

# John Gower's View of Word and Rhetoric

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Deviating halfway from his planned purpose, almost all of Book VII of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*<sup>1</sup> is devoted to Aristotle's education for Alexander. There has been a wide divergence of opinions among scholars concerning whether or not Gower purposely made an extended digression from the main subject of the seven deadly sins. However, there is no room for doubt that Gower, with King Richard II in mind, employed knowledge skillfully in order to show "the rihte weie" (8. 2147) to a worthy ruler:

Omnibus in causis sapiens doctrina salutem  
Consequitur, nec habet quis nisi doctus opem.  
Naturam superat doctrina, viro quod et ortus  
Ingenii docilis non dedit, ipsa dabit.  
Non ita discretus hominum per climata regnat,  
Quin, magis vt sapiat, indigent ipse scole. (7. i. 1-6)  
(In every case wise Teaching brings success;/ No princely  
fortune's his who's not been taught./ Teaching conquers Nature,  
and will give/ What native wit, as yet untaught, did not./ No ruler in the world is so sagacious/  
That he requires no school to make him sage.)<sup>2</sup>

The Latin headpiece above shows that "doctrina" is superior to or vanquishes "naturam." In 1381 Gower underwent the unusual experience of both the Peasants' Revolt and the horrible incident of the murdering of the governing classes, in which he probably read a black omen of their downfall. He has made much of teaching to educate administrators as the newly-risen classes. Gower seems to have been not so much a social reformer as a scholar. He stressed that teaching would be a matter of ever-increasing importance, particularly to rulers, which is his leading theory and principle.

Rhetoric, which the *OED* defines as "The art of using language so as to persuade or influence others," was reckoned one of the *trivium* in the Middle Ages. Any king, who has an ambition to be a worthy ruler, should be endowed with the intellectual and moral quality of speaking honestly what he thinks. To Gower rhetoric may be directly contrary or, in a sense, hostile to truth. His moral weight naturally is liable to be put on the latter rather than the former.

The principal point is that Aristotle urges Alexander to learn the cardinal virtue of truth while still of tender age:

Among the vertus on is chief,  
And that is trouthe, which is life  
To god and ek to man also.  
And for it hath ben evere so,  
Tawhte Aristotle, as he wel couthe,  
To Alisandre, hou in his youthe  
He scholde of trouthe thilke grace  
With al his hole herte embrace,  
So that his word be trewe and plein,  
Toward the world and so certain  
That in him be no double speche:  
For if men scholde trouthe seche  
And founde it noight withinne a king,  
It were an unsittende thing. (7. 1723-36)

Genius refers to the five Christian virtues: truth, liberality, justice, pity, and chastity, out of which the most important is, of course, truth. If the king should not utter the truth, “it were an unsittinde thing.” The literal sense of “unsittinde” in this case is “inappropriate, unsuitable, improper, indecorous, unbecoming, or unseemly,” as the *MED* expounds it adequately, but it holds the original meaning of “sit,” faintly associated with the implication of “not suitable to sit,” namely, “not suitable to sit on a throne.”

As well demonstrated in the trilogy of the French *Mirour de l’Omme*, or *Speculum Meditantis*, the Latine *Vox Clamantis*, the English *Confessio Amantis*, Gower shows an extraordinary interest in a variety of moral, legal, political, social, and educational issues, especially in “comun profit” (Prol. 377, 7.1609, 1993, 2828, 2957, 3007, 3009), which means “the common good, or public benefit.” The *MED* records a good instance in which the sense of “comun profit,” derived from L. *res publica*, is quite easy to grasp:

C1475 (? C1451) *Bk. Nobless* 68: *Res publica*, whiche is in Englissh tong clepid a *comyn profit*... ought... be referred to the provision and wise governaunce of a mesuage or a householde<sup>3</sup>.

Thus “common profit,” rendered from the Latin *res publica*, is paraphrased intelligibly as the care and wise management of a dwelling house or a household. Similarly the original meaning of *economy* in Greek was “house management.” “In the fallen world,” R.A. Peck observes, “common profit is an art which men must learn to value. The kingly man knows how to play well.”<sup>4</sup> The king is an actor on the stage, or *hypocrite* in the Greek sense of the word.

