

Some Typical Expressions in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

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It is worthy of mention that Gower's critical reputation has been rocking violently from side (favor) to side (malice). One of the causes may be due to the fact that he "appeared to succeeding ages almost constantly in the company of Geoffrey Chaucer" and was compared with him unfavorably, which has been "the fate of John Gower" in J.H. Fisher's phrase.¹ W.P. Ker, however, praised Gower's language, in particular his diction tinged with simplicity and ease:

Gower's language is never strained, and it is never anything but gentle. Wordsworth's ideal of poetical expression might be exemplified from Gower, and justified; for though Gower's vocabulary is not taken from the "humble and rustic life" which Wordsworth recommended, it is natural and unaffected; there is no artificial rhetoric in his phrasing, there is no ornamental words daubed over his page; there is, in short, nothing remarkable about his diction. It is attractive purely through its simplicity and ease, "as clean as hill-well water."²

There were some bitter and ill-natured critics who threw at Gower such negative or abusive words as "tediousness" and "dullness." J.R. Lowell, for example, criticized or derided him, saying that "Gower has positively raised tediousness to the precision of science, he has made dullness an heirloom for the students of our literary history...He is the undertaker of the fair mediaeval legend, and his style has the hateful gloss, the seemingly unnatural length, of a coffin."³ Another bitter critic, J.J. Jusserand, portrayed Gower as a freakish person half in jest, saying that "A little above the corpse around Chaucer another head rises; that of Chaucer's great friend, John Gower," who hated and despised the common people, and wrote immoderately and soporiferously, until "in the midst of the droning of his sermon, Gower suddenly

screams, roars, flies into a passion—'Vox Clamantis!' His hearers open an eye, wonder where they are, recognize Gower, and go off to sleep again."⁴ Jusserand went too far when he said that Gower "hated and despised the common people," which is, without doubt, his biased and mistaken view.

By contrast, there have been not a few impartial critics, such as G.C. Macaulay, W.P. Ker, C.S. Lewis, J.W.A. Bennett, J.H. Fisher, David Burnley, and R.F. Yeager, all of whom did justice to Gower. A.E. Farnham presents his sound and prudent view, highlighting Gower's peculiar style in reference to the connection of Chaucer with Shakespeare and Dante:

We quite rightly refuse to look down on Chaucer because he does not possess the range of Shakespeare or the power of Dante; it is time to accord Gower a similar courtesy and recognize that his achievement invites both appreciation and enjoyment. The excellence of his narrative art is inseparable from its peculiar style, from that almost perverse comic sense, that keen awareness of the didactic value of misdirected seriousness, which suffuses the entire *Confessio Amantis*.⁵

One of the factors, however, which has produced such a very large gap between the critics, is, perhaps, in part due to Gower's narrative form or style, because Gower's poems are seemingly simple and naive, but this impression turns out to be false or wrong, if we read his poetry diligently. In other words, it is hasty to conclude that his poetry is simple. Gradually we come to realize that his poetry has more profound thoughts and speculations than we imagine, since "pleine" is an easy but multilayered word which often has multiple implications, good or bad. "The most recent criticism of the *Confessio*," Siân Echard and Claire Fanger fairly maintained, "begins to show a renewed respect for 'moral Gower,' both as a writer and as a man of conscience, but there can be little doubt that Gower's readership remains smaller than his admirers might feel it deserves to be."⁶

As is made manifest later, Gower commonly uses the word *pleine* in a good sense, which he regards as one of the guiding principles of making poetry. ME. *pleine* is apt to be coupled with "trouthe," as evidenced in "The pleine trouthe"(1.1126), and combined with "trewe," as in "trewe and plein" (2.192), and "With trewe hertes and with pleine"(Prol. 184).⁷ The emphasis is put on his faith or conviction that word must be true and plain.

J.A.W. Bennett, referring to Gower's verse, says that "Gower's rhymed octosyllabics allow little room for rhetorical flourishes, which would disturb their

even flow, like that of the 'stille water, for the nonnes/ Rennende upon the smale stones (iv.3009-10) which in the cave of Morpheus as he describes it 'giveth great appetite to sleep'.⁸ Such an impressionistic and aesthetic interpretation gives me much pleasure.

The *Confessio*, a total of 33,444 lines, is composed of octosyllabic rhyming couplets. In this way, the poetry is lengthy and, additionally, the short lines destitute of variety and variation cannot be saved from the criticism of being monotonous and dull.

