

**Accessus:**

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

Accessus

Volume 5
Issue 2 *Gower Shorts*

Article 5

2019

One Voice, Ancient and Resigned

Will Rogers

University of Louisiana Monroe, wirogers@ulm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus>



Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, European Languages and Societies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Rogers, Will (2019) "One Voice, Ancient and Resigned," *Accessus*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol5/iss2/5>

This Article has been accepted for inclusion in Accessus by the editorial board of the journal and administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



One Voice, Ancient and Resigned

Acknowledgments

My many thanks to Tommy and Mary Barham for their continuing support that makes this research possible.

One Voice, Ancient and Resigned

But old men all look alike. Their voices are
as shaky as their limbs, their heads without hair,
their noses driveling as in childhood. Their bread,
poor wretches, has to be munched by toothless gums.

Una senum facies, cum voce trementia membra
et iam leve caput madidique infantia nasi,
frangendus misero gingiva panis inermi.¹

The literature that describes the old body is seemingly without end in medieval England, with various source texts from classical and medieval authorities, from Cicero, Juvenal, and Seneca to Roger Bacon and various anonymously authored texts depicting the pains and pleasures of the old body.² And this subject is one that consumes Gower and his poetry, appearing in works in all three languages in which he worked. In particular, the so-called Minor Latin works and the *Confessio Amantis* seem to flesh out fully the contours of a textualized old body for Gower, a kind of old persona, one that stresses the connection between wisdom, experience, and age.³ In his study of old age and these poems, R. F. Yeager has noted that this textualized old body touches on our modern imagination of the poet:

¹ Juvenal, *Satire X in Juvenal and Persius*, ed. and trans. G.G. Ramsey (London: William Heinemann, 1918), 1920221, here 208-209.

² A small sampling of this literature would necessarily include Cicero's *De Senectute*; Juvenal's *Satire X*; and selected epistles by Seneca. The body of secondary literature that treats medieval depictions and theories is likewise rich. See for example Shulamith Shahar's *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain*, trans. Yael Lotan (London: Routledge, 1997) and Pat Thane, *A History of Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³ For instance, see Candace Barrington, "The Trentham Manuscript as Broken Prosthesis: Wholeness and Disability in Lancastrian England," *Accessus*: 1:1 (2013): Article 4, <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=accessus> and her discussion of Gower's blindness and his later works. While not linked specifically to old age, Barrington's mapping of disability and its prosthetic treatment in the Trentham Manuscript and

On those many occasions (surely!) when we close our eyes and call up John Gower, the image that I wager we conjure most often is of an elderly, bearded man in a long robe. Depending on our degree of familiarity with the realia of Gower scholarship, that robe might be blue and the beard medium-length, forked, and salt-and-pepper (as “he” appears, along with beehive hat and longbow, in London, British Library MS Cotton Tiberius A.iv.fol. 9v); or, alternatively, the gown might be red and gold, and the beard shorter, a rounded Van Dyke, thick and lustrous black (as presently on his tomb effigy, in Southwark Cathedral); or the gown is wholly red and the beard white, long, and unshaven from ear to scraggly end near mid-chest (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 902, fol. 8r). Or perhaps, if one is a true aficionado, Gower appears (as he does in a tiny miniature in London, British Library, MS Additional 42131, fol. 209v), naked from the collarbone up, bald on top but with shoulder-length, wavy white hair below, bushy white eyebrows and a white beard, grizzled and forked, that extends from earlobe to what would have been four or five inches below his chin if blown up to scale.⁴

That the modern imagination, even supplemented by medieval images of Gower young and old, mostly imagines him old is telling; while Yeager notes that evidence of illustrations of younger

the later Latin verses discusses the effect of Gower’s blindness on his writing, which both the poet and other critics connect to his advanced age. David R. Carlson’s treatment of the endings of the *Cronica Tripertita* begins by noting links between Gower’s blindness and his age in the context of revision of his later texts. See “Gower on Henry IV’s Rule: The Endings of the *Cronica Tripertita* and Its Texts,” *Traditio* 62 (2007): 207-36.

⁴ R. F. Yeager, “Gower in Winter: Last Poems,” in *The Medieval Python: The Purposive and Provocative Work of Terry Jones*, ed. R.F. Yeager and Toshiyuki Takamiya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 87-103 (87).

