

On the Vocabulary of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

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It is a familiar fact that John Gower introduced a variety of new foreign words into his *Confessio Amantis*¹⁾ from French, while on the other hand, he made surprisingly frequent use of archaic and even seemingly obsolete words inherited particularly from Old English. L.F. Casson has rightly stated as to Gower's introduction of the foreign words that 'he is certainly a more daring innovator than Chaucer'²⁾. According to J. Mersand's statistic investigation, the total number of words employed in his poetry is 4502, specifically 2271 of which are the Romance words and the rest are the Non-Romance words³⁾.

Worthy of special mention is that, in addition to the English book called the *Confessio Amantis* (abbr. CA), Gower wrote the *Mirour de l'Omme* (abbr. MO) and the *Vox Clamantis* (abbr. VC) in Anglo-Norman and in Latin respectively, both of which undoubtedly exerted an unexpectedly considerable influence upon his English vocabulary. According to G.C. Macaulay, 'the poet desired to rest his fame upon three principal works, the first in French, the second in Latin, and the third in English'⁴⁾.

As the *OED* explains, *presage* (2.1790) appears to have been transplanted directly from Latin, not from French *presage*. *Prenostik* (2.1793) in the sense of 'presage' cited as the earliest in the *OED* is a partially Latinized form as seen in the word *prenostica* (VC, 1.13). *Morgage* 'a pledge' (7.4228) (MO, 6199), *novellerie* 'novelty, strangeness' (5.3955) (MO, 26099), *oblivion* 'the name of a ring which caused forgetfulness' (4.651) (MO, 14619), *pointure* 'pricking' (7.1048) (MO, 3528), *pretoire* 'a Roman praetor' (7.2847) (MO, 19121), *pusillamite* (? error) 'timidity' (4.314) (MO, 5463), *reguerdon* 'recompense, reward' (3.2716) (MO, 1529) and *reprise* 'cost, retribution' (1.3308) (MO, 1358) were borrowed directly from French. It is noteworthy that all these words except *pointure* occur in the rhyme position. The *OED* refers to *pusillamite* (*pusillanimite*, L *pusillus* very little + *animus* soul, mind) as a new word, quoted as the earliest. *Reprise* 'loss, cost, retribution' is used 'in Gower only'⁵⁾, which was derived directly from OF *reprise*.

Grevable 'harmful, injurious, offensive' (4.309) (MO, 2462), *menable* 'suitable for sailing,

favorable' (1.1067) (MO, 3676), *pernable* 'capable of being caught by force' (8.2931) and *sempiterne* (L *sempiternus*, L *semper* always) 'everlasting, eternal' (7.104) (MO, 5286), adopted directly from French, are used as rhyme words. These words, with the exception of *pernable*, are used in the *Mirour* as well. *Pernable* is derived from Anglo-French *pernable*, meaning 'proper to betaken or caught' ⁶⁾ rather than from Old French *prenable*, as the spelling clearly indicates. *Mecanique* 'manual labour or operation' (L *mechanicus*) (7.1693), used a synonym for *art*, was introduced by Gower into English :

Of hem that ben *Artificiers*,
Whiche usen *craftes* and *mestiers*,
Whos *Art* is cleped *Mechanique*. (7.1691-93)

Artificiers, used as the earliest, means 'craftsman, tradesman, workman'. It is about in the middle of the 16th century that *mechanique* has occurred as an epithet in the sense of 'pertaining to or involving manual labour or skill'. *Naturien* 'a student of nature, a natural philosopher' (6.1338, etc.), taken from French *naturien* (Godef.), appears in a rhyme position. It was ultimately taken place by *naturian* after the 16th century by the analogy of *astronmien* (2.230).

Gower's spelling as to *mestier* 'handicraft, trade', used since the early 13th century, is traced back to Old French *mestier* and *mester*. Both spellings like *mestier* and *mester* are used in the *Mirour*. Chaucer uses the form *mister* in portraying the Miller, which is an English spelling in the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* : ⁷⁾

In youthe he lerned hadde a good *mister*,
He was a wel good *wrighte*, a *carpenter*. (613-14)

Of course, Chaucer adopts the native word *wrighte* and the Anglo-French word *carpenter* with the aim of heightening a stylistic effect. Ultimately *mister* (med. L *misterium*, altered form of *ministerium*) was confused with another word *mystery* 'to close (the lips of eyes)', which is quite different in etymology.