G.C. Macaulay refers to Gower's rendering (7.4593 ff.) from Ovid's *Fasti* (ii.687-720) as typical of his style.⁹ The easiest way to become familiar with Gower's peculiar style is by practice readings, rather than through explanatory comments. As the proverb runs, practice makes perfect. By way of illustration, let us cite three passages from the *Confessio*, though rather lengthy, as salient and model examples clearly showing distinctive features of ease and simplicity of style:

1. And whan the messenger was come
 To Rome, and hath in conseil nome
 The king, it fell per chance so
 That thei were in a gardin tho,
 This message forth with the king.
 And whanne he hadde told the thing
 In what manere that it stod,
 And that Tarquinius understod
 Be the message hou that it ferde,
 Anon he tok in honde a yerde,
 And in the gardin as thei gon,
 The lilie croppes on and on,
 Wher that thei weren sprongen oute,
 He smot of, as thei stode aboute,
 And seide unto the messenger:
 'Lo, this thing, which I do nou hier,
 Schal ben in stede of thin ansuere;
 And in this wise as I me bere,
 Thou schalt unto mi Sone telle.' (7.4667-85)

2. And for the sped of this conqueste

He let do make a riche feste
With a sollempne Sacrifice
In Phebus temple; and in this wise
Whan the Romeins assembled were,
In presence of hem alle there,
Upon thalter whan al was diht
And that the fyres were alyht,
From under thalter sodeinly
An hidous Serpent openly
Cam out and hath devoured al
The Sacrifice, and ek withal
The fyres queynt, and forth anon,
So as he cam, so is he gon
Into the depe ground ayein
And every man began to sein,
'Ha lord, what mai this signefie?' (7.4701-17)

Macaulay refers to the story below as a favorable example of our author's style and versification, and he goes on to say that "It is told simply and clearly, and the verse is not only smooth and easy, but carefully preserved from monotony by the breaking of the couplet very frequently at the pauses: see 986, 998, 1006, 1010, 1016, &c."¹⁰ Let us cite the former part of the story as a suggestive and instructive example of Gower's versification:

3. Crist seith: '*Ther was a riche man*, (986)
A mihti lord of gret astat,
And he was ek so delicat
Of his clothing, that everyday
Of pourpre and bisse he made him gay,
And eet and drank therto his fille
After the lustes of his wille,
As he which al stod in delice
And tok non hiede of thilke vice.
And as it scholde so betide,
A povere lazre upon a tyde
Cam to the gate and axed mete:
Bot there mihte he nothing gete (998)

His dedly hunger forto stanche;
 For he, which hadde his fulle panche
 Of alle lustes ate bord,
 Ne deigneth noght to speke a word,
 Onliche a Crumme forto yive,
 Wherof he povere myhte live
 Upon the yifte of his almesse.

Thus lai this povere in gret destresse (1006)

Acold and hungred ate gate,
 Fro which he mihte go no gate,
 So was he wofulli besein.

And as these holi bokes sein, (1910)

The houndes comen fro the halle,
 Wher that this sike man was falle,
 And as he lay ther forto die,
 The woundes of his maladie
 Thei licken forto don him ese.

Bot he was full of such desese, (1016)

That he mai noght the deth eschape;
 Bot as it was that time schape,
 The Soule fro the bodi passeth,
 And he whom nothing overpasseth,
 The hihe god, up to the hevene
 Him tok, wher he hath set him evene
 In Habrahammes barm on hyh,
 Wher he the hevene joie syh

And hadde al that he have wolde. (6.986-1025)

It is quite understandable that Chaucer should do away with the form of the four-beat couplet used in his earlier poems like *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*.

The rhyming couplets, derived from late medieval French poetry, differ in the frequency of rhetorical flourishes from the grand style or elevated style fit for the epics of Homer, Virgil or Dante. To be smooth in rhythm or rhyme, the conjunctions, such as "and," "but," "for," and "or," etc., occur unexpectedly in the middle of a short line. The less expressive verse form, called narrative style, is inclined to be prosaic

rather than poetic. Gower's seemingly less-embellished style may give to the audience or reader an impression of being utterly devoid of sensitivity, but it has excellent merits unsurpassed by succeeding poets.

Rosiphilee got up early in the morning and was walking around in the garden, accompanied by her ladies when she came to the thicket near the river where she paused. There she took a rest in the woods, indulging in looking at fine scenery or *locus amoenus*. Silence reigned for a while. Then she told her ladies to withdraw:

It thoghte hir fair, and seide,
"Here I wole abide under the schawe":
And bad hire wommen to withdrawe,
And ther sche stod at one stille,
To thenke what was in hir wille. (4.1292-96)

Arno Esch mentions that "Einsamkeit, Schweigen und Besinnung kennzeichnen die innere Verfassung Rosiphelees."¹¹ It is a salient feature of Gower's narrative art to entrust something imaginative or fanciful wholly to the audience. It is not necessary to add any more words to the description of characters, which, as it turns out, evokes the audience's interest all the more strongly. Indeed, Gower's characters are meditative, as displayed in "Thoghte more than he seide" (2.894), "thoghte in his corage" (4.2937), and "thenke what was in hir wille" (4.1295). Such phrases are quite typical of Gower.