Gower exists, with the burial effigy looming large, Gower and Amans, the dual character of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* largely appear as old men.⁵ Indeed, as the quotation above shows, Gower's old age has consumed readings of his works, in part because he seems consumed by his own old age, which is expressed across his works, in Latin, Middle English, and French. His sight or lack thereof, the physical depictions of young and old Gower—in manuscripts, in his tomb, in his poetry, all these have been the focus of recent work by—to name a few—David Carlson, Jonathan Hsy, Matthew Irvin, and Eve Salisbury.⁶ But I am interested in something a bit different and a bit more difficult to visualize—what does elderly Gower *sound* like? Unlike these images and effigies, nothing survives of direct auditory evidence but Gower's poetic voice remains and is often an old one.

One point I would make early on in this paper is that Gower's old age is both young and old in the *Confessio*—that is whatever poetic sounds we might tie to Gower as part of an old persona are voiced primarily at the beginning and end of his Middle English work. In between, the quality and tenor of that old voice is somewhat lost, which seems to add to the surprise of Amans' unveiling of his age.⁷ And, like the physical descriptions of his body and the physical

⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶ The following are instructive of the range of theories and interpretations of Gower's age: Jonathan Hsy, "Blind Advocacy: Blind Readers, Disability Theory, and Accessing John Gower," *Accessus*: 1:1 (2013): Article 2 <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=accessus> Matthew Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2013); and Eve Salisbury, "Promiscuous Contexts: Gower's Wife, Prostitution, and the *Confessio Amantis*," in *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Malte Urban (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009): 219-40. A foundational text for thinking through Gower's age is J. A. Burrow's "The Portrayal of Amans in *Confessio Amantis*," *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1983), 5-24.

⁷ See Burrow, "Portrayal" (footnote 5), and Helen Cooper, "Gower and Mortality: The Ends of Storytelling," *John Gower: Others and the Self*, ed. Russell A. Peck and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017), 91-107.

depictions of that body, a good deal of caution is necessary for thinking about this old voice. So, in many ways I'm interested in what Gower seems to imagine old people sound like, and how this old voice, a kind of vocal articulation of the *puer senex* operates in opposition to some of the youthful voices in late fourteenth-century England.

To begin, I want to voice one last thing that I will not cover in this short paper. This is not a sound studies paper—and, while I am grateful for the recent work by medievalists and others interested in historical sound, I am less interested in the actual theories of sound, voice, and articulation than the way in which this voice might be heard or interpreted. In particular, what interests me for Gower's old voice is the rhetorical positioning of that voice as *old*. In other words, what does a poetic rendering of old age sound like in Gower? As a result, I pay attention to various other sources and contemporary works that dramatize how the aging voice is heard and what age does to the voice. Although there is little extant medical evidence of the effects of age on the voice, much has been written in recent decades describing such effects, and I make use of some of this information where appropriate. Finally, a note about the genesis of this work, which helps to explain the interest I have in understanding the formal qualities of an old poetic voice. This paper was inspired by *Staves and Stanzas: Writing Old Age in Late Medieval England*, a book project of mine that treats how old age is depicted as a political, rhetorical, and social phenomenon in late medieval Latin and English works, and these are the questions that guide this discussion of Gower's old voice. His own autobiographical sketch points to a loss of sight as he grows old, and his voice necessarily likely became more important. So, how can Gower's aging voice be reconstructed? I suggest that Gower's old voice can actually be heard in the Latin lyrics and the "Praise of Peace." By examining both the material that Gower describes

and uses in these later poems and the diction he uses, it is possible, I argue, to track how this poetic voice has lost bodily strength but has gained a magnificent “resonance,” one that matches Cicero’s Cato, a point in Cicero’s text I return to.

Without recordings or other evidence, much is lost in discussions of medieval voices and voicing. That being said, there is a wealth of information from late medieval texts—and their classical forbears—about the conditions of old age and much of this aligns with current medical knowledge of the old body, mind, and voice. Indeed, a modern view of the aging voice is supplied below:

When we age, not only our aches and pains worsen, our skin wrinkles, teeth fall out, and our hair disappears, voices show sign of age as well. Few of us just think about how important it is until it stops functioning properly. In advanced age, we loose [sic] some of the fine coordination that we had in younger years, we loose [sic] muscle mass, our mucous membranes become thin and dry. Aging affect [sic] two main aspects of vocal fold anatomy and function. First, much like muscles elsewhere in the body, muscles of the vocal fold loses bulk (atrophy). Second, the flexible tissues which are responsible for vocal fold vibration during voicing (i.e. superficial lamina propria) become thinner, stiffer and less pliable. Together these changes sometimes results [sic] in voice which is percieved [sic] as sounding ‘old’.⁸

⁸ Kamrul Hassan Tarafder, Pran Gopal Datta, and Ahmed Tariq, “The Aging Voice,” *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Journal* 5:1 (2012):83-86 (83).

