than it is, had he not been conscious to affect the dialect characterized by M. L. Samuels as “Type III London.”\textsuperscript{21} Summarizing the findings of recent studies in Middle English linguistics, Smith describes how during this period, “as the use of English asserted itself for national functions ..., the highly divergent spelling-systems of the earlier Middle English period began to become communicatively inconvenient” (70). The implication that Gower could have consciously discarded the more “grossly provincial forms” finds support in Ralph Hanna’s recent suggestion that Type III itself emerges from “a sequence of individual decisions to prioritise slightly differing sets of variants out of a robustly mixed but reasonably continuous sample.”\textsuperscript{22} Although it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate Gower’s place in linguistic history, the tenor of the studies just surveyed is to underscore Gower’s interest in maximizing access.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Macaulay, \textit{English Works}, 1:xcv; Smith, “Gower and London English,” 62.
\item \textsuperscript{19} For the Gower connections in Kent and Suffolk, see Fisher, \textit{John Gower}, 39-41, 50; and Hines et al., “Iohannes Gower,” 24-25.
\item \textsuperscript{20} “Gower and London English,” 69, and Table II, p. 72.
\item \textsuperscript{21} On Samuels’ categorization see Samuels, “Some Applications,” 87-93; and for recent discussion, see J. Smith, “Gower and London English,” 65-67; and Hanna, \textit{London Literature}, 5, 26-32.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Hanna, \textit{London Literature}, 31.
\end{itemize}
Although Gower treats the *Confessio* as fundamentally a work of translation, and shows himself conscious, in interesting ways, of the difficulties attendant on Middle English writing, scholars have given comparatively little attention to this aspect of the poem. Gower’s brief comment, that English is language in which “fewe men” write, has attracted comment. While Burrow judges Gower’s statement to reflect accurately the fact that the “Ricardian poets” lacked significant predecessors, Janet Coleman considers Gower’s statement hyperbolic. Several critics discuss the influence of Chaucer on Gower’s decision to write in English. As we saw in the introduction, Yeager suggests that Gower adopted English as the language of the *Confessio* primarily out of a “concern for effectiveness.” Elsewhere, Yeager writes that Gower’s reflections on English convey a “sense of his native language as appropriately a ‘median tongue,’ neither as lofty as Latin nor as courtly as French—the mode rather of frank parlance and consequently well suited for a poem ostensibly a secular confession.”

Related to the status of vernacular translation in the poem, the question what was the purpose of the poem’s Latin apparatus—or, alternatively and less dismissively, of the poem’s Latin—has also occasioned comment on Gower’s attitude to the vernacular. In general, two opposing approaches are visible in this scholarship. Minnis discusses Gower’s Latin apparatus as one of a number of strategies that Gower borrowed from scholastic literary practice in order to authorize his poem. The poem’s manuscript layout resembles not only medieval glossed copies of classical authors, as we saw in the last chapter, but also manuscripts of Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, which imitate...

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23 Copeland, *Rhetoric*, an important exception, is discussed below.
26 “Oure englisshe,” 42.
27 “Text as ‘Other,’” 256.
28 See especially the studies by Echard, discussed below.
the books of *auctores* in order to confer authority on the vernacular poem. Pearsall similarly describes Gower’s need to “stabilise the poem within the context of the learned Latin tradition: English is precarious, slippery, fluid—Latin acts as a fixative. The poem comes ‘cased’ or ‘boxed’ in Latin.” Latin props up the poem in two distinct ways. While the Latin verses, highly intricate, in strong contrast to the simplicity of the poem’s English, mainly serve to guarantee Gower’s subtle learning, the Latin prose commentaries adopt a more specifically academic stance: it “constantly erases the author, making him the vessel of a higher purpose.” From a different perspective, Yeager gives further evidence for the superiority of Latin in the *Confessio* by arguing that, even within the poem’s English, native words have a lower status than Latinate words (e.g. *kynde* and *nature*).

Although a second approach to the Latin of the *Confessio*, advanced most insistently by Echard, emphasizes that Gower’s Latin displays a hermeneutical instability that makes it as suspect as his English, there are good reasons for retaining Pearsall’s emphasis on the distance separating Gower’s Latin and English, and on the dignity conferred by the Latin. For one thing, Gower knew his Latin was inaccessible to a large portion of his audience. If Joyce Coleman is correct in her suggestion that Gower composed the poem for public performances in which a clerical praelector could interpret the Latin for a lay audience, this only underscores the degree to which Gower’s Latin would have been seen as belonging to a privileged culture.

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32 Yeager, “Learning to Read in Tongues.”
34 Coleman, “Lay Readers.”
In fact, the traditional tendency to order languages hierarchically was very much alive in the *Confessio*, and it is worth reviewing this hierarchy here. In late-medieval culture generally, Latin’s superiority was everywhere reaffirmed by its status as the language of the Scriptures, the Church, and the schools. Serge Lusignan has shown that the idea of Latin’s intrinsic superiority was widespread throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries;\(^3\) even Dante, for all the precociousness of his thought about the status of the vernacular languages, acknowledged this traditional idea, affirming in the *Convivio* that “lo lation molte cose manifesta concepute ne la mente che lo volgare far non può ... più è la vertù sua che quella del volgare” (“Latin expresses many things conceived in the mind which the vernacular cannot ... its virtue is greater than that of the vernacular”).\(^3\)\(^6\) John Trevisa expresses a similar doubt that difficult Latinate concepts were even capable of translation into his native tongue in his translation of the *Dialogue between the Lord and the Clerk on Translation* (shortly before 1387), and such doubts get full representation in the *determinationes* that emerged from Oxford Translation Debate of 1401-7.\(^3\)\(^7\) Thomas Usk’s disavowal of Latinate learning in his *Testament of Love* (1384-87) is illustrative: “let clerkes endyten in Latyn, for they have the propertie of science,” Usk writes, laying claim himself only to the “chalky purtreyture” of writing “our fantasyes in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge.”\(^3\)\(^8\) Although it is not necessary to identify any specific source in which Gower could have found such disparaging views of the vernacular, it is significant that a rather full account was available in a text which had great importance to Gower, the *De regimine principum* of Giles of

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36 Ed. Busneslli and Vandelli, 1.5.12; tr. Lansing 14.
38 For texts and discussion, see Wogan-Browne et al., *Idea of the Vernacular*, 28-34 (qt. 30), 130-38.
Rome.\textsuperscript{39} Urging that the young prince should be made to learn Latin early in his education, Giles explains the reasons for Latin’s superiority in conventional terms:

\begin{quote}
Videntes enim Philosophi nullum idioma vulgare esse completum & perfectum, per quod perfecte exprimere possent naturas rerum, & mores hominum, & cursus astrorum, \& alia de quibus disputare volebant, inuenerunt sibi quasi proprium idioma, quod dicitur latinum, \vel\ idiom\a\ literale: quod constituerunt adeo latum \& copiosum, \vt\ per ipsum possent omnes suos conceptus sufficienter exprimere.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

The philosophers perceived that there was no complete and perfect vulgar language through which they could perfectly express the natures of things, the customs of men, the courses of the stars, and other things concerning which they wished to dispute. Therefore they invented for themselves, as it were, their own language, which is called Latin, or else the language of letters. They made this so broad and copious that through it they could express all their concepts sufficiently.

Latin is linguistically superior because of its permanently fixed grammatical structure, which in turn resulted from its having been specially invented to serve the rigorous demands of philosophical inquiry. Philosophical pursuits require texts, and thus textual language (\textit{idiom\a\ literale}).\textsuperscript{41} As we will see below, Giles’s suggestion that Latin alone is capable of expressing “naturas rerum, \& mores hominum, \& cursus astrorum” has special relevance for the \textit{Confessio} (see 2.2).

The inherent instability of English surely raises questions about Gower’s adoption of this language in the \textit{Confessio}, especially in light of Yeager’s contention that this language choice was chiefly motivated by a desire for rhetorical effectiveness. In the only study to give sustained attention to the problem of locating the \textit{Confessio} within medieval theories of translation, Copeland acknowledges the difficulties which Gower faced in undertaking to produce a “vernacular substitute” for the classical texts on which the poem is in large part based.\textsuperscript{42} However, Copeland’s account tends

\textsuperscript{39} For Gower’s use of this text, see Porter, “Gower’s Ethical Microcosm.”
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{De Regimine Principum}, ed. Samaritanius, II, II, 7, p. 304.
\textsuperscript{41} For commentary on this passage, see Lusignan, \textit{Parler Vulgairement}, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{42} Copeland, \textit{Rhetoric}, 179.
to downplay these difficulties in favor of an alternative medieval model of translation, the decidedly more aggrandizing theory of *translatio studii et imperii*. Accordingly, Copeland sees the *Confessio* as waging a struggle against, and ultimately displacing, its Latinate sources. Translation becomes for Gower’s *Confessio*, as in effect for all medieval vernacular translations, “a primary vehicle for vernacular participation in, and ultimately appropriation of, the cultural privilege of Latin academic discourse.” Copeland argues that vernacular translations such as Gower’s should be seen as extensions of academic systems of hermeneutics, whereby commentary “displace[s] the very text that it proposes to serve. Medieval arts commentary does not simply ‘serve’ its ‘master’ texts: it also rewrites and supplants them.” So pronounced is the academic commentary’s rivalry with the originary text, on Copeland’s view, that this displacement appears as a “chief maneuver” and “characteristic move of academic exegesis” (3, 4). Copeland argues that Gower’s *Confessio* and a host of other vernacular translations “function largely as commentaries” and that “by taking over the textual strategies of academic exegesis, vernacular writing can insert itself into the privileged cultural sphere of Latin learning” (6).

Although Copeland is certainly right that Gower’s project entails a revision of English’s position relative to Latin, I suggest that Gower’s project is less aggressive, and less vigorously theorized, than her account describes it. Because part of the argument of this chapter is that vigorous theorizing is just what Gower refuses to attempt in English, it is necessary to offer a brief critique of her reading here.

Copeland emphasizes the extent to which academic discourse informs the *Confessio’s* English text as well as its Latin apparatus, and this discourse indeed has great importance. As we

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have seen, Gower’s two prologues reflect the academic practice of furnishing commentaries with a *prologus extrinsicus* and a *prologus intrinsicus*. In addition, the confession is organized schematically according to the Seven Deadly Sins; the influence of academic *ordinatio* can also be seen in other places, including the systematic discussion of the involvement of the five senses in sins—though Genius abandons this discussion after treating only sight and hearing—(I.289-574), and the compendium of Aristotle’s lore in Book VII. But whether Gower’s borrowing of these techniques should be seen as an aggressive appropriation depends on how strongly these techniques were still marked as foreign and Latinate by the time Gower wrote. In fact, it is likely that many traditionally Latinate structural principles had long since begun to permeate English vernacular experience, thanks to the institution of sacramental confession. The manuals of instruction for parish priests that survive suggest that fourteenth-century confession was a highly structured process. The priest proceeded systematically through the Seven Deadly Sins just as Genius does; at least one treatise, John Mirk’s verse *Instructions for Parish Priests*, even calls for the priest to inquire systematically into the penitent’s use of his or her five senses, which anticipates Genius’s opening to Book I. While Gower’s translation of the sacrament into a comparatively secular context raises important questions about Gower’s vernacular assertiveness, my point here, in response to Copeland, is simply that *ordinatio* and *compilatio* would not have seemed inherently foreign to English.

presence of these concepts in the *Confessio* was first noted by M. B. Parkes, “*Ordinatio* and *Compilatio,*” 130.  
45 Ed. Peacock, 40-42.  
46 I return to this point in section 2.2.  
47 The existence of English treatises on technical matters might also be mentioned here, but since these show a somewhat more complex relationship to the *Confessio*, this evidence will be discussed in a different context (see 2.2).
More significantly, Copeland’s reading relies heavily on a reinterpretation of that key term in Gower’s prologue, “divisioun.” Noting that the Prologue meditation on “divisioun” includes one of Gower’s most forceful statements of the problem of vernacular language, Copeland argues that the negative valence so keenly felt in the Prologue is more than compensated for by Gower’s importation of scholastic strategies, and especially divisio textus and divisio scientiae, into his poem (211-15). Because the scholastic principle of divisio is implicit in Gower’s method, Copeland argues, “the vernacular ... redefine[s] the status and function of academic discourse” (219). Copeland gives an ingenious account of how Gower effects, in his vernacular poem an “ethical revaluation of academic culture,” but the case depends wholly on an equivocation on “divisioun” that is not evident in Gower’s usage: Gower does not use the terms divisio textus and divisio scientiae, or any of their cognates, to describe his projects either in the Confessio as a whole or in the exposition of Aristotle’s lore in Book VII, and, still more tellingly, he never uses “divisioun” to denote divisio in any of its scholastic analytic senses: there is simply no internal evidence to support this revisionist reading of “divisoun.”

In the absence of such a revision, Gower’s account of the division of languages that occurred at Babel remains an ominous presence in the English poem, for, as we saw in the last chapter, Gower’s Prologue represents “divisioun” as an unmitigated evil, both the cause and the aggravated symptom of every failure in the political and ecclesiastical body. Since Gower uses the myth of Babel as a key trope describing “divisioun,” linguistic difference is deeply implicated in all societal evils:

And over that thurgh Senne it com
That Nembrot such emprise nom
Whan he the Tour Babel on heihhte
Let make, as he that wolde feihte
Ayein the hihe goddes myht,
Whereof divided anon ryht
Was the langage in such entente,
Ther wiste non what other mente,
So that thei myhten noght procede.
And thus it stant of every dede,
Wher Senne takth the cause on honde,
It may upriht noght longe stonde;
For Senne of his condicioun
Is moder of divisioun
And tokne whan the world shal faile. \(\text{(Pr.1017-30)}\)

As Copeland notes, Gower’s retelling of the Babel story near the beginning of his English poem serves as “an emblem of the *divisioun* or fragmentation of languages” and thereby calls attention to the “cultural fact of vernacularity” in a way that inevitably refers us back to Gower’s early remarks on his own decision to write in English (215). Far from mounting a revisionist assault on the traditional hierarchy of languages, however, Gower’s poem does not adopt English as an alternative vessel capable of carrying the same cargo as Latin, but as an alternative medium likely to achieve quite different results. Before we investigate what these results are, and thus, what are the advantages of English, it is necessary to look further into the “lowness” of English by investigating Gower’s practice as an English translator.

2.2 Theology in English and Latin

To be sure, English does not constitute a monolithic, uniformly “low” stylistic register for Gower. Although Gower seems to have written little in English besides the *Confessio*, the “Supplication to Venus” in *Confessio* VIII (lines 2217-2300) and the separate poem, “In Praise of Peace” (hereafter *IPP*), which Gower presented to Henry IV after his coronation,\(^48\) depart from

\(^48\) Ed. as “To King Henry the Fourth In Praise of Peace” in Macaulay, *English Works*, 2:481-92; I have also consulted the edition by Michael Livingstone in *John Gower: The Minor Latin Works*. One other extant English poem has been attributed to Gower, but Macaulay rejects this attribution: see *English Works*, 1:clxxiii, clxiv.
Gower’s customary practice in the *Confessio* in ways that are illuminating. The poems are written in rime royal and use a diction more elevated than that of the octosyllabic couplets that make up most of the *Confessio*. Classical allusions to Pan and Jove, as well as to Cupid and Venus, combine with the elaborate stanzaic form to produce the heightened style of Amans’s “Supplication,” which begins,

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The wofull peine of loves maladie,  
Agein the which mai no phisique availe,  
Min herte hath so bewhaped with sotie,  
That wher so that I reste or I travaile,  
I finde it evere redy to assaile  
Mi resoun, which that can him noght defende.  
Thus seche I help, wherof I mihte amende. (VIII.2218-23)
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Similarly, *IPP* clearly has an exalted purpose, marking Henry’s coronation and offering counsel on the subject of government, not in the oblique manner of the *Confessio* but directly and in a grand style. As Yeager notes, these poems show Gower’s mastery of other forms of English verse and strongly suggest that the lowlier style of the *Confessio* should be seen as a conscious choice.49

While the poems in rime royal must disabuse us of the notion that Gower had only one way of writing in English, they are far from proving that Gower found English to be an infinitely versatile medium. English is no omni-competent rival to Latin even in these poems. However elevated its style, Amans’s “Supplication” speaks from a position still much lower than that of the poem’s Latin apparatus: the “Supplication” is the moment in the *Confessio* when amatory themes rise to crisis, and, as we noted in the last chapter, for Gower as for most medieval writers, amatory themes are the most typical and appropriate concern of vernacular poetry. *IPP* gives further evidence of the limitations intrinsic to English. In both witnesses to the text of this poem—the Trentham Manuscript

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(British Library MS Additional 59495), which is the sole manuscript witness, and Thynne’s 1532 edition which according to Macaulay was based on a manuscript now lost—the English verses are accompanied by Latin in a way reminiscent of the *Confessio*. The Trentham version resembles the layout of the *Confessio* especially closely, introducing the poem with Latin headverses and following it with a Latin prose coda. In Yeager’s judgment, this format suggests that “Gower equated Latin with high style and important utterance” and that he added the headverses and coda in order to confer dignity befitting his royal audience.

Latin’s association with high style becomes more evident when *IPP* is compared to “Rex celi deus,” a Latin poem with which it has a close affinity. Both poems are believed to have been written for Henry IV’s coronation in 1399, though, in the case of “Rex celi deus” it was made in part by recycling materials from the *Vox*. Further, although “Rex celi deus” exists in five manuscripts without *IPP*, the two occur together in the Trentham Manuscript which has special authority by virtue of its close relationship to Henry. Michael Livingston speculates that the frequent Henrician dedications throughout Trentham suggest that it may be the master from which the king’s presentation copy was made; Fisher believes the manuscript was designed “to make a complimentary volume for the King.” The Latin coda following “In Praise of Peace” also includes a sentence introducing “Rex celi deus”: “Et nunc sequitur epistola in qua idem Ioannes pro statu et salute dicti domini sui apud altissimum deuocius exorat.” Given the connection between the two

52 Macaulay noted that thirty-four of the fifty-six lines are “an adaptation of the original version” of *Vox* VI.xviii (*Complete Works*, 4:416). For the dating of these works, see *Minor Latin Works*, ed. Yeager, 72, and Livingstone, “Introduction,” 89. See also Carlson, “Gower’s Early Latin,” 299-304.
poems, it is striking how far the two are removed in tone and perspective. For all its ornament and
dignity, IPP is simple in comparison to the aureate Latin poem, which begins:

Rex celi, Deus et dominus, qui tempora solus
Condidit, et solus condita cuncta regit,
Qui rerum causas ex se produxit, et unum
In se principium rebus inesse dedit,
Qui dedit ut stabili motu consistaret orbis
Fixus in eternum mobilitate sua,
Quique potens verbi produxit ad esse creata,
Quique sue mentis lege ligavit ea,
Ipse caput regum, reges quo rectificantur,
Teque tuum regnum, Rex pie, queso regat.

King of Heaven, God and master, who alone
Created Time, and alone rules all created things,
Who from Himself produced the causes of things,
And set a single principle in Himself to inhere in things,
Who set the world to remain with a stable movement,
Fixed forever in its motion,
And who, powerful in word, brought all creation into being
And who bound them by the law of His mind,
He, the head of kings, by whom kings are justified,
I pray that He rule you, pious king, and your kingdom.54

Whereas here, in truly aureate style, Gower subordinates clause after clause, postponing the main
verb a full ten hexameters, the opening invocation of the king in IPP, however stylistically elevated,
postpones its main clause only four much shorter lines:

O worthi noble kyng, Henry the Ferthe,
In whom the glade fortune is befalle
The poeple to governe uppon this erthe,
God hath thee chose in comfort of ous alle:
The worschipe of this lond, which was doun falle,
Now stant upriht thurgh grace of thi goodnesse,
Which every man is holde for to blesse. (IPP 1-7)

54 The Minor Poems, ed. and tr. Yeager, ll. 1-10, pp. 42, 43.
“Rex Celi Deus” is also striking for its theological ambition, and this quality makes Gower’s theological remarks in IPP look downright earthly. Even as Gower marshals theological topics in support of the policy of “Pes,” he gives these a very straightforward expression:

Bot now the feith of Crist is come a place
Among the princes in this erthe hiere,
It sit hem wel to do pite and grace.
...
Pes is the chief of al the worldes welth,
And to the Heven it ledeth ek the weie.
Pes is of soule and lif the mannes helthe
...
Pes is of al charite the keie,
Which hath the lif and soule for to weie weigh
...
And er Crist wente out of this erthe hiere
And stigh to Hevene, He made His testament,
Wher He beqwath to His disciples there
And gaf His pes, which is the foundement
Of charite...

(IPP 50-52, 78-80, 90-91, 176-80)

Absent here are the recondite doctrines of the “Rex celi Deus” that God “created Time” (or “established the seasons”), brought forth the “causes of things,” and binds things by the law of his mind—such doctrines would be markedly out of place in “In Praise of Peace.” Even the doctrine of charity finds earthy expression, represented as a structure built on “pes.” The English poem is also stylistically drab. Apart from the figure *anaphora* in the repeated clauses beginning “Pes,” a figure which by itself cannot produce aureation, these lines are quite unadorned. Gower avoids the intricate, heavily subordinated style of the invocation of the Godhead in “Rex celi Deus.” Although the poems share a major interest in theologizing kingship—both poems remind the king of his responsibility to obey the gospel of Christ—Gower’s English verses describe “pes” and “charite” in a much simpler style. The congruity between language choice and stylistic register corroborates Yeager’s claim that Gower perceived Latin as the language of high sentence.
The *Confessio*, likewise, contains theological discussion in English that contrasts starkly with Gower’s practice in Latin elsewhere, and such passages afford rich opportunities to observe Gower modifying his approach when writing in English, if not necessarily as a result of that language choice. If Yeager is right, and by 1399, with Lollard persecution on the rise, Gower “may have felt vulnerable that sections of the *Confessio* ... could be misconstrued in a witch hunt and so backed away from English poetry,”55 one such section might be Book V, lines 1737-1959. The most overtly theological portion of the poem, the passage is also interesting because it contains one of the poem’s two attacks on “Anticristes lollardie” (cf. Pr.349). The passage is part of a longer section which Macaulay entitled, “The Gods of the Nations.” This larger section gives an account of various forms of “misbelieve”—highlighting Chaldean, Egyptian, and Greek paganism—followed by accounts of the Jewish and Christian faiths. In broad outline, the section is based on an episode in the medieval romance of Barlaam and Josaphat in which a certain Nachor, as part of his defense of the Christian faith, issues a counterattack on pagan religion.56 The Barlaam and Josaphat story enjoyed a wide circulation in many different versions.57 Although Macaulay cited Migne’s version (PL 73) as Gower’s source and Masayoshi Ito followed this surmise in a subsequent study,58 Gower could not have known this version because Migne took his text from the *Vitae Patrum* of Rosweidus, which in turn gives not a medieval text but the work of the humanist scholar Iacobus Billius—a text that emends the legend by referring directly to a text of John of Damascus which had been incorporated into an earlier version of the legend.59 Further, Gower could not have based his account on the

55 Yeager notes that after this period “In Praise of Peace,” a poem “safely addressed to Henry,” is Gower’s only poem in English; “Politics and the French Language,” 151.
56 Gower alters the order of the pagan sects, which in the *Vita Barlaam et Josaphat* is Chaldeans, Greeks and Egyptians; see Ito, “Gower’s Use of *Vita Barlaam*,” 3-18, at 10-11.
57 See the classification of Jean Sonet, reproduced in *Barlaam et Iosaphat*, ed. Cruz Palma, 32.
59 Cf. *Vita sanctorum*, PL 73, col. 9; and *Barlaam et Iosaphat*, ed. Cruz Palma, 32.
shorter version of the *Vita* found in the Golden Legend, nor the Middle English versions based on this, since these omit the elaborate catalogue of Chaldean, Egyptian, and Greek gods which Gower followed earlier in Book V. It is most likely that Gower knew the legend in some form of the Vulgate *Barlaam et Josaphat* which is extant in over 60 manuscripts. However, it is also possible that Gower followed the somewhat abbreviated but still substantial version in Vincent of Beauvais’s *Speculum historiale* Book XV. Because of this ambiguity, in what follows I compare Gower’s account to both versions.

Traces of the Latin *Barlaam* may be just visible in Gower’s exposition of the Christian faith. Both in the Vulgate and in Vincent’s epitome, Nachor begins his account as follows: “The Christians take their name from Christ; for this is the name of the son of the most high God, who came down from heaven to save mankind.” From Nachor’s “dei altissimi” near the beginning of Nachor’s opening sentence, comes the opening line of Gower’s account, “The hihe almyhti majeste” (1737), and Gower’s “fro the hevene” a few lines later (1741) may be inspired by Nachor’s “de coelo descendens.” But Gower soon departs considerably from Nachor’s account of the faith. In both versions of *Barlaam*, Nachor’s speech is rich in New Testament allusion and takes an interest in the theological implications of the Incarnation. Christ took flesh “ex Maria uirgine” not by the seed of man but “de Spiritu sancto,” and thus “appeared to men.” Alone among the nations of the earth, Christ’s followers are those who have found the truth; “Cognoscunt enim Deum creatorem et auctorem omnium in Filio unigenito et in Spiritu sancto” (“For they apprehend God the creator and maker of all things in the only-begotten Son and in the Holy Spirit,” cf. John 1:14, 18). Gower omits

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61 *Barlaam et Josaphat*, ed. Cruz Palma, 52.
63 The Vulgate version reads: “Christiani autem a Christo dicuntur; sic enim filius Dei altissimi uocatur, qui de celo descendens propter salutem hominum ...” (*Balaam*, ed. Cruz Palma, 154). Vincent of Beauvais’s version is
these Trinitarian and Iohannine concepts, as we shall see. Though Nachor’s speech describes Christ’s relationship to the other persons of the Godhead in clear terms, it describes his humanity also. The son assumed flesh from the virgin, and “per crucem morte gustata, spontanea uoluntate” (“he tasted death on the cross, with his own will according,” cf. Heb. 2:9; Phil. 2:8). This concern for the hypostatic union likewise finds no parallel in Gower’s *Confessio*.

Notwithstanding Gower’s dependence on this text through the preceding one thousand lines, it may be unremarkable that he departs from it in his treatment of the Christian faith: we should not expect Gower to follow any source slavishly as he recounts something so familiar. Yet his avoidance of difficult theological topics is nonetheless noteworthy, because Gower was certainly capable of writing an original account of the Christian faith at least as rich in the Latinate theological terms as Nachor’s. This is evident from his treatment of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the hypostatic union in the *Vox*, which, apart from ornamental borrowings from Godfrey of Viterbo’s *Pantheon* and Peter Riga’s *Aurora*, appears to be Gower’s own.⁶⁴ In Book II of the *Vox*, Gower considers whether Fortune is to be blamed for the injustices of the present generation, ultimately concluding that man himself, not Fortune, is to be blamed, and that man must submit himself to the true sovereign, who is not Fortune but God. In Chapters vii and viii, Gower advances an argument of considerable theological acuity. Chapter vii, in thirty lines, discusses the attributes of God, devoting particular attention to the doctrine of the Trinity. Chapter viii, nearly twice as long, treats the Incarnation. Gower notes the Son’s procession from the Father:

\[
\text{Sic opus incepit natus, de corde paterno,} \\
\text{De gremio patris venit ad yma deus.} \\
\text{De patre processit,} \\
\text{(II.381-83)}
\]

---

⁶⁴ See Macaulay’s note on *Vox* II.379ff., *Complete Works*, vol. 4.
As he was born from the heart of the Father, the Son took up his work. God descended from the bosom of the Father. He proceeded from the Father...

Though incarnate, the Son’s divinity remains:

non de patre recessit,
Ad mundi veniens yma, set astra tenens;
Semper enim de patre fuit, fuit in patre semper,
Semper apud patrem, cum patre semper idem:
Assumpsit carnem factus caro, nec tamen illam
Desiit assumens esse quod ante fuit:
Vnitur caro sic verbo, quod sint in eadem
Hec duo persona, verus vbique deus:
Quod fuit, hoc semper mansit, quod non fuit, illud
Virginis in carne sumpsit, et illud erat. (II.383-92)

Coming down to the world he did not recede from the Father but kept a firm grasp on heaven. For he was always from the Father and in the Father, always by the Father and one with the Father. Having been made flesh, He assumed the flesh; having assumed it, He nevertheless did not cease to be what He was before. Thus the flesh was joined with the Word, so that the two might exist in the same person, the True God throughout. He always remained what He was; that which He was not He acquired from the flesh of the Virgin, and He was that. (Tr. Stockton, slightly modified)

Gower emphasizes the dual nature of Christ: “Infirmus carne, set robustus deitate, / Carne minor patre, par deitate manens” (“Weak in the flesh but strong in divinity, less than the Father in the flesh but remaining his equal in divinity”; 395-96) and so forth at considerable length, before summing up, “Sic homo perfectus, sic perfectus deus idem, Exsequitur plene quicquid vtrumque decet” (“Thus perfect man and perfect God at the same time, He completely performs whatever is incumbent upon both”; 411-12).

In comparison to the precise, balanced account of the Incarnation in the Vox, Gower’s treatment of the faith in the Confessio occupies a much lower register. Whereas the Vox belabors the equality and unity of the persons of the Godhead for some eighteen lines (361-78) prefatory to its
treatment of the Incarnation, the *Confessio* does not attempt to clarify the relationship between God and his Son, but merely says,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The hihe almyhti majeste ...} \\
\text{sende his Sone fro the hevene} \\
\text{To sette mannes Soule in eve} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(V.1737, 1741-42)

A few lines later, Gower names Christ himself, orthodoxy but imprecisely, as “The hihe creatour of lif” (1761; cf. 1781). Nowhere in this passage does Gower say anything more precise about Christ’s divinity than that he is “fro the hevene.” Nor does Gower concern himself in the *Confessio* with the question of whether the incarnation affected Christ’s divinity in any way. Christ’s human nature, by contrast, is traced to the Virgin, who is mentioned twice (cf. 1773, 1781). The *Confessio*’s use of familial language far exceeds that of the *Vox*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{the godhede} \\
\text{Assembled was to the manhede} \\
\text{In the virgine, where he nom} \\
\text{Oure flei}sh and verai man becom} \\
\text{Of bodely fraternite} \\
\end{align*}
\]

(V.1771-75)

Nevertheless, this emphasis on Christ’s humanity, and particularly on his flesh, suffices for Gower to outline an Anselmian version of the Redemption—that is, the Word had to become human because only a human being could propitiate Adam’s sin—a point of doctrine absent from the *Vita Barlaam*. 65 Gower writes,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{For thanne thurgh the ferste Sinne,} \\
\text{Which Adam whilom broghte ous inne,} \\
\text{Ther scholden alle men be lost;} \\
\text{Bot Crist restoreth thilke lost,} \\
\text{And boghte it with his flei}sh and blod. \\
\text{And if we thenken hou it stod} \\
\text{Of thilke rancoun which he payde, ...}
\end{align*}
\]

---

AI was behovely to the man.  

Whereas Gower’s *Vox* draws freely on the traditional, Latinate materials of theology—it refers to the Son’s procession “de gremio patris,” his hypostatic union, his immutable divinity—the English *Confessio* attempts none of these things. Instead, it treats us to a much more bodily account of the faith, one which focuses literally on the flesh and blood of Christ, on the Virgin mother, and on Christ’s “bodely fraternite” with all mankind.

It is notable that when Gower treated the Incarnation in the *Confessio*, the mere fact of his putting aside the *Vita Barlaam* to draw, apparently (although see below), on the resources of his own mind cannot explain Gower’s avoidance of the theological complexity found in the *Barlaam* account, for in *Vox* II.vii-viii Gower demonstrates his competence in writing an original account of these topics, albeit in Latin. This raises the question, might the differences between the *Vox* and *Confessio* treatments of the Incarnation be attributable, even in part, to the two works’ differences of language? Several considerations recommend we answer cautiously yes. First, we have already suggested that a comparison of “Rex celi Deus” and *IPP* show just this accommodation to linguistic decorum: while, assuredly, these poems are not identical in purpose, they are closely similar. As I suggested, *IPP* is as much concerned as “Rex celi Deus” with the task of theologizing Henry’s kingship, yet it occupies a lower register and avoids theological detail. We may see a similar shift of register downward when we compare the theological passages in the *Vox* and the *Confessio*. Due to the greater length and complexity of the these poems, comparing their purposes is of course much more difficult, and any conclusion here must be taken with caution; the difference in theological complexity might be taken as proof of the *Confessio*’s non-theological purpose. While of course the *Vox* is a different poem with different purposes from the *Confessio*, however, it is not noted for its theology, and even the theological passages II.vi and vii are very public in orientation, secular in the
medieval though not the modern sense. In fact, Vox II, originally conceived as the poem’s first book, advances an argument very similar to that of the Prologue of the Confessio. The condition of the world continuously worsens, and, although people blame Fortune for this, the problem is in fact man’s sin (i-iv). According to the Scriptures, creation serves the just man and resists the sinful man (v-vi). It is in this context that Gower takes up theology in chapters vi and vii: faithfulness to God is the only remedy, and this theme dominates the rest of Book II, setting the theological foundation for the estates satire that follows. Although the Confessio Prologue speaks in a far more disjointed fashion than both Vox II and the analogous passage in the Mirour discussed above in 1.1, the argument is in many ways substantially the same. If this is the same, it is possible to see the Confessio’s aversion to the theological specificity, not only of the Vox but also of Gower’s source text from the Vita Barlaam, as a significant anomaly.

But if the Confessio V exposition of the Christian faith eschews expository treatments of Latinate theology, Gower did not make it out of whole cloth, and one resource Gower turns to instead of clerical discourse, though it does not seem yet to have been noted, may show the passage to have a specifically vernacular character. Two Latin prose glosses in the margins of the poem quote from the Exultet from the Easter Vigil. A marginal gloss beside line 1756 reads, “Gregorius. O necessarium Ade peccatum! O felix culpa, que talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem.” Although Macaulay cites a passage approximating this idea in Gregory’s commentary In I Librum Regum, and Peck repeats this citation in the TEAMS edition, this is virtually an exact quote from the Exultet: “O certe necessaium ade peccatum et nostrum quod christi morte deleatum est. O felix

67 Scanlon’s argument that the Confessio Prologue ultimately moves in a concertedly secular direction, with the invocation of Arion (Narrative, Authority, and Power, 254), is discussed below in 3.1
culpa que talem ac tantum meruit habere redemptorem.” (“O truly necessary sin of Adam and of ourselves, which was blotted out by the death of Christ! O happy guilt, the desert of which was to gain such and so great a Redeemer!”)\textsuperscript{69} The authority of this gloss is as secure as most of the \textit{Confessio}’s other Latin prose marginalia, and exists in the vast majority of the manuscripts collated by Macaulay.\textsuperscript{70} The gloss a few lines earlier is rarer: according to Macaulay, it occurs among the manuscripts he collated only in the group of manuscripts which he identified as “second recension.”\textsuperscript{71} Although Macaulay did not comment on the authority of this gloss, it is consistently present in the “second recension” manuscripts, which Macaulay did take to be Gower’s own, and the gloss thus appears to be just as authoritative. This gloss, which reads “Nihil nobis nasci profuit, nisi redimi profuisse,” is likewise virtually a verbatim quote from the \textit{Exultet}: “Nichil enim nobis nasci profuit nisi redimi profuisset.” (“For it had advantaged us nothing to be born except we had the advantage of redemption.”)\textsuperscript{72}

But which came first? Were the lines from the \textit{Exultet} the seeds which inspired Gower’s exposition of the faith? Or was Gower working from a compilation which falsely attributed the lines to Gregory? It is possible Gower had a compilation of Gregory’s writings before him and used this to shape his account of the Christian faith. Gregory would have been a good choice for Gower, if, as I believe, Gower was concerned to invest his English poem with Latinate authority in such a way that would not appear to overreach the decorum of vernacular writing. Gregory is also Gower’s

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Sarum Missal}, ed. Legg, 118; tr. Warren 1:272.
\textsuperscript{70} Macaulay’s edition indicates that the gloss exists intact in at least fourteen of the twenty manuscripts he collated (AMH2XGERCLB2FWH3K), and in modified form in three others (SBA); see Macaulay, \textit{English Works}, text n. I. 1756 ff. margin.
\textsuperscript{71} The three are SBA; see Macaulay, \textit{English Works}, text n. 1. 1746 margin. Note that the remaining two manuscripts of the “second recension,” AdT, do not weaken the authority of this gloss because it is characteristic of them to omit the Latin prose summaries; see Macaulay, \textit{English Works}, 1:cliv.
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Sarum Missal}, ed. Legg, 118; tr. Warren 271.
favorite patristic writer by far, and elsewhere he quotes him more accurately. The prominent citations, both in the body text and in the glosses, of the author of the Pastoral Rule seem to safeguard Gower from the charge of Lollardy, clearly a relevant consideration given Gower’s discussion of Lollardy a few lines later (1807-19, see below). Perhaps Gower’s source used the Exultet lines to annotate Gregory, and Gower mistook the lines for a Gregorian lyric. But it is equally possible that Gower recognized the liturgical context of the two excerpts. Gower may have believed the Exultet hymn to belong to Gregory. In either case it is clear that Gower rests his account on sources which had the twin advantages of unimpeachable authority, and excellent credentials as lay theology.

This passage is interesting for another reason. Although the passage from In I Librum Regum which Macaulay suggests is probably correct—Gower probably knew it as well as, probably in conjunction with, the lines from the Exultet—Gower’s English exposition of the faith is far from a direct translation and has a remarkably different character. Gregory says, in effect, that it is good that Adam fell, because if he had not, Christ the Redeemer would not have come. Gregory then writes, “Si peccata, ad quae delenda uenisse creditur, per iustitiam dei permissa esse sentiuntur, dum pro peccatoribus deus homo nasciturus erat, ex illo malo quo omnes morituri erant, bonum quod malum illud uinceret, omnipotens deus sese facturum prouiderat.” (“If the sins, which [Christ] is believed to have come in order to destroy, are thought to have been permitted by the justice of God—since the God-man was going to be born for sinners—then the Almighty God foresaw that he would make, from that evil which caused all men to die, the good that would conquer that evil.”) While Gower

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73 Gower cites Gregory by name very frequently. Although sometimes it is unclear what text Gower has in mind, Macaulay identifies accurate citations of specific passages in the Regula pastoralis at Mirour 16347, and of the Moralia in Iob at Mirour 2242 and Confessio P.945.
74 Commentaire, ed. de Vogüé, VI, 10.1, vol. 3:316.
avoids anything like Gregory’s level of abstraction, he preserves Gregory’s optimism; and Gower’s combination of optimism and vernacular accessibility achieves a strange effect. As we noted above, Gower describes Christ’s relationship to us subsequent to the incarnation in terms of “fleissh” and “bodely fraternite.” Gower explains one consequence of this:

Werof the man in his dege
Stant more worth, as I have told,
Than he stod erst be manyfold,
Thurgh baptesme of the Newe Lawe,
Of which Crist Lord is and felawe. (V.1776-80)

This constitutes a wholly original formulation, rendering the abstract notion in the Exultet and in Gregory, “to have such and so great a Redeemer,” more concretely and vernacularly, in the statement that now “man ... Stant more worth.” Not only do these monosyllables render theology in stripped-down, earthier terms, but arguably, Gower’s reflection on post-Incarnation man’s “worth,” constitutes a quasi-demotic because specifically bourgeois translation. 75

Whether or not this is admitted, the more than two hundred lines remaining in the chapter persist in favoring the concrete over the abstract. After giving an aphoristic summary of the faith that manages to fit all the principal people, places and things (“the hihe Goddes myht,” “the Virgine,” “mannes soule,” “the feith,” “paradis”) into seven lines, Gower turns his attention to the importance of good works. This is appropriate structurally, since Gower devotes the greatest number of lines to the sloth of prelates (cf. 1825-1970), and thereby works his way back to Avarice, the sin under review in Book V, by naming this as the root cause of pastoral negligence. But Gower’s

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75 Bourgeois and mercantilist ideology in Gower has received comparatively little attention. But Sadlek observes Gower’s mercantilist interest in labor as “productive labor” (Idleness Working, 198, original emphasis). More generally, see also Galloway, “Gower’s Quarrel with Chaucer.”
commendation of pastoral labor is not responsible for introducing the larger theme of works, for the ecclesiastical satire follows a more general sermon on good works, that begins,

    Bot this believe is so certein,
    So full of grace and of vertu,
    That what man clepeth to Jhesu
    In clene lif forthwith good dede,
    He mai noght faile of hevene mede,
    Which taken hath the rihte feith.               (V.1788-95)

Gower emphasizes the point with a pithy couplet, “For feith only sufficeth noght, / Bot if good dede also be wroght” (1801-02), in the margin beside which he gives the Latin of James 2:26 which the couplet translates.

    It is here that Gower utters his strongest condemnation of “Anticristes Lollardie” (1803-24), and this position may suggest that the differences in theological register between Vox II and Confessio V have as much to do with chronology as with language choice. As mentioned above, the passage may show Gower feared his foray into public theology could be misconstrued as Lollard sympathizing and for this reason sought to disavow the sect in strong terms. The higher theological register of Vox II, by contrast, might be related to the fact that this text was written before the Peasants’ Revolt of June 1381,76 and thus before Wyclif’s condemnation in May of the same year, when Wycliffite sympathizing decisively took on a greater public cost.77 Unfortunately, none of Gower’s doctrines in the Vox II are substantively different from those of Confessio V. Although Gower condemns idolatry (x), this could not have been perceived as a specifically Wycliffite view at this time.78 We are left with differences of degree rather than of kind, and, in the absence of evidence

76 Fisher, John Gower, 102.
77 Not only John of Gaunt, but also Parliament, seems to have supported Wyclif virtually until the Oxford trial; see Evans, John Wyclif, 161-80, 191.
78 See Hudson, Selections, 179-80. In light of Hudson’s discussion, Stockton’s comment, “Gower is at pains to avoid both Wycliffite iconoclasm and the image worship then alleged by reformers” (Major Latin Works, 384 n. 1), appears anachronistic.
for a decisive change in Gower’s thought after 1381 and the rise of Lollardy as a movement, it is very difficult to discern to what extent the lower theological register of the *Confessio* passage may be attributable to a fear of anti-Lollard recrimination. In spite of this uncertainty, the anti-Lollard conclusion of the *Confessio* passage illuminates Gower’s sensibilities regarding vernacular decorum in other ways. Again it is useful to compare the passage to a close counterpart of the passage in the *Vox*, especially since in this case the analogy is extremely close. The two passages follow virtually the same thought progression—at both *Confessio* V.1803 and *Vox* II.239 (the start of chapter ix) Gower moves from an explanation of the faith to a warning against heterodoxy—and this similarity of argumentative context makes the differences between the two passages remarkable. In the *Vox* II, Gower does not of course have Lollardy in mind (he could not have), but he warns his reader against probing the rational grounds of faith too deeply, insisting fideistically that

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Multa viros nescire iuuat; pars maxima rerum
Offendit sensus; sobrius ergo sciat:
Committat fidei quod non poterit racioni,
Quod non dat racio det sibi firma fides.
   Adde fidem, nam vera fides, quod non videt, audit,
Credit, sperat ...
Argumenta fides dat rerum que neque sciri
Nec possunt mente nec racione capi.
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It is helpful for men to be in ignorance about a great deal; most facts offend the senses. Therefore, a man should acquire knowledge prudently. Let him entrust to faith what he would not have been able to trust to reason. Reason does not supply what a firm faith should provide.

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Increase your faith, for true faith believes and hopes for what it does not see and hear.... Faith furnishes evidence for things which cannot be understood by the mind or grasped by the reason. (VC II.463-67, 469-70)
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Gower’s warning here is far more erudite (and more Scriptural\(^79\)) in its treatment of faith, than the treatment in the *Confessio*. The global nature of Gower’s statements, valid for “men” (“viros”) generally, is also notable. Nothing in this passage brackets Gower’s audience: here, as throughout the *Vox*, Gower writes as if to benefit, via the intellectual elite of the kingdom, the kingdom as a whole.\(^80\) Especially noteworthy is Gower’s discussion of the inward life of faith:

\[Vult deus a nobis mentis amore coli.\]
\[....\]
\[Nam crux et roseo perfusi sanguine claui,\]
\[Expulso Sathana, nostra fuere salus.\]
\[Quisque Ihesum meditans intendere debet vt actus\]
\[Deponat veteres et meliora colat.\]

Nevertheless, God wishes to be worshipped by us with a loving spirit.... The Cross and its nails sprinkled with red blood were our salvation, for Satan was banished. Everyone who meditates on Jesus ought to lay aside his former ways and cultivate better things. (VC II.477, 483-86)

Borrowing the rich imagery of devotional literature, Gower shows himself willing to go so far as to offer spiritual guidance on the meditative practices to *clerks* (cf. VC III.2141-42, discussed below, 3.1).

