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Confessio Amantis or Confessio Principis: Gower's Confessio Amantis as a mirror for princes

Relatore
Prof.ssa Alessandra Petrina

Laureando
Matteo Zampiva
n° matr.1242040 / LMLLA

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. However, given the length of the poem – more than thirty thousand lines divided into eight books – I have decided to focus on two tales at the end of Book 6 and one specific part in Book 7. The stories are the tale of Ulysses and Telegonus and the tale of Nectanabus; from Book 7 I have chosen the section on the five points of politics. The selected parts are significant for the political topic that interests this study, even though they are not the only ones in the poem to deal with the theme. Indeed, a choice was necessary on account of the limited space available.

Writing about John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a difficult task since profound social and cultural transformations during the poet's lifetime converged into his writing. A case in point is the Hundred Years' War which caused a re-emergence of the English language and the growth of English self-awareness. As noticed by Gerry Knowles:

One of the effects was to force Englishmen and Frenchmen to see themselves as belonging to different peoples. The separation of English and French was not confined to language, and covered other areas of culture.¹

The need on the part of the English to distinguish themselves from the French is evident in writers such as Chaucer and Gower, who spurred the development of vernacular literature. They mingled the French and Latin traditions with the local one. Gower raised my interest for his combination of courtly love and the political topic. He was able to link the French tradition and the Latin *speculum principis* genre with the pronounced personal quality of Ricardian writers.

Given its encyclopaedic quality, *Confessio Amantis* includes numerous topics of interest to study, but here I have focussed on the political one. I have chosen the two tales at the end of Book 6 since they represent, in my opinion, a shift from amatory to political discourse. The two discourses are not disconnected, though, since learning good governance can help both the

¹ Knowles, Gerry, *A Cultural History of the English Language*, London: Arnold, 1979, p. 50.

desperate lover and the prince. The five points of politics in Book 7 depict Gower's idea of perfect prince, yet even from this strictly political section the lover can gain useful love instruction. This thesis intends to interpret *Confessio Amantis* as a mirror for princes for both monarchs and individuals of any social estate. In order to explain the double value of the poem, the term *kingship* is here understood in terms of psychological maturity, an idea borrowed from Peck.²

The study is divided into three chapters. The first one has two parts: 1) the medieval value of common good and 2) the persuasive power of the *exemplum*. The first deals with public felicity and social harmony as the main purposes of the didactic poem, although the narrative frame tells of a lover's confession in the form of a dialogue with his confessor. The title of the poem suggests the centrality of private love, yet kingship and common good are equally fundamental: Amans starts his confession as a desperate lover seeking success in love; eventually, thanks to Genius's help, he becomes conscious of his excessively old age for the court of Venus and understands the importance of his actions within society. Thus, courtly love is here treated in opposition to common good; the latter, in particular, is analysed using two late medieval concepts: on the one hand, the Christian view of the individual as a rational being with a tripartite soul; on the other, the concept of community in medieval political theory. The second part of the chapter is concerned with the narrative form employed by Gower in his poem: the *exemplum*. This kind of narrative exemplifies values and beliefs through stories of important characters. Here, I am particularly interested in the persuasive power of *exempla*, of which Gower takes advantage to instruct his wide audience in self-rule.

The second chapter analyses the Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus and the Tale of Nectanabus. It seems to me that they mark a shift in the general design of the poem: they conclude the book on Gluttony with two negative examples of kingship just before Book 7,

² Peck, Russell A., *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower's Confessio Amantis*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978, p. XXI.

which describes Aristotle's instruction of Alexander. Book 7 is a *speculum principis* illustrating a positive example of a king, thus it counterposes not only the examples of Ulysses and Nectanabus, but even all negative characters encountered so far. Undoubtedly, the political topic is present in Books 1 to 5 of the poem, but in Books 6 and 7, it becomes the main focus. While analysing the two tales, I have also had the chance to discuss the motive of self-knowledge, a fundamental one in Gower's idea of good kingship. Furthermore, self-knowledge is here understood as necessary for both the ethical and political spheres.

Finally, chapter three is divided into two sections: the first one attempts to interpret the whole poem as a mirror for individuals of any social estate; section two is specifically concerned with Gower's idea of a good king. In the first section, I have used Peck's useful argument that the key term kingship can, and should, be interpreted in the poem as a psychological category: when referred to the individual it stands for psychological maturity, meaning an individual who is in full control of one's body and mind and complies with the social hierarchy. In section two, I have attempted to tackle Gower's ideal prince through the analysis of the five points of politics described in Book 7.

CHAPTER 1
PUBLIC FELICITY BEFORE PRIVATE LOVE: GOWER'S INTEREST IN
COMMON GOOD

So moste it stonde upon ousselfe
Nought only upon ten ne twelve,
Bot plenerliche upon ous alle,
For man is cause of that schall falle.
(*Confessio Amantis*, Prologue 525-28)

In this chapter, I attempt to defend the view that common good is the ultimate purpose of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. The chapter begins with an introduction to the poem's structure and its main extant manuscripts. I will then go on to the first section to discuss courtly love in opposition to common good. In particular, common good will be explained through the conception of individual in the medieval Christian thought and through the concept of community in medieval political theory. The second section deals with the form of *exemplum* as a persuasive means to present moral values. Gower's work is in fact a collection of exemplary tales. Furthermore, this is of interest in the present study, because it allows us to interpret the entire poem itself as an *exemplum*, in that it rests on authoritative sources. Let us now turn to the introductory description of the poem.

Confessio Amantis is a poem that contains a variety of tales, all told by a confessor, Genius, to a distressed lover, Amans. The tales are linked by a narrative frame, a common narrative device in the later Middle Ages, hence the poem is a typical collection of stories. However, unlike the contemporary *Canterbury Tales*, in Gower's poem the occasion for tale-telling is not a realistic situation – Chaucer used a pilgrimage as framing device – but an allegorical dialogue between unreal characters. In fact, albeit Amans is revealed at the end of the poem to be John Gower himself, he actually represents the wilful side of the poet. Genius, instead, is the personification of the imaginative faculty, which in the later Middle Ages was

