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John Gower's Magical Rhetoric

“He was a gret rethorien / He was a gret magicien,” John Gower declares of Ulysses in Book VI of the *Confessio Amantis*, thereby capturing deep connections between rhetoric and magic.¹ Rhetoric depends upon verbal spellbinding while magic relies on compelling figures of speech, and both embrace a mystical concept of words.² Rhetoric and magic each admit of “white” and “black” practices, benign expressions such as fact-based argumentation or agricultural fertility charms that serve the community as well as malign manifestations such as deceitful persuasions and sexually manipulative enchantments that benefit only the perverse speaker. Throughout the *Confessio Amantis* references to magic abound. They occur when Genius compares love’s labors to alchemy, provides *exempla* of necromancers who trick their lovers, or lists authorities such as Zoroaster whom the priest believes Amans should know. Reciprocally, discussions of rhetoric recur throughout the *Confessio*: they surface in multiple allusions to Cicero, discussions of verbal style, and sermons on “trouthe” in language. Because enchantments are often performed through formulaic utterances, magic can be classified as a type of elocution and thus brought into rhetoric’s sphere.³ For Gower, this sphere is governed by

¹ John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, 4 vols., ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon, 1901), vols. 2–3. Quotations are taken from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, vols. 2–3, ed. Russell A. Peck and Latin trans. Andrew Galloway (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004): the opening quotation occurs at VI. 1309–1400. Hereafter, citations of the *Confessio Amantis* will be abbreviated, appearing as CA, with the poem’s book and line numbers to follow. All modernizations of Middle English and translations from Latin will be my own unless otherwise noted.

² William A. Covino, *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy: An Eccentric History of the Composing Imagination* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).

³ Francisco Alonso-Aleida, “Oral Traces and Speech Acts in a Corpus of Medieval English Healing Charms,” *Articles, Notes, and Queries* 23, no. 1 (2010): 6–14 (6).

the almighty Word, imbuing verbal magic with divine creative force and modeling a benevolent speech act to which rhetoric can aspire.

In the *Confessio Amantis* magic enters into rhetorical lore not only in the description of Ulysses and the various references mentioned above, but also—and most importantly—in Book VII’s definition of the art of “Rethorique,” which James J. Murphy identified long ago as the first discussion of rhetoric in the English language.⁴ Book VII’s lecture on “Rethorique” draws explicit connections between rhetoric and magic by identifying the W/word as an influence common to both fields. Murphy’s work inaugurates a distinguished body of scholarship situating Gower’s poetry within the history of rhetoric, and Gower critics have contributed observations on the poet’s innovations within that history, uses of figures of speech, and philosophies concerning language.⁵ Although this criticism has, with a few exceptions, emphasized secular

⁴ James J. Murphy, “John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* and the First Discussion of Rhetoric in the English Language,” *Philological Quarterly* 41 (1962): 401–11. While Murphy demonstrates Gower’s importance in crafting the first treatment of rhetoric in an English vernacular, Murphy contends that the medieval poet had little knowledge of the field. Murphy’s purpose was to rebut the conclusions of John M. Manly that Chaucer and his set relied heavily on the arts of poetry and prose for their compositions. See John M. Manly, *Chaucer and the Rhetoricians*, Warton Lecture on English Poetry, vol. 17 (London: British Academy, 1926). Murphy also positioned his argument against Robertson B. Daniels’s unpublished dissertation, applying Manly’s claims to Gower’s poems. See Robertson B. Daniels, “Figures of Rhetoric in John Gower’s English Works,” PhD Diss., Yale University (1934); James J. Murphy, “Chaucer, Gower and the English Rhetorical Tradition,” PhD Diss., Stanford University (1956).

⁵ Contributions to the body of scholarship on Gower’s rhetorical theory and practice are too numerous for an exhaustive list here. On Gower’s innovations within the rhetorical traditions, see especially Rita Copeland, “Lydgate, Hawes, and the Science of Rhetoric in the Late Middle Ages,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 53 (1992): 57–82 (67–68); on figures of speech, Masayoshi Itô, “Gower’s Knowledge of *Poetria Nova*,” *Studies in English Literature* 162 (1975): 3–20; on linguistic philosophy and context, Edwin Craun, *Lies, Slander and Obscenity in Medieval English Literature: Pastoral Rhetoric and the Deviant Speaker* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 113–56. Kim Zarins helpfully represents the state of Gower scholarship on rhetoric in “Gower and Rhetoric,” in *The Routledge Research*

viewpoints such as gendered or political readings of Book VII,⁶ I wish to highlight rhetoric's links in the *Confessio* to charms, alchemy, and the celestial capacities of the Christian Word. Certainly, interpretations of gendered or political contexts for Gower's "Rethorique" inform this article and represent significant aspects of the text: since Book VII constitutes a *speculum principum* based on Brunetto Latini's *Trésor*, the commentary on rhetoric occurs during instruction in masculine rulership.⁷ In addition to investigating the magical rhetoric of male

Companion to John Gower, ed. Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, Brian Gastle, and R. F. Yeager (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017), 38-39.

⁶ Because Gower writes explicitly about political contexts and liberal arts learning, scholarship regarding his poetry has often focused on secular topics, especially after the demise of Robertsonianism in the twentieth century. For political readings, see Russell A. Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978). Peck's Introduction positions rhetoric among the methods that Gower employs to convey political themes (xxiii). After the publication of Peck's important book, many other scholars advanced the thesis that Book VII's *speculum principum* (and the section on rhetoric within it) reflects the pervasive political themes in the *Confessio Amantis*. See, for instance, Judith Ferster, *Fictions of Advice: The Literature and Politics of Counsel in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 108–32, and Ann Astell, *Political Allegory in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 89. During the last twenty-five years, many secular readings of Gower offer perspectives on gender. For a gendered reading of Gower's rhetoric, see Diane Watt, *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex and Politics*, *Medieval Cultures* 38 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Exceptions to the secular approach to Gower's rhetoric include Götz Schmitz and Patrick J. Gallacher. Although many years ago both aligned Gower's treatment of rhetoric with the Christian Word, neither offered a comprehensive analysis of the Word's relationship to magic. See Götz Schmitz, "Rhetoric and Fiction: Gower's Comments on Eloquence and Courtly Poetry," *Gower's Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Peter Nicholson (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 117–42, and Patrick J. Gallacher, *Love, the Word, and Mercury: A Reading of John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975). In addition, Stephanie L. Batkie has addressed connections between Gower's use of language and alchemy. See Stephanie L. Batkie, "'Of the parfite medicine': *Merita Perpetuata* in Gower's Vernacular Alchemy," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 157–68. I wish to flesh out Gower's rhetoric of the Word, whose creative capacity makes all discourses possible and whose divinity, when manifested in human speech, enables verbal magic.

⁷ Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres du Trésor*, ed. Francis J. Carmody, University of California Publications in Modern Philology (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1948). See also Paul Barette and Spurgeon Baldwin, trans. *The Book of the Treasure (Li Livres dou Tresor)*

rulers and scholars, I rely on the nuanced readings of gender critics in Gower studies when connecting abusive speech to sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, it is also crucial to observe the prominent supernaturalism in Gower's rhetorical theory. A mystical concept of rhetoric explains why Gower credits the discipline with such transformative power.