As described at the beginning, Gower intends to tell his story without using rhetorical decoration to excess. The less-decorated descriptions excite the audience's curiosity all the more, from which a rich atmosphere of reticence and stillness results. It is hard to decide if Gower intentionally aims from the first at such poetic effects. We cannot deny, however, that one of these effects is produced by Gower's plain and honest style. The following passage is artistically calculated:

In kertles and in Copes riche
Thei weren clothed, alle liche,
Departed evene of whyt and blew;
With alle lustes that sche knew
Thei were enbrouded overal.
Here bodies weren long and smal,
The beaute faye upon her face
Non erthly thing it may desface;
Corones on here hed thei beere,

As ech of hem a qweene weere,
 That al the gold of Cresus halle
 The leste coronal of alle
 Ne mihte have boght after the worth:
 Thus come thei ridende forth. (4.1315-28)

G.C. Macaulay, the editor of Gower's text, noticed these revisions, but W.P. Ker took up the problem from a literary, linguistic, and stylistic point of view. Since then, his views have often been repeated by Gowerians as apt proof demonstrating of Gower's studied efforts:

- (1) The Beaute of hire face schon / Wel bryhtere than the Cristall ston.
- (2) The Beaute of here faye face / Ther mai non erthly thing deface.
- (3) The Beaute faye upon her face / Non erthly thing it may desface (4.1321-22)

W.P. Ker noted that "the change to the new reading—'The Beaute faye upon her face' (i.e. 'The fairy beauty on their faces') —is characteristic of Gower's style, both in the choice of the term, the alliteration, and the harmony of the vowels."¹² Then C.S. Lewis followed with his favorable criticism, such as "revisions which demonstrate, so far as such things can be demonstrated, the workings of a fine, and finely self-critical, poetic impulse."¹³ Peter Pison observed that "Gower then is pre-eminently a poet. Not a perfect poet, for despite the craftsmanship displayed, say, in the alterations that eventually led to 'The Beaute faye upon her face' he will occasionally...help himself out with tags like 'for the nonnes'..."¹⁴

Gower attempted to alter prosaic expressions into poetical expressions as well he could. Owing to this effort, he succeeded in producing many fine expressions. It is typical of Gower that both studied and natural expressions are harmoniously blended in the *Confessio*. As the plain style has an inherent deficiency of gravity and solemnity, it is quite difficult to tell "studied" from "natural."

Ker characterized Gower and his poetry as "a correct poet," "sincere and true," "natural," and "gentle" ¹⁵ with favorable epithets. From the very first, Gower's narrative poetry was bound by the restrictions or, more aptly, fetters of octosyllabic verse form. In Book VIII, Gower composes the "Supplication" to Venus in the form of pentameter or five-foot line, on which Macaulay comments that "This 'Supplication' is a finished and successful composition in its way, and it may make us desire that our author had written more of the same kind."¹⁶ R.F. Yeager affords a similar comment. ¹⁷ We wish with Macaulay and other Gowerians that Gower had written more of the

poetry of pentameter. Gower's narrative verse skillfully unites English accent with French syllabification.

Gower makes frequent use of trite similes, such as "lich the fox was slyh" (2.3033), "stille (ded) as eny ston" (1. 1794), "blake as eny cole" (5.6204), "biter as the galle" (6.341), "siker as the crede" (5.2912), "hot as eny fyr" (8.846), and "as a Lyon wode" (5.5684). A simile is a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another to clarify an image.¹⁸

The knight had two daughters, the younger of whom was very fair:

The yongest of hem hadde of age
Fourtiene yer, and of visage
Sche was riht fair, and of stature
Lich to an hevenely figure,
And manere and goodli speche,
Thogh men wolde alle Londes seche,
Thei scholden noght have founde hir like. (1.3133-39)

Her beautiful form or stature is likened to an heavenly figure. I often wonder if this kind of simile is commonplace or unique to Gower. Probably it is a trite simile, but, taking into account that Gower made narrative poetry within the limited sphere of medieval literary activity, it would appear to be more than a mere cliché.

In the "Tale of Florent" (1.1407-1882), the old ugly figure is grotesquely drawn:

Hire chekes ben with teres wet,
And rivelen *as an empty skyn*. (1.1680-81)

An old woman is usually described as a lady with an empty skin.

The *Confessio* has an abundance of proverbial phrases and sententious remarks, some examples of which it will suffice us to quote:

Bot *as Baiard the blinde stede*,
Til he falle in the dich amide,
He goth ther noman wole him bidde;
He stant so ferforth out of reule,
Ther is no wit that mai him reule. (4.1280-85)

Gower uses the metaphor of hunting:

Upon the bench sittende on hih
With Avarice Usure I sih,
Full clothed of his oghne suite,
Which after gold makth chace and suite

With his brocours, that renne aboute
Lich unto racches in a route.
 Such lucre is non above grounde,
 Which is noght of tho racches founde;
 For wher thei se beyete sterte,
 That schal hem in no wise asterte,
 Bot thei it dryve into the net
 Of lucre, which Usure hath set. (5.4383-94)

"The gain which they pursue is started like a hare and driven into the net," Macaulay notes.¹⁹

Gower uses the image of falconry or hawking. There are some men who go to church to seek out women, none of whom they love. To tell the truth, they go there to steal her heart, which is called sacrilege. They gaze fixedly at her like an hawk about to fall on a bird:

And thus he loketh on the fleissh,
Riht as an hauk which hath a sihte
 Upon the foul, ther he schal lihte. (5.7070-72)

Medea restored Aeson, Jason's father, to youth by virtue of medicine. He was successfully rejuvenated:

Hise hore heres were away,
 And *lich unto the freisshe Maii*,
 Whan passed ben the colde schoures,
 Riht so recovereth he his floure. (5.4171-74)

His white hairs regained their youthful appearances.