one of the four brain faculties – the others being Memory, Intellect, and Will. As manipulator of images and creator of tales, Genius is the one who can subdue the lover’s distracted Will to his Intellect. The narrative frame of the poem is, hence, an allegorical interaction between brain faculties. Amans is first introduced in Book 1 as a distressed lover who, seized by a schizophrenic rapture, escapes into the woods, and exhausted faints on the ground “without breath” (1. 119).³ When he wakes up, he complains to Cupid and Venus on his love sorrow, and the goddess of love, responding to his complaint, asks Amans his identity. His generic answer leads Venus to suspect that he may be a deceiver pretending to be her servant. Therefore, she orders that he confess to her priest, Genius. The romance narrative thus initiates the confession of the penitent Amans, while Genius interacts with him by telling stories with a didactic purpose. Seven of the poem’s eight books are dedicated to the treatment of a different sin – the sins are presented in this order: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lechery. The tales aim to correct Amans’s behaviour from his subjection to erotic desire, and Book 7 on the education of a king plays a special role in that. The dialogue between Genius and Amans is suspended throughout Book 7, when Amans is silenced, while the confessor illustrates how Aristotle educated Alexander the Great. Even here we have exemplary tales to depict the figure of the virtuous Christian king. However, the topic of proper education is relevant not just for a sovereign, who undoubtedly needs to learn how to wield his power justly, but even for all his subjects, who should be instructed on the governance of their behaviour. This means that *Confessio Amantis*, as a political poem, speaks to any individual, whatever their social position or role. The political plot is first introduced, however, in the general Prologue.

In the Prologue, Gower refers to old books as repositories of knowledge that has been passed down to contemporaries. Like old authors, he asserts, present writers should create new

³ Gower, John, *Confessio Amantis*, edited by Russell A. Peck, vol. 1, Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004. All subsequent quotations from the poem are taken from this edition, therefore from now on they will be indicated just by book and line number.

books to register current history and knowledge for future generations. This idea is interesting, in that it allows us to understand the author's purpose, which is to convey moral values that readers can use to judge their present behaviour. And judging is exactly what the poet does in the Prologue. Here, he excoriates the three estates – namely the State, the Church, and the Commons – but his intention is not to criticize such a social hierarchy. On the contrary, Gower appreciated a society that divided its people into orderly estates, each one with specific tasks to perform. On the other hand, his criticism is toward those individuals who form the estates, since they often behave immorally and neglect order by pursuing things that do not belong to their estate. As a case in point, we could cite a couple of examples from the section of the Prologue dedicated to the Church. Ecclesiastics, we are informed, should live a virtuous life and pursue wisdom. They should not look for money or collect earthly riches. But “the vice which Simon hath in his office” (Prologue 203-04), namely simony, was common practice at Gower's time. War is another such activity churchmen are supposed to avoid; in fact, wars are fought by knights, and kings decide which ones are worth fighting. The most clerks can do is to teach moral values on which a king can base his decisions. Therefore, the political *topos* that introduces the whole poem is intended as a key for interpretation. The individual pursuit of personal desire is cause of social and political division, and division leads to chaos. In *Confessio Amantis* Gower expresses his concern for humanity and its divisiveness, and in fact, at the end of the poem he writes a prayer for England, which was living a difficult time in the fourteenth century. In particular, in the 1380s, when Gower started *Confessio Amantis*, the country was in deep political and ideological uncertainty. Since the poem is strictly connected to the historical events of Gower's time, we should briefly go over them.

In the first place, three plague outbreaks between the forties and the sixties of the fourteenth century had largely diminished the population. Besides, England was fighting against France in the Hundred Years War – started in 1337 and fought over a long period of

time – which weighed heavily on the entire nation. Moreover, the close deaths of two monarchs jeopardised the English monarchy: king Edward III died in 1377, while his son Edward of Woodstock, called the Black Prince, had died the year before. The next heir to ascend the throne was Richard II, second son to the Black Prince, who nonetheless was only ten years old when he became king. Because Richard was a child, some regency councils were instituted to govern the country, but corruption and the bad use of the king's riches led to protests on the part of the lower classes, which were already facing difficulties caused by the plague and the war. The high taxes imposed for the continuation of the war with France and the corrupted nobles of the regency councils, the outbreaks of the Black Death in the previous decades and the risk of new ones, and the great instability of the political power led inevitably to the Peasants' Uprising in 1381.

Both the secular and the spiritual powers were going through a crisis. The church was coping with an ideological crisis based on, among others, the question of ecclesiastical poverty. Pope John XXII had been committed to the repression of the Franciscans, who argued that the pope and all churchmen should live their lives in poverty, just like Christ himself had lived without any worldly possessions, but only with the strength of his faith. On the contrary, John XXII maintained that Christ had been a wealthy man, therefore even the pope and the church could own wealth. Among the Franciscans was an English theologian, William of Ockham, who had argued with the pope on this matter and whose writings became widely known in England. Ockham's ideas would later have an impact on John Wyclif's stark criticism of the worldliness of the church and its lack of interest in the spiritual needs of people. Wyclif's opposition to and criticism against the church was essentially referred to the church's selling of its offices, the levying of taxes, and the attachment to political power. Furthermore, the Avignon Papacy and the following Papal Schism marked the conflict between Church and Empire, and the spiritual and political crisis of the first.

The historical events briefly outlined above had a great impact on Gower, who was deeply concerned with the future of mankind. He knew that history depended on the behaviour of all individuals, therefore his aim with *Confessio Amantis* was to create a didactic work that could teach his readers self-awareness and the respect of social order to achieve public felicity. At the beginning of the poem we find a confused lover who has forgotten his identity; throughout the eight books, while confessing, he is compelled to recollect the fragments of his past and, by putting them together, draw a picture of his soul. This is the process that leads him to remember his personal identity. Only in Book 8, the lover will be able to state his name, namely John Gower. This is now possible because he is fully aware of himself. Moreover, beside gaining self-awareness, the lover's Will is again under the control of Intellect. As a consequence, Amans withdraws from the service of Venus, which means that he has stopped looking for private love.

As regards the manuscripts of *Confessio Amantis*, they are more than forty, but I would like to name three of them in particular as they could be the most relevant in this study. Russell A. Peck, in his edition of *Confessio Amantis*, explains that the poem's manuscripts are traditionally divided into three versions, called recensions.⁴ The first recension was composed between 1386 and 1390, and contains a reference to Chaucer, to whom Gower suggests he write his testament of love. This is also called the Ricardian recension in that it is dedicated to king Richard II. In the Prologue, in fact, Gower describes his meeting with King Richard II on the Thames. The king invited him on his royal barge and asked the poet to write a book for him. Book 8 of the Ricardian recension concludes with a prayer for Richard. The second recension is from the years after 1390, when Gower added new lines and tales. Finally, a third version of the poem was produced in 1392. The significant changes in this last recension are the lack of reference to Chaucer and the substitution of the dedication from Richard to Henry of Derby,

⁴ See the introduction to the *Confessio Amantis* edited by Russell A. Peck, vol. 1, p. 36.

later king Henry IV. Besides, the prayer for Richard becomes a prayer for England. Among the manuscripts, MS Fairfax 3, Bodleian Library 3883 is the most reliable for the third recension, for it contains all Latin glosses written by Gower. Also, MS Bodley 902, Bodleian Library is quite important for its high quality. This is a revision of the first recension; however, because the first leaf containing the Ricardian Prologue is missing, we have to use it together with MS Bodley 294, Bodleian Library. The two Bodley manuscripts are both from the early fifteenth century, whereas the Fairfax 3 is probably from the late fourteenth century.