This contrasts sharply to the lower theological register of the *Confessio* V passage. The twenty-two lines following the exposition of the Christian faith offer spiritual guidance of a distinctly lay nature. Genius/Gower’s warning is clearly addressed to a lay audience: “thou ... Which thurgh baptesme proprely / Art unto Cristes feith professed” (1803-05). The preference for the concrete over the abstract which is implicit in Gower’s own laicized theology he now makes explicit as he enjoins laymen, vicariously in Genius’s injunction of Amans, to eschew Lollardy. Genius

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\(^79\) Cf. Heb. 11:1. Stockton notes other biblical references in the surrounding verses (*Major Latin Works*, 383-84).\(^80\) This claim is discussed more fully below, 3.1.
represents Lollardy not as a way of life—it does not consist in actions—but as a set of false doctrines:

```
this newe tapinage
Of Lollardie goth aboute
To sette Cristes feith in doute.
The seintz that weren ous tofore,
Be whom the feith was ferst upbore,
That Holi Cherche stod relieved,
Thei oghten betre be believed
Than these, whiche that men knowe
Noght holy, thogh thei feigne and blowe
Here Lollardie in mennes ere.  (V.1810-19)
```

This emphasis on argumentation reflects historical Lollardy, or perhaps more accurately perceptions of Lollardy, in important respects. Originally an academic movement, Lollardy would retain its intellectual pretensions even after it had migrated out from learned circles, and it is possible that Wyclif’s immediate successors elevated the intangible over the tangible still more highly than he had, arguing, with William Thorpe (1407), “the ultimate case of word against image, exalting the one to the exclusion of the other.” At the heart of the Lollard message by 1390 or very soon after were critical views of confession, penance, pilgrimage, the veneration of images, and the institutional Church. Gower’s earlier reference to Lollardy, in the Prologue, similarly aligns the sect with bad teaching, depicting it as an intellectual error primarily located “Among the clerkes in hemselve” (Pr.351). Nevertheless, though this alignment of Lollardy with bad theory may be attributed, at least in part, to the real character of historical Lollardy, the extent to which the passage opposes the ideas of the heretics to the concrete practices of “Holi Cherche” is remarkable. The Lollards are “Noght holy” because they are all talk. Genius compares the Lollards to a wind as they

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81 Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 166-67; cf. 143.
82 Doctrinal opposition to transubstantiation is ubiquitous in early Lollardy. Opposition to established views on other practices is widespread but subject to variation. See Hudson, *Premature Reformation*, 285-309, 314-15. For an
“blowe / Here Lollardie in mennes ere.” While the notion that orthodox, as well as heterodox, teaching exists appears in the references to “Cristes feith” and “the feith,” orthodox answer to false teaching is not true teaching but, at least insofar as Gower’s lay audience is concerned, the rather less intellectual and more concrete objective of “the feith,” as transmitted by authority. The proper refuge from the threat of Lollardy is not primarily doctrinal, but practical, even a flight from doctrine into proper, traditional actions, motivated by “fere”:

> Bot if thou wolt live out of fere,  
> Such newe lore, I rede, eschuie,  
> And hold forth riht the weie and suie,  
> As thine ancestres dede er this,  
> So schalt thou noght believe amis.  

(V.1820-24)

In the laity’s case then, good works and due observance of traditional church practices are the core of lay religious experience. The strong contrast between Gower’s practice here and the analogous passage in the Vox suggests, though it cannot prove, that the Confessio V digression on the Christian faith waters down its theology, not because theology is a merely peripheral concern—the sameness of argumentative context in the two passages indicates that Gower’s interests here are just as serious as in the Vox—but because it offers a specifically English-language accommodation. Whereas the Vox presents “meditation” on the “Cross and nails sprinkled with red blood” as the antidote to heretical speculation, the Confessio V digression replaces this with an emphasis on concrete practices. Thus, in V.1803-24 Gower may be seen as propounding the theoretical basis for the privileging of the concrete that is visible in his exposition of the Christian faith immediately before.

Other passages support this notion that Gower’s avoidance of theological abstraction in V.1737-1802 is not merely local and casual, but ideologically motivated. Gower eschews theological account of “the Lollard message” based on documents written shortly after Wyclif’s death in 1384, see also Rex, Lollards, 59-61.
abstraction elsewhere in the *Confessio* as well, in places where, given the clericalizing trajectory of
the poem alleged by Minnis, Copeland, and Scanlon, we might expect a fuller exposition of
theological doctrine. While the Book V excursus makes no mention of the Trinity, Gower uses the
term twice in the *Confessio*, but in both instances he treats the “Trinite” vaguely, if not
circumspectly. The second instance (cf. I.3275-76) takes direct interest in doctrinal instruction. In his
exposition of the school of Aristotle, Genius divides all learning into “Theorique,” “Rhetorique,” and
“Practique”; the “Trinite” is discussed at the beginning of his discussion of “Theologie,” the first
subdivision of “Theorique.”83 Genius names the Trinity first on the list of things which this science
addresses, and although he seems to approach giving a formulaic description of the triune mystery,
he stops short of this:

Theologie is that science
Which unto man gifth evidence
Of thing which is noght bodely,
Wherof men knowe redely
The hihe almyht Trinite,
Which is o God in unite
Withouten ende and beginnynge
And creatour of alle thinge,
Of hevene, of erthe and ek of helle. (VII.73-81)

Here Gower affirms the unity of the Godhead, but omits to mention the diversity of his persons.
Immediately after this Gower proceeds to summarize the medieval-Aristotelian notion of God as
“the ferste cause” (86), and his comparative silence on the triune mystery, relative to the fuller
account in the *Vox*,84 may have been motivated in part by an awareness of the anachronism of
incorporating Christian doctrine into what is ostensibly a summary of Aristotle’s teaching. But later

83 For Gower’s *divisio scientiae* and its relationship to that found in Brunetto Latini’s *Livres dou Tresor*, see
84 Cf. *Vox* II.361-70.
on, in the account of “Theologie,” Gower seems to forget this ostensible purpose of the digression, disavowing (Christian) theological knowledge not because it was unknown to Aristotle but because it is the special provenance of “clerks of divinite.” Gower says of “Theologie” in general,

To this science ben prive
The clerks of divinite,
The whiche unto the poeple prechen
The feith of holi cherche and techen,
Which in som cas upon believe
Stant more than thei conne prieve
Be weie of argument sensible.
Bot natheles it is credible.
And doth a man gret meede have,
To him that thenkth himself to save. (VII.121-30)

Gower’s renunciation of that science to which expert “clerks of divinite” are “prive” is somewhat ambivalent, for lines 128-30 indicate that some theological knowledge is necessary to those who would be saved. Nevertheless, Gower asserts that “Theologie” belongs most properly to those clerks whose duties are to preach and to teach “unto the poeple.” More clearly than the passage on Lollardy we examined above, this passage aligns the lay with the bodily. Peck glosses “Argument sensible” as “determinant argument (logic),” and if we follow this reading, Gower is here mainly concerned to describe the gap between learned argumentation and the totality of Christian truth: the former cannot capture all aspects of the latter. This variation on a commonplace would assert an essential continuity between clerical and lay, as Gower does in a passage in the *Vox* (partly quoted above) that warns against investigating the grounds of faith more than is proper:

Nos sentire fidem nostra racione probatam,
Non foret humanis viribus illud opus
... non nosse virorum
Est quid in excelsis construit ipse deus:

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85 Peck, *Confessio Amantis*, n. l. 127.
86 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, 32.1, which argues that the Trinity cannot be known by natural reason.
For us to experience faith tested by reason—that task is not for human powers.... It is not for men to know what God on high proposes. It is helpful for man to be in ignorance about a great deal; most facts offend the senses. Therefore, a man should acquire knowledge prudently. Let him entrust to faith what he would not have been able to trust to reason. Reason does not supply what a firm faith should provide.

Gower’s concern with *ratio*, especially in combination with the two Latin cognates of “sensible,” seems to support Peck’s gloss. But in light of Gower’s laicizing concerns evident in the *Confessio* passage, it is possible he is making a different point. While the MED cites Gower’s usage of “sensible” here along with two fifteenth-century instances as meaning “easily understood; logical, sensible” (def. 2b), this points up the term’s ambiguity, since the passage bears very different meanings depending whether we take “sensible” as “easily understood” or as “logical.” If we take “sensible” to mean either “easily understood,” or more basically, “Capable of being sensed or felt, apparent to the senses, perceptible; tangible; material, substantial” (def. 2a), the meaning differs considerably from Peck’s reading: while it is the job of “clerks of divinite” to teach theological doctrine to the “poeple,” some of this doctrine exceeds the cognitive capacities of layfolk and can only be apprehended by them “upon believe.” Gower’s “sensible” may even carry the negative connotations of one further definition of the word given in the MED: “Carnal, sensual, unspiritual” and “worldly, temporal, outward” (def. 4). Even if it does not, “Argument sensible” could denote a kind of demonstration that accommodates lower, more bodily modes of perception.

My reading of “Argument sensible” (VII.127) as a reference to a specifically lay mode of cognition is consistent with tendencies which Gower shows, not only in the denunciation of Lollardy which we discussed above, but throughout the *Confessio*, as we will consider more fully in chapter...
3. It also finds support in late-medieval clerical notions of the *illiterati*. One place where late-medieval clerks found theoretical justification for condescending attitudes toward the cognitive capacities of layfolk was Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*. In Book 3, Aristotle warns against using overly complex arguments before general, inexpert audiences, and compares the style appropriate in the assembly to “shadow-painting; for the greater the crowd the further the distance of view; thus, exactness is wasted work and the worse in both cases.”

In the *dispositio “contra translationem Anglicanam”* which he made during the Oxford debate on biblical translation, 1401-07, William Butler cites this passage from “tercio *Rhetoricae*” in support of his argument that the laity should not be trusted to handle the Bible in the vernacular. In the first chapter of his *De regimine principum*, Giles of Rome cites the same text, among others from the *Ethics*, in a way that more pointedly aligns the people with the crudeness of corporeality. Giles draws on the opening of the *Ethics* to explain his “modus procedendi”: since no discursive account can perfectly and comprehensively treat moral action, this science is “figuralis & grossus,” and the proper way to proceed is “typo & figuraliter.”

Giles gives three reasons why the science of ethics must be treated in a way that is *figuralis* and *grossus*, the third of which refers to the universality of this science and argues that, because the science concerns virtually a universal audience, its *modus* should be lowered accordingly, as Aristotle’s doctrine in the *Rhetoric* and *Ethics* requires. Giles says he intends to direct his instruction on the art of government to the people as well as the prince, since this will equip them better to know how to obey. He then writes (in Trevisa’s translation),

\[
\text{Þan al þe peple is in som wise lurner and scoler of þis art, bot fewe ben scharp of wit; þerfore it is iseid, iii" Rethoricorum, þat þe more peple is, þe lasse and þe forþer is þe}
\]

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88 For the text, see Deansley, *Lollard Bible*, 405; this is discussed by Watson, “Censorship and Cultural Change,” 841-42.
wit. Þan [i.e. for] þe scoler of moral mater, that is to saye of high and derke matere, it [sc. the wit] is symple and boystous, as it is ischewed, primo Rethoricorum. Þanne for nou3t al the poeple may comprehende sotil thinges, the processe in moral mater mote be boistous and by liknes of figuris. 90

While Giles no doubt is motivated partly by a desire to flatter his patron, the future Philip IV of France, by implying the superiority of his wit to that of “þe peple,” this cannot wholly account for the disparagement of the laity on view here. Considering the popular audience’s lack of wit, the teacher of ethics must proceed in a manner “boistous and by liknes of figures” (“simplex & grossus”). As Giles’s argument proceeds, it and John Trevisa’s translation (c. 1390) lend support to my reading of Gower’s “Argument sensible” by linking the “boistous” modus of vulgar instruction with the body and the senses. After reiterating that instruction on the art of government is useful for instructing the people as well as the prince, Giles writes, “hoc [i.e. instruction of the people] fieri non potest ... nisi per rationes superficiales & sensibiles: oportet modum procedendi in hoc opere, esse grossum & figuralem.” (“that may not be ... bote by superficial resons, that is to sey resons goyng aboute and sencible, that is felyng resons. Tharfore the maner processe in this work mote be gret and figural.”) 91 Trevisa’s expansion of Giles’s “rationes superficiales & sensibiles” to “superficial resons ... resons goyng aboute and sencible ... felyng resons,” clearly associates the common people with humbler, more bodily modes of cognition. This contemporary witness supports the notion that Gower may be rendering the theology of the Confessio in a simplified, particularly tangible, way, not because real theology is merely peripheral to his purpose, but because he is conscious of the lay, vernacular constitution of his audience and seeks to mediate his doctrine to this audience in the most appropriate way.

90 De regimine principum, ed. Samaritanus, I, I, 1, p. 4; tr. Trevisa, Governance of Kings, p. 7.
91 Ibid.
Conclusion

We have seen that Gower is highly ambivalent about the vernacular’s ability to displace Latin as a language of learning. We have also seen that, at least in the theological passages of the *Confessio*, Gower avoids the complexity and level of detail found in similar passages in the *Vox*. But in determining the significance of this disparity of theological register it has been necessary to exercise caution, since the *Vox* and *Confessio* passages may serve very different purposes, and it would be unreasonable to attribute all differences to Gower’s language choices. Although the case is by no means closed, several considerations suggest that the differences in register may be attributed in part to pressures of vernacularity. Most significantly, Gower’s avoidance of theological specificity even in the Book VII account of “Theologie,” where, if Gower were truly the confident translator of “lore” that Minnis, and especially Copeland and Scanlon, have made him out to be, we should expect a higher register, surely indicates a deliberate lowering of register. Further, we can interpret Gower’s “Argument sensible” as a reference to specifically lay modes of cognition and, accordingly, see Gower conscious of the need to accommodate his doctrine to a lay audience. In this light, Gower’s denunciation of “Anticristes lollardie” would indeed appear to betray a real anxiety about being tarred by that brush. In order to determine whether Gower feels pressure to modulate to a lay register in treating theology only, or in treating all the sciences, it is necessary to look further at the Book VII exposition of “Aristotles lore.”
3. At the Limits of Clerical Discourse:

Gower and “Lewed Clergie”

Introduction

In chapter 2 I suggested that the lower register of the theological passages in the *Confessio* as compared to those in the *Vox* should be attributed in some way to Gower’s sensitivity in the English poem to pressures of vernacularity. This chapter seeks both to confirm this thesis, by examining similar tendencies in other comparatively learned portions of the *Confessio*—above all in the Book VII excursus on “Aristotel’s lore”—and to qualify it, by noting that Gower shows a similar consciousness of his lay status in the *Mirour* and the *Vox*. Comparing Gower’s lay voices in the *Mirour*, *Vox*, and *Confessio* is illuminating for two reasons. First, the similarity of Gower’s voice in the *Confessio* to more explicitly theological lay voices of the *Mirour* and *Vox* suggests that theology, albeit more muted, similarly underwrites Gower’s project in the *Confessio*—the *Confessio* is a theological poem. Second, it allows us to begin exploring the reasons for the comparatively subdued tone of theology in the English poem. I will argue that the *Confessio* shows a fascination with the new possibilities of lay spirituality that were becoming increasingly visible in late-medieval Christianity, and that the poem’s movement away from “clergie” is caused less by negative considerations—the fear of being found a Lollard—than by Gower’s positive assessment of the intimate power available in the mother tongue.
3.1 Genius and the Limits of “Lewed Clergie”

Certainly at some level, Book VII shows the influence the “general libido sciendi” which Andrew Galloway finds at work in England in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Galloway stresses that *Piers Plowman* must be set in relation to this widespread desire for knowledge, especially for knowledge “that provides or seems to provide ways to fashion the social and economic self and world,” and adduces one manuscript, Cambridge University Library MS Ll. 4.14 as his main witness (97). In addition to a B-text of *Piers*, this manuscript also contains the poetic fragment formerly called *Richard the Redeless*, a translation of a treatise by John of Holywood (Sacrobosco) on mathematics, and treatises on astrology and physiognomy. Galloway discerns in this compilation, as in other books from the period, the presence of “a ‘new clericalism’: an increasing emphasis on defining ways of life in terms of professional knowledge and a widening extension of such knowledge beyond traditional religious vocations or even necessarily any fixed institutional loyalties” (98). The compilation bears a certain resemblance to *Confessio* VII. Gower makes available to his readers a similar breadth of knowledge, including topical and satirical writing—comparable to *Piers* and *Richard the Redeless*—and rudimentary knowledge of mathematics, astrology and medicine (cf. 145-202, 633-1506)—comparable to the scientific treatises in Ll. 4.14. Clearly the Book VII excursus responds in some way to the same hunger for knowledge that Ll. 4.14 and similar compilations indicate existed among late fourteenth-century layfolk, and Gower here shows himself motivated, to some extent, to make clerical discourse available to lay readers. Like Chaucer in such works as the Tale of Melibee, Gower knew that contemporary audiences could be as much

1 Galloway, “*Piers Plowman* and the Schools.” For other examples of this writing, see the collection, *Popular and Practical Science*, ed. Matheson; see also Somerset, *Clerical Discourse*, 10-12, discussed below.
attracted by “lore” as by “lust” (cf. Pr.19).

Yet Gower dovetails the exposition of “Aristotle’s lore” (VII.608) into the fictional confession—as he does most digressions in the Confessio—and the circumstances in which Genius’ instruction in Book VII arises greatly complicates any explanation based on inferences about the tastes of the poem’s original audience. Several critics argue that the Book VII excursus bears an important structural function in the Confessio, and, since this clearly has implications for the status of the “clergie” it contains, these arguments demand our attention here. ² Yeager believes the Book VII speculum principum serves an important function in the narrative of Amans’s spiritual development.³ Yeager emphasizes the range of Gower’s classical learning and the attractiveness of the Book VII compendium to a medieval audience (198-216). Thus the newly widespread appetite for learning in the vernacular, highlighted by Galloway, remains an important context for Confessio VII as well as Piers Plowman, and this might seem to draw Gower more closely within the orbit of other English translators of clerical material.

But while Yeager privileges Book VII for its doctrinal usefulness, Peck and Simpson privilege the book for other reasons. For Peck, Book VII is important not because it offers an epitome of knowledge motivated by academic interests but because it outlines the proper education of the ruler, and thus privileges practical over theoretical modes of knowledge.⁴ The book’s concern with the education of the king is evident from the fiction framing the Aristotelian epitome—Amans, having heard of the education Alexander received from Aristotle, asks Genius

² Cf. Copeland, Rhetoric, 211; and see above, 2.1.
³ Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, 207-08.
⁴ Peck, “Politics and Psychology,” 227, 237-38, and idem, Kingship, 141; a similar point is argued by Olsson, John Gower, 194-98.
to recount the content of this education (VI.2410-15; cf. VII.606-08), and Amans and Genius continue to take an antiquarian interest in Alexander and Aristotle throughout Book VII (cf. 3-5, 718-19, 1699-1710, 5384-85)—and from the hijacking of the book by Genius’s lessons on “Policie,” as this topic comes to fill the last 3728 of the book’s 5438 lines. According to Peck, Gower’s concern with the education of the king is consistent with the public and moral trajectory of the whole poem because, in Gower’s understanding of “the politics and psychology of governance,” every subject is a ruler of “his oghne dom” (VIII.2113)—that is, himself—and must equip himself for this office by pursuing the same bodies of knowledge that the *Secreta secretorum*, one of Gower’s main sources for Book VII, provided for the equipment of the ruler.⁵ Peck’s account renders the “clergie” of Book VII universally important, making this the proper pursuit of every man. Simpson emphasizes the importance of the Book VII digression in the narrative of Amans’ development, arguing that Amans’s request at the end of Book VI for an account of the doctrines Aristotle taught Alexander indicates a measure of spiritual progress. Amans says his heart “sore longeth / To wite what it wolde wene,” and that this “for a time ... scholde change / Mi peine, and lisse me somdiel” (2414-15, 2418-19); Genius, whom Simpson understands to be a faculty of Amans’s own soul, likewise says he *longs* to know more about “The scoles of Philosophie” (2429-33). Simpson considers this longing a response to the stories in Book VI about the political consequences of love gone awry, and he comments: “this suggests in itself that the soul, naturally desiring self-knowledge, responds to these stories of self-ignorance by desiring the ‘scientific’ knowledge which will bring the soul to knowledge of itself.

Almost despite themselves, the different powers of the soul tend towards integration.\textsuperscript{6} Simpson, like Peck, thus argues for “primacy of politics” in the \textit{Confessio}, especially as it is embodied in Books VII and VIII, and that “[t]he \textit{speculum principis} of Book VII is ... intimately connected with the implicit themes of the \textit{Confessio} as a whole,” namely the themes of self-knowledge and self-rule, especially in amatory matters.\textsuperscript{7}

Although Peck and Simpson both emphasize the primacy of politics and thus confer on the “clergie” of the Book VII \textit{speculum principum} considerable prestige, both critics are far from equating the politics of the \textit{Confessio} with Genius’s exposition of doctrine there, and with good reason. Not only does the \textit{speculum principum} arise out of narrative, as a response to the tales of Book VI, but it returns to narrative as Genius reverts to his customary, narrative-based pedagogy when he takes up “Policie” at line 1711. Book VII in fact contains as much narrative as almost any other book, and the narrative portions of Book VII outweigh the predicatory portions by a ratio of almost 7:3:\textsuperscript{8} clearly Gower’s exposition of “Philosophie” is of a different kind from the translations discussed by Galloway. Other critical accounts of \textit{Confessio} VII offer further evidence that Genius’s treatise on philosophy is less important for its doctrinal content than for its role in the narrative of Amans’s education. Olsson suggests the literal content of Genius’s doctrinal exposition in the early chapters of the book is incidental to Gower’s purpose in Book VII as a whole. Commenting on Gower’s very brief treatment of “Rhetorique” (VII.1507-1640), which historian of rhetoric James J. Murphy finds jejune,\textsuperscript{9} Olsson writes that Gower’s purpose of this section “is certainly not to prove his technical knowledge of rhetoric” but rather to make a

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Sciences and the Self}, 211; cf. 206.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., chap. 7, qt. 228.
\textsuperscript{8} Of the 5438 lines in Book VII, roughly the first 1710 (31\%) are directly didactic, whereas the latter 3728 (69\%) are for the most part devoted to storytelling.
\textsuperscript{9} Murphy, “John Gower’s \textit{Confessio Amantis}.”
moral point. Gower “seeks ... to identify the relationship between words—the ‘matter’ of the trivium—and the content of the other divisions of ‘philosophie,’ to the end of showing the special power or ‘vertu’ of language.”\textsuperscript{10} The higher purpose discernible in Gower’s treatment of “Rhetorique” can also be seen in the book as a whole. “The treatise of Book 7 evolves a model of ... unity in oneself and with God: it celebrates human capacity, lordship, ‘maistrye’ in one sense as displayed in an ideal king, and in another sense as mirrored in anyone who returns to the self from a \textit{regio dissimilitudinis}” (198). Nicholson likewise emphasizes the theological trajectory of Book VII, though he suggests its path runs parallel to and does not negate Gower’s more terrestrial concerns elsewhere: “Book 7 is ... not a digression from the subject of the poem but a separate path, a starting over with the goal of grounding all ethical teaching, including that on ethics in love, in the purposes of the Creator.”\textsuperscript{11} Noting that Gower and his main source for this section, Brunetto Latini’s \textit{Tresor}, do not adhere consistently to the encyclopedic principle of \textit{divisio scientiae} which their treatises ostensibly follow but “select different topics to emphasize,” Nicholson argues that Gower distinguishes his treatise from Latini’s by privileging “Theorique,” a field that has only minor importance in the \textit{Tresor}. Gower’s “Theorique” erects a standard by which all knowledge is to be judged. In direct opposition to Nectanabus, who abused his learning to seduce Olympias in the last major tale of the previous book (cf. VI.1789-2366), Genius endorses only the kind of study that leads back to God (338). The correspondences which Gower shows to exist between the elements of the universe and the humors of the body (cf. VII.380-92) reveal patterns that enable a fuller understanding of the Creator: “the very coherence of the universe ... is a revelation of God’s purposefulness .... Thus the orderliness, the discovery of the

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Love and Ethics}, 336.
laws that link phenomenon to phenomenon, leads us back to God, and the sciences, properly conceived lead to a better understanding of the Creator” (339-40). This has direct moral application to man. Gower describes the duty of all creatures to obey their Creator in the section on “Theologie” (108-09); Nicholson comments, “The rest of ‘Theorique’ may thus be seen simply as an exposition of what it means to ‘obey’” (339). In general, the purpose of Book VII is to “demonstrat[e] the origin of moral obligation in the ‘ferste cause’” (347). Like the jejune treatment of “Rhetorique,” Gower’s treatment of “Policie,” which takes up the majority of Book VII, resembles Gower’s treatment of “Rhetorique” in that “it is very general, and it could hardly serve as a manual for someone trying to learn the art” (348).

While these readings emphasize different aspects of the excursus, a general picture emerges that the excursus advances a moral perspective that is built out of specific details of the scientific knowledge but that finally transcends the minutia of these sciences. Thus, even while Nicholson emphasizes the extent to which the integrating structures of the Confessio set this work apart from the Mirour and the Vox,12 his notion of “transcend[ence]” echoes Olsson’s observation that Gower’s practical instructions regarding rhetoric and other sciences have strict limitations. In most of these readings, it is clear the minutia are finally less important than the general lesson or lessons. For the most part, these readings effectively dissociate the Confessio from Galloway’s “new clericalism.”

While the readings just surveyed seem to undercut the notion that the weaknesses in Gower’s treatments of the sciences have to do with the Confessio’s vernacular language,

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12 “In place of the mass of exhortations and warnings in the Mirour de l’Omme and the Vox Clamantis, Genius extracts a single basic lesson that transcends all of the counsel on the qualities of a good ruler and that reaffirms the book’s central theme: that the king himself rules by divine decree (7.1679-83), that he is therefore subordinate to higher things... Every man has moral responsibilities that flow from his position in creation, up to and including the king” (Love and Ethics, 348, my emphasis).
satisfactorily accounting for these weaknesses on structural and poetic grounds, both this quality of weakness, and the poetic context of the Book VII excursus, are worth further attention. Since, in chapter 2, we suggested reasons why the theological register of the *Confessio*, both in Book VII and elsewhere, may well be consequences of vernacularity, it is necessary to take this further by exploring the similar tentativeness in Gower’s treatments of other sciences. Gower’s diffidence regarding “Theologie” is not exceptional, and a similar epistemological humility, potentially related to vernacularity, also surface in his discussions of mathematics, medicine, and astronomy, both in Book VII and in related passages in Book IV. Gower’s treatments of all these arts show an awareness of their belatedness, and of their status outside the realm of specialized knowledge, by phrases like “as bokes sein” (285, cf. 600), “these Astronomiens ... thei clepen” (351), “as it is write in the clergie” (666), and “In Almageste it telleth this” (739). Sometimes these notices specify Aristotle the “Philosophre” and can be attributed to Genius’s fictional desire to epitomize “Aristotels lore” (cf. 3, 197, 328, 389, 462, 717), but often they allude to other sources (e.g. 184, 739, 1239, 1296, 1437), or simply to “clergie.” As a result, these phrases do not evoke the distance between contemporary intellectual culture and Aristotle so much as the gap between Gower’s own audience and the distant sources of learning in general. Gower deals with “clergie” only in broad outline, by no means reproducing it whole, and declares or “reherces” (e.g. 24, 221, 392, 1269), only selectively:

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so as I began
To speke upon Astronomie,
As it is write in the clergie,
To telle hou the planetes fare,
Som part I thenke to declare,
Mi Sone, unto thin Audience.  
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(VII.664-69)
In addition to clarifying that his summary of human learning is selective, Gower marks his own position as extraclergial. Genius, and ultimately Gower, dissociate themselves from “clerkes” and from “clergie” with a variety of phrases that punctuate the treatise: “These olde clerkes tellen this” (344), “Bot as the clerkes ous enforme” (495), “So as these olde clerkes spieke” (528), “Bot lest nou what seith the clergie” (380; cf. 666, 953, 1440, 1467, 1859 etc.). Such phrases serve to present Genius and Gower as outsiders to the professional domain of “clergie.” Gower achieves the same effect by different means in his very cursory treatment of “Geometrie,” the science by which

\begin{verbatim}
a man hath thilke sleyhte, 
Of lengthe, of brede, of depthe, of heyhte 
To knowe the proporcion 
Be verrai calculacion 
Of this science; and in this wise 
These olde philosophres wise, 
Of al this worldes erthe round, 
Hou large, hou thikke was the ground, 
Controeveden th’experience; 
The cercle and the circumference 
Of everything unto the hevene; 
Thei setten point and mesure evene.  \end{verbatim} 

(VII.179-90)

Though this science is “Full of wisdom and of clergie” (177), the lines extol the “olde philosophres” who discovered it more than they do the science itself, and much more than the bare outline of the science that Gower transmits to his readers.

Gower’s belatedness as a transmitter of doctrine takes on a specifically vernacular flavor when, as in the last quotation, he reflects on the historical development of the sciences. Towards the end of his treatment of astronomy, Gower remarks that the pioneers of this science “hadde a Gret travail on honde” (1443). The difficulty which Gower has in even recalling the names of all the astronomers and their books suggests that astronomy remains no less an overwhelming task
in the present:

Men sein that Habraham was on;
Bot whether that he wrot or non,
That finde I noght.
...
I mai noght knowen alle tho
That writen in the time tho
Of this science .... (VII.1474-76, 1481-83)

For Gower the vernacular compiler, even to give the main outlines of this history poses great challenges. These challenges are most prominent in Book IV, which gives Gower’s fullest discussion of the history of science and clearly traces the difficulty to problems of translation.

Gower’s catalog of the arts and their primary inventors first invokes the idea of *translatio studii* by beginning his list of inventors with Cham, the inventor of “lettres” and “clergie” (2397, 2400). Macaulay noted that a possible source for Gower’s remark on Cham is Godfrey of Viterbo’s *Pantheon* III, and Peck points to an earlier analogue in Remigius Gramaticus’s commentary on Donatus’s *Ars maior*. Both versions of the tale foreground difficulties inherent in cultural transmission by representing Cham’s anxiety that even writing, albeit a bulwark against oblivion, is subject to erasure. Godfrey writes, “Cham first wrote down the seven arts that we learn, and through them he had taught philosophers to know the parts of the heavens and to leave them again to others, and after for men to teach them. These arts Cham had written onto long columns lest they perish either by fire or the engulfing waves; each column was of bronze or brick.” By recalling the story of Cham, Gower recalls the dangers inherent in textuality.

Both the necessity and the perils of translation become explicit in Gower’s discussion of

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alchemy. Gower explains that “olde Philosophres” could make three stones of extraordinary powers, the third of which could cause “multiplicacioun / Of gold” (2573-74). Although this learning has been lost (“Bot now it stant al otherwise”) this should not discredit the science itself:

\begin{verbatim}
Bot noght forthi, who that it knewe,
The science of himself is trewe
Upon the forme as it was founded. \hspace{1cm} (IV.2597-99)
\end{verbatim}

Gower emphasizes this principle by repetition, again contrasting the ignorance of would-be practitioners of the craft to the “Auctorite” of the authors of the alchemical “scripture / Of Grek, Arabe and of Caldee” (2626-29). This sobering tale leads directly to Gower’s fullest account of translatio studii: Gower credits the invention of Latin letters to Carmente, and discusses the other writers who contributed to the body of learning enjoyed by the contemporary civilization in the Latin West (“toward oure Marches hiere”), especially by translating books “Out of Caldee, Arabe and Grek” (2658, cf. 2633). The theme of writing thus furnishes bookends for Gower’s discussion of science, and represents writing as a deeply flawed, though necessary, basis for civilization.

Gower’s consciousness of his belatedness gives Confessio VII a tone very different from that of its main sources, the Secreta Secretorum and Brunetto Latini’s Livres dou Tresor, both of which are much more confident of their ability to transmit useful knowledge. As is clear from its very title, the Secretum Secretorum is not modest about the value of its content, and its late-medieval English readers, who included Roger Bacon, Thomas Bradwardine and John Wyclif, esteemed it very highly as a source of learning.\textsuperscript{15} The treatise calls considerable attention to the theme of translation, since most versions include a letter by a certain Philo explaining how he

\textsuperscript{15} For the translation history of this treatise, see Manzalaoui, “The Pseudo-Aristotelian.”
translated Aristotle’s letter to Alexander from Greek into Chaldean and then into Arabic, and this would likely have given its European readers a sense of vertigo whether they read it in Latin or in a vernacular language. But far from a story about loss of meaning, this series of translations is invoked in order for the treatise to lay claim to the authority of Aristotle. Clearly Gower’s very different emphasis, on the vagaries and potential pitfalls of translation, was not inspired by this source, though the Secretum could have been an indirect inspiration for his reflection on these themes.

Brunetto Latini’s Livres dou Tresor presents a closer analog to the “clergie” of Confessio VII in some ways, since it takes an interest in issues surrounding vernacularity. Brunetto shows himself conscious of his treatise’s status as a historically contingent work, subject to the strengths and limitations of the language it is written in:

Et se aucuns demandoit pour quoi cis livres est escris en roumanç, selonc le raison de France, puis ke nous somes italien, je diroie qu’est pour .ii raisons, l’une ke nous somes en France, l’autre por çou que la parleure est plus delitable et plus commune a tous langages.

If anyone should ask why this book is written in Romance according to the usage of the French, even though we are Italian, I would say that there are two reasons: one, that we are in France; the other, that French is more pleasant and has more in common with all other languages.

Brunetto’s “ke nous somes en France” takes on great importance in light of his concern for using vernacular language in service of the body politic. While Brunetto could not have known that Dante, his pupil, would place him in Inferno in the circle of the Sodomites, apparently as a comment on his abuse of vernacular language by composing his Tresor not in Italian but,

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16 For a representative text of this letter see Secretum Secretorum, ed. Manzalaoui, 27-29.
17 Tresor, ed. Carmody, 18; tr. Barrette and Baldwin, 2.
unnaturally, in French,\textsuperscript{18} it is certain that Brunetto shared many of Dante’s ideas about the relationships between language, homeland, and body politic: this lends significance to Brunetto’s remarks on language choice. In their recent edition of the \textit{Tresor}, Spurgeon Baldwin and Paul Barrette emphasize the place that republican ideals held in Brunetto’s thought. Whereas earlier encyclopedic works compiled scholarly learning for a learned audience, the \textit{Tresor}, they claim, disseminates general information to a popular, and specifically vernacular, one:

\begin{quote}
[T]he \textit{Tresor}’s purpose is clearly not highly intellectual, not intended as scholarly information for a scholarly public. One might detect this early on from the frankly rhetorical tone of the book, as well as from the very choice of the image of the treasure, the couching of everything in a remarkably plain and straightforward style, and the declaration that the improvement of one’s status in the world is the most sublime of human aspirations. This opening statement reveals a point of view not philosophical but bourgeois, with a final goal which might be characterized as economic, but is, in the final analysis, political.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

As befits this bourgeois point of view, Brunetto is far more utilitarian than Gower. Although Brunetto’s consciousness of language difference and his proximity to Dante might have afforded him good opportunities for thinking about the perils inherent in cultural translation, such reflections are not to be found in the \textit{Tresor}. Brunetto’s account of the Babel myth is brief and inconsequential.\textsuperscript{20} Brunetto’s citations of authorities are very frequent, especially in Book II, on ethics, and Book III, on rhetoric and politics: “The Apostle says ... Solomon says ... Cassiodorus says ... The proverb says ... The master says.”\textsuperscript{21} But here Brunetto follows the encyclopedia tradition typified by such figures as Cassiodorus and Isidore of Seville, and his point is not that the authorities he cites are lost to us, but that they can be quickly called

\textsuperscript{18} Dante, \textit{Inferno}, XV; cf. Vance, “The Differing Seed.”
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Livres dou Tresor}, ed. Baldwin and Barrette, xix; cf. xii, xiii, xv.
\textsuperscript{20} See \textit{Tresor}, tr. Baldwin and Barrette, 279.
\textsuperscript{21} These phrases are taken from \textit{Tresor}, tr. Baldwin and Barrette, 212.
up by means of books. It is also noteworthy that Brunetto cites authorities much less frequently in Book I, since Gower draws most heavily on this book. There, Brunetto’s typical method is to state his doctrines baldly, without annotation. But nowhere in the Tresor does Brunetto query the efficacy of writing in the faithful transmission of knowledge.

Gower’s disparagement of writing in Confessio IV certainly extends to Latin as well as vernacular writing and by itself needs not signal his adoption of a distinctly vernacular, extraclerical position—after all, clerics themselves were capable of demoting Latin to the level of vernacular language, as we have seen again in Godfrey of Viterbo’s and Remigius Grammaticus’s uses of the Cham story. But Gower’s advertisement of his belatedness, together with the extraclerical position he adopts throughout the Book VII speculum principum and elsewhere, greatly complicates the picture, suggested by Minnis and Copeland, of Gower commandeering clerical discourse in order to bolster the flagging authority of the vernacular. Admittedly, Gower was conscious of English’s disadvantaged position, and he did adopt strategies from academic discourse, such as the extrinsic and intrinsic prologues, and the principles of ordinatio and compilatio, all of which serve in part to buttress the authority of his poem. Yet, even in the most clerical portions of the Confessio, the Book VII excursus and the Book IV account of labor, Gower passes by notable opportunities to establish his authority on the foundations of clerical discourse.

I suggest that the structural and poetic functions of the excursus on “Aristotels lore” noted in our survey of the critical commentary on Book VII cannot wholly account for the aura of extraclergiality that pervades this book and all the most intensely clerical passages of the

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22 For other examples, see Rita Copeland’s treatment of Dante in Rhetoric, 180-86; and Watson, “King Solomon’s Tablets.”
poem. Yet before theorizing with reference to external social, political, and religious contexts, what pressures vernacularity might exert on the *Confessio*, we must revisit the structural and poetic features of the text itself. Because the poem’s main movements towards clerisy—both in Book VII and also at the beginning of the confession and elsewhere—all instantiate a similar pattern that hinges on Genius’ ambivalent status as marginal “clerk,” it is advantageous to look at all these moments in order to discern what role the poem gives to “clergie.” As we will see, the ambivalent figure of the marginal clerk and the resultant problematization of clergial learning are recurring features of Gower’s project.

Genius is introduced by Venus as “my priest,” and “myn oghne Clerk,” whom Venus assigns to hear Amans’ confession concerning his conduct in amatory matters (I.193-202), but it soon appears Genius has a broader agenda. Genius declares that his field of expertise is limited to love, but, since he is also a priest, he will speak of “othre thinges, / That touchen to the cause of vice” (240-41). Genius admits that even here he is overstepping his bounds: because he is “with love ... al withholde,” he says,

The lasse I am to wyte, blame
Thogh I ne conne bot a lyte
Of othre thinges that ben wise:
I am noght tawht in such a wise. (I.262-65)

Because Genius’ distortion of his original assignment constitutes one of the poem’s first movements away from amatory discourse back towards clerisy—it re clericalizes the poem by subjecting love discourse to the schema of the Seven Deadly Sins and thereby restoring a clerisy akin to that of the Prologue—it is worth examining this moment more closely. Intriguingly, he shows himself motivated by a desire to avoid the charge of clerkly “lewedness” (i.e. ignorance):

for als moche as I suppose
It sit a prest to be wel thawed,
And schame it is if he be lewed,
Of my Presthode after the forme
I wol thi schrifte so enforme,
That ate leste thou schalt hiere
The vices, and to thi matiere
Of love I schal hem so remene,
That thou schalt knowe what thei mene.  (I.272-80)

Gower represents Genius comically, eager to survey the “vices”—not for any particular benefit this will confer on Amans, but, more selfishly, because he wants to show himself “well thewed.” While this phrase could be glossed “learned,” it also connotes “knowledgable in manners,”

but either way, in light of Genius’ earlier profession of ignorance, this eagerness to teach appears comic. Gower does little to resolve the apparent paradox between Genius’ professed ignorance of matters besides love and Genius’s determination to show himself not “lewed.” The concern with blameworthiness, being “tawht” and not being “tawht,” and what “sit[s] a prest” strongly recalls the late-medieval and Ricardian problem of the “lewed” priest, a longstanding theme of ecclesiastical satire but prominent also in Chaucer and Langland.

Genius’ paradoxical status—as both “lewed” and “thewed”—becomes richer as he reiterates several features of his Book I speech as he embarks on another movement towards clericalization, at the Book VII excursus. When Amans asks Genius to teach him Aristotle’s and Calistre’s lore (cf. VI.2274), Genius first commends Amans’ request—

Mi goode Sone, thou seist wel.
For wisdom, hou that evere it stonde,
To him that can it understonde
Doth grete profit in sondri wise  (VI.2420-23)

—then protests very emphatically he lacks the knowledge to answer:

Bot touchende of so hih aprise,
Which is noght unto Venus knowe,

— MED s.v. “theue(n)” (v.(1 and 2)).
I mai it noght miselve knowe,
Which of hir court am al forthdrawe
And can nothing bot of hir lawe.     (VI.2424-28)

Finally, he says it will be profitable to tell Amans about the “scoles of Philosophie” anyway, so that Amans “miht[] ben amended” (2429-36). Genius uses a similar logic (or unlogic) in the opening of the next book: he is “somdel ... destrauht” at Amans’ request, because “it is noght to the matiere / Of love” (VII.6-9). Here Genius is less forthcoming about his lack of knowledge, focusing his complaint on Aristotle’s merely marginal utility in amatory matters. The reason why Genius’ lack of knowledge no longer appears a detriment becomes clear a few lines later: Genius has access to books besides the “registre” of Venus. Genius agrees that “wisdom” (i.e. Aristotle’s) is always apposite, even in love, and thus deserves his and Amans’ notice. Though he himself is only slightly competent in such matters, his consolation appears to be that he has the texts of Aristotle and Calistre themselves:

    Though it be noght in the registre
    Of Venus, yit of that Calistre
    And Aristotle whylom write
    To Alisandre, thou schalt wite.     (VII.19-22)

But as we saw earlier, Genius’ confidence in textual traditions has real limits, and, while bookish knowledge might provide sufficient encouragement to embark on the digression, it soon becomes clear that the digression is only a very provisional instrument of learning.

    In several ways, however, the Book I and Book VI-VII moments of re clericalization query not only bookish learning but also, to an extent at least, the professional exponents of “clergie.” In pointing up the topical issue of the “lewed” priest by constant references to blameworthy (“to wite”), “noght tawht,” “[not] well thewed,” and “lewed” clerks in a poem that makes so much learning available, at least notionally, to a “lewed” audience, Gower places a
qualified obligation of clerical learning, not only on priests, but on readers of English. But the qualification is important and far-reaching, for the “clergie” the poem deals in is drastically, even infinitely, less important than the moral lesson that “transcends” this learning, to borrow Nicholson’s term. As we have seen, Gower undercuts the institutions of clerical learning in Book IV by showing their dependence upon translation, on the one hand, and upon the very extraclergial and universally human fact of labor, on the other.24 Similarly, Gower’s digression on “Aristotels lore,” in Book VII, ends up hijacked by a discussion, consisting largely of exemplary narrative, on the universal obligation to chastity—a lesson that overwhelms the preceeding clerical doctrines and effectively calls into question the value of clerisy.

Central to this undertaking is Gower’s reinvention of the figure Genius. Scholars have tended to emphasize the complexity of the Genius tradition while nonetheless ultimately deciding that Gower’s Genius is a direct descendent from his precursor in either Alan of Lille’s *De planctu Naturae* or Jean de Meun’s portion of the *Roman de la Rose* or both.25 George Economou emphasized that Genius’ role in the *De planctu Naturae* as Nature’s “second self”—her “priest and official spokesman”—dominates Gower’s Genius as well, as Gower undertakes a “realignment of Venus with Natura and reason” over against the “Venus scelestis” who seduces Genius in the *Roman de la Rose*.26 Denise Baker clarified that Gower’s Genius combines this role with a second role, that of the implicated Genius of the *Roman de la Rose*, in such a way that Genius can show sympathy to Amans’ plight as besotted lover even as he counsels him “to abide by reason rather than will.”27 What none of these foundational studies recognize is that Gower

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24 Cf. below, chapter 5.
25 The foundational study is Chance, *Genius Figure*. See also Wetherbee, “Theme of Imagination” (though it does not deal with Gower).
confers on Venus’ “clerk” a comically awkward and bookish quality that, while not found in the earlier tradition, is provides the basis for Gower’s critique of book-learning.\textsuperscript{28} By showing Venus’ priest to be racked with contradictions, Gower calls into question the effectiveness of “clergie.”

