



Ursinus College  
**Digital Commons @ Ursinus College**

---

English Faculty Publications

English Department

---

2014

# Introduction: John Gower's Twenty-First Century Appeal

Kara McShane

*Ursinus College*, [kmcshane@ursinus.edu](mailto:kmcshane@ursinus.edu)

R. F. Yeager

*University of West Florida*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/english\\_fac](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/english_fac)

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Medieval Studies Commons](#)

**Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

## Recommended Citation

McShane, Kara and Yeager, R. F., "Introduction: John Gower's Twenty-First Century Appeal" (2014). *English Faculty Publications*. 6.  
[https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/english\\_fac/6](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/english_fac/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact [aprock@ursinus.edu](mailto:aprock@ursinus.edu).

# Introduction: John Gower's Twenty-First Century Appeal

*Kara L. McShane and R.F. Yeager*

---

The contributions to this issue have grown from conversations at the Third International John Gower Society Congress held at the University of Rochester in July of 2014. Now fully reimaged and re-written for print, these pieces capture the complexity, interdisciplinarity, and energy currently present in the field of Gower studies.

Prolific across languages, learned, and politically invested, John Gower is a key figure of the later Middle Ages. While Geoffrey Chaucer is the English author most readily associated with the period (and has enjoyed far more critical attention), Gower in many ways better exemplifies his historical moment. His body of poetic work is enormous, amounting to almost 90,000 lines spread across the three major languages of his period (Latin, French, and English); the number of genres he touched, in short poems and long, is equally capacious, ranging from advice to princes, vernacular romance, frame tales, and healing narratives. Gower's work is, for the most part, explicitly political, referring directly to the reigning figures of the day. Indeed, Gower gives us the sole literary witness of the Great Rising of 1381, a political event that transformed English culture and literature. Gower's range is especially exciting in the present moment, because his work resonates as well for scholars working in the medical humanities, disability studies, multilingualism, and translation, all fields pertinently receiving scholarly attention. Yet amidst this wide spectrum of engagement, Gower's work is signally unified in an intense concern for social welfare—what Russell A. Peck has famously called “common profit”: the well-being of the individual and society.

The several initial essays consider Gower's linguistic, material, and structural contexts. Gyongyi Werthmüller of Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest offers a fresh comparison of Chaucer's and Gower's linguistic practice, taking up again—albeit armed with contemporary tools—both poets' use of the final *-e*. In “Final *-e* in Gower's English Poetry, in Comparison with Chaucer's,” she demonstrates that Gower's final *-e* is much more consistent than Chaucer's use; it is skillfully and deliberately employed throughout Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Werthmüller suggests further that the complexity of Gower's language is as worthy of study as Chaucer's, in no small part because of his trilingualism, and

*Kara L. McShane and R.F. Yeager*

she concludes by considering what role Gower's French poetry played in shaping his English linguistic choices.

Martha Driver (Pace University) brings attention to lexical choices in a particular manuscript of the *Confessio Amantis*, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.126, the work of a scribe known as Ricardus Franciscus. In "More Light on Ricardus Franciscus: Looking Again at Morgan M. 126," Driver explores Ricardus's emendations and edits to the *Confessio* text and examines his lexical choices to determine whether the scribe's native language was French or English. This examination sheds light not only on the importance of multilingual capabilities for scribes during the fifteenth century but also provides a case study of Gower's reception at this historical moment.

In the essay to follow, "Excerpting Gower: Exemplary Reading in New Haven, Takamiya MS 32," Joseph Stadolnik (Yale University) closely examines another manuscript of the *Confessio*, exploring possibilities that particular tales may have been read outside the framing context of the larger poem. While many readers may have encountered the *Confessio Amantis* as a whole text, Stadolnik considers the way that the Takamiya manuscript provides evidence of how the moral framework of the tales was adjusted via excerpts. By removing both the tales from the apparatus common in *Confessio* manuscripts and also Genius's moralizing voice, the manuscript prepares the tales for a free-standing existence in which they might be read for recreation. Stadolnik concludes by examining how the frames of these tales compare to the frames of the *Canterbury Tales* in the same manuscript, by way of considering the manuscript's treatment of Gower and Chaucer.