To investigate John Gower's magical rhetoric, this article begins with the *Confessio's* negative exempla of necromancers whose charms crush, degrade, and facilitate the rape of women. The male domination reinscribed in their incantations figures for the wide range of personal and political abuses perpetrated by those who pervert speech. These necromancers, including Ulysses and Nectanabus, prove the power of magical eloquence but also demonstrate its need for moral and ethical recuperation—for a rhetorical theory that exposes how enchanting speech can serve evil ends and outlines strategies for speaking up for the good. In answer to the malevolent verbal maneuverings of those like Ulysses and Nectanabus, Gower recovers a benevolent rhetoric of enchantment from classical theories on a reiterative plain style and an Augustinian concept of the Word. While conjurers and orators might intone compelling phrases for good or for ill, the truth plainly and repeatedly stated works a persuasive magic for both the individual and the common good. Constructing the truth and adding spiritual impetus to mesmerizing figures of speech, the Word—the core of all creation (including rhetorical invention)—invests any oration with divine influence. More potent than the stars, stones, and

(New York: Garland, 1993). As Christopher Fletcher points out, Gower's advice in the CA is often aimed at "moderating manhood," although Katherine J. Lewis reminds us of the remarkable female readers who also attended to Gower's Middle English poem. See Christopher Fletcher, "Masculinity," in *Historians on John Gower*, ed. Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 351–78 (364); and Katherine J. Lewis, "Women and Power," in *Historians on John Gower*, ed. Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 323–50.

herbs manipulated by magicians but classified with them in necromancy, the Word, manifested in human speech, has the ultimate suasive influence. It is at once the basis of all incantations and the channel for Christian purpose in rhetoric.

Before Gower epitomizes the field of rhetoric in the *Confessio*'s Book VII, he offers complex characterizations of magicians whose cunning language gives them malign influence over others but no defense against punishments for their own sins. The "Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus," declaring the former both "rethorien" and "magicien" and casting him as both wise man and imprudent lover of witches, is a case in point.⁸ In this tale Ulysses is conversant in all the liberal arts and master over spells woven by Calypso and Circe to bring him into sexual thralldom. "Thei couthe moche," Genius declares of Circe's and Calypso's capacities, but "he couthe more" (They knew much, but he knew more).⁹ In this comparison, "more" is constituted by advanced training in subjects that are catalogued below, by and large texts that are written by men for men.

He was a worthi knyht and king	He was a worthy knight and king
And clerk knowende of every thing	And a clerk who knew everything.
Of Tullius the rethorique,	Of Tullius the rhetoric
Of King Zorastes the magique,	Of King Zoroaster the magic
Of Tholomé th'astronomie,	Of Ptolemy the astronomy
Of Plato the philosophie,	Of Plato the philosophy
Of Daniel the slepi dremes,	Of Daniel the interpretation of dreams

⁸ CA, VI. 1391–1788.

⁹ CA, VI. 1441.

Of Neptune ek the water stremes,	Of Neptune the ocean streams,
Of Salomon and the proverbes,	Of Solomon the proverbs,
Of Macer al the strengthe of herbes,	Of Macer the strength of herbs,
And the phisique of Ypocras,	And the physic of Hippocrates
And lich unto Pictagoras	And just like Pythagoras
Of surgerie he knew the cures.	Of surgery he knew the cures. ¹⁰

Ulysses's twin expertise in rhetoric and magic is noted first in references to Tullius and Zoroaster above, while his mastery over the other disciplines could be said to sustain rhetorical and magical acts. Proficiency in Judaic commonplaces and methods of construal serve rhetorical studies, while astronomy, medicine, and herbal lore inform enchantments. In addition, Ulysses is a navigator, whose skills will finally bring him home, and a philosopher capable of synthesizing his vast learning into a coherent worldview. The breadth of his education is astonishing, encompassing the most famous writings from various religious and cultural traditions.

Mysteriously, Ulysses is privy to discoveries from both before and after his own lifetime. While Kurt Olsson observes that "Ulysses' knowledge lacks an *ordinatio*, or a field of topics to organize remembrance," it is actually rhetoric with its offices of *dispositio* and *memoria* that can aid the hero in categorizing, digesting, and recalling the authors above and their famous contributions.¹¹ In the contests with Circe and Calypso, Ulysses relies on a masculine body of knowledge that clearly enhances his spells and abilities to ward off predation. Specifically,

¹⁰ CA, VI. 1397–8, 1401–11.

¹¹ Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 186.

Ulysses's command of rhetoric and magic (and related disciplines) protects him from bestial lust and metamorphosis into a beast, the fate met by his shipmates.

Instead of merely extricating himself, however, from the clutches of those who would detain him from Penelope, Ulysses turns the threat of besotted degradation back upon Calypso and Circe, their struggle to resist the itinerant hero described in the following lines:

Bot that art couthe thei noght finde	But they could not discover any art
Of which Uluxes was deceived,	Through which Ulysses might be deceived
That he ne hath hem alle weyved,	Or be prevented from trapping them
And broght hem into such a rote	And bringing them into such a condition
That upon him thei bothe assote;	That they were both with him besotted;
And thurgh the science of his art	And through the knowledge of his art
He tok of hem so wel his part	He played with them so well his part
That he begat Circes with childe.	That he begat with Circes a child.
He kepte him sobre and made hem wilde,	He kept himself sober and made them wild,
He sette himselve so above	He set himself so far above them
That with here good and with here love,	That, retaining their goods and their love,
Who that therof be lief or loth,	Ignoring what anyone might think,
Al quit into his schip he goth. ¹²	Free from their power, to his ship he goes.

The two women languish because they could not discover the male-centric arts available to Ulysses. Winning the gendered contest of sexual-magical manipulation through his privileged education, Ulysses might seem from a masculinist point of view to emerge as a “sober,” superior,

¹² CA, VI. 1454–66.

and rational hero whose education paves the way for his escape. As Claire Fanger points out, however, Ulysses has cheapened his liberal arts education in this engagement with Calypso and Circe;¹³ he has deployed higher learning to sway bodies instead of minds, to serve himself rather than a community. He is in the end no better than the witches: all of them use spellbinding words to control and demean others, but Ulysses has more resources in accomplishing debased ends. What Gower aims to supply in Book VII's "Rethorique" lecture, in contrast, are verbal tools for achieving admirable aims.

Ulysses's degradation of rhetoric and women on his journey home is consistent with his culminating act in Troy of wheedling Antenor into betraying Ilium. In the "Rethorique" lecture, Gower emphasizes and deplors the latter incident of Ulysses's treachery and deceitful argumentation. For Ulysses, anyone considered other (whether the counselor to an enemy king or a nymph on a magical island) is subject to the enticements of enchanting oratory and the violence that attends cruel persuasions. As the "Rethorique" lecture maintains, however, others deserve the plain truth, and in dealing ethically and accurately with adversaries, the orator has an excellent chance of prevailing. Instead, Ulysses's magical-verbal victories involve obfuscation and devastation. Vitiating by disgraceful behavior and having impeded the understanding of those he wishes to dominate, Ulysses's own mental powers grow dim. He cannot understand a dream foreshadowing his punishment for the liaison with Circe: "Uluxes, thogh that he be wys, / With al his wit in his avis, / The mor that he his swevene acompteth, / The lasse he wot what it amonteth" (Ulysses, though he be wise, / With all his wit to advise him, / The more he tries to

¹³ Claire Fanger, "Magic and Metaphysics of Gender in Gower's 'Tale of Circe and Ulysses'," in *Re-visioning Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998), 203–219. Fanger argues that Ulysses values learning for its own sake, not for the personal and social good that it might bring.

account for the dream, / The less he understood its significance).¹⁴ Neither his magical powers nor the hermeneutic skills learned from the Book of Daniel and honed in rhetoric studies could illuminate the prophetic dream concerning Telegonus's fatal advance. Here, as elsewhere, Gower heavily weights the intentions of the rhetorical interpreter and speaker, and though malevolent purposes are often realized, the truthful, straightforward rhetorician can hope (unlike Ulysses) to triumph in the long run.