3.2 Gower’s “burel clerk” and Other Lay Voices

There is good reason, then, to regard Gower’s self-description in the Prologue as a “burel clerk” as no mere instance of the humility topos, but, with Scanlon, as a signal that Gower means to affect a distinctly lay persona.\textsuperscript{29} Not only does the phrase’s context associate “burel clerk” with vernacularity, as we saw in chapter 2, but this meaning of “burel clerk” does indeed show itself to be fundamental to the Confessio, through the vicarious agency of Genius: like the narrator, Genius is a marginalized clerk whose reliability is always suspect.

While Scanlon likewise sees an analogy between Gower’s Genius and his self-description “burel clerk” (255), there are problems with Scanlon’s reading of this phrase. For him, “burel clerk” epitomizes the secularist appropriation of discursive authority that Gower carries out in the Confessio: “The authority of the past now lies with him, a ‘burel,’ or lay ‘clerk’ ..., and his status as lay clerk makes the political contours of his ‘middel weie’ clearer. Gower intends nothing less than a clericalization of the vernacular, the production of a lay textuality with an authority separate from but analogous to the Latin traditions of the Church” (251). Scanlon’s account develops a notion of “lay textuality” that is concerned in no sense with Christian

\textsuperscript{28} Wetherbee, “Genius and Interpretation,” comes close to this view but does not follow up its implications for “clergie” (cf. 244).
\textsuperscript{29} Narrative, 251-55.
theology but rather with the ways in which secular poetry discursively constitutes secular authority. According to this reading, Gower’s poem “assumes that only the temporal power can safely enact moral order” and preaches the message that only “the reassertion of royal privilege,” and emphatically not the Church, can rectify public life.\(^\text{30}\)

One problem with Scanlon’s reading of “burel clerk” is that it isolates the public, lay voice of the *Confessio* from the closely similar public, lay voices of Gower’s *Mirour* and *Vox*. While the *Mirour* is sometimes thought the least public of Gower’s poems, and Fisher suggests Gower wrote it “more or less for his own edification,”\(^\text{31}\) it is notable that a great proportion—lines 18421-26605, about 27% of the whole—is given over to the inherently public genre of estates satire. In addition, Gower embarks on this section with the public clearly in view: when he writes, “What I intend to write here is not from myself only, but is rather the murmur, complaint, voice, and cry of all Christian folk,”\(^\text{32}\) he shows himself conscious of a public audience even as he alleges the public, common origin of his opinions. In a well-known passage that concludes his treatment of the clergy, Gower again employs the *vox populi vox dei* motif, this time aligning himself with the laity in clear terms:

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\begin{align*}
    \text{Mai s’aunc m’en soit au travers,} \\
    \text{Et la sentence de mes vers} \\
    \text{Voldra blamer de malvuillance,} \\
    \text{Pour ce que je ne suy pas clers,} \\
    \text{Vestu de sanguin ne de pers,} \\
    \text{Ainz ai vestu la raye mance,} \\
    \text{Poy sai latin, poy sai romance,} \\
    \text{Mais la commune tesmoignance} \\
    \text{Du poeple m’ad fait tout apers} \\
    \text{A dire, que du fole errance} \\
    \text{Les clerces dont vous ay fait parlance}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 266-67.
\(^{31}\) *John Gower*, 92.
\(^{32}\) *Mirour* 18445-448; tr. Wilson 253.
Encore sont ils plus divers.

But if someone should have an opinion on the subject opposite to mine and should want to blame the sentence of my verses on ill-will (because I am not a cleric clothed in scarlet and blue, but I have worn only rayed sleeves—I know little Latin and little French), it is the common witness of the people that has determined me to say quite openly (as I have told you) that there is still greater diversity of foolish error among the clerics. (*Mirour*, 21769-780; tr. Wilson, 291, slightly modified)

Fisher identifies the “rayed sleeves” here as the livery of court officials, and this self-description in opposition to the scarlet and blue of ecclesiastics, together with Gower’s appeals to the *vox populi* principle, show Gower fashioning for himself an alternative, specifically lay, authority. He does something similar in the *Vox*. There as well, Gower’s criticism of ecclesiastics leads him to foreground his own lay status:

> O res mira nimis! legit et studet ipse scolaris  
> Mores, dum vicia sunt magis acta sua:  
> Sic quia stat cecus morum sine lumine clerus,  
> Erramus laici nos sine luce vagi.

What an astounding state of affairs! The scholar reads and studies about virtue, while his own actions become more and more vicious. So, because the clergy without the light of virtue is blind, we errant laymen wander about in darkness. (*Vox* III.2139-42; tr. Stockton, 164)

In all these passages, Gower calls attention to the spiritual vacuum that the deeply compromised clergy has left as he fills it with his own, lay writing. But whereas in Scanlon’s reading of the *Confessio*, Gower seeks to discursively prop up a secular regime, I contend that Gower shows himself equally eager in all three poems to revitalize Christian doctrines of the self and society. To be sure, secular rulers have an important role in Gower’s vision for a healed *seculum*, but so does everyone else. The *Vox* frequently appeals to the same principle of *vox populi vox dei* that we saw in the *Mirour* (and that we will see, below, occurs in the *Confessio* as well). In a

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33 *John Gower*, 55-56.
retrospective overview of the *Vox* at the conclusion of the poem, as throughout the *Vox* and *Mirour*, Gower clearly associates the *vox populi* principle with a specifically Christian vision.

Everyone must reform himself:

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Corrigit hic mundum, qui cor retinet sibi mundum:
Cor magis vnde regat, hec sibi scripta legat.
Quod scripsi plebis vox est, set et ista videbis,
Quo clamat populus, est ibi sepe deus.
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The man who keeps his heart pure sets the world right. Therefore, let him rule his heart, let him read these writings for himself. What I have set down is the voice of the people [*plebis vox*], but you will also see that where the people call out, God is often there.” (*Vox* VII.1467-70; tr. Stockton, 287-88)

An ambivalence emerges here. On the one hand, Gower’s lay voices appear necessary only in response to the failure of *cleri et scholares*. But on the other hand, this last quotation suggests that, since reform must always begin with the individual, lay voices informed by the *vox populi* are always the most effective way to redress moral issues. This abivalence will concern us again momentarily as we return to the task of defining the vernacularity of the *Confessio*.

The consistency with which Gower adopts a markedly lay voice, not only in the *Confessio*, but also in the overtly theological *Mirour* and *Vox*, argues strongly that the lay voice of Gower’s “burel clerk” is not a theologically neutral authority concerned to prop up a civil regime, but a voice that, while extraclerically alternative to the institutional Church, remains committed to a political vision based on Christian self-correction. Just as the *Vox* and *Mirour* address the whole secular order by way of elite audiences, so the *Confessio* addresses the whole order by way of a (much broader) audience that includes nobility, gentry, and merchants, and probably ecclesiastics as well.34 As in the *Mirour* and *Vox* also, Gower’s political vision is

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34 For the multiple intended audiences of the *Confessio*, and further comparison to the national audience of the *Mirour* see above, introduction.
founded on Christian theology.

The similarity of Gower’s lay voices across three languages provides an important context in which our account of the vernacularity of the *Confessio* must be set. Minnis has recently urged scholars to expand the term “vernacular” to “encompass[] a vast array of acts of cultural transmission and negotiation, deviation and/or synthesis, confrontation and/or reconciliation,” much of which occurred in medieval Latin.\(^{35}\) Thus in a real sense Gower’s lay voices in French and Latin, as well as in English, are vernacular. Yet Gower’s English practice is nonetheless different, showing vernacular pressures peculiar to English. While the similarity of Gower’s lay voices in the *Mirour*, *Vox*, and *Confessio* alike might seem to militate against the notion that, as he wrote the *Confessio*, Gower felt constrained by the peculiar conditions of English vernacularity, in fact the similarity between the voice of the *Confessio* and the voices of the more overtly theological *Mirour* and *Vox* helps to explain why Gower felt such constraints. Fiona Somerset distinguishes two categories of vernacular writing visible in late-medieval England. On the one hand were vernacular treatises on popular science and philosophy, a literature that was only weakly, if at all, marked by vernacularity, and which was “of [no] great concern to its university-learned contemporaries” but was “viewed by academics as a largely innocuous distraction for the laity, dangerous only perhaps insofar as some forms of it may mislead those who dabble in them.” On the other hand were vernacular texts that “turn[] the terms, modes of argument, and topics currently of interest to highly educated academics to its own ends, either combining this academic material with better-known popular learning, like Trevisa and Langland, or using it undiluted ... as Wycliffite writers often do.”\(^{36}\) According to this


\(^{36}\) *Clerical Discourse*, 12.
paradigm, Gower should have felt constrained by English vernacularity only to the extent that he was trying something new and threatening, either because he was practising lay theology, or else turning university learning to some other illicit purpose. Somerset’s paradigm helps situate the main features of the vernacularity of the *Confessio* that we have seen in two ways. First, it confirms that Gower does intend more than merely to translate “lore” into the vernacular. His preoccupation with vernacularity and translation in the Book IV and Book VII excursus cannot be attributed to mere reticence in explaining science to laypeople; as per the critical consensus, these sections have a much larger structural and poetic function. Second, it suggests this function is very ambitious indeed: pace Nicholson, Gower’s “transcend[ent]” lessons do not merely provide a metaphysical backdrop for the poem’s moral lessons, but this more ultimate, and, in a real sense, theological perspective is at the very center of Gower’s agenda, just as it is in the *Mirour* and *Vox*.

It is intriguing, then, that Gower’s phrase “burel clerk” also appears in *Piers Plowman*, a text that shows a deep fascination with the extraclergical voices. While this coincidence might not in itself warrant seeing an affinity between Gower and Langland, the symptoms of constraint already visible in the *Confessio*, now illuminated by Somerset’s paradigm, lend further support for such an affinity. Because *Piers Plowman* provides a strong clue as to the vernacular textuality of the *Confessio*, it deserves our attention here. Langland uses the phrase, “burel clerkes,” in Passus X of the B-text in a speech where Clergie warns clerics against hypocrisy.37 Even “[l]ewed men” can see the beam in the eyes of many clerics, and only when these clerics correct themselves will the critical voices of “burel clerkes” be silent. Following Skeat, Schmidt glosses

37 Citations of the B-text refer to *Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt; citations of the C-Text are to *Piers Plowman: The C-Text*, ed. Pearsall.
Langland’s “burel clerkes” as “‘homespun scholars’, laymen who can perhaps read.” Langland seems to afford these unlearned critics a measure of justification, at least provisionally, until the clerics repent: “And thanne shul burel clerkes ben abasshed to blame yow or to greve, / And carpen noght as thei carpe now, and calle yow doumb e houndes” (B.X.286-87; cf. 276). This ambiguous group is of the highest importance to the poem, for Langland shows himself everywhere fascinated with the question of lay learning. Will positions himself within this group, and, as a result, his authority often appears seriously compromised. Since the primary meaning of “burel” is “coarse wollen cloth” or a garment of this cloth, he aligns himself literally with the “burel clerkes” with the line “Thus yrobed in russet I romed aboute” (B.VIII.1; cf. C.X.1). Will thus presents himself in a dubious light: while “russet” could denote the habit of one of the mendicant orders, more likely it refers to the false habits adopted by the legion of gyrovagi—pretenders who affected mendicant status in order to live by begging—which had grown up by this time (cf. B.Pr.3; B.XIII.3; B.XX.5). Several passages show considerable anxiety over the moral status of Will’s writing (e.g. C.V.12-46; B.XI.411-14, XII.16). Similarly, the notoriously uncertain status of Piers depends, at least in the scene in which he first appears, on his position outside institutions of learning (cf. B.V.537-55/C.VII.182-99; B.VII.131-38).

It is clear that Langland cultivates a deliberately ambiguous persona in response to new conditions in lay learning that arose in England during the second half of the fourteenth century. Somerset represents Langland’s strategy in cultivating this ambiguous persona as

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38 Ibid., n. l. 286.
39 See especially Galloway, “Piers Plowman and the Schools”; Scase, New Anticlericalism, 161-73; and Somerset, Clerical Discourse, ch. 2.
40 MED s.v. “burel” (n.(1)), def. 1.
42 See Galloway, “Piers Plowman and the Schools,” 95-96; and Somerset, Clerical Discourse, chap. 2.
pointedly subversive. Will’s ambiguity allows him to adopt an “attitude toward learning” that “rejects conventional answers and uncovers new questions even as—or perhaps especially because the various figures he encounters repeatedly solicit (*vel sollicitant*) the grounds for his position.”

Somerset documents the wide array of models the poem advances for the relationship between “clergie” and grace—Piers and Will in different ways urge a critical stance towards institutions of learning (as does Trajan in his outburst, “baw for bokes” [B.XI.140/C.XII.73]); Ymaginatif suggests that the wide dissemination of “clergie” will bring with it the dissemination of grace; and Anima affirms the traditional relationship of “clergie” to “lewed”—and notes that none of these models emerges victorious (33-54). *Piers Plowman* thus furnishes a vivid illustration of Somerset’s thesis that late-medieval English writers found the paradox of “lewed clergie” useful for exploring the problems of vernacularity (13). Somerset notes that “lewed” and “clergie” both encompassed a wide range of meanings, not all of which made “lewed clergie” necessarily paradoxical: “‘clergie’ is used to mean ‘learning’ and even ‘body or field of knowledge’ as well as to refer to persons of clerical status ... ‘lewed’ means ‘uneducated’ or ‘illiterate’ or even ‘stupid’ as well as ‘lay.’” Nevertheless, Somerset argues that for many writers “lewed clergie” presents a useful conceptual paradox that “presumes, then challenges, the conventional model of didactic pastoral interaction whereby clerics are charged with conveying to the laity the essentials of faith necessary for salvation” (13).

Somerset’s account of Langland is illustrative for the *Confessio* both negatively and positively. Negatively, if Langland’s complex attitude towards “lewed clergie” recalls the ambivalence about lay voices that we noted in the *Vox*, there is a crucial difference. Langland

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43 *Clerical Discourse*, 32.
shares Gower’s notion that lay voices are a stopgap to fill the spiritual void left by a failed clergy. Langland’s prophecy that “burel clerkes” will cease blaming and carping once clerics repent strongly suggests that their satirical activities in the meantime, while ordained by God, are merely provisional. But Langland does not share the countervailing notion visible in Gower that “the people” generally, in some perennial, inherent sense, constitute a check on power. Langland never quotes the vox populi proverb: although David Aers notes passages that “[a] radical reader, such as a John Ball, would ... have found congenial,” Langland always appears extremely guarded and ambiguous. Importantly, Gower employs the vox populi proverb in all his works. Just as in the Mirour and the Vox, Gower appeals to the “commune tesmoignance / Du poeple” and the “vox populi” as a way of authorizing his satire of the clergy (21774-75; Vox III.1267, cf. Pr.11-13), so in the Confessio Prologue, Gower alludes to this principle as a way of authorizing his satire of civil rulers (124, 174) and of the commons (514). Thus, comparison to Piers Plowman on this score cannot serve to bring the Confessio particularly within the realm of a specifically English vernacularity; on the contrary, Gower’s invocation, in English, of the “comun vois” (Pr.124) suggests his indifference to specifically English pressures. But this in itself is illustrative. Since Gower is hardly a radical visionary—he is less radical than Langland—I suggest that Gower feels greater freedom to invoke vox populi precisely because he did not view this strategy to be highly subversive and therefore necessitating special modulation in English. While we are accustomed to think of Langland as circumspectly self-critical, sensitive to external pressures bearing on his potentially incendiary text, Gower does not

45 For example, one of the principles of Langland’s revision of the B-text is a desire to distance his poem from the Peasants’ Revolt; see Middleton, “Critical Heritage,” 6.
appear sensitive to English vernacularity in such an external way. We can infer, then, that Gower’s modulation downwards in the *Confessio* was motivated less by external pressures of this kind—whether the fear of being seditious or of being perceived as such—than by an internal sense of linguistic decorum.

In determining the nature of this internal sense of what was proper to write about in English, comparison to Langland is illustrative once more, this time in a positive way. Langland’s doubts about the importance of “clergie” for salvation, audible in Trajan’s outburst and in speeches by Piers and Will, recalls the similar skepticism about book-learning uniquely visible in Gower’s English writing. While this skepticism might exist implicitly in the *Mirour* and the *Vox*—in these poems’ creation of a lay voice, and in their more basic notion that the *vox populi* speaks with authority not possessed by clerks—the rather more explicit appearance of this skepticism of “clergie” in the English *Confessio* and in *Piers Plowman* suggests that Gower and Langland alike found such ideas somehow congruous with a specifically English language public rhetoric.

If this surmise is correct, it opens the *Confessio* to a network of issues raised by recent scholarship on English “vernacular theology,” for the writers of this literature are similarly preoccupied with finding out alternatives to clerical learning. ⁴⁶ As is well known, new religious movements in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries effected a dramatic rise in the profile of the laity—especially female but also male—relative to the clergy. ⁴⁷ Ideally, all the mendicant orders tended to elide the traditional distance between cleric and lay; ⁴⁸ Franciscan spirituality, by virtue

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⁴⁶ Esp. Watson, “Conceptions of the Word”; this is discussed below.
⁴⁷ Vauchez, *Laity*.
of its emphasis on simplicity and its ideal of the mixed life, was especially sympathetic to the condition of layfolk.\textsuperscript{49} Other, essentially lay, religious movements eroded the spiritual elitism of the clergy still further.\textsuperscript{50} In view of the strong impetus all these new religious movements gave to religious literature in the vernacular, it is not surprising that the new ways of thinking about lay and women’s piety were accompanied by new ways of thinking about vernacular language.\textsuperscript{51} Watson has shown that a wide range of vernacular religious texts from fourteenth-century England draw upon the doctrine of kenosis—that in the Incarnation God put aside his glory only by way of paradox, since this event effectively reversed the relationships of humble and exalted, weak are strong—to affirm that the lowliness of the vernacular is paradoxically its great strength. Thus, for example, when the author of \textit{Pore Caitif} offers to “teche simple men and wymmen of gode wille the right way to hevene ... withouten multiplicacion of many bokes,”\textsuperscript{52} Watson finds in this statement a reminder to lay and cleric alike “that only a certain set of religious truths (oriented towards feeling and praxis, not speculation) matter and that these truths are common to all: the ‘clergy’ that really needs to be learned (whether by vernacular leaders or clerics) is not Latin, but holiness.\textsuperscript{53} This has implications for the vernacular: “Rather than regarding the mother tongue as an emblem of crassness,” as some contemporary texts, such as Nicholas Love’s \textit{Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ}, do, \textit{Pore Caitif} “treats the vernacular as an emblem of ... universality.” Because the treatise “suffisith” for salvation, it “links itself,” in all its vernacular

\textsuperscript{49} For the Franciscan ideal of the mixed life, combining aspects of the \textit{vita contemplativa} and the \textit{vita activa}, see Fleming, \textit{An Introduction}, 8-10.
\textsuperscript{50} For the new clerical respect for laypeople, see Vauchez, \textit{Laity}, 105; Sells, “Pseudo-Woman,” 143; and Bynum, \textit{Fragmentation and Redemption}, 138.
\textsuperscript{51} For an account of the “flood” of vernacular religious works that appeared in Germany and the Low Countries during the thirteenth century, see McGinn, “Introduction.”
\textsuperscript{52} Downside MS 26542, f. 142r, transcribed by Watson, “Conceptions,” 107.
\textsuperscript{53} Watson, “Conceptions,” 108.
lowliness, to the lowliness of Christ’s human nature (108-09). A robust doctrine of the
Incarnation nourishes the high view of lay and vernacular spirituality visible in such texts as
Pore Caitif and The Prickynge of Love. Their authors “take the union between Christ’s two
natures seriously by insisting that vernacular readers can use what they read not only to think
about the human Jesus but to attain understanding of his divinity” (111). To the authors of these
texts and to many other clerics, the vernacular becomes the most fitting written medium of
theological truth, even if it makes for expressions of theology different from those of Latin texts.

Admittedly, although I have given reasons for a more profoundly theological reading of
the Confessio, the contexts just described may seem far distant from Gower. In the next section I
consider two places where Gower unambiguously invokes the paradox of the Incarnation, in
order to argue that Gower’s views on “lewed clergie” are unmistakably focused on the theology
of kenosis.

3.3 Incarnation and the Vernacular:

“Three Questions” and “Constantine and Silvester”

Olsson notes that “Three Questions” is pervaded by the mystery of Incarnation; even
further, I contend that the tale is specifically kenotic in that it presents Christ’s emptying of
himself as transforming ethics, requiring all men to follow Christ in his humiliation. Gower
emphasizes the universal impact of the Incarnation in the epigram to the tale:

Est virtus humilis, per quam deus altus ad yma
   Se tuit et nostre viscera carnis habet.
Sic humilis superest, et amor sibi subditur omnis,
   Cuius habet nulla sorte superbus opem.

54 John Gower, 90. Gower’s source for “Three Questions” remains unknown. For recent discussion, see Bratcher,
“Clever Peasant Girl.”
Through humble power God most high to depths
Has gone, and bears the entrails of our flesh.
The meek’s on high, and every love is his,
Whereas the proud one never gains love’s help. (I.xii.1-4; tr. Echard and Fanger, modified)

“Three Questions” illustrates humility initially by means of its opposite, pride. King Alphonse of Spain (Gower identifies the three main characters later; cf. 3390-96), enamored of his own wit, delights in perplexing his court with riddles insoluble to all but one knight, Petro. Envying him, Alphonse resolves on his destruction. He composes a three-part riddle, decreeing that, unless Petro answers correctly by “The thridde weke,” he will forfeit his life and estate (3110). Kenosis is inscribed in the riddle challenge in several ways. Not only do the solutions to all three riddles center on the contrast between humility and pride, but they also, recalling the Latin epigram, invoke the narrative of Incarnation directly. Further, when Petro’s young daughter Peronelle solves the riddle, feminine weakness is shown finally to out-manoeuver masculine strength.

Although the tale does not disparage clerical learning—there are no clerks in this tale—it does contrast masculine wisdom unfavorably to feminine. The opening lines of the tale describe Alphonse unambiguously as “wys,” but they also show him, more disconcertingly, “sett[ing] of his wit gret pris” (3067-68).

Of depe yimaginaciouns
And strange interpretaciouns,
Problemes and demandes eke,
His wisdom was to finde and seke;
Wherof he wolde in sondri wise
Opposen hem that weren wise. (I.3067-74)

Alphonse’s “oppos[ing]” of the “wise” may signify an unsavory aspect of his own corrupted variety of wisdom, if the moment suggests he has grown hostile to wise men. A few lines later,

55 Cf. MED s.v. “oppose(n) (v.),” def. (c) “to torment.” Certainly the primary sense here is def. (a) “to ask.”
Alphonse clearly becomes a model of corrupted wisdom, as he bends his “wittes” to subvert wisdom into “confusion”:

[Alphonse] thoghte he wolde his wittes plie
To sette som conclusioun,
Which scholde be confusioun
Unto this knyht, so that the name
And wisdom the hihe fame
Toward himself he wolde winne.   (I.3084-89)

Alphonse’s “wisdom” has been reduced to an instrument of mere self-aggrandizement. While the tale perhaps does not represent Alphonse’s selfish abuse of wisdom as characteristically masculine, and Don Petro offers an alternative, moral use of wisdom oriented to speaking “trowthe” (3082), it is notable that the young woman Peronelle ultimately triumphs where the wisdom of the men at court have failed. Importantly, Peronelle’s “wisdom” (cf. 3224) is explicitly gendered feminine. Only by persistent and characteristically feminine entreaty does Peronelle persuade her father to tell her the cause of his private sorrow. An outsider to court, she must petition her father privately in the intimate space of a garden,

Upon hire knes sche gan doun falle
With humble herte and to him calle
....
And evere among merci sche cride,
That he ne scholde his conseil hide
From hire that so wolde him good
And was so nyh his fleissh and blod.   (I.3146-47, 3167-70)

If Peronelle’s suppliant position here does not warrant characterizing her role as feminine, her next entreaty appeals specifically to her femininity. After Petro has told her about the riddle game and its high stakes, Peronelle next asks permission to speak to the king on behalf of her father:

For yit par chaunce I may pourchace
With som good word the kinges grace
For ofte schal a womman have
Thing which a man mai noght areche. (I.3203-04, 4306-07)

Having no other recourse—"He cowthe don himself no cure" (3211)—Petro consents and Peronelle of course solves the riddle and delivers him. Thus the "wisdom" of the young maiden will confound the wisdom of the men.

The persistence of theological themes causes the tale’s inversion of strength and weakness to resonate richly with the myth of kenosis. Theological resonances are discernible when Peronelle offers herself a willing substitute for her father—

> ye schull make him understande
> How ye ...
> Have leid your ansuere upon me;
> ... 
> Upon my word ye wole abide
> To lif or deth, what so betide (I.3197-99, 3201-02)

—and when she undertakes to "pourchace ... grace ... lif ... to save" (3203-05). When Petro returns with Peronelle to the royal court and announces his decision to rest his fate with her, the courtiers marvel:

> Tho was ther gret merveile on honde,
  That he, which was so wys a knyht,
  His lif upon so yong a wyht
  Besette wolde in jeupartie,
  And manye it hielden for folie. (I.3234-38)

The responses of "merveile" and, especially, of the judgment of "folie" recall kenosis. As in St. Paul’s statement, “But the foolish things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the wise; and the weak things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the strong” (1 Cor. 1:27), so here, the semblance of "folie" is merely superficial and in fact Petro’s trust in his daughter is well founded—she will in fact assuage the king’s “wraththe” and cause him to
“foryive” her father’s “gilt” (3325, 3334). Further, insofar as the passage focuses not on Peronelle but on Petro’s astonishing surrender of his life into the hands of his daughter, it recalls St. Paul’s words in praise of the humility of the eternal Word in taking on human flesh: “[He] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ... He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death” (Phil. 2:7-8). The story invokes the paradox of Redemption on two levels, then. As a figure of Christ, Peronelle recalls the Wisdom of the Father, who was humble and weak according to the flesh yet confounded the wisdom of the wise; “Lich to an hevenely figure” (3135), she willingly stands in for Petro and becomes his redeemer. At the same time, Petro himself takes on attributes of the suffering Christ. First, we cannot align him straightforwardly with the sinner in need of redemption because he has committed no fault. Furthermore, there are indications that his wise daughter extends and perfects his own humble wisdom. Even though his acquiescence to his daughter’s request to be his stand-in might is in a sense a desperate last resort—

He cowthe don himself no cure;
So betre him thoghte in aventure
To put his lif and al his good,
Than in the maner as it stod
His lif in certein forto lese           (I.3211-15)

—even here Gower notes Petro’s good judgment in the matter, crediting him once more with an attribute he has emphasized throughout (cf. 3074, 3079-80, 3088). Petro’s daughter entreats him to confide in her by pointing out that he has never regretted it in the past:

I have ofte herd you seid,
That ye such trust have on me leid,
That to my soster ne my brother,
In al this world ne to non other,
Ye dorste telle a privite
So wel, my fader, as to me.         (I.3152-58)
While one of Gower’s purposes here is to display the perfect virtue of Peronelle, he does not glorify her to the diminishment of her father, and Petro’s decision to place his life foolishly in the hands of the girl again recalls the paradox of kenosis. Like Christ in Gethsemane, Petro agonizes alone “Withinne a Gardin” (3144); taking encouragement from his “hevenly” daughter, he decides to humble himself by adopting a strategy that will open him to the charge of “folie.”

Theology comes directly into view in Peronelle’s solution of the riddle. Her answer to the first question—

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What thing in his degre
Of al this world hath nede lest,
And yet men helpe it althermest?  (I.3100-02)
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—is not theological and has little to do with kenosis except insofar as it demonstrates that values are not always what they first seem:

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The Erthe it is, which everemo
With mannes labour is bego
....
Wer it hath of himself ynowh,
So that his nede is ate leste.  (I.3251-52, 3258-59)
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But Peronelle turns to biblical narrative in her answers to the remaining questions. To the second question, “What most is worth, / And of costage is lest put forth” (3103-04), Peronelle answers, “Humilite” (3275), and, importantly, she supports this answer with reference to the Incarnation.

Through humility,

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the hihe trinite
As for decerte of pure love
Unto Marie from above,
Of that he knew hire humble entente,
His oghne Sone adoun he sente,
Above alle othre and hire he ches
For that vertu which bodeth pes:
So that I may be resoun calle
Humilite most worth of alle.  (I.3276-82)
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This divine exemplum captures the lesson of the tale as a whole: humility is strength, the lowly finally surpass the proud. We will see the same lesson enacted in the larger narrative of Peronelle’s deliverance of her father. But the biblical exemplum causes these narratives of reversal to take on theological significance. Mary furnishes a fitting emblem not only of humility but also of kenosis: the only biblical text to identify Mary as humble is the Magnificat, which follows a line of thought from God’s consideration of the humble—

And Mary said: My soul doth magnify the Lord .... Because he hath regarded the humility of his handmaid; for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. Because he that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is his name. (Luke 1:46, 48-49)

—directly to kenosis:

He hath shewed might in his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart. He hath put down the mighty [superbos] from their seat and hath exalted the humble. He hath filled hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. (1:51-53)

Here we find the same inversion of humility and pride, weakness and strength, that we find in Pauline accounts of the Incarnation, and Mary’s story thus follows a trajectory of kenosis. But Peronelle’s answer points up the kenosis theme even more than does the biblical account of Mary’s humility. In particular, the notion that God “ches” Mary from among other possible vessels of salvation (“Above alle othre”), while implicit in the Magnificat, resonates more readily with St. Paul’s account of God’s choice to work salvation by means of weak and foolish things: “For the word of the cross, to them indeed that perish, is foolishness; but to them that are saved, that is, to us, it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; and the prudence of the prudent I will reject.... Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor. 1:18-20). While Peronelle is not foolish—as Gower says, she speaks
“wordes wise” (3224, 3345)—we have seen that the court erroneously counts Petro’s trust in her as “folie,” and thus aligns the passage with St. Paul’s account of the “word of the cross.” Her wisdom, like the wisdom of the crucified Christ, certainly causes surprise. Further, the eventual outcome resembles St. Paul’s argument that initial lowliness brings greater final glory:

But the foolish things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the wise; and the weak things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the strong. And the base things of the world and the things that are contemptible, hath God chosen; and things that are not, that he might bring to nought things that are; That no flesh should glory in his sight.... That, as it is written, he that glorieth may glory in the Lord. (1 Cor. 1:27-29, 31)

In this case glory is given not to Christ, but to Peronelle, whose wise answers result in an eclipse of both Alphonse and Petro: the king is so pleased that, before all the court, he “foryive[s]” Petro and lays “al his pris on hire” (3328). Not only does Peronelle’s cleverness win her father’s deliverance, but, in a last twist, she persuades the king to elevate her father to peerage and award him an earldom (3354), thereby forcing the king to honor his earlier oath, that, were she the daughter of a peer of the realm, he would marry her (cf. 3335-40). Of course, the happy conclusion fulfils the expectations of romance. But this should not discount the story’s biblical and theological resonances, for the glorious conclusion is just as fitting for a theological tale that implicitly invokes Christian eschatology in general, and the 1 Corinthians account of the paradoxes of salvation, in particular.

Alphonse’s third question was, “Which is of most cost, / And lest is worth and goth to lost?” (3105-06). Peronelle answers Pride, and supports this answer with an account of Lucifer’s fall, which forced him to exchange heaven for hell, and Adam loss of “pris” in Paradise, which she also attributes to Pride (3304). This might be seen as kenosis-in-reverse—the vain attempt to fill oneself with what one cannot hold only brings loss—although there is little beyond the
paradoxical opposition of “cost” and “lost” [i.e. loss] to suggest this meaning. But Peronelle’s answers to this question are notable for how they the grand scope of biblical narrative to bear on questions of contemporary justice. Whereas she brought her answer to the second question to bear on the present—

who that hath humblesce on honde,
He bringth no werres into londe,
For he desireth for the beste
To setten every man in reste  (I.3286-90)

—now her argument takes on greater force as it progresses from the fall of Lucifer, to the fall of Adam, to the “wo” in Middelerthe, to the spiritual harms wrought by Pride, and—last and most significantly—to the present condition of Alphonse himself (cf. 3298-3321). Her moral case against Pride culminates in an implicit indictment of the king:

Pride is the weste of alle wicke,
And costneth most and lest is worth
In place where he hath his forth.
Thus have I seid that I wol seie
Of myn answere, and to you preie,
Mi liege lord, of youre office
That ye such grace and such justice
Ordeigne for mi fader hiere,
That after this, whan men it hiere,
The world therof mai speke good.  (I.3305-10, 3313-21)

Peronelle is of course very tactful here, but she implicitly uses the king’s near destruction of his wisest knight as a final exemplum of the high cost and and low worth of Pride. Her wisdom and tact pay off, and Peronelle actually induces Alphonse to reverse not only his sentence against Petro but also his pride. By giving the girl audience, Alphonse has perhaps already begun to put aside his pride. But by responding to Peronelle’s speech with admiration, now untainted by envy, he demonstrates his further progress in humility. Finally, he effectively shows his own foolishness by falling victim to Peronelle’s wit and committing himself to marriage. By falling
from pride, through foolishness, to humble obedience to his vow (cf. 3335-86), Alphonse’s own story provides another reflection of kenotic myth.

At the very least, “Three Questions” proves that Gower understood the Incarnation to entail a universal ethical obligation to humility; this is consistent with the poem’s theological thrust which I have argued for, even showing the ethics of the Confessio to be underwritten by Pauline imitatio Christi. But the tale also demonstrates Gower’s interest in the ways in which kenosis underwrites a reenfranchisement of the weak, valorizing a rhetoric of weakness. Several considerations serve to extend this to the vernacular rhetoric of the Confessio. First, “Three Questions” occupies a privileged position as the concluding, summary tale of Book I.56 By virtue of this placement, the tale enacts the undoing not only of Alphonse’s pride but also of Pride itself, the chief of the Seven Deadly Sins, and it is highly significant that kenosis should figure as the mechanism of this ethically pivotal moment. But kenosis takes on greater importance for the Confessio as a whole if we imagine, with several critics, that Peronelle’s delicate task of speaking truth to power not only resembles but intentionally represents the rhetorical project of Gower’s poem.57 If Judith Ferster is correct to see the poem as both an extended reflection on the problems inherent in advising the powerful and a carefully negotiated enactment of such advice-giving, this implies Gower wrote with a keen awareness of the perils that political discourse entailed in the late 1380s, and that the many-sided complexity of Gower’s doctrines may be seen in part as a politic strategy of negotiation.58 Misty Schieberle develops Ferster’s thesis with specific reference to four tales, focusing especially on “Three Questions,” that feature moments

56 Cf. Olsson, John Gower, 102; Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 75.
57 Schieberle, “Women and Counsel”; cf. Scanlon, Narrative, 257; and Olsson, John Gower, 90.
58 Ferster, Fictions of Advice, esp. 110. For the thematic and programmatic importance of counsel in the Confessio, see ibid., 108-34; Scanlon, Narrative, 252; and Schieberle, “Women and Counsel,” 92. For an account of the political climate for writing during the 1380s, see Strohm, “Politics and Poetics.”
of effective counsel by women and argues that the “submissive yet assertive” counsel on offer in such stories figures Gower’s own relationship to power.\textsuperscript{59} Though Schieberle’s claim that the “feminized counsel” visible in “Three Questions” “prepares [Gower’s] reader to accept the advice presented in the Confessio as a whole” (93) remains conjectural, I suggest that the feminization of counsel is just one of kenosis’ implications for rhetoric, and that it is the theme of kenosis, binding the tale to the theological substructure of the poem as a whole, that renders the tale an effective mirror of Gower’s project. More than the feminization of counsel it is the vernacularization of counsel—its liberation from clerical discourse—that characterizes Gower’s Confessio as a whole.

Just as “Three Questions” concludes Book I, on Pride, so “Constantine and Silvester” concludes Book II, on Envy. “Constantine” handles kenosis more allusively than “Three Questions,” by foregrounding extr clerical approaches to truth and showing their connectedness to the Incarnation. Yet kenosis is robustly present in this. A major implication of kenosis, at least as it is worked out in late-medieval piety, is a reappraisal of bodily suffering. Caroline Walker Bynum interprets the radically ascetic penitential practices that characterized women’s spirituality from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century as “not primarily an effort to escape from body” but “an effort to plumb and to realize all the possibilities of the flesh. It was a profound expression of the doctrine of the Incarnation: the doctrine that Christ, by becoming human, saves \textit{all} that the human being is.”\textsuperscript{60} Christ’s body brought not only the capacity for suffering, but also extremely rich possibilities for Christian \textit{imitatio}—what Bynum calls “the \textit{opportunity of}

\textsuperscript{59} Schieberle, “Women and Counsel,” 103.
\textsuperscript{60} Bynum, \textit{Holy Feast}, 294; cf. Newman, \textit{From Virile Woman}, 210-211.
In a similar vein, Miri Rubin and Sarah Beckwith argue that late-medieval Christianity’s emphasis on the physicality of the God’s body in the Eucharist encouraged lay groups, and especially women, to become conscious of their intimate connectedness to God precisely because of their corporeality.62

If any of Genius’s exemplary narratives depict the displacement of clerical learning by a new emphasis on the affective uses of body suffering, this is certainly true of “Constantine and Silvester.” Genius tells the tale as an illustration of the virtue of “Pite,” giving it as the final tale of Book II because “Pite” is the remedy of Envy, the vice to which that book is devoted. Although clerical authority is present within the tale, its role is clearly secondary to the affective power of physical suffering. As we shall see, the tale shows Gower keenly interested in effecting a reversal of clerical and lay.

But Gower is not entirely responsible for the reversal, for similar tendencies are present in earlier versions of the story. Genius announces that he found the tale “Among the bokes of latin” (3186), and Macaulay notes that Gower most likely used a Vita Silvestri similar to that in the Legenda Aurea of Jacobus de Voragine.63 By pointing up the Latinity of his source, Genius calls attention to his work as a translator, and yet the process of laicization was already under way in the Latin versions. Jacobus’s life of Silvester privileges emotion, affect, and miraculous intervention over intellect and argumentation.64 The portion of the life relating Constantine’s conversion begins by telling how, after his persecution forced the bishop of Rome and his clergy

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61 Bynum, Holy Feast, 246.
63 Macaulay, English Works, n. II.3187. Though Scanlon claims Gower’s version is closer to that in the Renaissance compilation Sanctuarium, seu Vitae Sanctorum by Bonino Mombrizio, I have not been able to consult this. Importantly, however, in every detail Scanlon provides from Mombrizio’s version, Jacobus’ is the same. Consequently, Jacobus’ version seems an adequate representation of the Vita Silvestri tradition as Gower found it.
64 For the text, see Legenda Aurea, ed. Graesse, 70-79; tr. Ryan 1:62-71.
into hiding, Constantine fell sick with leprosy. The pagan priests advise him to have three thousand children slaughtered at the gates of the city, and bathe in their blood. Approaching the place where the children were gathered, Constantine pities the grieving mothers of the children and relents, resigning himself to die rather than commit an act of cruelty. Sts. Peter and Paul reward Constantine’s act of pity by visiting him in a dream, and promise that, if he summons Silvester, the bishop will show him a spring which will cure his leprosy. After Constantine does this, the bishop returns and accepts Constantine as a catechumen, and the health-giving “spring” is revealed to be the water of baptism. As in the “feminized” piety of such popular devotional works as the *Meditaciones Vitae Christi*, so here, the affective response of pity is shown to be the way to spiritual understanding. The story of Constantine and Silvester, then, already participated in a highly affective rhetorical mode.

In Gower’s treatment, however, the opposition of natural affectivity and specialized clerigial knowledge becomes stronger. Gower privileges affectivity much more strongly than does Jacobus. Rather than pagan priests, “grete clerkes” convene to discuss the treatment of the emperor’s leprosy (3199). Whereas Jacobus compresses the nefarious deliberations of the priests into three words (“Tandem ad consilium pontificum vdolorum adducta sunt tria millia puerorum”), Gower stages an elaborate conference transparently modeled on a medieval learned council: the great clerks “ben assent” to gather and “trete upon this lordes hele”; they “apointen” and “determine” as their “final conclusioun” that Constantine should arrange the bloodbath (3199-213). Gower’s failure to sharply distinguish the corrupt “clerkes” who prescribe the bloodbath from Christian “clergie” who appear later is typical of his version. Gower gives

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65 For a useful discussion of this work in relation to Chaucer, see Frank, “Pathos,” 180-81; see also below.
Silvester a much more peripheral role, relying almost solely on pathos and affectivity. It is telling that “Silvestre and his clergie” are not mentioned until 165 lines into the tale (cf. 3186), whereas in Jacobus’ version, the exile of Silvester “cum suis clericis” is a crucial circumstance mentioned at the very beginning. Gower amplifies the story considerably, and one of his additions, a paraphrased account of what Silvester taught the emperor as catechumen, seems to afford clergial knowledge greater importance (3385-3439). But long before this moment, even before Silvester returned from exile to meet with Constantine to Rome, the decisive event has already occurred. Whereas in both versions of the tale Constantine responds to the lamenting mothers with pity, only in Gower’s does this result directly in his salvation. In Jacobus’s version, Peter and Paul’s promise to the emperor is conditional because Constantine still must receive the sacrament of baptism. But in Gower’s, the saints declare definitively,

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for thou hast served  because
Pite, thou hast pite deserved:
Forthi thou schalt such pite have
That god thurgh pite woll thee save. (II.3339-42)
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Whereas Jacobus takes occasion in his life of Silvester to buttress the doctrine of papal supremacy—he tells how Constantine, immediately upon converting, enacted legislation to affirm the supremacy of the Roman pontiff—Gower not only diminishes Silvester’s role in the conversion itself but also undercuts papal authority. Even though Peter and Paul instruct Constantine to summon Silvester to his court, and Silvester still receives the honor of catechizing and baptizing him, the authority of the Roman bishop is undercut by an egalitarian vein that runs through the tale. This appears in the two portions Macaulay judged to be Gower’s most

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66 Ed. Graesse, 71.
67 See ed. Grässe, 72; tr. Ryan 1:64.
important additions.\footnote{Macaulay, \textit{English Works}, n. II.3187.} First, after witnessing the anguish of the grieving mothers, Constantine reflects privately on the nature of human life. “Kinde” prefers no one, and

\begin{quote}
The povere child is bore als able  
To vertu as the kinges Sone;  
For every man his oghne wone  
After the lust of his assay  
The vice or vertu chese may.  
\end{quote}

This passage does not directly call into question the need for authoritative, clerical guides to moral virtue, and the notion that true gentility comes not from birth but from virtue might seen less remarkable because commonplace. Nevertheless, the egalitarian tendency is more pronounced in the speech Gower assigns via paraphrase to Silvester, even becoming the dominant note in the imagined sermon. God will not respect rank when he judges all men for their deeds. Silvester surveys the estates, declaring that these will have no value at the last judgment. Significantly, the last of the distinctions which the catalogue obliterates is the one defined by learning:

\begin{quote}
The lewed man, the grete clerk  
Schal stonde upon his oghne werk,  
And such as he is founde tho,  
Such schal he be for everemo.  
\end{quote}

The last two passages and the intervening text show problems with Scanlon’s secularizing account, which sees “Constantine and Silvester” as founded, not on an opposition of learning and simplicity, but of secular and ecclesiastical power. As Scanlon notes, the coda to Gower’s tale eradicates the \textit{Vita Silvestri}’s concern to glorify the papacy, even to subordinate imperial to papal power, replacing this emphasis with an exposé of papal corruption. Upon being baptized, Constantine does not enact laws in support of the papacy (as in the \textit{Vita}), but he does
honor the papacy indirectly by founding churches in honor of Peter and Paul and endowing them materially. This bodes ill:

Bot how so that his will was good
Toward the Pope and his Franchise,
Yit hath it proved other wise,
To se the worchinge of the dede:
For in Cronique this I rede;
Anon as he hath mad the yifte,
A vois was herd on hih the lifte,
Of which al Rome was adrad,
And seith: ‘To day is venym schad
In holi cherche of temporal,
Which medleth with the spirital.’
And hou it stant of that degree
Yit mai a man the sothe se:
God mai amende it, whan he wile,
I can ther to non other skile.    (II.3482-96)

While Gower is of course not unique in tracing present corruptions back to the Donation of Constantine, the prophecy makes an especially fitting conclusion to Gower’s version of the tale in light of the strongly lay, egalitarian character seen throughout. Scanlon reads this prophecy rather differently, however, claiming that it “assumes ... only the temporal power can safely enact moral order.” Reading Constantine’s bequest tragically, as not only harbinger of “the moral collapse of the Church” but also “an abdication on the part of Constantine” that will “make necessary the reassertion of royal privilege which occurs in the Tale of Boniface, and for which Gower will argue more systematically in Book VII.”70 While royal power certainly plays an important role in the reform envisioned in the lay voices of all of Gower’s poems, as we saw in 3.2, so does every lay individual. Certainly, the tale of Constantine contains a specific warning that princes should not adopt a servile position before ecclesiastics. But Constantine’s abdication

70 Narrative, 266-67.
itself represents not a critique of the clergy but reminder that civil, as well as ecclesiastical, office is susceptible to corruption: Constantine made his bequest to the Church not because seduced by the pope, but from his own bad choice. The egalitarian sentiment in the passages quoted above, cutting across all the estates by likening the “povere child” to the “kinges sone,” and, importantly the “lewed man” to the “grete clerk,” shows that the tale transfers privilege not so much from pontif to prince as from clerk to layman, learned to “lewed”; this is populist, laicizing rhetoric.