The issue then moves from the material to the structural. Jeffery G. Stoyanoff of Spring Hill College focuses on the framing of the *Confessio Amantis*, demonstrating how Gower's use of a circular frame throughout shapes and directs the reader's interpretive possibilities. In "Beginnings and Endings: Narrative Framing in *Confessio Amantis*," Stoyanoff argues that this circular frame requires that the reader consider the entire work retrospectively, reexamining all that has come before in light of the frame's close. In the process, he emphasizes, the position of wisdom, rather than love, reveals itself as crucial to the *Confessio*'s project.

Turning toward the social and political, the following five essays all address, in one or another way, the tensions Gower identified in a realm he found to be increasingly fractious, and some of the solutions his poetry proposes. Emily Houlik-Ritchey of Rice University considers the role of the neighbor in her "Fellows in the Wilderness: Neighborly Ethics in 'The Tale of the Jew and the Pagan.'" The tale substitutes a righteous heathen version of the "golden rule" in order,

## South Atlantic Review

she asserts, to create an alternate ethical foundation for Christianity and thus limit Christianity's ethical indebtedness to Judaism. By placing the Jew and the pagan in the same geographic liminal space—as travelers along a road—Gower creates a space where ethics and civilization are challenged and explored. At the same time, by positioning the pagan as a type of proto-Christian, Houlik-Ritchey argues that the tale in fact reinforces Judaism and Christianity's troubled—but neighborly—relationship.

In “Social Healing in Gower’s *Visio Angliae*,” Kara L. McShane (Ursinus College) continues this focus on social relationships through a fresh examination of Gower’s account of the Great Rising of 1381. The essay considers the first book of Gower’s Latin poem *Vox Clamantis* through the lens of social healing and narrative medicine. McShane argues that by creating a narrative that reinscribes the class hierarchy, Gower seeks to recreate societal unity after the existing social order has been fractured. Further, for McShane the allegory marks Gower’s concern with common welfare early in his poetic career and thus demonstrates consistency between his major Latin and English works.

Building as well on Gower’s concern for social healing through narrative, Pamela M. Yee (University of Rochester) in “So schalt thou double hele finde’: Narrative Medicine in the ‘Tale of Constantine and Sylvester’” offers a new reading of Gower’s “Tale of Constantine and Sylvester” through the lens of Rita Charon’s three-step model of narrative medicine. In the process, Yee resituates the tale, in which the Emperor Constantine is cured of leprosy by faith, in the broader context of the *Confessio Amantis*, particularly in the relationship of Genius and Amans.

In “Old Words Made New: Medea’s Magic and Gower’s Textual Healing,” William Rogers (University of Louisiana, Monroe) emphasizes the connections between magic and medicine in Middle English literature, turning for his example to look closely at Medea’s healing magic in the “Tale of Medea” (and Jason) through medicine. By reading Medea’s tale alongside *On Tarrying the Accidents of Age*, a treatise on rejuvenation, Rogers highlights how Gower thinks of age in medical and textual terms, and argues for what he calls a “poetics of rejuvenation” in Gower’s *Confessio*.

In “‘The science of himself is trewe’: Alchemy in John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” Clare Fletcher of Trinity College, Dublin, approaches Gower and the sciences from the perspective of alchemy. Fletcher suggests that the alchemical passages of the *Confessio Amantis* uncover their centrality to two of Gower’s major concerns: the decline of the world and the decline of language. As a response to this deterioro-

*Kara L. McShane and R.F. Yeager*

ration, Gower emphasized the transforming force of labor in reforming both the individual and society.

Gower's concern for the rightly ordered society is the topic also of Candace Barrington (Central Connecticut State University). Her contribution moves the focus from science to law, a field with which Gower was quite familiar. She explores the tension between ecclesiastical law and common law, especially focusing on the problem of intentionality, in "Common-Law and Penitential Intentionality in Gower's 'Tale of Paris and Helen.'" Through its depiction of Paris, Gower's tale offers a productive reflection of a crisis that occupied English thinking at the time. While intention was essential to ecclesiastical law, the difficulty of determining intention plagued common law cases. As a result, the tale—and indeed Gower's work more generally—demonstrates for Barrington the intersections between law and literature, emphasizing how the two mutually informed each other in Ricardian England.