The withdrawal of love is compared to pulling out the root of a green tree, which naturally dies:

For *lich unto the grene tree*,
 If that men toke his rote aweie,
 Riht so myn herte scholde diei,
 If that mi love be withdrawe. (4.2680-83)

In Gower's day, there frequently occurred various revolts or riots. As recorded in the *Vox Clamantis*, he witnessed such an event in 1381, when the clamorous mob, instigated by Wat Tyler and John Ball, stormed the City across London Bridge, in what was called the Peasants' Revolt:

But often for defalte of bondes

Al sodeinliche, er it be wist,
A Tonne, whanne his lye arist,
Tobrekth and renneth al aboute,
Which elles scholde noght gon oute;
And ek fulofte a litel Skar
Upon a Banke, er men be war,
Let in the Strem, which with gret peine,
If evere man it schal restreigne. (Prol.502-10)

Gower suggests outbreaks of popular revolt by means of the two images: ferments overrun a cask and a little chink lets in the stream.

The same idea is found in the exemplum against the vice of “Cheste,” which “is that form of contention which expresses itself in angry words. Gower seems to have taken it to be connected with the verb ‘chide’, as Macaulay notes.²⁰

“Cheste” is compared to a well:

That every thing which he can telle,
It springeth up as doth a welle,
Which mai non of his stremes hyde,
Bot renneth out on every side.
So buillen up the foule sawes
That Cheste wot of his felawes:
For as a Sive kepeth Ale,
Riht so can Cheste kepe a tale;
Al that he wot he wol desclose,
And speke er eny man oppose. (3.427-36)

The same idea is found in the *Mirour*:

car ly sage aucī
Ce dist, que deinz le cuer de luy
Folie buylle tresparmy,
Comme du fontaine la liquour. (MO.4146-49)

(for the wise man also says that in her heart folly bubbles right through like liquid in a fountain.)²¹

Traditionally, a flower is often compared to the virginity of maidenhood, as in “the flour of maidenhiede” (5.6352), “The ferste flour he tok aweie” (5.5382), and “sche hath forlore/ The flour which sche hath longe bore” (8.303-4). An allegorical comparison between a flower and female virginity is here used conventionally. The

phrase *devoureth His oghne fleissh* suggests the image of a wolf. "The wylde fader," alluding to King Antiochus, raped his own daughter:

The wylde fader thus devoureth

His oghne fleissh. (8.309-10)

"Wylde" has multiple meanings, ranging from "beastly, cruel" through "lascivious, wanton, lusty" to "primitive, barbarous." *Cheste*, or contention in words, is likened to a fountain or a spring gushing forth unceaselessly:

For he berth evere his mowth unpinned,

So that his lippes ben unloke

And his corage is al tobroke,

That every thing which he can telle,

It springeth up as doth a welle,

Which mai non of his stremes hyde,

Bot renneth out on every syde. (3.424-30)

The words and phrases *unspinned*, *unloke*, *tobroke*, *springeth up*, and *renneth out* are used metaphorically.

Admittedly Gower's poetry, as compared with that of Chaucer, is short of metaphor, a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another. Moreover, Gower compares "Cheste" to the leaven of the bread. "Cheste" personified is compared to leaven, which often makes all the paste sour:

He is the levein of the bred,

Which soureth all the past aboute:

Men oghte wel such on to doute,

For evere his bowe is redi bent,

And whom he hit I telle him schent,

If he mai perce him with his tunge. (3.446-51)

The lexical meaning of "levein" is a raising agent in the making of bread, i.e. "leavening."

Contrary to the law of nature, Lichaon, meaning "wolf" in Greek, butchered his guests and then he cooked their flesh, which he served to all his family, so that Jupiter, in anger, took vengeance on the cruel king for his inhuman act. Finally Lichaon was transformed into a wolf:

A wolf he was thanne openly,

The whos nature prively

He hadde in his condicion. (7.3367-69)

Gower highlights his cruelty by inverting the normal word-order: "A wolf he was."

As the proverb runs, "it is too late to lock the stable door after the steed has been stolen." Macaulay notes concerning the phrase *pleith an aftercast* that "This looks like a metaphor from casting dice, but it is difficult to see the exact application. It means of course here that he is always too late in what he says or does":²²

for whan the grete Stiede
Is stole, thanne he taketh hiede,
And makth the stable dore fast:
Thus evere he pleith an aftercast
Of al that he schal seie or do. (4.901-5)

It is remarkable that, the *OED* takes "aftercast" in the sense of "a second or later throw (at dice)," while the *MED* takes it to mean "a plan made after the event."

The story of "The Rape of Lucrece" (7.4754-5130) is comparatively rich in figure, metaphor, and imagery. One of Gower's excellent metaphors with great poetic power is observed in the phrase "*the water in hire yhe Aros*," where Gower does not express literally "her eyes were filled with tears," but figuratively "the water arose in her eyes." Thus, as is often expressed as "Tears welled up in her eyes," the tears are compared to a well: "With teres, whiche, as of a welle The stremes, from hire yhen felle" (4.839-40) and "Riht as men sen a welle springe, With yhen fulle of wofull teres,..Sche wepte" (7.5004-7).

