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Gower and rhetoric

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Rhetoric was one of the three verbal arts known as the *trivium* (rhetoric, grammar, and dialectic), yet of these three, it could be argued that rhetoric was the most fundamental, the most ingrained, in medieval culture. As Rita Copeland posits, “If grammatical Latinity had to be learned by rigorous introduction and exercise, rhetoric was absorbed by example even before one learned its rules systematically: simply by going to church and hearing a sermon or hearing any formal discourse would have naturalized the basic rules of rhetoric.”¹ Key here is the ubiquity – and accessibility – of rhetoric, at least in theory, so that even those without Latin learning can be seen to display what Radulphus Brito in the late thirteenth century identified as “customary rhetoric” or *rhetorica usualis*, found in daily life.² That natural saturation of rhetoric is conveyed in Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis*, which contains the first treatise on rhetoric in English.³ In its origins, as Gower narrates them in his treatise, rhetoric comes ready-made; no rules of rhetoric are named, no Chaucerian lament of a laborious “craft so long to lerne”⁴ – only a statement that rhetoric is a divine gift bestowed on man:

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Above alle erthli creatures
The hihe makere of natures
The word to man hath yove alone,
So that the speche of his persone,
Or forto lese or forto winne,
The herties thought which is withinne
Mai schewe, what it wolde mene;
And that is noghwhere elles sene
Of kinde with non other beste.
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(CA VII. 1507–15)⁵

Rhetoric seems a simple gift, effortlessly acquired: Gower gives no hint of arduous process or prerequisite knowledge. In his treatise he could have elaborated on the five fundamental parts of rhetoric – *inventio* or subject matter, *dispositio* or arrangement, *elocutio* or style, *memoria* or memory, and *pronunciatio* or delivery – but he doesn’t.⁶ Andrew Galloway notes that Gower’s “poem continually denies its use of rhetoric” and assumes a posture of plain communication, delivering ideas packaged with language much as merchants work behind the scenes, unnoticed, to deliver their goods, and that linguistic transparency is the sense Gower conveys here.⁷ Rhetoric is a natural, inevitable thing that draws little attention to itself as it serves as a vehicle for the heart’s thought. However, at other times Gower’s exaggerated displays of rhetoric render language as “unnatural” and
unreliable, or expose a practice of rhetorical normalization. Such a conflict is at the heart of Gower’s rhetoric and poetics, complicating all his assertions that language sets man above “alle erthli creatures” in a kind of spiritual elevation linking man to God and as a civilizing force linking men to one another.

Gower’s rhetoric, then, is deceptively simple. That simplicity – that modesty *topos* underscoring gift over craft – elides the complexity of Gower’s attitudes toward the theory and practice of rhetoric. Recent scholarship is finally drawing out those conflicting attitudes and recognizing Gower’s position, not merely as the author of the first treatise of rhetoric in English, but as a comprehensive and inclusive author invested in rhetoric’s application to public life, spanning all social classes and genders. To be sure, Gower also manifests strong ambivalence towards rhetoric’s arbitrary power that can undermine its civilizing forces, but his sense of rhetoric as a freely given gift that opens the heart to others is foundational to his rhetorical and ethical project.

**Rhetoric’s mythical origins: Civilizing eloquence**

In the passage quoted at the opening of this chapter, Gower represents rhetoric’s mythic origins as a divine gift, something beyond the human that defines the human, but he also locates medieval rhetoric’s roots in classical rhetoric, the primary works being Cicero’s *De inventione*, the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (ascribed to Cicero in the Middle Ages), and Horace’s *Ars poetica*. Greek tradition ascribes the invention of rhetoric to Corax of Syracuse in 476 BC, but the absence of Greek learning gave Cicero prominence as a father of rhetoric for many centuries in the Latin West, since Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* would not be available to a medieval readership until William of Moerbeke’s widely read Latin translation in the late thirteenth century.

Copeland points out that medieval writers did not write a history of rhetoric a modern reader would expect, beginning with the Greeks and Romans and finally encompassing the Christian West. Instead of such a chronological narrative explaining how practices changed over time, medieval authors wrote of rhetoric as if from the inside, conveying a history that is unchanging if not static and permanent – what Copeland calls the *longue durée*. Thus when Gower and other medieval authors wrote of rhetoric’s origins, they looked to rhetoric’s mythic origins and wrote as if they were fellow participants in that myth, allowing them to “take part in a kind of *longue durée* by inserting their contemporary moments into a long and unchanging mythic history that slowly – glacially – accumulates the baggage of time.”

By “mythic history,” she refers to the workings of a master narrative that does not occur as a single moment in time but rather as a narrative that lives on through all time. This understanding is evident in Gower’s poetry. For Copeland, the origin of rhetoric that opens Cicero’s early treatise, *De inventione*, was just such a master narrative of language’s civilizing power, which he offers in the form of a myth:

1.1.2. Moreover, if we wish to consider the beginning [*principium*] of this thing we call eloquence – whether it is an art, a study [*studium*], a skill [*exercitatio*], or a gift of nature – we shall find that it arose from honorable causes and continued on its way from the best of reasons.

1.2.2. For there was a time when men wandered at large in the fields like animals and lived on wild fare; they did nothing by the guidance of reason, but relied chiefly on physical strength; there was as yet no ordered system of religious worship nor of social duties; no one had seen legitimate marriage nor had anyone looked upon
children whom he knew to be his own; nor had they learned the advantages of an equitable code of law. And so through their ignorance and error, blind and rash passion satisfied itself by misuse of bodily strength, which is a very dangerous servant. At this juncture a man – great and wise I am sure – became aware of the power latent in man and the wide field offered by his mind for great achievements if one could develop this power and improve it by instruction. Men were scattered in the fields and hidden in sylvan retreats when he assembled and gathered them in accordance with a plan; he introduced them to every useful and honorable occupation, though they cried out against it at first because of its novelty [insolentia], and then when through reason and eloquence [ratio atque oratio] they had listened with greater attention, he transformed them from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.  