The king would hold, as a rule, the decisive power of life and death over people. Accordingly, he must take the verbal responsibility on himself. The king should keep his word. His words must be true and plain. Gower repeatedly claims that one word ought to have single meaning, not double. He will not approve of the multiplicity or ambiguity in senses with ease. Probably “moral” Gower might identify ambiguity in meaning with double tongue, though he seemed to be temperamentally fond of play on words.

Word must be “plein,” the meaning of which is “whole, complete, and full” as to the truth. “Plein” and “trewe” are equivalent in meaning, as in “trewe and plein” (2.1912, 7.1731) and “trewe hertes and with pleine” (Prol. 184). It is merely “pleine,” nevertheless, that is inextricably coupled with both “trouthe” and “word,” as in “pleine trouthe” (1.1126, 4.704, 7.1638, 7.2340, 7.2442), “wordes pleine” (2.2919, 5.4911, 7.2343, 7.2350), and “pleine wordes” (7.1534, 8.2185). “Pleine” is broadly equivalent in sense to “trewe,” as in “word be trewe and plein” (7.1731). “Double,” directly opposed to “pleine,” means “intentionally ambiguous, deceitful, deceptive” about actions, words, and meanings, as in “double entente” (2.494, 2.2192) and “double speche” (7.1733) :

The word is tokne of that withinne,  
Ther schal a worthi king beginne  
To kepe his tunge and to be trewe,  
So schal his pris ben evere newe. (7.1737–40)

Gower, like Chaucer, stresses how important it is for the king to keep his “tunge,” meaning “a word, an utterance” and to be true. Similarly Gower advises him to pay constant attention to words, which, once uttered, cannot be retrieved. The proverb says that what is done cannot be undone:

Avise him every man tofore,  
And be wel war, er he be swore,  
For afterward it is to late,  
If that he wole his word debate.  
For as a king in special  
Above all other is principal  
Of his pouer, so scholde he be  
Most vertuous in his degre. (7.1741–48)

“Debate” here means not “to contend,” but “to retract (one’s words)”. A king ought to be endowed with “vertu,” which has

the sense of both mental and physical might. It is common knowledge that "vertu" is a word with two senses of virtue and power (cf. ModE. "by virtue of").

The king wears a crown symbolizing royal authority which is made of gold (7. 1751), suggesting excellence and people's esteem. "The Stone" (7. 1754), or jewel, has three qualities, such as hardness, efficacy, and brightness, suggesting constancy ("no variance in his condition"), honesty ("to keep his word"), and the recorded form of a name of this world's fame respectively.

Genius tells a story of "King, wine, woman, and truth," originally from 3 Esdras (ch. iii, iv)<sup>5</sup>. Once upon a time, there lived in Persia three wise men whose names were Arpaghes, Manachaz, and Zorobabel. King Darius placed great trust in them. He put the question to them: which is the strongest among wine, woman, or the king?

Of thinges thre which strengest is,  
The wyn, the woman or the king. (7. 1812–13)

The King gave the "fulli daies thre" (7. 1816) of grace to each to come to an answer to it. First, Arpaghes used transparent flattery and said:

Lo, thus a kinges myht...  
So as his reson can argue,  
Is strengest and most value. (7. 1846–48)

The king's might is the strongest and most valuable.

Manachaz's answer was that wine is the most powerful:

wyn is of the more emprise. (7. 1849–50)

"Emprise" here implies "power or potency." The phrase *of the more emprise* means "the more powerful."

Finally Zorobabel answered on behalf of women, since both king and vine-grower are born of women, who also conquer men with love. Zorobabel said:

That women ben the myhtieste.  
The king and the vinour also  
Of women comen bothe tuo. (7. 1874–76)

Zorobabel's answer is that women are the most powerful.

Furthermore, Zorobabel unexpectedly went on to tell the added story of Alceste as an exemplum of truth:

What strengest is of ertthli thinges,  
The wyn, the women or the kinges,  
He seith that trouthe above hem alle  
Is myhtiest, hou evere it falle.  
The trouthe, how so it evere come,  
Mai for nothing ben overcome. (7. 1953–58)

From "the tale of Alceste" he naturally drew the conclusion that truth is the most powerful among the trilogy of wine, women, or king. Gower gives full play to his ability as a moralizer in declaring somewhat ironically that the king is inferior to a woman, not to speak of truth. As Genius asserts, truth is "the vertu sovereign of alle" (7. 1776).