These changes are remarkably similar both to a medicalized discussion of the old body in medieval England as well as literary depictions of that body. And certainly, to return to the opening of this paper, both of these kinds of portrayals depend on the borrowing of classical material, from texts such as Cicero's *De Senectute* and Maximianus's *Elegies*. What I will attempt to show for the rest of this paper is that these texts represent two different options for thinking through or depicting the aged voice, and that Gower seems to echo Cicero's text and the construction of Cato throughout many of his works, especially those narrated by or that include old characters.

Voice is central to both of these texts, and, as I will show below, Gower's use of the old figure follows largely the Ciceronian example, both in form and content, but certainly the echoes of Maximianus and his *Elegies* haunt Gower's old age. From the MSS of the Latin poetry that likely circulated in medieval England to extant translations and paraphrases of the *Elegies* in the MS Harley 913 and Digby MS 86, evidence exists that Gower might have known this poetry.⁹ And Cicero's *De Senectute* was clearly known in medieval England—as scholars have pointed out William Caxton's late fifteenth-century imprint was based on an earlier century English translation, probably created by William Worcester.¹⁰ A quick introduction of both texts and

⁹ For the Digby MS 86, see https://medieval.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/catalog/manuscript_4426. Susanna Fein's edited collection represents some of the best work on the manuscript and its contents: *Interpreting MS Digby 86A Trilingual Book from Thirteenth-Century Worcestershire*, ed. Susanna Fein (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2019). For MS Harley 913, see *Poems from BL MS Harley 913: The Kildare Manuscript*, ed. Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ See "William Worcester: A Preliminary Survey," in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays*, ed. K. B. McFarlane (London: Hambledon Continuum, 1981), 199-224 for a brief discussion of Worcester's activities.

their constructions of the old poetic voice is necessary, which then introduces some examples from Gower's texts, whose discussion makes legible, if hazy, a genealogy of this aged voice.

Maximianus's poetry has a decidedly negative view of the pain that old age inflicts on its subject, and many of these descriptions highlight remarkably, by the time of Gower, generic features of the pains of old age. The *Elegies* actually, though, make explicit what happens to the old voice, which of course seems in direct opposition to what Cicero argues in his book on old age. Cicero, throughout his text, argues for an acceptance of old age, its pains, and limitations, which Maximianus emphasizes often in discussions of what the speaker has lost in his aging. Besides the usual descriptions of physical and romantic activity, the *Elegies* include at the beginning a description of the speaker's voice and the power it once marshalled:

While I was young and handsome, while mind and sense remained,
I was a speaker renowned throughout the world.
Often I fashioned the lying songs of a poet.
And often my fictions brought real glory to me.
Often I won the decision in cases at law.
Deserving the tribute awarded my nimble tongue. (I.9-14)¹¹

The speaker notes the equal range of this voice, equal in lyric poetry and rhetoric and persuasion, nimble and able to perform a variety of activities. This voice, however, has been destroyed, reduced to a shadow of its former glory, a point the speaker emphasizes in the lines that follow:

I sing no songs; the greatest joy of song

¹¹ Maximianus, *Gabriele Zerbi*, *Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged and The Elegies of Maximianus*, trans. L. R. Lind (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), 319-36. All citations refer to this translation by line number.

Has fled; true grace of voice has perished quite.
 I arouse no public, write no alluring poems,
 Seek favorable judgments with suits by no means savage. (127-130)

In almost systematic fashion, the speaker undoes each accomplishment of his voice, noting that neither songs nor persuasive speeches in law court sound as impressive now that age has wrecked this voice. Of course, considering the range and life of the *Elegies* themselves, we might consider that this claim is rhetorical—for indeed, MS Harley 913 speaks of the *Elegies* in a condensed Middle English translation.