Enfile 'to put (something) on a thread or string' (7.4333), *englue* 'to fasten (things) together, beguile or delude (someone)' (3.1553) and *reguerdoned* 'rewarded' (3.2761) are derived from Old French *enfiler*, *engluer* and *reguerdoner* respectively. It should be noted that Gower used them as rhyme words. The noun *fuisoun*, conversed into the verb *fuisouned* 'supplied plentifully', is used as a rhyme word. *Reguerdoned* 'rewarded' (3.2716) is derived from Old French *reguerdoner* (MO, 3762, *reguerdoner*). Like Gower, Shakespeare used the noun *reguerdown* (5.2368), derived from Old French *reguerdon* 'recompense, reward' :

Stoope then, and set your Knee against my Foot,
And in *reguerdon* of that dutie done,
I gryt thee with the... Sword of Yorke. (*I Hen. VI*, III. i.170)

Let us examine some words which do not occur in the rhyme position :

And love of his *pointure* stingeth
After the lawe of nature
The youthe of every creature. (7.1048-50)

The *MED* quotes *pointure* as the sole citation in the sense of 'piercing, pricking ; —used *fig*', which was introduced from Old French *pointure* (MO, 3528). Gower seems to have used the word at issue in the figurative sense : 'sexual incitement'.

Terremote is derived from Old French *terremote*, traced back to Latin *terrae motus* 'earthquake', the last citation of which is from c1450 :

And after that himself he schok,
Wherof that al the halle quok,
As it a *terremote* were ;
Thei seiden alle, god was there :
In such a res and forth he flyh. (6.2205-9)

This word occurs in the *Mirour* in the form of *terremoete* (4522). Probably Gower may have used French *terremote*, since the meaning of 'earthquake' can be easily inferred from the native verbs like *schok* and *quok*.

In the following two stanzas English, French, and Latin words curiously mingle. *thoght*, *wanhope*, *bringeth*, *kinde*, *forsaketh*, *Slouthe*, *trouthe*, and *bowe* are native words, while *conceiveth*, *deceiveth*, *meintiene*, *folie*, and *reson* are French words. *Tristesce* and *Obstinacie* are Gallicized Latin.

wanhope first appears in *R. Glouc.*, meaning 'hopelessness, despair'. The *OED* notes that 'In early use chiefly, despair of salvation. Hence often in amatory compositions which imitate religious language'. *conceive* and *deceive* first appear in *Cursor Mundi* (a1300), meaning 'to become pregnant' and 'to beguile' respectively. *Tristesce*, meaning 'sadness, grief, melancholy', is not placed in the rhyme position :

That he withinne his thoght *conceiveth*
Tristesce, and so himself *deceiveth*
That he wanhope bringeth inne. (4.3395-97)

For *Tristesce* is of such a kinde,
That forto meintiene his folie,
He hath with him *Obstinacie*,
Which is withinne of such a *Slouthe*,

That he forsaketh alle trouthe,
And wole unto no reson bowe ; (4.3432-37)

Tristesce is, according to the *OED*, derived from Old French *tristesce* and then traced back to Latin *tristitia* 'sadness'. From the below Latin gloss it can be surmised that the word was not completely Anglicized :

Hic loquitur super vltima specie Accidie, que Tristicia siue
Desperacio dicitur.

Further Gower notes :

Obstinacio est contradiccio veritatis agnite :

It is evident, therefore, that *tristicia* 'despair, despondency' is equivalent in meaning to *desperacio* 'lack of hope or faith, despair' :

I am in Tristesce al amidde
And fulfild of Desperance : (4.3498-99)

On the contrary, Gower, as is often emphasized, is extraordinarily concerned with archaic or obsolete words. He exploited native words specifically in the vivid description of violent storm or tempest :

The Sky wax derk, the wynd gan blowe,
The firy welkne gan to thondre,
As thogh the world scholde al to sondre ;
Fro hevene out of the watergates
The reyni Storm fell doun algates
And al here takel made unwelde
That noman mihte himself bewelde. (3.984-90)

"His vocabulary is of the poetic English kind," Casson has remarked, "which might have been taken straight over from an Old English poem, but which proves at any rate the close kinship of spirit between English of the ninth century and that of the fourteenth"⁸⁾. It is worthy of note that he put Gower's use of old words upon 'the close kinship of spirit'.

Welkne 'sky' can be traced back to *Beowulf* in which the word at issue means 'cloud' whose equivalents are 'sky' and 'hevene'. The first instance of *unwelde* meaning 'difficult or cumbrous to manipulate or handle', dates back to c1220 *Bestiary*. It was frequently used from c1400 till c1450, as the *OED* explains. *Bewelde* means 'to control, handle, manage' which dates back to the thirteenth century (c1200).