This is especially evident in how the tale privileges emotion as a spiritual catalyst. As we have seen, Jacobus’s version valorizes pity, though to a lesser extent, especially in the passage in which Constantine’s pity for the grieving mothers is aroused:

> when he came out to the place where the bath was to be prepared, the children’s mothers crowded forward to meet him with their hair in disarray, crying and wailing pitifully. Constantine wept and halted his chariot, stood up, and said: “Hear me, counts and fellow knights and all you people here present! The honor of the Roman people is born of the font of piety.... Therefore let piety win in this conjuncture.... It is better for me, therefore, to die, the life of these innocents being spared, than by their destruction to recover my life—an uncertain recovery at best, whereas what is certain is that the life so recovered is a cruel one.”

71 Ed. Grässe, 71-72; tr. Ryan 1:64.

72 For the wide semantic range this word carried at least by the time the Vita Silvestri was read by Gower, see Galloway, “Politics of Pity,” 86-87.

Jacobus fills the scene with pathos by showing the anguish of the mothers and the emotional effects in Constantine, and by repeating the word *pietas* (“piety” or “pity”). But Gower outdoes Jacobus in each of these respects. The grieving women are given greater prominence, as we will see, and the children themselves are shown adding to the noise of the mothers’ lamentation:

> Ther was ynowh to wepe and crie
> Among the Modres
> ...
> And thus wommen ther come ynowhe
With children soukende on the Tete.
Tho was ther manye teres lete,
Bot were hem lieve or were hem lothe,
The wommen and the children bothe
Into the Paleis forth be broght
With many a sory hertes thoght
Of hem whiche of here bodi bore
The children hadde, and so forlore
Withinne a while scholden se.
The Modres wepe in here degre,
And manye of hem aswoune falle,
The yonge babes criden alle. (II.3222-38; cf. 3286)

Gower specifies the children’s age as less than seven (3207). Virtually identical to the age of Chaucer’s “litel clergeoun” in the Prioress’ Tale, this age represents the end point of childhood innocence and the association with innocence adds pathos to the image of the tender image of “children soukende on the Tete.” Whereas Jacobus repeats the word “pietas” three times in the passage describing Constantine’s repentance, Gower makes the tale revolve around “pite,” “charite” and their cognates (cf. 3290, 3295, 3300, 3302, 3311, 3324, 3328, 3330, 3332, 3340, 3341, 3438). Gower’s version also differs from Jacobus in making Constantine witness the mothers’ and children’s lamentation within the private space of his own chamber instead of in view of the public. This enables Gower to represent Constantine’s internal deliberations at greater length and with greater intimacy. But it also renders the process whereby Constantine undergoes conversion more accessible. Robert Frank notes that in one popular treatise exemplary of late-medieval laicizing piety, the *Meditaciones Vitae Christi* composed in Latin by the Franciscan John of Caulibus but circulated in many vernacular versions, a domestic scene serves as a way of accommodating the humble: in such a highly imagistic, “feminine” piety, domestic

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73 PriT VII.503.
scenes help create “[a] Christ ... with whom the humblest can identify.” Similarly here, Gower strips the crucial moment of Constantine’s baptism of the trappings of public ceremony and office, thus enabling his readers to participate more fully by envisioning themselves in the domestic space and emulating Constantine’s reponse of pity. Whereas in the last quotation from Jacobus, Constantine’s virtuous pity is connected to his Romanitas, Gower makes it clear that Constantine’s pity was ordained by the universal law of “kinde”: “Mai non eschuie that fortune / Which kinde hath in hire lawe set” (3250-51).

Pity is certainly not portrayed as available only to males, and in a number of ways Gower associates this virtue with femininity. The private, domestic context we have just noted helps to accentuate the feminine qualities already present in the story as Gower received it. All versions of the story agree that grieving women and children can be effective instruments in persuading men to right action, and Constantine’s own mother Helen plays a key role later on (cf. Confessio II.3471-74). But Gower enlarges the role of mothers by using “Moder” and related words (“wommen,” “children,” “babes”) as frequently as he does “pite” (cf. 3205, 3219, 3223, 3227, 3230, 3234, 3236, 3238, 3287, 3288, 3307, 3319 etc.). The word first appears in Genius’s introduction of the story:

“Ayein Envie is Charite,  
Which is the Moder of Pite,  
That makth a mannes herte tendre  
That it mai no malice engendre  
In him that is enclin therto.  
For his corage is tempred so,  
That thogh he mihte himself relieve,  
Yit wolde he noght an other grieve,  
Bot rather forto do plesance  
He berth himselven the grevance,  
So fain he wolde an other ese.   (II.3173-83)

In both Jacobus and Gower, Constantine’s pity for the women and children moves him even to self-sacrifice. But importantly, Genius’s introduction to the tale compares this willingness to sacrifice one’s “oghne bodi” (3292) to the feminine sacrifices of maternity and childbirth. Having just spoken of “Charite” as the “Moder of Pite,” Genius proceeds to describe the moral and spiritual benefits of “Pite” in terms of their physiological effects on men. Pity makes a “mannes herte” tender; significantly, it limits the kind of engendrure (i.e. offspring) his heart can bring forth (“it mai no malice engandre”). Such a man’s heart is “tempred” so as he would rather suffer for another’s “ese” than bring himself relief at the cost of another’s pain. If these physiological changes suggest those wrought by pregnancy and maternity on the female body, it is possible to hear a pun in Gower’s “He berth himseleven the grevance.” The one explicit mention of childbirth in the tale directly associates this with pain, as the mothers (“hem whiche of here bodi bore / The children hadde,” 3233-34) lament the thought of their children’s death. Constantine’s conversion turns on the “grete mone” of mothers and the “wo” of children. Significantly, this moment is again described in terms that suggest pregnancy and the pain of childbirth:

He sith also the grete mone,
Of that the Modres were unglade,
And of the wo the children made,
Wherof that al his herte tendreth,
And such pite withinne engendreth,
That him was levere forto chese
His oghne bodi forto lese,
Than se so gret a moerdre wroght
Upon the blod which gulteth noght. (II.3286-94)

75 Cf. Confessio II.3291-93; Legenda Aurea, ed. Graesse, 72; tr. Ryan, 1:64.
While “engendreth” can simply mean “bring about” (MED s.v. “engendre(n),” def. 4), the presence of mothers and of the theme of bodily self-sacrifice suggest a procreative meaning remains present here, as it was at 3176. But, significantly, Gower is not using the word in its male meaning, “to beget” (def. 1b), for “pite” is itself the offspring, engendered within Constantine. In a strange reversal, the begetter of this virtue is ostensibly feminine: the noises of the maternal “mone” and the “wo” of the children. Gower’s representation of Constantine’s spiritual birth thus recalls the paradoxes that were so common in late-medieval piety: as in the devotional writing discussed by Watson, so here, feminine weakness is identified with closeness to God.

Whereas Jacobus’ story affords an important place to learned disputation, even if alongside pathos and the rhetoric of the body—Silvester disputes with the learned opponents of the faith—Gower’s story operates on the basis of affective, corporeal rhetoric alone. Even when hierocracy reasserts itself in the form of Silvester’s paraphrased sermon, it is notable how far bodies and actions are privileged over ideas and doctrines. Of the forty-three lines surveying Christian doctrine from the Fall to the Last Judgment (3387-3430), a full twenty-five are concerned with the need for moral action (3406-3430). The brief account of the Incarnation highlights Christ’s “fleissh and blod” by the repetition of these words:

He styh up to his fader evene
With fleissh and blod into the hevene;
And riht so in the same forme
In fleissh and blod he shal reforme,
Whan time comth, the qwike and dede.  

(II.3401-05)

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76 Legenda Aurea, ed. 73-78; tr. Ryan 1:65-70.
This privileging of Christ’s body serves effectively to remind us that it is incarnational theology, and not merely a heightened taste for pathos, that underlies the characteristically late-medieval rhetoric of the body that Gower is employing here. Blood and bodily pain receive considerable prominence in the account of Constantine’s conversion. The need for innocent “childes blod” (3206) is the catalyst of conversion, and the healing power of blood becomes a leitmotif: “blod, thei seiden, schal be leche” (3220; cf. 3284-85, 3294, 3360). The intimate connection between the averted sacrifice of the children and the atoning sacrifice of Christ becomes explicit when Gower has Constantine baptized in the very vessel “which for blod / Was mad” (3445-46). But just as Christ’s “fleissh and blod” serve as emblems not only of his suffering but also of his ascension and final victory, so the mothers and children constitute humble, feminine images of victory as well as suffering, when Constantine turns their tears to laughter by giving them money, food, and clothing (3301-24). Gower’s telling of the story favors suffering, and finally rejoicing, mothers and children for the same reason it favors the suffering, and finally resurrected, body of Christ: in the incarnational rhetoric that pervades Gower’s version of the story as so much late-medieval devotional writing, such physical displays are what communicate moral and theological truth most effectively.

But more than Incarnation, the tale figures kenosis. Christ’s emptying of himself is shown to reverberate through all subsequent human ethics when Constantine remarks, “Who that woll maister be, / He mot be servant to pite” (3299-300), thereby placing on all who would be great the obligation to follow Christ’s example. But if this is the moment when the doctrine becomes most overt, kenosis underlies the tale as a whole. Constantine willingly sacrifices “his oghne bodi” and is thereby lifted up; the weak and suffering are shown to be victors; body and affectivity vastly outperform clergial wisdom.
“Constantine and Silvester” and “Three Questions” together occupy only a modest space within the vastness of the *Confessio*. But the extent of Gower’s reliance on theological motifs in both of these prominent summary tales is surely significant, for theology evidently struck him as the most effective means by which to summarize the moral instruction of Books I and II, and this fact lends further support for my contention that theological concerns play a greater role in the poem than recent critics have allowed. But if these two tales, though atypical in the overtness of their theological interests, may be seen as a more overt expression of theological interests that pervade the poem as a whole, the same may be true of their shared concern with kenosis. But how might kenosis manifest itself in stories that do not mention the Incarnation, or show the humbling of the proud and exaltation of the humble? The significance of kenosis is that it breaks down social and institutional boundaries by suggesting that God is near to all people, regardless of rank, or alternatively, that he is especially near to the humble and weak. If an overt interest in kenosis is unique to “Three Questions” and “Constantine,” these tendencies are not. I suggest that kenosis is central to Gower’s program to forge a distinctly English vernacular rhetoric.

**Conclusion**

In chapters 2 and 3, we have seen evidence that Gower backs away from “clergie” in the *Confessio*. To some degree, this backing away might be attributed to perceptions on Gower’s part that English was a weak instrument of learned discourse, and that English’s “lewed” readers were only slightly capable of cogitating matters “nought bodely,” as we suggested in chapter 2. But we have now seen evidence that Gower perceived not only weakness, but also strength, in vernacular language. The lowered theological register of the poem is not purely the result of negative attitudes to English, for the Book VII excursus demotes the arcana of “Aristotels lore”
less out of necessity than out of a concern to accentuate the more important and more difficult lesson of “chastite” and the theological lesson that all life is lived in God’s order and in his sight. But if Gower has ideological grounds for demoting book learning, clearly Gower would apply the same priorities to all laymen, not just the exceptionally “lewed.” At this point we see not merely a rhetorical accommodation of ethics to the needs of stupid Englishmen, but an instance of Gower’s perception that all ethics partakes of vernacularity already, because it must be worked out in the contingencies of lived experience. English seems to have the advantage for such a program, and I suggest that is why Gower lavished so much attention on this project, although, in the rise of the Lollard persecution later on, other constraints may have motivated his virtual abandonment of English after 1393.77

I have argued that during the period of the Confessio Gower does not back away from theological and scientific arcana out of fear his poem might be judged Lollardizing or seditious, for Gower appeals loudly and repeatedly to the “comun vois”—something that would have made Langland cringe. Rather, some finer, internal sense of linguistic propriety seems to constrain him from certain kinds of writing in English and towards others. Finally, I have argued that the key to Gower’s vernacular sensibilities is kenosis—not because Gower was peculiarly attuned to that doctrine, but because the doctrine already pervaded vernacular culture at this time, providing a dominant trope that served to elevate the lowly vernacular. We see ample evidence for this in Gower. While kenosis, as a doctrine, is absent from the majority of tales of the Confessio, it receives full attention in the prominently placed summary tales of Books I and II. Since not only the kenotic tales, but also the poem as a whole, show a strong preference for affective rhetoric

77 As Yeager suggests; “Politics and the French Language,” 151. See also above, 2.2.
over clerical argument and predication, the myth of kenosis appears central to Gower’s
distinctively English-language rhetoric. But if Christ’s kenosis has changed human ethics, as
Gower claims, then, again, kenotic rhetoric is no mere “accommodation” of “ethics” but an
acknowledgement of ontological “vernacularity”: the world is vernacular.
4. Kinde Grace:

Metamorphosis and Accommodation

Introduction

As should be clear from chapters 2 and 3, to say that Gower’s *Confessio* is deeply concerned with finding out ways to accommodate moral doctrine to a broad public is by no means to judge the poem mere clerkly condescension. Gower’s lay rhetoric may bear traces of the disparagement of lay cognitive abilities that is commonplace in clerical discussions of the instruction of the “lewed,” but it is strongly inflected by new developments that had transformed late-medieval piety and pastoral rhetoric by this time, effectively dissolving the binaries learned/unlearned and spiritual/material. Nor is the “middel weie” of the *Confessio* simply a compromise between learned and unlearned stylistic registers, but an accommodative rhetoric that seeks to make moral wisdom as attractive as possible “for Engelondes sake” and meet wise and simple alike in a common mode that takes full advantage of the strengths of the vernacular. The vernacular rhetoric of the *Confessio* affects voice that, while essentially extraclerical, is not secular in the modern sense but, on the contrary, assumes the immanence of the divine in the corporeal and the lay. In this chapter and the next, we will return to the Ovidian tendencies which were our concern in chapter 1 in order to examine how Gower gathers from Ovidian myth rich resources for accommodating moral and theological doctrine to the general audience of the poem. The present chapter, on metamorphosis, and chapter 5, on the art of love, will investigate the ways in which these two fields provide essential materials for the rhetoric of the body that Gower fashions for his English public.
Stories of metamorphosis are especially apt for such a project because, by the diffusiveness and ambiguity of their significations, they distinguish the poem from clerical agendas that focus on watering down truth for the laity. The very indirection of metamorphosis tales brings clear benefits for a writer eager to find ways to accommodate his doctrine to an audience whose appetite for moral instruction is limited. As we saw in the introduction, Gower is aware of the reluctance of his fellow countrymen to receive moral correction. Accordingly, metamorphosis is attractive because it reveals by concealing, in a paradox that relies heavily on the good will of the reader for its success, just as the moral meaning of the *Ovidius Maior* does (see 1.3). In this chapter, I argue that stories of metamorphosis serve Gower’s interest in fashioning an accommodative rhetoric in two main ways. First, because metamorphosis is a quintessentially mythical trope that always confers on narrative an air of “mythic typicality,”¹ Gower, by offering such stories directly to the reader without the benefit of any but a very imperfect interpretive apparatus, Gower at once flatters his lay reader and points up the public accessibility of truth. Second, stories of metamorphosis offer unique opportunities for a distinctive, vernacular theology because they are inherently concerned with the mystery whereby human beings cooperate with divine providence. In his metamorphosis stories, Gower focuses on the contribution of Nature to spiritual life, and assesses this contribution very highly. As a result, grace is represented as already near at hand and ready for use, even without clerical mediation.

4.1 Metamorphosis and Myth

As we saw in chapter 1, Gower’s frequent use of miraculous transformation confers on

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¹ Clarke, *Allegories of Writing*, 1; see below.
the world of the *Confessio* an aura of mystery and brings the poem into close contact with Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Yet for all his Ovidian affinities, Gower is more at home with the medieval *Ovidius Maior* than with the Augustan poem itself, and his tales of transformation often seem trite in comparison with their darker Ovidian exemplars. While it is possible to find affirmations of order and cosmic justice in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovidian metamorphosis most characteristically points up scenes of victimhood, silenced voices, and moral disorder.² Leonard Barkan shows that each of the rivals in the weaving contest at the beginning of Book 6 represents an opposing aesthetic of metamorphosis: while Minerva foregrounds fixed principles of cosmic justice and aesthetic order, using her tapestry to show “[p]unishment, finality, and finite panels of narrative,” Arachne foregrounds multiplicity and flux by depicting “not fixity but process, as the gods keep changing their shape while the artistic web in which they are woven keeps changing its colors.”³ According to Barkan, Arachne’s aesthetic plays a much more important role in both the *Metamorphoses* and the “metamorphic tradition” of Western art generally: in both, “morality wars with beauty and is often submerged in it” (3, 5).

If Arachne’s perspective dominates the “metamorphic tradition” generally, most medieval art must be excepted from this tradition. As Barkan puts it, medieval mythographers adapted various strategies “to tame the fantastic and immoral tales of ancient metamorphoses in order to grant them acceptance into the Catholic cosmos.” So successful were these efforts to tame myth by “demystification, allegory, and integumentum” (105) that by Gower’s time writers were barely troubled by the paganism of the tales, and metamorphosis had lost much of its potency as well. But because metamorphosis still retains a measure of power, as I hope to show,

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³ *Gods Made Flesh*, 3, 4-5.
it is useful to compare Gower’s metamorphoses to those of other writers.

Adapting Barkan’s reading of the mainstream Ovidian tradition, Lynn Enterline argues that Ovid and the Renaissance writers he most influenced show a fascination with the “complex, often violent, connections between body and voice.” The “desecrated and dismembered bodies” that fill Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and later works in the Ovidian mode “are imagined to find a way to signify, to call us to account for the labile, often violent, relationship between rhetoric and sexuality” (2). While this violence is not limited to magical transformation, metamorphosis has an important role: figures such as Io and Actaeon are transformed, resulting in “disquieting erasures” that contribute to the *aporias* so characteristic of Ovidian poetry. Ovidian writers show a fascination with the materiality and hence lability of language: “As many characters discover to their peril, the performative dimension of Ovidian rhetoric is in excess of, or to the side of, thought” (12). Though such instances of speech, however unpredictable, are effective in various ways, often they produce no effect on the addressee within the story. Enterline notes that a telltale sign of Ovid’s influence in later poetry is “the scene of an impossible demand,” typified when “Narcissus pleads in vain with his image, Echo with Narcissus, Apollo with Phaethon, Pentheus with his aunt and mother, Actaeon with his hounds.” In such scenes, “It is as if ... hopelessness ... augments the beauty, pathos, or rhetorical ingenuity of words spoken to no avail.” Not primarily about psychological persuasion, these scenes have other purposes: “resistence to another’s address underlines language’s formal beauty, its unexpected and uncontrolled duplicity, or, more generally, its moving force (for readers and audiences if not for the implacable addressee)” (14).

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Enterline’s account of the Ovidian tradition is illustrative of Gower’s practice both positively and negatively. With Ovid, Gower shows a keen awareness of the material basis of language and poetry, and by this means keeps always before us the “disturbing unpredictability of the human voice” (11). Gower’s metamorphoses share with Ovid’s this basic quality of driving us back to materiality. As we saw in chapter 1, the changing forms featured in so many of Gower’s stories are reflected in the shifting, disfigured form of the Confessio itself. Like Ovid, Gower underscores the irreducibly material basis of poetry and human knowledge, and shows himself conscious of the problems this brings, given matter’s changeableness and corruptibility. But the aporia stressed by Enterline is lacking from Gower’s stories of metamorphosis, even when, as in “Tereus” (V.5551-6047), these are very dark. With the possible exception of Amans’ failed suit toward the lady and toward Venus and Cupid (this is discussed in chapter 5), nothing like the “scene of the impossible demand” occurs. On the contrary, there are a large number of tales showing successful persuasion or conversion—especially “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” (I.2785-3041), “Constance” (II.587-1598), “Constantine and Silvester” (II.3187-497), “Pymaleon” (IV.371-450), “Iphis” (IV.451-505), “Rosiphelee” (IV.1245-446), “Florent” (I.1407-861), “Three Questions” (I.3067-402), and “Apollonius of Tyre” (VIII.271-2008).

Though they yield comic, rather than tragic, results, Gower’s scenes of persuasion and conversion are like Ovid’s scenes of impossible demand in that often, as in the case of “Three Questions” and “Constantine and Silvester,” flesh and spirit are brought together in extremely productive ways, with the difference that “representation, materiality, and action” do not “collide” but combine in happy endings. An example is the constructive use of pathos in

5 Ibid. 6.
“Constantine and Silvester,” which we looked at in chapter 3: though based on a physiological response to physical suffering, pathos nevertheless produces spiritual insight. As we will see, Gower’s metamorphoses frequently combine materiality with meaning in similar, powerful ways, but generally have happier endings than Ovid’s.

The brighter tone of Gower’s metamorphoses, and—in the sense that they are purged of the disorienting tendencies found in Ovid—their “tameness,” is easily seen. In comparison to Ovid’s, Gower’s metamorphoses are “tame” because the confessional framework in which they are set serves at once to maintain a critical distance from such stories and to interpret them in terms of reassuringly familiar sensibilities. Often metamorphosis appears merely as the mechanism by which the lesson of the tale is demonstrated emblematically in some visual or other sensual detail. Thus, in the tale Macaulay titled “Acis and Galatea,” Gower reduces Ovid’s thirteen hexameters (Met. 13.885-97) relating Acis’s transformation into a spring to six much shorter English octosyllabic lines. Whereas Ovid’s lines emphasize the marvelous quality of the transformation, Gower’s much sparser account focuses mainly on the “freissh[ness]” of the spring, a focus that appears original to Gower, though it may be based on Ovid’s “purgaturque” (890). Acis

into a welle  
Transformed, as the bokes telle,  
With freisshe stremes and with cliere,  
As he whilom with lusti chiere  
Was freissh his love forto qweme. please   (II.193-97)

Whereas Gower’s focus on the freshness of the well might seem peripheral to the exemplum’s moralization, which concerns the envy of Polyphemus, elsewhere Gower uses metamorphosis to

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6 This observation is indebted to Nicholson’s classification of some of the tales of the Confessio as “emblematic tales”; see Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 84.
epitomize the same lesson pointed up by Genius’s moralization in a memorable, static image. Thus Genius tells “Phebus and Daphne” as an exemplum against “Folhaste.” Again the signification given to the image appears to be Gower’s own. In Ovid’s version, Daphne flees her pursuer and calls upon her father Peneus for help: her transformation provides a way of escape that is unjust and disquieting (Met. 1.451-567). In Gower’s version, by contrast, Daphne’s transformation is not a means of her escape but a sign to Phebus and to other would-be perpetrators of “Folhaste.” Gower does not describe Daphne’s plight with sufficient intimacy to disturb his reader very deeply.

And forto make him [Phebus] full believe That no Folhaste mihte achieve To gete love in such degree, This Daphne into a lorer tre Was torned, which is evere grene.   (III.1713-17)

What most interests Gower is the story’s signification, which he establishes by adding a gloss on the laurel’s evergreenness:

In tokne, as yit it mai be sene, That sche schal duelle a maiden stille, And Phebus failen of his wille.   (III.1718-20)

Like Acis’s freshness, Daphne’s ever-green laurel provides a “tokne” of the vanity of Folhaste, a lasting memorial which “yit mai be sene.” Other tales in which metamorphosis is reduced to a emblematic function include “Phebus and Cornide” (cf. III.804, 809) and “Demephon and Phillis” (cf. IV.865, 871), and the tendency to interpret metamorphosed bodies as signs is also found in “Narcissus” (I.2352), “Tereus” (V.6044), “Neptune and Cornix” (V.6204-11), and “Lichaon,” (VIII.3365).

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The framing narrative loses a great deal of its power to “tame” Gower’s Ovidian material whenever Gower allows a tale to extend beyond the length and narrative complexity of a brief exemplum. “Tereus” probably qualifies as the darkest tale of the _Confessio_, not only because of its scenes of mutilation, filicide, and cannibalism, but also because its length and narrative compulsion enable the reader to respond more viscerally to these than to Acis’s death or Phillis’s suicide, or even to Eolus’s murder of his daughter in “Canace and Machaire” (cf. III.222-331). But even in “Tereus,” Genius distances us from the tale by making a narrow moral application to Amans. Genius moralizes each of the bird species the three characters are turned into (V.5949-6047), and then returns us to Amans’s comparatively easy situation:

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Bewar, mi Sone, er thee so falle;
For if thou be of such covine,
To gete of love be Ravine
Thi lust, it mai thee falle thus,
As it befell of Tereüs.     (V.6048-52)
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One further way that Genius’s moralizations keep mythic power in check is by bringing comfortably affirming Christian doctrinal and ethical norms to bear. At the risk of losing sight of the rich ambiguities within Genius, the unreliable narrator responsible for setting the tales within the frame, we should note how frequently and effortlessly Christian commonplaces occur. Contemporary ecclesiastical concerns are frequent (e.g. Pr.193-498; I.608-72; II.3050-84, 3482-3496; V.6961-7095). Genius moves easily between classical myth and contemporary application. Early in Book I, Gower segues from an opening group of tales that includes “Acteon,” “Medusa,” and “The Sirens” to a discussion of contemporary ecclesiastical concerns, under the headings “Ipocrisis Religiosa,” “Ipocrisis eclesiastica,” and “Ipocrisis secularis”; it is striking

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8 See especially Wetherbee, “Latin Structure,” and idem, “Genius and Interpretation”; and see above, 3.2.
that Genius illustrates his arguments about contemporary and specifically Christian concerns (cf. 656-64) by means of two tales from pagan antiquity, “Mundus and Paulina,” and “The Trojan Horse” (289-1234). Genius also invokes Christian doctrine in aid of moral and other kinds of argument without fanfare (e.g. III.172; V.1737-824; VIII.1-198, 2088). We cannot be certain what Genius is meant to represent—indeed he is inherently syncretistic—but Christian theological commonplaces of sin and judgment, redemption and grace, are never wholly absent, and their constant presence contributes greatly to the “taming” of myths of metamorphosis.

This “taming” of myth raises questions directly pertinent to my contention that Gower presents myth as if unmediated truth, for Genius in these myths seems guilty of the very “glossynge” Chaucer and others parody as the central characteristic of clergial culture at its worst. Several points should be made here. First, it is not my contention that the Confessio is innocent of clerisy, and these stories, though not untypical of the Confessio, may exemplify more strongly clergial tendencies than are found elsewhere in the poem’s eight books. But our brief survey of Gower’s “tamed” myths is illuminating for another reason, which might serve to qualify Gower’s clericalism even here. However much Genius may resemble the logocentric glossator, his apparently earnest interpretation very often slips away from the most obvious implication of the story. As we saw in “Acis and Galatea,” Genius’s interpretation of the spring’s “freshness” is peripheral to the story’s ostensible focus, which is not Acis’ character but Polyphemus’. A similar point might be made in “Phebus and Daphne.” Like an incompetent glossator, Genius ignores Daphne’s suffering and insists solely on the lesson furnished by Daphne’s transformation, even though, to do this, he must very artificially abstract the detail of Daphne’s greenness from the tale, whose most obvious feature is injustice: to teach Phebus a
lesson, the gods terminate Daphne’s existence as a woman. The often-noted hermeneutical
slippage that exists between story and gloss tends strongly to undermine Gower’s clericalism.⁹

More importantly, Gower’s appropriation of Ovidian myth has another side that points up
myth’s resistance to clerical exegesis. In light of the reassuring commonplaces seen in the stories
just surveyed, it may seem unlikely that the metamorphoses of Gower’s Confessio should retain
anything of the mythic power found in Ovid. But as we saw in 1.3, comparison of the Confessio
to the highly polysemic glossed Ovidius Maior yields similarities as well as differences. While
Gower emphasizes the immanence of truth in myth and concerns himself with making myth
accessible, independently of clerical mediation, we also noted that Gower’s poem, following
major currents in the late-medieval literary practice that are also visible in the moralized Ovids,
highlights the reader’s role and the importance of reading with right intention. Whereas the
moralized Ovids emphasize the virtuosic reading of the author-clerk, the Confessio points up the
urgency that its own inexpert, extraclerical readers read ably and correctly. Importantly, if
“[m]ythic typicality places an allegorical frame around any literary metamorphic episode,”¹⁰ in
Gower’s case the allegoresis is profoundly nonclergial, for the allegories implied even by
Gower’s emblematic metamorphoses are never so reducible to univocal meaning as Genius’
exegesis might suggest.

The sheer frequency of metamorphosis in the Confessio is important, then, because every
instance of the motif contributes to the poem’s mythic richness of meaning. Metamorphosis
occurs in 26 of poem’s roughly 141 tales¹¹—a substantial portion—and to convey a sense of this

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¹⁰ Clarke, Allegories of Writing, 1.
¹¹ This count is from Fisher, John Gower, 188. Other scholars count the tales of the Confessio variously from 112
(J.-Th. Welter) to 150 (Nicholson); see Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 410 n3.
mass it is worth listing these tales here according to the classification—admittedly imperfect—by which I discuss them in this thesis. Emblematic metamorphoses occurs in “Acteon” (I.333-78), “Gorgons” (389-435), “Narcissus” (2254-2366), “Acis and Galatea” (II.97-210), “Phebus and Cornide” (III.783-817), “Phebus and Daphne” (1685-1745), “Demephon and Phyllis” (IV.731-886), “Echo” (V.4573-4652), “Tereus” (5551-6074), “Neptune and Cornix” (6145-6217), and “Phebus and Leucothoe” (6713-6783). Other tales assign metamorphosis greater narrative prominence by presenting metamorphosis as a punishment or reward a subject’s good or bad conduct (see 3.2 and 3.3). Punitive metamorphoses occur in “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” (I.2785-3042), “Tiresias” (III.361-80), “Iphis and Araxarathen” (IV.3515-3684), “Lichaon” (VII.3355-69), and “Lot” (VIII.223-46). Remunerative metamorphoses occur in “Pygmalion” (IV.371-450), “Iphis” (451-505), and “Ceix and Alceone” (2927-3123). A further category of metamorphosis, self-transformation by means of sorcery (see chap. 5), occurs in “Hercules and Acheleons” (IV.2045-2134), “Jason and Medea” (V.3247-4149), “Ulysses and Telegenus” (VI.1391-1788), and “Nectanabus” (1789-2366). Finally, four remaining stories of metamorphosis do not easily fit any of these categories and receive no further attention in this thesis: “Florent” (I.1407-1861), “Argus and Mercury” (IV.3317-64), “Midas” (V.141-332), and “Calistona” (6225-6337). All these tales—indeed, as do many other tales from Ovid and from pagan myth—contribute to the richness of the poem’s meaning and thus to the significance of Gower’s entrustment of it to “oure englissh,” in the extraclergial manner we discussed in 1.3. In the final analysis, however, we could not judge Gower’s stance towards myth strongly extraclergial unless it allowed considerably more space for the vagaries of mythic play, and much more obviously refused to tame myth through exegesis, than it does in the tales of emblematic metamorphosis. It remains for the rest of this chapter to demonstrate that many of
Gower’s tales of metamorphosis indeed can be mythically powerful, because they bring together representation and materiality in ways that are both provocative and effective for Gower’s rhetorical purposes. The world of the Confessio, like that of the Metamorphoses, is typified by flux and changeability, but with the difference that Gower insists on the nearness of grace. As I will argue, the primary function of Gowerian metamorphosis is to explore the boundary between nature and grace and show it to be extremely permeable. As a result, grace is represented as near at hand, as if already present in nature, independently of clerical mediation.

4.2 Unkynde Punishments, Kynde Equivocations

If the tales involving emblematic metamorphosis “tame” myth to a considerable extent, the same is not true in tales that afford metamorphosis a much greater prominence by means of a punishment and reward dynamic. In this section we will look at four stories in which divine providence imposes metamorphosis on human beings as a punishment—“Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment,” “Tiresias and the Snakes,” “Lichaon,” and “Iphis and Anaxarathen”—leaving metamorphoses that occur as rewards for Section 4.3.

It is useful to approach the punitive metamorphoses of the Confessio by way of the parallel use to which Gower puts metamorphosis in the Vox Clamantis. In Gower’s account of the Peasants’ Revolt in Vox I, metamorphosis serves to represent the rebels as abhorrent to the point that they have lost their humanity. Gower explains his technique in the prologue: since the revolt “was as loathsome and horrible as a monster, he reports that in a dream he saw different throngs of the rabble transformed into different kinds of domestic animals ... [who] deviated

12 Because it uses punitive metamorphosis only very allusively, I omit “Lot.”
from their true nature and took on the barbarousness of wild beasts” (prose heading, Prologue; tr. Stockton 49). This notion that the various “bands of rabble” are justly represented as transformed into beasts because they have transgressed nature runs throughout Gower’s account of the groups of asses, oxen, swine, dogs, cats and foxes, domestic birds, flies and frogs, that fills the first eight chapters. But in most cases, Gower is not content to make the point with one transformation only. Metamorphosed asses behave like horses, foxes and cats like dogs, and chickens like eagles (191-98, 464, 520). Again the point is that the abhorrent rabble has transgressed the limits of its nature: “Nature wandered so far from her regular course that a pig did not keep to the behavior of a pig, but rather of a wolf” (319-20, tr. Stockton 57).

As we saw in the introduction, Gower’s willingness in the Confessio to explore human “passiones” (I.60, margin) from the perspective of the patient sets his new project apart radically from that of the Vox. The different ways in which punitive metamorphosis is used in the two poems is also very telling. Like the Vox, the Confessio uses punitive metamorphosis primarily as a way of demonstrating the unnaturalness of certain forms of behavior, as we will see. But whereas in Vox I Gower uses metamorphosis to denounce the unnatural vice of others, in the Confessio Gower uses metamorphosis within exempla, a generic setting that presupposes a degree of community between the metamorphosed subject and the reader. In Vox I, the author and his community of readers are in no way subject to metamorphosis, only the loathsome mob is, which Gower represents as the wholly “other” progeny of Cain (cf. 757). But in the Confessio unnatural behavior poses a real temptation and thus an internal threat. Metamorphosis is not a rhetorical device to strengthen a condemnation of others, but a technique for showing the innate capacity for vice that is common to all.

The punitive metamorphoses of the Confessio represent vice as not only more threatening
but also more amorphous than the vices of the rebels of *Vox* I. Though the various bands of rebels engage in various crimes, common to all these crimes is their underlying irrationality. The rebels’ lack of reason is sometimes explicit—“They who had been men of reason before ("homines prius innate racionis") had the look of unreasoning brutes” (177-78, tr. Stockton 54); “Now they wore the faces of men and now their transformed heads of wild beasts, and they had no power of reason ("racione carent")” (781-82, tr. Stockton 67)—but irrationality is implicit everywhere in Gower’s account of the “frenzy” (*furor, rabies*) that has come upon the raving mob (E.g. 267, 501; cf. 433, 442, 503, 674, 748). In the *Confessio*, by contrast, though punitive metamorphosis still signifies the unnaturalness of vice, unnatural human behavior is never so neatly identified with irrationality. In some cases Gower’s avoidance of the irrationality theme is very conspicuous. Nebuchadnezzar’s transformation is already associated with irrationality in the biblical account, when the king says, after he is restored, “sensus meus redditus est mihi” (Daniel 4:31), and exegetes understood the king’s temporary transformation to signify irrationality. But Gower says that Nebuchadnezzar’s transformation resulted from his violation of “Goddes lawe” (I.3041); Gower thus represents Nebuchadnezzar’s sin not as irrationality but, more ambiguously, as counter to the law of God, and thus, very likely, to nature (see below). Similarly, traditional allegoresis of Lycaon’s transformation into a wolf gave precedent for locating the tyrant’s crime at least partly in its irrationality. Pierre Bersuire says that Lycaon “was secretly a wolf in mind.... Today there are many who although they seem men—that is although they pretend they are just, rational, and benign [iustos rationabiles & benignos]—nonetheless have the mind of a wolf—that is a cruel mind [mentem ... crudelem].” But Gower

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s says that Lichaon was transformed because he committed crimes not against reason but “ayein
the lawe of kinde” (VII.3356). We will see that Gower interprets punitive metamorphosis as a
punishment of crimes against nature also in “Tiresias and the Snakes,” “Iphis and Araxarathen,”
and “Nebuchadnezzar.”

Gower’s rewriting of punitive metamorphosis to present serious vices as transgressions
not primarily against reason but against the more elastic concept, nature, introduces rich
ambiguities. White has noted in some detail, though without special notice of Gower’s stories of
metamorphosis, that Gower takes full advantage of the ambivalence within the concepts *natura*
and *ius naturae* as he received them.\(^\text{15}\) Legal, theological, literary, and other sources testify to a
vibrant dialogue on nature, and it is worth summarizing the ambivalent bequest of these
traditions here. In one important stream, Christian Platonists viewed *natura* as a benevolent force
aligned with reason by subsuming the quasi-divine figure Nature beneath the general providence
of the Christian God: she is *vicaria dei*, God’s deputy in creation.\(^\text{16}\) Following Boethius, Bernard
Silvester, Alan of Lille, and other writers represent Nature as unambiguously good. But other
currents were at work to implicate Nature-in-general in the corruption brought about by the Fall.
In the influential view of Augustine, Nature’s status changed at the Fall: originally good, Nature
has been corrupted and now stimulates mankind to wickedness, as is seen especially in man’s
corrupted sexual instinct.\(^\text{17}\) Although D.W. Robertson, Jr. emphasized the dominance of this
view in the Middle Ages, White shows that the situation is more complex, for postlapsarian


\(^{13}\) Alan of Lille, *De Planctu Naturae*, ed. VIII.224. For an overview of this tradition, see White, *Nature*, 68-109. The
classic study of medieval representations of nature is Economou, *Goddess Natura*.

\(^{14}\) See especially *De libero arbitrio* 3.13, PL 32:1289; for discussion, see White, *Nature*, 10-11.
Nature continues to have good as well as bad effects.\textsuperscript{18} But Nature’s complicity in the sexual instinct means that her role since the Fall runs fundamentally contrary to reason and to goodness, as White emphasizes. According to an important legal dictum of the Roman jurist Ulpian found in both the \textit{Institutes} and the \textit{Digest}, “Natural law is what nature has taught all the animals, for this law is proper not only to the human race, but to all living beings.”\textsuperscript{19} This conception of natural law, because it aligns man with the animals irrespective of man’s reason, suggests a much darker version of Nature. While Olsson emphasizes that this conception dominates Gower’s thinking about Nature, White distances Gower from legal and theological formulations and shows that his conception, though having a strong Ulpianic tendency, exists at a more elemental level.\textsuperscript{20}

Although “Tiresias and the Snakes” depicts a less serious crime than “Lichaon” and the rest, the tale is useful for illustrating how Gower’s stories of punitive metamorphosis invoke nature in interesting and problematic ways. When Tiresias comes across a pair of snakes copulating “as nature hem tawhte,” he intervenes angrily by striking them with a stick (III.365-71). The gods become angry (“wrothe,” 372) and redress his “unkinde” action “unkindeliche”:

\begin{quote}
for he hath destourbed kinde
And was so to nature unkinde,
Unkindeliche he was transformed,
That he which erst a man was formed
Into a womman was forschape. (III.373-77)
\end{quote}

Gower underscores the strange symmetry of the narrative by repeating not only \textit{unkindenesse} but also \textit{angre}:

\begin{quote}
That was to him an angri jape;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} Robertson, \textit{Preface to Chaucer}, 398; for White’s criticism, see \textit{Nature}, 3-4, 20.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Institutiones} 1.2, ed. Cooper, 6.
\textsuperscript{20} Olsson, \textit{John Gower}, 78. White, \textit{Nature}, 182-85; see further below.
Bot for that he with Angre wroghte,
Hise Angres angreliche he boghte.  (III.378-80)

This punishment of an angry and “unkinde” action angrily and “unkindeliche,” with sex change, raises questions about the crimes against “kinde” and about divine justice. What is “unkindenesse,” and, if acting “unkindeliche” means acting against one’s nature, how is this even possible? Further, if unnaturalness is so great a sin that the gods must intervene to punish it, what sense does it make for the gods to execute a sentence that is similarly “unkinde”? These two questions, the one about the meaning of “unkindenesse” and the other about why it may justly be punished with a further violation of the natural order, resurface throughout the punitive metamorphoses of the Confessio.

If the tale answers these questions, it only does so by insisting unhelpfully on the ambivalence of human nature, thereby disorienting Amans as to what his nature is and, accordingly, by what standard the gods will judge him. Since the story does not have a mythographical tradition interpreting Tiresias’s transformation as an allegorical expression of his irrationality (Arnulf of Orléans, Pierre Bersuire, and the Ovide Moralisé author interpret the story either as an allegory of the seasons or else as an image of Christ and the Jews21) it is especially interesting that Genius invokes rationality, interpreting the tale as a study in the relationship of reason and nature. Genius explains that man is distinct from the beasts because he is subject to the rule of “reson,” as well as “kinde”:

Lo thus, my Sone, Ovide hath write,
Werof thou miht be reson wite,
More is a man than such a beste.   (III.381-83)

So much recalls a commonplace in the commentary on many Ovidian tales, though not on this one. But significantly, Genius invokes the principle of man’s rationality even while warning Amans not to adopt too servile an attitude to what is “resonable”:

So mihte it neve re ben honeste  
A man to wraththen him to sore  
Of that an other doth the lore  
Of kinde, in which is no malice,  
Bot only that it is a vice:  
And thogh a man be resonable,  
Yit after kinde he is menable  
To love, wher he wole or non.  

(III.384-91)

As Tiresias erred in striking beasts, which only do what nature has taught them, so much more do men err when they wrathfully intervene in the love affairs of other humans. Remarkably, then, the tale distinguishes “kinde” and “reson” only to uphold “kinde” as the most fitting principle by which human conduct should be governed, at least insofar as the love affairs of others are concerned. Tiresias was punished, not for a failure to be ruled by reason, but, in effect, for an excessive regard for reason at the cost of the sub-rational, natural desires that are just as important to his humanity.

“Tiresias and the Snakes” and the other stories of punitive metamorphosis represent human nature in surprisingly liberal ways. To be sure, this does not result in unequivocal optimism about man’s condition: even if Tiresias’ fault seems fairly benign, “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment,” “Lichaon,” and “Siculus” all present heinous crimes and the transformations reinforce our sense of the crimes’ heinousness. But Gower’s persistence in suggesting that the characters who are transformed have squandered something good which “kinde” has conferred on them lends these stories a benevolent aspect insofar as these stories relate to Amans and the poem’s ideal reader, who are not guilty of such crimes.
To a degree, Gower does in the tales of punitive metamorphosis what he does elsewhere by other means. In a similar, negative way, Gower elsewhere calls attention to the goodness of nature by condemning certain crimes as “unkinde.” Thus, both Clytemnestra’s murder of her husband and Orestes’ revenge are said to be “unkinde” (III.2055, 2065-66); and when Albinus humbles his wife Rosemund by having her drink unwittingly from a cup made from her father’s skull, Genius describes this action as an instance of “unkynde Pride” (I.2565). Certain vices, such as Envy (II.369-72, 3136-46), Ire (III.5-12), Avarice (V.119-24), and ingratitude (“Unkindeschipe,” V.4883-920) are said to be inherently contrary to nature. White notes that, in these and similar passages, Gower affirms “the high dignity of the natural order,” an order that exists “below the level of rational operation” and demands “spontaneous emotions that we would call instinctive: the love of son for mother or of brother for brother.”22 Thus Gower affirms the goodness of nature (though with reservations, which White is careful to stress) even in stories where there is no punitive metamorphosis.