While Gower's flawed Ulysses maintains some heroic qualities—the fortitude to defeat superhuman threats and the prudence to choose the queenly wife Penelope—in the “Tale of Nectanabus” that immediately follows, the necromancer whose persuasions and enchantments deceive Olympias offers an even more negative exemplum.¹⁵ Whereas Ulysses sometimes deploys charms and blandishments in the service of larger purposes like preserving the Greeks—revealing a slice of the Word's full potential, as Gower will argue later, to master the world—Nectanabus operates for his private satisfactions alone. Nectanabus's actions and words are so reprehensible that Genius speculates in the beginning of the tale about why God allowed such trickery to “slyden under His suffrance” (slide under his watch).¹⁶ Nectanabus, a former king of Egypt whose magic could not prevent the loss of his realm to enemies, enters Macedonia, where he finds the beautiful Queen Olympias alone while her husband is away at war. His inability to rule his kingdom indicates a lack of self-regulation, and in contrast with Ulysses, the former

¹⁴ CA, VI. 1575–79.

¹⁵ CA, VI. 1789–2366.

¹⁶ CA, VI. 1792. See Peter G. Beidler, “Diabolical Treachery in the Tale of Nectanabus,” in *John Gower's Literary Transformations in the Confessio Amantis: Original Articles and Translations*, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 83–90.

monarch of Egypt is already controlled by base emotions before he attempts the magical control of Olympias. Overcome with lust, Nectanabus dupes the faithful and innocent woman into having sex with him through a combination of mystifying speech, mysterious invasion of her dreams, and shapeshifting.

First, he approaches her with a false prophecy that she will conceive a powerful child by the god Hammon of Lybia, and although Olympias wants stronger proof, she is spiritually affected and confused by his strange predictions: “Sche wiste litel what he mente, / For it was guile and sorcerie, / Al that sche tok for prophecie” (She understood little of what he meant, / For it was guile and sorcery, / All that she took for prophecy).¹⁷ It is specifically Nectanabus’s enchanting rhetoric that disorients Olympias and forces her to place it in a verbal category with which she is familiar (prophecy). Exploiting her befuddlement concerning his oratorical genre, Nectanabus turns to occult calculations in order to effect what he has “foretold.” Although prophecies announce matters that have been foreordained, the sorcerer deploys magic to transform his false words into a divination:

His chambre be himselve tok,	He took himself alone to his chamber,
And overtorneth many a bok,	And turned the pages of many a book,
And thurgh the craft of artemage	And through the craft of magic
Of wex he forgeth an ymage.	He forges an image of wax.
He loketh his equacions	He looks into his equations
And ek the constellacions,	And also the constellations,
He loketh the conjunccions,	He looks into planetary conjunctions,

¹⁷ CA VI. 1950–52.

He loketh the recepcions,	And reciprocal alignments,
His signe, his houre, his ascendent,	His sign, his hour, his ascendant,
And drawth fortune of his assent:	And draws a good fortune:
The name of queene Olimpias	The name of Queen Olympias
In thilke ymage write was	Was written on the wax image
Amiddes in the front above.	Front and center.
And thus to winne his lust of love	And thus to win his love's lust
Nectanabus this werk hath diht; ¹⁸	Nectanabus accomplished this work.

The wax figure functions as a simulacrum of Olympias, which the sorcerer can literally hold in his own hands, while the elaborate calculations yield the time most fortunate for Nectanabus's groping. Nectanabus sends her a dream of sexual union with Hammon to provide proof for his statements, and the next night he appears in her chamber as a divine dragon that converts into a man for a sexual encounter. He has objectified Olympias in a figurine that will influence her body and assumed divinity only to "win his love's lust": the multiple imitations and reduplications that he oversees—the creation of the wax figure in Olympias's image and of the dragon-man from Hammon's legend—are debased versions of the creative iterations of the Word, which lovingly manifests aspects of the godhead in plenitude.

Ironically, part of Nectanabus's prophetic invention is unwittingly prescient: the sorcerer had promised that an invincible child would emerge from Olympias's union with "Hammon," and indeed Alexander the Great was born from Nectanabus's deceit. Nectanabus's knowledge of

¹⁸ CA, VI. 1955–69.

the stars allowed him a window onto human destiny. Seb Falk observes that the figure of Nectanabus represents both the sophistication of Gower's astronomical sources and the most corrupt abuses of what the stars can reveal.¹⁹ While Ulysses relies on unspecified verbal arts to countermand and redirect the enchantments of Calypso and Circes, Nectanabus employs one specific kind of astrologically dependent spell for his wicked ends: a "carecte."²⁰ As Tamara F. O'Callaghan has demonstrated, Gower alludes to "carectes" throughout the *Confessio Amantis* to signify a charm invoking astrological alignments, and Nectanabus deploys this kind of incantation in a self-interested display of image magic in which the simulacrum of Olympias assumes great power over the woman herself.²¹ In the context of the *Confessio Amantis*, both Ulysses's magical eloquence and Nectanabus's charms constitute immoral speech acts proceeding from evil, self-interested intentions—*exempla*, Genius explains, of "the vice of Sorcerie" showing how the abuse of enchanted language debases the lover, betrays the beloved, and in the case of Ulysses's deceit of Antenor, even destroys civilizations.²²

¹⁹ Seb Falk, "Natural Sciences," in *Historians on John Gower*, ed. Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 518–20.

²⁰ CA, VI. 2006, 2340.

²¹ Tamara F. O'Callaghan, "The Fifteen Stars, Stones, and Herbs: Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis* and its Afterlife," in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation and Tradition*, ed. Elisabeth Dutton, with John Hines and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2010), 145. In addition to the references to "carectes" in the "Tale of Nectanabus," the word occurs as part of the discussion in CA, I. 468–77 and CA, IV. 1336–54, 2560–64. On image magic, see Sophie Page, *Magic in the Cloister: Pious Motives, Illicit Interests, and Occult Approaches to the Medieval Universe* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 73.

²² CA, VI. 1386.

In the *Confessio Amantis*'s rhetoric lecture in Book VII, however, Genius moves toward a more positive view of verbal magic by connecting spells and “carectes” to the holy and inventive Word. All charms and rhetorical genres depend upon God’s original speech act; it is the speaker’s intention that establishes whether the Word’s creative inspiration is used in the service of goodness. Already in Book VI, Genius comments that incantations might be used for “good entente,” and a recuperation of verbal magic in Book VII depends upon *exempla* rejecting the models of Ulysses and Nectanabus.²³ As a confessor, Genius is well-positioned to identify infractions of speech and suitable restitutions. The rhetoric lecture argues openly against Ulysses’s fraudulent persuasions and outlines benign forms of elocution for countermanding evil speech that are not practiced by the Greek hero. It deplores Ulysses’s deceitful language in persuading Antenor to betray Ilium and proposes that a “facounde / Of goodly wordes” (capaciousness of goodly words) such as the hero possessed be used only to advance the truth.²⁴ It pits Cicero’s straightforward speech in the Roman Senate against the obfuscations of corrupt magicians and disingenuous orators. In Book VII, Nectanabus’s astrological lore and devious spells are supplanted by Aristotelian knowledge and ethical discourse, bodies of learning that are also allied with occult practices in Gower’s source texts, but there the occult aids good government rather than dupes leaders and their wives. Having been told that Aristotle joined Nectanabus in tutoring the young Alexander the Great, Amans, just digesting the tale of the magician, successfully entreats Genius for an address that might have issued from the philosopher, a thinker better prepared to assess, theorize, and manage the mystical properties of language.