The scene of storm at sea is vividly described by abundant native words :

Fortune hath evere be muable
And mai no while stonde stable :
For now it hiheth, now it loweth,
Now stant upriht, now overthroweth,
Now full of blisse and now of bale,
As in the tellinge of mi tale
Hierafterward a man mai liere,
Which is gret routhe forto hiere.
This lord, which wolde don his beste,
Withinne himself hath litel reste,
And thoughte he wolde his place change
And seche a contre more strange.
Of Tharsiens his leve anon
He tok, and is to Schipe gon :
His cours he nam with Seil updrawe,
Where as fortune doth the lawe,
And scheweth, as I schal reherse,
How sche was to this lord diverse,
The which upon the See sche ferketh.
The wynd aros, the weder derketh,
I blew and made such tempeste,
Non anchor mai the schip areste,
Which hath tobroken al his gere ;
The Schipmen stode in such a feere,
Was non that myhte himself bestere.
Bot evere awaite upon the lere,
Whan that thei scholde drenche at ones.
Ther was ynowh withinne wones
Of wepinge and of sorghe tho ;
This yonge king makth mochel wo
So forto se the Schip travaile :
Bot al that myhte him noght availe ;
The mast tobrak, the Seil torof,
The Schip upon the wawes drof,
Til that thei sihe a londes cooste.
Tho made avou the leste and moste,
Be so thei myhten come alonde ;
Bot he which hath the See on honde,
Neptunus, wolde noght acorde,
Bot altobroke cable and corde,
Er thei to londe myhte aproche,
The Schip toclef upon a roche,
And al goth down into the depe.
Bot he that alle thing mai kepe
Unto this lord was merciable,
And broghte him sauf upon a table,
Which to the lond him hath upbore ;

The remenant was al forlore,
Wherof he made mochel mone. (8.585-633)

The romance words are as follows :

acorde (OF *acorder*), *aproche* (OF *aprochier*), *availe* (F *vaille*), *contre* (OF *cuntree*), *corde* (F *corde*), *diverse* (OF *divers*), *fortune* (OF *fortune*, L *fortuna*), *merciabile* (OF *merciabile*) 'merciful, compassionate', *muable* (OF *muable*) 'mutable, changeable, variable' which Chaucer first uses in the *Boece*. The last citation is from 1481 (Caxton). *reherse* (OF *rehercer*), *remanent* (OF *remanent*), *sauf* (OF *sauf*), *stable* (OF *stable*), *strange* (OF *estrange*). *tablr* (OF *table*), *tempeste* (OF *tempest*), *travaile* (OF *travaillier*) 'Of a ship : To 'labour', to roll or pitch heavily and right itself with difficulty'. (c1205)

On the other hand, the above quotation includes native words, some of which are as follows : *arest* 'to stay, remain' (c1325), *awaite* 'to wait for' (c1230), *bale* 'woe, mischief', often opposed alliteratively to *bliss*, *blithe* (a1000), *bestere* 'to begin to move actively' (c1300), *depe* 'the deep part of the sea' (a1000), *Derketh* 'to become dark' (a1300), *drenche* [OE *drencan*, Ger *tranken*] is intimately associated with 'to drink', 'to sink in water, to be drowned' (1297), In Old English *ferke* 'to carry' is, according to the *OED*, 'known only in one example in the sense 'to bring, conduct' ; but the vb. *fercian* to support, feed, may perh. be the same word, as this sense may have developed from that of supplying with provisions for a journey'. Its last citation is from c1400 (*Destru. Troy* 614). *forlore* 'to destroy, cause to perish, cut off' (a1000), *gere* 'apparatus generally' (a1300), *lere* [OE *lyre*] 'destruction, death' (MED), *mone* 'lamentation' (a1225), *overthroweth* 'to cast down from a position of prosperity or power' figuratively used. *tobroken* 'to break to pieces', *altobroke* (*All* emphasized the particle combined with a verb), *torof* 'to burst asunder' (c1275), *toclef* 'to split or fall asunder' (c888), *updrawe* means 'to pull out of the ground' (c1290). Gower uses it in the sense of 'to bring up, to rear', *wawes* 'a wave' (c1275), *wones* 'inhabited place' (a1225), frequently used as a tag-phrase like *withinne wones*, meaning 'everywhere, anywhere'.

Fyrdrake 'fiery dragon', a mythical creature belonging to Germanic superstition, is taken from *fyr-draca* in *Beowulf* :

Pawæs... frecne fyr-draca, fæha 3emyndið (5371)

An interesting thing in the below quotation is that Gower uses synonymous words like *res*, *overhaste*, and *rape* which undoubtedly are all native words. Usually he employs *haste* (verb as well as noun), *hasten*, *hastely* (5.4044), *hastif* (5.6286), *hastif* (4.1629), *hastifesse* (5.1482), and *hastihiede* (5.3532).

