



**Accessus:**

A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media

**Accessus**

---

Volume 7  
Issue 2 *A New English Translation of Gower's  
Vox Clamantis*

---

Article 1

2022

## Preface to a New English Translation of Gower's Vox Clamantis

Georgiana Donavin

*Westminster College*, [gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu](mailto:gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu)

Eve Salisbury

*Western Michigan University*, [eve.salisbury@wmich.edu](mailto:eve.salisbury@wmich.edu)

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



Part of the European Languages and Societies Commons, and the Medieval Studies Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Donavin, Georgiana and Salisbury, Eve (2022) "Preface to a New English Translation of Gower's Vox Clamantis," *Accessus*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 1.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/accessus/vol7/iss2/1>

This Introduction 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](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



### Preface to a New English Translation of Gower's *Vox Clamantis*

The purpose of *Accessus* is not only to provide “a new venue for the innovative work of Gower scholars,” as noted in our [Mission Statement](#), but also to make the poems of this important fourteenth-century poet accessible to an Anglophone audience. While many medieval texts in Latin and in various historical vernaculars cry out for a contemporary English rendering, John Gower's major Latin poem, the *Vox Clamantis*, has faced unusual impediments in reaching modern readers, even in a time of burgeoning scholarship in Gower Studies. These hurdles include the challenging format of the primary text edition, the prose style of the only complete translation in print, and a relative scarcity of reference materials to guide new readers through the complexities of the poem's social satire. In the English translation of the *Vox Clamantis* published here, a multiyear endeavor by Robert J. Meindl and Mark T. Riley, we present a poetical rendering of the entire poem that imitates the *Vox*'s verse forms and rhetorical expressions. We hope that open access to the complete *Vox* in Meindl and Riley's beautiful and compelling phrasing will spark more scholarly interest in the poem and original interpretations of this worthy text.

In the century following G. C. Macaulay's magisterial edition, the *Vox Clamantis* struggled to secure a wide-ranging Anglophone readership.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with the second half of the twentieth century, as fewer Latin courses were offered in many institutions of both secondary and higher learning, it became more difficult to develop the linguistic expertise for critical reading of a poem as complicated and allusive as the *Vox*. Without extensive glosses and an expansive explanatory apparatus, an elaborate satire like Gower's could be an overwhelming

---

<sup>1</sup> G. C. Macaulay, *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. 4, The Latin Works (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902).

challenge, and Macaulay's edition, presuming Latin fluency, made approaches to the text daunting.

If command of the primary text could be elusive for those less advanced in Latin, so too was the scholarship. Published in German in 1953, Maria Wickert's *Studien zu John Gower* offered deep and extensive insights that could be used to introduce another generation of students to the poem, but only if they could read her work in its original language.<sup>2</sup> Meindl's translation of Wickert's study into English in 1981 solved that problem, that is, until the book eventually fell out of print. Now available in a second edition published by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) and more broadly disseminated than the 1981 translation, Meindl's work has cultivated another audience, suggesting not only a resurgence of interest in Gower's Latin poem but also in the work of a woman credited with having written the "book that began the modern study of the *Vox Clamantis*."<sup>3</sup> In the translation of the *Vox Clamantis* offered here, Meindl and co-author Mark T. Riley have made a comparable contribution to the study of Gower's Latin poem.

The *Vox Clamantis* in its entirety, as presented in this issue of *Accessus*, provides a full account of the events surrounding Gower's vision and critique of English society. To set the stage Meindl and Riley's general introduction and subsequent synopses of each of the poem's books provide the historical context in which the work was undertaken as well as an explanation of how the various parts of the poem were assembled. As described in their opening comments, their

---

<sup>2</sup> Maria Wickert, *Studien zu John Gower* (Köln: Kölner Universitäts-Verlag, 1953).

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Meindl, trans., *Maria Wickert: Studies in John Gower*, 2nd rev. ed. (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 2016). The quotation derives from the back of this book cover.

strategy entailed the replication of “the movement of the Latin verses by rendering them in couplets of alternating iambic hexameter and iambic pentameter, which provide in English a reasonable approximation of the Latin original.” This is a format that enables readers to feel the power of Gower’s Latin words as they reverberate in English verse. The metrics of the translation not only capture the structural disruptions prompted by the failure of society’s institutions and the individuals responsible for their governance but also convey the emotion with which the poet’s message was originally delivered. As Meindl and Riley point out, the verbal force of Gower’s critique reaches beyond the traditional three estates to address four groups and their range of influence: the “clergy, gentry, the urban mercantile community and officialdom—from legal practitioners through judges and royal counsellors to the king himself,” making clear the pervasiveness of the breakdown in the order of things. In rendering Gower’s Latin work into an English poetic form commensurate with the jarring nature of its subject matter, Meindl and Riley provide a twenty-first-century audience embroiled in conflicts of its own a means by which to understand how all societies, whether of the past or the present, can go awry. Gower’s Latin verse is given new life along with an invigorated language expressing the intensity of the poet / narrator’s rage and fear, as well as his disillusionment with those who have neglected their duties or fallen to corruption.

