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Masculinity

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Whilst early work on gender history focused on representations of women and on their social experience, in recent years masculinity has gradually emerged, not without some difficulty, as a legitimate category of historical analysis.¹ Studying John Gower's works through the lens of masculinity poses many of the same methodological difficulties which have attended the historical study of masculinity as a whole.² Whilst women can seem to be a clearly identifiable object of study, masculinity is more difficult to define. This is partly because many of our sources take a male point of view for granted, dealing with women as an exception from an assumed male norm. Paradoxically, this can make it easy to forget when it is in fact adult males who are at issue. In the case of John Gower, although his works often deal with women, and can be sympathetic to their plight, a number of scholars have argued that his moral and literary project is focussed on masculine experience.³

Women are far from forgotten in Gower's works, but if his major poetic works are united by a common moral enterprise, as many scholars have argued, this project does seem to entail

¹ The possibility of the history of masculinity was opened up by Joan W. Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review*, 91 (1986), pp. 1053-75, and developed by John Tosh, 'What should historians do with masculinity? Reflections on nineteenth-century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), pp. 179-202.

² For reviews of the early work in the field see Karen Harvey and Alex Shepard, 'What have Historians done with Masculinity? Reflections on Five Centuries of British History, circa 1500 to 1950', *Journal of British Studies*, 44 (2005), pp. 274-80. For a critical look back, John Tosh, 'The History of Masculinity: An Outdated Concept?' in Sean Brady and John Arnold, eds, *What is Masculinity? Historical Arguments and Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 17-34. For the particular case of medieval studies see Christopher Fletcher, 'The Whig Interpretation of Masculinity? Honour and Sexuality in Late Medieval Manhood', in Brady and Arnold, eds, *What is Masculinity?*, pp. 57-75; Fletcher, '“Sire, uns hom sui” : Transgression et inversion par rapport à quelle(s) norme(s) dans l'histoire des masculinités médiévales ?', *Micrologus' Library*, 78 (2017), pp. 23-50.

³ A.S.G. Edwards, 'Gower's Women in the Confessio', *Mediaevalia*, 16 (1993), pp. 223-37; Diane Watt, 'Gender and Sexuality in *Confessio Amantis*' in Sian Echard, ed., *A Companion to Gower* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 197-213, esp. 197; Amanda M. Leff, 'Writing, Gender and Power in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Exemplaria*, 20 (2008), pp. 28-47. For earlier views which stressed Gower's empathy for women's plight, see Derek Pearsall, 'Gower's Narrative Art', *PMLA*, 81 (1966), pp. 475-84, reprinted in Peter Nicholson, ed., *Gower's Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1991), pp. 62-80; Linda Barney Burke, 'Women in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Mediaevalia*, 3 (1977), pp. 239-59. Later writers continue to find in Gower a critic of the sufferings imposed on women, notably in courtly romance, e.g. Carolyn Dinshaw, 'Rivalry, Rape and Manhood: Gower and Chaucer' in Anna Roberts, ed., *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp. 137-70, although such interpretations do not deny Gower's male-centredness.

the formation of a certain kind of subject who is usually male. In the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Mirour de l'omme*, for example, women figure less prominently than either the male clerical estates, the knights, lawyers or merchants, whose sins occupy the bulk of the estates parts of these poems. When Gower cites women as the occasion for the sexual sins of male priests (VC: III.1581-1622); monks (VC: IV.431-490; MO: 21048-21060); kings (MO: 22779-22824); and knights (VC: V.19-468), it is the correction of male morality which concerns him. He does deal with nuns on their own account, regarding them as more likely to fall into sin than men, and consequently more meritorious if they succeed in resisting it (VC: IV.547-676).⁴ Women also figure amongst Gower's urban sinners although not, interestingly, amongst noble miscreants. Female bourgeois are targeted for finery which would be worthy of a countess (MO: 25681-25704). Although Triche is a male merchant in the *Mirour* (MO: 25177-26220), Fraud in the *Vox* is a female tradesperson (VC: V.735-834), and Gower notes that both regrating and its attendant sins are normally a woman's business (MO: 26329-26340). This, though, is the limit of Gower's concern with women in two poems dominated by the extensive treatment of the sins of ecclesiastical and noble males. Given that Gower's avowed object is less to raise indignation at the sins of others than to inspire his audience to correct themselves (CA: Prol. 514-528; VC: III.9-42), it has to be said that men are better served than women in the range of moral exempla offered in his major works. Even in the *Cinkante Balades*, although the female addressee of forty-five of these is given the opportunity to reply in the other five, most critics have read the work as a whole as a process by which the male speaker approaches his moral fulfilment.⁵ Likewise in the *Confessio Amantis* although women feature prominently both in the stories Gower tells and in the poem's framing narrative, many recent critics have remarked upon a tendency to return to a masculine perspective. Genius and Amans even when they are talking about women, conspire to draw the moral for men.⁶ In a way comparable to the treatment of the peasant rebels in Book I of the *Vox Clamantis*,⁷ it has

⁴ See Mathew Irvin, 'Genius and Sensual Reading in the *Vox Clamantis*' in Dutton, Hines and Yeager, eds, *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, pp. 196-205,

⁵ Holly Barbaccia, 'The Woman's Response in John Gower's *Cinkante Balades*', in Elisabeth Dutton, John Hines and Robert F. Yeager, eds, *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), pp. 230-8; Robert F. Yeager, 'John Gower's French', in Siân Echard, ed., *A Companion to Gower* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 137-51, at 147.

⁶ See e.g. the story of Rosiphelee and Jophthah's daughter, which Amans interrupts to demand advice applicable to men, CA: IV.1596-1607, discussed in Isabel Davis, 'John Gower's Fear of Flying: Transitional Masculinities in the *Confessio Amantis*', in Nicola F. McDonald and W.M. Ormrod, eds, *Rites of Passage: Cultures of Transition in the Fourteenth Century* (Woodbridge: Boydell/York Medieval Press, 2004), pp. 131-152, at 136; and the use of the story of the Trojan horse, CA: I.1077-1225, discussed below. For further examples see Edwards, 'Gower's Women' and Leff, 'Writing, Gender and Power'.

⁷ For a reading of book I of the VC as Gower's inclusion of the rebellion of 1381 as part of his moral self, see Isabel Davis, 'Calling: Langland, Gower, and Chaucer on Saint Paul', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*,

been argued that women in the *Confessio* serve as a stimulus to action and self-exploration on the part of the male, educated, gentry or noble public who formed both his imagined and much of his actual audience.⁸

The would-be analyst of the role of masculinity in Gower's work thus shares the first difficulty experienced by historians of masculinity: how to make visible what is simply assumed. Recent critics have responded to this challenge by reading Gower through modern theoretical categories, for example concentrating on male heterosexual sexuality or on fatherhood as themes which can be linked objectively to certain kinds of male experience, even if they are not experienced by all men.⁹ Another possible approach would be to analyse Gower's writing in the context of models of manhood and youth which were available in contemporary scholastic writing and in didactic works such as preaching, encyclopaedia and 'mirrors for princes'.¹⁰ Yet these two methods both have drawbacks if they are employed exclusively. It can be difficult to navigate between modern theoretical models and medieval conceptual structures, and there is a high risk of unacknowledged slippage between the two.¹¹ On the other hand, a contextualising approach based on normative works necessarily privileges interpretations which a highly or even adequately read public would ideally read into Gower's works, and discards as misreading their likely reception by the partially educated and the inattentive, who nonetheless make up a substantial proportion of any audience.

The present article thus pursues a different, complementary method, focusing on lexicon and the use of words. This approach, pioneered by the German *Begriffsgeschichte* and the French school of *textométrie*, has not often been employed by historians of late medieval England.¹² This methodology does not annul or supersede methods based either on other

34 (2012), pp. 53-94, at 79-81, 85-9, 91-3. The sins of labourers also have an 'added on' feel in the *Mirour*, dispatched in 59 lines at the end of 8100 dedicated to the sins of the estates (MO: 26425-26484).

⁸ For Gower's implied and actual audiences: A.I. Doyle and M.B. Parkes, 'The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century', in M.B. Parkes and A.G. Watson, eds, *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries* (London: Scolar Press, 1978), pp. 163-210; Derek Pearsall, 'The Gower Tradition' in Alastair J. Minnis, ed., *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1983), pp. 179-97, at 184; Kate Harris, 'Ownership and Readership: Studies in the Provenance of the Manuscripts of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', Unpublished University of York D.Phil. thesis (1993).

⁹ Maria Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower's Confessio Amantis: Authority, Family, State and Violence* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000); Isabel Davis, 'John Gower's "strange places": errant masculinity in the *Confessio Amantis*', in Isabel Davis, *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 76-107.

¹⁰ An approach taken in the analysis of fifteenth-century kingship and masculinity presented by Katherine Lewis, *Kingship and Masculinity in Late Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹¹ See Fletcher, 'Whig Interpretation'.