Cicero’s two criteria for a good orator, wisdom and eloquence, are applied to transform a lawless society into a civilized one. Ann Astell argues that Gower sought to become that figure who spoke to the current political reality of his day through “allegorical rhetoric,” just as Cicero cast himself as that “great and wise” man and his own Rome as the transformed society, both of them cast there for the discerning reader to uncover.  

Rhetoric’s strong political application, mythologized by Cicero and later expanded upon by commentators on Aristotle’s translated Rhetoric, deeply appeals to Gower, who in effect directly recasts the Ciceronian myth in the Prologue of his Confessio Amantis. He adapts Cicero’s myth to the myth of legendary bard Arion. From these myths Gower imagines an ideal bard whose art can transform society:

Bot wolde God that now were on
An other such as Arion,
Whiche hadde an harpe of such temprure,
And therto of so good mesure
He sang, that he the bestes wilde
Made of his note tame and milde,
The Hinde in pes with the Leoun,
The Wolf in pes with the Moltoun,
The Hare in pees stod with the Hound;
And every man upon this ground
Which Arion that time herde,
Als wel the lord as the shepherde,
He broghte hem alle in good acord,
So that the comun with the lord,
And lord with the comun also,
He sette in love bothe tuo.

(CA Prol. 1053–68)

For scholars interested in Gower’s rhetoric, this scene of animals and humans responding to beautiful music may seem a departure from Cicero’s portrayal of a society whose members are incrementally willing to embrace a new order after careful persuasion (ratio atque oratio). However, the exuberantly transformative, unifying power of Arion’s harp, bringing natural enemies to “love” one another, underscores the disciplinary overlap between music and rhetoric. This recalls Gower’s large-scale rhetorical strategy, to tell his tale “Somwhat of lust, somwhat of lore” (CA Prol. 19), a practice that in turn
draws on another rhetorical progenitor – Horace – whose principle that poetry should delight and instruct was well known in the fourteenth century. Here, as Matthew W. Irvin has noted, Gower’s emphasis is on the “lust” of rhetoric, its “lusti melodie,” rather than its lore. Music (or Gower’s poetic voice) taps into sensory experience and emotions. His is a poetics of attachment according to Maura Nolan, who contrasts the stern hierarchical judgments of the Vox Clamantis to the ideal vision of social harmony in the Confessio’s Arion passage: “The poetics of Arion thus turns away from the detached voice of authority that excoriated the rebels and affirmed social hierarchies, in order to embrace forms of attachment: peace, harmony, community, love.” Her work builds upon R.F. Yeager’s distinction between Gower’s approaches to social improvement (namely that Gower steps away from his voice “as an excoriating John the Baptist, as he did while writing the Vox Clamantis”) and instead embraces his own, preferred role as a modern-day Arion.

The rhetoric Nolan and Yeager describe thus treats music and poetics both as joint keys to Gower’s political project. To Irvin, however, Gower does not define how Arion’s peace-making ability can be applied to England’s politics. Other scholars see Gower applying the text more topically to politics. Astell’s argument for allegory opens the text to a wide range of political readings, which, she argues, Gower expected his audience to perform: “King Richard’s failure to interpret the Confessio properly – that is, allegorically – will incur for him a heavy penalty.” Astell supports a view of Gower as a poet who writes with irony and elaborate allegory as central to his rhetoric, demanding his readers go beyond what he says on the surface.

“Of evele and eke of goode also”: Conflicting, immoral, and amoral rhetoric

The Arion passage focuses upon an idealized past, but as Gower demonstrates throughout his corpus, words exhibit a power for evil as well as for good. Sirens also sing. The suspicion of rhetoric is as ancient as Plato’s critique against the Sophists, and from that time a recognized binary between stylistic veneer and philosophical truth has implied rhetoric’s ethical bankruptcy. This division of linguistic form and truthful content finds expression in decisions surrounding literary form, as Eleanor Johnson demonstrates in her study of prosimetrum, a literary form mixing verse and prose, which reached late medieval England primarily through Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy. Johnson finds that shortly after Chaucer...composed his Boece...the Wycliffites produce their prose translations of the Bible and Trevisa translates the Polychronicon...prose is coming to be prized for its supposedly unique access to truth and clarity, while poetry is increasingly seen, among vernacular literary theorists, as prone to lying and deceit.

For Johnson, Gower in his Confessio took Boethius’ division of difficult verse and clarifying prose in the Consolation as a rhetorical model – but one he applied fluidly. She argues that in general Gower’s incipits, written in syntactically difficult Latin, are to Boethius’ meters as Gower’s English text is to Boethius’ elucidating prose. But not always: the English text sometimes becomes a kind of meter to the glosses’ prose, “showing.” Johnson observes,

the boundaries among lyric, narrative, and commentary, as well as between Latin and English, to be far more porous and shifting than the Boethian paradigm would
allow. There is in the *Confessio*, no absolute “Latin,” no absolute vernacular, no absolute meter, no absolute prose.  

Johnson’s inquiry into Gower’s linguistic relativism is one way of exploring what Copeland calls the fluctuating tension between rhetoric and philosophy, between ancient authority and authorial originality, and their representation in literary form. “Medieval poets,” she contends, “did not simply accept the Platonic binary between truth value and representation, philosophy and rhetoric: rather, they worked with that binary, using rhetoric as the site from which they would negotiate the conflicting claims over the authority of knowledge and the power of representation.” So too, as Johnson’s example of *prōsimetrum* elucidates, Gower works with rhetorical structures which he may seem to uphold – but inconsistencies therein exhibit relativism and fluidity as well.