Having defined the general features of *Confessio Amantis*, I will now move on to discuss the topic of love in the poem in its two forms of erotic code and book of common good.

1.1 The medieval value of common good

As explained in the introduction to the present chapter, it is clear that love is a major topic in Gower's poem. However, the romance narrative that constitutes the frame remains in the background, while the central narrative of the poem is Amans's confession in the form of a dialogue with Genius. Furthermore, the poem ends with the lover's withdrawal from the court of love. All this may appear confusing, but it becomes clearer if we distinguish between courtly love and common good: they are both present in the poem, but if on the one hand courtly love is the starting point, on the other hand common good is the ultimate purpose of the poem. Hence, the form of love Gower is focussing on in *Confessio Amantis* is public. In the section that follows, I will start by differentiating among love, sex, and marriage in the later Middle Ages. The first two were connected, while marriage was conceived separately, and differently from today. I will then focus in particular on courtly love, since it is a form of private love and can be analysed in contrast to common good. Then, I will attempt to outline common good through the concept of Will in Christian thought, and the concept of group in medieval political theory.

C. S. Lewis, in his seminal study *The Allegory of Love*, citing Eugène Vinaver writes that the “cleavage between Church and court [...] is the most striking feature of medieval sentiment.”⁵ The quotation fits well Lewis’s argument about the contrast between the nature of marriage within the feudal system, and the Church’s understanding of romantic love as an evil passion. Unlike today, marriage was conceived, in the Middle Ages, as a contract stipulated for social and economic purposes. Hence, the sentiment of love between a man and a woman was not a precondition for marriage, nor was it at the basis of the union. A marriage could be arranged, for instance, to ensure heirs to a noble family, or to improve the family estate. On the other hand, courtly love was about desire and erotic pulsion, and it happened outside marriage by way of adultery. In fact, humility and adultery were the main features of courtly love. As concerns the first, romantic love was an act of the lover’s submission to the beloved. A man was at the service of the lady he loved, which means that the lady was superior to him and she was the one who decided whether to accept or deny the man’s love. The relationship between a superior beloved and an inferior lover was the same as the bond between a vassal and his lord. A vassal was bound to his lord by true allegiance and homage; in exchange, the lord gave him land and protection. It was a bond of mutual love, although it was not erotic. Because courtly love derives from the bond between a vassal and his lord, the feeling has been defined a feudalization of love.

Moreover, referring to the other characteristic of courtly love, i.e. adultery, Lewis asserts that “any idealization of sexual love, in a society where marriage is purely utilitarian, must begin by being an idealization of adultery.”⁶ The fact that marriages were just matches of interest could cause men and women to look for sexual love with partners outside marriage, and if adulterous love was to be recognized in opposition to the arid contract of marriage, then

⁵ Lewis, C. S., *The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 [1 ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936], p. 22.

⁶ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 16.

it had to be idealized. That idealization could not start but from sex and adultery, typical traits that did differentiate love and marriage. Thus, it is clear that this form of romantic love, which arose in courts, was against the doctrine of the Church, because it stood on carnal desire. This does not mean, however, that sex was deemed wrong as an act *per se*, but rather it was conceived as a way bestowed by God on mankind for the purpose of offspring. And children, of course, should be given birth within marriage.

In contrast to the court, the Church considered the sexual act immoral when enacted to fulfil a personal desire. On the question of sex, medieval thinkers generally agreed with pope Gregory I, who asserted that the sexual act is innocent, but the desire is morally evil.⁷ In the following centuries, this opinion was expanded. For example, the German Dominican friar Albertus Magnus conceived desire as God's punishment for the Fall. To support this idea, the friar suggested that if men and women had stayed in paradise, pleasure would have been greater than on earth. Hence, pleasure is not the problem because it existed also in paradise. The real problem is, in Albertus Magnus's view, the weakness of man's reason. This is to say that the major flaw of human beings after the Fall is their difficulty in governing Will through reason. Therefore, going back to courtly love, the medieval Church's hostility against this passionate feeling was not necessarily due to the wickedness of the sexual act, but rather to the sinful nature of desire that could cause it. In other words, courtly love represented for the Church the victory of desire over reason, which was the same as to say that evil was winning over good. Indeed, this was a serious theological question.

If on the one hand Christian thinkers could justify quite easily the sexual act, on the other hand that justification was impossible for passion. As noticed above in Vinaver's quotation, court and Church had conflicting views of courtly love. The Church condemned it, whereas the court tended toward an idealization of sex and adultery. That idealization is to be

⁷ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p.17.

found in romances, but the reason that moved authors to write love stories which resembled in many ways the religious ritual remains for us a mystery. A case in point is the common expression “religion of love,” which refers to a ritual of love with specific precepts and the worship of a divinity. In fact, in romances we often find the mention of a god of love, like the narrator at the beginning of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, who declares his unaptness to love “for I, that God of Loves servantz serve, ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse” (1. 15-16). The reference to a god of love was a very common *topos* in romance, but here Chaucer even has a humility trope – which was also frequent in the opening of medieval poems, and Gower makes no exception – alluding to the pope’s title “Servant of the Servants of God.”⁸ It may be argued that this irreverent imitation of religion was an attempt to exhibit love under a new attire, similar to that of religion, in the hope of making it acceptable in a culture embedded in Christian thought; therefore everything had to comply with its doctrine if it was to be accepted. Or perhaps lay men and women’s depiction of love in religious terms functioned as a mere evasive means from everyday life. In this sense a romance could function as a comic parody of religion that led people to laugh upon it.⁹ Lewis adds also the possibility that courtly love could be a “rival religion,”¹⁰ hence another possible faith to choose as an alternative to Christianity. Eventually, he writes that “*Frauendienst* may be any of these, or any combination of them,”¹¹ underlining in this way the ambiguous relationship between courtly love and religion.