After this figurative expression, Gower compares her tears to the dew which drips from the leaves and flowers. Finally the phrase *woeful salt* is coupled with "tears," not with "water":

With that the water in hire yhe
Aros, that sche ne myhte it stoppe,
And as men sen the dew bedroppe
The leves and the floures eke,
Riht so upon hire white cheke
The wofull salte teres felle. (7.4830-35)

Thus Gower clearly portrays her weeping figure as "the woeful salt tears fell on her white cheek." Tears falling on her cheek are compared to dew with which leaves and flowers are besprinkled.

Towards the end of the poetry, when it is brought to light that Amans was an old man unfit for love in age, the impulse of sudden and somewhat gruesome exposure of his old age is pleasantly softened by rural and pastoral imagery, e.g., green grass and

withered hay:

That which was whilom grene gras,
Is welked hey at time now.
Forthi mi conseil is that thou
Remembre wel hou thou art old. (8.2436-39)

Genius tells the story of a King of Hungary (1.2021-2274) in which his arrogant brother got angry at the King's acts of excessive humility toward two aged pilgrims, despising it as a disgrace to the royal dignity:

The kyng his yhe caste aboute,
Til he was ate laste war
And syh comende ayein his char
Two pilegrins of so gret age,
That lich unto a dreie ymage
That weren pale and fade hewed,
And as a bussh which is besnewed,
Here berdes weren hore and whyte;
Ther was of kinde bot a lite,
That thei ne semen fulli dede. (1.2038-47)

Gower likens the hoary, white beard to a bush bestrewn with snow. The comparison of beards to a bush is seen in "A much berd as a busk ouer his brest henges" (*SGGK*, 182).²³ A remarkable thing is how Gower masterfully contrasts the vernal rural landscape of "the Monthe of Maii" (1.2026), when the King is playing and singing with lords, ladies, and nobility, with that of the bush covered with wintry snow, which bodes of death.

Gower utilizes the tragic story of Pyramus and Thisbe (3.1331-1502) as an *exemplum* of warning against making hasty decisions. When Thisbe saw a lion coming near a well, she froze with fear, and, then, hurriedly hid herself behind a bush like a bird:

And Tisbe dorste not remue,
Bot as a bride which were in Mue
Withinne a buish sche kepte hir clos
So stille that sche noght aros;
Unto herself and pleineth ay. (3.1411-15)

Believing that the lion had devoured Thisbe, Pyramus killed himself, which is utilized as an *exemplum* of the vice of over-hastiness. It is interesting to note that

Ovid's original phrase *obscurum..in antrum*" (i.e. "in a black cave")²⁴ is replaced with the phrase *Withinne a buish*. Norman Callan noticed that "Gower should feel the necessity at this point for heightened emotional effect, and should therefore insert the simile of the frightened bird—a simile commonplace but also eminently pathetic."²⁵ This is a familiar simile, but one which has an irresistible appeal to emotion.

It is characteristic of Gower to make good use of Homeric similes. In the "Tale of Florent" (1.1407-1882), the knight, Florent, flees by night with a would-be wife who is old and ugly. Thus Florent is compared to an owl which hides itself quietly in daytime, and flies about actively in search of prey at night:

Bot as an oule fleth be nyhte
Out of alle othre briddes syhte,
Riht so this knyht on daies brode
In clos him hield, and schop his rode
On nyhtes time, til the tyde
That he cam there he wolde abide. (1.1727-32) 16

With regard to similes, such as "Sche loketh for as doth a More" and "lich unto the wollesak/ Sche proferth hire," J.A.W. Bennett characterizes them as "vivid" and makes further reference to "Florent cannot bear to ride with her except 'On nyhtes time'."²⁶

"Detraccioun" or "Malebouche" is compared to the nettle which burns the fresh roses and makes them withered.

For as the Nettle which up renneth
The freisshe rede Roses brenneth
And makth hem fade and pale of hewe,
Riht so this fals Envious hewe,
In every place wher he duelleth,
With false wordes whiche he telleth
He torneth preisinge into blame
And worschipe into worldes schame. (2.401-8)

C'est celle urtie mal poignant,
Que d'amertume vait brillant
La rose qui luy est voisine. (*MO*. 3721-23)

(She is the evil stinging nettle who burns with bitterness the rose which is her neighbor.)²⁷

Macaulay notes that "the opposition of rose and nettle is common in our author, e.g. *Bal*.xxxvi.3, *xlvi*.1, *VC*.vii.181."²⁸

"Cheste" is compared to "a city without wall." An unfortified city where everyone can go in-and-out freely is metaphorically applied to a person talking or chattering about whatever comes to mind without deliberation:

As a Cite withoute wal,
 Wher men mai gon out overal
 Withouten eny resistance,
 So with his croked eloquence
 He spekth al that he wot withinne. (3.437-41)

The literal meaning of "croked" is "twisting, winding," while the figurative meaning is "wrong, misguided, defective, rude."