Long considered stylistically unwieldy, even to a flaw, only recently have these inconsistencies in Gower’s texts been regarded as purposeful. For J. Allan Mitchell, the “confounding varieties of rhetoric” reflect Gower’s preference of *Practique* over *Theorique* and thus deliberately champion inconsistency as reflecting the complexity of life. To Mitchell, the text is better off for its lack of conformity: a uniform moral, while coherent and consistent, would also be reductive and unrealistic. Gower’s rhetorical flexibility – conflicting, fickle, and unstable in the Platonic paradigm – adapts to the complex shifts of human life in a way a universal code never could. Comprehensiveness, Mitchell argues, mattered more to Gower than a shallow coherence.

Gower addresses the binary of rhetorical polish versus philosophical truth in his section on *Rhetorique* in Book VII where he notes that words are creative yet destructive:

> The wordes ben of sondri sectes,  
> Of evele and eke of goode also;  
> The wordes maken frend of fo,  
> And fo of frend, and pes of werre,  
> And werre of pes, and out of herre  
> The word this worldes cause entriketh,  
> And reconcileth whan him liketh.  
> (CA VII. 1572–8)

Any social progress made through Arion’s transformative song stands reversed in this demonstration of linguistic flux. Characteristically, Gower underscores his point with a rhetorical device. The chiasmus (“frend of fo / and fo of frend,” etc.) operates differently from the chiasmus in the Arion passage, because there, language reversed and improved the existing social order. Here, as Malte Urban points out, Gower ends these strings of chiasmus with a “lingering aftertaste of negativity”: friends turn into foes, peace into war. Linguistic flux aligns rhetoric with social instability devoid of philosophic truth and ungrounded by a driving moral principle. Gower’s distant tone neither condemns nor condones this play, but exhibits the infamous disconnect between truth and rhetorical embellishment. Since Cicero and Quintilian, ethics was a prerequisite of the orator, but Gower like other medieval poets admits that verbal power may be used for good or evil, or simple caprice, insofar as these shifts in rhetoric occur “whan him liketh.” While Ciceronian rhetoric emphasized the humanizing power of words, Gower’s language tacks back and forth according to the winds of chance and so erases any civilizing progress.
What game is Genius (and Gower) playing by describing such whimsical yet powerful rhetoric? Diane Watt notes an “amoral” quality to Gower’s apparent contention that “word” – that is, language itself – is to blame for an inherent slippage: “Gower, or his writing, betrays a cognizance of the plurality of language.” Yet language may pose dangers and inconsistencies while also yielding its own truths. Rhetorical figures and linguistic games, popularized in a rhetorical tradition to which we now turn, offered Gower the opportunity to experiment with the blurred binary of truth and beauty.

(In)nocent games: *Artes poetria* and the *Vox Clamantis*

While Cicero established the link between rhetoric and politics, that between rhetoric and poetics developed more slowly and indirectly. By the later fourteenth century the renaissance of the late twelfth century had combined Ciceronian rhetoric and Horace’s *Ars poetica* to yield a proliferation of *artes poetria*, including Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova* (composed c. 1208–13), Matthew of Vendôme’s *Ars versificatoria* (c. 1175), and John of Garland’s *Parisiana poetria* (c. 1231–5). Of these, the most influential was Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s *Poetria nova*, surviving in over 200 manuscripts. The title (possibly bestowed by later commentators rather than the author) invokes both Horace’s *Ars poetica* and also the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (known in the Middle Ages as the *Rhetorica nova* to differentiate it from Cicero’s early work, *De inventione*, called the *Rhetorica vetus*). As Päivi Mehtonen notes, the *ad Herennium* was a foundational text in teaching figures and tropes; it is a tradition Geoffrey continues and Gower explores in the three languages of his day, suggesting the importance of both texts to Gower’s work.

Readers have long linked Gower’s and Geoffrey of Vinsauf’s texts, an important link since Gower’s access to Geoffrey has been questioned, as well. James J. Murphy, in a pioneering article on rhetorical sources in Gower’s work, argued strongly against any connection to Geoffrey of Vinsauf and posited that Gower was only familiar with the work of Brunetto Latini and some unnamed sources containing *gigures*. Current opinion, however, agrees more with Martin Camargo, whose views on Chaucer’s rhetorical knowledge in principle extend to Gower too. Camargo argues that Chaucer would have received his schooling before the rhetorical renaissance of the late fourteenth century, but shows first-hand knowledge of Geoffrey of Vinsauf in the 1380s. Marjorie Curry Woods notes that “The *Poetria nova* was a service text, not an avant garde one,” by which she refers to its primary role in teaching medieval Latin rhetorical tradition to adolescent boys – including, certainly, young John Gower. Masayoshi Itô has quantified a number of devices that show Gower’s rhetorical range, counting 297 instances of *paronomasia* in the *Vox*. Since only thirty-two of these are adapted from other sources, such as Peter Riga’s *Aurora*, Itô argues that Gower prioritized rhetorical invention in his Latin poetry – as did Geoffrey. Itô also underscores the ornamentation of Gower’s style. At its most extreme, it is highly visible verbal play: long strings of repetition at the beginning of clauses or lines called *anaphora* (e.g., *VC* I. 635–69), eighty oxymorons on love (*VC* V, chapter 2), and an *ubi sunt* passage including over a hundred names. Such elaborate or “excessive” ornamentation is indicative of the so-called Mannerism that Curtius ascribed to medieval Latin. Itô focuses on three rhetorical figures, *Significatio*, in which a word brings to mind two or more words or meanings, is a pun or double entendre; for example, in showing the topsy-turvy inversion of power during the 1381 Rebellion, Gower encodes through puns the rebels Jack Straw’s and Wat Tyler’s surnames in a
passage about the power that ostensibly inferior substances (mere straw and tiles) have over superior and so-called durable ones (oak and marble):

Hec erat illa dies, subito qua maxima quercus
A modico leuiter stramine vulsa cadit:
Hec erat illa dies, fragilis qua tegula vires
Marmoreas vicit viribus illa suis.
[This was the day on when the mighty oak suddenly fell, easily uprooted by ordinary straw. This was the day on which the fragile tile surpassed the durability of marble in its strength.]37