However, it may be argued that this ambiguity is more on the part of the Church than of the court. If on the one hand lay courtiers had found a means to express erotic love in literary terms, namely the allegory of love in romances, on the other hand, churchmen apparently acted

⁸ Chaucer, Geoffrey, *Troilus and Criseyde*, edited by Stephen A. Barney, New York: Norton and Company, 2006, p. 9, note 3. All subsequent quotations from the poem are taken from this edition, therefore from now on, they will be indicated just by book and line number.

⁹ This interpretation may explain the ironic tone in works like Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, or the anonymous twelfth-century *Concilium in Monte Romarici*. The latter is a parodic council of nuns whose aim is to decide who the best lovers are between clerics and knights. The nuns use the *Ars Amatoria* as their gospel and praise a god of love. Eventually, the nuns decide that clerics are better lovers than knights.

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 26.

¹¹ Lewis, *The Allegory of Love*, p. 26.

less clearly. The most obvious example is the treatise *De Amore* by Andreas Capellanus, who was not just a writer, but also a chaplain. What is confusing of Capellanus is that he was a religious person who, in the Middle Ages, wrote a treatise that justified adulterous and erotic love, even establishing the precepts to be followed. We may wonder, for example, how the final retraction of *De Amore* can be explained. Of course, answers may vary depending on interpretation. In his final retraction, he could have wanted to make an act of contrition for what he had asserted in the book. Or he could have been concerned with the actual circulation of his book, which should not be immoral in order to be successful. Eventually, we should take into account that, contrary to popular opinion, in the Middle Ages variety existed; hence we may allow for the possibility that, for example, a churchman like Capellanus did not aim to condemn love at all costs.

According to more recent critics the medieval debate on desire and sexual pleasure does not seem to be as trenchant as it is supposed to be by Lewis. For example, Claire Catalini showed that Augustine established a hierarchy of gravity for the three sins “fornicationes, adulteria, incesta.”¹² Besides, writing about sex and marriage, she asserts that “he considers marital sex to be legitimate only when its aim is procreation, and when pleasure is reduced to a minimum.”¹³ Hence, Catalini’s study implies that consensual love between a man and a woman who were not relatives was not harshly condemned by the Church, whenever pleasure was under control.

Another study worth citing is Michelle Bolduc’s interpretation of *Breviari d’Amor* by the troubadour Matfre Ermengaud.¹⁴ Bolduc argues that “Matfre offers in his work a theological

¹² Catalini, Claire, “*Luxuria* and its Branches”, in Buschinger, Danielle, and Spievok, Wolfgang, ed., *Sex, Love and Marriage in Medieval Literature and Reality. Thematische Beiträge im Rahmen des 31th International Congress on Medieval Studies an der Western Michigan University (Kalamazoo-USA) 8.-12. Mai 1996*, Greifswald: Reineke-Verlag, 1996, pp. 13-20.

¹³ Catalini, p.15.

¹⁴ Bolduc, Michelle, “Transgressive Troubadours and Lawless Lovers? Matfre Ermengaud’s *Breviari d’Amor* as a Courtly *apologia*”, in Classen, Albrecht, ed., *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Tempe: ACMRS, 2004, pp. 65-83.

defense of *fin'amors*, which he sanctions as long as it is not immoderate.”¹⁵ As a consequence, Ermengaud seems to be interested in teaching the Church’s doctrine to lay people, especially to courtiers, so that they can live their love according to orthodox truth. In other words, Bolduc’s essay implies that romantic love was not reckoned as wrong *a priori* by the Church; instead, lay people needed to learn how to live romantic love within the limits of orthodoxy, for example by reducing sexual pleasure to a minimum.

Notwithstanding the mysteries that surround *De Amore*, this work became indeed very famous and initiated the erotic code as we find it in romances. Unlike Capellanus, however, John Gower writes a poem to instruct in a public feeling: common good. Considering his two other major works, *Vox Clamantis* and *Mirour de l’Omme*, he appears to be a man with a solid morality and an honest interest for the good of humanity. In my view, Gower clearly expresses his intentions in *Confessio Amantis*: even though the poem starts with a distressed lover who complains of his love sorrow to Venus and Cupid, Genius eventually leads him to abandon courtly love for common profit. Therefore, the poem is about love, but instead of the private love of a knight for a lady, he looks at charitable love and the peaceful living of human beings on earth without division. A major fault in courtly love is that it is an individualistic feeling, because the lover’s ardent passion is directed toward one lady, resulting in the satisfaction of his own Will. This allows for an argument that needs to be analysed more in detail.

In the later Middle Ages, the dispute on the faculty of Will seems to occupy a foremost position, and it is, moreover, connected to the medieval notion of self and one’s relationship with the community. As far as Will is concerned, we may consider the twelfth-century Commercial Revolution, which seems to have caused a shift in what people considered alluring. Lester K. Little offers an interesting starting point for reflecting on the import of the event by arguing that the Commercial Revolution, begun in the eleventh century, translated into a radical

¹⁵ Bolduc, p. 68.

shift of values.¹⁶ Between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries there was, indeed, a great development of international trade thanks to the opening of new commercial routes towards the Far East, the birth of competition, and economic rationalism. But the most striking novelty was the extensive use of money, which eventually changed the social structure and the fundamental values of reference.

Before the eleventh century, in fact, feudal society had a rigid hierarchic structure based on the relationship between lord and vassal, and power was indeed maintained by the lord. To be at the service of a lord meant to receive protection and to live in a community of people. To lose one's lord in battle, or to lose his favour for wrongdoing were the worst things a man could experience. One example is the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer*, where the lyrical I expresses in typical elegiac tone his wretchedness for the loss of his lord and his companions in war. The fact that he is now alone, without his lord and his fellows, renders his life worthless. After the watershed of the Commercial Revolution, power started to be associated with money, and with the raise of the commercial class everybody could potentially become rich, or sufficiently so, with the consequence that feudal relationships may be considered of less value. Since people started to move to the cities and live in larger communities, personal relationships were less a fundamental for cooperation, or at least not in the same way as in the smaller feudal community, and money allowed for the collaboration of people in lack of acquaintanceship.

This change of social relationships occurred in conjunction with a rearrangement of the cultural values of reference, and in particular it weighed on the theological debate about virtues and vices. Before the revolution, pride was deemed the "chief vice"¹⁷, whereas after it, if on the one hand pride remained a main sin, on the other hand avarice equated it. The feudal community

¹⁶ Little, Lester K., "Pride Goes Before Avarice: Social Change and the Vices in Latin Christendom", *The American Historical Review*, 76 (1971), pp. 16-49.