¹² For *Begriffsgeschichte*: Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, trans. T.S. Presner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). For a late medieval case study inspired by this approach: Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University

kinds of close-reading, on the identification of intertextuality, or on the analysis of Gower's literary project in terms of medieval literary theory.¹³ Rather, by focusing on particular lexical items across a large corpus, or simply a very large text like the *Confessio Amantis*, it foregrounds how less attentive audiences were likely to understand them, those who only half-remembered their Giles of Rome but who understood and practised the Middle English language.¹⁴ This study is focussed on the *Confessio Amantis*, and the use within it of a number of key words, notably 'man' and 'manhood'. The use of the vocabulary of manhood in the *Confessio*, a relatively late work in Gower's oeuvre (composed c.1386-1390) cannot stand in for his works as a whole, and a full study would need to analyse his complete oeuvre in three languages. Yet there are a number of reasons for beginning with the *Confessio*. First, the *Confessio* is of particular interest amongst his major works as a poem which, being written in Middle English, was accessible to learned, unlearned and semi-learned audiences. Second, through the changing dedications attached to its various recensions, the author of the *Confessio* sought to attach this work to the political world of the late 1380s and 1390s, a period in which the nature of manhood was of crucial political importance.¹⁵ By moving from lexical analysis, to a concentration on particular sections of the *Confessio*, and then back to their resonance with contemporary political events, all whilst keeping different meanings of manhood always in view, I hope to offer new perspectives both on the interpretation of Gower's works and on late fourteenth-century political culture.

of Pennsylvania Press, 1998). For application of this approach to early modern England: Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010). For a different, lexically-based approach: Christopher Fletcher, *Richard II: Manhood, Youth and Politics, 1377-99* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). For *textométrie*: Fletcher, 'What makes a political language? Key terms, profit and damage in the Common Petition of the English Parliament, 1343-1422' in Jan Dumolyn, Jelle Haemers, H.R. Oliva Herrer and Vincent Challet, eds, *The Voices of the People in Late Medieval Europe: Communication and Popular Politics* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 91-106, at 93-5.

¹³ For approaches based on literary theory which emphasize the structural unity of Gower's works: Alastair J. Minnis, 'John Gower, *Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics', *Medium Ævum*, 49 (1980), pp. 207-29 and Minnis, 'Moral Gower and Medieval Literary Theory' in Minnis, ed., *Gower's Confessio Amantis: Responses and Reassessments* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1983), pp. 50-78; James Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

¹⁴ On the use and reception of Giles of Rome, see S.H. Rigby, 'Aristotle for Aristocrats and Poets : Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum* as a Theodicy of Privilege', *The Chaucer Review*, 46 (2012), pp. 259-313; Charles Briggs, *Giles of Rome's De Regimine Principum: Reading and Writing Politics at Court and University, c. 1275-c.1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ For the dedications, see George B. Stow, 'Richard II in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*: Some Historical Perspectives', *Mediaevalia*, 16 (1993), pp. 3-31.

Manhood was of particular importance in different ways throughout the reign of Richard II (1377-99) as a result of a complex and changing set of political circumstances.¹⁶ As a result of this king's accession at the age of ten, and of the political and social instability caused by an expensive, losing war on the continent, the 1380s were marked by a series of violent confrontations in which the question of whether the king should be treated as a man or a boy was central. From the age of thirteen onwards, the young king was considered to be in his full powers even as all parties were aware that a man of knightly class in his position would be a minor.¹⁷ This difficult situation put the question of the king's manhood to the fore. One strategy pursued by the king and those about him to demonstrate his manhood and hence his personal authority was to push for a royal military campaign on the continent, and thus win 'honour and manhood'.¹⁸ This project was unimpeachable in ideological terms, but it was undermined by rival schemes, by the fear of revolt, and by the belief that money granted for war would be siphoned off for other uses, a doubly frustrating experience for the king since the liberality of his household was another means to demonstrate manhood.¹⁹ Instead, just as he reached the age of eighteen, Richard II was forced to accept the re-imposition of compulsory counsel-taking mechanisms which had been removed when he was thirteen years old. The king's attempts to resist these mechanisms reached a climax in the defeat of his allies at the battle of Radcot Bridge in 1387 and the exile or execution of his friends and supporters in the Merciless Parliament of 1388.²⁰

Thus whilst the *Confessio Amantis* was being composed, the young king to whom it was initially dedicated was undergoing a series of humiliations in which he was denied the full status of a man. This state of affairs, and Richard II's reaction to it, resonated strongly with contemporary concepts of manhood as they are apparent in the broader use of the language of 'manhood' and 'manly' action. In the 1390s, that is to say after the composition of the *Confessio* but during the period of its first circulation, the king's manhood took on a different resonance. In contemporary language, one significant kind of 'manly' action was to take revenge.²¹ After a period of uneasy peace, during which it was not clear whether Richard had forgotten his earlier humiliations, even as he gradually assumed the powers which would normally be wielded by an adult king, it finally became apparent that he had forgiven and forgotten nothing. In 1397-99, he took judicial revenge on those who had humiliated him in the

¹⁶ For a full discussion, see Fletcher, *Richard II*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 97-150. For the king's honour and manhood, *Ibid.*, pp. 146-7.

¹⁹ On household expenditure, which was actually very restrained in the 1380s, but which was rendered problematic by the ongoing debt occasioned by the royal wedding of 1382 and by the continuing desire to control royal finances, see *Ibid.*, pp. 194-204.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-191.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-5.

1380s, ultimately provoking his own deposition at the hands of the *Confessio*'s other dedicatee, Henry Bolingbroke, earl of Derby.²² Although Gower did not react to these events by revising the presentation of manhood in later recensions of the *Confessio*, it is possible to detect a change of emphasis, and the assumption of a narrower position within the full range of the possible meanings of manhood after the deposition of Richard II in his revisions to certain passages of the *Vox Clamantis* and in his *Cronica Tripertita*.

This article thus attempts to make a contribution to the study of masculinity in John Gower's works and in contemporary political culture in four interlinked ways. First, it examines how the word 'man' was used in the *Confessio Amantis* and what this suggests about the 'point of view' of this work. Second, it analyses the vocabulary of 'manhood' and 'manly' action in the *Confessio* in order to establish how Gower's use of these words was situated within the range of possibilities offered by the Middle English language. Third, it turns to a specific book within the *Confessio*, book I on the sin of Pride, to show how Gower in this text seeks to moderate and control certain of the contemporary associations of manhood. Finally, it contrasts the treatment of one theme closely linked to contemporary concepts of manhood – that of vengeance and justice – in one tale in book III of the *Confessio*, compiled like the rest of this text in the late 1380s, with the portrayal of the manhood of Richard II after his deposition in Gower's revisions to the *Vox Clamantis*, and in his *Cronica Tripertita*. It will be argued that Gower's desire to moderate lay noble manhood ultimately provides little practical guidance as to where precisely the just measure of manhood might be found. In the end it is only hindsight that enables the moralist to select from contemporary commonplace and indeed from his own earlier works to declare which manifestations of manhood ought to be emulated and which ought to be shunned.

What is a 'man' in the *Confessio Amantis*?

What, then, does a 'textometric' approach tell us about the presentation of 'man', 'manhood' and 'manly' action in the *Confessio Amantis*?²³ First, it is possible to gain an impression of what a 'man' is or normally is in this poem by analysing the use of 'man' and 'wyht'. Focusing on these lexical items or 'lemma' provides support for those critics who argue for the male-

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 249-274.

²³ The following analysis was made using the text of the *Confessio Amantis* available online in the Middle English Corpus of Prose and Verse, University of Michigan: <<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/>>. This text was prepared using the lemmatisation platform PALM <<http://palm.huma-num.fr/PALM/>>, developed as part of the European Research Council project 'Signs and States'. It was then analysed using TXM, a software package which permits the exploration (concordances, contexts...) and statistical analysis (cooccurrences; lexical progression; factorial analysis) of a digitized textual corpus, developed at the École Normale Supérieure, Lyon: <<http://textometrie.ens-lyon.fr/>>.

centredness of this work. Putting together variant spellings, singulars and plurals, Gower uses the lemma 'man' 878 times in the course of the *Confessio*, and 'wyht' some 66 times, compared with 135 instances of 'woman' and 180 uses of 'wife'. Both can be used to refer to human beings or people in general, for example at the end of the world when 'every man schal thanne arise / To Joie or elles to Juise [i.e. bitterness]...' (Prol.1041-2); or when Genius declares that 'natheles a man mai se' (IV.1227) how nowadays many do not know what love is; or declares, as a universal truth, that 'schame hindreth every wyht' (VII.1967). 'This man' can be used to denote an individual who has been invoked earlier in the same passage, although this is only ever done for males: no woman is referred to as 'this man' (I.2138, 2578; III.1255 VI.1190, 1728; VII.2458; VIII.762, 802, 845, 917, 1441, 1448, 1466). 'Wyht', on the other hand, can be used of both men and women: the hag in the tale of Florent, for example, is referred to as 'this olde wyht' (I.1548, 1672) or 'that foule wyht' (I.1785); but the same word is also used, for example, to denote the 'yonge cler' who assists the future Boniface VIII in persuading Celestine V to abdicate by becoming his 'prive wyht' (II.2858).