The other two figures, *traductio* and *annominatio*, operate through repetition. Itô defines *traductio* as the simple repetition of a word in the same form, and *annominatio* as the repetition of a word but varying its grammatical form or playing with the same roots or stems of words.38 *Annominatio* is a favorite of Gower’s, who seems adept at working with the fluid variations of words and underscoring lexical similarities and semantic differences. An even more graphic form of play in the Prologue to the *Vox* includes an enigmatic treasure hunt in which Gower deconstructs his own name:

Scribentis nomen si queras, ecce loquela
Sub tribus implicita versibus inde latet.
Primos sume pedes Godefridi desque Iohanni,
Principiumque sui Wallia iugat eis:
Ter caput amittens det cetera membra, que tali
Carmine compositi nominis ordo patet.
[If you should ask the name of the writer, look, the word lies hidden and entangled within three verses about it. Take the first feet from “Godfrey” and add them to “John,” and let “Wales” join its initial to them. Leaving off its head, let “Ter” furnish the other parts; and after such a line is arranged, the right sequence of the name is clear.]39

*Vox Clamantis* in turn has a very similar name game with a different pope and a different moral, claiming that Pope Clement VII, the pope of Avignon, really ought to be given the negative prefix “*In*” to evoke his true personality:

Sic differt Clemens nunc a clemente vocatus,
Errat et Acephalo nomine nomen habens.
So the one now called Clement is far from being clement, and he is wrong in keeping this name, for his name lacks a prefix.\(^{[1]}\)

Annominatio, a repetition in this case of the same word with different grammatical cases (clemens, clemente, nomen, nomine) underscores the disconnect between a word and the thing it represents. As the opposite of Innocent, a good man with a metrically challenging name, Clement’s name fits the meter but not the “inclement” man.\(^{41}\)

Previous scholarship has focused on establishing Gower’s engagement with rhetorical tradition and poetic practice, but more recent scholarship has assessed how Gower’s practice engages with tradition, and/or changes over time, within one or more of his languages. Building on earlier work by R.F. Yeager, Maura Nolan has studied Gower’s cento in the Vox, particularly his usage of Ovidian lines, to perceive an Ovidian voice in productive conflict with the authoritative voice of Gower’s text.\(^{42}\)

Urban also examines Gower’s cento, to point out that incorporating ancient texts does not form a bridge to the past but rather highlights a rupture between them.\(^{43}\) In terms of Gower’s own present and past in writing Latin, A.G. Rigg notes that Gower’s Latin (including the Confessio’s rather different Latin) is varied across time and texts, “compressed into a syntactically tight, often cryptic and almost riddling epigrammatic unit,” and finds the Chronica Tripertita’s leonine rhyme similarly typical of fourteenth-century political poetry and well suited to this poem, which he considers the first piece of Lancastrian propaganda.\(^{44}\)

David R. Carlson has extensively studied change in rhyme usage in Gower’s later, short Latin poetry, observing that Gower’s Latin rhyme dramatically increases during the course of his career: “Rhymed Latin…evidently still had an unavoidable prestige for Gower.”\(^{45}\)

Another scholar who fruitfully discusses shorter poems is Siân Echard. Her analysis of the Latin poem “O Deus immense” clarifies that the short poems written over his career show Gower adapting concepts from his earlier work (here, the Mirour).\(^{46}\)

Gower’s shorter poems continue to evince similar obsessions for certain themes, and at times show him almost “talking about and to himself.”\(^{47}\)

Rhetorical figures in Gower’s Anglo-Norman and English poetry

Gower’s Anglo-Norman Mirour and English Confessio share rhetorical figures with his Latin poetry, yet reflect Gower’s vernacular poetics in more explicit ways. Rhetoric and poetics in both languages deserve study in their own right, but it is helpful to remember that the figures Gower employs in his English poetry were already in practice in his earlier French work, as well as his Latin.

Robertson Balfour Daniels’ early work on Gower’s rhetoric points to the importance of literary form.\(^{48}\)

Octosyllabic poetry lends itself to a balance of clauses and phrases and hence to antithesis and contentio, figures that ably show units of contrast or accord within the line. Such balanced figures lend themselves to sententiae, i.e., proverbial or sententious aphorisms which are prominent in the poem.\(^{49}\)

Daniels also notes that Gower’s Confessio uses more polysyndeton than asyndeton (indicating he prefers to repeat conjunctions rather than tersely omit them in sequences),\(^{50}\) a high amount of anaphora (repetition at the beginning of phrases) as opposed to epistrophe (repetition at the end of phrases), as well as metaphors and similes (similitudo), though he deems Gower’s metaphors unoriginal.
Ethopoeia or character sketches (notatio), descriptions of appearance (effectio and descriptio), and personification (conformatio) are common figures of thought. Daniels points out as well that Gower sparingly uses the tropes considered figures of speech or *omatus difficilis*, even though such tropes are associated with verse.51

Instead of elaborate figures, Gower seems to rely on skillful repetition. Ito’s quantitative work on the *Mirour* and the *Confessio* illustrates this admirably. Itô demonstrates that both poems make extensive use of traductio: he identifies 980 examples of rhyming and non-rhyming traductio in the *Mirour*, and 756 in the *Confessio*.52 Most of non-rhyming occurrences of traductio (in the *Mirour*, 524 examples, 98.5 percent; in the *Confessio*, 99 percent) repeat the same word. An example cited by Itô is characteristic: “She wepth, she sorweth, sche compleigneth” (CA VIII. 1513).53 This instance of traductio also displays anaphora (repetition at the beginning of lines or phrases). Traductio can also showcase other rhetorical figures, as chiasmus (commutatio) here: “Al that schal falle, falle schal” (CA VIII. 1172). Similarly, often traductio is used with antithesis or contentio to underscore contrasts or similarities – more so in the *Mirour de l’Omm* than in the *Confessio Amantis*, but there are many examples in both languages, some of which are close in meaning:

Tout se travaille et tout se peine

( MO 1207)