¹⁷ The notion of chief vice is explained in Little, p. 18. He explains that written representations of vices tended to identify the most important vice by positioning it either at the top or at the bottom of the list; sometimes it could be placed separately. This notion does not imply the existence of one sin which engenders the others, instead it indicates a hierarchic order of sins with the chief one as the most difficult for mankind to overcome.

of the earlier Middle Ages, in fact, was based on the relationship between lord and vassal: obtaining the lord's favour and acceptance was the first concern for a man. But someone may have had an excessive opinion of oneself and placed one's person on the same level of the lord. From the point of view of religion, pride was similar to *hybris*, a feeling of excessive confidence in oneself that often became arrogance and could lead a person to defy God. Little uses a quotation by Morton W. Bloomfield to depict pride:

Here one recalls that Bloomfield identified pride as "the sin of rebellion against God, the sin of exaggerated individualism," and hence a rebellion against "a disciplined and corporate society, which the Middle Ages held as an ideal."¹⁸

The passage is significant because, besides stating that the sin of pride is a "rebellion against God," it considers individualism a major negative consequence of this sin, for medieval people conceived of society as an orderly group of individuals that worked for a common end.

As regards avarice, it may be obvious that after the rise of commerce and the widespread use of money, this sin started to be regarded as dangerous. The commercial revolution convinced people that money, which was now starting to be in the place of personal relationships, was what determined power. And money could be gained relatively easily by engaging in commercial activity. This is the age when people started longing for the acquisition of material wealth in order to survive, change social status, or even gain power. Thus, later medieval people had to cope with two demanding sins on their way to salvation, i.e. pride and greed, and the fact that they were the most difficult to conquer conferred them the definition of chief vices. The social and cultural transformations caused by the Commercial Revolution not only influenced the theological debate on the question of the chief vice, but even shifted the focus of the debate on human Will. The Will of human beings and their ability to govern their behaviour to avoid sin became a paramount theme. For that reason, we should now look at Will as a medieval faculty of the mind and the way it was connected to the good of the community.

¹⁸ Little, p. 32.

The tripartite structure of the human mind is explained by Augustine in *De Trinitate* through the Trinity. In the same way as God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are three distinct persons but all parts of a whole, likewise, a human being has three different faculties, namely Memory, Intellect, and Will. These faculties reproduce the perfect image of God, and just like the Trinity, they are bound in a hierarchic relationship to serve three distinct functions; however, even though they are distinct, they are integral parts of the same whole and hence dependent on each other. Memory, the first, is the agent that allows men and women to remember the past. Being a collector of fragments, it can create a unified vision of the past, and hence recover the mind from forgetfulness. The opening of *Confessio Amantis* plays a role in determining the importance of Memory. The author, in fact, refers to old books as repositories of past knowledge that have been passed down to contemporaries, and in the same way as old writers did, Gower expresses the need for him and his coeval writers to create new books that can likewise register present knowledge and history for future generations. The second faculty, Intellect, is humankind's ability to reason, estimate, and calculate. Intellect enables human beings to discern what is contained in Memory, and thus to elaborate the information in it. This faculty is essential, in that it guides human beings in decision making. Even here, we may explain Amans's withdrawal from Venus's court in Book 8 as his own choice, which he takes after looking at himself in the mirror and seeing his old face; thus, he understands that the goddess is right: there is no more time for him to dedicate to courtly love. He had better leave that activity to young people. That decision is the result of a reflection on both past and present: the confession has allowed Amans to reconsider his own past as a lover, recollect his fragmented identity misled by desire, and see the old man he actually is at present. Finally, Will is the fuel of the rational soul; it is love that moves human beings to action.¹⁹ In this depiction

¹⁹ Simon Kemp and Garth J. O. Fletcher, in "The Medieval Theory of the Inner Senses," *The American Journal of Psychology*, 106 (1993), pp. 559-576, distinguish between animal and human cognition. According to medieval theorists, both animals and humans processed the incoming sensory information by means of three cells of the brain, and each cell worked different functions. The first cell was for Common Sense and

of mental faculties, Will is therefore the stimulus without which nothing could happen, but if corrupted by sin it can lead mankind to achieve evil things. The divisiveness emphasised in *Confessio Amantis* is exactly the consequence of this corruption that has deteriorated the scheme of the tripartite psychology of the mind, putting commonweal in jeopardy for the achievement of individual profit. In other words, Amans's behaviour is bent to the achievement of an individual end, i.e. the fulfilment of his love desire, which is a matter that has political implications too, as his Reason has lost control over Will. On the contrary, Memory, Intellect, and Will should be employed to achieve eternal things, such as knowledge, truth, and God. The lover of the poem is in a spiritual exile because, due to the corruption of his rational soul and the subjection of his Intellect to his corrupted Will, he has distanced himself from God. Genius's tale-telling has in fact a therapeutic function, since his tales have a double purpose: first, they aim to engage the lover's Intellect to re-establish the supremacy of reason over desire; second, they aim to guide Amans in recovering his identity²⁰. Consequently, once the trinity of the lover's mind has been recovered, he will get closer to God and to salvation.

Even though the poem seems to focus on Amans's individual condition, its ultimate purpose is, however, not individual. We should not forget that at Gower's time there was no subjectivity, at least not in the modern sense. Individuals were far from being envisaged as unique subjects allowed to make choices on their own. In contrast with our liberal values, each individual was reckoned just for their humanity, a characteristic that combined everyone and

Imagination; the central one for Cogitation and Estimation; and the third for Memory. However, human beings had an additional rational soul, or mind, with two more faculties: Intellect and Will. It is the Intellect that judges the information perceived by the senses and the possible desires that could arise consequently. Will, instead, is the faculty that allows for action on the basis of the analysis of Intellect. The problem arises when human beings, exercising free will, decide to disregard eternal things and pursue temporal things, thus subduing their Will to desire.

²⁰ Here, identity refers both to Amans's specific identity as John Gower and to his recognition as a human being. According to medieval theorists, the most important characteristic that distinguishes human beings from animals is that men and women possess a rational soul for universal knowledge. Universal knowledge is a higher and more abstract level of knowledge than particular knowledge, which refers to the experience of the real world. To achieve particular knowledge, human beings and animals use a system of cognition that relies on the senses; but only the first can achieve universal knowledge by means of other faculties that are not connected to bodily organs. Furthermore, universal knowledge connects mankind with God. For a general discussion of the topic see Kemp and Fletcher.

equated all individuals as sons of God. Of course, this concept had enormous implications for the political understanding of society, for which subjectivity was not a relevant feature. If anything, individuality was allowed only in confession, when one was supposed to recollect one's past and draw a picture of the state of one's soul. This is the utmost subjectivity medieval culture could conceive.