²³ CA, VI. 1305.

²⁴ CA, VII. 1550–63.

Genius responds to Amans's request by delivering a treatise in Book VII on all seven liberal arts, including rhetoric, and their practical applications. Relating both ancient and contemporary perspectives on all the disciplines, Genius's ethos is transformed through his own discursive magic from a purveyor of romance tales, mythologies, and historical lore to an academic authority. Book VII represents Genius as a knowledgeable speaker much closer to John Gower *in propria persona* than the dutiful priest trailing behind Venus.²⁵ At first, in subservience to the goddess, the confessor hesitates to assume a scholarly mantle, saying:

I am somdel therof destrauht,	I am somewhat distraught about this
For it is noght to the matiere	Because it does not pertain to material
Of love, why we sitten hier	Concerning love, the very reason we sit here
To schryve, so as Venus bad.	In confession, as Venus bade us.
Bot natheles, for it is glad	But nevertheless, because it is good
So as thou seist, for thin apprise	As you say, for your own understanding
To hier of suche thinges wise,	To hear of such wise things

²⁵ For an in depth and nuanced reading of the various *personae* in the *Confessio Amantis*, see Matthew W. Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2014). Irvin's analysis concentrates on the tensions between the thoughts and utterances of Amans and those of Gower the author / narrator. Since the beginning of modern scholarship on Gower, many critics have described dissonances, as well, between Genius's moralizing and Gower's direction of the *Confessio's* tales. The best explanation of how Genius comes to approximate the poet's voice is by James Simpson (*Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 167-97), who argues that Genius "enformes" himself (gives form to an authorial self) through the educational treatise of Book VII. In *Incest Narratives and the Structure of Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Victoria, B.C.: ELS, 1993), I argue that Genius's development is spurred by his increasing disgust with consanguineous relationships and thus his rejection of Venus and Cupid as spiritual models.

Wherof thou myht the time lisse, By which you might pass the time,
So as I can, I schal thee wisse. As best I can, I will instruct you.

Doing the best he can—which turns out to be very good, indeed—Genius gains confidence and seems to rise above his station as Venus's priest. This is a leap he has made before (for instance, when discoursing on Christ's peace and just wars in Book III), but the presentation on rhetoric and the liberal arts seriously and permanently expands the scope of his expertise.²⁶ James Simpson and others explain how the priest's understanding outruns Venus's realm in Book VII and prepares the way for his own persona and that of Amans to recombine in the narrator "John Gower," who concludes the poem.²⁷ Constructing a compendium on the liberal arts improves the teacher (Genius) as much as it edifies the student (Amans).

The complex tripartite organization of the liberal arts lecture in Book VII, reflecting Genius's emerging position as an encyclopedic instructor, places each of the seven arts in one of three epistemic categories—theory, rhetoric, or practice—with Latin glosses to guide the reader in the order of and hierarchies inherent in the disciplines. Derived from Aristotle's classification of the theoretical, practical, and productive sciences, these categories of learning were loosely available to Gower in the *Trésor*; however, while the *Trésor* divides philosophy into Theory, Practice, and Logic, with rhetoric comprising the final discipline of the practical arts and dialectic being the chief subject under logic, Gower creates an elevated place for rhetoric in

²⁶ CA, III. 2251–2362.

²⁷ Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, 167–97. See also Georgiana Donavin, "Rhetorical Gower: Aristotelianism in the *Confessio Amantis*'s Treatment of 'Rethorique,'" in *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts*, ed. Malte Urban (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 155–73.

Book VII's academic triad.²⁸ Rita Copeland calls Gower's reconfiguration of the disciplines a "most radical revision of the place of rhetoric in the system of the sciences," even in an age of shifting concepts of the discipline, and Götz Schmitz emphasizes the moral imperative given to rhetoric in Gower's schema.²⁹ "Rethorique" takes its place between "Theorique" and "Practique," a disciplinary fulcrum that allows for the conveyance of theology and science and the working out of practical knowledge in truthful and artful speech. Uplifting "Rethorique" to an epistemological category announces the importance of the field in understanding the compositional strategies for the *Confessio Amantis*, especially Gower's pervasive practice of deploying repetitive figures of speech in a plain style. In the complex and learned Book VII, Genius amends Nectanabus's necromantic lore with Aristotelian philosophy; the priest expounds upon astronomical and geometrical concepts that go beyond Nectanabus's calculations and supplies principles for a veracious rhetoric that surpasses the sorcerer's duplicitous "carectes."

Even while transitioning from Nectanabus's instructions to Aristotle's, the poem maintains an interest in necromancy, partly because Aristotle was believed to be the author of the mystical *Secretum Secretorum*.³⁰ The *Secretum Secretorum* is based on the ninth-century Arabic

²⁸ Schmitz points out that in Gower's rearrangement of the disciplines of the *trivium*, rhetoric occupies "a higher, philosophical plane." See Schmitz, "Rhetoric and Fiction," 126.

²⁹ Copeland, "Lydgate, Hawes, and the Science of Rhetoric in the Late Middle Ages," 67. See also Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, eds., *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): "Gower may not be imagining an Italian-style *vernacular* civic discourse in England, but his explosive revision of the scientific model reflects a new political reality in which vernacular culture must rely upon rhetoric to mediate between ethics and public affairs" (11). Schmitz, "Rhetoric and Fiction," 128. In addition, Matthew W. Irvin points out that starting from Latini's narrow views in the *Trésor* on rhetoric as public persuasion, Gower expands the field to make it more "personal," embracing verses on Amans's desire and acknowledging the power in each individual's use of the word. See Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*, 14.

³⁰ Robert Steele, ed., *Secretum Secretorum, Opera hactenus inedita Roger Baconi V*

Sirr al-asrār purporting to be Aristotle's book of advice to Alexander and to contain personal letters sent between the famous philosopher and his mighty pupil.³¹ Although the *Secretum Secretorum* was sometimes valued more as a medical than an ethical treatise because of its scientific content (both occult and otherwise), its reputation as a book of privileged information passed from a great philosopher to a great king guaranteed that copies were prepared in the manner of a *speculum principum*.³² It is not known what version of the *Secretum* Gower read and used for his own *speculum principum* in the *Confessio*'s Book VII, but as Mahmoud A. Manzalaoui has shown, the *Secretum* underwent additions and reorganizations, and by the fourteenth century it was readily available in a Short Form and a Long Form, both versions demonstrating that the secret of secrets is wisdom.³³ Ostensibly a ruby ring made potent by

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), 25–172.

³¹ Mahmoud A. Manzalaoui, "The Pseudo-Aristotelian 'Kitab Sirr al asrār': Facts and Problems," *Oriens* 23 (1974): 147–257.

³² Steven J. Williams, *The Secret of Secrets: The Scholarly Career of a Pseudo-Aristotelian Text in the Latin Middle Ages* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 125–26, 256, 263–71. Williams notes that the split reception of the *Secretum Secretorum*, some valuing the text for scientific information, others for ethical instruction, can be seen in the two titles under which it circulated, "Secretum Secretorum" speaking to the first audience and "De regimine principum" to the second (269). In Williams's assessment, the *Secretum* "is not particularly hard to understand," so it did not take the privileged place in the thirteenth-century science curriculum that the *Physics* or *De anima* occupied (191). On the *Secretum Secretorum*'s popularity as a *speculum principum*, see Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 83–84, 120–21, and William Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 49–50.

