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## Preface to a New English Translation of the Minor Latin Works of John Gower

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## Preface to a New English Translation of the Minor Latin Works of John Gower

This issue of *Accessus* is dedicated to a new translation of Gower's shorter Latin works, most of them written in the last two decades of the poet's life. It seems fitting to follow the publication of Robert J. Meindl and Mark T. Riley's poetic translation of the *Vox Clamantis* in *Accessus* 7.2 with their new English rendition of Gower's final verses and prose commentaries in 8.1. Here, guided by a Table of Contents appended to this preface, the reader will find a complete compilation of Gower's minor Latin language writings in translation, as well as introductions to each work, appendices on non-authorial verses and prosody, and a bibliography. While the entries are short, the compilation achieves great breadth, moving from Gower's self-portrait as a satire-wielding archer in *Ad Mundum Mitto* to complaints about contemporary ills constructed from lines from the *Vox*, to verse letters to kings and his archbishop, commentary on marriage and love, Gower's own epitaph, and more. The virtues of *John Gower: The Minor Latin Works* are many, going far beyond the increased availability of the poet's briefer compositions to non-Latinate English audiences. Our translators have presented us for the first time with all the poet's minor Latin writings in carefully wrought verse, its style and diction linked with important traditions in translation, satire, and philosophical poetry in British literature. In addition, through their deep understanding of Gower's versification, they have given us a clearer view on how the poet crafted various self-authorizing personae, so much so that even those who have spent part of a lifetime studying Gower's works are likely to appreciate them anew.

Even a commonplace such as Gower's emphasis on the macrocosm and microcosm finds unexpectedly dynamic expression in Meindl and Riley's translation of the minor works. In *Gower Studies* it is often said that by illuminating parallels and disjunctions between divine rule and human government, scripture and the Church, Christ's example and contemporary behaviors,

Gower finds a guide in the heavenly principles of creation against which his poetry weighs observations on society, home, and person. The final lines of the *Carmen super Multiplici Viciarum Pestilencia* in Meindl and Riley's translation, in which the reader is directed to consider the Virgin's gift as the foundation for "peace in the world," is an especially good example of the macrocosm / microcosm depicted afresh (line 320). In their rendition of Gower's words, the reader "[s]hould first make peace, keeping the laws of God" in order to find social and personal harmony (line 321). To Meindl and Riley, this poem leads to a position similar to that of "An Essay on Man," from which they quote in the *Carmen's* introduction, and the diction of their translation shares some of the simplicity and grace of the final lines of Epistle I of the "Essay." Claiming the *Carmen* provides hope to the sin-darkened world that "Whatever is, is right," our translators connect the minor Latin works beyond much-discussed classical and medieval sources to the satirical and philosophical poetry of Alexander Pope, also a translator of ancient verse, and thus to the continuities in even Enlightenment British verse of the content, style, and genres promulgated by Gower.

Not only a memorable description of sin marring a beneficent cosmic rule, the *Carmen* is, according to Meindl and Riley, an important "experiment from the 1390s in which Gower combined elegiac lines from the *Vox Clamantis* with a new elaborate leonine style that will reach its full development in the *Cronica Tripertita*" (3). For the larger corpus of shorter poems, Meindl and Riley identify three groups of Latin poetic style: the "elegiac meter of the *Vox Clamantis*" (*Rex Celi Deus, Ecce Patet Tensus*), the "dactylic hexameter with various internal rhyme schemes" (*O Recolende, De Lucis Scrutinio, Est Amor, O Deus Immense*) and the "elegiac poems with internal rhymes" (*Quicquid Homo, Cultor in Ecclesia, Dicunt Scripture*). Appendix B provides an exposition on *O Recolende's* artistry with hexameter and rhyme. In imitation of

Gower's verse types, Meindl and Riley capture the cadences of his language as well as a range of emotion, from the rage and fear of earlier satire to the reluctant acceptance of the poet's deteriorating eyesight and impending death. In this way, they provide another perspective on the portrait of a man whose life experience underwrites his writerly authority.

In the following pieces of verse and prose, Gower points to this perspective by deploying narrators clearly invested in his own relationships, observations, faith, and politics: in his marriage to Agnes Groundolf, witness to falsehood, adoration of Christ, and commendations of Henry IV. Even what is composed as cento, reiterated from the *Vox*, repurposed from the liturgy, or appropriated from Lancastrian propaganda Gower is claiming as his own, without projecting his speech from a fictional lover or confessor, as he does in the *Confessio Amantis*. Meindl and Riley launch the collection with one such unadorned articulation of Gower's "purpose in writing"; *Ad Mundum Mitto* ("I Send My Shafts") is the poem appearing in *Vox Clamantis* manuscripts and accompanying iconic images of Gower as archer aiming at the world. While *Ad Mundum Mitto* expresses the poet's intentions with satire, *Est Amor*, its final verb being in the first person, reveals his plans for marriage: "Hence I Gower, old in years, hopeful of my due, / Safe in the spousal order, reach the marriage bed" (lines 26-27). Other poems (*Rex Celi Deus*, the *Epistola ad Arundel*) describe his position with Henry IV or the Archbishop of Canterbury, the latter poem casting the poet as an ancient blind man who nevertheless sees himself as the son of a spiritual father. The final entry of this compilation poignantly records the text Gower intended for his tomb.

Despite the range of emotion in Gower's more personalized expressions, including the sense of loss as blindness and death engulf the poet, Meindl and Riley do not let their readers wallow in despair at the end of the collection. Instead, they add Appendix A with translations of

laudatory works attributed to Ralph Strode (*Quam Cinxere Freta* and *Eneidos Bucolis*). These short poems change the mood from righteous anger and somber sadness to one in celebration of Gower as a “champion” of “joyous” songs, an accolade that, as our authors remind us, stands in stark contrast to the seriousness of the “moral” Gower we’ve come to know through the earlier works and Chaucer’s designation.

Meindl and Riley’s capacity to place the minor works within broader traditions of English verse and to capture the cadences of the poet’s compositions, his artful deployment of figures of speech, and the ardency of his many voices, especially that of the dying poet, makes this collection an extraordinary gift to Gower Studies and Medieval Studies more generally. For that, we are immensely grateful!

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