In fact, not only were human beings seen as components of a group, but even their bodies were understood in terms of a corporate society. Gower, following the medieval anatomical theory, in Book 7 represents the stomach as the "comun coc" (7.479), whose duty is to cook food for all body organs. It is its responsibility "to make hem myhty for to serve the herte, that he shall not sterve" (7.483-84). Traditionally, the human digestive system was depicted as a kitchen even in medical texts, while the other body organs were like people to be fed, because each one of them had different functions to perform and their performances required energy. Ultimately, the end is to serve the "herte principal" (7.487), which is, in this medical allegory, the king that rules his kingdom through reason. Heart and king were usually coupled in medieval metaphors, because it was said that the heart was the site of the noble rational soul. Similarly, a king was expected to govern with magnanimity and reason. Moreover, both the Augustinian explanation of the Trinity and the medical allegory of the body argue for the fact that a whole is constituted by single components, each one with a different function and subjected to a single ruler. It seems to be a typical trait of medieval thought, indeed, to see individuals as members of a greater whole, without which they would be unidentifiable. Let us now turn to the concept of group in medieval political theory, so that we can fully understand this important paradigm, commonality, as a fundamental in medieval social life. Having discussed the composition of the mind of individuals in medieval theory, we will now move on to see how subjects were conceived in relation to a community in medieval political theory, and what Gower could have meant, possibly, for common profit.

According to medieval political theory, a group of individuals, be it a kingdom, a religious community, etc., needed a ruler just like a body needs a head. And even the chosen ruler was expected to pursue the good of the community like any other subject, and not his own desires. At the heart of social organization was common good, which must be the purpose of anybody without exception, even at cost of their own happiness. By drawing on Thomas Aquinas's concept of "unity of order,"²¹ Ewart Lewis was able to show the political understanding of the relationship between individuals and the social context in the Middle Ages. Aquinas distinguished between unity in the pure sense of an undivided whole and unity perceived as an aggregation of parts that may work different tasks but, however, participate in the same and common end. That common end is the common good, defined as "the good common to the individual members."²² This definition highlights the fact that the wellbeing and happiness of the community are superior to the individual good, and as a consequence, each person was expected to sacrifice, if necessary, their individuality for the common good²³.

Common profit was thus conceived, in political theory, as the wellbeing of the entire community toward which all individuals must tend. The king did not make any exception and was expected, just like his subjects, to subdue his private ends to common good. Medieval people were aware that the monarch was a human being like any of them, but the thing that distinguished him from the rest of the people was his office. As a man, he was expected to follow moral principles in the same way as any individual in his realm, but since he was the king, his behaviour had to be the prime example. Therefore, the human nature common to all individuals was the fundamental principle of medieval society, and this renders *Confessio*

²¹ Lewis, Ewart, "Organic Tendencies in Medieval Political Thought", *The American Political Science Review*, 32 (1938), p. 857.

²² Lewis, "Organic Tendencies in Medieval Political Thought", p. 855.

²³ In "Organic Tendencies in Medieval Political Theory", p. 863, Lewis asserts that "the end of political action was an end known by reason, fixed by the very nature of humanity, not subject to dispute." This means that if individuals are all the same because of their human nature, and individuals form society, then political action ought to be based on moral principles valid for all individuals.

Amantis a poem for any individual, notwithstanding his or her social status. In this sense, Gower's work is a didactic poem that teaches universal moral values for the final aim of common good. In relation to the exemplarity of the ruler, we may want to see a statement by Lewis, who writes:

Far from positing an inherent unity of will in the community – or even the spontaneous agreement of wills assumed by democratic theorists – medieval thinkers agree that, without the will of the ruler as a unifying principle, the multitude would be “dispersed in all directions.”²⁴

Firstly, this passage asserts again that the medieval concept of society was not that of an undivided whole; instead, referring to medieval political theory, it was an aggregation of individuals, hence of many wills, who shared a common end. Secondly, the role of the king is here valued for its function of establishing a common intent, hence suggesting a common direction for the multitude. Following this theory, the education of the king assumes a significant value, in that he needs to be taught, more than anybody else, how to govern his Will through reason and avoid any sin. On the sovereign as a unifying principle depends, in fact, the wellbeing of the whole kingdom.

The political concept of group is similar to that of the Trinity that we have seen above. In *De Trinitate*, Augustine seems to imply that the Trinity is an aggregation of three different persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – which are, however, expression of the same God through the Trinity. Hence, God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but He is also all of them together. Similarly, the human mind has a tripartite structure, with the three parts being Memory, Reason, and Will. All of them are not only closely related to one another, but they even contain one other. In other words, in order to remember, a person needs Memory, but also reason to interpret his or her memories, and Will to decide what to remember. Likewise, he or she can comprehend reality not only through Intellect, but even thanks to what one has

²⁴ Lewis, “Organic Tendencies in Medieval Political Thought”, p. 856.

already learned and is stored in Memory; and Will allows us to choose how to act, but with the support of reasoning. Finally, human beings act because they are driven by their intent, but without Memory we would not remember that we can act through Will; moreover, reasoning is possible because Will stimulates that activity. Apart from the complex phenomenology of the mind described by Augustine in his treatise, what is of interest to us is his idea that these three elements that form the human mind are three distinct faculties with their own functions; nonetheless they cannot occur singularly, but only as a whole. Therefore, the concept of “unity of order” can be applied even to this model of the mind’s structure. As far as the constitution of the civil community is concerned, that of the Trinity may not be the only Christian equivalent. It could be argued, in fact, that except the unity of the Trinity, the civil community as a “unity of order” may even derive from the concept of unity of the Church.