Similarly, the perplexing questions raised by stories involving punitive metamorphosis—“how is unkinde behavior possible?” and “how can unkinde requital be true justice?”—are not utterly unique to these stories. Again White’s study of how Gower represents nature generally in the Confessio is useful for contextualizing the stories of metamorphosis. While White does not directly address the questions raised by metamorphosis stories, his suggestion that, for Gower, nature represents something “instinctive” and “below the level of rational operation” offers potential solutions to both. To the first question (“how is it possible to act contrary to nature?”), drawing on White, we could answer that nature is not “Tiresias’s nature” but a universal instinct

22 White, Nature, 177, 178.
that serves, except in cases where love is concerned, as a “prompt towards what is right”;\textsuperscript{23} Tiresias ignored this prompt, and that is why his action was so vicious. White comes near to addressing the second question (“how can an unkinde requital be true justice?”), when he examines instances of the same counterintuitive pattern by which one unkindeness requites another in tales that do not involve punitive metamorphosis: this happens in “Orestes” (III.2065-66), “Tereus” (V.5905-06), and “Amon” (VIII.222), and implicitly in “Albinus and Rosemund” (I.2565-661). White notes that this pattern reaffirms the goodness of Nature: in the case of such unkinde requitals, “our satisfaction indicates to us that the violation of the natural order is so monstrous that retribution can only be satisfactory if of a similarly monstrous kind.”\textsuperscript{24} Should we accept White’s conclusion that nature represents something universal, sub-rational, and instinctive, these problems would seem less perplexing.

But White’s account is less satisfactory where the agent of vengeance is not human but divine. While White considers a range of cases in which human beings unkindly requite the unkindness of their fellow human beings, in the tales of punitive and remunerative metamorphosis the agent of such requitals is a god or gods. Importantly, the divinities in Gower’s myths are never planetary and natural (although Genius discusses the natural influences of the planets elsewhere, cf. VII.721-946), but supernatural agents given to meddling in human affairs. The presence of divinity in has far-reaching consequences, because, very often in such tales, Gower invites us, by means of theologically charged language, to see the divine agent as a surrogate for the Christian God. Such theological interpretation is less clearly appropriate in some cases than others. It is not obviously appropriate in the case of “Tiresias and the Snakes”:

\textsuperscript{23} White, \textit{Nature}, 187.
even if the resolution provided by the tale’s sequel (III.701-767) might be compared to theological grace, there is little to suggest this, and in any case this sequel abandons the earlier tale’s concern with Nature. Those tales that either have a happy ending featuring the restoration of human form (“Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment”; arguably “Tiresias”), or else dramatize natural opportunities badly missed (“Lichaon” and “Iphis and Araxarathen”; arguably “Lot”), emphasize the goodness of Nature in a sense not found in the Nature traditions discussed by White. Unlike both the Augustinian concept of natural goodness of the prelapsarian world and the Platonist conception that aligned Nature with reason, these stories represent grace as still near at hand by virtue of its implication in postlapsarian Nature. Before turning to these stories, it is useful to review scholastic conceptions of grace, not in order to make Gower a Thomist or theologian of any other scholastic variety, but because this background shows that Gower’s exploration of the theology of grace in the stories of punitive metamorphosis, though markedly vernacular, and somewhat bolder in its blurring of the boundary of nature and grace, remains well within the scope of orthodoxy.

At the most basic level, scholastic theology distinguishes two states of human existence, the state of nature and the state of grace. According to Aquinas, man in his natural state is unable to attain salvation, since salvation “involves knowing God face-to-face, participating in the inner life of God that is proper to God,” and human nature, on account of both man’s fallenness and man’s finitude, lacks the capacity for these things.25 In his natural state, man cannot will or do anything good.26 The ability to know supernatural truth and to do what is ultimately good can

26 ST I-II.109 a. 2.
only be given supernaturally, by means of grace. But nature and grace are not opposites, for, according to a common scholastic dictum, “Gratia non tollit natura sed perficit” (“Grace does not remove nature, but perfects it”). According to Aquinas, grace extends the capacities already present in nature to encompass supernatural ends. Aquinas distinguishes two different modes of grace. In the first, God moves men “to know or will or do something”; this grace is a motion extrinsically imparted to the soul. But in the second, God in effect expands man’s nature by infusing in him habits of the soul, giving man a new “quality of soul.” Importantly, this “habitual gift” affects men’s movement towards natural as well as supernatural ends:

Now He so provides for natural creatures, that not merely does He move them to their natural acts, but He bestows upon them certain forms and powers, which are the principles of acts, in order that they may of themselves be inclined to these movements, and thus the movements whereby they are moved by God become natural and easy to creatures, according to Wisdom 8:1: “she . . . ordereth all things sweetly.” Much more therefore does He infuse into such as He moves towards the acquisition of supernatural good, certain forms or supernatural qualities, whereby they may be moved by Him sweetly and promptly to acquire eternal good; and thus the gift of grace is a quality.

Further, at times grace appears already in some sense folded into nature. Aquinas contends that, notwithstanding the inability of things naturally to seek the good, “All things, by desiring their own perfection, desire God Himself, inasmuch as the perfections of all things are so many similitudes of the divine being.”

Gower’s metamorphoses suggest this still more. Like “Tiresias and the Snakes,” “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” advocates an ethic based on nature while complicating the question of what nature is. The story tells how God transformed Nebuchadnezzar “into a bestes

27 E.g. Aquinas, ST I.1.8 ad 2; II. Sent, d. 9, q. 1, arg. 4. Cf. Chenu, Nature, Man, and Society, 38.
28 ST I-II Q. 110 a. 2.
29 For criticism of the validity of the concept “pure nature” in the medieval theological tradition, see for example Rahner, Nature and Grace, chap. 5; and Milbank, Suspended Middle, 82-83, 88-103.
30 ST I Q. 6 a. 1 ad 2.
forme” (I.2972) on account of his pride, and how at the end of seven years, while still a beast, the king repented, humbled himself, and was restored to human form. There is justification, to a point, for viewing Nebuchadnezzar’s transgression as a failure of reason, as opposed to a more amorphous failure to live according to kinde. He is so vainglorious that he forgets God (2847, 2897; cf. 2801). God does not punish the king immediately, but first warns him with a “foretokne” in a dream (2812). In Daniel’s exposition of the dream, Nebuchadnezzar receives a clear warning of what will happen; Daniel also exho rts him very reasonably to “amende” himself (2934) and purchase peace through good deeds. Nevertheless, Nebuchadnezzar fails to heed these warnings:

whan a schip hath lost his stiere,
   Is non so wys that mai him stiere
   Ayein the wawes in a rage.
   This proude king in his corage
   Humilite hath so forelore,
   That for no swevene he sikh tofore,
   Ne yit for al that Daniel
   Him hath conseiled everydel,
   He let it passe out of his mynde,
   Thurgh veine gloire, and as the blinde,
   He seth no weie, er him be wo.   (I.2943-53)

The images of the rudderless ship and the blind man, and the description of Nebuchadnezzar’s laxness in letting Daniel’s warning “passe out of his mynde,” indicate that Nebuchadnezzar’s failure is in part a defect of his reason. But it is clear that Nebuchadnezzar’s pride is not simply a defect of reason. Though Nebuchadnezzar is guilty of forgetting, his memory for some things functions too well:

His herte aros of veine gloire,

31 “He was so full of veine gloire, / That he ne hadde no memoire / That ther was eny good bot he” (2799-2801): although MS Fairfax 3 and two others read good in l. 2801, according to Macaulay the majority read godd.
So that he drowh into memoire
His lordschipe and his regalie
With wordes of Surquiderie.  (I.2957-60)

Accordingly, Nebuchadnezzar’s cure is not described as a correction of the intellect or memory, but as a case of forgetting:

So that the Pride of veine gloire
Evere afterward out of memoire
He let it passe.  (I.3037-39)

Both here and in the last quotation, moral goodness depends on Nebuchadnezzar’s forgetting, even of something true. The problem is not that he thinks he possesses “lordschipe” and “regalie” when he does not, but, more vaguely, that he has an excessive regard for them.

The standard by which Nebuchadnezzar’s self-regard is judged excessive is *nature*. At the very end of the tale Gower indicates that Nebuchadnezzar’s sin is a violation against “Goddes lawe”:

And thus is schewed
What is to ben of Pride unthewed [immoral, “uncivilized”]32
Agein the hihe Goddes lawe,
To whom no man mai be felawe.  (I.3039-42)

It makes little sense to take “Goddes lawe” to mean the prophetic counsel Daniel gave Nebuchadnezzar to “Amende” himself, since by the time Daniel gave this advice the king was already under God’s judgment. Since Nebuchadnezzar was a heathen, and thus he received no revelation until the dream and Daniel’s interpretation of it, the only alternative is to take “Goddes lawe” as a reference to the natural law.33 This makes good sense. Gower implies that Nebuchadnezzar’s pride is unnatural when he alludes to the natural cosmic order by noting

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33 For an account of the natural law’s place within the broader category of divine law, see Aquinas, *ST*, 1a 2ae, 91.2.
man’s subordination to God (“To whom no man mai be felawe”). The notion that “vein gloire” violates the natural law because the human condition necessitates an attitude of humility finds implicit confirmation at the end of the tale:

Forthi, my Sone, tak good hiede  
So forto lede thi manhiede,  
That thou ne be noght lich a beste.  
Bot if thi lif schal ben honeste,  
Thou most humblesce take on honde,  
For thanne myht thou siker stonde ... (I.3043-48)

Amans must keep his “manhiede” clear of beastliness by taking hold of “humblesce”: this virtue is so important to human nature that without it man is dehumanized, effectively becoming a beast. Although the reference to Pride’s capacity to “unthewe[]” a person certainly complicates this picture, effectively implicating civilization as well as nature, in the causation of Pride, we will see that this paradox belongs fully to Gower’s meaning.

The notion that Pride is unnatural is consistent with Genius’s teaching throughout Book I, the treatise on Pride, which frequently represents at least the extreme forms of Pride as sins against kinde. In “The Trump of Death,” when the king of Hungary’s brother criticizes him for showing honor to some aged pilgrims, the king defends his conduct by appealing to the “lawe of kynde,” by which God has set in the old men an image of the king’s own mortality (2228-31). In “Narcissus,” the protagonist shows his “Surquiderie” (contemptuous pride) to be not only hateful and ultimately suicidal, but specifically “contraire / To kynde” (2357-58). “Albinus and Rosemund,” as we have seen, centers on a singular act of “unkynde Pride” (2565). Gower’s notion that extravagant forms of pride are unnatural makes sense theologically, not only because all sin is a corruption of nature, but also because humility, a species of temperance, is a natural

34 Cf. MED s.v. “thewe(n)” (v.(1 and 2)).
virtue according to Aquinas. Thus man is naturally humble in the sense that humility is a virtue naturally within his reach, without special grace. But “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” goes further than these stories in suggesting that grace interpenetrates the category of the natural. Not only does the story end happily, with God’s merciful restoration of the repentant king, but, more significantly, it produces this moment of grace by showing the collaboration of divine and human agency in metamorphosis, thus pointing up the immanence of grace in nature.

While Nebuchadnezzar’s metamorphoses are not natural—God is the primary cause of each—stories of metamorphosis make it difficult to see where primary causes end and secondary causes begin. Nebuchadnezzar’s initial loss of human form is as miraculous as its subsequent restoration to him. If “humblesce” before God is a quality proper to human nature, as Genius suggests, how did Nebuchadnezzar denature himself? His physical deformation, caught up with the spiritual deformation which was its secondary cause, helps point up the unnaturalness, and thus the mystery, of “veine gloire.” Even more than Tiresias’s “unkynde” action and consequent metamorphosis, Gower’s representation of the king’s unnatural pride prompts the reader to wonder where this sin has come from by implicating this sin in changes to Nebuchadnezzar’s physical constitution. Gower represents Pride as initiating a sequence of psychological and somatic transformations which, once underway, cannot be stopped:

This proude king in his corage  
Humilite hath so forlore  
That for no swevene he sih tofore  
...  
He let it passe out of his mynde,  
Thurgh veine gloire, and as the blinde,  
He seth no weie, er him be wo.  
...  
The vanite of Pride him hente;

35 *ST* II-II Q. 161 a. 4. On the naturalness of the cardinal virtues see *ST* I-II Q. 62 a. 2.
The process, which already involves corporeal as well as mental phenomena (it affects “corage,” “mynde,” eyes, and “herte”), leads inexorably to metamorphosis:

And whan that he him most avaunteth,
Al sodeinliche, as who seith treis,
Wher that he stod in his Paleis,
He tok him fro the mennes sihte
....
And thus was he from his kingdom
Into the wilde Forest drawe,
Wher that the myhti goddes lawe
Thurgh his pouer dede him transforme
Fro man into a bestes forme...

The events suggest a kind of logic: Nebuchadnezzar transgresses “goddes law” and the law demands metamorphosis. But the metamorphosis remains not just paradoxical but inscrutable, for causation becomes to be obscured by a finally insoluble interlacing of agencies. An ambiguity in line 2971 makes it impossible to tell by whose power the king is transformed: “his power” may refer to the power of either “goddes law” or Nebuchadnezzar. While we can note Nebuchadnezzar’s pride as a key cause in the chain of events, we finally cannot separate all the human and divine causes because Gower implicates Nebuchadnezzar’s corrupted will even at the point of transformation. Gower forecloses the possibility of a resolving the chain of causation by reintroducing the fact of Nebuchadnezzar’s responsibility, and inscrutable mystery remains.

Even more than his change to animal form, Nebuchadnezzar’s change back to human form is marked by a poetically effective blending of the material with the spiritual, in a moment that Christopher Ricks praises for “simplicity of genius.”

And so thenkende he gan doun bowe,
And thogh him lacke vois and speche,

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36 Ricks, “Metamorphosis in Other Words,” 31.
He gan up with his feet areche,
And wailende in his bestly stevene
He made his pleignte unto the hevene.
He kneleth in his wise and braieth,
To seche merci and assaieth
His god, which made him nothing strange,
Whan that he sih his pride change. (I.3022-30)

Noting the penitential context exerts strangely anthropomorphic pressures on the still animal word, “braieth,” Ricks writes, “You must prick up your ears to make quite sure what word you have heard: prayeth? brayeth?” The scene recalls Enterline’s account of how Ovidian poetry conflates representation, materiality, and action. Like Ovid’s subjects of “disquieting erasure,” Nebuchadnezzar is bereft of “vois and speche” and this creates an opportunity to display rhetoric’s “performative dimension.” The beast-king’s only recourse is a clumsy, bodily display of penitence, in which language is reduced to the animal noise that Ricks terms “brayer.” Like so many scenes in Ovid, this scene asks us “to consider language not merely as a mode of representation but as a (deeply unreliable) mode of action”; and yet, tellingly, this “impossible demand” is answered by grace.

“Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” represents grace as immanent, as if already present in nature, by showing the king’s salvation to occur only after he is reduced to a natural state. It is not simply that, stripped of his kingdom, he has nothing to be proud of. By contrasting his new state with the artificiality of his former life, Gower insists that Nebuchadnezzar is cured by a return to nature. After Nebuchadnezzar is exiled “Into the wilde Forest” (2969),

lich an Oxe under the fot
He graseth, as he nedes mot,
To geten him his lives fode.
Tho thoghte him colde grases goode,

That whilom eet the hote spices,  
Thus was he torned fro delices:  
The wyn which he was wont to drinke  
He tok thanne of the welles brinke  
Or of the pet or of the slowh,  
It thoghte him thanne good ynowh:  
In stede of chambres wel arraied  
He was thanne of a buissh wel paied,  
The harde ground he lay upon,  
For othre pilwes hath he non.            (I.2973-86)

The language of deprivation here draws on penitenti al discourse, to be sure, but also on the discourse of art and nature associated with the Golden Age topos. With the possible exception of the beast-king’s grazing and his drinking “of the pet or of the slowh,” all his deprivations suggest, albeit in a strange, bestialized fashion, the natural purity of the Golden Age. By describing Nebuchadnezzar’s deprivations as creating a condition of natural simplicity that contrasts to specific marks of the civilization Nebuchadnezzar had earlier ruled, Gower represents them as the natural antidote needed for his unnatural “veine gloire.” Nature alone can restore Nebuchadnezzar to the naturally human condition of “humblesce” before God, and paradoxically, nature herself—even the deranged nature of beast-transformation—is the conduit of grace. But while Nebuchdnezzar’s extreme case demanded the extreme remedy of bestial experience, Gower makes it clear that bestial experience is not normally a part of natural human life: Nebuchadnezzar’s pride manifested not only his unnaturalness, but also that he has become “unthewed” (3040) or uncivilized. The story suggests, then, that even ordinary manifestations of nature, within civilized life, have the capacity to move men to goodness, even, it would seem, spiritual conversion.

Like “Tiresias and the Snakes” and “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment,” “Lichaon” interprets punitive metamorphosis as a punishment for unnatural behavior. Lichaon commits
crimes “ayein the lawe of kinde” (VII.3356) by murdering and cannibalizing his guests, and in consequence of this crime he becomes a wolf. Gower notes that the wolffish transformation is allegorically appropriate: after Lichaon’s transformation, he comments,

And thus the cruelte was kidd,
Which of long time he hadde hidd;
A wolf he was thanne openly,
The whos nature prively
He hadde in his condicion. (VII.3365-69)

The contrast of inward and outward, pointed up by the rhyme of “kidd” with “hidd,” suggests that Gower may have been using Bersuire’s *Ovidius moralizatus* here, which, as we saw above, has “he who was secretly a wolf in mind became a wolf outwardly.” But while Bersuire, as we noted, foregrounds the irrationality of Lichaon’s cruelty (“mentem ... crudelam”), Gower foregrounds its unnaturalness. This results in confusion about nature similar to what we saw in “Tiresias” and “Nebuchadnezzar.” More particularly, “Lichaon” raises difficulties for any system that would sharply distinguish nature from grace. Whereas “Nebuchadnezzar” did this by showing nature’s instrumentality in bringing about conversion, “Lichaon” does it by representing nature as responsible for instilling *pite*, a virtue with strong theological associations, as we will see.

“Lichaon” occurs in a group of exempla on *crualte* (VII.3249-513), the antithesis of *pite*, the virtue that Genius discusses as the fourth “point of policie” directing how princes should govern (3103-4214). *Pite* and its Latin equivalent, *pietas* (cf. VII.x.3 etc.), both carry a secondary sense of “piousness” at this time, and Genius associates *pite* with specifically theological themes throughout the chapter. While one of Genius’s main concerns in the chapter is to show that the king needs to temper his justice with *pite* in order to strengthen his regime,
Genius’ reasoning, so far from utilitarianism, comes closer to belief in sympathetic magic. Just as, in “Constantine and Silvester,” human “pite” and mercy are seen to draw divine “pite” and mercy (see above, 3.3), so here the king’s pity draws the love of the people:

in the lond wher Pite fareth
The king mai nevere faile of love,
For Pite thurgh the grace above.  (VII.3132-34)

Genius’ rhyme of “love” with “grace above” points up the extent to which Gower’s political concerns are inseparable from theological ones. It is not simply that God rewards the piteous, although that principle is reaffirmed both positively and negatively throughout the chapter (e.g. 3105, margin, 3149*-60*, 3318*-56*, 3159-62, 3249-64, 3440-41, 3520-21, 3614-22). Pity is theological also in its origin.

The chapter on pity begins with the example of “the hihe mageste” who was “stered” by pity to send his son to take on “fleissh and blod”: “Pite was cause of thilke good, / Wherof that we ben alle save” (3108-11), and for this reason men should prize this virtue (3115). This appeal to the redemption narrative as the archetypal basis of human pite contributes to Gower’s representation of the virtue, in the chapter as a whole, as, paradoxically, already charged with grace, as “already graced.” Gower suggests that pite has a special, divine origin also when he says, several times, that “Charite the moder is / Of Pite” (VII.3167-68; cf. 3358*-59*, II.3173-74): like Aquinas, he closely aligns pity (pite/misericordia) with charity, a theological virtue, and thus with grace. The point is not that Gower believes pity is a theological virtue. As we have

39 I borrow this term from Milbank and Pickstock, who claim that, in Aquinas, a “new theological ontology of constitutive supernatural supplementation and ecstatic relationality reveals a cosmos already in a sense graced” (Truth in Aquinas, 38). The point is not that Gower is doing scholastic theology, but that the nature/grace dualism that dominates popular accounts of medieval theology should not be seen as precluding Gower’s graced nature.
40 Aquinas discusses misericordia as an “inward act” of charity in ST II-II Q. 30 a. 3. Elsewhere he explains that the theological virtues lead to “happiness surpassing human nature,” which “man can obtain by the power of God alone”
seen, for Gower the Latin equivalent of *pite* is not *misericordia* but *pietas*, a word with a wider semantic range (but cf. “pite and misericorde,” 3303). Especially in light of Galloway’s demonstration that *pite/pietas* is extremely pliable and contested in Ricardian political rhetoric,\(^\text{41}\) it is clear that no occurrence of *pite* in political discourse is likely to be theological in any narrow sense. But in Gower at least, *pite/pietas* generally has a theological valence, and his occasional linkage of the term with *charite* and with salvation suggest that *pite* has its origin in grace: *pite* is not only a way of winning grace but is itself a consequence of grace.

Gower never says explicitly whether *pite* arises from nature, from grace, or from both, and more typical of his representation of this virtue is his argument tracing the human obligation to *pite* back to a threefold source:

\begin{verbatim}
For who that pite wol biholde,—
It is a poynt of Cristes lore.
And for to loken overmore,
It is bihovely, as we fynde,
To resoun and to lawe of kynde.
\end{verbatim}

(VII.3156*-61*)

These lines do not say whether grace is a necessary condition for human obedience to the law, and they consider *pite* as an obligation rather than a gift. But even though it is not Gower’s concern to show that *pite* is a consequence of grace, the invocation of “Christes lore” suggests that Gower sees grace as relevant here.

Grace, possibly in a theological sense, comes up in Gower’s commendation of prudential *pite* as a “point of policie,” and Gower may suggest that *pite* is the result of grace in this context. Gower explains how a royal policy of *pite* results in general prosperity (“thrift”), because “love” is a better motivator of subjects than “doute” (fear):

\(^{\text{41}}\) Galloway, “Politics of Pity.”
For whan a thing is do for doute,
Fulofte it comth the worse aboute;
Bot wher a king is Pietous,
He is the more gracious,
That mochel thrift him schal betyde,
Which elles scholde torne aside. (VII.3157-62)

“Gracious” here certainly contains a pun. Since it comes immediately after, and rhymes with, “Piteous,” we initially hear “gracious” as a description of the king’s conduct, possibly synonymous with “kindly,” “honorable,” or “pleasing” (MED s.v. “gracious” (n.) defs. 3, 4, 5); but the following line forces us to reconsider the word as meaning “fortunate” (def. 2). Given the theological subtext throughout the chapter, however, it is also possible to take this word as carrying a secondary sense, “filled with God’s grace” (def. 1 b). This sense works well in the context of the punning line, since divine grace is medial between those senses that make the word descriptive of the king’s conduct and those that make the word descriptive of the king’s fortune: to be a recipient of divine grace means both receiving a gift of fortune and acting graciously. The sense “filled with God’s grace” also works well in light of Gower’s decision to open this chapter, on the “policie” of human governance, with an exemplum of the divine ruler (“the hihe mageste,” 3108). According to this reading, good rulers draw the hearts of their people to themselves, by love, after the model of God himself: whether rulers understand this theologically or not—and Trajan (cf. 3144) presumably did not—this model of gracious pite follows God’s pite toward man and thus depends on this archetypal act of grace.

Theological clarity is less characteristic of Gower’s reflections on pite than is a rich collaboration of natural and supernatural categories. We saw this in the passage quoted a little above, where Gower assigns pite a threefold claim to importance, based on Christian teaching, reason, and the “lawe of kynde,” and we also see it implicit in “Lichaon,” the only story in the
chapter on *Pite* that involves metamorphosis. “Lichaon” comes in a group of tales illustrating pity’s antithesis, cruelty (cf. 3247-48). The group shows uncertainty over just how *crualte* relates to nature, since the tales disagree on whether *pite* is proper to human nature only, or to nature generally. In the exemplum of the Lion, immediately following “Lichaon,” Genius teaches that even this most ferocious of beasts will “Restreigne his ire” if a man falls before him “In signe of mercy and of grace” (3392-99). Genius emphasizes that this is a lesson from nature: he introduces the exemplum, “Of the natures this I finde, / The fierce Leon in his kinde ...” (3387-88), and notes that the lion exercises pity “of his nature” (3394), and the tale thus represents unbounded carnage as contrary to nature in the broadest, Ulpianic sense that encompasses humans and animals. But in the next tale, “Spertachus and Thamaris,” Gower represents pity as an exclusively human, non-animal quality. According to Thamaris, Spertachus’s savage crimes result directly in his banishment from the human race:

> “O man, which out of mannes kinde
> Reson of man hast left behinde
> And lived worse than a beste,
> Whom Pite myhte noght areste,
> The mannes blod to schede and spille
> Thou haddest nevere yit thi fille....”  

(VII.3489-3498)

“Lichaon” might seem to adopt the understanding of *pite* shown in “Spertachus.” Lichaon’s bloodlust is “ayein the lawe of kinde” only before his transformation, but fitting enough after he becomes a wolf, the story seems to suggest, for his new form expresses “openly” what before was his “nature prively.” But Lichaon’s punitive metamorphosis for behavior “against nature” makes this alignment with “Spertachus” problematic. As in “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment,” metamorphosis serves to conflate human and divine agency. Though Lichaon’s transformation has a judicial aspect, insofar as it manifests Jupiter’s “Vengance,” and thus can be
seen as an imposition of divine will on a man, the tale also represents it as an organic outgrowth of Lichaon’s behavior. The passage may tacitly suggest a fusion of Jupiter’s agency with Lichaon’s when it describes the decisive event using the passive infinitive construction with “let”: “Into a wolf him let transforme” (3364). Gower underscores that responsibility for the transformation is jointly held by his use of the emotive language of commoving:

Jupiter the glorious,
Which was commoeved of this thing,
Vengeance upon this cruel king
So tok, that he fro mannes forme
Into a wolf him let transforme .... (VII.3360-64)

*Commeven*, which means “to drive,” “to stimulate,” or “stir up; rouse to anger, move to pity” (*MED* defs. 1a, 1b, 2), might seem to represent the god’s role as a detached reaction to Lichaon’s and thus fully distinct, as Jove’s role is in Ovid’s account, but, like the Middle French “commovoir,” the word also implies a sympathetic movement. Gower has repeatedly emphasized the reciprocal nature of cruelty’s antithesis, pity. God “Was stered” to pity, with the result that this virtue should be “sette in pris” by all men (3109, 3115). God’s grace brings about the graciousness of kings. Trajan exercised love in order to draw the hearts of his subjects to him. Could something similar be true of cruelty? If God has “graced” humankind by his own exercise of pity, and thereby brought about gracious pity in mankind, can a similar range of causes be seen to contribute to the heinous crimes such that are committed by Lichaon?

Gower indeed does distribute causation also in the case of Lichaon’s “crualte.” The account of *crualte* in the larger passage of which “Lichaon” forms a part stresses the infectiousness of this vice. Gower describes the origins of *crualte*, somewhat mysteriously, as a

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process of “engendering” (3250, 3415): while the language of “engendering” is a common way of describing human emotions in Middle English (*MED* s.v. “engendre(n)” def. 4), it is notable that Gower uses the same language to describe *crualte* that he earlier had used to describe the *pite* that arose when Constantine saw and heard the suffering of the grieving mothers and children (see above, 3.3): this suggests that a similar kind of sympathetic influence occurs here. Gower demonstrates this in “Siculus,” an image of a society poisoned, in this case the society of a royal court. Directly after introducing the “cruel king” and his love of capricious human carnage, Gower mentions that “He hadde of conseil manyon” (3307), as if subtly implicating them and thereby suggesting the infectiousness of this vice. This is confirmed when Gower says that one of Siculus’s courtiers, Berillus, “bethoughte him hou he myhte / Unto the tirant do likinge” (3311-12), and invented an instrument of torture. Berillus

> Let forge and make a Bole of bras,  
> And on the side cast ther was  
> A Dore, wher a man mai inne,  
> Whan he his peine schal beginne  
> Thurgh fyr, which that men putten under.  

(VII.3313-15)

The device is expressly designed, wondrously, to dehumanize its victims:

> And al this dede he for a wonder,  
> That whanne a man for peine cride,  
> The Bole of bras, which gapeth wyde,  
> It scholde seme as thogh it were  
> A belwinge in a mannes Ere,  
> And noght the criinge of a man.  

(VII.3316-23)

When Siculus decides to test the device by roasting Berillus as its first victim, the tale shows allegorically the bestial nature of *crualte*—Berillus has by “a wonder” become a beast—but it also shows the communal nature of this vice, since Berillus has also become like Siculus—
Berillus has “Unto the tyrant do[ne] likinge” (3312) in two senses. The tale proves that sympathetic influence can, amazingly, bring about crualte and damnation as well as pite and salvation.

In addition to the sympathetic influences exerted horizontally, by men, crualte also involves the patriarchal influence of Satan. Just as Gower begins his account of pite by noting the divine origin of this virtue, so he begins his account of crualte by suggesting its satanic origin. Gower places crualte in the context of cosmic war:

Of crualte the felonie
Engendred is of tirannie,
Ayein the whos condicion
God is himself the champion,
Whos strengthe mai noman withstonde. (VII.3249-53)

Soon after this, in “Siculus,” Gower explicitly traces human cruelty to demonic instigation, for it is “The devel, that lith in helle fast” (3325) who moves the tyrant to put Berillus into the bull. In light of Gower’s demonology in these places, it is likely that, two stories after “Siculus,” we are meant to find demonic collusion also in Lichaon’s crime. “Jupiter the glorious” is a fitting title for the devil, since biblical texts associate Satan with brightness and glory (e.g. Isaiah 14:12; Luke 10:18; etc.), and patristic writers hold Jupiter and the other pagan deities as images of demons. As Berillus was undone, partly by Siculus’s crualte, partly by the devil’s, and partly by his own, so in a similar way, Lichaon was destroyed by his own crualte in collaboration with the devil’s.

It is not that Gower so insistently represents pite as a quality of human nature that, for a man to show a defect in pite, he must be directly under demonic influence. Rather, because of his

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equivocations on *kinde* in “Lichaon” and elsewhere, especially in stories of metamorphosis, Gower suggests that there can be no clear demarcation between nature and grace when it comes to *pite*: *pite* is natural, insofar as it is the normal response of most human beings (even pagans, cf. 3207*-329) to certain situations, but supernatural, insofar as it is always somehow tied to the “the grace above” (cf. 3134). Conversely, where *pite* fails, so perverse a contravention of nature is only possible in the presence of some monstrous, and ultimately demonic, influence. It is possible to translate Gower’s thought into scholastic terminology: since grace perfects capacities already present in nature, the natural inclination to mercy could be considered a part of the soul’s acquisition of this virtue. 44 But Gower is less concerned to formulate the mechanics of this process systemically than he is to describe the workings of virtue in narrative.

A similar trajectory is visible in “Iphis and Araxarathen,” since Araxarathen’s punitive metamorphosis into stone likewise represents pitilessness, albeit pitilessness in love, as grievously subhuman. The story tells how the young nobleman, Iphis, loves Araxarathen, a maid of low estate. When she does not return his affections, Iphis hangs himself outside the gates of her house, and Araxarathen, conscience-stricken, asks the gods to make her a lasting spectacle of pitilessness—she who “dede no pite / To him” desires likewise to receive “no pite” (IV.3628-30)—and her prayer is answered when she is transformed into stone. Genius holds Iphis and Araxarathen jointly responsible for the tragic ending of their tale. Iphis’s sin is to succumb to an unreasonable love. Despite his high rank,

he was soubgit  
To love, and put in such a plit,  
That he excedeth the mesure  
Of reson, that himself assure satisfy  
He can noght; for the more he preide,

44 Cf. *ST* I Q. 1 a. 8: “Natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity.”
The lasse love on him sche leide. (IV.3523-28)

In comparison to Iphis, Araxarathen’s behavior at first appears both reasonable and virtuous:

He was with love unwys constreigned,  
And sche with resoun was restreigned:  
The lustes of his herte he suieth,  
And sche for drede schame eschuieth,  
And as sche scholde, tok good hiede  
To save and kepe hir wommanhiede. (IV.3529-34)

Although these lines applaud Araxarathen’s behavior (“as sche scholde”) on the basis of her reasonable restraint, her guilt, measured not by reason but by some more indeterminate standard, receives emphasis in the rest of the tale. It is perhaps possible to read the tale ironically, as a condemnation of Iphis for inciting Araxarathen’s death, now understood as thoroughly unjust; but such a reading must account for the triple testimony to Araxarathen’s guilt. Araxarathen confesses her own guilt (3610), the gods answer her plea for justice and transform her into a statue, and the people of Salamyne commemorate the couple with an epitaph that distributes responsibility for the tragedy equally to each: “He was to neysshe [soft] and sche to hard” (3681). Even if she was right initially to reject a foolish impetuosity in love, Araxarethen was wrong not to respond with appropriate pite.

Although Iphis and Araxarathen are both culpable, it is significant that the metamorphic punishment is meted out, not to Iphis for his transgression against reason, but to Araxarathen, who, for all her reasonableness, shows no pite until it is too late—especially in light of the fact that Gower reversed Ovid’s story so that Iphis is now high born and Araxarathen low born, thus

45 E.g. Olsson, Structures, 140-44  
46 It should be noted that Genius does not criticize Araxarathen in this way—he uses the tale as an illustration of Desesperance (3499, cf. 3686, etc.), the sin of Iphis. Nevertheless, elsewhere in Book IV, Genius condemns the sin of Ydelnesse in love at length (see 1083-1614).  
47 Nicholson also makes this distinction in his reading of the tale (Love and Ethics, 249-50).
underscoring the strangeness of her refusal to return his love. By what standard is Araxarathen condemned? Araxarathen’s behavior is not explicitly identified as unkinde, and the property of showing pite is not intrinsically synonymous with kindenesse. But in light of Genius’s doctrine of the universality of the sexual instinct in all kinde, Araxarathen’s, like the other punitive human-to-stone metamorphoses, strongly suggests unkindenesse.

Compared to “Lichaon” and “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment,” “Iphis and Araxarathen” is less suggestive of the immanence of grace. It retains its Ovidian character and its tendency to despair: even though Araxarathen is finally persuaded of the importance of pite, the gods’ willingness to answer her prayer yields tragedy rather than salvation. But the tale reaffirms the importance of pite in human nature, both by way of Araxarathen’s fate, and by demonstrating, like the Book VII discussion of Pite, the natural, infectious way that this virtue is normally “engendered” (cf. II.3290). When his suit fails, Iphis determines to make “Ensample” by recording his “wofull deth” for posterity, and Genius comments, “that was pite” (3590-91, 3594); as a result “Ther was wepinge and ther was cry” (3600), and this general lament moves Araxarathen—her human nature shows through—and she repents. While this repentance is set in a context more Ovidian than Christian, and pite is thus insulated from grace, the story nevertheless points up nature’s importance in instilling pite.

In conclusion, we have seen that Gower finds in punitive metamorphosis a versatile tool for exploring the relationship of nature and grace. By invoking pite, “Lichaon” and “Iphis and Araxarathen” obfuscate which standard of kinde the subjects of metamorphosis have offended against, thereby smuggling a virtue with strong theological associations into these stories’

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definition of human nature. “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” does something similar by suggesting that *kinde* is sufficient to rectify a corrupted soul and restore it to a condition of *humblesce* before God. Before investigating why Gower is so interested in mingling together nature and grace, which we will do at the end of the chapter, we will now turn to a different group of metamorphoses that show similar tendencies.

### 4.3 Metamorphosis as Reward: Between Nature and Grace

As a kind of counterpart to the stories in which metamorphosis functions punitively there are three stories in which metamorphosis occurs as a reward: “Pymaleon,” “Iphis,” and “Ceix and Alceone” (again I except those stories that reduce metamorphosis to a purely emblematic function). Like their punitive counterparts, the remunerative metamorphoses show an interest in exploring the theology of grace. But unlike the punitive metamorphoses, these are more problematic because metamorphosis from human form is, in the nature of things, a mixed blessing at best. Like “Iphis and Araxarathen,” these stories retain a large measure of Ovidian fictionality, though they avoid Ovid’s cynicism. For this reason, it is impossible to discern a single moral purpose in them, and notwithstanding Genius’ signposts, Gower’s intention is seldom unified. Nevertheless, the same interpretive structures that we noted in section 4.1—above all, the constant presence of a Christian understanding of grace—are in evidence here and these tales can be read as reflections on grace.

But these three tales are problematic for another reason. They all occur in Book IV, where Genius urges Amans to avoid Sloth in love, and this group of tales has often been read as conveying a message about grace in a way very different from what I am suggesting here.
“Pymaleon” is seen as “ultimately serv[ing] an idolatrous love,”49 “Iphis,” allegedly, “only encourages more wishing and fantasy;”50 and “Ceix and Alceone” is taken as an ironic depiction of passion and love in malo.51 According to such readings, the three stories, together with most others in Book IV, function as an ironic foil to the poem’s true message, which is that Amans must abandon earthly love for the love of God. But as we saw in the introduction, there are good reasons for believing that Gower’s purposes in the Confessio were not so unified as these approaches assume, and the poem does not require us to interpret ironically those portions that advocate earthly love. Following Nicholson, I see these tales as more broadly offering “lessons in conduct” applicable to various areas of life, rather than a unified, encrypted message to reject earthly love.52 But while these tales do not require us to impose a unified Christian interpretation by means of irony, neither do they require us to banish Christian doctrine from our reading of these tales. The Christian framework fully manifested elsewhere in the confession can be seen to inform Gower’s versions of these tales in a positive way, as will be seen when we compare the stories individually to their Ovidian sources, below. As I hope to show, for all their Ovidian strangeness, in Gower’s treatment the stories become Christian reflections on grace. Yet Gower does not achieve this by inviting us to read allegorically—love stories remain stories about earthly love. By using myth to depict the goodness of the natural, Gower shows that goodness is readily at hand and urges us to see earthly love itself within a theological context of grace. These stories do not condemn earthly love by ironically praising it, or exalt love as a sufficient end in itself. Nor, more subtly, do they celebrate love as a limited, earthly end, inferior and finally

49 Olsson, John Gower, 143. David G. Allen similarly refers to Araxarathen as Iphis’s “idolized beloved” (“God’s Faithfulness,” 214); cf. Peck, Kingship, 85.
50 Olsson, John Gower, 138; cf. Peck, Kingship, 85; Gallagher, Word and Mercury, 76.
52 Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 250; cf. ibid. 210-11.
irrelevant, or commend a particularized earthly love, in the manner of Dante, as an allegory of Christian charity. If Gower’s stories are allegorical, they are allegories of a very indeterminate kind. Accordingly, I suggest that these stories represent earthly love as a real, but provisional, good that itself references charity: earthly love itself, not Gower’s textual account of love via clergial allegoresis, signifies charity by virtue of Gower’s persistent efforts to re-enchant it.

The first two examples of remunerative metamorphosis occur in adjacent tales within Genius’s warning against “Pusillamite,” and there may seem to be good reasons for ironic reading here. Pymaleon falls in love with the ivory statue he has made and he has “hire” taken into his chamber:

And after, whan the nyht was come,  
He leide hire in his bed al nakid.  
...  
He keste hire colde lippes ofte,  
And wissheth that thei weren softe,  
And ofte he rouneth in hire Ere,  
And ofte his arm now hier now there  
He leide, as he hir wolde embrace,  
And evere among he axeth grace,  
As thogh sche wiste what he mente .... (IV.401-02, 405-11)

While Pymaleon’s actions here are reprehensible according to Christian sexual morality, we are, after all, reading myth. Gower might be conscious of the scene’s transgressive quality, yet what is clear is his interest in normalizing the action by making the statue, by means of the feminine pronouns, already a woman—she who will be Pymaleon’s wife. If it is possible to suspend Christian sexual morality at this moment along with disbelief, transgression disappears, and with it, the necessity of ironic reading.

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53 For determinate and indeterminate writing, see Sturges, Medieval Interpretation, 2, 21, 33; cf. Akbari, Veil, 13. See also below, 4.3.
54 For an example of a Christian condemnation of Pygmalion’s “lecherye,” see Christine de Pisan, Epistle of Othea,
Certainly, Genius’ most immediate concern in the section is to examine Amans’ work ethic in regards to earthly love, and critical accounts have, with reasonable justification, stressed the incompatibility of Gower’s amorous and theological interests in this book. Thus Nicholson argues that Book IV’s concern with Sloth caused Gower’s interests in courtship and in moral theology to diverge here: while “Pride, Envy, and Wrath are wrong at virtually all times,” and are condemned by the “demands of love” and the “demands of God” alike, there is, by contrast, no positive remedy for Sloth that will “reconcile the spiritual and the worldly, especially when it comes to love.” Nicholson concludes that Book IV, “more than any other book so far, is all but exclusively concerned with conduct in love.”

While Nicholson is right that Book IV shows a bifurcating tendency due to the inherent difficulty in thinking about activity-in-love and activity-in-piety together, Gower nonetheless insists that the two perspectives are not utterly distinct, and first disorients by means of strange juxtapositions, then makes us try to reconcile the two. An example of Gower’s disorienting tendency to introduce spiritual themes into the overwhelmingly amatory discussion in Book IV occurs in Gower’s treatment of the first species of Sloth, “Lachesse” (procrastination), immediately before the chapter on “Pusillamite.” Gower explicates this sin by means of two pagan myths whose concerns are overwhelmingly amorous (“Aeneas and Dido” and “Ulysses and Penelope”), one tale from folklore which is more universal in application (“Groestete”), and, finally, one tale from the Bible which clearly tips the balance in a spiritual direction (“The Foolish Virgins”). While Genius does not overtly interpret this last story as having theological import, it certainly has. This is clear not only from its status as a parable of Christ, but also from

tr. Scrope, 35.

55 Love and Ethics, 209-10.
the seemingly gratuitous reference to Christ as “thilke lord”—a surprising appellation given that no lord has yet been mentioned, and which can thus only mean “the Lord himself” (256). Having disoriented his reader in this way, Gower concludes the chapter in a way that seems to confer a double valence on “grace.” When Amans complains, “me was nevere assigned place, / Wher yit to geten eny grace” (271-72), the amatory sense of the word crowds out any other sense. But this univocal focus on amatory concerns is dispelled in Genius’ much more general reply:

Slowthe is mihti to confounde  
The spied of every mannes werk.  
For many a vice, as seith the clerk,  
Ther hongen upon Slowthes lappe. (IV.300-03)

As we will see, Gower similarly complicates “grace” in his treatment of “Pusillamite.”

What makes the theological interests of chapter ii, on “Pusillamite,” very clear is the chapter’s dependence on pastoral theology. It is notable that the chapter draws far more deeply on the discourse of pastoral theology than on the discourse of love. Gower’s pusillanimous lover, paralyzed by fear, is unknown in Ovid (although Ovid discusses the excessive fears of females, this bears little similarity to Gower’s pusillanimous lover). Similarly, peor is a projection of the female psyche in the *Roman de la Rose*. It is true that the male narrators of Froissart and Machaut have a more timorous character, but this is represented as a virtue rather than a vice: Machaut’s commendation of humble service is very different from Genius’s charge that Amans show more enterprise, a stronger work ethic.

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56 Sadlek contextualizes the doctrines of Book IV within theological as well as other “labor ideologies” (*Idleness Working*, 171-74, 189-207); see below. See also D. Allen, “Lover’s Despair,” though there is no reference to “Pusillamite.” The classic treatment of *acedia* is Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth.*

57 E.g. *Ars amatoria*, 1.55, 768-69.


59 For comparison of Gower and Machaut on this point, see Burrow, “Portrayal,” 6-8, and Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 24-25.
In his study of labor ideology in classical and medieval literature, Gregory Sadleks notes that “labor issues arise in surprising ways” particularly in Gower’s treatment of “Pusillamite”:

“Genius defines *pusillamite* as the opposite not of courage in battle but of willingness to undertake work. The pusillanimous soul is ‘He that hath litel of corage / And dar no mannes werk beginne’ [316-17] …. For (male) lovers, the ‘mannes werk’ is to pursue courtship aggressively, and Genius illustrates this with the tale of Pygmalion.”