Now let us make inquiries about Gower's unique view of rhetoric, the art of persuasion, as stated above, which is basically incompatible with truth. In Book VII he makes manifest his view of rhetoric:

Compositi pulcra semonis verba placere

*Principio poterunt, veraque fine placent.*

Herba, lapis, sermo, tria sunt virtute replete,

Vi stamen ex verbi pondere plura facit. (7. v, 1-4)

(Fair words at first are pleasing in a speech./ But in the end what pleases is the truth./ These three are efficacious: herb, stone, speech;/ And yet by force of word's weight more is moved.)<sup>6</sup>

Gower emphasizes a variety of efficacy or working of word whose most concrete expression can be seen in the 15 times repetition of “word” or “wordes.” The following passage, though rather lengthy, shall be cited:

*Word* hath beguiled many a man;  
With *word* the wilde beste is daunted,  
With *word* the Serpent is enchanted,  
Of *word* among the men of Armes  
Ben wounded heeled with the charmes,  
Wher lacketh medicine;  
*Word* hath under his discipline  
Of Socerie the karectes.  
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 reconsileth whan him liketh.  
The *word* under the coupe of hevene  
Set every thing or odde or evene;  
With *word* the hihe god is plesed,  
With *word* the *wordes* ben appesed,  
The softe *word* the loude stilleth;  
Wher lacketh good, the *word* fulfilleth,  
To make amendes for the wrong;  
Whan *wordes* medlen with the song,  
It doth plesance wel the more. (7. 1564-87)

It may be called repetitio or wordplay which shows that he was concerned with rhetoric.

Richly adorned expressions please us at first, but it is truth that pleases us at last. Thus Gower seems to have been fond of using the antithesis between “principium” and “finis,” by means of which the change in the situation or state of affairs is clearly represented:

Non tua conceptam michi firmant oscula pacem,

Nam tua *principia finis* habere negat. (VC, II, 137-38)

(You have made peace with me, for your beginnings refuse to have an end.)<sup>7</sup>

There are some proverbs, such as “If the beginning is good, the end must be perfect,” “A good beginning makes a good ending,” and “An ill beginning, an ill end,” while on the other hand, there is a proverb, such as “All is well that ends well,” which, as Macaulay has noted, may be derived from “Si finis bonus est, totum bonum erit,” as in the *Gesta Romanorum* (Tale LXVII) :

Rebus in ambiguis tu certum ponere noli,

Fallitur augurio spes bona sepe suo:

Est magis humani generic iactura dolori,  
 Nescit *principium* quid sibi *finis* aget. (VC, VI, 751–54)  
 (Do not place reliance in dubious things, a favorable hope is often  
 deceived by its own presentiment, and is a casting of mankind into affliction, the beginning does not know what the end  
 will bring.)<sup>8</sup>

“Res ambiguae” means literally “ambiguous or dubious things” in English. As stated above, God gave the word to man, clearly based on a divine-gifted theory of language:

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 hertes thought which is withinne  
 Mai schewe, what it wolde mene. (7. 1507–13)

Man can express himself through the words gifted by God. The word is called “the techer of vertus” (7. 1520). As made clear above, it is Gower’s belief that man’s “herte and tunge moste acorde” (5. 2925).

Gower dwells on rhetoric in Book VII. He uses “rethorike” and its related words, such as “rethorike” (4. 2649), “rethorique” (8. 3117), “rethoriques” (7. 1631), “rethorique” (6. 1401, 7. 36, 7. 1523, 7. 1556, 7. 1589, 7. 1642), “rethorien” (6. 1399), “eloquence(s)” (3. 440, 4. 2651, 7. 1544, 7. 1560, 7. 1619, 8. 3115, 7. 1631), “eloquent” (7. 37, 8. 393), and “faco-(u)nde” (5. 3126, 7. 36, 7. 1560):

Next of science the seconde  
 Is Rethorique, whos faconde  
 Above alle other is eloquent. (7. 35–37)

Let us examine the meaning of the technical terms chiefly concerned with rhetoric. “Science” refers to “a branch of knowledge or learning.” “Rethorique” is “one of the three liberal arts called the *trivium* dealing with eloquence and persuasiveness of language.” “Faconde” means “facility, skill (in the use of language).” “Eloquent” implies “fluent, persuasive, literary, poetic” in the field of oratory or style.