Gower has Genius tell a story about a man of indolence, who finds it troublesome to go on an expedition to win his lady and lives an easy life doing just as he wishes:

And as a cat wolde ete fisshes
 Withoute wetinge of his cles,
 So wolde he do, bot natheles
 He faileth ofte of that he wolde.(4.1108-11)

Such an idler is likened to a cat which omits the trouble of wetting its claws prior to eating fish.

"Even the sober and proper Gower," J.A. Burrow observes, "indulges in this kind of simile, most remarkably in a passage describing a slothful man having nightmares":

Bot thanne who so toke kepe,
 Whanne he is falle in such a drem,
 Riht as a schip ayein the strem,
 He routeth with a slepi noise,
 And brustleth as a monkes froise
 Whanne it is throwe into the panne. (4.2728-33)

The images of both a ship moving against the current and a monk's pancake sizzling in a frying-pan are as heterogeneous as anything in *Piers Plowman*.²⁹ "Froise" is a kind of pancake containing chopped meat or fish. Indeed, this may be Gower's devised simile, but it is hard to fathom Gower's association of heavy wheezing snores with the noise of a ship against the current, or with sizzling pancakes.

Genius uses an elaborate Homeric simile to describe love-delicacy. There are three kinds of dainty dishes which Amans relishes as his “heart’s food” (6.742). The first food is provided by the eye, the second by the ear, and the third by that which “grows of [his] own thought” (6.749):

Riht as myn yhe with his lok
Is to myn herte a lusti coc
Of loves fode delicat,
Riht so myn Ere in his astat,
Wher as myn yhe mai noght serve,
Can wel myn hertes thonk deserve
And fieden him fro day to day
With suche deyntes as he may. (6.827-34)

His eye serves as a cook. But, when his eye is of no avail, his ear then acts as a cook feed his heart in the place of eye.

Aeson, Jason's father, was old. By a starlit night, Medea, skilled in magic, went out to the brook with the aim of rejuvenating Aeson:

The world was stille on every side;
With open hed and fot al bare,
Hir her tosprad sche gan to fare,
Upon hir clothes gert sche was,
Al specheles and on the gras
Sche glod forth as an Addre doth:
Non otherwise sche ne goth,
Til sche cam to the freisshe flod,
And there a while sche withstod.
Thries sche torned hire aboute,
And thries ek sche gan doun loute
And in the flod sche wette hir her,
And thries on the water ther
Sche gaspeth with a drecchinge onde,
And tho sche tok hir speche on onde. (5.3962-76)

Medea glided silently through the grass like an adder. Gower's source relies mainly on Ovid's *Metamorphosis*:

Egreditur tectis vestes induta recinctas,
Nuda pedem, nudos humeris infusa capillos,

Fertque vagos mediae per muta silentia noctis

Incomitata gradus.

([Medea] went forth from her house clad in flowing robes, barefoot,
her hair unadorned and streaming down her shoulders; and
all alone she wandered out into the deep stillness of midnight.)³⁰

However, Macaulay makes a specific note that "The comparison to the adder in l. 3967 is Gower's own":³¹

Gower uses some animals in similes, e.g., *fox* (3.3033), *hare* (7.3776), *hound* (2.1858), *leo(u)n* (7.5240), *swayn* (5.6894), *tigre* (7.4944), and *wolf* (5.5633). Virginius killed his daughter Virginia with his sword to save her honour of virginity. Virginius' reckless dash is compared to the wild boar being chased after by hounds. J.A. Burrow states that "None of Chaucer's contemporaries attempts anything quite like the similes in *Troilus*. The nearest Gower gets is in similes of that heroic kind which later appealed to Lydgate, where warriors are compared to some fierce animal, thus:

Lich to the chaced wylde bor;

The houndes whan he fieleth sor,

Tothroweth and goth forth his weie,

In such a wise forto seie

This worthi kniht with swerd on honde

His weie made (7.5255-60)."³²

Further Burrow goes on to say that "In general Gower's similes are less elaborate and beautiful, more inclined to be baldly instructive, than Chaucer's." ³³ Macaulay notes that "The simile is due to Gower": ³⁴

It is quite suggestive that G.C. Macaulay refers to the new artistic style of poetry and a new element of versification as characteristic of Gower's alliteration. He comments that "Alliteration is used by Gower in a manner which is especially characteristic of the new artistic style of poetry. It is sufficiently frequent, both in formal combinations, such as 'cares colde,' 'rusty hf,' 'park and plowh,' 'sward or spere,' 'hief and loth,' 'wel or wo,' 'dike and delve,' 'slepe softe,' 'stille...spede,' and as an element of the versification: For so, thei seide, al stille and softe/ God Anubus hire wolde awake. (1.886-87), The lost is had,/ the lucre is lore. (4.2590) Which many a man hath mad to falle,/ Wher that he mihte nevere arise. (4.3384-85) And thanne he gan to sighe sore,/ And sodeinli abreide of slep. (5.3670-71) Sche hath hir oghne bodi feigned,/ For feere as thogh sche wolde flee (7.3468-69)³⁵

Yeager keenly observes that "In the *Confessio Amantis* we find three basic

alliterative schema: AABB ('Ther *mai* no *mannes* *tunge* *telle*, 7.5080); ABAB ('A *man*, which wolde *make* him *wys*' 7.2452); and ABBA ('Wher *many* a wonder woful *mone*, 4.834).. In the AABB type, the sentences are divided by the alliteration into rough units, one primarily involved with the subject, the other with the predicate: The *freisshe* *floures* *sprede* and *springe* (7.808)³⁶