But whereas Sadlek interprets this need for “mannes werk” in relation to an emergent bourgeois emphasis on “productive labor” and ultimately stresses (drawing on Jean-Charles Payen’s interpretation of the *Roman de la Rose*) how Gower “goes even beyond Jean’s *Rose* toward the ‘embourgeoisement de l’éros’” (192; cf. 195-207), it is notable that, earlier in the chapter, Sadlek demonstrated the appearance of that same concern with labor and productivity in accounts of Sloth in late-medieval pastoral treatises (173-86). To be sure, many discourses are in play. But I contend that the surprising qualities of Gower’s labor doctrines make greater sense if they are seen directly in dialogue with pastoral theology.

Genius’ teaching on “Pusillamite” has its main precedent in treatises of pastoral theology. I quote at greater length a passage noted by Sadlek:

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[Pusillamite] hath litel of corage
And dar no mannes werk beginne:
So mai he noght be resoun winne;
For who that noght dar undertake,
Be riht he schal no profit take.   (IV.316-20)
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Though certain words (“winne,” “profit,” etc.) seem to resonate with mercantilist discourse, it is notable that these notions echo Gower’s own, explicitly Christian, doctrine of Pusillanimity in

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60 Idleness Working, 194.
61 On this tradition, see Wenzel, Sin of Sloth.
the *Mirour*:

[*Pusillamité*] dares not commence to take on herself any office—either of work or of service—from which she could profit [*proufiter*]. Rather she is full of supposed and imagined perils and lacks heart and loses a sense of purpose, so that she does not want to help herself, and rather lets everything go—both honor and benefits. (5487-96)

In his commentary on this portion of the *Mirour*, Siegfried Wenzel writes that Gower’s conception of *acedia* is distinctive in that it “neatly balance[s]” the religious and worldly faults that derive from this vice, noting that Gower introduces *Accide* “as the sin who ‘does no service to either God or the world’” (256) and that a similar balance occurs throughout the accounts of her five children; Lachesce, for example, “Trestout met en delaiement, / Et le divin et le mondein” (“postpones everything, both the divine and the worldly,” 5615-16). Wenzel’s judgment here has great significance for *Confessio IV*, since it suggests Gower’s special interest in how physical labor nourishes spiritual health. But it is important to recall that the central insight here is not Gower’s own, but typical of fourteenth-century popular accounts of *acedia*. In fact, the *Mirour*’s treatment of *Pusillamité* appears to borrow from the tradition of the *Somme le Roi* by the thirteenth-century Dominican Laurent, which describes “pusillanimyte” as “vnboldenesse, þat is whan a man haþ a manere drede to bygynne and dar nout auntre hym, for þei weneþ þat þe erþe wole faile hem.” In the *Confessio*, Genius’ insistence on “mennes werk[s]” also has a close parallel in Chaucer’s discussion of *acedia* in the Parson’s Tale. Notably, the Parson, like Gower, emphasizes “manly” courage as the remedy for “Accide”:

“Agayns this roten-herted synne of Accidie and Slouthe sholde men exercise hemself to doon

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62 Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, 119. Wenzel does not discuss *Confessio IV*.
63 E.g. ibid., 91-93.
64 *Book of Vices and Virtues*, ed. Francis, 27. For similar contemporary expressions of this idea, cf. ParsT 690-91, 715.
goode werkes, and manly and vertuously cacchen corage wel to doon, thynkyng that oure Lord Jhesu Crist quiteth every good dede, be it never so lite."65

Gower could of course have borrowed penitential discourse in a way that stripped it of spiritual import just as Chaucer borrowed “ecclesiastical-liturgical” conceptions for the *Legend of Good Women*,66 but Gower’s thought progression in the “Pusillamite” chapter indicates that theological perspectives remain operative. While the epigram to chapter ii is more narrowly devoted to amatory concerns—“Amicicie” and “amor”—the English proem to the chapter only settles on the amorous courtship theme after twenty-seven lines (313-54) surveying “Pusillamite” in general. Importantly, Genius’ survey follows a downward trajectory. His opening gambit—an instance of the poem’s clericalism—connects the chapter to institutionally authorized discourses by pointing up the necessity of translation into English:

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Touchende of Slowthe in his degre,
Ther is yit Pusillamite,
Which is to seie in this langage,
He that hath litel of corage
And dar no mannes werk beginne.       (IV.313-17)
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While Genius shows himself willing to translate his learning downwards into “this langage,” he also shows himself anxious to authorize his doctrine by pointing up its polyglot and clerical basis, and these lines thus lend support to my contention that penitential discourse retains a strong presence in the chapter. Indeed, there are good reasons to regard Genius’ remark on translation as having implications, beyond mere linguistic translation, to inform the very shape of the chapter. According to Wenzel, the “new appraisal of human or worldly activity” that we have noted in treatments of “Pusillimite” by Gower, Chaucer, and Laurent is a development that

65 ParsT 687.
comes to prominence only in the fourteenth century, and is a distinctly popular version of the sin that effectively entails “a reversal of earlier positions” on such concepts as labor and quies.\textsuperscript{67} Although Gower may have known he was working in a distinctly popular and recent version of the tradition, even if he did not, he evidently found its popularizing trajectory congenial to his own purpose. This suggests that the narrowing of scope of “Pusillamite” from sin, to character flaw with earthly as well as spiritual consequences, and finally to vice in respect to “love and his servise,” is itself at least in part a strategy of translation downward, and as such, at no point does Gower altogether abandon “Pusillamite” considered as a sin.

The reason Gower can keep amatory and spiritual concerns simultaneously in play is largely due to the elasticity of the concept “mannes werk.” While, in the lines just quoted, this phrase might seem to confirm that Gower is really only interested in addressing amorous matters, the lines that follow make it clear that “mannes werk” is not meant in a sexual sense exclusively (although it probably includes that sense; cf. 3124-3388), and that “Pusillamite” consists of a refusal to “play the man” in any situation where work and risk-taking are prerequisite to achieving one’s “cause” and reaping “profit” (318-24; cf. 333, 338-39). Clearly at its next appearance, the notion of taking on “mannes werk” (or “manhed,” see below) encompasses a very broad scope that would include mercantile ventures as well, lending apparent support to Sadle\'s contention that Confessio IV effects an “embourgoisement” of love. But several features of Gower’s account of “manhed” strongly invoke the spiritual concerns occluded by Sadle\’s discussion.

\begin{quote}
[O]f this vice the nature
Dar nothing sette in aventure,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} Sin of Sloth, 78, 92-93.
Him lacketh bothe word and dede,
Wherof he scholde his cause spede:
He woll no manhed understonde, undertake 68
For evere he hath drede upon honde. (IV.321-26)

As we have seen, Wenzel finds in Gower a special affinity for the pastoral notion that Sloth turns on a lack of physical as well as spiritual courage. He draws on the same notion here.

Immediately after this passage Gower elaborates on the pusillanimous man’s failure to “dar” by invoking the proverbial “wolf in the weie.” Genius’ statement “Him thenkth the wolf is in the weie” (IV.327-33) is a biblical allusion, as is witnessed by the appearance of similar variations on the proverb in other pastoral discussions of pusillanimity, 69 and this may contribute to the theological significance of the passage. Better support comes from Gower’s remark that the pusillanimous man lacks “word and dede” (323). While it might be tendentious to argue merely from this formula that Gower has in view the Christian faith, even though we have seen him use the formula for this purpose elsewhere (see chapter 2), surer support for such a reading comes from the occurrence of virtually this same formula in an analogous moment in the Mirour when, 39 lines after treating Pusillamité and in the same section, Gower moves from Peresce of the body to Peresce of the soul:

si Peresce ...
Fait l’omme tard et allentis
Solonc le corps de ce q’appent
Au monde, encore plus tradis
Fait le corage et plus eschis
De ce que l’alme proprement
Duist faire a dieu; car point ne rent,
N’en dit n’en fait n’en pensement,
Les charges qui luy sont assis
Du sainte eglise, et meëment
Prier ne poet aucunement,

68 MED s.v. “understonden” def. 15.
69 Cf. Prov. 22:13, 26:13; Mirour 5509-13; Book of Vices, ed. Francis, 27; and ParsT 679.
Ne juner, si ne soit envis.

If Laziness ... makes man tardy and slow in body in that which is owed to the world, all
the more slow and ill-humored does she make a man’s heart to do what is owed to God;
for he does not at all fulfill—neither in word, in deed, nor in thought—the obligations
that are laid upon him by Holy Church, and above all he cannot pray or fast, unless it be
reluctantly. (Mirour 5532-44; tr. Wilson 80, modified)

Earlier in the same passage, Gower observes how the pusillanimous man’s spiritual lack is
accompanied by a bodily lack: shamefully, he loses his manliness, becoming effeminate:

Se laist a son hontage
Effeminer de son corage,
Don’t fait hommesse en soy perir.

So his shame ends in making his heart effeminate, as a result of which the manliness in
him perishes. (Mirour 5506-08)

Gower thus places works of body and of spirit on a continuum in a way that implies that to be
full, manhood requires spiritual life. Even though the Mirour remains more firmly within the
religious vein than the Confessio, it is notable that the Mirour passage shows Gower associating
bodily and spiritual laziness in the discourse of Pusillamité. At the very least, this belies
Nicholson’s remark that the remedy of sloth will be very different depending whether duty
toward God or duty toward man is in view. Further, considering the (slight) theological
resonances in chapter i, the overt reference to a learned discourse in need of translation and the
biblical exemplum in this chapter, I suggest that the same association of bodily and spiritual sloth
is in play in the Confessio’s chapter on “Pusillamite”; here too, full “manhed” implies spiritual
life.

If I am right in finding theological resonances in this proem, the reference to “grace” a
little later (336) is richly significant. Importantly, Gower is concerned with the psychological
entrapment which accompanies “Pusillamite,” as indeed it also accompanies certain varieties of
Sloth in the penitential literature.\textsuperscript{70}

He hath the sor which noman heleth,
The which is cleped lack of herte;
Thogh every grace aboute him sterte, \textit{abounds}\textsuperscript{71}
He wole noght ones stere his fot;
So that be resoun lese he mot,
That wol noght aunte forto winne. \hfill (IV.334-37)

Though the “sor which noman heleth” appears frequently in love poetry, significantly, Gower wrests this topos to a new context: whereas conventionally the sore is remedied only by the beloved, in this case the sore is a “lack of herte” within the man himself. There is good reason, then, to see this “sore which noman heleth” as a spiritual sickness that can only be cured by grace. In this light, the mention of “grace” in the next line is especially interesting. While “grace” cannot be theological grace in a technical sense—whereas this man is paralyzed, grace is a quality of the soul that motivates man to will the good\textsuperscript{72}—in view of Gower’s interest, witnessed throughout this chapter, in a bastardized grace that is already immanent in nature and in lay experience, I suggest the lines could be paraphrased as follows. “The pusillanimous man has every opportunity and resource necessary to do what is right; grace itself, so to speak, is all around him. But because he lacks the will to activate the natural capacities within himself, he loses his chance.” While this does not require a theological meaning, it invites the possibility.

I suggest that Genius’s doctrine of Pusillamite is so dependent on pastoral theology and on the unity of the physical and the spiritual as to remain strongly colored by Christian faith, and that the chapter keeps theological grace implicitly in view, even after the transition to “love and his service” (341). In what follows I discuss the two stories, and then “Ceyx and Alceone” which

\textsuperscript{70} See Wenzel, \textit{Sin of Sloth}, 82, 87-88.  
\textsuperscript{71} Peck (ed.), \textit{Confessio Amantis}, n. l. IV.336; cf. \textit{MED} s.v. “sterten” def. 3.  
\textsuperscript{72} \textit{ST} I-II Q. 110 a. 2.
comes later in Book IV and shows a similar dynamic. But since, as I argue, these stories recall Christian grace not allegorically but by re-enchanting earthly love by pointing up its gift-quality—that is, the stories do not point to Christian grace but urge us to see that earthly love itself points to grace—this theology is naturally very oblique and only becomes clear cumulatively. For this reason, I offer these readings provisionally with the intent that the three stories, considered together, offer a clear picture of Gower’s vernacularization of grace.

“Pymaleon and the Statue” presents problems to theological reading. Indeed, several critics read the tale ironically, as overtly recommending the antithesis of Christian virtue but covertly endorsing Christian virtue itself. But ironic readings tend to exaggerate the degree to which the tale violates Christian morality, for Gower in fact makes Pymaleon less lust-driven than his counterpart in the *Metamorphoses*. Like his namesake in Ovid, Pymaleon pretends his statue is real by talking to it. But whereas, in Ovid’s version, Pygmalion’s speech and behavior are pointedly erotic, Gower’s Pymaleon is genteel and courtly: “at mete / He wolde hire serve and preide hire ete” (397-98; cf. *Met*. 10.259-66). Further, Christopher Ricks notes the tale’s lack of prurience; Gower’s sense remains “cool and true.” Yet Gower’s version has a sexual element that easily rivals that found in the later renditions by Marston and Dryden. Ricks notes that “Gower makes us catch our breath in catching the moment” (46), citing the lines,

And it lay in his nakede arm,
The colde ymage he fieleth warm
Of fleissh and bon and full of lif.  

Ricks comments, “The miraculous metamorphosis is in the trice.... ‘[F]ieleth’ concentrat[es] within itself—like a hinge—both the past and the sudden present, since he is said to feel the cold

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73 Ricks, “Metamorphosis in Other Words,” 45.
image warm. The process ... is one that makes sense by courtesy of metamorphosis” (47). Here the maiden’s transformation is powerful because Pymaleon is not only “a true type of the artist,” as Pygmalion is in all versions, but “he is also in some respects the true type of the lover, at once transfigurer and transfigured.”

The relationship between Pymaleon’s function as type of the lover on the one hand and of the artist on the other is worth exploring further. While the tradition clearly assigns him an important typological status for artists, Gower’s narrative diminishes this function considerably. Gower avoids “art” and its cognates, though he uses them very abundantly in Book IV and elsewhere, in favor of a circumlocution: “The werkes of entreile he cowthe / Above alle othre men as tho” (375). While this effectively identifies him as an artist, it also recalls “werk” in the abstract, especially since this is a major focus of the tale, as it is in Book IV generally. More importantly, Gower shows Pymaleon to be “travaile[d]” (troubled; 377) by love even at this point in the story, even as he works on the statue. Not purely artificial, then, Pymaleon’s statue is a product partly of “werkes of entreile” (374) and partly of the natural cause, love. This is significant because it transforms the tale from a dirty (or ironic) story about a statue-fondler into a story about love’s transfiguring power. Further, by shifting the emphasis from the wonders of art to the wonders of nature, Gower is able to make the story into a reflection on nature and grace, as we will see.

Accepting Ricks’ reading of “Pymaleon” as a sincere exploration of human love, we can go further and read this concern with transfiguration theologically. On one level—here we approach allegorical reading—one ostensible purpose of the story is to illustrate the efficacy of

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74 I argue below, in chap. 5, that “art” is central to Gower’s conception of ethics.
prayer. Pymaleon not only prays but he also practices “penance”:

And evere among he axeth grace,  
As thogh sche [the maiden statue] wiste what he mente.  
And thus himself he gan tormente  
With such desese of loves peine,  
That no man mihte him more peine.  
Bot how it were, of his penance  
He made such continuance  
Fro dai to nyht, and preith so longe,  
That his preiere is underfonge,  
Which Venus of hire grace herde. (IV.410-19)

As we saw in 1.3, Gower elsewhere uses of pagan devotional practices as a metaphor for Christian devotion, and the sacramental terms here (“penance,” “continuance,” “preith,” “preiere”) may have the same function. Building on the chapter’s basic debt to pastoral theology, the frequency of sacramental terms here invites us to read more in the two instances of “grace” than merely a conventional reference to requited love. The tale thus suggests, though admittedly in a very odd and persistently erotic way, a parable suggestive of the Christ’s words, “Ask, and it shall be given you: seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). Once such an “indeterminate” allegory is admitted, the tale implicitly urges its reader to emulate the constancy in prayer generally.

But earthly love is never entirely crowded out, and the tale is about the inherent capacity of this love for transfiguration. If Pymaleon’s attraction to the statue initially is purely physical, it is also heart-felt—

With al the herte of his corage  
His love upon this faire ymage  
He sette (IV.391-93)

—and the next lines (noted above), on his courteous service of the maiden/statue substantiate
this. Far from auto-eroticism, Pymaleon’s love implies a degree of sympathy toward his wife, and the narrative shows their relationship to increase in richness: beginning with one-sided, physical attraction, the story moves to service, consummation, and finally fruitfulness, not only in producing the child Paphos but also, by extension, the island that will be named for him (430-36). Importantly, it is Pymaleon’s love that attracts divine mercy, for Genius emphasizes that mercy and grace are results of love’s mysterious power to transform. While the lines at the end of the tale, “Be this ensample thou miht finde / That word mai worche above kinde” (437-38), might be read to emphasize the radical “otherness,” implicitly the supernaturalness, of prayer (“word”) and of the grace this invites, the narrative goes far to eradicate the boundaries among nature, art, and grace. Not purely artificial, Pymaleon’s statue is a product partly of “werkes of entaille” and partly of love, as we have seen. Pymaleon’s prayer arises, then, from very natural causes: word is a part of “kinde,” contained within it as one of the seeds of nature’s own transfiguration. While the mechanics of this process are by no means articulated with scholastic precision, the tale offers a bastardized version of Aquinas’ “Gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit.” But Pymaleon’s grace, initially purely sexual, becomes far more, and we are invited to ask how far the goodness of natural love might extend. Before taking this further it is useful to look at the two remaining remunerative metamorphoses.

Perhaps even more than “Pymaleon,” the following story “Iphis” poses difficulties for an unironic Christian reading. The tale tells how Cupid took pity on the same-sex lovers, Iphe and Iante, by transforming Iphe into a man so the couple could consummate their love in a way accordant to nature. Even worse, like its source in Metamorphoses 9.666-797, it represents the couple as joining sexually before Iphe’s transformation—

Togedre as thei ben pleiefieres,
Liggende abedde upon a nyht,  
Nature, which doth every wiht  
Upon hire lawe for to muse,  
Constreigneth hem, so that thei use  
Thing which to hem was al unknowe. \( (IV.481-87) \)

Whereas at least Nature moved Canace and Machaire to heterosexual love (see above), here Nature “Constreigneth hem” to same-sex love. Importantly, it is only after and because of this “love” that Cupid takes pity and transforms Iphe into a man:

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\begin{align*}  
\text{Wherof Cupide thilke throwe} \\
\text{Tok pite for the grete love,} \\
\text{And let do sette kinde above.} \quad (IV.488-90) 
\end{align*}
\]

According to Diane Watt, this moment and others like it show Gower “explor[ing] transvestism, transgendering, and transsexuality.”75 Yet if we compare “Iphis” to its analogues in the fourteenth-century moralized Ovids, it is unlikely the tale would have seemed quite so heterodox to Gower’s contemporaries. Both Bersuire and the \textit{Ovide Moralisé} author, here, as elsewhere, circumvent the question of homosexuality by interpreting Iphe as an evil person (female) who needs to become good (male) in order to attain salvation: neither writer explains what the initial “homosexual” coupling might signify.76 The question of whether homosexual practice is morally licit simply does not arise. Admittedly, it is less clear that homoeroticism recedes from view in Gower’s case, for same-sex desire undoubtedly plays an important role in Gower’s tale. Still, its role is strictly provisional, a means of arousing Cupid’s pity that ultimately brings about heterosexual love. While it cannot be said that Gower neutralizes the homoerotic content of Ovid’s myth as completely as Besuire and the \textit{Ovide Moralisé} author do, the moralized Ovids set an important precedent for reading the myth as an unproblematic, happy story depicting

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75 \textit{Amoral Gower}, 75, 81.
theological grace. Thus we need not, on principle, rule out an unironic Christian reading of Gower’s “Iphis.”

But where the moralized Ovids demand Christian readings of myth by forcibly imposing allegoresis, nothing in Gower’s story demands that we read Christianly. More problematic than “Pymaleon and the Statue,” “Iphis” does not even represent its protagonists as active in prayer, but only in bed. It may seem more difficult to discern even a shadow of theology in this tale’s single brief reference to “grace” (496; see below). But Gower’s story finds more stable moral ground, though admittedly not yet an invitation to theological reading, in the fact that the initial alignment of homosexuality with the natural soon gives way before more conventional understandings of Nature and sexuality. Not only is homosexual desire provisional, a step toward heterosexual, married love, but it is also essentially inadequate and ultimately unnatural. After saying that Cupid has mercy on Iphise on account of “the grete love,” Gower explains that the love “Nature” had moved her to was, paradoxically, unnatural. Cupid has pity on Iphis:

[He] let do sette kinde above,
So that hir lawe mai ben used,
And thei upon here lust excused. (IV.490-92)

While Peck glosses line 490, “And caused [love, l. 489] to be put above nature,”77 it more likely means he “let Nature be restored to her proper seat of dominance,” since this makes better sense of the reference to Nature’s law and the excusing of lust in the next couplet: when the actions are consonant with Nature, sexual pleasure is the more excusable. The point, that from the perspective of this revised version of Nature even the first impetus to female same-sex love was

9.3113-57.
77 Confessio Amantis, ed. Peck, n. IV.490.
unnatural, becomes clearer in the lines that follow:

For love hateth nothing more
Than thing which stant agein the lore
Of that nature in kinde hath sett. (IV.493-495)

When Cupid intervenes and “Transformeth Iphe into a man,” he makes it possible for the couple to enjoy “kinde love” in a way “Which was to kinde no offence” (502-05).

To be sure, Gower’s back-peddling hardly makes the story morally credible, let alone theological. Whereas Pymaleon’s love tends strongly beyond Pymaleon himself by broadening into familial, and implicitly even economic and political circles, Iphis’s love seems to culminate phallocentrically by presenting “kinde love” as emphatically Iphis’s prize—

Forthi Cupide hath so besett
His grace upon this aventur,  
That he acordant to nature,  
Whan that he syh the time best,  
That ech of hem hath other kest,  
Transformeth Iphe into a man,  
Wherof the kinde love he wan  
Of lusti yonge Iante his wif. (IV.493-503)

—even if the next lines expand the picture to include Iante: “And tho thei ladde a merie lif, / Which was to kinde non offence” (493-505). The unmitigated carnality of the passage may be underscored by in a pun in line 501. The feminine version of Iphis’s name appears to be Gower’s invention—Ovid does not name Iphis in the nominative case at this stage of the narrative and the ablative Iphide is deliberately gender-ambiguous; in the Ovide Moralisé she is first named “Yphis, une pucele / Qui fu en valeton muee.”

Significantly, Gower has referred to her by name twice before this point, both times using

the masculine form “Iphis” (467, 471), and “Iphe” comes as a novelty in line 501. With the elision of the second syllable, “Iphe” sounds like “if,” and thus, the phrase “if into a man” at the point when Iphis—but for one thing—is exactly positioned to prove his manhood, calls attention to the way that coitus brings potential manhood to actuality.

What moves the story beyond a celebration of raw carnality is the interest it takes in the dynamics of provisionality. The tale is primarily about the movement from a culpable love to a love “Which was to kinde non offence.” As in “Pymaleon,” the vehicle of transformation is human love acting in its capacity to attract divine “grace.” As we noted above, it is because of the union of the two women (“Wherof”), and in the same moment, that Cupid “Tok pite for the grete love, / And let do sette kinde above.” Importantly, this reaction presupposes an ambivalence of the natural. In order for “grace” to be manifested, Iphe’s love had to be paradoxically both natural and unnatural: because natural, it could arouse Cupid’s sympathy, and because unnatural, this love stood in need of “grace” and transformation. Once again, “pite” appears as the catalyst in this process, reinforcing the importance of what earlier we compared to sympathetic magic, whereby a likeness between two objects enables one object to influence the other by imparting one of its qualities. Again this process seems to presuppose that, for all its waywardness, Nature contains something good. This waywardness is important, because it helps to establish congruity between the (very markedly fallen) provisional Nature that instigated Iphe to love another woman sexually, and the (still fallen) Nature that reigns in the more ordinary world of Genius, Amans, and the poem’s ideal reader. Because a kind of “queerness” afflicts this Nature as well, as is evident in the “kynde equivocations” that we investigated earlier, it follows that Iphis and Iante’s new-found bliss is still deeply
imperfect. In fact, the final line of the tale invites us to query the validity of Nature as the final moral standard: the couple finally led a “merie lif, / Which was to kinde non offence” (504-05).

As we will see in chapter 5, Gower’s fascination with the partial and impermanent goodness of Nature finds fullest confirmation in the Book VIII “beau retret” from love, which is made necessary less by morals than by Amans’s age at that point in the poem. While fuller discussion must await that chapter, it is necessary here to distinguish my argument from the ironic readings of the tales by Robertsonian critics. The essential difference is that I emphasize that Gower views Nature as good. Gower is not only sensitive to the goodness of Nature and of earthly love, as White affirms in *Nature, Sex, and Goodness*, but, far beyond this, sufficiently positive in his estimation of these things that he can affirm them as good even without the psychic violence of actively suppressing superior rational and spiritual truths. Natural goodness is inherently compatible with spiritual goodness because “gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit.” The goodness of the natural has implications for poetry as well, since poetry, like earthly love, is a provisional good that tends towards transcendence in a way quite different from the univocal allegory alleged by exegetical critics. Since “Ceix and Alceone” weaves together the themes of earthly love and “Poesie” in particularly rich ways, and it shows what remarkable consequences Gower’s accommodation of the provisional has for poetry, it is appropriate to turn to this tale now.

Of the three stories of remunerative metamorphosis, “Ceix and Alceone” is perhaps the most amenable to allegorical reading, and thus affords an important test case for my claim that Gower furnishes stories from Ovid in a way that, while still driven by theological interests, is
less a rehash of clergial strategies than a markedly lay alternative.\textsuperscript{79} Like “Pymaleon,” the tale involves religious devotion that, despite its paganism, recalls analogous species of devotion in Christianity. After his brother is changed into a goshawk, Ceix seeks the cure through pious means: he undertakes a “pelrinage” to the land of his “devocioun”

\begin{quote}
To don his sacrifice and preie,
If that he mihte in eny weie
Toward the goddes finde grace
His brother hele to pourchace
\end{quote}

(IV.2937-44)

While Ceix is gone, Alceone shows her piety not only by her faithful love for her husband but also by prayers and sacrifices on his behalf (2958-70). Finally, the tale shows piety rewarded when couple is reunited in a blissful new life as seabirds. “Ceix and Alceone” works reasonably well as an allegory of Christian grace. It comes in a series of tales on prayer and diligence, two themes that have important applications in the Christian life. After “Ceix” comes “The Prayer of Cephalus,” which applauds its protagonist for his prayer for a prolonged night of lovemaking with Aurora. While these lessons are not apparently Christian, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, in light of Gower’s tendency to read ancient pagan rites as imperfect shadows of Christian ones, they can be read as reflections on the cooperation of grace with human effort and all thus have Christian applications, albeit somewhat extrinsic ones. “Ceix and Alceone” possesses qualities highly consonant with Christian interpretation—above all a more cheerful tone, and a less inscrutable representation of divinity (see below), than are visible in Ovid—which might seem to corroborate an allegorical Christian reading of the blissful, if avian, afterlife of the faithful lovers as an allegory of Christian salvation. All this might be thought to invite clerical “glosing.”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{79} Gower’s source is \textit{Met.} 11.266-748.

\textsuperscript{80} Cf. \textit{SumT} III.1793.
Yet the tale’s apparent amenability to allegoresis need not preclude a reading of the tale as deeply lay and extraclerical in nature. As we saw earlier, “Pymaleon” offers possibilities for allegorical reading alongside possibilities—in my view stronger and more important—for a fully vernacular, unmediated experience of myth, and the same is true here. Gower points up the immediacy of myth by advertising the poetic status of both his source text and his English rendition. Genius opens the story, “This finde I write in Poesie ...” and similarly names his source “Poesie” later in the story (2927, 2988). What lends this significance is the extent to which Gower shows himself attentive in this tale to the quality of mythic strangeness that typifies not only this story—which features several metamorphic spirits and also a journey to the house of Sleep—but also poetry itself. The second occurrence of “Poesie” makes the link between poetry and mythic strangeness very clear. Gower describes Yris’s journey to where she found the god of Sleep

in a strange lond,
Which marcheth upon Chymerie:
For ther, as seith the Poesie,
The god of Slepe hath mad his hous,
Which of entaille is merveilous. (IV.2986-2990)

Although “strange” primarily means “foreign,” the sense “unfamiliar, unknown” is certainly present as well, as is evident from Gower’s description of the house as “merveilous” and, especially, his addition of the word “Chymerie.” While “Chymerie” is actually a mistranslation from Ovid’s “Est prope Cimmerios longo spelunca recessu” (Met. 11.592), Gower knew this exotic word from elsewhere in his mythographical reading. The fact that he found it acceptable here suggests his aspiration to high mythical

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81 It is worth noting that Machaut does not translate these lines in his version of the myth; cf. Fountain of Love, 576-602.
flight. The palpable weirdness of diction and subject matter inspired the aside in the next lines, “For ther, as seith the Poesie, / The god of Slep hath mad his hous” (2991-92). The first instance of “Poesie,” though not conclusive, may bear further witness that Gower associated poetry with mythic strangeness. Gower’s appeal to “Poesie” by way of introduction to the tale of Ceix and Alceone seems to presuppose the association of “Poesie” with strangeness. Not only the tale generally but even the opening lines of the narrative point up this quality:

This finde I write in Poesie:
Ceix the king of Trocinie
Hadde Alceone to his wif,
Which as hire oghne hertes lif
Him loveth; and he hadde also
A brother, which was cleped tho
Dedalion, and he per cas
Fro kinde of man forschape was
Into a Goshauk of liknesse.  (IV.2927-35)

This last event, seemingly random and never explained, but highly suggestive of divine caprice, is the stuff of dreams and of myth, so if Gower had this inciting incident already in mind as he began writing, this would indicate that even the line-2927 reference to “Poesie” connotes the strangeness of myth.

As we have seen, the Ceyx and Alcyone story necessarily entails a degree of strangeness, but Gower shows himself eager to keep this strangeness foregrounded. Strangeness and uncertainty continue to dominate as Ceix embarks on a pilgrimage “Into a strange regioun” (2938) in order to offer sacrifices and petition the gods on behalf of his brother. If the later instance of “strange” indeed connotes the sense “unfamiliar, unknown,” the same may be true here. Notably, the phrase “strange regioun’ is Gower’s
own, for Ovid has Ceyx embark specifically for the oracle of Apollo at Claros (Met. 11.410-14), as does the Ovide Moralisé poet, whereas Bersuire only says that Ceix “traveled by sea” (“mare navigaturus intruit”) without describing what place he went to. Whether or not this sense of “strange” is admissible here, mythic strangeness in fact pervades the tale as a whole. But why should this be? While Macaulay noted that the tale follows Ovid’s account very closely, and while, to a degree, the tale’s strangeness is a result of direct translation, it is not enough to say the tale has a mythic quality because it follows Ovid. Why does Gower follow Ovid closely here, when elsewhere, as we have seen, he “tames” Ovidian myth? Towards the end of the tale, Gower clearly takes a special interest in the story’s capacity for mythic strangeness. Gower’s account of the three metamorphic spirits in the cave relates nearly every detail in Ovid’s version (3038-55), and further, as Macaulay notes, Gower “improve[s]” on Ovid when he has all three of the spirits, not Morpheus alone, appear before Alceone (cf. 3057-65).

This last point may suggest one possible explanation for Gower’s interest in mythic strangeness: ostensibly, the tale is about the validity of dream interpretation (cf. 2922-26), addressing the question by means of Alceone’s true dream of her husband’s death. But this fact alone cannot explain the mythic strangeness in “Ceix and Alceone,” for Gower could have more efficiently used any of the stock exempla on the truth of dreams used for this purpose, for example, by Chaucer and by Langland. Indeed, Gower indulges the story’s capacity for creating dream atmosphere to its fullest. Gower collapses the phenomenological space between

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dreaming and waking by making Alceone’s dream more like her waking experience than it is in Ovid’s version. Morpheus, in the persona of Ceix, does not tell Alceone about his shipwreck and loss, as he does in Ovid (cf. Met. 11.650-66). Instead, Gower has three spirits inform Alceone about the disaster by recreating it before her visually (3057-65). While Gower’s change thus resembles Chaucer’s in the Book of the Duchess, Gower of course does not have Morpheus animate a dead body in morbidly comic fashion.86 Chaucer’s rendition of the myth comes to an abrupt halt because it collapses under the weight of its absurdly carnal premise. Gower, on the other hand, surpasses Ovid in the creation of dream atmosphere, not only in the central part of the narrative, but also in the way he allows this atmosphere to linger even after Alceone awakens. By narrating an illusion that becomes truth, Gower obscures the difference between the dream and the awful revelation and between the dream and the joyful metamorphosis: from the appearance of the spirits by her bedside onwards there is no difference between Alceone asleep and awake. She cries out, still “Slepende abedde ther sche lay” (3067), and her women gather to comfort her, but we are never told she wakes. Her dream has so perfectly mimicked waking reality that, the next morning, she knows for certain Ceix is dead; the syntax is ambiguous, but it implies the dream even showed her where on the beach to look for Ceix. Whereas Ovid has

Upon the morwe and up sche sterte,  
And to the see, wher that sche mette
The bodi lay, withoute lette
Sche drowh, and whan that sche cam nyh,
Stark ded, hise armes sprad, sche syh
Hire lord flietende upon the wawe.   (IV.3078-83)

The next lines sustain the dream atmosphere by showing the waking vision’s effect on Alceone

86 Cf. BD, 62-230.
after she sees her dead husband: her wits leave her, and, taking no thought for death, she throws herself into the deep (3084-86). Because nothing clearly differentiates Alceone’s waking and dreaming experience, even the fulfillment of the dream possesses a dreamlike quality. Seeing the “infortune of double harm” (3088)—first Ceix’s death and now Alceone’s—the gods intervene:

Hire dreinte lord and hire also  
Fro deth to lyve torned so,  
That thei ben schapen into briddes  
Swimmende upon the wawe amiddes. (IV.3093-96)

These lines necessarily recall the earlier incident when Dedalion was “per cas” transformed into a bird, and, like that incident, this event is implicated, not only in a dreaming state of consciousness but also in the world of “Poesie.”

This uncanny ability of dreams—and implicitly, of “Poesie”—to reveal truth is indeed one of Gower’s main interests in the tale. As a consequence, the tale locates in dreams and in “Poesie” a pattern of movement similar to the movement through, and by means of, the provisional that we found in “Iphis.” Again, it is important to distinguish the reading I propose from allegoresis. Both tales conclude in an image of the highest state of earthly love fulfilled in marriage, and, although this image is meant to call to mind a higher blessedness, it would be wrong for us to disparage the reality of the sign in favor of the signified. Gower’s changes to the conclusion of Alceone story underscore that Gower’s version of the myth is very much about earthly love and marriage. Whereas Ovid emphasizes the birds’ estrangement from humankind to an extent that the happiness of their reunion is kept from view—

  her hard beak  
  Printed cold kisses on his lips.  
  Whether he felt them
—Gower gives us a comparatively full picture of the couple’s joyous and fruitful sexual union (3097-119). Yet several aspects of Gower’s tale serve to drive beyond mere earthly love and urge us toward theological grace. Most basically, the tale re-enchants love by representing love as an experience finally susceptible only to mythical treatment. Earlier I suggested that Gower’s marking of the tale as mythic with the words, “This finde I write in Poesie,” was motivated in part by the somewhat difficult background detail of Dedalion’s chance transformation into a goshawk. But significantly, even before Dedalion’s appearance, Gower introduces a rarity of a very different kind:

This finde I write in Poesie:
  Ceix the king of Trocinie
  Hadde Alceone to his wif,
  Which as hire oghne hertes lif
  Him loveth. (IV.2927-31)

If the mythic marker of line 2927 is motivated primarily by Gower’s need to give an account of Dedalion’s transformation, nevertheless, the line influences this sketch of marital bliss, rendering it similarly mythic. The tale certainly bears this out, for the dreamlike quality that pervades the tale lasts to the very end. This suggests the provisional character of even the highest form of earthly happiness: because set in a dream world, the happy conclusion points beyond itself. Further, Gower’s version renders the intervention of the (pagan) gods less inscrutable, more like Christian grace, than Ovid’s version. While Ovid notes that husband and wife were magically transformed because the gods had pity, he minimizes this aspect, reducing it to the two-word clause,

87 Ovid undermines the happiness of the ending in other ways as well; cf. Hiscoe, “Ovidian Comic Strategy,” 374.
“superis miserantibus” (741), and, even if this implies the gods are rewarding Alcyone’s faithfulness, the transformation remains utterly inscrutable. Gower, by contrast, makes it clear that the gods transform the husband and wife in response to Alceone’s faithful devotion to her husband (cf. 3121), and, by implication, to the piety that she has shown to the gods. Seeing Ceix dead and Alceone about to die, the gods turn them “Fro deth to lyve” and transform them “for the trowthe of love, / Which in the worthi ladi stod ...” (3097, 3090-91). The metamorphosis is thus made as comprehensible as any act of grace can be.

This nudge toward spiritual grace, not only in “Ceix” but also in “Pymaleon” and “Iphis,” seems to bring us back to allegory, and thus to clerisy. If these stories are allegories, they are very muted ones. To borrow terminology developed most fully by Suzanne Akbari, they are more strongly marked by “horizontal” than “vertical” tendencies because they “celebrate[] the play of words and the unfixed nature of linguistic meaning”:

that is, many meanings coexist without clear hierarchical order, thus creating considerable interference. Further, these stories are alike in being about love in a poem that is devoted to a very large extent to love: rather than use love as a metaphor (whether inconspicuous and servile to or conspicuous and competitive with its spiritual signification) to represent a higher spiritual truth, as in “vertical” allegory, Gower insists on the worthiness of earthly love, both in these tales and throughout the poem. What enables him to do this, while still pointing up the finally superior necessity of grace, is his emphasis in all three stories on the provisional nature of earthly love.

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88 Akbari, Seeing through the Veil, 14. For discussion of “vertical” and “horizontal” allegory, see ibid., 12-16; cf. Quilligan, Language of Allegory, 28, 236.
Conclusion

Gower’s equivocations on Nature—now as a force for moral confusion, now as a force for good—place goodness (as well as moral confusion) within reach of the laity. Stories of metamorphosis go further by suggesting that Nature’s goodness extends virtually to spiritual grace. This derives in part from the very status of metamorphic myth as a highly valued, authoritative textual alternative to clerical and institutional learning because it conveys truth to the reader even when clerical mediation is present only dimly or not at all. Stories of punitive and remunerative metamorphosis take the goodness of Nature further. As we have seen, the stories of punitive metamorphosis for the most part suggest this negatively, by showing that all crimes and many misdemeanors presuppose a forced suppression of the natural instinct. In the case of “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment,” Nature takes an active role in assisting grace, and this last tendency is seen also in the stories of remunerative metamorphosis. Though these stories all center on the fulfillment of love in blissful marriage, the point is not that love fantasies fulfilled are always “vertical” or “horizontal” allegories of grace. Rather, by emphasizing the provisional character of earthly love, these particular stories keep earthly love as their primary topic, but with an additional sacralization of this love, and thus encourage readers to see spiritual realities that lie not beyond the sensus literalis but beyond earthly love itself.

This is a distinctively vernacular rhetoric because it avoids allegory—the characteristic strategy of “glosing” clerics—or else uses it only in a very muted, “horizontal” fashion. Instead of allegory, Gower offers the text itself, advertising the immediacy of the text by calling attention to the poetic quality, and especially the quality of mythic strangeness, shared by both Ovid’s text and Gower’s rendition. Although this is most explicit in “Ceix and Alceone,” we saw in 1.3 that Gower quite often identifies his sources as “the Poete” or as “Ovide,” and, in light of
Ovid’s clear status as master of mythic strangeness and of metamorphosis, these other references testify to the immediacy of myth in the *Confessio* in much the same way. One important result of this is that, like earthly love, “Poesie” itself becomes a provisional and instrumental good: if not actually sacralized as love is, “Poesie” is a *bona fide* aid to spirituality. As we will see in the next chapter, it is not just a small group of tales that presents love and poetry as provisional goods in this sense, but the very trajectory of the poem in its course away from myths of love to Amans’ “beau retret” and prayer.
5. Art, Ethics, and Grace

Introduction

The claim of my last chapter that Gower depicts grace as ready at hand, virtually immanent within Nature, seems finally belied by Amans’ failure at the end of the poem to obtain “grace” in love. Amans’ “beau retret” (VIII.2416) does indeed provide a glaring counterexample to the residual optimism found not only in Genius’s amatory doctrines—be diligent like Pymaleon, Iphis, and Alceone, he implies, and you also will find fulfillment of your wishes—but also, by extension, in the idea that grace is readily available, needing only appropriation through the proper exercise of will. For this reason, it is necessary to turn to this final counterexample here. In this chapter, I argue that Amans’ “beau retret,” and the whole confession that leads up to it and thus leads to failure, indeed serves in part to confirm that Nature’s goodness has limits. But just as importantly, the failure of the confession—a wide-ranging dialogue that affords opportunities to try and find wanting a very wide array of discourses—confirms the limited efficacy of discourse in general. Gower represents Amans’ final, and, at long last, now overtly spiritual, lesson as only possible because of Amans’ natural course in the body. The goodness of the natural returns, and with it, the possibility of a markedly lay spirituality.

5.1 Ethics, Art, and Textual “Experience”

In the last chapter we considered the very great contribution Ovidian metamorphosis makes to the vernacular rhetoric of the Confessio. This chapter considers the related contribution of Ovid’s discourse of love. I argue that the Confessio draws on the Ovidian and medieval art of
love not only for the content of its amatory advice and for its “comic strategy”\(^1\) in giving advice in the voice of the fallible narrator Genius, but, more fundamentally, for its self-conscious play upon its own dubious epistemic status—that is, on the impossibility of an “art” of love. By couching his most public discussion of ethics in terms borrowed from the art of love, Gower suggests that no discursive account of ethics is sufficient to bring about moral reform that the world needs. Especially in an Aristotelian framework, ethics is not finally motivated toward learning doctrines, but toward practice in the ever-changing situations of embodied experience. By representing ethics as a kind of “art,” a category which, as we will see, entails negative qualities for Gower, the \textit{Confessio} is able to register the elusiveness of moral wisdom, something that paradoxically depends on experience, and, as we will see again in this chapter, ultimately on grace.

Intriguingly, those instances in which art appears to rival omnicompetence are generally cast in a negative light.\(^2\) Achelons is

\begin{verbatim}
A soubtil man, a decevant, 
Which thurgh magique annd socerie 
Couth al the world of tricherie.  
\end{verbatim}

(IV.2075-78; cf. VI.1434-44)

Likewise, “Ulysses and Telegonus” and “Nectanabus” both feature protagonists who autonomously manipulate fortune to their own ends, and significantly, both these exempla against sorcery, a species of Gluttony, condemn the practitioners of these arts. The stories contribute to Genius’s teaching on Gluttony, but they also serve a structural function since they lead directly to the compendium of Aristotle’s doctrine that they directly give rise to (cf.