De leur flans et de leur costées

(MO 7903)

Ou par aguait ou par engine

(MO 4946)

In every place, in every stede

(CA IV. 1123)

To this pourpos and to this ende

(CA IV. 2947)

Which under lock and under keie

(CA V. 6621)

The device is more common in the *Mirour*. Both poems, however, can use their octosyllabic line – which Itô deems symmetrical and so an amenable form for a poet like Gower with “a keen sense of correspondence” – to accommodate this euphonic if pleonastic style.54 The meter’s symmetrical quality is conducive to parataxis and tautological expressions in both poems (e.g., “Trop est malvois, trop est culvert,” MO 9004; “Tout se travaille et tout se peine,” MO 1207). Word pairs become pronounced in both languages, often with idioms or built-in structures:

Ore est doulcette, ore est amere

(MO 22155)

Sovent as chald, sovent as froit

(MO 29121)

Now is sche red, nou is sche pale

(CA VIII. 848)
En temps du peas, en temps du guerre
(MO 25384)

In time of were, in time of pes
(CA IV. 1685)

On soit ce bon ou soit ce mal
(MO 13195)

Sometime nay, sometime yee
(CA IV. 810)

As with his Latin verse, *annominatio* is also a common device in his vernacular poetry: Itô counts 1,361 instances of *annominatio* in the *Mirour*, and 465 instances in the *Confessio*, as here with variations on the verb “to feel”: “Mi wo to you is bot a game, / That fielen noght of that I fielen” (CA VIII. 2152–3). Over half of the *Confessio*’s *annominatio*s are the sound play created from different words; in this example from the “Tale of Pigmaliion,” “forwept-forwakid” works in tandem with *traductio*: “He leide hire in his bed al nakid, / He was forwept, he was forwakid (CA IV. 403–4). Rhyme frequently displays *annominatio* (60 percent), with prefix or suffix rhymes (“acord-descord”) or a likeness in the latter part (“fieleth-kieleth”); such rhymes can underscore contrasts (“fend-frend”; “devoured-favoured”). Just as Echard noted that Gower’s Latin and French show similar concerns, so too does he use the same or similar *paranomasia* in more than one language, as with these examples of “beguiled beguilers”:

Ensi guilor pour guiement
Serra guilé de guilerie.
[Thus the deceiver shall be deceitfully deceived for his deceit.] (MO 15599–600)

For often he that wol beguile
Is guiled with the same guile,
And thus the guilor is beguiled.
(CA VI. 1379–81)

Such *annominatio* feels sententious in its cleverness. The epigrammatic quality of the rhetoric is common in both languages.

*Traductio* and *annominatio* can be used together for added ornamentation and emphasis; this can be even more striking in the *Mirour* since the stanza form allows for more repetition. For example, “nient” appears thirteen times in fewer than twenty lines (MO 29–47), a pattern of repetition all the more heightened by concurrent *annominatio*: “Tout estoit nient, quanq’om ore tient / Et tout ce nient en nient revient / Par nient, qui tout fait anientir” (MO 37–9).

Rhyme allows for much paranomasia in both poems. The *Mirour* particularly lends itself to what Itô calls “phrasal rime” (MO 245): “tramis: terme mis” (MO 29611–12), “pourchas: pour aas” (MO 7312–13), “teste seins: Tousseins” (MO 8701–2), and there are examples in the *Confessio Amantis* (“be newed: besnewed” (CA VI. 1497–8)), “chamber ayein: chamberlain” (CA VII. 4991–2), “housebondes: hise bondes” (CA VII. 5347–8). The *Mirour*’s twelve-lined, two-rhyme stanzaic form, unlike the *Confessio’s* couplets, allowed for more pronounced figures in rhyme. By Itô’s tally, the *Confessio* has...
383 *rime riche* couples, while the *Mirour* has 241 instances of *rime riche* in consecutive lines but another 207 within the stanza. 

*Annominatio* and *traductio* also become pronounced in rhyme – an effect Gower clearly enjoyed. One show stopper is rhyming the word “pointe” six times in one stanza (MO 2353–64); in another instance, he rhymes an entire stanza with variations on the word “corde” (“concorde,” “recorde,” “recorder,” etc., MO 13885–96). As Itô explains, the concordant form suits the content on the virtue of Concorde. 

*Rime riche* in the *Confessio* occasionally contains lesser clusters, but there the difference is that the rhymes change with each couplet. The famous example is the passage from Book V:

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And in this wise, taketh kepe,
If I hire hadde, I wolde hire kepe,
And yit no Friday wolde I faste,
Thogh I hire kepte and hielde faste.
Fy on the bagges in the kiste!
I hadde ynogh, if I hire kiste.
For certes, if sche were myn,
I hadde hir lever than a Myn
Of Gold; for al this worldes riche
Ne mihte make me so riche
As sche, that is so inly goode.
I sette noght of other goode.
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(CA V. 79–90)

There is no *tour de force*, however, on one rhyme word over a dozen lines in the *Confessio*, as occurs in the *Mirour*. 

Itô notes that colloquial idioms such as “to describe briefly” or “to tell the truth” are frequently used in the *rime riche* of the *Confessio* but rarely in the *Mirour*. Such idioms contribute to Gower’s reputation as a “plain” poet, as first articulated by J.A. Burrow’s influential *Ricardian Poetry*. “Plain” poetry uses simple, colloquial language that means what it says, which explains Gower’s preference for these idiomatic expressions. On a related note, Itô observes that there are many examples of *significatio* (which he defines as *double entendre*, or puns) in the *Vox*, but only fifteen in the *Mirour*, and virtually none in the *Confessio*. This scarcity of *significatio* reinforces Burrow’s observation of Gower’s plainness in his English poetry, despite some scholarly attempts, such as that of Galloway, to look beyond or problematize this persistent label. Discussing the passage from Book V of the *Confessio* quoted above, Galloway expertly notes that Gower’s text claims a “rhetoric-free” status, yet through its plain style metaphorically and metonymically associates women and treasure as an “inevitable” if problematic pairing: “But the verbal tropes by which such economies are made to seem natural and inevitable emerge, when isolated as ‘rhetorik,’ as themselves an unnatural force. This is so even though the poem continually denies its use of rhetoric.”