The final three essays take up reception and reimagining of Gower's work by two of his authorial descendants, Lydgate and Shakespeare. Stephen R. Reimer (University of Alberta) explores the connections between Gower and fifteenth-century author John Lydgate in "A New Arion: Lydgate on Saints, Kings, and 'Good Acord.'" While conventionally many have seen Lydgate as a Chaucerian imitator, Reimer's article claims a place for Lydgate as a major poet in his own right. For Reimer, Lydgate might be fruitfully aligned with Gower in terms of political agenda and relationship to poetic authority: in *Lives of Ss. Edmund and Fremund* and the *Lives of Ss. Alban and Amphibal*, Lydgate presents models of good governance in hopes of creating the good society. Thus, both poets are politically engaged, more directly than Chaucer, in their concern for the common welfare and "good acord."

In "Lydgate and the Trace of Gower," Robert R. Edwards of Pennsylvania State University considers the several ways that Lydgate crafts his own authorial identity in relation to Gower and Chaucer. While Lydgate explicitly claims Chaucer as a poetic master, Edwards posits that in fact it was Gower who served as a model for Lydgate in the delicate work of negotiating sponsorship and urging political change. As Edwards notes, "Lydgate turns to Gower in works that speak about power and to power," so that Gower provides an example of how a poet might successfully advance an effective public poetry, balancing praise and defense of political figures.

In the final essay in this issue, Jonathan Baldo (Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester) explores connections between Gower's work and Shakespeare's *Pericles* through a consideration of memory's role in Shakespeare's play. In "Recovering Medieval Memory in Shakespeare's *Pericles*," Baldo argues that the play seeks not only to

## South Atlantic Review

recover Gower's voice but also the medieval perspective on memory represented in Gower's writing. The essay thus moves beyond "John Gower's chorus-like presence in the play, which many critics have considered, to explore instead the ways in which the play revives and dramatizes medieval memory culture. Shakespeare's medievalism thus presents England's own past as "Other," reminding audiences of the changing place of memory in English culture.

### About the Authors

Kara L. McShane is Assistant Professor of English at Ursinus College, where she specializes in medieval literature and digital humanities. She received her Ph.D. in medieval English Literature from the University of Rochester in 2014. Her research interests include Middle English romance and dream vision, travel writing, cultural translation, and digital pedagogy; she is especially interested in the intersections between written and spoken vernaculars in medieval English culture. Her current project, *In the Words of Others: Exotic Documents and Vernacular Anxieties in Medieval England*, is part of a growing body of work that turns to medieval culture's multilingualism as a means of troubling the notion that English was the inevitable linguistic point at which England would arrive. In this project, McShane examines instances of non-English writing across a range of Middle English narratives, arguing that these moments of writing create space for authors to express anxieties about writing as a means of memorialization and about the vernacular as a medium.

McShane is the general editor of *Visualizing Chaucer*, a Robbins Library Digital Project, and has contributed to *The Camelot Project* and *Once and Future Classroom*, an open-access journal dedicated to teaching the Middle Ages. She also serves as an assistant editor for *medievally speaking*, an open-access review journal supported by the International Society for the Study of Medievalism ([medievallyspeaking.blogspot.com](http://medievallyspeaking.blogspot.com)). Email: [kmcshane@ursinus.edu](mailto:kmcshane@ursinus.edu).

R.F. Yeager is Professor of English and World Languages at the University of West Florida. He is President of the International John Gower Society, editor of *JGN The John Gower Newsletter*, and has published widely on medieval English and European literatures. His special interests are Old English literature and language, the French of England, and the poetry of Chaucer and Gower. He has written and edited more than seventeen books and collections of essays, including *Teaching Beowulf*, with J. B. Bessenger, Jr., for the Modern Language Association; *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion*; *A Concordance to the French Poetry and Prose of John Gower*; *Who Murdered Chaucer? A Medieval Mystery*, with Terry Jones, Terry Dolan, Alan Fletcher, and Juliette Dor; has edited and translated *John Gower: The Minor Latin Works*, and a companion volume, *John Gower: The French Balades*; and, with Brian W. Gastle, has co-edited *Approaches to Teaching John Gower's Poetry*, for the Modern Language Association.

With Alastair Minnis, he is series editor for the John Gower Society Monograph Series, which at present contains ten titles. His current areas of research include English recusant writings, especially in Spain, the scribes and limners of late fourteenth-century Norwich, and a literary biography of John Gower. Email: [rfeager@hotmail.com](mailto:rfeager@hotmail.com).