In contrast to stillness, Gower makes artistic uses of the sound of [g]:

The world was stille on every side;
With open hed and fot al bare,
Hir her tosprad sche gan to fare,
Upon hir clothes *gert* sche was,
Al specheles and on the *gras*
Sche *glod* forth as an Addre doth:
Non otherwise sche ne *goth*,
Til sche cam to the *freisshe* *flod*,
And there a while sche withstod.
Thries sche torned hire aboute,
And thries ek sche gan doun loute
And in the flod sche wette hir her,
And thries on the water ther
Sche *gaspeth* with a *drecching*e onde,
And tho sche tok hir *speche* on *honde*. (5.3962-76)

Peter Fison observes that "Gower achieves an almost serpentine motion, and it is to convey this, rather than for its own sake, that he uses the alliteration in *Adrian and Bardun* 'The grete, gastli Serpent glyde' (5.5062) where the contrast between the hiss of 'gastli' and the final slither in 'glyde' is surely unique before Dryden."³⁷

Upon a time and as he drouh
Toward the wode, he sih besyde
The *grete* *gastli* Serpent *glyde*,
Til that sche cam in his presence,
And in hir kinde a reverence
Sche hath him do, and forth withal
A Ston mor briht than a cristall
Out of hir mouth tofore his weie
Sche let doun falle, and wente aweie,
For that he schal noght ben adrad. (5.5060-69)

When we read the "Tale of Constance" in class, Professor Michio Masui referred to the alliterative phrase *wawes wilde* (2.713) as being most typical of Gower. At that time, Prof. Masui was devoting himself to the study of Chaucer's rhyme words.³⁸

Let us examine the portrait of a woman sketched in the three typical examples. This is the ugliest woman that Gower ever produced in his *Confessio*. She is waiting for Florent to come:

1. *Hire* Nase bass, *hire* browes hyhe,
Hyre yhen smale and depe set,
Hire chekes ben with teres wet,
 And riven as an emty skyn
 Hangende doun unto the chin,
Hire Lippes schrunken ben for age,
 Ther was no grace in the visage,
Hir front was nargh, *hir* lockes hore,
 Sche loketh forth as doth a More,
Hire Necke is schort, *hir* schuldres courbe,
 That myhte a mannes lust destourbe,
 Hire body gret and nothing small,
 And schortly to describe hire al,
 Sche hath no lith withoute a lak. (1.1678-91)

Her flat nose, high brows, tiny and sunken eyes, cheek wet with tears, loose skin hanging down to the chin, and wrinkled lips. Then he summarizes her as having no grace in her face. Then he paints her narrow forehead and hoary hair. She looks forth like a Moor. Her short neck, bent shoulders, and huge body. Once more he simply characterizes her as having no limb without a lack of some sort.

He hears someone speaking about the good qualities in all the ladies whom he sees. In each lady, he finds some quality which pleases him, this or that:

2. *Som on, for sche* is whit of skin,
Som on, for sche is noble of kin,
Som on, for sche hath rodi chieke,
Som on, for that sche semeth mieke,
Som on, for sche hath yhen greie,
Som on, for sche can lawhe and pleie,
Som on, for sche is long and small,
Som on, for sche is lyte and tall,

Som on, for sche is pale and bleche,
Som on, for sche is softe of speche,
Som on, for that sche is camused,
Som on, for sche hath noght ben used,
Som on, for sche can daunce and singe. (5.2469-81)

Thus the physical or mental characteristics of a woman is assiduously described.

Gower has Genius tell the story of “love-delicacy.” The pronoun *he* refers to “myn yhe” (6.754). By seeing, Amans’ eyes figuratively eat the food of all her “schapthe” (6.785), meaning “form,” which “occurs repeatedly in the *Ayenbite of Inwyte*”³⁹ When he sees the beautiful figure of the lady he loves, his eyes are fully fed:

3. *He seth hire face of such a colour,*
That freisshere is than eny flour,
He seth hire front is large and plein
Withoute fronce of eny grein,
He seth hire yhen lich an hevene,
He seth hire nase strauht and evene, .
He seth hire rode upon the cheke,
He seth hire rede lippes eke,
Hire chyn acordeth to the face,
Al that he seth is full of grace,
He seth hire necke round and clene,
Therinne mai no bon be sene,
He seth hire handes faire and white. (6.767-79)

It is interesting that the order of a lover’s turning his eyes upon the “schapthe” of a woman is described, e. g. face, forehead, eyes, nose, lips, chin, neck, hands, etc.