³³ Mahmoud A. Manzalaoui, Introduction, in *Secretum Secretorum: Nine English Versions*, ed. Mahmoud A. Manzalaoui (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), xi. On various additions and subtractions to Philip of Tripoli's translation of the *Secretum Secretorum*, see Williams, *The Secret of Secrets*, 142–47. Maria Wickert argues that Gower used a manuscript of the *Secretum* with a Christian inflection, although she does not suggest a manuscript to which the medieval poet might have had access. See Maria Wickert, *Studies in John Gower*, trans. Robert J. Meindl, 2nd ed. (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2016), 216–17, n. 69.

planetary dust and guaranteed to set the wearer at the top of society and far from mortal danger, the secret of secrets may be impossible to obtain; lacking this ring, the ruler's talisman is merit, and the text that teaches virtue through which merit is won—the *Secretum Secretorum*—substitutes for the ring.³⁴ Good advice, then, issuing from a *speculum principum*, teaches leaders to protect themselves (and therefore their people) when the magical ruby is unattainable. This cluster of ideas—the power in charms and stones infusing the noble person and existing parallel to prudent words—presents itself also in the *Confessio*'s treatment of rhetoric.³⁵

The Latin head verses to Book VII's section on rhetoric, comparing the powers of “sermo” (speech) to those of mystical stones and herbs, ensure that the reader attends to the connections among magic, the perception of truth, and persuasive oratory:

Compositi pulcra sermonis verba placere

Principio poterunt, veraque fine placent.

Herba, lapis, sermo, tria sunt virtute repleta,

Vis tamen ex verbi pondere plura facit.

(Beautiful words of a speech will please

In the beginning, and true words please in the end.

Herb, gem, speech: these three are full of power,

Though the force from the weight of the word is greater.)

³⁴ Ferster, *Fictions of Advice*, 42–43.

³⁵ For an analysis of connections during the English Renaissance between numinous materials such as herbs and stones and the prudent or curative word, see, Louise M. Bishop *Words, Stones, and Herbs: The Healing Word in Early Modern England*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

The Latin verses' first two lines announce their indebtedness to Aristotle by echoing the *Rhetoric*, I. i. 12–14, which states that “that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove and more likely to persuade” than false but beautifully adorned ideas.³⁶ The tales of Ulysses and Nectanabus have already demonstrated how well-wrought words please and deceive the innocent, while the narrator's perspicacious judgments of their oratory please in the end. The Middle English lecture following the Latin verses repeats the attribution of Gower's rhetorical theory to Aristotle: “The Philosophre amonges alle / Forthi commendeth this science, / Which hath the reule of eloquence” (Among all [the liberal arts] the Philosopher / Therefore commends this science [rhetoric], / Which oversees eloquence).³⁷ Genius will lecture on the kind of rhetoric that Aristotle recommends: an accurate, perpetually efficacious argument in a plain style. The Latin verses' last two lines, in their reference to magical substances, allude to the *Secretum Secretorum*'s mystical ruby that parallels the word of wisdom; they also hint, as I will argue later, at the trinitarian Word. The final lines declare the potency of enchanted stones and plants such as the *Secretum*'s ruby, the Philosopher's Stone, or medicinal herbs and claim that the “W/word” is mightier than even these numinous objects. While the Stone must emerge in alchemical procedures and herbs may be concocted into medicines, the W/word itself—without scientific or culinary intervention—functions as the principle of all invention and transformation, verbal and otherwise, and is therefore more influential than any other mystical properties. Herbal charms and stones engraved with patterns connected to the astrological *decans* accrue power

³⁶ English translation by John Henry Freese, *Aristotle: The Art of Rhetoric*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926). I have chosen Freese's translation over Kennedy's here for the former's felicity. See also George A. Kennedy, trans., *Aristotle, On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

³⁷ CA, VII. 1542–44.

through association with the zodiac, but the W/word creates change independently without necessarily aligning with or making explicit reference to the stars. It is the supernatural W/word that becomes the cornerstone of Gower's definition of rhetoric, the W/word with which the orator enchants the audience into an unshakeable belief in what is right (not merely an ephemeral persuasion in what is satisfying). The mystical W/word, necessary for all incantations, renders the magical Christological.

The syncretic Aristotelian context of the *Confessio*'s rhetoric section, framed by the Latin head verses, relies not only on the *Secretum Secretorum*, but also on a host of Aristotelian texts sweeping across Western Europe by the fourteenth century. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* had been available in Latin translation and commentary since the thirteenth century, and those without exposure to the primary text might access tables concerning the main Aristotelian rhetorical concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos. In "Pathos and Pastoralism: Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in Medieval England," Rita Copeland does so much to clarify both the transmission of Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and the medieval English uses of it.³⁸ In "Rhetorical Gower," I explain the likelihood of the poet's having participated in some of the traditions that Copeland traces and his awareness of the teachings on the *Rhetoric* in Giles of Rome's popular *De regimine principum* (a mirror for princes so well-liked that John Trevisa translated it into Middle English around 1400).³⁹ Gower had probably seen the ubiquitous tables summarizing Aristotelian thought and understood Giles's commentary on the *Rhetoric* based on William of Moerbeke's Latin translation.⁴⁰ In

³⁸ Rita Copeland, "Pathos and Pastoralism: Aristotle's *Rhetoric* in Medieval England," *Speculum* 89, no. 1 (2014): 96–127.

³⁹ Donavin, "Rhetorical Gower," 155–73.

⁴⁰ William of Moerbeke, *Rhetorica*, ed. Leonhard Spengel, *Aristoteles I* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1894), 178–342. The *Rhetoric*'s presence in fourteenth-century England is indicated in Bodleian

addition to the *Rhetoric* and related tables and commentaries, the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, a Greek text translated into Latin and inscribed in Western manuscripts in the fourteenth century, reinforces the idea that the Philosopher conveyed his rhetorical theory to the great conqueror and prompts Genius to report to Amans that “Rethorique” is among the subjects taught to Alexander by Aristotle.⁴¹ Although significant questions remain concerning Gower’s means of obtaining a Latin translation of and commentaries on the *Rhetoric* and concerning the combination of popular Pseudo-Aristotelian lore, summary tables of Aristotelian texts, and serious scholarship that informed Gower’s view of Aristotelian rhetorical studies, scholars generally agree that some type of legal education allowed the poet access to sophisticated academic texts.⁴²

MS Digby 55, first noted by P. Osmond Lewry in “Four Graduation Speeches from Oxford Manuscripts (c. 1270–1310),” *Mediaeval Studies* 44 (1982):138–80. Digby 55 includes a graduation speech quoting from William’s *Rhetorica*. On fol. 203ra the speech cited here opens: *Sicud dicit Philosophus primo Rhetorice laus est sermo elucidans magnitudinem virtutis* (*Rhetorica* 1:9). Giles of Rome (Aegidius Romanus), *Rhetorica Aristotelis cum fundatissimi arcium et theologie doctoris Egidi de Roma luculentissimis commentarii* (Venice, 1515; Facsimile repr. Frankfurt: Minerva, 1968). Giles of Rome, *De regimine principum* (Rome, 1607; repr. Aalen, 1967).

⁴¹ E. S. Forster, trans., *De Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 11, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924), 230–311. Scholars now agree that the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* ought to be attributed to Anaximenes of Lampsacus, who was also one of Alexander’s tutors. See P. Chiron, “The Rhetoric to Alexander” in *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric*, ed. Ian Worthington (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 90–106 (101–03).