In the case of 'man', further information can be garnered by focussing on the use of this lemma in opposition (antinomy), or in lists. 'Man' is thus sometimes placed in opposition to 'beste' in phrases such as 'Noght as a man bot as a beste' (I.1240); 'For he was half man and half beste' (V.5276); 'Which myhte grieve man or beste' (VII.929).²⁴ It is also placed in lists which suggest that 'man' and 'beste' are different things, such as: 'For every man and bridd and beste, / And flour and gras and rote and rinde...' (I.3260-1); 'Of man, of beste, of herbe, of ston / Of fische, of foughl, of everychon / That ben of bodely substance...' (VII.139-141). 'Man' is sometimes distinguished from a god or an angel, for example: 'bothe angel and man ... obeien goddes myht' (VII.7117-9); 'An other god of Hercules / Thei made, which was natheles / A man...' (V.1083-1085).²⁵ These usages imply that a 'man' is a being which is not a god, an angel or an animal. On this evidence alone, we might think that a 'man' was simply a human being. Elsewhere, however, 'man' is used in opposition to 'woman' or 'wife', for example: 'Yit makth a man the ferste chace, / The womman fleth and he pourseith' (VII.4286-7); 'Which of the tuo more amorous is / Or man or wife...' (III.745-6).²⁶ It is thus often clear that 'man' refers not just to a human being but specifically to an adult male. When one female character changes sex, we are told that Cupid '[t]ransformeth Iphe into a man...' (IV.501). Iphe is already a human being, now she becomes a male human being. We are told that Minerva 'was wyse, and of a man / The wit and reson which he can / Is in the celles of the brayn...' (V.1461-3), and are

²⁴ See also III.383, 2596-8. 'Man' is on one occasion a privileged subset of 'beste': 'That ilke ymage bar liknesse / Of man and of non other beste.' (I.908-9).

²⁵ See also VII.2462-7.

²⁶ See also IV.1516; V.2569-70, 4175-7.

warned how 'a man ... leve that a man schal do' through effeminate stupidity (VII.4303-5). In these examples, 'a man' is clearly an adult male.²⁷

On a number of occasions, when Gower talks in general about what 'a man' might do, in a way which might at first seem to refer to all human beings, he then quickly uses a masculine pronoun, raising the suspicion that 'man' does not apply to females in these cases but only to males. This seems likely not only when the subject is boasting or military activity, for example when we are told that 'Good is therfore a man to hide / His oghne pris...' (I.2648-9), or 'In time of werre a man is fre / Himself, his hous and ek his lond / Defende with his oghne hond...' (III.2236-8), but also when moral self-improvement and rhetorical technique are in question, for example when the lesson is that 'Ther may a man the sothe wite, / If that he wolde ensample take...' (IV.3312-3), or 'Hou Tullius his Rethorique / Componeth, ther a man mai pike / Hou that he schal hise wordes sette' (VII.1589-91). On occasion, Gower also makes an opposition between 'god' and 'man' in a context which makes clear that women are not included with the latter. When Alexander's mother 'thoghte hou that sche was deceived, / That sche hath of a man conceived, / And wende a god it hadde be...' (VI.2331-3), 'a man' is not just a human being, but also specifically an adult male.

An analysis of the use of 'man' in the *Confessio* thus confirms what recent critics have argued on the basis of the analysis of particular passages or the structural characteristics of his works: that Gower, although superficially offering instruction for all humanity, is above all concerned with the male half of that population.²⁸ Even without understanding Gower's moral and literary project, anyone capable of understanding Middle English would have absorbed, without necessarily being able to say exactly why, that for Gower a 'man' was normally an adult male. To an extent this was a characteristic that he shared with many contemporary writers, and with contemporary culture as a whole, but it does suggest that Gower's moral project was not equally concerned with female and male experience.

Moreover, when the connotations of words which superficially share the same referent ('man') are considered, such as 'manly' and 'manhood', a rather less mainstream Gower emerges.²⁹ In these cases, it can be shown that Gower mobilizes many of the common uses of these words, but neglects others. This partiality, once revealed, makes it possible to demonstrate the selectivity of Gower's presentation of manhood. This has consequences not

²⁷ Cf. the discussion of jealousy in Book V, in which the husband is referred to throughout simply as 'a man' (452-69).

²⁸ That said, Gower does use the word 'mankinde' 11 times in the *Confessio*, always referring to mankind in opposition to God, a god or the gods: II.3108, 3387; IV.2443; V.1609, 4110; VI.7; VII.1033, 3336, 3820; VIII.67, 82,

²⁹ On the ambiguity of 'man' and its consequences for the semantics of 'manhood', 'manly', etc.: Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 25-8.

only for understanding how his moral project was situated in contemporary society and culture, but also sheds light on a different kind of selectivity, specifically in the way in which he deals with contemporary politics. Gower's works contain within them tools which can be used to attack his own later presentation of political events. This opens up the broader question of how Gower's works might legitimately be read, whether in terms of his general authorial project, or the possible counter-readings which persisted, despite his best efforts.

The nature of 'manhood' in the *Confessio Amantis*

How did Gower's works relate to commonplace associations of manhood as they circulated in the language and culture of late medieval England?³⁰ At its simplest, in Middle English 'manly' action denoted strength, energy and forceful activity, especially when an individual was hard pressed, particularly in battle.³¹ This language was an inheritance of the Latin language, of classical philosophy and medical theory, but it was nonetheless still active not only in medieval Latin but also in late medieval vernacular languages and in everyday assumptions about the particular characteristics of an ideal adult male human being.³² From the later Roman republic and into the early middle ages, the ideal qualities of a man were summed up in the concept of *virtus* which retained its etymological link to the *vir*: the man.³³ It has been argued that in the Roman republic *virtus* was dominated by courage, physical force and military efficiency.³⁴ Nevertheless, long before the arrival of Christianity, *virtus* had begun to take on moral connotations, under the influence of the Stoic association between manly strength and moral resistance.³⁵ In the hands of Christian writers, this mobilisation of the strength and constancy of the *vir* in the face of moral as well as physical challenges was redeployed to permit converted Roman nobles to show *virtus* by suffering patiently.³⁶ The Latin Middle Ages inherited this

³⁰ For a survey of the late medieval language and theory of manhood: Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 25-73. For the early and central medieval background: Fletcher, '“Sire, uns hom sui”'.

³¹ *MED*, 'manli (adj.)', 3; 'manli (adv.(1))', 2. Additional examples and commentary in Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 32-9.

³² For earlier medieval examples, see Fletcher, '“Sire uns hom sui”', pp. 38-42. For a comparable language in late medieval Spanish, see Hipólito Rafael Oliva Herrero, 'Masculinity and Political Struggle in the Cities of the Crown of Castile at the End of the Middle Ages', in Christopher Fletcher, Sean Brady, Rachel Moss and Lucy Riall, eds, *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 161-178.

³³ Mathew Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), pp. 19-20, 31, 68-9; Myles McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 12-71

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-141.

³⁶ Kuefler, *Manly Eunuch*, pp. 105-17.

double conception of *virtus*.³⁷ On the one hand, the nature of man was thought to derive from physical strength. On the other, virtue continued to be seen as a struggle, and virtuous living required manly vigour.³⁸

Gower uses 'manhood' twenty-one times in the course of the *Confessio Amantis*. On at least eight of these occasions, this lemma is used to denote military effectiveness, courage and strength.³⁹ When a 'worthi povere kniht' pursues his case at the court of Julius Caesar, finally obtaining personal justice by confidently asserting his military ability and his suffering on an earlier campaign in Africa, we are told from the start that he 'lacketh nothing of manhede' (VII.2070). It is the 'mighty hond of his manhode / As he which hath ynowh knihthode' which permits Philip of Macedon sorely to grieve the Romans (II.1639-1640). The Trojans, too, hesitate to make war on the Greeks because, 'Stant nou in Grece the manhode / Of worthinesse and of knighthode...' which has enabled them to conquer all Europe (V.7337-8). Gower also uses 'manhood' to refer to energy which is not only military but which also invokes more general qualities of vigour and the avoidance of Sloth. Thus, when Genius defines Pusillanimity as the characteristic of 'He that hath litel corage / And dar no mannes werk beginne' (IV.316-7), he asserts that he who suffers from this vice is always fearful and 'woll no manhed understonde' (325). In the same vein, when Amans asks Genius to provide examples of knightly deeds done for love, Genius advises that the lover should 'for no Slowthe lette / To do what longeth to manhede' (2033), and concludes his examples with the assurance that 'wommen loven worthinesse / Of manhode and of gentillesse' (2197-80). This kind of 'gentillesse' is not simply a matter of riches and good birth, however. Instead 'love honeste' makes the villain courteous and the coward hardy, 'so that verrai prouesse / Is caused upon loves reule / To him that can manhode reule' (2302-4). Elsewhere in the *Confessio*, Genius mobilizes manhood specifically to admonish those rulers who fear to slay in a just cause. This is not Pity but Pusillanimity: 'For if manhode be restreigned, / Or be it pes or be it werre, / Justice goth al out of here, / So that knyhtode is set behinde.' (VII.3540-43)

The resonances of 'manhood' in late medieval England went considerably beyond these basic associations with energy, courage and military accomplishment. 'Manhood' was

³⁷ Silke Schwandt, *Virtus: Zur Semantik eines politischen Konzepts im Mittelalter* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2014).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 9, esp. pp. 187-91; Fletcher, ' "Sire, uns hom sui" ', pp. 38-42. For the use of *viriliter* in the metaphor of a combat against sin in central medieval monastic sources, see Katherine Allen Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011).