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\textit{\footnote{1}{This phrase is from Hiscoe, “Ovidian Comic Strategy”; cf. Hatton, “Gower’s Use of Ovid”; Simpson, \textit{Sciences and the Self}, ch. 5, and see below.}}
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\textit{\footnote{2}{The one exception is Medea, who perfects her “art magique” to the point that Gower says “with [her] craftes ... Sche was ... a goddesse” (V.3947, 4104-07). Gower appears less anxious to condemn her sorcery because the tale’s primary concern is Jason’s perjury.}}
\end{flushright}
VI.2401-19), and thus are deeply concerned with the status of art. As Peck notes, “Nectanabus” serves as a kind of counterpart to “Apollonius of Tyre,” which directly follows Book VII: whereas Nectanabus abuses his “craft” in order to facilitate the sexual seduction of Olympias and, deluding her into thinking he is a god, fathers on her Alexander, in the last major story of Book VI, Apollonius devotes his knowledge to moral purposes, for the benefit of his people, in the single major story of Book VIII.³ Ulysses’ sexual manipulation of Circe is similar. In Gower’s version of the story, Circes and Calipsa find their own arts and sciences powerless to move Uluxes; he, however, “thurgh the science of his art / He tok of hem so wel his part, / That he begat Circes with childe” (VI.1459-61). Both Nectanabus and Uluxes are killed by their own illegitimate sons; in both cases, Genius makes the connection between their use of sorcery and their tragic ends explicit (cf. 1768-81, 2337-2366). By contrast, Apollonius, who typifies the licit use of “art,” though like these sorcerers in his prodigious knowledge of art and science, is subject to adversity and failure throughout his life, and yet he will ultimately encounter good fortune as we will see below. It is worth noting that the only other figures celebrated in the Confessio for their mastery of “art,” Perseus and Pymaleon, are similarly subject to divine providence, and their art succeeds only as a consequence of their pious collaboration with divine grace (cf. I.419-35; and for Pymaleon, see chapter 4). As we will see in this chapter, this provisional view of art stands much closer to Gower’s ideal. Repeatedly in the Confessio, licit uses of art reveal art to be limited, fallible, and ineffectual in the face of adverse fortunes, yet finally efficacious thanks to the collaboration of art with an ultimately benevolent providence.

But art is extremely important, for ethics itself is an art. It is useful to approach the issue of Gower’s representation of ethics as a licit, though highly fallible art, via Mitchell’s recent account of Gower’s “casuistic ethics,” since this critical account comes closest to the claim I

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³ Peck, Kingship, 134-35.
want to advance here. Mitchell argues that the late-medieval tendency to privilege case logic—a scholastic habit visible in theology, philosophy, ethics, and law alike—explains the relative shapelessness of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, without gutting the poem of ethical import. In the context of “casuistic ethics,” the poem’s breadth and variety are precisely the qualities that make it powerful as an instrument of ethics: the strength of “casuistic ethics” is that it “furnishes individuals with a flexible and adaptable means for deliberating upon and responding to the contingencies of circumstance,” and Gower, accordingly, offers the *Confessio* as “a *liber exemplorum* that is comprehensive rather than coherent.” The poem “provides hypothetical rather than categorical imperatives to deal with questions of love, human if also divine, because the instances in which love arises are so very diverse.” Ethics, in Aristotelian scholasticism as in Gower, is a practical science concerned with application in the realm of change, contingency, and particulars.

One of the strengths of Mitchell’s account is its sensitivity to the ways in which Gower represents ethics as dependent on the reader’s willingness to cooperate, and thus dependant on a complex, improbable series of events. Mitchell notes that one way Gower problematizes the vagaries of reader response is by reminding us of the extent to which the moral life requires the proper use of memory, a faculty which in Amans’ case at least is morally compromised. Further, while Gower offers the confession as a remedy for this ailment, Mitchell notes that even *confession* is far from a sure fix, for Gower also implicates the faculties of perception, and especially conscience, as an arbiter of true and false information, in fallen nature. Thus

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6 Ibid. 37.
7 Ibid. 40.
8 Ibid. 66-70; cf. Chandler, “Memory and Unity.”
Mitchell’s account registers the multi-layered complexity of Gower’s representation of ethical progress and the obstacles in its way.

I want to suggest that the Confessio goes even further in problematizing ethics. It is not simply a matter of getting the reader to respond to texts in the proper way; there is a problem inherent in texts themselves. Several features of the Confessio suggest that texts are not able to convey the kind of practical, experiential knowledge—knowledge “how to”—that the ethical life requires. Taking Mitchell’s observation about the importance of particulars and practical application a step further, I want to call attention to certain features of the Confessio that represent the contingency of ethics in so radical a way as to unsettle the poem’s relationship even to so contingent a science as “casuistic ethics.” More specifically, I will suggest that Gower represents ethics not so much as a radically contingent, practical, “science,” but, more precariously, as an “art.”

There is long precedent for conceptualizing ethics as “art.” Early Greek thought conceives of ethics as technê. Yet before Aristotle and sometimes even in his writings, there is “no systematic or general distinction between epistêmê and technê,” and to call ethics technê was by no means to impugn its reliability as a field of human knowledge. On the contrary, Martha Nussbaum notes that for the early Greeks, technê stood in opposition to tuchê (“chance”), and the conception of ethics as technê arose from a desire to banish “ungoverned contingency from social life.” Further, Nussbaum also finds that treatments of technê in fifth- and fourth-century Athenian texts consistently point to four main features—“universality,” “teachability,”

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10 This is certainly true of Plato; see Nussbaum, Fragility of Goodness, 89-121. This is less clear for Aristotle, who, in rejecting Plato’s notion of an epistêmê of ethics, according to Nussbaum (idem, 290 and n.), also rejected the notion of ethics as technê. But Nussbaum clarifies, “[Aristotle’s] own account of ethics, being a systematic ordering of appearances, has just about as much claim to technê status as does Protagoras’s proposal; what he means is, that it is not technê or episêmê in the sense demanded by either the Republic or the Posterior Analytics” (idem, 290 n.).
11 Nussbaum, Fragility of Goodness, 94.
12 Ibid. 89, 94.
“precision,” and “concern with explanation”—which together highlight the reliability and transmittability of the art of ethics.

Although the relationship remains somewhat fluid, “art” and “science” are somewhat more distinct in medieval Latin writers. Medieval discussions of the hierarchy of the sciences frequently subordinate “art,” and specifically ethics, to the “sciences” that deal in higher levels of certainty. Aristotle had theorized a lower position for technê as compared to epistêmê, and Thomas Aquinas classes moral philosophy as an “operative science” akin to medicine and alchemy, and notes that all of these “minus possunt habere de certitudine” compared to other sciences; in Aquinas’s nomenclature moral science is an “operative science,” and virtue itself is an art. Thus to align ethics with art is to call attention to the lesser degree of certainty it offers. Aquinas makes this hierarchy explicit, but Gower need not have read these discussions in order to have conceived “art” as offering less certainty than “science.” Despite the considerable overlap between “ars” and “scientia,” “art” and “science,” these words are not universally interchangeable, and perusal of the MED shows that Middle English “art” and “science” each retain a large part of the semantic fields of their Latin ancestors. While it is true that, according to the MED, “art” can mean “Learning, scholarship” (def. 6a), and “science” can mean “A skill, handicraft; a trade ... skillfulness, cleverness ... craftiness” (def. 4), these two words clearly have different connotations. In the majority of its senses, “art” suggests the practical application of

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13 Ibid. 95-96.
14 He does this in Nicomachean Ethics 6.3, 1139b 15-18, even if at other times he uses technê and epistêmê as synonyms.
15 “Et ideo etiam quanto alia scientia magis appropinquat ad singularia, sicut scientiae operativae, ut medicina, alchimia, et moralis, minus possunt habere de certitudine” (In Librum Boethii De Trinitate, ed. Busa, 4:536, col. 3). Following Aristotle, Aquinas denies that moral science is an art, affirming that in actions properly governed by moral science, “virtue takes the place of art”: “scientia vero moralis, quamvis sit propter operationem, tamen illa operatio non est actus scientiae, sed magis virtutis, ut patet in libro ethicorum. unde non potes dici ars, sed magis in illis operationibus se habet virtus loco artis” (ed. cit., 4:532, col. 3; tr. Maurer 13).
16 Latin ars carries a rich semantic load, but all of its meanings suggest doing or making; for the senses of ars in Ovid’s Augustan Rome, see Sadlek, Idleness Working, 47-48.
knowledge (in defs. 3, 4, 5, 7; but cf. def. 6), whereas “science” tends to suggest intellectual
knowledge (in defs. 1a, 1b, 2, 5; but cf. def. 4). As we will see momentarily, the words have
different connotations in Gower as well.

To be sure, the mere coincidence that “art” and “casuistic ethics” both have pragmatic
orientations does not prove that the Confessio, because it engages in “casuistic ethics,” views this
ethics as an “art,” or for that matter that the Confessio presents itself as an “art.” What does align
Gower’s ethical program with “art” is the depth of the poem’s debt to the Ovidian and medieval
art of love. While he never calls the Confessio an “art,” Gower presents it as a verse treatise on
love, thereby placing it, at least loosely, within a literary genre dominated by Ovid. There can
be no doubt that, for Gower, the field of didactic verse on love was still dominated by Ovid’s Ars
Amatoria and Remedia Amoris: not only does Gower draw more amatory exempla from Ovid—
albeit from Ovid’s oeuvre as a whole—than from any other source, but he also alludes
specifically to the didactic poems on love in many ways. Genius refers directly to Ovid’s
Remedia amoris at the end of his Book IV digression on the useful arts, a passage we will look at
below. Other allusions are only slightly subtler. As Gregory Sadlek has shown, the content of
Genius’s amatory advice shows considerable affinity to Ovid, especially in the Book IV
discussion of the uses of labor, even if Ovid’s advice has been tempered by other “labor
ideologies.” Genius’s didactic methodology also bears a considerable debt to Ovid, as various
scholars have argued, James Simpson perhaps most energetically. To notice the depth of
Gower’s debt to Ovid—the one writer Gower privileges with the title “the poete” (cf. V.5231)—

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17 For Ovid’s continuing influence on the medieval art of love, see Allen, Art of Love, ch. 2; and Minnis, Magister
Amoris.
19 Simpson, Sciences and the Self, esp. ch. 5. See also Tinkle, Medieval Venuses, ch. 7; Hatton, “Gower’s Use of
Ovid”; Hiscoe, “Ovidian Comic Strategy”; and Dimmick, “Ovid in the Middle Ages,” 280-82. For a more cautious
assessment of Gower’s Ovidian tendencies, see Harbert, “Lessons from the Great Clerk.”
is to bring Gower’s poem at least loosely within the tradition of the Ovidian and medieval art of love.

But what insight is gained from saying that the Confessio is loosely affiliated with the art of love? The reason this generic affiliation is important is that it offers an alternative perspective on the very features of the poem’s representation of ethics which Mitchell describes with his model of “casuistic ethics.” Mitchell is certainly right to point to analogues in confessional and preaching handbooks: like the Confessio, these libri exemplorum all offer a range of cases, marked by diverse approaches compensating for diverse circumstances, always leaving the important tasks of selection and adjudication to the reader. Circumstances affect cases, and must therefore be taken into account in questions of ethics, both in the Confessio and in books of “casuistic ethics.” But it is remarkable how well the alternative model of the art of love accommodates these same qualities. Especially if this tradition is taken broadly to include both the art and the remedy of love, as in Andreas Capellanus’s De Amore, Jean de Meun’s portion of the Rose, the Libro de Buen Amor, and other medieval “arts of love,” we find that all these works impose a similar imperative on the reader to sift and choose.²⁰ The juxtaposition of pro- and contra- perspectives on sexual love that are characteristic of the medieval art of love is mirrored in the Confessio: now Genius goads Amans to love, now he counsels him to give love up. Although these contrasts are certainly less severe than those found in Andreas Capellanus, Jean de Meun, and Juan Ruiz, Genius’s counsel is comparable to the confused amatory doctrines in those “arts.” But even when considered independently of the Remedia amoris, the art of love is itself inherently ambivalent, and offers a didactic model based on the principle of pragmatic utility that accounts at least as well as the “casuistic ethics” model for the contradictions that

²⁰ On this propensity in the medieval art of love, see Minnis, Magister Amoris; and Walsh, ed. A Cf. Allen, Art of Love, 5-9.
exist between Genius’s doctrines of Crusade and Prowess, and between “Folhaste” and Idleness.”

The reason why the *Confessio*’s status as an “art” matters is that, compared to Mitchell’s account of its status as “casuistic ethics,” it positions Gower’s poem lower on the scale of epistemic certainty. Without a doubt, Mitchell’s account already places the poem’s epistemic pretensions quite low. Whether we see the *Confessio* as advancing “art” or “casuistic ethics,” both formulations are faithful to the ways in which the poem eschews abstractions, privileges particulars, and shows a strong pragmatic orientation. Both models register the poem’s very limited confidence in its own power to reform its audience, and in both cases ethical reform must rest with the individual reader.

The “art” model and the “casuistic ethics” model also both account well for Gower’s notion that the exempla of the *Confessio* constitute a treasury of “experience,” but it is in their different ways of handling this that the divergence of the two models becomes visible. Gower offers himself as an “example” in both the English and the Latin verses near the beginning of Book I, and in the Latin verses he also theorizes more generally about the ability of exempla to transmit experience: “Vt discant alii, docet experiencia facti, / Rebus in ambiguis que sit habenda via” (I.ii.3-4; “In things unclear experience shows the way; / By it may others learn”). Mitchell calls attention to these lines in the course of his argument that the *Confessio* as a whole constitutes a *liber exemplorum* that, while it lacks formal coherence, furnishes serious ethical wisdom no less for that. Mitchell comments, “*experiencia* becomes a touchstone of persuasion and practical ethics,” and, in a footnote, he observes that Gower’s equation of bookish “exempla” with “experience” is not unique to the *Confessio*. In the prologue to Book I of the *Vox*

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21 Cf. III.2485-2546; IV.1963-2044; III.1685-1728; IV.1083-2700. These examples are discussed by Mitchell, *Ethics and Exemplary*, 52-57.
Clamantis, Gower says that “Scripture veteris capiunt exempla futuri, / Nam dabit experta res magis esse fidem” (“Writings of the past contain fit examples for the future, for a thing which has previously been experienced will produce greater faith,” I.Pr.1-2). Mitchell claims that “Experience, in Gower as in other literature, is inevitably mediated by prior bookish example ... yet medievals might go on to observe that reading a book is equal to ‘experience,’” and cites Mary Carruthers’ The Book of Memory to this effect.22

Mitchell’s citations of the Vox and, via Carruthers, of other texts about the efficacy of books in transmitting experience are certainly germane, and suggest the ethical seriousness, and even high ambition, of Gower’s English poem. From its position at the very start of the confession it is clear that when Gower reflects on how “docet experiencia” he has in view not only Amans’ experience of the “wonder hap” (I.67)—though this is the immediate object of these lines—but also, by implication, the many “ensamples” that fill the Confessio. This becomes more evident when Gower has Genius introduce various exempla with phrases such as, “And of old time how it hath be / I finde a gret experience” (I.1072-73; cf. V.321, I.217). Yet other considerations indicate that the Confessio is less than reliable as a conduit of ethical wisdom. In the Confessio, at least, Gower’s reflections on what we might call textual experience is compromised by strong Ovidian undercurrents. Simpson points out that Genius and the Ovidian praeceptor amoris have a great deal in common, including a claim to authority based on “experience.”23 Early in the Ars amatoria, the Ovidian narrator claims, “Usus opus movet hoc: vati parete perito” (“Experience prompts my labours. Heed the sage,” 1.29). The praeceptor’s claim to offer stable and trustworthy erotic advice based on this authoritative but elusive

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22 Mitchell, Ethics and Exemplary, 43, n. 22 (my emphasis); cf. Carruthers, Book of Memory, 169.
23 Simpson, Sciences and the Self, 155.
“experience” is notoriously duplicitous. As Simpson argues, Gower knew what he was doing when he cast Genius in a similarly ironic light, by having Amans defer to him: “So as thou hast experience of love” (I.217).

To the extent that Gower’s poem constitutes an “art,” the Confessio presents its “craft”—self-governance in all matters amatory—as singularly difficult, even impossible. Indeed, Chaucer’s version of the proverb, “The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne,” is very apt: like other writers in the art of love tradition, Gower is very conscious of the absurd impossibility of an art of love. Even in his morally conservative, sanitized version, the “art” is founded on a paradox. Where Ovid revels in the absurdity of reducing unruly amor to codification—claiming to have done the impossible, even to have schooled the unruly puer Amor himself—Gower delights in a similar contradiction. Gower’s delight in love’s paradoxes might at times be formulaic—“egra salus, vexata quies pius error, / Bellica pax, vulnus dulce, suaue malum” (I.i.7-8)—but even here it is notable that Gower nonetheless glibly proposes love as an easy alternative to the questions of the commonweal that he used to treat: immediately following these headverses, Gower calls love a “thing ... noght so strange” as the questions of public reform that he treated in earlier writings (I.10). But love is strange, and, as I will argue below, it is precisely love’s strangeness that makes it useful to Gower’s ethical project in the Confessio: love serves as an effective surrogate for ethics because love and ethics are alike in their resistance to codification as “art.”

Admittedly, the “loose” affiliation I have pointed out between the Confessio and the arts of love does not mean that the Confessio is an art of love in any strict sense. But I suggest that the poem fails to qualify as an art of love, not because it transcends the methodology and meager

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epistemic pretensions of “art”—in my view it never does—but because it applies the methodology of “art” to a broader scope of questions than just how to find the girl, win her, and keep her, and the addenda on how to fall out of love. All of these concerns do find a place in the Confessio, but so do questions of political order, pastoral theology, ecclesiology, etc. This same versatility conforms very well to the inherently loose genre implied by the term “art.”

Further evidence of Gower’s association of ethics with “art” comes from his discussion of alchemy (or “Alconomie”) in the excursus on the “Uses of Labour” (IV.2456-2632). The discussion is doubly useful for us here: not only does it help show Gower’s alignment of ethics with “art,” but also because it attests to the precarious epistemology of “art” as a category ranking below “science.” Earlier I noted that, notwithstanding the overlap that exists between the Middle English words “art” and “science,” perusal of the MED indicates the words preserve a good deal of the connotative difference that separates their Latin cognates. It is here in the discussion of alchemy that we can see these different connotations in evidence also in Gower. On first sight, Gower’s discussion seems to obliterate the distinction, since Gower refers to alchemy now as a “craft,” now as a “science,” and now as an “art” again (2505, 2598, 2614; cf. “pratique,” 2612). But looking closely we see the distinction is in force here. Gower distinguishes the “science” recorded in books from the “craft” or “art” whereby this science is put into practice, whether successfully or unsuccessfully. Today the “craft” stands on dubious ground—“I not hou such a craft schal thryve” (2592)—but this does not invalidate the science itself: “Bot noght forthi, who that it knewe, / The science of himself is trewe / Upon the forme as it was founded” (IV.2598-600). Thus when Gower refers to alchemy as a “science,” his point is that, even though contemporary practitioners of the “craft” fail, this is not the fault of the books, which really do preserve the “science,” that is, they preserve as true a record as can be expected
from texts, of the “craft” or “art” practiced by the ancients (cf. 2505). The point is not that book-
learning is irrelevant to the practice of alchemy: Gower says that the ancients made the three
alchemical stones “thurgh clergie” (2533), and he lauds the ancient sages above all for writing
these things down (cf. 2606-32). But books cannot contain all of the secrets of the “practique” of
alchemy (2612).

Gower’s reflections on the loss that is inherent to *translatio studii* are interesting not only
because they clarify a lexical point. The alchemy discussion casts a very large shadow over the
exposition of the “arts” of which it forms a part, taking up 175 of the 276 lines Genius devotes to
this purpose (cf. 2396-2671). If alchemy is so perishable a “science” that it can become lost even
to those in possession of reliable texts, then, might not other “sciences” be subject to similar
kinds of losses? Why should this process of decay be unique to alchemy? These are questions, I
believe, that the Book IV excursus invites us to ask.

In some ways, certainly, alchemy presents a unique case, since alchemy was highly
controversial by the time Gower was writing. But Gower’s particular concern with the vagaries
of alchemy’s textual transmission is apparently unique. Philosophical attacks on alchemy deny
that the science could ever have been successful. Jean de Meun’s and Chaucer’s vernacular
accounts of alchemy include no hint of the distinction Gower draws between the ancient
practitioners of the art, who were successful, and the contemporary practitioners, who are not,
and neither does the discussion of alchemy in the *Speculum Doctrinale*. To all appearances,

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26 “[B]etween the time of alchemy’s inception in the mid-twelfth century and the end of the thirteenth century a
general backlash against this discipline gradually developed, with mainstream scientific and religious authorities
coming to agree in its denunciation” (Newman, “Technology and Alchemical Debate,” 426).
27 E.g. that of Avicenna’s *De congelacione*, which was influential in the West from its translation c. 1200; see
28 *Roman de la Rose*, ed. Langlois, 16065-16148; *Canterbury Tales*, ed. Benson, VIII.720-1481. For discussion of
Jean de Meun’s account in the context of the ongoing alchemical debate, see Newman, *Promethean Ambitions*, 77-
82.
Gower raised the problem of textual transmission here because he took a particular interest in it. Arguably, alchemy is paradigmatic of all the sciences, for, as we saw in chapter 2, Gower has reservations about the ability of texts to transmit knowledge in general. But certainly the Book IV excursus draws an especially close connection between alchemy and ethics by showing them both, tenuously, to be rooted in “experience.” To practice alchemy, it is not enough to have texts, one also needs “experience.” When first introducing alchemy, Gower refers to it neither as an “art” nor as a “science” but as an “experience,” a direct, practical result of diligent labor:

    And also with gret diligence
    Thei founden thilke experience,
    Which cleped is Alconomie.   (IV.2457-59)

Gower reaffirms that alchemy is deeply rooted in “experience” later on, when he turns to the question of modern alchemy. Contemporary practitioners “spoke faste of thilke Ston” described by the ancients, but this is empty talk, since “hou to make it, nou wot non / After the sothe experience” (2581-83).

    If the “art” of alchemy’s dependence on “experience” cannot by itself be said to point up a deep affinity between that “experience” and the “experience” of ethics, it is notable that the lines which follow the section on alchemy bring us and Amans back explicitly to the question of amatory self-governance. Genius moves from alchemy to Latin letters, to the arts of rhetoric and translation, to the poetry of Ovid, and finally to the Remedia Amoris. This sets up Genius’s pointed remark to Amans:

    Forthi, mi Sone, if that thou fiele
    That love wringe thee to sore,
    Behold Ovide and take his lore.   (IV.2672-74)

This advice, of course, is not what Amans wants to hear, and he says as much. But importantly, even after Amans rejects his priest’s suggestion, Amans and Genius continue to be on amicable
terms. Genius has suggested one possible way to proceed, offering the Remedia Amoris. But when Amans refuses that way, in effect requesting more of the other Ovidian art, Genius readily grants this wish and proceeds to some of the most unrelentingly pro-sexual-love portions in the whole Confessio (cf. 2701-3684).

If we accept Genius’s advice there as ethically legitimate, and I think we can—after all, Genius is not counseling fornication but only sound principles of courtship—we are very nearly back to Mitchell’s description of Gower’s ethics as based on cases, relentlessly circumstantial, but morally serious for the most part and certainly not latitudinarian. However, the Confessio’s affinities to “art” and its association of ethics with “art” serve to point up an aspect of Gower’s ethics that tends to be lost in Mitchell’s account of the Confessio’s place in “casuistic ethics.” Gower knows that even the best books are not likely to “setten al in evene / This world” (I.2-3), because ethical knowledge is as precarious as any art can be, based on that elusive thing, “experience.” Yet Gower is not finally a pessimist: though conscious of the difficulties in applying “science” to the realm of chance and contingency, and doubtful about the moral efficacy of books, Gower is certain that ethical progress is made available by the work of divine grace. In the next section we will explore how these features serve to bring the Confessio into closer relationship to the art of love and how this relationship affects the ethics of the poem.

5.2 Chance, Art and Grace: “Apollonius of Tyre”

One reason “art” and knowledge “how to” are difficult to account for is that they are subject to chance. Mitchell’s account of “casuistic ethics” is again useful here by way of contrast, because it so closely approaches the claim I want to advance here. Mitchell notes that,

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30 Cf. Mitchell, Ethics, 41.
to have any effect, exemplary narrative always “requires an improvisatory decision about the applicability of one or more cases to lived experience.” By means of this “improvisatory” quality, Gower’s *liber exemplorum* makes allowance for the element of unpredictability that complicates the application of one case to another:

> [T]he exemplary array constitutes something like a horizon of possible outcomes, a taxonomy of cases, a repertoire useful for orienting the moral subject without predetermining final ethical positions in practice. Just so, the exemplaria introduces an aspect of the unpredictable into any ethical analysis, because casuistic morality is ... improvisatory even as it is imitative."

In practice, however, Mitchell’s account only affords this “aspect of the unpredictable” a background role and this notion recedes from view after these introductory remarks. This is the more unfortunate, since, as we will see momentarily, Gower’s ethics not only makes allowance for the unpredictable, but, more subversively, shows a fascination with the reversals wrought by chance. While it might be possible to modify Mitchell’s “casuistic ethics” model so as to give greater prominence to chance, it is certain that chance is returned to the center when we consider ethics as a quasi-Ovidian art. Reflections on fortune and chance are frequent in the arts of love. Sometimes Ovid contrasts the successes that come from chance to those that come from artful calculation, as when he explains that, while chance (“casus”) may play a role in winning the girl, in keeping her only “artis” will avail (*Ars amatoria* 2.14; cf. 1.379-86). But elsewhere he takes for granted that art and chance are intermingled: “audentem Forsque Venusque iuvat” (“Both love and luck will help a daring game,” 1.608), and “Casus ubique valet; semper tibi pendeat / Quo minime credas gurgite, piscis erit” (“Chance is almighty: keep your hook at work, / In the least likely pool a fish will lurk,” 3.425). The intermingling of love and fortune becomes as much a commonplace in the medieval art of love as in medieval love poetry generally.\(^{32}\)

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32 For comparisons of love and fortune in medieval German literature, see Schnell, *Causa Amoris*, 410-13.
treatment of “l’Art d’Amors,” Guillaume de Lorris compares the changing appearances of Amor to that of Fortune.  

Gower points up the radical uncertainty of love at the beginning of the confession, in lines that recall Ovid’s “Forsque Venusque”: “Sunt in agone pares amor et fortuna, que cecas / Plebis ad insidias vertit vterque rotas” (“In combat Love and Fortune equal are: / As snares for mankind both revolve blind wheels,” I.i.5-6). It would be easy to trace this theme through the whole course of the poem—for example, in Gower’s initial “wonder hap” (I.67), in his reference to Cupid “who hath every chance / Of love under his governance” (III.1695-96), in stories such as Jupiter’s Two Tuns (VI.325-90), and in the epilogue (VIII.3143-46)—and Olsson is right to note “[Genius’s] advice throughout [is] ... ‘uncertain,’ his surest counsel repeatedly qualified by references to chance.” In addition, the theme of love and chance is given greater prominence by larger structural considerations that unite the beginning and end of the poem. The epigram to the Book VIII Tale of Apollonius of Tyre is closely similar to the epigram to Book I:

Omnibus est communis amor, set et immoderatos
Qui facit excessus, non reputatur amans.
Sors tamen vnde Venus attractat corda, videre
Que racions erunt, non racione sinit.

Though love is everyone’s, the man whose love
Is out of bounds is reckoned not as lover,
Yet Venus lures the heart by random lot
Which does not let him reckon reasonably. (VIII.i)

The inclusio or envelope structure suggested by the similarity of epigrams I.i and VIII.i.i deserves attention. The two epigrams explore remarkably similar themes: in each, Gower begins by discussing the universality of love, proceeds to the destructive capacity of love, and then describes love as associated with chance (“sors” VIII.i.i.3; cf. “fortuna,” I.i.7). But it is not only

33 *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Langlois, 3978-91; cf. 5877-920 etc.
34 Olsson, *John Gower*, 225.
the correspondence between the two Latin epigrams that suggests that at this moment in Book VIII Gower is deliberately returning to the same concerns that first set him writing in Book I.

Critics have often noted that “Apollonius,” which the Book VIII headverses introduce, plays an important structural role in the *Confessio*.\(^{35}\) Not only is this the last, and by far the longest, tale in the poem, but it also seems designed to facilitate closure. Important for my argument here, for reasons that will soon be evident, one of its functions is to model the right application of knowledge to kingship; thus, together with the negative exemplum showing Nectanabus’s abuse of knowledge (VI.1789-2366), it provides a “frame” around the exposition of the sciences in Book VII.\(^{36}\)

“Apollonius” circumscribes the poem’s view on the efficacy of art, not only by answering the omnicompetent-but-nefarious model on view in “Uluxes” and “Nectanabus” with a virtuous model, but also by reining in the relatively confident exposition of learning in Book VII. As befits Hellenistic romance, the tale gives greater prominence to chance and random contingency than do most other stories in the *Confessio*.\(^{37}\) While ostensibly serving as an exemplum against incest that is concerned to show that this sin “torneth ofte to vengance” (267), the tale goes far beyond Antiochus’s incestuous love for his daughter and relates at length the “aventures” that befall Apollonius, his wife, and his daughter Thaise (538; cf. 481, 1118). These “aventures” are caused by apparently random events. When lightening strikes Antiochus and his daughter dead, this is described as a “chaunce” event (1001; cf. 836, 1955). Although “fortune” sometimes appears as an agent of predetermined, certain events (e.g. 279, 642), elsewhere the word is used to signal the randomness that seems to characterize human experience; thus, “Fortune hath evere

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be muable” (585; cf. 600-02, 1320). Random contingency is also suggested by the paratactic style such connecting phrases as “Bot over this now for to telle / Of aventures that befelle” (537-38; cf. 365, 374, 496, etc.) give the tale, and by other features. As Nicholson observes, “the narrative metaphor for the nature of life in the world, in this tale and others like it is the sea-voyage. The sea is the domain where ‘Fortune doth the lawe’ (600): ... sea-travelers knowingly submit themselves to the hazards of the winds, the storms, the tides and currents, and the simple arbitrariness of Neptune (623, 1593).”\(^{38}\) One storm wrecks Apollonius’s ship near Pentapolis, where he will find his wife (604-633). Another storm induces Apollonius’s wife to give birth aboard ship and causes her, as it seems, to die in delivery (1040-58). A third storm drives the crew of pirates who have spared Thaise from death but taken her as a slave to seek harbor at Mitelene (1400-05), the city where Apollonius, presuming her dead, will be astonished to find her, after his ship is blown there by yet another storm.

While critics have offered various explanations for this heightened emphasis on chance,\(^{39}\) I want to suggest that “Apollonius” justifies its important, final position by offering a study in the relationships among three elements that make up the core of the ethics of the *Confessio*, namely, chance, artful self-determination, and divine providence. However strong our impression of random contingency might be in the tale at points, an awareness of the agency of the most high God ultimately triumphs.\(^{40}\) Neptune plays havoc with Apollonius’s seafaring, but “he that alle thing mai kepe / Unto this lord was merciable” (629-30) and Apollonius is brought safely to shore. Divine providence is also discernible in the characters’ occasional pleas to God

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\(^{39}\) This has been seen variously as evidence of Gower’s Boethian interests (Olsson, *John Gower*, 220-25), as an “interrogation of the grounds of exemplarity” (Robins, “Romance, Exemplum,” 165), and as a test of God “or perhaps ... our expectations of him” (Nicholson, *Love and Ethics*, 374).

for deliverance (e.g. 664, 1385; cf. 1590)—pleas which will be granted—and in various
connecting phrases (e.g. “Bot such a grace God hire sente ...” 1428; cf. 1160, 1710). God’s
benevolent sovereignty over the action becomes clearer towards the end of the tale, especially in
Gower’s account of Apollonius’s reunion with his wife, which “the hihe God” (1789) brings
about by appearing to Apollonius in a dream. Reminders of God’s grace abound in the tale’s

In the Apollonius romance, characters are not rewarded for their actions immediately, or
in an entirely predictable way, but neither are the gifts of fortune arbitrary. The temporal and
structural distance between action and reward offers Gower an ideal space in which to explore
the usefulness of the arts in negotiating the vagaries of fortune. While the tale has sometimes
been seen as a narrative reprise of the didactic exposition of the arts and sciences in Book VII,
especially insofar as Apollonius is seen as fulfilling that book’s call for a learned, just ruler, critics have not always been sensitive to the ways in which the tale represents the arts of
government as essentially geared toward application in practice, and thus always subject to
chance reversals. I want to call attention to these twin aspects, art and chance, and show how
they collaborate in the tale as agents of divine justice.

Unsurprisingly in light of the poem’s larger affinities to the art of love, when Gower
selected a final, “‘capstone’ tale” by which to demonstrate how fortune can be manipulated by
virtue and “art,” he chose one that again gives scope to the art of love. The tale is about love. Not
only the epitaph, quoted above, but the initial Latin prose gloss presents the whole course of
Apollonius’s hardships as having been suffered “propter amorem.” Further, large portions of

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42 This term is from Yeager, *John Gower’s Poetic*, 229.
43 The relevant portion of the gloss reads, “Vnde Appolinus a facie Regis fugiens, quamplura, prout inferius
intulantur, propter amorem pericla passus est” (271, margin).
the tale center on courtship. The antithesis of the virtuous, married love that the story upholds as exemplary is Antiochus’s incestuous relationship to his daughter, recounted at the beginning of the story, and the opposition between this unnatural, secret love and the natural, public rite of exogamous courtship is pointed up by the earliest events in the narrative. When the fame of Antiochus’s beautiful daughter spreads through the world, suitors flock to Antioch; the king wards them off by means of a riddle challenge, punishing with death those who answer wrongly. This is the context of Apollonius’s first appearance, and when Antiochus rejects his suit and threatens to kill him even after he solves the riddle, Apollonius, having fled the country, soon finds himself in a contest for another beautiful princess, this time the daughter of Artestrathes, king of Pentapolis (cf. 691). Since these episodes, separated only by one brief episode in which Apollonius brings famine relief to the city of Tharsis, occupy over six hundred lines of the tale (271-1019, not counting 440-570), courtship clearly has a very strong presence in the tale. This presence is confirmed by one further courtship episode, when Athanagoras is shown first deliberating how he might woo, and then wooing, Thais at the end of the tale (1766-72).

Although the tale is not wholly about courtship, I want to argue that the courtship episodes provide a model showing how life, and especially the life of rulers, must be guided by a kind of knowledge similar to the experiential knowledge ostensibly on offer in the arts of love. Just as love stands in for other areas of human experience, so does courtship typify other human pursuits, and especially governance. Both in courtship and in other areas of conduct, Gower shows that, even though man’s present condition is characterized by uncertainty, arts and knowledge “how to” still are highly beneficial, and, when virtuously pursued, will meet with grace.

While none of the poem’s suitors are themselves Ovidian, the art of love influences the
tale’s courtship episodes in various ways, and the courtship episodes uphold an ultimately Ovidian opportunism as the proper way to proceed in love. As we noted in the last section, one of the basic ironies indulged by the art of love tradition is the impossibility of reducing love, in essence an unruly passion, to a set of rules. While the mere fact that Apollonius, Artestrathes’ daughter, and Athanagoras all suffer symptoms of lovesickness at points (see below) does not make these moments Ovidian, it is nonetheless significant that the courtship episodes all set questions of conduct within the disorienting context of the lover’s passion. But lovesickness is just one of the external conditions within which the lover has to advance his suit, and, like the art of love, the courtship episodes call attention to the external, chance elements that exist both in love, and by extension, everywhere art is to be applied.

Apollonius’s initial suit toward the daughter of Antiochus illustrates both the strengths and limitations of art. Apollonius is singularly well suited to meet the challenge of this particular courtship contest. Not only is he able to equip himself “with worthi compainie ... and with good navie” (383-84), but he is wise in every field of knowledge and in the art of speech:

Of every naturel science,
 Which eny clerk him couthe teche,
 He couthe ynoowh, and in his speche
 Of wordes he was eloquent.     (VIII.390-93)

Sure enough, Apollonius’ wisdom equips him to solve the riddle where others have failed. But in the art of love, as in all art, success does not entirely depend on skill or desert but requires chance and fortune as well. Even though the tale as a whole affirms the efficacy of arts in general and of Apollonius’ arts in particular, here virtue and knowledge are insufficient and the hero can only flee secretly by night (451).

Apollonius is well equipped, but success in courtship demands more than virtue and preparation. Gower points up the importance of chance in courtship when he first shows the lusty
Apollonius determining to try his fortune with the Antiochene princess: “He thoghte assaie hou that it ferde” (382). Trial and error methods lie at the center of the ethic of this tale. Apollonius’s virtues and knowledge of arts meet with fuller success when his ship is wrecked near Pentapolis and he winds up in the court of another king in possession of a marriageable daughter. As luck and providence would have it, Apollonius’s nakedness and destitution disadvantage him in no way, because he arrives in time for a festival of games in which the contestants compete, after the custom of the place, naked (678-86). Again Apollonius undertakes to “assaie” his fortunes, and this time his knowledge and virtue appear to fuller advantage—

Appolinus, which war and wys
Of every game couthe an ende,
He thoghte assaie, hou so it wende,
And fell among hem into game  (VIII.696-99)

—and Apollonius emerges victorious.

But these games are merely preliminary to the more important contest for the hand of Artestrates’ daughter. The outcome of this contest underscores that virtue and art are not opposed to chance and fortune as explanations of what makes a lover’s suit successful, and shows rather all these working together: the hero’s virtue is an instrument of fortune. Apparently random elements abound, not only in Apollonius’ chance arrival at the right time, but also in the strange way in which the story emphasizes the maiden’s passionate love of Apollonius far more than his love for her. We know Apollonius is not immune to lover’s passion (cf. 376-80), and it is clear that by the end of his sojourn in Pentapolis he is in love with Artestrates’ daughter (cf. 924, 968). But the happy conclusion of this courtship is brought about by fortune, far more than by Apollonius’ efforts, as is evident from the fact that she suffers lovesickness for him before he has made any special effort to win her affections. Gower attributes Apollonius’ good fortune to “chance” and to the quasi-personification, “love”: 
Bot as men sein that frele is youthe,
With leisir and continuance
This Mayde fell upon a chance,
That love hath mad him a que rele
Ayein hire youthe freisshe and frele,
That malgre wher sche wole or noght,
Sche mot with al hire hertes thoght
To love and to his lawe obeie.  

While she loves him for his “gentilesse,” for the “wisdom of his lore,” and for his “sciences” (789, 791, 810-11), Apollonius’ knowledge and virtue are shown as instruments of forces beyond his control.

In order to collaborate with chance and fortune, virtue must be worked out in practice, and here we see Gower’s valorization of art and knowledge “how to.” The “Princes Sones thre” all bring their suits competently enough: they proffer humble service and make a good display of their lineage and wealth (875-77; cf. 889). But these suitors are not given the opportunity to address their suits to the maiden directly or to perform any meaningful action. Instead they must comply with a stiffly formal procedure:

  ech of hem do make a bille
  He [King Artestrates] bad, and wryte his oghne wille,
  His name, his fader and his good;
  And whan sche wist hou that it stod,
  And hadde here billes oversein,
  Thei scholden have ansuere ayein.
  Of this conseil thei weren glad,
  And writen as the king hem bad,
  And every man his oghne bok
  Into the kinges hond betok,
  ....
  The billes weren wel received...  

Since this is all we know of these princely suitors, they certainly appear cold, inert, and undeserving; especially uninspired is the legal formality suggested by the repetition of “bille(s).” Yet the point is not that these suitors appear cold and inert in the story because of incompetence,
but that they are given no opportunity to prove themselves able and active. Apollonius, by contrast, is not only gentle and knowledgeable but also prepared to demonstrate these qualities whenever the occasion arises. Furthermore, he is fortunate to find occasions for this (760-833), and, in large part by accident, as it seems, he wins the princess’ love in due course.

The trial and error ethic of “Apollonius” shows that chance reversals sometimes occasion moral failures and failures of judgment, even in virtuous men and women. Apollonius vastly misjudges Strangulio, calling him “on of alle / Forth with thi wif, whiche I most triste” (1292-93) and entrusting his daughter to be raised by this couple, when they will soon be plotting Thaise’s death. Apollonius also fails in his suit towards Antiochus’ daughter, and, at least according to Antiochus’ limited judgment, this is because of his “litel wit” (433). Later, months after he has married Artestrates’ daughter, the couple embarks on a sea voyage and, during a violent storm, the young wife gives birth and, as it seems, dies in the process. Even with allowances made for the generic conventions of romance, on some level Apollonius must be guilty of misjudgment here, since he takes her to be dead and arranges for her to be cast overboard in a coffer even though she will finally turn out to be still alive.

Master Cerymon’s resuscitation of Apollonius’ wife makes an important contribution to the tale’s representation of how human knowledge and art serve as instruments of divine providence. The physician and his disciples unlock the coffer “with craft” (1176), and whether we take this phrase to mean “by force” or “by skill,”44 this is the first in a series of crucial, timely interventions by men informed by art. Cerymon is the very model of preparedness:

he, which knew what is to done,  
This noble clerk, with alle haste  
Began the veines forto taste,  
And sih hire Age was of youthe,  
And with the craftes whiche he couthe

44 MED s.v. “craft (n.(1)),” defs. 1 and 2.
He soghte and fond a signe of lif. (VIII.1184-89)

Transferring the king’s wife to a couch in a heated room, the master and his disciples warm her and revive her pulse. Then the master physician plies his art, anointing all her joints “With certein oile and balsme” (1198) and putting “a liquour in hire mouth, / Which is to fewe clerkes couth” (1199-1200). Thanks to Cerymon’s rare arts, the woman soon regains consciousness and, later, after she is restored to Apollonius at the end of the tale, the master physician’s deeds are remembered, and Cerymon is given a place in the royal court (1873-85).

Thaise offers a third example of the utility of virtue and knowledge “how to” in negotiating adverse fortunes. Apollonius charges Strangulio and Dionise with Thaise’s education (1300) and they are faithful in this: soon Thaise attains to unparalleled learning and wisdom (1331-33). Later, when she is captured by pirates and sold to a brothel keeper, the combination of God’s “grace” (1428) with her own virtue enables her to remain chaste; finally, these things, combined with her great learning, persuade her master to let her open a school for daughters of the aristocracy. Thaise’s “wisdom” now comes to prominence, as she shows herself unparalleled in both clerical wisdom and feminine arts:

Sche can the wisdom of a clerk,
Sche can of every lusti werk
Which to a gentil womman longeth,
And whom it liketh forto carpe
Proverbes and demandes slyhe,
An other such thei nevere syhe,
Which that science so wel tawhte.... (VIII.1483-91)

While the former category may have little to do with “improvisatory” knowledge “how to,” the latter category, especially since it comprises the skills of repartee (“forto carpe... demandes slyhe”), clearly does. But the passage underscores the utility of all knowledge in life by showing Thaise’s resourceful applications of her learning in such a way as to keep “hirself fro schame”
When Thaise’s virtue and wisdom become widely known, she is given greater opportunity for exercising them. Athanagoras and his councilors send for the young woman to comfort the lord who has by chance arrived in Mitelene and who grieves inconsolably on board his ship. While no one knows yet that Thaise is his daughter, all suppose that if any remedy is possible, she will find it by virtue of her knowledge: “Sche can so moche of every thing, / That sche schal gladen him anon” (1656-57). She duly comes “hire Harpe on honde” (1659) and puts her practical knowledge to work:

[Sche] seide hem that sche wolde fonde
Be alle weies that sche can,
To glade with this sory man.

...  
Al the Schip hire hath besoght
That sche hire wit on him despende,
In aunter if he myhte amende....  
(VIII.1660-62, 1664-66)

Like the youthful Apollonius undertaking to “assaie” his fortunes, first as a suitor for Antiochus’ daughter and later in the games at Pentapolis (cf. 382, 698), Thaise determines to test all of her available resources (“fonde / Be alle weies that sche can”; “In aunter if ...”) to determine whether Apollonius may be comforted. Again the trial and error strategy is not immediately successful. She descends into the dark place in the bottom of the ship where Apollonius mourns, and begins to harp and sing “lich an Angel” (1671). When this proves ineffective, she changes course and addresses the king in “sondri bordes,” “demandes strange,” and “many soubtil question” (1675-76, 1683). Now Apollonius seems moved to madness and “half in wrath the he bad her go” (1689). But instead of leaving, Thaise changes her strategy once more. As a number of critics have rightly noted, Thaise’s last resource is kinship (“sibb of blod”) itself, and, since only the “chance” event that she is his lost daughter restores him (cf. 1698-1711), the happy outcome
ultimately must be credited to benign providence. But, again, providence is shown using human craftiness as its instrument, and Thaise’s persistence and resourcefulness are the necessary means by which this kinship is made known:

\[
\text{Bot yat sche wolde noght do so, i.e. depart} \\
\text{And in the derke forth sche goth,} \\
\text{Til sche him toucheth, and he wroth,} \\
\text{And after hire with his hond} \\
\text{He smot: and thus whan sche him fond} \\
\text{Desesed, courtaisly sche saide,} \\
\text{‘Avoi, mi lord, I am a Maide;} \\
\text{And if ye wiste what I am,} \\
\text{And out of what lignage I cam,} \\
\text{Ye wolde noght be so salvage.’} \quad (VIII.1690-99)
\]

Thaise’s wisdom in extending her hand even after Apollonius has begged her to leave, and in speaking “courtaisly” even after he has struck at her, find success, and the grieving king is soon restored to himself. Importantly, these actions are not represented as chance events but as outgrowths of her great learning and virtue. The episode thus proves again the value of practical, improvisatory knowledge “how to,” guided by virtue, in dealing with adverse fortunes.