**Rhetoric and class from king to commoners**

Gower criticizes all social classes, and aiming at their rhetoric is a way medieval poets, including Gower, could criticize others. As David K. Coley observes:
The spoken word, both in its symbolic potential and in its performative efficacy, became a contested locus in late medieval England, a site alternatively occupied and coveted by philosophers, ecclesiasts, kings, bureaucrats, magnates, courtiers, and commoners alike, a site that was perceived as crucial to understanding and shaping a nation destabilized by years of plague, international war, civil conflict, and socio-economic turmoil.66

Edwin D. Craun notes that the third estate in the *Vox Clamantis* is *linguosus* — “using speech to instigate quarrels” — and that in the *Confessio Amantis* many of the tales focus on “sins of the tongue.”67 Such examples point, again, to Gower’s awareness of the binary between good and evil speech, but also suggest his awareness that rhetoric can boost, as well as criticize, the voices of the marginalized. The fear of lower classes usurping power is represented as a linguistic takeover by Gower’s contemporary Richard Ullerston, who during the Oxford Translation debates begun in 1401 discouraged the accessibility of translated material because it cedes power to the masses:

Translation into the mother tongue...will bring about a world in which the laity prefers to teach than to learn, in which women (*mulierculae*) talk philosophy and dare to instruct men — in which a country bumpkin (*rusticus*) will presume to teach. Translation will also deprive good priests of their prestige. If everything is translated, learning, the liturgy, and all the sacraments will be abhorred; clerics and theology itself will be seen as useless by the laity; the clergy will wither; and an infinity of heresies will erupt. Even the laity will not benefit, since their devotion is actually improved by their lack of understanding of the psalms and prayers they say.68

In this respect, the rhetoric of the *linguosus* third estate, particularly in Book I of the *Vox Clamantis*, is not merely a senseless and demeaning production of animal noises as David Aers claims.69 Gower critiques the rebels’ descent into unrestrained violence, yet at the same time notes their power in the rhetorical and poetic terms that he values in his own poetics.70 Ullerston posits a topsy-turvy world that bears some resemblance to Gower’s own visions of social upheaval, but Gower’s text differs from Ullerston’s dystopia in his dramatization of the *expertise* of the third estate and manipulations of royal power, both in the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Confessio*, where he turns to *rime riche – annominatio* – as a device to instruct the aristocracy, and his larger audience.71 Here and elsewhere, rhetoric is one way to chart Gower’s investment with representing all social classes as well as the power struggles and tensions between them.

**Gendered rhetoric**

Georgiana Donavin has done valuable work on gender and rhetoric, particularly concerning late medieval affective representations of the Virgin.72 She demonstrates that in the *Mirour* especially Gower draws from this Marian tradition, focusing in his portrait of Mary on emotional effect: “Unlike the N-Town play or Lydgate’s *Life*, the *Mirour* does not highlight Mary’s education or intellectual prowess, but instead her emotional responses to the fruition of divine events.”73 Because of Mary, female speech can provide an ideal for men to marvel at and emulate. Some of Gower’s most beautiful and rhetorically rich poetry in the *Mirour* is in the section on Mary’s life — as Maura Nolan has
noticed as well. Nolan calls attention to another rhetorical figure — *apostrophe* — in Gower’s act of speaking her many names:

O dame, pour la remembrance  
De ton honoure et ta pleasance  
Tes nouns escrivre je voldrai;  
Car j’ay en toy tiele esperance,  
Que tu m’en fretz bonne alleggance,  
Si humblement te nomerais.  
Pour ce ma langue en filerais,  
Et tout mon cuer obeierais,  
Solonc ma povre suffiance  
Tes nouns benoitiz j’escriveray,  
Au fin que je par ce porray,  
Ma dame, avoir ta bienvuillance.

(MO 29905–16)74

In so addressing Mary with self-abdication, Gower is “performing his submission to the Virgin even as he repeatedly engages in the powerful practice of naming.”75 His reverential tone and admission of his own limitations constitute a dramatic shift from the rhetorical “name games” of the *Vox Clamantis*, a shift in poetics that aligns with Donavin’s thesis. It illustrates a Christian innovation to classically inherited rhetoric.

In his English poetry, Gower allows his women a variety of speech performances that deserve more analysis. Medea performs magic while clucking “as a Hen” (*CA* V. 4101). To Watt, this signifies that her “powers appear primarily to be derived from the disruption rather than manipulation of rhetoric and speech.”76 Also complicated is Philomela’s invented human speech while in the form of a nightingale, even as her shifts in shape and speech respond to male crimes enacted on her body and tongue. Gower’s portrayal of such women as Medea and Philomela underscores the strain on their fantastical speech, as tongues and bodies become new under the old shaping pressures of male violence and deceit.