³⁹ 'At least' because it is not always possible to be sure of the connotations of a usage which also has a simpler referent, for example when knightly youths are brought up to manhood (II.794, III.1964) discussed below.

also a synonym for honour, both in the sense of renown and of worthiness of respect.⁴⁰ Gower uses it seven times in this sense in the course of the *Confessio*.⁴¹ 'Manhood' in one sense was the honour which was acquired by those who accomplished military deeds, much like the Greeks in the examples given above. Gower tells the story, for example, of an Emperor's son, frustrated by the *pax romana*, 'Whos herte stod upon knythode: / Bot most of all of his manhode...' (II.2513-4). He takes service with the Sultan so that he can accumulate military renown and hence social status. The spectrum of uses of 'manhood' went beyond purely military renown, to honour in the sense of social status, and finally to honour in the sense of morally right action. The poor knight who petitioned Julius Caesar (VII.2070) wished to stress not only his military deeds but also the respect and good treatment which he deserved.

Whilst remaining closely tied to military deeds, 'manhood' could be undone by shameful or dishonourable behaviour. Thus when Ulysses feigns madness in order to avoid participating in the Trojan war, Nauplius berates him both for the use of a subterfuge, which 'is gret schame to a king' (IV.1862) and for the neglect of his military reputation when he 'for Slouthe of eny love ... leve of armes the kythode, / Which is pris of thi manhode' (1877, 1879-80). Ulysses' trickery thus threatens his manhood not only in the sense of military renown but also in the sense of personal reputation and social standing. In his discussion of chastity in Book VII of the *Confessio*, Gower explicitly plays on the link between 'manhood' as renown and 'manhood' as worthiness of respect associated with honourable action. Having dealt with truth, largesse and pity with justice, Genius turns to chastity, which turns out to be a requirement, first of all, of manhood in the sense of honourable behaviour. Every good man knows that at marriage:

His trouthe pliht lith in morgage
Which if he breke, it is falshode,
And that descordeth to manhode. (VII.4228-30)

This is especially true of princes, who should avoid falling into 'such riote / And namely that he nassote / To change for the wommanhede / The worthinesse of his manhede.' (VII.4253-6). The meaning of '[t]o change for the wommanhede' is at first ambiguous: it is not initially clear whether the king risks losing his manhood on account of womankind or in exchange for their characteristics. As the discussion continues, the latter reading comes to the fore at the same

⁴⁰ *MED*, 'manhede', 2c, 3e. Cf. *MED*, 'manli (adj.)', 4a; 'manli (adv.(1))', 4a, 4c. For discussion: Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 25-44. See also Derek G. Neal, *The Masculine Self in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 13-55. For comparable resonances in medieval Spanish, see Oliva Herrer, 'Masculinity and Political Struggle'.

⁴¹ In addition to the examples discussed in this section, see also I.1212, 3044, considered in the next part of this article.

time as the political consequences of such behaviour. A man who loses his wits for love becomes effeminate, and 'leve that a man schal do' (4305). Genius then presents the example of King Sardanapaulus, as an example of a prince who 'for love himself mislede / Wherof manhode stode behind' (4310-11). Sardanapaulus does not only become 'wommannyssh', he spends so much time with women that he starts to make lace, weave purses and sew on pearls (4332-4). '[T]his king in wommanhede / Was falle fro chivalerie' (4336-7), and is soon deposed by a more militarily-minded opponent. Thus whilst Gower often employs 'manhood' to refer to energy and vigour, especially in a military context, and to the renown which is acquired by deeds of military courage, he also uses it to refer to the honourable reputation which is lost by subterfuge, duplicity, and by effeminacy in the sense of assuming feminine occupations and feminine characteristics.

These were not the only ways that 'manhood' and its cognates could be used in Middle English, yet these usages occur more rarely in the *Confessio Amantis* than those carrying connotations of military and moral courage. Gower uses 'manhede' in opposition to divinity, in the case of the manhood of Christ, apparently without any other connotations (V.1772); as a generic way of talking about all men, sometimes possibly including female human beings (Prol.260); sometimes in explicit opposition to women (VII.1878). He also uses this word to refer to the adulthood of a male individual, perhaps with the idea of strength also, as when a youth, raised to be a knight, is 'updrawe into manhede' (II.794; cf. III.1964). Another use of 'manhood' in Middle English was as a synonym for largesse, a usage which linked together the qualities of *virtus*, of Christian *humanitas*, and the generosity which attached to the status of a noble or a knight.⁴² Gower employs this link between manhood and largesse only once, and then it is embedded in a metaphor in which 'lack of manhode' is shown by men who ungenerously and jealously keep tabs on their wives (V.455). On the one occasion in the *Confessio* in which Gower uses the adjective 'manlich', it is used in a context of vengeance. After the rape and suicide of Lucretia, Brutus 'with a manlich herte' drives her husband and father to leave their sorrow and avenge the deed (VII.5093-5105).⁴³ Yet nowhere else in the *Confessio* does Gower make the link between 'manhood' and vengeance which is found, for example, in Middle English romance.⁴⁴

A survey of Gower's use of 'manhood' and its cognates in the *Confessio* leaves the impression that he approves of the 'manhood' of energy and vigour, of the 'manhood' of social status and reputation, and of military renown. Reading this work through the lens of 'manhood', it is very difficult to accept the view that Gower was a pacifist, rather than simply a critic of

⁴² *MED*, 'manhede', 2d. Cf. *MED*, 'manli (adj.)', 4b; 'manli (adv.(1))', 4b; Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 45-56.

⁴³ Gower uses the expression '[w]ith manful herte' on another occasion, simply to imply courage. See VII.2881.

⁴⁴ For examples: Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 34-5.

certain kinds of war which he considered to be unjust.⁴⁵ Arguably, it was because the rightness of these associations were so widely assumed, and shared by Gower, that they have been neglected at the expense of the criticisms of Genius and Amans of particular kinds of knightly violence to be found in Books III, IV and V. It is also clear that in Gower's view neither the manhood of energy, of martial renown, or of social standing could be dissociated from the manhood accrued by faithfulness to one's word and the avoidance of double-dealing. Moreover, although Gower's use of 'manhood' in the *Confessio* suggests enthusiasm for the connotations of physical energy and moral rectitude which lay within the semantic range of 'manhood', he made only limited use of the associations of this term with largesse or vengeance, linking each to the 'manhood' of renown and social status only once, and then indirectly. To explore the significance of these findings, however, the 'view from above' provided by computer-aided discourse analysis is not enough, and we have to return to more traditional methods of close reading.

Pride and social status: moderating manhood

The theme of manhood and how it ought to be understood is considered most directly in Book I of the *Confessio Amantis*, which is concerned with the sin of Pride. In this book, as in the discussion of Chastity in Book VII although at greater length, Gower does not simply deploy certain conventional uses of manhood and neglect others, he actively seeks to impose a certain vision of manhood. He advocates a view of manhood which is opposed, quite conventionally, to duplicity and double-dealing, but also, more controversially, to other forms of manhood as renown or social standing.

In the first tale illustrating the sin of Pride, which is presented by Genius as an example of Hypocrisy, the priests of Isis assist a duke in impersonating their god in order to have sex with a virtuous and married noblewoman, Paulina (l.761-1076). This tale is glossed as an illustration of the hypocrisy of the worldly priests (1023-1036). It is quickly followed with another tale of trickery: a variation on the tale of the Trojan Horse (1077-1189). This is portrayed as a lesson both not to trust 'such a peple' (1193) and for women to beware of men who feign their 'trowthe' (1199), a moral which resonates with the plight of Paulina. Nonetheless, Genius glosses these stories for the benefit of Amans as a lesson in the correct nature of manhood:

Forthi, my Sone, as I thee mene,

⁴⁵ For the suggestion of pacifism: Robert F. Yeager, 'Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 9 (1987), pp. 97-121; Nigel Saul, 'A farewell to arms? Criticism of warfare in late fourteenth-century England' in C. Given-Wilson, ed., *Fourteenth Century England: II* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), pp. 131-145.