The alliterative *Elde Makip Me Geld* depicts the speaker of the poem as an old man who condemns the horrors of old age through graphic descriptions of a failing body and the narrative of grief that this body produces: “I grunt, I grene, I groan, I gruche.”¹² The alliteration of the verbs signals their near equivalence. All words denoting verbal or written complaint, they are tied together in a constellation of negative emotions, affected by age. Indeed, the speaker is clear: “And al þis wilneþ eld,” and the horrors of old age, driven by old age, can almost be heard in the alliterative sweep of the poem. But the resignation and lament offered by the poem seems less like the voice of the aged Gower. Even when Venus reminds Amans, who is identified some lines later as Gower, of his age in *Confessio Amantis*, Amans appears to maintain a kind of power, even in resignation and the “softe pas” home, appearing whole enough to continue on.

More like Gower’s aged voice are the echoes of *Cato Maior De Senectute*, which centers on the imagined dialogue among Cato the Elder, Laelius and Scipio, in a work that self-

¹² W. Heuser, *Die Kildare-gedichte; die ältesten mittenglischen denkmäler in anglo-irischer überlieferung* (Bonn: P. Hanstein’s Verlag, 1904), 170-172 (171).

consciously seeks to elevate the status of old men. Voicing and the authority that might be attached to an aging, if amplified voice, are central to this text, as the introduction makes clear:

Now on other subjects I have said much and shall often have much to say; this book, which I am sending to you, is on old age. But the entire discourse I have attributed, not to Tithonus, as Aristo of Ceos did, (for there would be too little authority in a myth), but, that I might give it greater weight, I have ascribed it to the venerable Marcus Cato; and I represent Laelius and Scipio, while at his house, expressing wonder that he bears his age so well, and Cato replying to them. If it shall appear that he argues more learnedly than he was accustomed to do in his own books, give the credit to Greek literature, of which, as is well known, he was very studious in his later years. But why need I say more? For from now on the words of Cato himself will completely unfold to you my own views on old age.¹³

Cicero's disappearance from his text on senescence is one that operates as a kind of voicing to which we should pay attention. Giving Cicero's own text to Cato, the aims of this text on the political and social ramifications of old age become arguably more authoritative voiced by the ancient Roman. Worth remarking upon here too is Cicero's own defense of this voicing—as the sentiments Cato produces seem far more intellectual and learned than those in his extant books. Indeed, this tie between Cato's old books and his apparent wisdom is a common link, but also one that strikes at the heart of Gower's poetry and his handling of old age and history. Indeed, from "Visio Anglie" and *Confessio Amantis* and the "Praise of Peace," Gower seems interested

¹³ Cicero, *On Old Age, On Friendship, On Divination*, trans. W.A. Falconer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923), 9-99, here 11.

in the way old books speak with the implication that old age might be read and heard in a similar fashion. In other words, there are two sources for this authority both at the beginning of Cicero's text and throughout the Gowerian corpus, which appear to be synonymous: the old voice (and body) and old book. And indeed, the voice of Cato is one that provides not only safety but also authority.

Authority on age is a central concern of the text, as surely as it is for Maximianus's *Elegies*. The signal difference is that the resonance and quality of the old voice is useful to Cicero's Cato, as he has changed the aims of that voice and redirected where it is heard. And it is this authority that Cato actually cites in his defense of the old voice, remarking in Cicero's text that

The orator, I fear, does lose in efficiency on account of old age, because his success depends not only upon his intellect, but also upon his lungs and bodily strength. In old age, no doubt, the voice actually gains (I know not how) that magnificent resonance which even I have not lost, and you see my years; and yet the style of speech that graces the old man is subdued and gentle, and very often the sedate and mild speaking of an eloquent old man wins itself a hearing.¹⁴

These lines, which make clear that the voice of the aged speaker is centered not only on his corporeal power but also on his stylistic power, are curious: Cicero, through Cato, suggests that it is not just the authority given to age that increases the sound and power of the aged voice but a change in resonance, delivery, and pace. And while the voice is weakened—the body and the lungs themselves weakened—it is a change in style and delivery that increases persuasiveness

¹⁴ Cicero, 37.

and power. The lesson here about the old voice is one that Cato emphasizes and expands on, as he ties instruction of the young to this voice and its qualities, arguing for the power of this voice, until Cato describes the honeyed speech of Nestor.