Rhetoric is situational and reflects the flux of life. As with third-estate rhetoric, female rhetoric can be represented as evil or, at the least, threatening to men. Even here, though, we might consider the power of women’s speech, and the effect Gower achieves by rendering female speakers in rhetorical opposition, using the same verbal tools but applied to differing effect. Mary in the *Mirour* is the virtuous counterpart of Sin — the daughter whom Satan has verbally “indoctrinated” (“la gardoit et doctrinoit / De sa plus tricherouse guile,” *MO* 212–13). Sin thus serves as a kind of rhetorical challenge to Marian eloquence.77 Nolan finds a similar use of Fortune in opposition to Mary, in Gower’s uses of *apostrophe* to reflect their differences, but also in the different ways in which he addresses them. His words to Fortune (*MO* 22081–124) are sermonizing, didactic *anaphora*, but his affective address to Mary, quoted above, is sensual.78

**Gower’s word on eloquence**

While the twelfth century witnessed a renaissance in rhetoric and the thirteenth heralded Continental rhetorical treatises in the vernacular, rhetoric in the fourteenth century had its own resurgence. As grammar instruction increasingly shifted to the vernacular, so too
the vernacular made its appearance in literary texts, and ultimately in the first rhetorical treatise in the English language, which John Gower included in the seventh book of his *Confessio Amantis*. As Copeland has noted, Gower’s text appropriates Brunetto Latini’s division of the theoretical and practical sciences from the *Tresor: theoretica* in Book I, *practica* as ethics in Book II, and *practica* as politics in Book III; this third book of Brunetto’s *Tresor* joins rhetoric and politics. 79 Instead of grouping rhetoric with politics, Gower’s three categories are “Theorique,” “Rhetorique,” and “Practique.” Gower treats rhetoric as its own epistemological category and shifts its position from Brunetto’s *Tresor* to fit instead between theory and practice. Thus in Gower’s hands rhetoric bridges the larger treatises on the theoretical sciences such as mathematics and astronomy, connecting them to practical sciences such as politics. The repositioning underscores rhetoric’s role in transforming theory to practice.

Along with this rendition of rhetoric as its own science Gower develops “the reule of eloquence” (CA VII. 1544). His treatise serves as a meditation on the power and the pitfalls of verbal beauty. As Gower notes in his Latin header to his treatise, words are more powerful than nature’s power:

Herba, lapis, sermo, tria sunt virtute repleta,
Vis tamen ex verbi pondere plura facit.
[Herb, stone, speech are all three full of power; but the force from the weight of a word does more.]

(CA VII. v; trans. Andrew Galloway)

Yet as we have seen, words – and power (Latin *vis*; plural *vires*), itself – are for Gower not necessarily things of *virtue* – and this bilingual pun operates in the Latin header, above, and in his English text:

In Ston and gras vertu ther is,
Bot yit the bokes tellen this,
That word above alle erthli thinges
Is vertuous in his doinges,
Wher so it be to evele or goode.

(CA VII. 1545–9)

Copeland notes that Gower’s treatise is more radical than that of Dante or Brunetto in rhetoric’s position as “the highest science,” sovereign over the trivium. 80 Yet Gower’s Genius is at pains to tell his audience that rhetoric is shifty, not a stable virtue – in fact, language is “vertuous” – that is, powerful – whether it works for good or evil, which is not very *virtuous* (the word can only be defined as powerful in Gower’s text). Despite these warning signals Gower describes rhetoric in eloquent and edifying terms that almost belie his criticism that rhetoric is an arbitrary force favoring neither war nor peace.

Eloquence’s powerful duality is the heart of Gower’s treatise. Eloquence must be subordinated “To trouthe,” harnessed by ethics according to rhetorical tradition, but as Elizabeth Allen has demonstrated, “trouthe” is only a partial truth, no matter how “plainly” spoken. 81 Eloquence opens humanity to a wider range of possibility that in turn includes moral elevation according to the spirit of the law, if not always to the letter. Moreover, eloquence maintains its contrast to violence; there are hurts only rhetoric can heal. Gower’s yoking of verbal remedies for physical suffering conveys his
hope for language’s power – a power that is greater than any herb or stone – that when used for good can bring on Arion’s peace and harmony.

Allen and Mitchell have noted the inconsistency between Genius’ exemplary morals, text, and gloss, and even between the message Genius offers Amans to pursue love when in fact Amans is denied love in the end; in this nexus of apparent contrasts, rhetoric holds a central role. Throughout his work, Gower underscores rather than conceals the tension between plain speech and eloquence. Gower plainly praises plain speech and eloquently criticizes the dangers of eloquence, yet this binary is problematized by his own eloquent criticism of eloquence. Without easy resolutions, hope still remains in his trilingual vindication of words as powerful and capable of ennobling natural enemies to embrace peace. As with Arion’s ideal example, Gower perceives the potential effect of eloquence as socially and spiritually transformative, and portrays rhetoric as the gift that makes humanity more human.

Directions for future research

There is a lot of room for new research in rhetoric and Gower studies. While there are five parts of rhetoric – inventio or subject matter, dispositio or arrangement, elocutio or style, memoria or memory, and pronunciatio or delivery, there is not much work on how these parts specifically apply to Gower. Donavin has ably discussed Gower and inventio, but this scholarship could well be expanded on, and dispositio, memoria, and pronunciatio could yield much new work and reframe well-known passages in a new way. 82

Elocutio or style has a longer scholarly history, but as mentioned above, readers of Gower such as Galloway are challenging notions of Gower as a plain poet, and more work needs to be done to refine this changed perception of Gower’s style. Moreover, as scholars increasingly pay attention to Gower’s French and Latin poetry, the complexity of his rhetoric and literary style becomes obvious. If he is not a plain poet, what is he? I am speaking of Gower’s style broadly, but there is also a great need for an understanding of his specific stylistic practices – rhetorical tropes and figures – across his three languages of composition.

Intersections of rhetoric and other areas of inquiry – such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability studies, among others – can likewise yield new insights in reading Gower and pushing beyond the scholarship already mentioned above. For example, unlike Chaucerian characters, Gower’s women elevate their speech as much as Gower’s men do with rime riche (a kind of rhyming epistrophe, in which the rhyme words appear identical though are semantically or grammatically different). 83 To what extent does this even-handedness apply (or not) with other rhetorical figures? To what extent does Gower grace marginalized voices – which social groups are given rhetorical “gifts,” and are these gifts equal?