⁴² There are too many explications of Gower’s potential connections with the law to be mentioned here. Conrad Van Dijk provides excellent summaries of scholarship on the question of Gower’s training up until the publication of his book. See Conrad Van Dijk, *John Gower and the Limits of the Law* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2013). In a more recent publication, Sebastian Sobocki offers compelling evidence that Gower was a chancery lawyer who, although less distinguished than a canon lawyer, nevertheless would have received an education in English law and the discourses supporting it. See Sebastian Sobocki, “A Southwark Tale: Gower, the 1381 Poll Tax, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*,” *Speculum* 92, no. 3 (July 2017): 630–60 (631–39). Anthony Mussen cautions that “there is, as yet, no unequivocal evidence which definitively confirms [Gower’s] status as a lawyer.” See Anthony Mussen, “Men of Law,” in *Historians on John Gower*, ed. Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2019), 226.

Gower thus approaches the *Confessio*'s rhetoric lecture as an Aristotelian who is learned in both the convincing construction of legal documents and the mysterious associations between persuasion and enchantment. He funnels this preparation into the lecture of Genius, whose persona is becoming more knowledgeable and credible. Following the Latin verses that introduce Genius's treatment of rhetoric, the Middle English discussion covers a wide range of topics concerning rhetoric's origins and applications while still emphasizing verbal sorcery. I will now briefly summarize those topics before returning to the supernatural W/word, its potential to reverse the evil spells of Ulysses and Nectanabus, and the most ethical and effective rhetorical strategies taught in the "Rethorique" lecture.

Genius's rhetoric lecture opens by lauding the W/word's mystical power and God's gift of speech to humankind alone before it underscores humanity's responsibility to use this divine verbal gift wisely: "So scholde he be the more honeste, / To whom God gaf so gret a gifte, / And loke wel that he ne schifte / Hise wordes to no wicked us . . . (So humans must be the more honest, / People to whom God gave so great a gift, / And look well that they do not shift / Their words to any wicked use).⁴³ The lecture points to rhetoric as the discipline that can aid in the wise exchange of heaven-sent language and prepare the student to rebut speeches constructed to deceive, like Ulysses's sly urging of Antenor. To practice rhetoric honorably, Genius claims, it is necessary to acknowledge and guard the discipline's power; "Rethorique" crowns the trivium and controls both grammar and logic through its conveyance of the divinely invested W/word. A concluding section provides a historical exemplum of rhetoric's influence during a constitutional crisis in Rome. Refashioning material from Brunetto Latini's *Trésor*, the conclusion mentions

⁴³ CA, VII. 1516–19.

the debates surrounding Catiline's rebellion and establishes Cicero as a kind of hero-orator in exposing a plot against the Roman Republic.⁴⁴ Cicero, Cato, and Silanus, senators who speak straightforwardly in a time of danger, provide an antidote to Ulysses's epic deceit. According to Genius, Cicero's candid statements revealing the perils of a revolt against Rome become a model for a literary plain style that captivates the audience with the power of the truth. Among the various topics in the rhetoric lecture, I will focus in what remains on Genius's treatment of the magical, alchemical, and holy W/word and the spellbinding Ciceronian style that best deploys it.

Within the rhetoric lecture, Gower emphasizes the supernatural W/word, naming it twenty-nine times in 133 lines and repeating in the Middle English lecture the Latin verses' dictum on the W/word's superiority to other numinous objects:

In ston and gras vertu ther is,	In gems and grass there is power,
Bot yit the bokes tellen this,	But yet the books tell us this,
That word above alle erthli thinges	That the word above all earthly things
Is vertuous in his doinges ⁴⁵	Is effective in its aims.

The word is more efficacious in its "doinges" than any other charmed substances, but like them, alters or shapes reality. In Gower's expression, the word "enformes" thought, creating ideations through which humanity perceives both natural and supernatural.⁴⁶ This is one reason why the

⁴⁴ Discussing the Catilinarian orations, Gower adapts Brunetto Latini, *Trésor*, III, xxxiv-xxxvii.

⁴⁵ CA, VII. 1545–49.

⁴⁶ CA, VII. 1638.

poet hinges all the liberal arts on the discipline of rhetoric: such “enformacioun” begins with instruction in speech and literacy, progressing to more advanced topics until orators, wise in the seven arts and ready to practice persuasive skills at level, return to rhetoric for guidance in civic and professional participation. Helen Cooper observes that the rhetoric lecture’s statement on the word’s “vertu” underscores the importance of poetry for Gower, “for words have just such a power of metamorphosis, of transformation for worse or for better.”⁴⁷

Hoping for “better,” Gower’s rhetoric advances a verbal alchemy, with the W/word described as an agent of change, like the Philosopher’s Stone. In this view, oratory, revealing the “enformacioun” of the speaker’s views, transmutes the hearer’s mind in the same way that the stone converts base metals. The Middle English reference to “bokes” that treat the transformations wrought by stones, plants, and words not only recalls the *Confessio*’s debt to the *Secretum Secretorum* and the talismanic ruby that fosters prudence, but it also points to hermetic works associated with Hermes Trismegistus, whom Gower lists as the originator of alchemy in the *Confessio*’s Book IV.⁴⁸ Scholars such as Stephanie L. Batkie and Matthew W. Irvin have revived discussions of Gower’s hermeticism,⁴⁹ comparing alchemy to rhetoric and recalling the scientific sources that G. C. Macaulay and George G. Fox long ago discovered in the *Confessio Amantis*.⁵⁰ The extended passage in Book IV on Labor that mentions Hermes Trismegistus while

⁴⁷ Helen Cooper, “‘Peised Evne in the Balance’: A Thematic and Rhetorical Topos in the *Confessio Amantis*” *Mediaevalia* 16 (1993 [for 1990]): 113–39 (134).

⁴⁸ CA, IV. 2606–07.

⁴⁹ Recent discussions of alchemy and language in the CA include Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower*, 199–203. See also Batkie, “‘Of the parfite medicine’,” 157–68.

⁵⁰ CA, VII. 2606, 2457–2605. Macaulay argues that Gower relies on the *Liber Hermetis de xv stellis et de xv lapidus et xv herbis, xv figures, etc.* or on another unidentified source. See Macaulay, *Complete Works*. Vol. 1, 522. See also George L. Hamilton, “Some Sources of the

encouraging Amans to counteract amorous sloth inspires this comparison by setting textual and alchemical labor side by side.⁵¹ There, a discourse on the industry dedicated to inventing the means of writing—starting with creating the alphabet and culminating in Ciceronian speeches—immediately follows a passage on the alchemical labor of producing the Philosopher's Stone. While ancient alchemists or rhetoricians such as Cicero accomplished transformative labors, however, such metamorphosing industry has all but disappeared, according to the *Confessio's* Book IV; not willing to endorse alchemy as performed in his own generation, Gower points out that contemporary practitioners do not understand the teachings of the ancient masters or have the experience to arrive at the Philosopher's Stone.⁵² In Steele Nowlin's estimation, Gower believed that fourteenth-century alchemists and poets fail in the same way: supposed experts go through the forms (whether they follow *formulae* in alchemical treatises or guides to poetic structures in the *artes poetriae*), but are missing the force of invention to modify metals or move readers.⁵³ In Book VII's rhetoric lecture, Gower promotes a rhetoric, enabled by the potent

Seventh Book of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*," *Modern Philology* 9, no. 3 (1912), 343. In *The Medieval Sciences in the Works of John Gower* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931), George G. Fox offers a short discussion on the stones, plants, and stars in Gower (80–81). Tamara O'Callaghan points out that no one has identified in what form Gower received such hermetic literature, whether in translation or in Latin. See Tamara F. O'Callaghan, "The Fifteen Stars," 140. For related background on connections between magic and science in the late Middle Ages, see Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science during the first Thirteen Centuries of our Era*, 4 vols., 6th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), vol. 1, 287–92.; see also Jim Tester, *A History of Western Astrology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1990), 24, 62–3.