In the Middle Ages, it was believed that the community of believers constituted the mystic body of Christ on earth. In this case, the believers are a multitude of men and women, just like the subjects of a kingdom, related to each other by their faith in God. In religion, divinity is like the king in the civil community: it is the unifying principle. The Will of the king and the doctrine of the Church lead to the common end, therefore they ought to be respected for the peaceful living of all and the good functioning of the group. The unifying principle is necessary to avoid chaos and social disintegration. As maintained by Peck, Gower and his contemporaries seem to be concerned with mankind’s responsibility in governing their behaviour. The critic argues that “the heart of the dispute concerns the relationship of will to grace in man’s quest for salvation.”²⁵ It could be added that governing one’s own behaviour was in the first place a problem of human life on earth. In fact, during their life on earth, human beings had to deal with the Church, which was the representative of God on earth. Churchmen were the shepherds of men and women and were supposed to guide their flock. However, as

²⁵ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit in Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, p. XV.

outlined at the beginning of the present chapter, the Church was in an ideological crisis in Gower's time. It was criticized for immoral behaviour, such as simony and fighting wars. As a case in point, this is how Gower excoriates the church in the Prologue:

The cherche keye in aventure
Of armes and of brigantaille
Stod nothing thanne upon bataille;
To fyhte or for to make cheste
It thoghte hem thanne noght honeste.
Bot of simplesce and pacience
Thei maden thanne no defence.
The court of worldly regalie
To hem was thanne no baillie. (Prologue 212-20)

By comparing the past and present conduct of the clergy,²⁶ the narrator criticizes present churchmen for their commitment to activities of other estates. For instance, they should not fight wars, neither should they be interested in living in sumptuous courts. Gower's argument here is that each individual should respect the social hierarchy of the three estates. In the Prologue to *Confessio Amantis*, in fact, it is clear that the author is not against the State, the Church, and the Commons; he criticizes instead the wrong behaviour of those who inhabit those estates. Therefore, Gower felt the responsibility of guiding his fellows back onto the right path, and to achieve this, people had to learn to behave according to moral values, thus shifting their focus from personal desires to the public good.

Apparently, poetry is for Gower the best tool to do that. For that reason, he concludes the Prologue with the Tale of Arion. The story is about a semi-legendary poet and musician, Arion, that the author may have read about in works such as Ovid's *Fasti* and Hyginus's *Fables*.²⁷ Arion was so good at playing the harp that his music could bring all creatures, both

²⁶ It is not clear to what past Gower is referring to in the comparison, but in the introductory Latin verses to the section "The Church," he names the laws of "old Moses and new John" (Prologue *iii*). This could be a reference to Exodus 20, 2:17, and Deuteronomy 5, 6:21, where God's commandments were revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Hence, Gower might not have a particular biblical, mythological, or historical past in mind, but rather an ideal time governed by the laws of God.

²⁷ Peck, in his edition of *Confessio Amantis* (vol. 1, p. 253, note 1053), identifies as possible sources Ovid's *Fasti*, 2.79-118 ff., Hyginus's *Fables*, 194, and Solinus's *Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium*, cap.11. He also cites Herodotus as the first who wrote about the story of Arion.

animals and humans, to accord. Wolf and sheep, or hind and lion, lived peacefully together when his music was played. The protagonist of this story could stand for the poet, who may solve the problem of division and discord on earth with poetry. Possibly, the Tale of Arion is Gower's hope that God send another Arion that could reconcile the world.

In medieval thought, to be able to govern one's Will was essential to be a good Christian member of the community. Moreover, as explained above, the king was conceived as the unifying principle of the community. In this role, he established a common direction that all individuals were supposed to follow. Hence, being able to govern one's behaviour was even a political topic. As a consequence, *Confessio Amantis* can be considered a mirror for princes for the purpose of educating kings on how to wield their power according to Christian values. However, the protagonist of the poem is a distressed lover and not a prince who is becoming king, and we cannot deny the romance plot that frames the tales. It is my view that Gower chose a double motif to address a wide readership. This could also be supported by the fact that he wrote *Confessio Amantis* in English, unlike his previous Latin poem *Vox Clamantis*, and the French *Mirour de l'Homme*. In fact, aware that it may be difficult to address such a varied public, Gower explains:

I wolde go the middle weie
And wryte a bok between the tweie,
Somwhat of lust, somewhat of lore
That of the lasse or of the more
Som man may like of that I wryte. (Prologue 17-21)

In the next section, I will discuss Gower's use of the *exemplum* in his didactic poem to persuade his readers.

1.2 The persuasive power of the *exemplum*

Let us now consider the *exemplum*, a narrative form that medieval authors used for instruction and edification. As explained in the introductory section of this chapter, *Confessio Amantis* is a collection of tales which aim to highlight human virtuosity and weakness; the ultimate goal is of course to teach people to pursue the first and avoid the latter.

The medieval *exemplum* is generally thought to be modelled on the Greek *paradeigma* and the Roman *exemplum*, both rhetorical devices of persuasion in ancient rhetorical theory.²⁸ In particular, the *paradeigma* was a narrative inserted into a public discourse to persuade. Much more interesting for our study is Scanlon's explanation of the Roman *exemplum* through Quintilian's formulation. Quintilian writes that the *exemplum* "is the relation (*commemoratio*) of a thing done (*rei gestae*) or that might have been done, which is useful in the persuasion of that which you have claimed."²⁹ The interesting thing in Quintilian's formulation is that he links discourse with material experience. According to Quintilian's definition, in order to produce a persuasive discourse, one has to rest his or her *commemoratio* on things done, hence on concrete experience. In Scanlon's view it is the material part, the *res gesta*, which "produces not only an immediate historical effect, but an enduring moral value."³⁰ This means that when people listen to an exemplary narrative they are persuaded to enact the good behaviour or to avoid the bad conduct in the tale, stimulated by the fact that these are presented in historical terms. Those *res gestae* are perceived as historical facts, hence, both positive and negative consequences of the behaviours in the plot appear as real consequences that happened or could have happened. Thanks to the experiential part of the narrative, the *exemplum* is perceived in historical terms, which makes it easier for the audience to believe in it; as a consequence, the values conveyed

²⁸ For a general discussion of the topic see Curtius, Ernst Robert, *European Literature in the Latin Middle Ages*, translated by Williard R. Trask, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, especially 3.7, pp. 57-61; and Scanlon, Larry, *Narrative, Authority and Power. The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, especially ch.2, pp. 32-33.

²⁹ Cited in Scanlon, p. 33.

³⁰ Scanlon, p. 33.

through that *exemplum* are more likely to be accepted as part of the culture in which the tale is presented.

However, a persuasive narrative cannot rest on any *res gestae*. In fact, in the Roman *exemplum*, persuasion was due to the fact that the narrative was backed up by “heroic figures and *auctores* the audience already venerated.”³¹ This strategy is used by Gower as well. In his poem, he inserted tales derived from both classical and scriptural sources, and because he aimed to present himself as herald of moral values, he even made himself the protagonist of the poem, Amans. Far from asserting that Gower intended to present himself as an authority, I maintain instead that he meant to propose himself, as distressed Amans, the mediator between authoritative old books and his contemporaries. In other words, Gower conveys moral values by appealing to old *auctoritates* and using exemplary narratives in order to be highly effective.