A number of such intersectional studies have not yet been directly or sufficiently applied to Gower studies, including (to my knowledge), intersectional studies that bridge rhetoric, race, and Gower. Cord J. Whitaker’s work on rhetoric, race, and Middle English literature, specifically in The King of Tars, resonates with Gower studies when he speaks of polyseous metaphors that complicate the apparent opposition of binaries: “black paradoxically calls forth white, and damnation calls forth redemption.” 84 Such attention to the mutuality of seemingly oppositional terms could expand upon and advance studies of Gower’s contradictory rhetoric as noted by Galloway and others, but with new contexts.
Finally, there is more to be said about Gower’s contribution to the history of rhetoric. Copeland has demonstrated that Gower gave rhetoric a larger role than Brunetto Latini did in his division of the theoretical and practical sciences, and yet as Galloway notes, Gower elides his emphasis on rhetoric. So there seems to be some disconnect or inconsistency between his theoretical acknowledgment of rhetoric and his practical application of it as a working poet. Such friction makes Gower and his stance on rhetoric all the more complex and worthy of attention.

Notes
1 I would like to thank the volume’s editors, R.F. Yeager, Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, and Brian Castle, for their careful feedback to this chapter throughout the publication process. Rita Copeland, “History of Rhetoric and the Longue Durée: Ciceronian Myth and Its Medieval Afterlives,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 106:2 (2007): 185.
9 James Murphy, Rhetoric in the Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 3.
10 Copeland, “History of Rhetoric,” 186. Copeland elaborates on this concept of mythic narrative as one involving an origin story in which people of all times can participate in; for medieval scholars of rhetoric, myth seemed a more accessible and hence appealing model than a linear, chronological narrative of historical contributors to rhetorical study.
15 Yeager, John Gower’s Poetic, 238.
16 Irvin, Poetic Voices, 73.
17 Astell, Political Allegory, 91. Other topical references range from a reference to the Merciless Parliament of 1388 in Gower’s praise of Cicero over Caesar, to Richard as a superficial reader potentially doomed to Acteon’s fate (Richard’s emblem, the white hart, is the animal Acteon transforms into as a punishment for looking at a goddess’s flesh and not the divine truth beyond that surface).
20 Johnson, Practicing Literary Theory, 191.
22 For example, James Simpson and Winthrop Wetherbee have explored Genius as an uneven authority figure; see Simpson, Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille’s Anticlaudianus and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Wetherbee, “Gower Teaching Ovid and the Classics,” in Approaches to Teaching the Poetry of John Gower, ed. R.F. Yeager and Brian W. Gatele (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2011), 172–9; and Wetherbee, “Genius and Interpretation in the ‘Confessio Amantis,’” in Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earl Kaske, ed. Arthur Groos (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986), 241–60. Genius’ apparently inadequate or forced moralizations in turn underscore the underlying complexity of pairing moral to exemplary tale, but one issue in his display of inconsistencies is that Genius does not seem aware of his own limitations.
25 The point has been noted in Poetic Voices by Irvin, who observes that “Genius poses language as totally dependent on the virtue of its maker,” 239–40.
29 Woods, Classroom Commentaries, 14.
33 Woods, Classroom Commentaries, 34–5.
36 Itō, John Gower. 204, 207, 212.
38 Itō, John Gower. 203. Please note that terminology is not uniform across classical and medieval (and modern) rhetorical terminology. The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics specifically notes that traductio as defined by Quintilian and others entails the simple repetition of a word (as Itō defines it), but other rhetoricians equate the word to polyptoton—essentially repetition with the same qualities as Itō’s annominatio. Hence “one should therefore be explicit about definitions when using any of these terms.” The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 1993), 968.
I have argued that Gower’s play introduces the possibility of modifying language to match reality, attaching a man’s true head to match his true personality; see “From Head to Foot: Syllabic Play and Metamorphosis in Book I of Gower’s Vox Clamantis,” in On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium, ed. R.F. Yeager (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007, 144–60, esp. 144–8. Gower is clearly writing in a long-sanctioned rhetorical tradition. In late fourteenth-century England, however, this tradition becomes politically charged. As Andrew Galloway and others have noted, vernacular letters circulating at the time of the Rebellion of 1381 were “aenigmatibus plenam” or “full of enigmas” according to chronicler Thomas Walsingham, and these cryptic letters by John Ball and possibly others signify sedition and rhetoric in the wrong hands; Galloway, “The Rhetoric of Riddling in Late-Medieval England: The ‘Oxford’ Riddles, the Secretum philosophorum, and the Riddles in Piers Plowman,” Speculum 70.1 (1995): 78–81. See also Jan Ziolkowski’s discussion of similar plays on meter, grammar, gender, and sex in Alan of Lille’s Grammar of Sex (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1985), esp. 23–7; and Malte Urban, “Rhetoric of Riddling,” 85. That Gower would use enigma so prominently in his text (albeit a Latin text) is interesting, because it shows a correspondence in voices both authoritarian and seditious — both privileged and marginalized. I have argued (“From Head to Foot,” 153, 157) that the rebels of 1381, as depicted in Book I of the Vox, employ similar “knife tricks” in decapitating heads of state and swapping body parts to their own empowerment.

63 Itō, *John Gower*, 263.
70 If I am correct in thinking Gower compares their acts of violence on heads of state with violent play with syllabic heads and feet in his graphic riddles, the rebels’ rhetoric is something Gower compares to his own rhetoric, lending a kinship and oblique sophistication to their voices. See “Head to Foot,” 144–60.
71 Zarins, “Rich Words,” 43–5. Gower’s application of *rime riche* is especially telling in three tales from Book V, the book of Avarice: “Tale of the Two Coffers” (CA V. 2273–390), the subsequent “Tale of the Beggars and the Pasties” (CA V. 2391–441), and the “Tale of Adrian and Bardus” (CA V. 4937–5162).
74 “O Lady, for the remembrance of your honor and your pleasure, I want to write your names. For I have such hope in you that if I thus name you humbly, you will alleviate my burdens. Therefore, I will prepare my tongue, and I will completely obey my heart; I will write your blessed names as best I can, according to my poor ability, to the end that I may have, my Lady, your good will.” *Mirour de l’Omm*, 395.
82 Georgiana Donavin, “Rhetorical Gower.”