Despite Gower's denial of rhetorical embellishments, he is interested in punning, wordplay, allusion, and etymology. Gower uses *polyptoton* or *traductio* which is a device for repeating words from the same root but with different endings:

For often he that wol beguile
Is guiled with the same guile,
And thus the guilour is beguiled. (6.1379-81)
That was to him an angri jape;
Bot for that he with Angre wroghte,
His Angres angreliche he boghte. (3.378-80)

Bot thei that worchen be *supplaunt*,
 Yit wolden thei a man *supplaunte*,
 And take a part of thilke *plaunte*
 Which he hath for himselve set:
 And so fulofte is al unknet,
 That som man weneth be riht fast.
 For *Supplant* with his slyhe cast
 Fulofte happneth forto mowe
 Thing which an other man hath sowe. (2.2368-76)

The *MED* defines "supplant" metaphorically as "acquisition of the position and advantages of another through guile," equated in meaning with "supplantation, usurpation." Gower, however, aptly defines the word at issue figuratively but amorously as "to mowe thing which an other man hath sowe."

Gower uses the figure of speech called *anaphora* in which "one word or phrase at the beginning, and of another at the end, of successive clauses, sentences, or passages" is repeated:

The See *now* ebbeth, *now* it floweth,
 The lond *now* welketh, *now* it groweth,
Now be the Trees with leves grene,
Now thei be bare and nothing sene,
Now be the lusti somer floures,
Now be the stormy wynter shoures,
Now be the daies, now the nyhtes,
 So stant ther nothing al upryhtes,
Now it is lyht, now it is derk;
 And thus stant al the worldes werk
 After the disposicioun
 Of man and his condicioun. (Prol. 933-41)

O thou my sorwe and my gladnesse,
O thou my hele and my siknesse,
O thou my wanhope and al my trust,
O my desese and al my lust,
O thou my wele, o thou my wo,
O thou my frend, o thou my fo,

O thou my love, o thou my hate,
For thee mot I be ded algate. (3.279-86)

Gower is fond of the common device called *oxymoron* as well. A few typical examples will suffice to be quoted:

[I] Wol wryte and schewe al openly
Hou love and I togedre mette,
Wherof the world ensample fette
Mai after this, whan I am go,
Of *thilke unsely jolif wo*,
Whos reule stant out of the weie,
Nou glad and nou gladnesse aweie,
And yet it may nocht be withstonde. (1.84-91)

Gower defines love as "unhappy pleasing woe," and represents the ambivalent nature of love, declaring that "[its] government has gone astray (Now joy, and now joy-fled-away), Yet there is no withstanding it by any force of human wit."⁴⁰

The echo of this ambivalence, sounding throughout the *Confessio*, finally comes back to the phrase *thilke unsely jolif wo* (8. 2360):

Bot if my conseil mai be lieved,
Thou schalt ben esed er thou go
Of *thilke unsely jolif wo*,
Wherof thou seist thin herte is fyred. (8.2358-61)

Gower is a conscious and keen poet.

Oxymoron is a figure of speech combining contradictory words and meanings, such as "a biter swete"(6.250), "the lusti peine" (2.2586), and "love is a wofull blisse"(5.5993), to heighten a special effect mainly in the portrait of love sickness:

He drinkth the *bitre* with the *swete*,
He medleth *sorwe* with *likyngee*,
And *liveth*, as who seith, *deyinge*. (1.1708-10)

And thus soffre I the *hote chele*,
Which passeth othre peines fele;
In cold I brenne and *frees in hete*:
And thanne I drinke a *biter swete*
With *dreue lippe* and *yhen wete*. (6.247-51)

Other examples are: "his conseil bothe cold and hot" (2.1966), "O thou my wele, o thou

my wo" (3.283), "wofull peine" (3.913, 1361, 8.2217), "Thus medleth sche with joie wo" (5.5989), "A lusti fievere, a wounde softe" (5.5995), "the sweete soureth" (6.1190), "the jolif peine groweth" (7.1910), "The lusti wo, the glade peine" (8.1763), "Of love and of his dedly hele" (8.3155), "In joie he wepeth, in sorwe he singeth" (6.68). Ker noticed perceptively in the phrases "O whiche sorwes glade, /O which wofull prosperite" (4.1212-13) *oxymorons* "freshly studied, and with some humour."⁴¹

Finally, we must touch on a device called *rimes riches* or identical rhymes. The same word, for instance, "wise/ wise," "leve/ leve," and "rede/ rede," occurs in the rhyme position to achieve emphasis, of which, above all, Gower was very fond. Usually, they may be neglected as a mere rhyme-tag or filler, but Gower's *rimes riches* play a vital role in the *Confessio*. Gower's *rimes riches*, Yeager emphasizes, "heighten the conversational flavor of the poetry, urging us to forget that it is poetry, by bringing into it the sorts of parentheses and qualifications with which average Englishmen commonly pace their discourse. Such figures contribute directly to that sense of verisimilitude required of dramatic poems."⁴² In this way, Gower used *rimes riches* as a device for making poetry.

Texts

The Complete Works of John Gower, 4 vols. ed. by G.C. Macaulay (Scholarly Press, republ. 1968)

Notes

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- 12 Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
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- 15 Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 104, 105, 107 respectively.
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- 23 Tolkien, J.R.R. and E.V. Gordon (eds.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 2nd ed. by Norman Davis (Oxford, rpt., 1995), p. 6.
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- 33 Burrow, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
- 34 Macaulay, vol. 3, p. 535.
- 35 Macaulay, vol. 2, p. cxxvii.
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