Forthi be war, Mi Sone, as I the warne dar,
Do thou nothing in such a res,
For suffrance is the welle of Pes.
Thogh thou to loves Court poursuie,
Yit sit it wel that thou eschuie
That thou the Court noght overhaste.
For so niht thou thi time waste ;
Bot if thin happ therto be schape,
It mai noght helpe forto rape. (3.1669-78)

Gower uses French words like *suffrance* (a1300), *Pes* (c1154), *Court* (a1175), *poursuie* (a1290), and *eschuie* (OF *eschiver*) (1340). On the contrary, Gower uses the archaic native word *res* four times as the phrase like 'in such a res', though different in meaning. *Res*, cognate with ON *ras*, means 'a rush or run' which first appears in Cynewulf's *Crist* (a900). As the *OED* explains, it is 'In ME. chiefly a poetic word (very common in the 14th century), used with considerable laxity of meaning'. Probably the word in question was used as 'the archaism of convention' as remarked by L. F. Casson⁹⁾.

The *OED* takes the phrase in (or on) *a rese* to mean 'in a rush or run' and 'in haste to get from one place to another'. The *OED* quotes the instances from *Cursor Mundi* (a1300), *E. E. Allit. P. B.* (13..), *Gaw & Gr. Knt* (13..), and Chaucer's *Troilus* (c1374):

But in a rees to Troilus he (Pandare) wente. (4.350)

The last citation is from c1460. Here we should bear in mind that Gower was quite familiar with the earlier vernacular literature, so that he used them in a rhyme position with ease.

Another meaning of the phrase is 'A sudden or violent impulse, a fit or paroxysm, an attack of distraction or frenzy'. The *OED* quotes as follows:

And thanne he seith, 'O, which a sorwe
It is a man be drinkeles!
So that halfdrunke in such a res
With dreie mouth he sterte him uppe,
And seith, 'Nou baille ca the cuppe.' (6. 56-60)

Overhaste means 'To pursue (sth.) with excessive haste' as the *MED* defines it. The first citation in the *OED* is from Chaucer's *Troilus* (c1374), but he uses it as a noun. It is Gower that first uses the word as a verb.

The verb *rape* means 'to hasten, hurry, make haste' which first appears in *Gen & Ex.* (c1250). The last citation is from c1430.

The following quotation affords a variety of linguistic techniques which are typical of Gower. He

puts in the rhyme position the adverbs or adverbial phrases such as *oute*, *aboute*, *ayein*, *in certein*, *in yong Age*, *in his corage*, *in his hond*, *into the lond*, and *in his weie* :

And therupon the clerkes seide,
'As the Serpent, whan it was oute,
Went enviroun the schelle aboute
And mihte noght torne in ayein,
So schal it fallen in certein :
This child the world schal environe,
And above alle the corone
Him schal befalle, and in yong Age
He schal desire in his corage,
Whan al the world is in his hond,
To torne ayein into the lond
Wher he was bore, and in his weie
Homward he schal with puison deie.' (6.2234-46)

The preposition *enviroun*, meaning 'round, about', derives from OF *environ*. Wycliffe first uses this word as an adverb in his *Sermon*. It is Gower that first uses *enviroun* as a preposition. He also uses it as a verb, meaning 'to go round in a circle'.

As described above, Gower uses archaic words as well as French new words. L.F. Casson pointed out that "The vocabulary, however, is a mixed product, sharing in the nature of each : there are archaisms from English, as well as new-words from French. But it is the archaism of convention"¹⁰⁾.

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Notes

- 1) The *Complete Works of John Gower* 4 vols., ed. G. C. Macaulay (1899-1902 ; Scholarly Press, republished 1968). All quotations from Gower are from this edition.
- 2) L. F. Casson, "Studies in the Diction of the *Confessio Amantis*", *ESt*, 64 (1934), 185.
- 3) Joseph Mersand, *Chaucer's Romance Vocabulary* (1939 ; Kennikat Press, 1968), pp. 45-46.
- 4) Macaulay, the *French Works* vol. 1, p. xii.
- 5) *OED*, s. v. Reprise, 1.
- 6) Macaulay, the *English Works* vol. 2, p. 547.
- 7) L. D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd Ed. (Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1987).
- 8) Casson, op. cit., p. 188.
- 9) Casson, op. cit., p. 189.
- 10) Casson, op. cit., p. 189.