The quality of characterizing these voices as both old and effective is a useful one in considering Gower's texts and the depictions of old speakers. For instance in Book VIII of *Confessio Amantis*, Gower describes the voices of the aged as they pray to Venus on behalf of Amans:

And whan thei comen to the place
 Wher Venus stod and I was falle,
 These olde men with o vois alle
 To Venus preiden for my sake.
 And sche, that myhte noght forsake
 So gret a clamour as was there,
 Let pité come into hire ere;
 And forth withal unto Cupide
 Sche preith that he upon his side
 Me wolde thurgh his grace sende
 Som confort, that I myhte amende,
 Upon the cas which is befalle. (8.2726-2737)¹⁵

¹⁵ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, 2nd edition, Books 1 and 8, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, ed. Russell A. Peck with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006): <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-book-8#f8.1>

The power of the aged voices is effective precisely because they all speak as one (“o vois alle”) and this quality is one that matches the examples Cato provides of aged speakers in *De Senectute*. But these speakers are not the wrecked orators of *Elegies*: rather because of the Cato-like efficacy of these voices, “so gret a clamor” reaches Venus’s ears, and she answers the resounding power of these aged speakers. While the dates for the *Confessio* cannot be known with absolute certainty, certainly he was at work on the *Confessio* in the early 1390s, which places Gower in his early sixties, younger than Cicero’s Cato, but clearly capable of crafting the dignified and resonant voice of the aged.

An earlier text, “Visio Anglie” (Book I of *Vox Clamantis*) likewise describes and depicts the aged voice, appropriately for a text that stresses the noise and sounds of an England, unrecognizable to the poet considering the events of 1381 and the early years of Richard II’s rule. At one point in the text, the speaker spots an island marked by error and evil. Seeing a “worthy man, above the rest,” the speaker inquires after the island and its inhabitants.

A quo q̄iesiui, ‘Dic, insula qualis, et vnde
Tantus adest populus, quis <sit> et inde modus?’
Ecce senex ille, portu qui stabat in illo,
Reddidit ista meis horrida verba sonis:
‘Exulis hec dici nuper solet Insula Bruti,
Quam sibi compaciens ipsa Diana dabat.

“Visio Anglie” (1959-1964)¹⁶

¹⁶ *John Gower: Poems on Contemporary Events: The “Visio Anglie” (1381) and “Cronica tripertita” (1400)*, ed. David R. Carlson and trans. A. G. Rigg (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and Bodleian Library, 2011).

I asked: ‘This island, what’s it like, and whence
 So many folk? And how do they behave?’
 That aged man, who stood there in that port,
 To my remarks returned these fearful words:
 ‘Its name is now “the Isle of Exiled Brut”’;
 Diana, in compassion, granted it.

While the description of this man is brief, as brief as the discussion of his reply, it is a point in the “Visio” that merits some discussion. These fearful words return to the speaker, answering his question. But the choices Gower makes for describing the voicing of the old, worthy man are important: using *sonis* here helps one to hear the Ciceronian echoes of a Cato-like voice, as *sonus* is used often not only for sounding and resounding, but in the context of style and to mark language as “sonorous,” which sounds much like Cato’s own voice.¹⁷

As the opening of Cicero’s *De Senectute* reminds us, the tie between that aging speaker and his old books is a deep one, as Cicero defends his choice of Cato the Elder and his eloquence by linking it to his late-in-life study of Greek literature. And this tie between old corpora—books and bodies—is one that defines in large part how the old voice of Gower might sound—textual and deeply invested in historical examples. “In Praise of Peace,” Gower’s late poem to Henry IV, makes this connection clear, as throughout Gower advises the monarch to heal the old wounds of

¹⁷ “sonus” (n): *Lewis and Short Dictionary* (via *Perseus Latin Word Study Tool*):
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=s%20C5%20Dnus&la=la&can=s%20C5%20Dnus0#lexicon>

the country and the crown through recourse to old texts. The difference, then, between Richard and Henry would not be clearer—one depended on the false advice of often young counselors, if chroniclers like Adam Usk are to be believed, and one will depend on the deep resonances of the past:

Ther folwith grace, if it be wel governed;
 Thus tellen thei whiche olde bookes conne,
 Whereof, my lord, Y wot wel thow art lerned.
 Axe of thi God, so schalt thou nought be werned
 Of no reqweste whiche is resonable;
 For God unto the goode is favorable. (23-29)¹⁸

and

My liege lord, if that thee list to seche
 The sothe essamples that the werre hath wrought,
 Thow schalt wiel hier of wisemennes speche
 That dedly werre turneth into noght.
 For if these olde bokes be wel soght,
 Ther myght thou se what thing the werre hath do,
 Bothe of conqeste and conquerour also. (92-98)