⁵¹ CA, IV. 2363–95.

⁵² CA, IV. 2580–83. See R. F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: A Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1990), 167. Steele Nowlin, *Chaucer, Gower, and the Affect of Invention* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 138–39.

⁵³ Nowlin, *Chaucer, Gower*, 138–39.

W/word, in which speakers invent the most straightforward and compelling ways of conveying a mind-altering truth. As Richard Firth Green has argued, a concept of “trouthe” is central to much fourteenth-century writing,⁵⁴ but Gower’s concern with veracious language surpasses the norm to pervade almost all of his poetry. Gower wished to return to a time when “[t]he word was lich to the conceite / Without semblant of deceite” (the word conformed to the thought / with no shadow of deceit).⁵⁵ He therefore promoted a syncretic Aristotelian rhetoric in which the W/word enables a turn away from the examples of Ulysses or Nectanabus toward the admirable and honest oratory of Cicero.

The W/word, treated morally and ethically, enables this turn but in the discourses of untrustworthy speakers similar to Ulysses and Nectanabus does not guarantee it. Cataloging the many changes that the W/word-as-Philosopher’s Stone catalyzes, Genius notes that the mighty *verbum* does not always lead to “trouthe.” Says Genius:

With word the wilde beste is daunted,	With the word the wild beast is daunted,
With word the serpent is enchanted,	With the word the serpent is enchanted,
Of word among the men of armes	By a word men in arms have their wounds
Ben woundes heeled with the charmes,	Healed by means of charmes,
Wher lacketh other medicine;	When other medicine is lacking;
Word hath under his discipline	The word has under its rule
Of sorcerie the karectes.	The “carectes” of sorcery.
The wordes ben of sondri sectes,	Words are of sundry types,

⁵⁴ Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ CA, Pro. 113-14.

Of evele and eke of goode also;	Of evil and of good also
The wordes maken frend of fo,	Words make friend of foe,
And fo of frend, and pes of werre,	And foe of friend, and peace of war,
And werre of pes, and out of herre	And war of peace, and out of order
The word this worldes cause entriketh,	The word this world's cause betrays,
And reconsileth whan him liketh. ⁵⁶	And reconciles when it is pleasing.

The W/word can alter health, policy, and diplomacy. It can halt the charging beast and enchant the poisonous snake. It constitutes medicinal charms that close wounds and the “carectes” that fashion human destiny. The mighty W/word can both uplift and crush; it is equally powerful for both good and ill. Here the comparison between rhetoric and alchemy attenuates: while alchemists desire the Philosopher’s Stone to increase the valuation of metals (and a failure to produce the stone does not devalue the metal meant for transformation to gold or silver), a rhetorician like Ulysses might unleash the W/word only to debase the audience, for instance when he convinces Antenor to betray Troy. The possibility of the W/word’s inspiring more enmity, war, and treachery in the world renders an Aristotelian rhetoric that privileges frank argumentation in plain but compelling language even more crucial. The W/word embodies a raw transformative power that must be harnessed by an ethical theory of oratory and as shall be seen, controlled by divine forces. It is “out of order” without rhetorical strategies for consistent content, arrangement, and style. With instruction in ethical and moral speech, however, “Wher

⁵⁶ CA, VII. 1565–73.

lacketh good, the word fulfilleth / To make amendes for the wrong” (When good fails, the W/word supplies it / To make amends for any wrong.)⁵⁷

In Genius’s description of the W/word’s alchemical influence, Gower shows how to make amends, how to capture attention through sermonically repetitive and thus convey a crucial message. Repetition, in fact, supplies the syntax for the W/word’s benign incantations. Genius, Gower’s own priest of the reiterative W/word, conjures his audience with reduplicative figures of speech such as anaphora in “With word the wilde beste is daunted, / With word the serpent is enchanted.” The next line— “Of word among the men of armes”—continues to intone the opening phrase in a diacope, with a different preposition in the initial position. “And fo of frend, and pes of werre, / And werre of pes, and out of herre” offers a chiasmus in which reduplicated phrases are presented in reverse order. Many of the lines throughout the passage begin with “word” or “wordes,” continuing the overarching pattern of anaphora. As David Rollo explains concerning high medieval historians who emphasize their command of the written word, the “author [is] projected as magician and the written medium he controls designated through a lexicon that collapses the verbal arts with glamorous sorcery (*gramaire/grimoire*), performative conjuring (*praestigia*), intoned spells”⁵⁸ Gower intones a spell to portray the power of the W/word and model the reiterative possibilities for binding that power in truthful and persuasive speech. Whereas Rollo finds that twelfth-century historians allude to magic in order to mystify readers and claim a superior authority, Gower builds his magical rhetoric upon a plain style that

⁵⁷ CA, VII. 1584–85.

⁵⁸David Rollo, *Glamorous Sorcery: Magic and Literacy in the High Middle Ages* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xii.

elucidates obscure matters for the common good. Gower's diction is lucid, the syntax fairly straightforward, and the figures of speech pared down to meaningful and evocative reiterations.

For Gower, the plain style had roots in Graeco-Roman expectations concerning purity of language and pointed argumentation, dating back to Aristotle's mandate in Book III of the *Rhetoric*: "let the virtue of style . . . be defined as 'to be clear' . . ."⁵⁹ In this statement Aristotle is referring in part to the legal speeches for which the most basic requirements were a simple narrative of the facts and a direct argument for the litigant's case.⁶⁰ Expanding greatly upon Aristotle's sparse commentary on elocution, Cicero and Quintilian valued *ratio plane loquendi*, native words used in customary ways for the sake of perspicuity.⁶¹ For an example of the plain style in reasonable discourse, Gower turns in the finale of the *Confessio*'s "Rethorique" section to the speeches by Cato, Silanus, and Cicero during the Catilinarian debates. He mentions these orations because they illustrate a form of elocution that is most desirable, "a tale plein withoute frounce."⁶² The most ardent speaker against the Catilinarian rebels was Cicero, believed by most medieval students to be the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, whose fourth book amplifies on the figures of speech and thought that adorn discourse, and therefore was Cicero considered to

⁵⁹ Kennedy, trans., *Aristotle*, III. ii. Schmitz notes that Gower's preference for clarity and simplicity of language derives from Aristotle and was transmitted in Cicero's *De inventione*. See Schmitz, "Rhetoric and Fiction," 121.

⁶⁰ Kathy Eden, *Poetic and Legal Fiction in the Aristotelian Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 14.

⁶¹ See Cicero, *De oratore* III. 39–49, *Silva rhetoricae*, <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Primary%20Texts/Cicero-DeOratore.htm#book3>; Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* VIII.ii. 1–11, *Silva rhetoricae*, <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Primary%20Texts/Quintilian.htm>.

⁶² CA, VII. 1594. In this line and others, Gower is using the spelling "plein" or "pleine" for the word elsewhere rendered in Middle English as "plain" or "plaine. For the meaning Gower intends here, see *MED* plain(e adj.) 3.: "plain, simple, unadorned . . ."

be the arbiter of style.⁶³ Gower adheres to “Cithero,” not for models of ornate discourse, but for an ability to choose the simple and repetitive figures of speech that will underscore “the pleine trouthe.”⁶⁴ Examples of this Ciceronian style came to Gower possibly from Sallust and surely from the study of the Catilinarian orations in Latini.