It sit the wel to taken hiede
That thou eschue of thi manhiede
Ipocrisie and his semblant (l.1210-1213)

'Manhiede' here refers to honourable and trustworthy conduct and the avoidance of falseness. This vision of manhood is then developed as the discussion passes to the vice of disobedience. 'Inobedience' consists of not bowing to God, but instead following one's own will (1235-9). This is then developed, putting animality to the fore:

Noght as a man bot as a beste,
Which goth upon his lustes wilde,
So goth this proude vice unmylde,
That he desdeigneth alle lawe: (1240-3)

Being a 'man' as opposed to an animal means following 'the reule of conscience' and being sufficiently humble to obey God and, when appropriate, his fellow men (1244-1251).

The remainder of Book I of the *Confessio* deals with the more difficult issue of how to temper the need for honour and manhood in the sense of the need for the respect and recognition due to one's station. The tales which follow deal with this difficult balancing act for men of gentle, noble and especially kingly status: how to reconcile the necessary defence and display of one's own social status against the Christian requirement of humility. Gower next presents the Tale of Florent, his own version of the story told by Chaucer as the Wife of Bath's Tale (l.1407-1861).⁴⁶ Florent is a much more positive character than Chaucer's rapist knight, being a 'worthi knight' (1408) who seeks deeds of arms 'for the fame of worldes speche' (1415). That is to say, he seeks the kind of 'manhood' pursued by the son of the Emperor in Book II (2513-4), and which makes the Trojans think twice about making war on Greece in Book V (7337-8). Trapped by his enemies, Florent is tricked into trading his life against the solution to the question of '[w]hat alle wommen most desire' (1481), and finally agrees to marry a repulsive old woman in exchange for the answer. When the hag keeps her side of the bargain, Florent experiences the necessity of marrying her (which he must do to keep his word) above all as a

⁴⁶ For a discussion of sources and different interpretations of this story, see Thomas Hahn, 'Old Wives' Tales and Masculine Intuition', in Thomas Hahn and Alan Lupack, eds, *Retelling Tales: Essays in Honor of Russell Peck* (Woodbridge, Brewer, 1997), pp. 91-108. For a recent view which argues for Gower as the first person to put this tale into its present form, see Russell A. Peck, 'Folklore and powerful women in Gower's "Tale of Florent"', in S. Elizabeth Passmore and Susan Carter, eds, *The English 'Loathly Lady' Tales: Boundaries, Traditions and Motifs* (Kalamazoo: West Michigan University, 2007), pp. 100-145.

threat to his social status and honour. He smuggles her into his castle by night and marries her in the dark so that no one knows what she looks like (1727-1761). His honourable in the sense of virtuous conduct (keeping his word) forces him to run the gauntlet of dishonour in the sense of the disapprobation of the world. Yet the magical conclusion of this story defuses this contradiction. When Florent discovers that, by night, she is magically transformed into a beautiful eighteen-year-old, he is faced with a further conundrum: would he prefer her beautiful at night and ugly during the day, or vice versa? When Florent, in despair, submits to her will, he is delivered through his humility from the necessity of choosing between private and public fulfilment: his wife is transformed on a permanent basis into a beautiful woman, daughter of a king (1821-61).

Book I follows a trajectory from Pride to Humility in a way which repeatedly touches on and seeks to moderate views of manhood as public honour and social status, specifically as a characteristic of knightly, noble men. The tale of the 'Trump of Death', for example, begins as the 'wys and honeste' (2024) king of Hungary rides out of the city, surrounded by 'lordes and with gret nobleie / Of lusti folk that were yonge' (2032-3). As he does so, however, he sees two pilgrims 'of so gret age' that they look almost as if they were dead (2041-7). When they ask him for charity, the king gets down from his carriage, and takes them in his arms, kissing their hands and feet, in full view of the 'lordes of his lond', who do not look kindly on their monarch's humility. Murmur and disdain arises amongst them, and they say

Eche unto othre: 'What is this?
Oure king hath do this thing amis,
So to abesse his realte
That every man it myhte se,
And humbled him in such a wise
To hem that were of non emprise.' (I.2061-66)

Already in this opening passage it is clear that the king will triumph over the backbiters who think only of their 'oghne Pride' (2060). When the king's brother brings to his attention the muttering amongst his lords that 'he dede such a schame / In hindringe of his oghne name' (2095-6), he is humiliated by the king, who sounds before his door the trumpet that signals his death. Nonetheless, although I would not for a moment suggest that this is Gower's intended interpretation, it is possible to read this incident against its own moral, since in terms of a number of contemporary conceptions of manhood, the murmuring courtiers have a point. The story carries a clear moralistic interpretation from the outset – thinking on death ought to lead one to Christian humility – but at the same time it is acknowledged that abasing oneself to one's social inferiors could be perceived as humiliating. Kings who were not as politically

secure as Hungarian kings of 'olde daies' (2023), and even more noblemen, knights or those with less sure of their social status, had to be careful whose hands and feet they kissed, whatever the dictates of Christian morality.⁴⁷

A slightly different approach to the need to reconcile forms of manhood related to personal status and honour with the virtue of humility occurs a little later in Book I in the tale of Albinus and Rosamund. This time, it is accepted that public honour is rightly associated with manly, military deeds. What goes wrong is when the celebration of personal renown is pushed to an exceptional extreme. At the beginning of this story, Albinus becomes king of Lombardy by defeating, amongst others, Gurmond, leader of the Geptes, whose skull he has made into a cup (2474-6). Then, once he has successfully conquered the entire country, Albinus marries Rosamund, Gurmond's daughter, since '[t]hei love ech other wonder wel' (1489). Now that he rules unchallenged, Albinus organises jousting and a feast, at which all the worthy knights speak of their deeds, inspiring the king to competitive boasting. Albinus calls for the cup, which is so covered in gold and jewels that it cannot be seen that it contains Gurmond's skull. He then bids his wife drink from it saying, ' "Drink with thi fader, Dame" ' (2551). The king then tells her in front of all present that the cup was made from her father's skull. This leads Rosamund '[t]o vengen hire upon this man' (2578) for his 'despit / Of hire and of hire fader bothe' (2580-2581), and she duly conspires with her maid and the king's butler to have the Albinus murdered. Yet it has to be said that, before Albinus went too far in humiliating her by the public performance of his killing of her father, Rosamund was prepared to accept him as her husband. This opens up the possibility of a more moderate attitude towards renown, in which social standing quite appropriately accrues through military victory – which, as we have seen, is implicitly accepted in the use of 'manhood' elsewhere in the *Confessio* – and that this well-merited reputation is only compromised by a very extreme form of boasting. Even as the manhood of renown is condemned for its excesses, the possibility of a more measured enjoyment of the social celebration of one's own military achievements remains an implicit possibility. Thus, in this tale, and in line with commonplace contemporary Aristotelianism, virtue can be found in a moderation. To that extent, Gower does acknowledge the legitimacy of manly honour, at least insofar as it is acquired by military deeds. The manhood of social status is not

⁴⁷ This reading of the 'Trump of Death' and the following readings of 'Rosamund and Albinus' and the 'Tale of Nebuchadnezzar' differ from those recently proposed by T. Matthew N. McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue: Ovid, Lay Religion, and English Poetry in the Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp. 156-161. For reasons that will become clear, I think it would be incorrect to read 'manhood' as simply the nature of mankind in the sense of humankind. If, as McCabe argues, for theologians humility can be a 'natural' virtue for human beings, it is one which Gower has to recommend in the opposition to alternative interpretations of 'manhood'.

simply dismissed by opposition to Christian humility, but is only condemned when it leads to the extreme, public humiliation of others, pushing them to violent revenge.

In the penultimate story against Pride – the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar – an excessive attachment to the conventional associations of manhood is placed in more radical opposition to Christian humility. First, Genius introduces the particular sub-sin which is to be targeted, in this case vainglory, by an attack on ‘new’, ever-changing fashions which an unambiguously male youth might adopt (2694-2702). Yet the tale which is used to condemn vainglory takes this sin in a different direction. Nebuchadnezzar is so full of vainglory that he forgets that there is any god but he (2799-2801). He is warned in a dream of his imminent humiliation by God, who will take away his ‘mannes herte’ and replace it with a ‘bestial’ one. He will lose his ‘mannes forme’ and eat grass ‘in the liknesse of a beste’ for seven years (2921-5). His only hope is to give alms, do justice with mercy and pray for God’s grace, but he does nothing of the sort, and his punishment duly falls. Nebuchadnezzar withdraws into the wild forest where he is transformed ‘[f]ro man into a bestes forme’ (2961-72). The king grazes like an ox in a way which stresses not only his animality but his loss of superior status and its accoutrements. Where once he ate hot spices, now he eats cold grass; where once he drank wine, now he drinks from the well; where once he stayed in well-arrayed chambers, now he sleeps in a bush, having no pillow but the hard ground (CA: I.2976-2986). This continues until, after seven years, he eschews his vainglory, and, unable to speak, wails in a ‘bestly’ voice to heaven. Now that he is ‘humble and tame’ he receives God’s mercy and is restored to ‘[h]is mannes forme’ (3034). Like the fashionable young men who constantly transform their appearance, like so many chameleons (2698-2702), Nebuchadnezzar is transformed by his pride, but not into a man of honour and authority (as the young men hope) but into a beast.