¹⁸ John Gower, “In Praise of Peace,” in *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Selection*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series, ed. Kathleen Forni (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), ll 23-29 <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/yeager-gower-minor-latin-works-livingston-in-praise-of-peace>

These quotations make clear that there is a valuable connection between “wisemennes speche” and those “essamples” which can be found in “olde bokes.” Both offer reasonable paths forward, and, if Henry is to govern well, he will, unlike Richard, listen to those old counselors and books. Old books, like old speakers, know all those truths to which Henry must now listen, if the old wounds of the previous decades are to be healed.

This link between the speech of old books, and how it is likened implicitly to old speakers can be heard in Gower’s voice, long after that voice has been silenced by death. The *Confessio Amantis*, “Visio Anglie,” and “In Praise of Peace” imagine “old bokes” speaking with wisdom, an activity which they share with wizened figures of age—indeed both have old bodies, which are often incomplete, and are valued for their intellectual power. In *Pericles*, however, that role is almost totally given over to choral Gower, who calls attention both to the limitations of sight and the visual and offers to narrate what the audience can see. A blind and aged poet, resurrected in 1608 augments the visual with his own words. This “mortal Gower” is the “moral Gower” of *Confessio* and of the “Visio Anglie.”

In order to

sing a song that was sung

From ashes ancient Gower is come,

Assuming man’s infirmities

To glad your ear and please your eyes.

It hath been sung at festivals,

On ember eves and holy ales,

And lords and lives in their lives have read it for restoratives

The purchase is to make men more glorious,

Et bonum quo antiquius eo melius.

If you, born in these latter times

When wit's more ripe, accept my rhymes,

And that to hear an old man sing

May to your wishes pleasure bring,

I life would wish, and that I might

Waste it for you like taper-light. (1.1-4; 11-16)¹⁹

Throughout this opening speech, Gower both announces his position as a medieval poet and a narrator who exists in the present. The reflection of old age is everywhere in these lines. Gower calls himself “an old man” and announces he is come from “the ashes,” and imagines time as “like taper-light.” These references to the superannuated poet recall a discourse of age that seems lifted almost directly from Chaucer’s Reeve’s Prologue rather than Gower. Still, the impression of Gower is clear from the beginning lines: a writer and reviser of *restoratives*, Gower is poised in these lines to reflect not only his modest position—he is, after all, the “burel clerk” of the *Confessio*—but also his moral stance in texts from *Vox Clamantis* to the later Latin lyrics. Beyond Gower’s modesty and morality, these lines present the image of an old man singing to an audience with a wit more advanced and developed.

Gower’s agency throughout the play serves several purposes, one of which clearly is to highlight the ancient textual trajectory of the story of Apollonius of Tyre. Its textual tradition is older than Gower, of course, but his recurring role as prime mover of the play’s plot means that

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, *Pericles* (Surrey, UK: The Arden Shakespeare, 2004).

the medieval nature of the tale is always remembered.²⁰ According to Helen Cooper, Shakespeare “does know it [the tale of Apollonius] is older than Gower, as that first chorus makes clear, and his treatment is designed to reinforce that sense of antiquity,” even as “the few changes he makes to Gower’s development of the story almost all serve to add to its medieval qualities.”²¹ So, in “assuming man’s infirmities,” Gower is vivified and made to speak the contours of a slightly changed tale from the one that he himself penned two centuries earlier. Gower, back from the dead, speaks in an archaic language, calling himself an old man, invoking the common image of man’s life as a candle, burning to its end. In spite of these descriptors of age, so modestly given, Gower’s apologetic entry into this afterlife carries with it many features of his past. Announcing “*Et bonum quo antiquis eo melius*,” Gower complicates from the beginning the status of ancient texts and authors. A good thing is better the older it is, and one can almost hear Gower defending his age within texts, as he will throughout his corpus.