Gower’s rhetoric, if lexically examined, differs in its content from the one stressed on the persuasiveness of language. Rhetoric is defined as:

Is Rethorique the science  
 Approped to the reverence  
 Of wordes that ben reasonable:  
 And for this art schal be vailable  
 With goodli wordes forto like,  
 It hath Gramaire, it hath Logique,  
 That serven bothe unto the speche. (7. 1523–29)

The *MED* takes “reasonable” to mean “eloquent,” but it seems proper in this context to take literally “reasonable,” since “eloquent” in the phrase *In his speche Of wordes he was eloquent* (8. 392–93) means “effective expression.” “Vailable” means “beneficial, profitable, efficacious.” “Goodli” has a variety of meanings, such as “gracious, courteous, friendly, gentle, kind.” Gower may have wished to make good use of rhetorical power in order to please people with friendly words. As is well known, the Book of Revelation of St. John begins with the following passages: “In the beginning the Word already was. The Word was in God’s presence, and what God was, the Word was. He was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; without him all things came into being.” (John, 1, 1–3)<sup>9</sup>

As the book of Troy tells us, Ulysses exploited his eloquence and skill in seeming-goodly words so as to make Antenor sell the town of Troy over to him. He made cunning use of his rhetorical devices in order to cheat Antenor. Such rhetoric should be precluded:

For whan the word to the conceipte  
 Descordeth in so double a wise,  
 Such Rethorique is to despise  
 In every place, and forto drede.  
 For of Uluxes thus I rede,  
 As in the bok of Troie is founde,  
 His eloquence and his facounde  
 Of goodly wordes whiche he tolde,  
 Hath mad that Anthenor him solde  
 The toun, which he with tresoun wan.  
 Word hath beguiled many a man. (7. 1554-64)

Ulysses succeeded in gaining the town of Troy with treason. “Tresoun” (cf. the doublet *tradition*) was one of the most heinous crimes like felony in the medieval times. “Eloquence” is defined as the art of writing with persuasive power and “fe-counde” as skill in the use of language. Gower acknowledges himself to be a faithful disciple of Plato and Aristotle. If rhetoric works as merely the purpose of persuasion, it is thought to be a sly device of deceiving others. His own rhetoric is defined as follows:

For thilke scole of eloquence  
 Belongith nought to my science,  
 Uppon the forme of rethorique  
 My wordis forto peinte and pike,  
 As Tullius somtyme wrot.  
 Bot this y knowe and this y wot,  
 That y have do my trewe peyne  
 With rude wordis and with pleyne,  
 In al that evere y couthe and myghte,  
 This bok to write as y behighte,  
 So as siknesse it soffre worlde. (8. 3115-25)

Gower makes use twice of the possessive pronoun “my” to highlight his own rhetoric, which is quite different from that of medieval rhetoricians. He denies rhetoric to be an art of embellishing words. Moreover, he strongly asserts that he, despite his illness, has bent his painful effort to write his poetry with “rude wordis and with pleyne” at the request of King Richard II. “Rude” here has positive senses like “artless, unpretentious, simple,” not negative ones like “ill-mannered, impolite, insolent.”

At the beginning of Book I, Gower has already declared his main purpose specifically in confessing and asked Amans to tell “pleinly”:

For what a man schal axe or sein  
 Touchende of schrifte, it mot be plein,  
 It nedeth nought to make it queinte,  
 For trowthe his wordes wol noght peinte:  
 That I wole axe of the forthi,  
 Mi Sone, it schal be so plainly,  
 That thou schalt knowe and understonde  
 The points of schrifte how that thei stonde. (1. 281-88)

In the lines above, Gower's intended gist of long confession between Genius and Amans is exactly afforded. With regard to confession, a sort of communication, what a man shall ask or say must be plain. It is unnecessary to make it "queinte," or "speak elaborately, often deceptively," since truth will not "peinte," or colour its words, as well exemplified in "forto *peinte* Caroles with my wordes qweinte" (1. 2729) and "This Cardinal..with his wordes slyhe and queinte, The whiche he cowthe wysly *peinte*, He schop this clerk.." (2. 2854). Genius's claim is that confession must be plain and answer should be plain. J.D. Burnley points out that "there is an implied moral significance in that which is rhetorically coloured is always in potential contrast with plain and honest. This contrast is explicit when both Chaucer and Gower use the phrase *depeynted wordes* to refer to deliberately deceptive euphemisms."<sup>10</sup>