A modern reader might be tempted to reduce the opposition between ‘man’ and ‘beast’ which runs through this story into ‘human’ and ‘animal’.⁴⁸ Yet to do so would involve neglecting many of the late medieval resonances of ‘manhood’. In this tale, the maleness of Gower’s concerns are less evident than the socially-situated nature of the issues he raises. It is possible that Gower might have argued that the moral he is presenting ought to apply to the whole human race, but in this story he draws lessons which are primarily adapted for an audience of men and, indeed, women, of a certain rank: those who had the possibility of falling into the temptations of changing fashions, of consuming wine and spices, of sleeping on cushions, and of taking vainglorious pride in their authority and social status. All of this resonated strongly with contemporary commonplace assumptions about what ‘manhood’ was. The possibility of contradiction between some of these assumptions and the moral values espoused by Gower

⁴⁸ E.g. McCabe, *Gower’s Vulgar Tongue*, p. 158.

are brought out in a further paradox which Genius offers to Amans in the conclusion of this section:

Forthi, my Sone, tak good hiede
So forto lede thi manhiede,
That thou ne be noght lich a beste. (3043-5)

If 'manhood' simply meant 'humanity' this statement would be nonsensical. Advising the lover to put a check on his humanity to stop him resembling an animal is a contradiction in terms. But in the context of the full range of the associations of 'manhood' in late medieval culture, its links to personal status and its role as a synonym for honour, we can see how this moral works. True men need to limit and control their 'manhood' as it was conventionally understood, lest they fall into animality.

Men might start out by thinking that manhood lies in accruing the honour of deeds in war, as did Florent at first, but they learn that public approbation and private fulfilment are won through submission to the will of another. Men might think that they lose manhood by humiliating themselves to their social inferiors, but in so doing they forget their mortality. Men might think that their manhood is promoted by boasting of their martial deeds and prowess, but such boasting leads to their downfall at the hands of those they humiliate. Men might think that manhood lies in their public authority, in the display of their station in life, in the clothes they wear and the food they eat, but if they do not acknowledge that all these come from God, then they are no better than animals. Although a contemporary Aristotelian moralist might argue that there is no contradiction here, simply the requirement to find a mean between two extremes, Gower does not seek to determine where such a mean might be found, but instead arranges his narrative to demonstrate the superiority of moral virtue over the social dictates of manhood. In Book I of the *Confessio*, after duplicity has been defined as a failure of manhood, the manhood of social status is portrayed either as something to be bridled by an insistence that all honour and virtue derives from God (a view which no late medieval person would have denied), or as something which is condemnable when taken to unimaginable extremes (making one's wife drink publicly from a cup made from the skull of her defeated father).

By such means, Gower seeks to impose his own interpretation of manhood, pushing aside genuine tensions between certain kinds of manhood and the dictates of Christian humility. Can a man really submit honourably to the will of a woman? Can a man really bow to his social inferiors without endangering his own status? Surely a man's military deeds do increase his honour, and he is quite right to celebrate them? Who is to judge when the clothing and life-style which pertains to nobility has been pushed to excess? Gower only comes close to providing a genuine accommodation in the case of military renown, for the rest the only

guide to avoiding excessive display of one's social status is to acknowledge that this status comes from God. In the reality of social life, the moralized vision of manhood which Gower presents would have provided little help in reconciling the dictates of honour and those of Christian morality.

Vengeance, justice and politics

The delicate balancing act between the manhood of personal honour and the Christian requirement for humility was just one area in which Gower grappled directly with the question of how to create a moral manhood out of the raw material of its conventional associations. Another was his treatment of homicide, justice and vengeance in Book III of the *Confessio*, which discusses the sin of Wrath. Analysis of this book has tended to focus on the tales which seem to criticize the excessive punishment of the crimes of lovers. Rather less commented upon has been the one story, the tale of Horestes, which stands out in the trajectory of this book, arguing for the necessity of extreme, exemplary violence and even a certain kind of vengeance in particular circumstances.⁴⁹ As we have seen, this tale had strong contemporary political resonances, yet it was composed before the consequences of the political crises of the 1380s had become fully apparent, and mobilized materials which could be used in different ways. The tale of Horestes suggests a very different reading of these events to the one which Gower would elaborate after the deposition of Richard II in 1399. In his *Cronica Tripertita* and in his revisions to certain passages in the *Vox Clamantis*, Gower portrayed Richard II, not as a man, but as a youth and even as an animal. This presentation was justified by Richard's duplicity, which, as we have seen, was set in opposition to 'manhood' both in contemporary language in general and in Gower's works in particular. Yet the tale of Horestes suggests how a different interpretation of the politics of the 1380s and 1390s could have been produced from within Gower's own works.

When Book III of the *Confessio* considered Justice and Mercy, it took on highly charged themes which became more so during this poem's composition and in the years which followed. At first, as one would expect given the way each book of the *Confessio* leads from a vice to its curing virtue, Book III provides warning tales against excessive and uncontrolled indignation in response to the misdeeds of others. Many critics have commented on the tale of Canace and Machaire, a story of incestuous love between two siblings brought up in close

⁴⁹ For earlier comment on this tale see Yoshiko Kobayashi, 'Principis Umbra: Kingship, Justice and Pity in John Gower's Poetry' in Robert F. Yeager, ed., *On John Gower: Essays at the Millennium* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007), pp. 71-103; Conrad van Dijk, 'Vengeance and the Legal Person: John Gower's Tale of Orestes' in Andreaa D. Boboc, ed., *Theorizing Legal Personhood in Late Medieval England* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 119-141.

proximity, which is told in such a way as to condemn the excessive cruelty, induced by melancholy, of their father Eolus (143-360).⁵⁰ Similarly, in the story of Phoebus and Cornide, when the former learns of the sexual infidelity of the latter, it is his action in killing her which is at fault (783-817).⁵¹ What has interested critics in Gower's telling of these tales has been the way they jar with Christian teaching on sexual morality, rather than with how they function within the structure of Book III.⁵² For some this shows the potential openness of 'amoral Gower', for others it shows the unreliability and imperfection of the teachings of Genius.⁵³ Yet, in fact, these stories do accord with the general schema of Book III, notably in its unsympathetic attitude to Alexander, who is portrayed, in the tale of Alexander and Diogenes (1201-1330), as a man enslaved by his will and, in the tale of Alexander and the Pirate, as a king who wages war purely out of a lust for worldly dominion (2363-2417). These themes are inherent in the structure of Book III and in Gower's larger moral project, and it would be wrong to suggest that they were introduced specifically in response to the political circumstances of the late 1380s. Nonetheless, certain tales possessed a particular contemporary relevance. The story of Demophon and Athemas, for example, in which two youthful kings swear vengeance on their rebellious people (1791-1860), must have seemed particularly pertinent during a period in which the king's allies had fought his noble opponents in the field. It was to be hoped that Richard II might, like them, be persuaded not to despoil his own realm, however just his cause.

The trajectory of Book III from Wrath to Mercy is disturbed by the tale of Horestes, the only story to which Genius attaches a gloss advocating the necessity of just violence in response to a crime. What is more, this tale, although it precedes an explicit discussion of the legitimate homicide of criminals, does not take place in a clearly judicial context. Horestes is a child when his father, Agamenon, returns from the Trojan wars and is slain '[b]e treson' in his bed by his wife Climestre and her lover Egistius (III.1919). Despite an opening Latin gloss which portrays this as the tale of how 'Horestes then of minor estate counselled long afterwards with most cruel severity avenged himself',⁵⁴ in the body of the story Horestes' long-prepared

⁵⁰ In an extensive bibliography, I have found useful Georgiana Donavin, '“When reson torneth into rage”': Violence in Book III of the *Confessio Amantis*', in Yeager, ed., *On John Gower*, pp. 216-234; Leff, 'Writing, Gender and Power', p. 35-8; Watt, 'Gender and Sexuality', pp. 198-9; Watt, *Amoral Gower*, pp. 82-3; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 176-7. See also works cited by Watt, *Amoral Gower*, p. 164, n. 40.

⁵¹ Donavin, '“When reson torneth”', pp. 220-1; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, pp. 177-8.

⁵² Nicola F. McDonald, '“Lusti Tresor”': Avarice and the Economics of the Erotic in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*' in Elizabeth M. Tyler, ed., *Treasure in the Medieval West* (Woodbridge: Boydell/York Medieval Press, 2000), pp. 135-156.

⁵³ Watt, 'Gender and Sexuality', pp. 198-9; Simpson, *Sciences and the Self*, p. 178.