This collaboration of human and divine has another dimension. The tale insists not only that all human actions work in concert with providence, but also that that providence is fundamentally benevolent. Villains such as Antiochus, Strangulio and Dionise are weeded out by God’s justice, but references to God’s “mercy” and “grace” far outnumber these two instances of divine “justice” (cf. 629, 1160, 1254-55, 1257, 1428, 1960-61). Further, even in these two cases Gower emphasizes the merciful aspect of providence. When Antiochus and his daughter are struck dead by lightning in an act of divine “vengeance” (998), this is a harbinger of joy for Apollonius and his wife, and for the peoples of Tyre and Pentapolis (1001-19). When the traitors Strangulio and Dionise are executed, this causes thanksgiving for God’s mercy toward Thaise:

\[\text{45 Robins, “Romance, Exemplum,” 170-71; Nicholson, Love and Ethics, 374-75; cf. Olsson, John Gower, 221.}\]
And every man hath gret mervaile
Which herde tellen of this chance,
And thonketh goddes pourveance,
Which doth mercy forth with justice.
Slain is the moerdrer and moerdrice
Thurgh verray trowthe of rihtwisnesse,
And thurgh mercy sauf is simplesse
Of hire whom mercy preserveth;
Thus hath he wel that wel deserveth.  

This passage is important for its contrast between “justice” and “mercy.” While the contrast is of course a theological commonplace, Gower’s insistence that God’s favor toward Thaise still constitutes “mercy,” and not “justice,” even though Thaise’s virtues and deserts have been manifested in every possible way, sometimes seems belied by statements that represent the virtuous characters as simply getting what they deserve. Not only do good things happen to these characters in the end, in outcomes that in hindsight might seem inevitable, but Genius’ concluding moralization of the tale insinently privileges this final perspective: “Lo, what it is to be wel grounded” (1903), Genius opines, before drawing a pointed comparison between Apollonius’ “Honeste[]” marriage (1905, cf. 1906), which led to prosperity, and Antiochus’ love “ayein kinde” (2007), which led to punishment. Genius continues,

The mede aryst of the servise;
Fortune, thogh sche be noght stable,
Yit at som time is favorable
To hem that ben of love trewe.
Bot certes it is forto rewe
To se love ayein kinde falle,
For that makth sore a man to falle,
As thou myht of tofore rede.  

But there is more to the tale than a simple lesson about fortune and desert. Even here it is notable that Genius qualifies his doctrine of fortune and desert, stating that Fortune is “som time ... favorable.” But more importantly, Genius’ conclusions about the moral significance of the tale are superficial, the result of his too facile yoking of a long and complex narrative to a simple
The romance as a whole reveals that salvation results from a deep collaboration of desert and grace. Typical is the episode in which Leonin attempts to prostitute Thaise, but she is saved from dishonor by God’s “grace” and by the modesty that her “sorwe” signals—

Bot such a grace god hire sente,
That for the sorwe which sche made
Was non of hem which pouer hade
To don hire eny vileinie.

And thus sche kepte himself fro schame .... (VIII.1428-31, 1446)

Gower is justified in attributing Thaise’s salvation to a miraculous “grace” because the odds are so strongly against her in the brothel episode. It is the same with Apollonius in the tale as a whole. While the romance trains us to expect a favorable outcome, the frequent disasters ensure that we do not attribute the happy ending wholly to the virtues of the characters, nor wholly predictable. Rather, causation is revealed to be complexly layered and mysterious.

Gower takes special delight in the mysteriousness of benevolent providence. One way Gower conveys this mysterious quality is by dramatizing wonder on the part of people in the tale. When Gower describes God’s intervention to save Thaise from her foster parents,

every man hath gret mervaile,
Which herde tellen of this chance,
And thonketh goddes pourveance. (VIII.1954-56)

Similarly, when Apollonius returns to Pentapolis to succeed his father-in-law and be made king, “The lond [is] ... wonder glad” (1986). At other times the narrator himself marvels at the fortunate turns he recounts. Gower judges it “a dede wonderfull” (938) that Artestrates and his wife consented to their daughter’s marriage to Apollonius without knowing his parentage. Later he writes,

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Now have I told of the spousailes.
Bot for to speke of the mervailes
Whiche afterward to hem befelle,
It is a wonder for to telle.     (VIII.975-78)

The providential landing of Apollonius’ wife’s coffer on the beach also occasions “gret merveile” (1158). Gower delights especially in the mysterious turn of bad fortunes into good. Apollonius marries the daughter of King Artestrates and thereby becomes heir to the throne of Pentapolis, but his presumed low birth dampens the general enthusiasm. When Apollonius’ royalty is made known by an envoy from Tyre, the people of Pentapolis rejoice at their turn in fortune (1016-18). The same pattern is reflected in the overall trajectory of Apollonius’ progression from sorrow to joy: “olde sorwes ben foryte, / And gladen hem with joies newe” (1906-07).

The story takes shape as a tapestry of near-misses, produced by knowledge, art, and providence working together for good, and this explodes human understanding. The theme of wonder serves Gower’s purpose well because it points to the inadequacy of human learning to control human fortunes, or even to conceive fully of them after the fact. On its own, art is inefficacious because good fortune does not depend finally on learning.

5.3 The Laughter of Venus

The mysterious character of grace provides a solution to a problem related to Amans’ “beau retret,” the crux with which we began this chapter. If providence were simply benevolent, the analogy between this final “capstone” tale and Amans’ own story would be lost—why should Apollonius’ and Thaise’s arts be graced with a favorable providence, and Amans’ long toils in the “art” of love not be? But providence is not only benevolent but also mysterious. In this section, I argue that Gower’s insistence on the mysterious quality of providence reaffirms the
analogy between Apollonius and Amans by making it possible to affirm that, while Amans’ may be damned to failure in earthly love, he can expect a more mysterious grace—in a way analogous to how “Apollonius” teaches its reader to expect grace—if he follows Genius’ final advice to “tak love where it may not fail” (2086). I further argue that this dynamic helps explain why Gower invented Amans and thus embarked on the love fiction as a strategy of rhetorical accommodation in the first place.

The reason Venus’ charge to Amans to “make a beau retret” cannot simply be a comment on illicit love is that her pronouncement reduces love to a fee-for-service dynamic, a reduction that the poem’s representation of ethics as art, especially visible in “Apollonius of Tyre,” roundly discredits. As we have seen already, “Apollonius,” like many other myths of love in the Confessio, greatly complicates the question of desert. We are reminded of this, immediately after Venus gives her answer, when Amans falls into a swoon and observes the pageant of famous lovers. Not all of the lovers are bywords of meritorious service:

Theseus, thogh he were untrewe
To love ...
Yit was he there natheles, (VIII.2511-13)

and Gower draws from the tradition of Ovid’s Heroides a catalogue of jilted women (2551-612). Still more important for Amans’ case is the company of lovers attending Elde, all of whom seem to be in the same situation as him, with the one difference that they have happily found grace where he has not (2665-88). While this pageant is by no means normative—after all, these lovers, with their unequal fortunes, only appear within Amans’ sorrow-induced dream (in Macrobius’ classification, a visum, and thus having no prophetic significance)\(^47\)—we are reminded one last time that love and service are seldom weighed against one another so

\(^{47}\) Cf. Kelly, Medieval Imagination, 57.
Amans’ failure is richly significant. Even though his love is finally revealed to be illicit and foolish, it is not enough to say Amans fails because of this. Gower postpones the revelation of Amans’ age until the very end of the poem, and he gives no indication that his love is illicit prior to this point. Instead, Gower depicts Amans’ struggle in the “art” of love as a way of showing providence and the mystery by which it combines with human agency and “art.” Gower reveals Amans to be an ineffective lover over time, through the course of a narrative that allows Gower to represent his situation as profoundly analogous to Apollonius’. In both cases, grace ultimately will be found, but only after a long struggle that, during its course, seems essentially characterized by failure. Gower’s poem seems to indicate that only by this struggle can practical, experiential knowledge “how to” be gained, and the way prepared for grace. In this section I will argue that Gower does this in order to represent Amans’ career as illustrative of the value of learning by a slow process of exploration and, often, failure.

Amans commits himself as busily as any suitor to the tactics recommended by the praeceptor amoris, but to no avail. Sometimes it is unclear why his wooing is so ineffective, for example when he says he has “assaied / Rondeal, balade and virelai” (I.2726-27) to win the lady’s love—a tactic that seems reasonable enough—but his lady remains unimpressed for reasons beyond Amans’ control. At other times, more interestingly, Gower distinguishes between knowledge of what should be done, which Amans has, and knowledge how to do it, which he lacks. In answering Genius’ question whether he is guilty of “Forgetelnesse,” Amans admits his guilt, and tells how carefully he plans his course, memorizing what he should say to the lady, when the occasion arises, but then fails in the execution, forgetting it all (IV.557-87). Again, when Genius asks Amans whether he has been guilty of negligence in his suit towards the lady,
Amans adamantly denies this. But it is notable that Amans shows himself more strongly inclined to the theory of the “art” of love than its practice:

... thogh I be non of the wise,
    I am so trewly amerous,
    That I am evere curious
    Of hem that conne best enforme
    To knowe and witen al the forme
    What falleth unto loves craft. 

(IV.919-24)

While Amans is committed to learning “loves craft,” and fascinated by the knowledge of “hem that conne” (“I am evere curious ... To knowe and witen”), his knowledge is incomplete, for he lacks the experiential knowledge by which to implement the “craft.”

... yit ne fond I noght the haft
    Which mihte unto that bladd acorde;
    For nevere herde I man recorde
    What thing it is that myhte availe
    To winne love withoute faile.
    Yit so fer cowthe I nevere finde
    Man that be resoun ne be kinde
    Me cowthe teche such an art,
    That he ne failede of a part;
    And as toward myn oghne wit,
    Controeve cowthe I nevere yit
    To vinden eny sikernesse
    That me myhte outher more or lesse
    Of love make for to spede.

(IV.926-39)

Amans’ metaphor of the haft and blade nicely points up the importance of knowledge “how to” by suggesting a parallel between the “craft” of love and the woodcutter’s craft, a skill that certainly cannot be gained from mere talk. To bring one’s conduct into accord with “art” requires experiential knowledge, but, paradoxically, this can only be gained by action. Amans’ remarks that artful knowledge can never be complete—there is no exponent of the “art” of love who “ne failede of a part” and no method capable of winning love “withoute faile”—also points up the disconnect between the knowledge and practice of “art.”
The fact that Amans’ ineptness as a lover is fundamentally a failure of *art* finds confirmation when Amans is compared to the various suitors on display in “Apollonius of Tyre.” The brief episode relating Athenagoras’ courtship of Thaise highlights the young king’s wisdom in skillfully implementing his plan at the right moment:

```
He waiteth time, he waiteth place,
Him thoghte his herte wol tobreke,
Til he mai to this maide speke
And to hir fader ek also
For marriage: and it fell so,
That al was do riht as he thoghte,
His pourpos to an ende he broghte,
Sche weddeth him as for hire lord ....  (VIII.1768-75)
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Yet for all the attention to Athenagoras’ wise judgment and skillful action in bringing “His pourpos to an ende,” the result still depends on a favorable providence. Like Apollonius when he “assaie[s]” his fortunes at Antioch and then at Pentapolis, and Thaise when she “assaie[s]” whether she can comfort Apollonius in his grief, Athenagoras must wait and see how his fortunes will play out: “This lord thenkth al his world forlore, / Bot if the king wol don him grace (1766-67; cf. “it fell so...,” 1773).

Amans’ conduct seems to parody Athenagoras’ tactful waiting. Although he recognizes, in hindsight, that his delay in wooing the lady was caused not by wisdom but deluded “Lachesce” (procrastination), at the time it seemed reasonable:

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whanne I thoghte mi poursuite
To make, and therto sette a day
To speke unto the swete May,
Lachesce bad abide vit
And bar on hond it was no wit
Ne time for to speke as tho.
Thus with his tales to and fro
Mi time in tariinge he drowh.     (IV.28-35)
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In hindsight, Amans recognizes he had opportunity:
Whan ther was time good ynowh,
He seide, ‘Another time is bettre;
Thou schalt mové senden hire a lettre,
And per cas wryte more plein
Than thou be mowthe durstest sein.’
Thus have I lete time slyde
For Slowthe .... (IV.36-42)

The counsel, underlined above, that Amans should await a more favorable time to advance his suit and should save his profession of love for a letter, has the appearance of prudence, and even approximates the Ovidian principle of utility (cf. *Ars Amatoria* 1.437-40; 3.469-73). But problematically, this counsel is given by the personification Lachesce, and Amans commits a gross error of misjudgment by taking this advice as applicable here.

But even if in hindsight we know Amans is too old to continue pursuing the lady and that his love is unreasonable, it is not clear that Amans is a fool. From another perspective repeatedly affirmed in the poem, Amans is not entirely culpable for his lack of success, but he is a victim of fortune: his art proves unequal to the challenges he is dealt. Whereas Athenagoras tests his fortunes and finds grace, Amans meets with no good opportunity to test his fortunes, and finds no grace—at least, this is how he sees it later in Book IV:

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Bot me was nevere assigned place,
Wher yit to geten eny grace,
Ne me was non such time apointed. (IV.271-73)
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Here Amans’ plight resembles that of the failed suitors in “Apollonius of Tyre.” Like the “Princes Sones thre,” who are given no opportunity to prove themselves worthy, active suitors and must compete for the hand of Artestrates’ daughter by bringing formal, and impotent, “billes,” Amans by the end of the *Confessio* is reduced to bringing a “bille” against Venus and Cupid (VIII.2324). Admittedly, Amans’ “bille” is characterized by passion and desperation and

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is not so coldly legalistic as theirs. Yet the complaint context surely activates the legal formality implied by most senses of *bille*.\(^{49}\) For all of Amans’ “peine of loves maladie” (2217), Amans still conceives of love’s labor as a legal transaction. While Amans says that in the past he has asked Jove for “grace” (2253), a fee-for-service mentality dominates the petition. Amans complains to Cupid of the illegality of “service in thi court withuten hyre” (2291-93), and his plea to Venus is similarly rich in courtroom diction (underlined below):

> Withoute gult thou dost on me thi wreche;  
> Thou wost my peine is evere aliche grene  
> For love, and yit I mai it noght areche:  
> This wold I for my laste word beseche,  
> That thou mi love aquite as I deserve,  
> Or elles do me pleyly for to sterve.    

(VIII.2295-2300)

On some level, certainly, Amans and the three suitors are all culpable for their delusion in thinking that a legal plea could meet with success in love: love is always unpredictable and ultimately comes by grace, not desert.\(^{50}\) But Gower shows deep sympathy to those lovers who, like Amans (cf. I.169-70), think solely in terms of desert. Importantly, the confession raises Amans to an awareness of grace not by shattering belief in desert but, more subtly, by showing the compatibility of desert ethics with grace ethics. Herein lies the central insight of Venus. Whereas the heroic lovers of romance Apollonius and Athenagoras can “assaie” their fortunes in love merely extrinsically, Venus, applying to Amans a more nuanced language of “assessment,” perceives that every extrinsic “assessment” is also an intrinsic one. Venus accuses Amans of feigning youth and vainly “assa[yng]” to love, whereas a true “assay” shows him to be old:

> There ben ful manye yeeres stole  
> With thee and with suche othre mo,  
> That outward feignen youthe so  
> And ben withinne of pore assay.

\(^{49}\) This sense is attested in *MED* s.v. “bille (n.),” defs. 1-5; but see also def. 6a, and *OED* s.v. “billet-doux.”  
\(^{50}\) Cf. Olsson’s remark that Amans “does not understand that a return of favors is a matter not ‘Of duete, bot al of grace’ (V.4555)” (*John Gower*, 137).
Venus’ pun “assay/assaies” introduces a deep ambivalence in the language of “assessment” that was present in the Apollonius story only implicitly. On the one hand, Gower describes Amans here as, like Apollonius, objectively “assaying” his extrinsic circumstances—“mak[ing] ... assaies / To love.” But on the other hand, the rest of the sentence turns even this “assessment” back onto Amans—he is bound to “faile upon the fet” because of his impotence—and thus activates the sense of “assay” that was used three lines earlier to refer to Amans’ intrinsic worth as a lover. This is appropriate to the ethics propounded by the confession and by “Apollonius,” according to which “art” is always subject to chance and needs to look for grace: from this perspective, every act of extrinsic “assessment” is also a self-assessment, for every such test is a test of one’s own improvisatory knowledge “how to.” By conflating extrinsic and intrinsic assessment, Gower presents grace ethic and desert ethic as complementary perspectives that are both valid.

This has important consequences both for Amans’ love and for earthly love generally. Without too much imagination, we can find an allegorical signification of quite a different order from those which I cautioned against earlier involving the allegoresis of Genius’ tales. Because Venus is a personification, it is natural to read her insight that every assessment involves self-assessment allegorically, as a lesson taught by sexual desire itself. The same lesson that Venus teaches Amans—essentially, the first-hand experience of failure—sexual desire teaches every lover or would-be lover: every lover, sooner or later, will find himself “of pore assay” and hear Venus “louh” (cf. 2870). To recognize the importance of the experience of failure in the “art of ethics” advanced by the Confessio we need only recall the key role of failure in “Apollonius of
It is not simply that the romance stages repeated defeats as a background to set off marvelous, benevolent providences, but that, in view of the tale’s representation of ethics as art, these periods of defeat are constitutive of the virtuous characters’ knowledge “how to” and, thereby, of their characters’ joy. Similarly, the broader, Christian perspective visible at the end of Amans’ confession represents failure as constitutive of virtue in its fullest sense, now revealed as necessarily spiritual. For Amans, spiritual conversion is only possible when earthly love is seen to be essentially characterized by failure. Amans’ new love is defined negatively by its difference in this regard: this love, uniquely, exists where “it may noght faile” (2086).

The notion that Gower intends Amans’ impotence to suggest the inherent limitation of all earthly love provides a way to preserve the analogy between Amans and Apollonius, notwithstanding the discrepancy noted above. In fact Gower does not set up the analogy between Amans and Apollonius only to tear it down, for Amans is not finally characterized by failure. The scene in which Venus pronounces her judgment completes a shift in the poem’s explicit concerns from the erotic to the spiritual that was first signaled by Genius’ injunction immediately after “Apollonius of Tyre,” “Tak love where it mai noght faile.” Desiring to “make an ende,” Venus produces “A Peire of Bedes blak” with the motto *Por reposer* and hangs them about Amans’ neck. The motto signifies the end to bodily labor but not to labor, for, addressing him for the first time as “John Gower,” Venus instructs him to “preie hierafter for the pes.” Venus urges him to “make a plein reles / To love” and “go ther vertu moral duelleth, / Wher ben thi bokes,” and so he does (2903-70).

Good reasons exist why Amans-Gower’s new project of prayer, reading, and writing should be seen as part of his ongoing story, analogous to the later phases in Apollonius’ life, and thus, like the latter episodes of “Apollonius,” as offering a new opportunity for proving the
meritoriousness of his knowledge “how to.” Importantly, the narrator’s resolution to turn to prayer and “vertu moral” is a natural outgrowth of reflections on the failure of his earlier project.

He is struck by his failure and, particularly, by how much time he has wasted in pursuit of the lady.

So wiste I nought wher of to yelpe,
Bot only that y hadde lore
My time, and was sori ther fore
And thus bewhapid in my thought,
Whan al was turnyd to to nought,
I stod amasid for a while ... (VIII.2952-57)

But sorrow and amazement give way to resignation:

And in my self y gan to smyle
Thenkende uppon the bedis blake,
And how they weren me betake,
For that y schulde bidde and preie. (VIII.2958-61)

Having moved from shame and confusion to thoughtfulness, and then being moved to smile, Amans-Gower begins to warm towards his new project. The next lines suggest that his earlier experience of failure on a grand scale was crucial to his present outlook:

And whanne y sigh non othre weie
Bot only that y was refusid,
Unto the lif which y hadde usid
I thoughte nevere torne ayein. (VIII.2962-65)

A graduate of the school of failure, Amans-Gower warms to his new project:

And in this wise, soth to seyn,
Homward a softe pas y wente,
Wher that with al myn hol entente
Uppon the point that y am schryve
I thenke bidde whil y live. (VIII.2966-70)

If Gower’s shift to the present tense signals the decisiveness of this moment, it is equally clear that the change is only possible because of his having been “schryve.”

Obviously, Amans-Gower’s new-found grace has limits. His new outlook remains firmly
secular (“preie hereafter for the pes”). His happiness is also limited by uncertainty about the future, as the poem leaves him on the cusp of this devotional and literary project, without telling what degree of success he will encounter as he takes up the cause of “pes.” But when we consider that the poem ends, not tragically, in failure, but in mediis rebus, with the narrator’s fate yet to be determined and thus still potentially comic, the analogy between Amans and Apollonius becomes plausible once again. Like Amans’ life, Apollonius’ involved failure and even an apparently final defeat by adverse fortune. Only after resigning himself to despair in the darkness of his ship’s hold did he encounter grace and the form of a joyful reunion with his still living daughter Thaise (cf. 1636-1747), and later with his wife. As we noted in the last section, the Apollonius romance displays providence as essentially benevolent. Does the Confessio epilogue uphold the analogy to Apollonius even here, and permit us to see reason for optimism in Gower’s outlook on England’s future?

The short answer must be no. Gower had good reasons to exercise restraint in his depiction of the future. Constitutionally, he was restrained because, unlike other writers such as Langland, he was not given to prophetic speculation. Theologically, Gower’s resolutely traditional eschatological outlook would hardly allow him to believe that a widespread return of Christian fidelity was imminent (cf. Pr.881-902). It is possible to overstate the parallel between the lives of Apollonius and Amans-Gower because the narrator’s future remains uncertain.

But real parallels exist, and hope is not wholly absent from Gower’s outlook on the future. When we recall Gower’s profession of hope at the end of the Prologue—a hope that, in light of the preceding two hundred lines on the pattern of decline endemic in human experience, appears profoundly counterintuitive—it is clear Gower sees unfavorable odds as presenting no great obstacle to a favorable providence:
As in “Apollonius,” so here, Gower reminds us that favorable fortunes are necessarily the work of divine grace. This two-fold precedent, first in the counterintuitive conclusion of the Prologue, and then in “Apollonius,” makes it possible to read John Gower’s future as still reachable by hope.

Nor is hope absent from the poem’s epilogue. While we are not shown enough of Amans-Gower’s new life to witness the fruition of grace, the end of the poem nevertheless gives ample cause to look for grace with eager expectation. The narrator’s account of his new life of prayer and books of “vertu moral” leads seamlessly to Gower’s epilogue on the contemporary estates, a passage that abounds in professions of hope:

His grace and mercy for to fonde
Uppon my bare knes y preie,
That he this lond in siker weie
Wol sette uppon good governance.

For if they [“the Clergie,” 3095] wroughte in this manere
Aftir the reule of charite,
I hope that meen schuldyn se
This lond amende.

So were it good to ben al on,
For mechil grace ther uppon
Unto the Citees schulde falle,
Which myghte availle to ous alle,
If these astatz amendid were
Me thenkth y dorste thanne seie,  
This londis grace schulde arise.  

(VIII.2984-87, 3002-06, 3045-49, 3052-53)

These lines are far from cheerfully optimistic; rather, Gower intends to create a sense of indeterminacy. We are returned to satire, with its prescriptive and future orientation. Gower leaves us with a sense of eager expectation, even in the face of empirical, doctrinal, and biblical evidence to the contrary, that public renewal is still possible.

It is now possible to address directly the basic question of this chapter—if providence is benevolent, why does Amans fail? Notwithstanding Gower’s belief that providence is essentially benevolent, inclined to reward virtue and art with good, Amans’ faithful service of the lady fails to find fulfillment because Amans has adopted an overly mechanistic view of grace; by inscribing failure into his story, as well as Apollonius’, Gower ensures that the operations of grace remain a mystery. Genius makes the point explicit earlier, in the Book V discussion of usury, when Amans vehemently protests his innocence of this crime: he has served his lady diligently and so far his payments have brought no return. Genius rejects Amans’ defense. Amans’ problem is he thinks love must conform to the laws of financial transaction, instead of the laws of grace:

Such is the statut of his lawe,  
That thogh thi love more drawe  
And peise in the balance more,  
Thou miht noght axe ayein therfore  
Of duete, bot al of grace.  

(V.4551-55)

Indeed, as we have seen, the principle that love is not bound by the constraints of ordinary laws, but only by the law of lawlessness, is reiterated throughout the Confessio. But importantly, Gower lets the grace of erotic love ultimately give way to the grace of moral and political stability, and this effectively transfers love’s unpredictability from private, erotic love to public love which is ultimately found only in Christian charity. In the Prologue, Gower attributes
all the divisions of the world to a “lacke of love” and defect of “charite” (892, 902), and he yearns for a renewal of brotherly love before it is too late:

   good is, whil a man may,
   Echon to sette pes with other
   And loven as his oghne brother;
   So may he winne worldes welthe
   And afterward his soule helthe.         (Pr.1048-52)

Even if here Gower seems to reduce love to a legal transaction (1051-52), Gower is not naively optimistic, for such a transaction can only occur once widespread brotherly love is restored, something Gower thinks has only a remote chance. Arion’s task of restoring harmony by restoring love (1068) is likewise described as remote, a virtual impossibility. The notion that the true solution to public strife and injustice is charity appears again in the poem’s epilogue (VIII.2995-3005). As in the Prologue and in “Apollonius,” grace works in mysteries and by surprises; grace is sometimes nearest when expectations are least. There may still be hope that Christendom, and even England, will recover knowledge how to love.

Conclusion

Gower’s demotion of ethics from the status of a science amenable to scholastic analysis to an “art” on par with wood cutting, plowing, and love-making effectively translates ethics from a clerical to a lay setting. Both the confession and “Apollonius of Tyre,” the poem’s “capstone” tale, affirm an ethics that, while based on prudential preparation, is so highly conscious of the reality of chance reversals, and thus of the need for grace to overcome them, as to make ethics very much a hit-and-miss affair as far as human agency is concerned; it is no more a clerk’s game than anyone else’s. While providence is benevolent, it also works in strange ways, implicating itself with man’s art and thus, inevitably, his failure. This failure is necessary
because it is constitutive not only of “art” but also, because of this, of the eschatological joy that man’s artful efforts, as well as grace, give rise to. More positively, Gower insists that grace is near at hand because providence is essentially benevolent; by means of the poem’s indeterminate conclusion, he endeavors to bring the reader to a state of eager expectation for grace.
Conclusion:
Gower, Vernacularity, and Lay Religion

Gower’s trilingual corpus presents extremely rich opportunities for the study of vernacularity in late-medieval England, and it is remarkable that these opportunities have been largely neglected. Not only does his English writing fashion a rhetoric whose markedly vernacular qualities are worthy of comparison to other English texts written at this crucial time—as has occasionally been noted, for example by the contributors to *The Idea of the Vernacular*, but never developed. But also, since Gower can be seen in all his works, not just the English ones, to adopt a markedly lay stance, the commonalities that span his writings enable us to assess vernacular modes in other languages—including in Latin, as Alastair Minnis has recently advocated—and thus, by comparative analysis, to sift out the distinctive qualities of each. While this thesis has largely been concerned to determine what pressures bear on Gower’s English, its procedure has often relied on comparisons to Gower’s French and Latin writing, and this has revealed something of the amount of work that remains before a full comparative analysis of all of Gower’s vernaculars should be complete. But before discussing avenues of future research it is necessary to review what has been seen here.

In the introduction and in chapter 1, I advocated an approach to the *Confessio* similar in broad lines to those of George Coffman, John H. Fisher, J. A. W. Bennett, Russell Peck, and R. F. Yeager, according to which Gower is seen championing a public, reformist vision deeply underwritten by “public Christianity.” This is controversial in at least two aspects. First, other scholars have stressed that Gower’s reformist vision is resolutely secular, not only in the

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1 For discussion, see above, introduction.
2 *Translations of Authority*, 11.
3 Cf. Watson, “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” and see below.
medieval sense that refers to this *seculum*, but also in the modern “humanist” sense, as is visible when Anne Middleton admires the poem for its “high-minded secularism.” While my argument for the fundamentally theological character of the poem, first put forward in the introduction, spans the thesis as a whole, chapter 1 defends the other controversial aspect of my approach to the *Confessio*, my insistence that this is a public poem that is in continuity with the main project undertaken in Gower’s other writings, especially in the *Mirour* and the *Vox*, and that, because it is *more* public, in some ways represents the culmination of that project. In response to readings that would detach the “lover’s confession” from the political rhetoric of the Prologue, I argue that Gower’s fascination in both Prologue and confession with the world picture of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* effectively demonstrates that the two parts work together and that Gower means to keep public themes prominent throughout, as indeed he does. In the course of this argument I compare the *Confessio* not only to the *Metamorphoses* itself but also to the *Ovidius Maior* in its medieval environments, and this reveals important differences that set Gower’s veritable *Ovidius Maior* apart from other fourteenth-century versions, and, crucially, show his poem to adopt a markedly lay stance.

Chapter 2 follows this insight into the lay character of the poem by investigating the status of English in Gower’s thought. Disputing Rita Copeland’s interpretation of the poem as an assertion of vernacular and lay power, I contend that Gower associates translation not nearly so much with cultural power (*translatio imperii*) as with decay and loss, and in general entertains grave doubts about the moral usefulness of texts, and of English texts in particular. I substantiate these findings by comparing Gower’s practice in treating theology in analogous passages drawn, first from *In Praise of Peace* and “Rex celi deus,” and then from the *Confessio* and the *Vox*, where the lower theological register of Gower’s English is very striking. Although I suggest in

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4 “Public Poetry,” 112.
chapter 2 that Gower accepted the belief, visible in clerical discussions of preaching to lay audiences, that layfolk are restricted to lower modes of cognition and may simplify his doctrine accordingly, chapter 3 modifies this view by calling attention to a more important cause of the downward modulations that characterize Gower’s English. Downward modulations are discernible in the *Confessio* not only in the overtly theological and scientific passages, where intricate concepts are at stake, but globally, in the poem as a whole. To argue this I adapt Larry Scanlon’s reading of Gower’s self-description as “burel clerk.” Whereas Scanlon argues that this self-description provides Gower with an extraclerical persona foundational to his secularist program, positioning him both outside and in opposition to the Church, I argue that, just as Gower’s voices in the *Mirour* and *Vox* are extra-ecclesiastical, yet devoted to Christian theology, so is the voice of the *Confessio*. To investigate why Gower should bother adopting a lay position still lower than those of the *Mirour* and *Vox*, I contrast Gower’s practice to Langland’s, which famously demonstrates strong anxieties about the validity of lay learning and lay critique. Whereas Langland shows himself responsive to external pressures—the fear of causing or seeming to cause sedition—Gower does not seem very concerned about these kinds of external pressures—he is so far from heterodoxy, so culturally mainstream, in all his works that he almost seems above suspicion. I argue, rather, that his modulations downwards should be attributed to some internal sense of linguistic decorum, a sensibility governing what should and should not be written in English. Finally, in readings of “Three Questions” and “Constantine and Silvester,” I suggest that one important aspect of Gower’s sensibility is an association English with affective piety.

Chapters 4 and 5 investigate Gower’s sense of linguistic decorum further by returning to the claim of chapter 1 that Gower’s Englishing of Ovid represents a laicizing move; in different
ways, these chapters argue that Gower finds in Ovidian writing theological riches of a kind particularly suitable for a lay address to a lay audience. While Gower employs various strategies that tame metamorphosis to varying degrees, making the trope less mythically powerful than it is in Ovid, several of Gower’s stories of metamorphosis retain, even cultivate, a considerable measure of mythic power. In chapter 4 I argue that, particularly in stories in which metamorphosis occurs as punishment or as reward, Gower utilizes myth’s power to create a particularly laicized theology in which grace is shown to be near at hand, as if already immanent within nature. Chapter 5 develops these themes in reference to Gower’s use of the Ovidian art of love. Recalling Gower’s skepticism of texts that we outlined in chapter 2, I argue that Gowerian ethics positions itself even lower on a scale of epistemological certainty than J. Allan Mitchell’s account of the poem as “casuistic ethics” seems to imply. Not a science, not even of a casuistic kind, but an art, Gowerian ethics is pervaded by an Ovidian awareness of the limits of discursive approaches to knowledge “how to.” This skepticism of discursive and bookish knowledge enables Gower to point up the mysteriousness of grace. To this end, it is notable that Gower chooses the Greek romance, “Apollonius of Tyre,” as the poem’s capstone tale. This tale depicts a conflict between characters exemplary of virtuous use of “art” and chance reversals, a conflict that can acceptably be resolved only by grace.

Gower’s tactic of ending the poem indeterminately, in a state of eager expectation that combines anxiety over man’s corruption with a real hope for grace and reform, is characteristic of Gower’s tendency throughout the poem to emphasize the mysteriousness of grace. In a variety of ways, Gower consistently invokes God’s free benevolence as the source of all goodness, including the earthly manifestations of goodness that are most often on view, even in instances where goodness might seem merited by human actions. Grace is unpredictable, and it is
perilously easy to lose hold of. But grace is generally ready at hand, for the Confessio even suggests its immanence in Nature, as we saw in chapter 4. As we noted there as well, Gower’s insistence that goodness is a free gift of God has the rhetorical advantage that it effectively accommodates the poem’s moral and political message to non-clerical readers. Whereas clerical and ecclesiastical structures present themselves as the normative channels for grace, Gowerian grace, mysterious and awe-inspiring, exceeds these institutional confines and issues forth in unexpected ways and places.

Gower’s account of the unpredictability of grace is also underwritten by the Confessio’s depiction of love. Because love, like grace, is inherently mysterious and defiant of human expectations, Gower’s decision to represent human love as a provisional good that points to grace—in Amans-Gower’s “beau retret,” but also in the confession itself, as we saw in chapter 4—is well founded. Like grace, love is also instrumental in the Confessio’s displacement of clerical science by the art of ethics, and, accordingly, in its extraclerical circumvention of ecclesiastical channels of grace. By showing, on the one hand, the certain danger of the master-arts employed by Ulysses and Nectanabus, and on the other, the limitations that book learning holds for more ordinary lovers such as Amans and even Apollonius, Gower insists that another kind of knowledge is necessary. Truly effective knowledge is virtuous, artful and improvisatory; it is more humbly dependent on divine grace than Ulysses and Nectanabus are willing to recognize, but also more capable of attracting this grace through virtuous and opportune application than Amans and Apollonius initially appear to be.

But while both of these features—the poem’s emphasis on the mystery of love and grace, and its valorization of the art of ethics—serve what might be called a populist rhetorical end, the focal point of Gower’s secular hope remains the office of kingship. This might seem a
contradiction. Certainly, royal government plays a central role in Gower’s political vision, and Gower is keenly aware of the king’s capacity for bringing about greater misery or good, so much so, that, as we noted in the introduction, the poem has been seen as a *speculum principum* teaching the “art” of governance. But the *speculum principum* genre by no means excludes non-princely audiences.\(^5\) Giles of Rome’s *De regimine principum*, though originally written for the future Philip IV of France, exists in over 350 manuscripts, and Thomas Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*, though offered to the future Henry V of England, survives in 43 manuscripts.\(^6\) The *Secretum Secretorum* similar enjoyed an extremely wide circulation in various forms.\(^7\)

Comparison to John Trevisa’s translation of Giles’ *De regimine* underscores the popularizing intentions of the *Confessio*. Not only is this translation, which Trevisa composed for Thomas Berkeley, confined to a single manuscript, but also, as Fiona Somerset argues, it seems to betray an anxiety to prevent “just anyone” from obtaining access to its information.\(^8\) Gower’s *Confessio*, by contrast, exists in 49 manuscripts plus 6 fragments, not counting extracts.\(^9\) Gower draws an explicit analogy between the king and the moral self in general when he charges every man to exercise proper rule of “his oghne dom” (VIII.2113), and, as I argued in the introduction, there are good reasons to accept Middleton’s notion that Gower intended the poem as “public poetry.” The poem’s frequent emphasis on the theme of kingship, then, by no means cancels Gower’s commitment to a voice that is comparatively popular in its tone, if still biased toward the gentle and leisured classes.

Nor does Gower’s investment in the office of kingship preclude the kind of suspension

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\(^5\) For the popularity of political writing generally in late-medieval England, see *Four English Political Tracts*, ed. Genet, xi-xii, xvi.  
\(^6\) For Giles, see *Goverenance*, ed. Fowler et al., xii.; for Hoccleve, see *Regiment*, ed. Blyth, 14.  
\(^7\) *Four English Political Tracts*, ed. Genet, xvi.  
\(^8\) *Clerical Discourse*, 69.  
\(^9\) Pearsall, “Manuscripts,” 73-75.
between human actions and divine providence that we have been explored in chapter 5. On the contrary, Gower’s longing for a just king underscores that Gower’s approach to ethics paradoxically combines optimism about the efficacy of this art, on the one hand, with apparent fatalism on the other, as is seen, for example, in the return to the theme of kingship in the poem’s epilogue. There, Gower seems at first to represent grace as entirely predictable, because completely contingent upon the actions of the king:

For what kyng sett hym uppon pride
And takth his lust on every side
...
Though god his grace caste aweie
No wondir is, for ate laste
He schal wel wite it mai nought laste,
The pompe which he secheth here. (VIII.3089-90, 3092-95)

Just as it is “No wondir” when God removes his grace from a wicked king, so grace appears predictably, almost mechanistically, when a king

with humble chere
Aftir the lawe of god eschuieth
The vices, and the vertus suieth. (VIII.3096-99)

But while on one level Gower can find these operations of God’s grace “No wondir,” it is evident from the rest of the poem that the king’s job to eschew vice and follow virtue is never easy. No “art” of governance can make him do it without the operation of grace, and from this perspective the process becomes very much a wonder. The surrounding passages, on the dominant evils of the day, together with the petitionary context of the whole passage—this entire chapter is a prayer—suggest that the epilogue’s prescription for a just king and Gower’s intercession, much earlier in the poem, for a true Arion, can only come as a result of God’s grace. Far more than on the perishable knowledge of books, Gower’s hope rests in God, the wellspring of charity (cf. VIII.3168-72). The poem’s final lines, like the apparently chance
reversals that characterize Amans’ life and the “Tale of Apollonius” both, underscores that learning is insufficient. Study of the books “where vertu moral duelleth” (2925) is a worthy pursuit, but only “love” together with the “remenant of grace” can bring us to eternal joy (3168-72).

The theological quality now discernible in the Confessio raises questions about the relationship of Gower’s lay voice to the institutional Church. Whereas, as we have seen, Scanlon interprets Gower’s lay stance as the key to a secular regime-building exercise, Sheila Lindenbaum notes that Gower shows reservations about ecclesiastical and civil governments alike: “In Gower’s political poems, we often have the sense that he is stepping in where documentary culture has failed, trying to enforce a workable poetic alternative until political and religious institutions repair themselves.”

While Lindenbaum’s sense of the provisional quality in Gower’s writing is deeply perceptive, we have also discerned in Gower a more fundamental ambivalence to institutionalism that has profound implications for the status of the laity. Gower was no more anti-church than he was anti-state. At the same time, his fascination with lay alternatives to traditional, more strongly hierocratic models of Christian life have very suggestive parallels in vernacular devotional writing.

In an article seeking to define “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” Nicholas Watson notes in late-medieval English devotional writing the emergence of three distinct models of the laity that had come to compete with the traditional understanding. While earlier tradition, stemming from Augustine, had tended to view the devout laity as mediocriter boni—located somewhere between perfecti and reprobati—the new models “gave almost the same opportunities to—and made almost the same demands on—the devout laity as

11 See esp. Rice, Lay Piety and Religious Devotion; and the following reference.
they did the professional religious and the clerisy.” Watson sees Chaucer as locating himself in none of these “perfectionist” definitions but in the humbler category that Watson terms “mediocrist,” and Gower might seem to resemble the “figure of the late penitent” (104) in which Chaucer casts himself in the Retractions and thus likewise qualify as “mediocrist”: not only does Amans-Gower undergo a conversion at the end of the poem, but John Gower did as well, retiring around 1377 to the priory of St. Mary Overeys, where presumably he wrote the Confessio as an aging, sick man (cf. Pr.79*-80*).

But Amans-Gower’s conversion results from a lesson taught by Venus; Venus was both licit and a useful pedagogue, and I have argued that a similar dynamic of provisionality governs Gower’s poem as a whole. Unlike Chaucer, who repudiates all his tales that “sownen into synne,”

Gower represents conversion as a natural development out of an (inevitably finally failing) experience of earthly love. I suggest that Gower’s emphasis on virtue and vice makes it possible to align his Confessio (like The Two Ways of another literary friend of Chaucer, Sir John Clanvowe) with the “puritanical” model of lay perfection, “which developed out of certain strands of thirteenth-century pastoral theology” and which had widespread influence in various movements of reform. But Gower’s poem is much more artful and complex than Clanvowe’s treatise, and in other respects resembles Watson’s third, “affective” model, which “hold[s] love the only secure spiritual value, and impl[ies] ... at least potentially, an inverse relationship between love and formal status or learning” (102). Certainly, the Confessio does not fit here very easily either. Post-conversion, Gower hardly gushes with affective spirituality. But the poem

12 “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” 101-02.
14 Canterbury Tales X.1086.
15 Watson, “Chaucer’s Public Christianity,” 103.
16 Ibid. 102.
does privilege affect, and it takes a very ambivalent attitude to learning. These features distinguish it sharply from models of lay perfection based on *imitatio clerici*. More importantly, the *Confessio* assigns love a fundamental role in reshaping both the *seculum* and the soul. Though Gower’s poem does not fit Watson’s schema very easily, another analogy, to *Cleanness*—a poem that constructs a lay-perfectionist scheme but nonetheless expresses a high regard for sex—suggests that the lay and vernacular cultures of this period still hold surprises and that Watson’s schema might need revision.

Comparison to *Cleanness* also suggests the limitations of adapting Watson’s project of situating Chaucer with regard to lay devotional cultures to the case of Gower, since, like *Cleanness*, the *Confessio* is a poetic work that engages theology in very idiosyncratic terms. The *Confessio*’s encounters with problems of vernacularity and mediation undoubtedly hold great interest for reasons apart from the *Confessio*’s affinities to specific lay devotional cultures. But the very public social role that Gower assigns poetry seems to drive us back to the necessity of cultural reading. Recalling Gower’s keen perception of the tension of goodness against provisionality present in all earthly goods, poetry included (see chapters 4 and 5), I suggest that, rather than see Gower’s project as “trying to enforce a workable poetic alternative *until* political and religious institutions repair themselves,” what we witness in Gower’s writing is a consciousness of the existential fact of mediation. In the introduction we saw that the theme of mediation has become a leitmotif in *Confessio* criticism—rightly so, in a poem that famously adopts a “middel weie” between “lust” and “lore.” I have argued that the *Confessio*’s modulation

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17 For this term, see Rice, *Lay Devotion*, 50ff.
19 For a reading that emphasizes that *Cleanness* is a work of vernacular exploration, as opposed to an exposition of doctrine, see Rhodes, *Poetry does Theology*, 73-106. In response, Watson comments, “Theology ‘does’ poetry at least as often as poetry ‘does’ theology” (“Cultural Changes,” 131).
downwards is less the consequence of embarrassment at the weakness of English or the cognitive impairment of lay readers than it is a recognition of the existential priority of vernacular language: Gower recognizes that all truth is mediated and, accordingly, urges a kind of epistemic humility that, while it does not aim to subvert authority, has a strong tendency to question the validity of institutions. But the appearance of similar tendencies, not only in the Confessio but also in the Mirour, Vox, the two ballade sequences Macaulay dubbed Cinkante Balades and Traité selon les autours pour essampler les amantz marietz, and many shorter poems as well, underscores that the Confessio’s interest in mediation should not be seen as an isolated, idiosyncratic poetic insight but an aspect of other lay political discourses whose affinities with writers such as Chaucer, Langland, Wyclif, Philippe de Mézières, Christine de Pizan, and Alain Chartier, need further exploration as part of the history of laicization and secularization.
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*Speculum Doctrinale.* See “Vincent of Beauvais.”


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