His art of rhetoric, however, will be taken into account with some grains of allowance. J.A.W. Bennett says:

The reticence goes with a simple style that professedly eschews elaborate rhetoric (though he shows knowledge of rhetorical figures in Book vii), claiming that 'I no Rhetorique have used.' We must not take such disclaimers too seriously. He is by no means a *naif* and he abounds in commonplaces of literary origin. Thus in the Prologue we find the figures of the 'mean' between 'lust' and 'lore'. The numerous incidental classical allusions to the fires of Etna and the gold of Croesus are also part of the *colores rhetorici*. But Gower prefers the gnomic to the elaborate, plain narrative to the picturesque. Gower speaks always in proverbial figures and expressions.<sup>11</sup>

Gower dwells on about the rhetorical terms which Tullius wrote in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, erroneously attributed to Cicero, in which he recommended the manner of polishing, choosing, loosing, or lightening words, and declaring the tale clearly without ambiguity:

Bot forto loke upon the lore  
 Hou Tullius his Rethorique  
 Componeth, ther a man mai pike  
 Hou that he schal his wordes sette,  
 Hou he schal lose, hou he schal knette,  
 And in what wis he schal pronounce  
 His tale plein withoute frounce. (7. 1588-94)

"Componeth," literally meaning "to compose (a text)", which, according to J.D. Burnley, "echoes the Latin *compositio*, which is the quality of artistic construction, both phonetically and lexico-grammatically."<sup>12</sup> "Pike" has rhetorical sense of "to choose his words."<sup>12</sup> "Lose" means "to free from a constraint." "Knette" means "to put together a discourse," as in Chaucer's familiar phrase "To knytte up al this feeste, and make an ende" (Pars. 47). "Pronounce" means "to declare (sth.) publicly." "Withoute frounce" means "without ambiguity." All of these are used as technical and rhetorical terms in connection with literary style.

Words are used plainly in everyday speech. We must tell the truth without embellishment. We must conclude our discussion by honesty and sincerity in order to subdue artful sophistries. The first point of policy is truth, in which we can realize the face of Gower as a moralist:

Whenever I read Gower's poetry, I am fascinated with its smoothness. One of the reasons for this may be that his poetry is plain and easy to understand. I think that Gower wrote his poetry to be acquainted with it to be easy to memorize. This quality comes from his natural skill and technique. To evaluate and taste his poetry is the highest merit, indeed. His skill of writing poetry is innate and beyond rhetoric. It is an art of persuasion.

Gower's plain style gives me a deep and pleasant impression which remains in my memory. The more I read his poetry, the more tasteful his poetry becomes. His poetry is made of words replete with the profound sense and taste. "The *Confessio* itself, apparently lighter and more entertaining than any of Gower's other poems, is manifestly a complex and intricate work that demands careful reading,"<sup>13</sup> as A.G. Rigg aptly remarked in the Preface.

## Notes

- 1 G. C. Macaulay (ed.), John Gower. *The Complete Works of John Gower*. 4 vols. (Oxford, 1899-1902; Scholarly Press, republ. 1968). All quotations of Gower are from these editions
- 2 Echard, Siân and Claire Fanger. *The Latin Verses in the Confessio Amantis: An Annotated Translation* (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1991),

p. xxvi.

- 3 *MED*, s. v. *commu* (e 4).
- 4 Russell A. Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), p.23.
- 5 G.C. Macaulay, *op.cit.*, vol.III, p.528.
- 6 Echard and Fanger, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
- 7 E.W. Stockton (tr.), *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and the Tripartite Chronicle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), p.101.
- 8 E.W. Stockton, *op.cit.*, p.237.
- 9 *The Revised English Bible with Apocrypha* (OUP and CUP, 1989), p.79.
- 10 J.D. Burnley, "Chaucer, Usk, and Gepffrey of Vomsaif," *Neophilologus*, 69 (1985), p.285.
- 11 J.A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, ed. and compl. by Douglas Gray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp.413-14.
- 12 J.D. Burnley, "Picked Terms," *English Studies*, 65 (1984), pp.195-204.
- 13 Echard and Fanger, *op.cit.*, p.xxvi.

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