⁵⁴ Latin gloss by I. 1885: 'cuius mortem filius eius Horestes tunc minoris etatis postea diis admonitus seueritate crudelissima vindicauit.' Kobayashi, '*Principis Umbra*', pp. 93-4 also finds hesitation in the suggestion at the beginning of the tale that Horestes 'wroghte mochel shame / In vengeance of his fader

vengeance is considered by all characters, except the guilty and their accomplices, to be fundamentally legitimate. Once Horestes, who has fled to the court of the king of Crete, has grown to be 'a man of brede and lengthe, / Of wit, of manhod and of strengthe' (1963-4), all parties rally round to provide him with the means to wage war against his mother and her lover and so '[t]o venge him at his oghne wille' (1957). The only hesitation concerns the specific punishment he exacts from his mother, killing her by ripping off her breasts. This is the act which turns vengeance into most cruel vengeance, but taking revenge in itself is not considered to be problematic by any of the tale's protagonists.

The idea that the punishment visited upon Climestre might be excessive is first suggested by the fact that Horestes only agrees to it when he is told to exact it by the gods (2004-2016). The gods do however justify their decision. The act's very cruelty is necessary to ensure its effectiveness:

He was ansuerd, if that he wolde
His astate recovere, thanne he scholde
Upon his Moder do vengeance
So cruel, that the remembrance
Therof mihte everemore abide,
As sche that was an homicide
And of hire oghne lord Moerdrice. (1997-2003)

Faced with this logic of exemplary violence, Horestes reluctantly accepts.

The pagan gods could have provided a nice alibi, suggesting that such extreme vengeance, although acceptable before the coming of Christianity, could not be so thereafter. Yet in the telling of the tale this potential justification is not brought out, and so the implication is that the logic of extreme violence reluctantly applied is also valid for Christians. Horestes' killing of his mother is preceded by a speech which resembles a judgement, in which she is condemned as a 'cruel beste unkinde' who slew 'thin oghne lord' and whose 'treson stant of such record, / Thou miht thi werkes noght forsake' (III.2055, 2059, 2060-1). Then, after Horestes kills her, the tale diverts into a discussion about how it is always so after some deed: every man has their own idea as to whether he acted rightly or wrongly (2112-30). Although this begins as opinion about whether it is right or wrong to kill one's own mother in this fashion, this is quickly diverted into uncertainty about the facts of the case. What matters in public

deth.' (III.1960-61) and that, once he is a man, Horestes first sets out to pursue his cause 'As he that was in herte wroth' (III.1982). Both he and van Dijk, however, see this hesitation as overruled by the ensuing mission of exemplary vengeance conferred upon him by the gods, and regretfully accepted. Kobayashi, '*Principis Umbra*', p. 94; van Dijk, 'Vengeance', pp. 130-132.

opinion is not differing attitudes to the morality of Horestes' behaviour but rather each individual's precise or imprecise knowledge of events (2118-9). The way to resolve this is to call a 'parlement ... To nowe hou that the sothe was' (2130, 2133). Individual opinion about the morality of extreme judicial violence is less important than the reconstruction of a precise account of events. By this means, Horestes is unanimously let off. At the parliament, Horestes re-introduces his defence: the gods ordered him to do justice with his own hand (2139-2142). In a moment, his act is justified. One lord, Menesteüs argues that 'The wreeche which Horestes dede, / It was thing of goddes bede, / And nothing of his crualte' (2147-9). He offers combat to anyway who thinks otherwise, and nobody dares to contradict him. The subsequent suicide of 'false Egiona', daughter of Egistus and Climestre and party to the murder of Agamenon, is presented not as a consequence of the inadequacy of this judgement, but as her own fault for having been involved in her father's killing (2172-2195).⁵⁵

In glossing this story, in reply to Amans' question as to whether it is ever legitimate to kill a man, Genius declares that violence in an unjust cause is wrong (III.2241-2362). This is not such a ringing declaration as might be supposed, since Gower had already argued, in the *Vox Clamantis*, that the king ought to fight his enemies – following the example of his father, the Black Prince – if 'the faculty of necessity' demanded it (VC: VI.917-84). Indeed, Genius goes on to specify two general cases in which violence is always legitimate. The first of these, to defend one's home and country is dealt with in a few lines (CA: III.2235-40). The second is treated in greater detail: violence to punish criminals is not only virtuous but compulsory (2201-34). Citing Seneca, Genius declares that the judge who spares one 'schrewe' grieves a thousand good men (2219-2220). As we have seen, Gower would return to this theme in Book VII of the *Confessio*, declaring that to restrain violence in justice or in war is not Pity but Pusillanimity: 'For if manhode be restreigned, / Or be it pes or be it werre, / Justice goth al out of here' (VII.3540-42). Indeed, this was a theme which he had already elaborated in the *Mirour de l'omme* in which the just judge Pité dispenses the sanction of death, all whilst regretting that the condemned '[a]d deservi d'estre tué' (MO: 13944).⁵⁶

This insistence upon the necessity of judicial retribution marks a departure from many of the tales of justice and violence contained in Book III, and indeed from the overall structural trajectory of this book, which, dealing with Wrath, leads inevitably to the correcting power of Mercy. At first sight it might also be thought to contradict that strand of late medieval thinking which recommended legal process over self-help as a response to crime. This tradition was represented, for example, by Albertanus of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii* (1246),

⁵⁵ Van Dijk, 'Vengeance' concentrates on the case of Egiona, who is condemned by Genius in a way not found in Gower's sources. It seems fair to accept his view that Gower thus seeks to tie up loose ends, and ensure the exemplarity of Orestes actions.

⁵⁶ Kobayashi, '*Principis Umbra*', pp. 71, 77.

which was adapted into French in the mid-fourteenth century by Renaud de Louens as the *Livre de Melibée et Dame Prudence* and translated by Geoffrey Chaucer as the *Tale of Melibee*.⁵⁷ In Chaucer's telling, Dame Prudence firmly advises her husband, a 'yong man ... myghty and riche', against taking vengeance himself on those who attacked his house, herself and his daughter.⁵⁸ He should instead follow due process of law, as a formidable range of authorities recommend. Nonetheless, this does not exclude the possibility of taking matters into one's own hands if formal mechanisms were wanting. Melibee's fault is to reach for his sword before seeking justice through the law. Similarly, when Genius remarked in his gloss on the tale of Demophon and Athemas, that one should 'do nothing be myht, / Which mai be do be love and riht' (III.1859-60), this did not exclude the possibility that, love and right not being available, might and right would do just as well. The tale of Horestes is not incompatible with formal justice as it was conceived of in the late fourteenth century. Horestes' act is finally made acceptable by the legitimate authority which stands behind it: that of the gods, whom he reluctantly obeys. Moreover, although critics have not drawn attention to this, probably because it is not explicitly stated by Gower, Horestes as his father's son is also the legitimate king of his country: he thus has every right to judge his mother. As Gower stressed in the *Vox Clamantis*, he must execute justice in accordance with law, with the correction of God, even though on earth he answers to no one (VC: VI.581-642). Since he follows the orders of the gods, this is indeed what Horestes is doing. Even though there is a moment of public doubt following the execution of this judgement, which is also an act of vengeance, a parliament serves to clear matters up after the fact.

Whilst it would be wrong to read the tale of Horestes as either a commentary on contemporary events or as an attempt to intervene in them, it cannot be denied that the themes which it raises were of central, political importance not only at the time it was written but also in the years that followed. The tale of Horestes thus taught a ruler such as Richard II, to whom the first recension of the *Confessio Amantis* was addressed, that whilst divine approval was the only guarantee of legitimate justice, he as king had every right to decide whether that approval was forthcoming or not and a duty to act if he believed it was. He should justify his actions using legal mechanisms, but should not hesitate to execute justice in a way which anticipated legal process, especially in cases involving treason. This could include doing justice on those whose treason lay in their efforts to force him, the king, to act against his own will, and thus to humiliate and dishonour him. In this way the requirements of the manhood of personal honour, and the need for vengeance, could be reconciled if the person avenging

⁵⁷ The tradition is discussed in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 923.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 'The Tale of Melibee', VII.967.

himself was the king. This was precisely what Richard II was to do in 1397-99, using preemptive violence mixed with parliamentary judicial process against those who had humiliated him and murdered his closest counsellors ten years previously.⁵⁹

The moral of the tale of Horestes could thus have provided Gower with a means of defending Richard's actions in the last two years of his reign, presenting him as a king and a man who had avenged himself in accordance with divine justice. Indeed, this was precisely how Richard portrayed his own actions in a letter to Albert of Bavaria, count of Holland and Zeeland, after moving against his enemies in 1397.⁶⁰ The king thanked God who had protected him from the cradle against those nobles, whom he had raised to honour, who had conspired treacherously whilst he was of tender age to disinherit the Crown and usurp royal rights. They had raised themselves in arms against the king's will. Taking royal authority upon themselves, they had condemned those faithful to the king to a public death. They had left him with hardly anything beyond his title, going so far as to threaten his person. Now, at last, he had brought them to justice.⁶¹

Yet, in practice, when Gower composed his own version of the story of Richard II's rule, in the aftermath of his deposition in 1399, he let no suggestion emerge that the king's actions might be viewed in these terms.⁶² Instead, in his revisions to the *Vox Clamantis* and in its continuation, the *Cronica Tripertita*, Gower set the politics of the reign into an ethical schema which obscured the real origins of political instability in the 1380s.⁶³ In this schema, Richard's failure was first of all a failure to cultivate the right kind of manhood. In the revised Book VI of the *Vox*, Gower declares that 'the king, an undisciplined boy, neglects the moral behaviour by

⁵⁹ Fletcher, *Richard II*, pp. 249-79.