Like the medieval author whose work they translate, Meindl and Riley stand upon the shoulders of scholars who came before them. In 1962, Eric W. Stockton published a prose translation of the *Vox Clamantis* based on his Harvard dissertation,<sup>4</sup> and in 2011, A. G. Rigg’s

---

<sup>4</sup> Eric W. Stockton, trans., *The Major Latin Works of John Gower* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962). In this publication both the *Vox Clamantis* and *Cronica Tripertita* were made available in English prose, although ten years earlier, Stockton had produced a version of his *Vox* translation in his doctoral dissertation. See Eric W. Stockton, “A Translation of John

delightful and poetic English rendering of the *Vox*'s Book 1, the *Visio Anglie*, and of the *Cronica Tripertita* appeared in David R. Carlson's edition, *Poems on Contemporary Events*.<sup>5</sup> While Stockton's accomplishment gives English speakers an entrée to the contents of the *Vox*'s entirety and Rigg's translation demonstrates the first book's aesthetic and rhetorical pleasures, until now scholars have awaited an English versification of the whole poem. Meindl and Riley have also benefited from a slowly increasing flow of critical readings of the *Vox*, offering interpretations as distinct as John H. Fisher's coverage of its position in the larger corpus and Stephanie L. Batkie's more recent analysis of sound and aurality; our translators have been aided, too, by historical examinations of the topics in Gower's satire as presented in *Historians on John Gower*.<sup>6</sup> In the latter anthology of essays, readers learn contexts for Gower's criticisms of fourteenth-century English life, from investigations of the 1381 Uprising, to political and gender theory, monasticism, and much more. While Gower made these historical events, frameworks, institutions, and persons come alive in the *Vox*, Meindl and Riley's lively English conveys them to a broader contemporary audience.

The Gower Project has prioritized new efforts on the *Vox Clamantis*, in addition to the cutting-edge theoretical work that *Accessus* promotes. Earlier versions of all seven books of the

---

Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, with an Introduction and Notes," Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1952.

<sup>5</sup> David R. Carlson, ed., and A. G. Rigg, trans., *Poems on Contemporary Events: The Visio Anglie (1381) and the Cronica Tripertita (1400)* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> John H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964); Stephanie L. Batkie, "The Sound of My Voice: Aurality and Credible Faith in the *Vox Clamantis*," in Russell A. Peck and R. F. Yeager, eds. *John Gower: Others and the Self* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017), 32-49; Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard, eds., *Historians on John Gower* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2019).

translation presented here have been sponsored and archived on [The Gower Project Translation Wiki](#), a resource for those seeking English renderings and modernizations of Gower's poems. Since 2012, Meindl has relied on the Wiki to share his progress in translation, and more recently Riley became a full partner in this effort. Over the course of more than a decade, the translation came to fruition, and *Accessus* published Meindl's commentaries featuring explanations for various sections of the poem: "[Semper Venalis: Gower's Avaricious Lawyers](#)," on Book 6, "[The Failure of Counsel: Curial Corruption in Book VI of the \*Vox Clamantis\*](#)," and "[The Community of the Realm: Gower's Account of the Commons in Book V of the \*Vox Clamantis\*](#)." In other words, the Translation Wiki and *Accessus* have become repositories for progressive work on the *Vox*. In some ways, although it is an accurate and wholly polished English rendering of the *Vox*, this translation is still a work in progress: the files on the Wiki may be revised while a full apparatus, including notes on the poem's manuscripts and other reading aids, is being prepared for the possibility of a print edition. In addition to Meindl's and Riley's contributions, *Accessus* also features scholarship by [Lynn Arner](#), [Candace Barrington](#), and [Joyce Coleman](#) analyzing Gower's Latin texts, the images in them, and the manuscripts in which they are found.

We hope that Meindl and Riley's translation encourages new communities to read and listen to the *Vox Clamantis* with fresh eyes to see and ears to hear the cadences of Gower's Latin poetry captured in English. Their translation urges all readers to heed the poet's clarion call to remember that the writings of that past have relevance to present lives. To that end '*Scripture*

*veteris capiunt exempla futuri*' seems a fitting tribute to the authors of this new translation and to the poet whose audacious writing inspired it.

Eve Salisbury  
Emerita, Western Michigan University  
[eve.salisbury@wmich.edu](mailto:eve.salisbury@wmich.edu)

Georgiana Donavin  
Westminster College  
[gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu](mailto:gdonavin@westminstercollege.edu)