Unlike the speaker of *Elde Makeþ Me Geld* or the speaker of Maximianus’s *Elegies*, Gower embodies Cato’s voice throughout his poetic works, valuing old age precisely because it is *not* youthful, rash, and given over to vain desires. We might further hear in this textualized old age and its voicing in Gower’s poetry a rather frequent commonplace of these works—old books say/know the truth, even if preserved incompletely, uniting the old body and old book through

²⁰ Elizabeth Archibald provides important detail on the medieval reception of the “Apollonius” narrative in *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1991).

²¹ Helen Cooper, “This worthy olde writer’: Pericles and other Gowers, 1592-1640,” in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Siân Echard (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010. First published in 2004): 99-113 (109). See also Martha Driver’s “Conjuring Gower in Pericles,” in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R.F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010): 315-325.

their steady voices. Gower sounds neither weak nor impotent, but voices his powerful exempla and advisory material in an old voice which we can nevertheless hear clearly.

Bibliography

“Sonus” (n): *Lewis and Short Dictionary* (via *Perseus Latin Word Study Tool*):

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=s%C5%8Dnus&la=la&can=s%C5%8Dnus0#lexicon>

Archibald, Elizabeth. *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations*.

Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1991.

Barrington, Candace. “The Trentham Manuscript as Broken Prosthesis: Wholeness and Disability in Lancastrian England.” *Accessus* 1:1 (2013): Article 4,

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=accessus>

Burrow, J.A. “The Portrayal of Amans in *Confessio Amantis*.” *Gower’s Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments*. Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1983. 5-24.

Carlson, David R. “Gower on Henry IV's Rule: The Endings of the *Cronica Tripertita* and Its Texts.” *Traditio* 62 (2007): 207-36.

Cicero. *On Old Age, On Friendship, On Divination*. Translated by W.A. Falconer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923. 9-99.

Cooper, Helen. “Gower and Mortality: The Ends of Storytelling,” *John Gower: Others and the Self*. Edited by Russell A. Peck and R. F. Yeager. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017. 91-107.

-----, “This worthy olde writer’: Pericles and other Gowers, 1592-1640.” *A Companion to Gower*. Edited by Siân Echard. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010. First published in

2004, 99-113.

Driver, Martha. "Conjuring Gower in Pericles," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation and Tradition*. Edited by Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines, and R. F. Yeager. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2010. 315-25.

Gower, John. *Confessio Amantis*. 2nd edition, Books 1 and 8. TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Edited by Russell A. Peck with Latin translations by Andrew Galloway. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006,

<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-book-8#f8.1>

----- "In Praise of Peace," in *The Chaucerian Apocrypha: A Selection*, TEAMS Middle English Texts Series. Edited by Kathleen Forni. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/yeager-gower-minor-latin-works-livingston-in-praise-of-peace>

----- *John Gower: Poems on Contemporary Events: The "Visio Anglie" (1381) and "Cronica tripartita" (1400)*. Edited by David R. Carlson. Translated by A. G. Rigg. Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies and Bodleian Library, 2011.

Heuser, W. *Die Kildare-gedichte; die ältesten mittenglischen denkmäler in anglo-irischer überlieferung*. Bonn: P. Hanstein's Verlag, 1904, 170-172.

Hsy, Jonathan. "Blind Advocacy: Blind Readers, Disability Theory, and Accessing John Gower." *Accessus*: 1:1 (2013): Article 2,

<https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=accessus>

Juvenal. *Satire X. Juvenal and Persius*. Ed. and Trans. G.G. Ramsey. London: William Heinemann, 1918. 192-221.

- Kamrul Hassan Tarafder, Kamrul Hassan, Pran Gopal Datta, and Ahmed Tariq. "The Aging Voice." *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Journal* 5:1 (2012): 83-86.
- Maximianus. *Gabriele Zerbi, Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged and The Elegies of Maximianus*. Translated by L.R. Lind. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988. 319-36.
- McFarlane, K.B. "William Worcester: A Preliminary Survey." *England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays*. Edited by K. B. McFarlane. London: Hambledon Continuum, 1981. 199-224.
- Shahar, Shulamith. *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain*. Translated by Yael Lotan. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Pericles*. Surrey, UK: The Arden Shakespeare, 2004.
- Thane, Pat. *A History of Old Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- R. F. Yeager, "Gower in Winter: Last Poems." *The Medieval Python: The Purposive and Provocative Work of Terry Jones*. Ed. R.F. Yeager and Toshiyuki Takamiya. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 87-103.

Will Rogers
University of Louisiana Monroe
wirogers@ulm.edu