The *Confessio*’s rhetoric lecture praises the Ciceronian model of a plain reiterative style that clarifies and reinforces accuracy in discourse. Throughout the *Confessio Amantis* and explicitly in Genius’s lecture on “Rethorique,” Gower demonstrates that a plain style supported by repetition is most appropriate for a rhetoric of the W/word that can move the passions toward intellectual truth and right belief. Maura Nolan’s perceptive observation that a plain style can offer a “vivid rendering of sensory data” helps us to understand this process.⁶⁵ Passions arise from sensory appeals inspired by the W/word and move the hearer’s will to rethink a compelling issue. In the passage praising the W/word, the image of the charging beast or the feel of an open wound can inspire fear or pain and the desire to ameliorate them through rhetorical expressions. Gower’s “public poetry of the Ricardian period,” as famously labeled by Anne Middleton, deploys the plain style for affective discourses that are nevertheless reasonable and restrained, discourses that reflect “bourgeois moderation, a course between the rigorous absolutes of religious rule on the one hand, and, on the other, the rhetorical hyperboles and emotional vanities

⁶³ *Rhetorica ad Herennium, Silva rhetoricae*, <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Primary%20Texts/Ad%20Herennium.htm>.

⁶⁴ CA, VII. 1638.

⁶⁵ Maura Nolan, “Sensation and the Plain Style in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” in *John Gower: Others and the Self*, ed. Russell A. Peck and R. F. Yeager (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 111–141 (113).

of courtly style.”⁶⁶ Genius unlocks the power of the W/word to reveal the great metamorphosing capacity of rhetoric, but also to model the controlled repetitions necessary for goodly speech.

Repetition is key for a moral and ethical exercise of the W/word because it has the potential to enact an *imitatio Christi*. Whereas Nectanabus constructs a mere *imitatio Olympiae* for his “carectes,” the practitioner of the moral rhetoric espoused in the *Confessio*’s Book VII imitates Christ and spreads the W/word. Gower relies on Aristotle for a discursive epistemology and on Cicero for exemplary execution of the *genera dicendi*, but ultimately the medieval poet owns in the rhetoric lecture that speech is a great gift from God. To complete his incantation on the force of the W/word, Gower directly associates the *verbum* with Christ: “The word under the coupe of hevene / Set everything or odde or even; / With word the hihe God is plesed” (The Word under the dome of heaven / Puts all in balance; / With the Word the high God is pleased).⁶⁷ It is Jesus who brings the Word to earth from heaven, sets sinful humanity in balance with the creator, and receives God’s approval. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in both the baptism and transfiguration narratives, God the father identifies his son, with whom he is “well pleased.”⁶⁸ The final lines of Gower’s encomium on the W/word bring to fruition nine *repetitiones* of “word” and point to the Word’s role in all reproductions. The Word can truthfully reproduce the “conceite,” or the speaker’s thought, because, according to Genesis and the Gospel of John, it is the method of replicating God’s image. While Ulysses’s and Nectanabus’s charmed utterances mask a dangerous “conceite,” Gower’s rhetoric of the W/word can unveil evil

⁶⁶ Anne Middleton, “The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II,” *Speculum* 53, no. 1 (1978): 94-114 (95).

⁶⁷ CA, VII. 1565–81.

⁶⁸ CA, VII. 1581. Matthew 3:17 and 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22.

intentions by spreading abroad an understanding of what is good. Master over all other supernatural substances and expressions, the W/word is the sanctified means of creation enacted in Genesis, proclaimed by the Gospel of John, and theorized by Augustine: a verbal instrument that might be used in honor of God's making. Gower grants reproductive and transformative agency to the W/word that hermetic sources attribute to the stars, because the W/word comes directly from heaven and multiplies endlessly on earth.

Such multiplications include the healing charms, astrological prognostications, and diplomatic speeches that Genius cites as manifestations of the W/word. While Book VI of the *Confessio Amantis* repudiates the enchanting but deceitful language of the magicians Ulysses and Nectanabus, Book VII's rhetoric lecture recuperates a practice of moral and ethical conjuration in which the divinely invested W/word is channeled to beneficent ends. Gower's brand of verbal magic is similar to the benign charms for healing or good fortune that, although the church inveighed against necromancy, were often tolerated and sometimes promoted. Karen Jolley points out that incantations involved in herbal healing gained church acceptance from the Old English period onward,⁶⁹ and Genius's repetitive chanting in Book VII's lecture might be viewed as a curative for rhetoric. According to Valerie Flint, medieval Catholic appropriations of pre-Christian incantations made magic miraculous, and birth charms or field blessings that combined emblems of the cross with necromantic speech acts revealed God's presence in all well-intended utterances.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Karen Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Asheville, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁷⁰ Valerie I. J. Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). See also Ciaran Arthur, *'Charms', Liturgies, and Secret Rites in Early Medieval England* (Cambridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2018). For a summary of scholarship on medieval pastoral literature concerning magic, see Kathleen Kamerick, "Pastoral Literature

The Word manifests itself fully in enchanting human speech when language advances “trouthe.” Gower followed Augustine in believing that human utterance ought to reflect the divinity and veracity inherent in the Word and that “the truth of valid inference was not instituted by men [but] by God in the reasonable order of things.”⁷¹ Just as the Word became incarnate without vitiating the godhead,⁷² rhetoric, according to Gower, has the capacity to preserve and “enforme” the truth.⁷³ Augustine remarks on the similarity between the revelatory capacity of words for each person and the incarnation of the Word. In the *De Doctrina Christiana*, after quoting from 1 Corinthians 1.21 (“the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us”), he has this to say:

It is as when we speak. In order that what we are thinking may reach the mind of the listener through the fleshly ears, that which we have in mind is expressed in words and is called speech. But our thought is not transformed into sounds; it remains entire in itself and assumes the form of words by means of which it may reach the ears without suffering any deterioration in itself. In the same way the Word of God was made flesh without change that He might dwell among us.⁷⁴

and Preaching,” in *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic*, ed. Sophie Page and Catherine Rider (London: Routledge, 2019), 475–86.

⁷¹ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 2.32, 50.

⁷² Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.13

⁷³ CA, VII. 1637–8.

⁷⁴ Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, 1.13.

In the *Confessio Amantis*'s Book VII Gower conceptualizes a W/word that preserves thought because the speech was honestly intended and plainly expressed. The *repetitiones* that adorn important insights cast a verbal magic with a W/word that was already redolent with creative power and capable of combating deceit and revealing the truth.

In Gower's rhetoric lecture in Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, the Word casts a spell and is God's spell, potentially reinventing the truth for every speaker and transforming the mind of anyone who has an ear. The Word, descending to earth directly from heaven, manifests itself in human words, and although the W/word is like the Philosopher's Stone—an alchemical catalyst of mental, personal, and political conversions—it nevertheless surpasses the supernatural force of numinous gems and plants. Counteracting the threat of evil conjurers, Gower relies on a complex web of current Aristotelian texts, Ciceronian exempla, and biblical revelations to construct a beneficent and effective theory of oratory that can rebut duplicitous speech and promote honest arguments. Intoning in a plain style redolent with reiterative figures of speech, Genius compels Amans—and all readers of the *Confessio*—to moral and ethical points of view. Like Ulysses, Gower is both “rethorien” and “magicien,” but the medieval poet's words are “lich to the conceit.”

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