⁶⁰ British Library, Cotton MS Galba B.i, f. 22, printed in J.H. Harvey, 'The Wilton Diptych – A Re-examination', *Archaeologia*, 98 (1961), pp. 1-28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² In three of the four earliest manuscripts which contain both the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Cronica Tripertita* (Oxford, All Souls MS 98; Glasgow, Hunterian Museum MS T.2, 17; British Library, Harleian MS 6291), the modifications to book VI.545-80 are written in, over erasures, in the same hand as *CT* but in a different hand from the rest of *VC* (Macaulay, *Latin Works*, pp. lxi, lxiii, lxxv). In the other manuscript which contains both *VC* and *CT* (British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A.iv) the corrections to *VC*, bk VI have been added in a different hand from the text, and the text of *CT* follows in yet another hand (Macaulay, *Latin Works*, pp. lxiii-lxiv). Of the three MSS which contain *VC*, the revisions, but not the *CT*, one only might support the hypothesis of a pre-deposition revision (the Ecton MS, described by Macaulay, p. lxxvi), although Macaulay only ventures to suggest that it might possibly date before 1402. Both the Ecton MS, and the much later Digby MS 138 and Laud MS 719, could have been copied from MSS which once contained the *CT*. This, together with the way the themes of these revisions and those of the *CT* coalesce, seem to me to provide adequate grounds to propose a post-1399 date for both.

⁶³ On the *CT*'s close reliance on the 'Record and Process' of Richard II's deposition for its telescoped and tendentious account of the reign, see David R. Carlson, 'The Parliamentary Sources of Gower's *Cronica Tripertita* and Incommensurable Styles' in Dutton, Hines and Yeager, eds, *John Gower, Trilingual Poet*, pp. 98-111.

which a man might grow up from a boy' (VC: VI.555-6). The political instability of the 1380s was not the result of lack of consensus over military strategy, unwillingness to grant taxation in the aftermath of the Peasants' Revolt, and controversy over acceptable forms of governance, but of the king's desire to despoil, not even the people, but the earls of Gloucester, Arundel and Warwick.⁶⁴ It was thus simply in self-defence that these lords 'arose manlily' (*viriliter insurrexerunt*).⁶⁵

As the argument is developed in the *Cronica Tripertita*, the king, forsaking love, transgressed the law, and so the people rose up (CT: I.4). The king, who always had a hard heart, followed vile, youthful counsel and so decided to make accusations against certain nobles, simply in order that he might despoil them (I.17-18). Luckily the king's partisans were defeated in battle by the earl of Gloucester, which sets the scene for 'the three men who were full of good sense (*pleni ... racione*)' to seek for justice (I.121-2). Much as the nobles of Greece had done when murmuring arose about Horestes' actions, they called a parliament 'so that they might cleanse and repair the state of the realm.' (I.128-130). This parliament executed and exiled the king's wicked counsellors: 'Gone was the flatterer, the villain, the plotter, the false counsellor, the schemer, the envious promoter.' (I.202-3) Their laudable aim, like Gower himself, was to reform the king's morality, and hence the kingdom: 'Thus they moulded a reformed, reinvigorated king' (*Sic emendatum Regem faciunt renouatum*) (I.210).

Yet it would soon become clear that better moral guidance was no solution, and for Gower this could only have been the result of the king's recalcitrance. In particular, Gower's Richard II lacks one of the fundamental qualities of manhood insisted upon in the *Confessio Amantis*: he is false, untrustworthy and treacherous. Consequently, he lacks the 'manhood' of honourable conduct which was an essential bulwark to the 'manhood' of energy, vigour and military renown. Describing what is never portrayed as revenge, the *Cronica* instead describes how

'The false, two-faced King feigned all things and hid his plottings with deceit (*dolos sub fraude tegebat*), although his ruin lay hiding in wait.' (CT: II.7-8)

Throughout the second part of the *Cronica Tripertita*, Gower insists on Richard's 'dolus', his, double-dealing, fraud or deceit:

'O the deceit, and O the treachery, which the King had so long repressed, when the man unique in dissimulation poured forth wickedness.'

⁶⁴ Epilogue to the VC linking to the CT in Macaulay, *Latin Works*, p. 313.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* My trans.

O fraud, o que dolus, quos rex sub ymagine solus,
Dum scelus exhausit, tam londo tempore clausit! (II.23-4)

In terms of the *Confessio*, Richard in the *Cronica* is presented as the very model of 'Ypocrisie', which ought to be eschewed for manhood (CA: I.1210-1213); the kind of man, who like an unfaithful husband, loses his manhood by failing to keep his word (VII.4228-30).

Richard's revenge is portrayed as long hidden and unexpected in its violence. First, 'like a whirlwind the violent young man made attack upon the rejected Swan [the earl of Gloucester], even while it thought itself at peace' (CT: II.27-8). '[F]iercer than the wolf' (II.36), the king apprehended the earl in his own home, before taking him away to be murdered in captivity in Calais. Then, 'with hidden guile in his spirit' (*conspirat fraude latente*) (II.54) Richard failed to honour charters of pardon granted to the earl of Arundel (II.126-30). The earl was condemned to death by 'other false men (*fallaces alii*), knights who came forth as followers of the king, who were neither honourable nor merciful' (II. 139-40). Finally the earl of Warwick, told that he will be forgiven if he admits all, was tricked into confessing and sent into exile on the Isle of Man: 'O! How clever this juvenile, violent piece of trickery (*fraus iuuenilis*) then appeared!' (II.165). The king is not only a youth, and therefore not fully a man, but also, like Nebuchanezzar, both a tyrant and an animal:

'O woe for that year in which haughtiness abounded in the tyrant! That wild beast (*ferus*), so to speak, crushed those whom he wished (*voluit quos vincere, vicit*).'
(II.282-3)

Gower concludes the second part of the *Cronica Tripertita* by praising the military accomplishments of Gloucester, Arundel and Warwick (II.326-9). He then seeks to underline, like the old soldier who petitioned Julius Caesar in Book VII of the *Confessio*, the wickedness of the ruler who fails to honour his own veterans:

'Alas, King, you who have betrayed such associates (*qui tales fraudasti collaterales*), may a ruinous destiny finally be your punishment!' (II.330-331)

For Gower in the *Cronica Tripertita* Richard II cannot be a man because of his untrustworthy nature. He says one thing and secretly plots another. Nonetheless, what he secretly plots is not so removed from a different side of manhood. What he wants is revenge, or what he would have perceived as justice, on those who had usurped the authority of the Crown, killed his friends and threatened the person of the king himself some ten years before. Thus, if Richard

had been victorious, Gower could have written a work commending his actions in the same terms as he had sympathetically portrayed Horestes. For Gower, the just ruler should not take retribution in hot blood or in the sway of unreasonable passions. But then again, he must exact just retribution for crime, regretfully, in accordance with divine teaching, using judicial assemblies if necessary to confirm retrospectively the rectitude of his actions. For Gower, the wise man tempers his manhood so as not to be like a beast. But no man, in the real politics of the 1380s and 1390s, could safely turn the other cheek. John Gower's readers would have found no easy answers here simply because, in the highly disturbed political world of the late fourteenth century, such answers did not exist.

In the *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower seeks to shape a certain kind of moral personality which is also a kind of manhood. The poet thus wholeheartedly embraces the broader associations of manhood with energy and vigour, with knightly courage and with military renown. He was keen, however, to stress how manly honour must be supported by honourable conduct, by the avoidance of falseness, duplicity and double-dealing. When he considers manhood explicitly, he tries to promote some of its associations and to palliate others, and he specifically attempts to limit the manhood of honour in the sense of personal status. Although he broadly seeks to temper wrath, he insists that retributive violence coolly exacted in a just cause is not only admissible but compulsory. Yet although Gower leaves a clear impression of the kind of manhood of which he approved in terms of personality and ethics, less clear is how his strictures might be applied to concrete social and political practice. The range of the themes he considers, the complexity of the framing structures of his works and the sheer variety of the narrative materials he used meant that he provided material which could be used to support and to condemn precisely the same line of action. Like many a public moralist before and since, Gower could always have it both ways.