Scanlon defines the *exemplum* as “a narrative enactment of cultural authority,”³² remarking the fact that the *exemplum* embodies and re-enacts cultural values through narrative. In his view, therefore, this narrative form contributes to create cultural authority. Unlike Larry Scanlon, John Burrow writes as follows:

In a fiction which merely exemplifies an ethical concept (“patience,” “gluttony”) or an accepted truth (“Woman are fickle,” “*Radix malorum est cupiditas*”), literature condemns itself to an ancillary role as the servant of the moral or political or religious beliefs of its age. [...] but in the literal mode of “exemplification,” the story may do no more than illustrate slavishly *idées reçues*.³³

Burrow’s observation conceives, instead, the *exemplum* as a “servant” of cultural authority in general, implying that moral, political or religious beliefs are self-sufficient from the point of view of discursive status; therefore, they can be immediately obvious without any illustration by means of *exempla*. Values and beliefs are understood by Burrow as unproblematic given truths.

³¹ Scanlon, p. 33.

³² Scanlon, p. 34.

³³ Cited in Scanlon, p. 29.

Burrow is probably correct when he writes that the *exemplum* “exemplifies an ethical concept,” but I disagree with his understanding of exemplification. As expressed in the quotation above, exemplification means to him to “illustrate slavishly *idée reçues*,” this definition also implies that a reader accepts the values and beliefs contained in the narrative without questioning them, because they are culturally authoritative *per se*. However, I would like to argue that the *exemplum* is not just a cold illustration of external general principles, but rather a narrative that engages its readership in a process of identification with its characters and their positions.

In relation to the reading of old tales and its shaping power, Russell A. Peck writes as follows:

the reading of old tales affords its participants “a thing experienced” (*experta*), a means of testing knowledge personally the way one might momentarily test any kind of sensual information, whether from nature or parchment, by trying it out in the mind to find out how it might be true.³⁴

Like Quintilian’s definition, this passage links the tales with experience, in particular with *experta*, “a thing experienced;” it seems in fact, according to Peck, that reading a tale equates having experienced something in the real world. When one reads a tale, he or she has the possibility to test knowledge as if they were actually having experience of it, and this testing is enabled by the narrative element. In other words, to read a tale allows the reader to visualize concrete situations in their mind and experience them as if in the real world. Moreover, both readers and characters are called to make choices and take decisions in the development of the plot; therefore, readers are actively involved in reading as a process of affirmation and enactment of values and beliefs.

Even Helen Cooper seems to agree with the idea that persuasiveness is a main feature of medieval *exempla* when she writes that “exemplary tales are designed to make morals

³⁴ The quotation is from the introduction to Peck’s edition of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*, vol.1, p. 2.

attractive.”³⁵ While discussing the frame of medieval story-collections, she proposes a spectrum with two poles: at one end are those story-collections characterised by “a simple structure and moral emphasis;” at the other end are those characterised by “literary complexity and a greater stress on pleasurableness.”³⁶ Cooper places *The Canterbury Tales* at this latter end, arguing for its complex narrative frame that connects the stories by stressing aesthetic value instead of morality. Chaucer’s tales are told by a great variety of characters who express contrasting views on different themes: some are moral, others may be immoral. The author anticipates this variety in *The Miller’s Prologue* suggesting the reader to “turne over the leef and chese another tale” (I. 3177)³⁷ if one does not want to hear a story, and to find what he or she may appreciate better. Chaucer emphasises the moral responsibility of his readers, therefore he writes “blameth nat me if that ye chese amys” (I. 3181).

Unlike Chaucer, Gower’s program is in the first place didactic; pleasurableness is for him a means to attain morality in a convincing way. This does not mean that Chaucer does not consider morality in his collection of stories, but rather that he subdues the didactic to pleasurableness to present the great variety of human experience. On the other hand, Gower employs the pleasure of narrative to make moral instruction appealing. The story of Arion that concludes the Prologue could be seen as Gower’s affirmation that tales may have a restorative effect on the divisiveness of the contemporary world. *Confessio Amantis* is presented by its author as a collection of exemplary tales with a therapeutic function. Even negative *exempla* serve in a positive way, as they show the negative consequences of evil behaviours and thus indicate what to avoid.

³⁵ Cooper, Helen, “The Frame”, in Correale, Robert M., and Hamel, Mary, eds, *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, vol. 1, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2005, p. 3.

³⁶ Cooper, p. 3.

³⁷ Chaucer, Geoffrey, *The Canterbury Tales*, in Benson, D. Larry, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. All subsequent quotations from the poem are taken from this edition, therefore from now on they will be indicated just by line number.

Gower uses the *exemplum* as a highly effective narrative device in *Confessio Amantis*, but his aim is not simply to convince people to accept passively the teachings of his poem; he wants people to reflect on the stories and to verify in their own consciousness whether the knowledge they convey is true or not. This reflection is stimulated by the visualization of images in the mind of the audience, which, in Peck's words, "becomes staging area for its *poesis*."³⁸ In this sense, the audience creates in their mind certain images resting on the sensible information perceived through eyes and ears – which Gower describes as *fragilis ostia mentis* (1. iv). In Book 1 Genius dedicates a section to explain Amans that sight and sound are the most fragile senses of human beings; they are in fact always open, and evil can easily access the body and reach the heart, residence of the soul. For that reason, the confessor warns Amans that "betre is to winke than to loke," (1. 384) and "what thou hier, be wel war" (1. 532-33).

In conclusion, I believe that Gower used the *exemplum* in his *Confessio Amantis* for two main reasons: first, it is a narrative mode that rests on the experience of authoritative figures; second, by means of images formed in the individuals' brain, it may visually guide the audience to pursue moral behaviours. Moreover, this rhetoric connected to experience may have been reckoned by Gower as apt to persuade the wider audience of *Confessio Amantis*, which, unlike his previous French *Mirour de l'Omme* and his Latin *Vox Clamantis*, was addressed to a more general and less learned public.

³⁸ See the introduction to the *Confessio Amantis* edited by Russell A. Peck, vol. 2, p. 5.

CHAPTER 2

“Of thiself hast ignorance”: ULYSSES AND NECTANABUS’S LACK OF SELF- KNOWLEDGE AS THE INTRODUCTION TO BOOK 7

Men sein, a man hath knowleching
Save of himself of alle thing;
His oghne chance no man knoweth.
(*Confessio Amantis* 6. 1567-69)

This chapter is devoted to the analysis of the two stories that conclude Book VI of *Confessio Amantis*, namely the Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus and the Tale of Nectanabus. The tales represent a shift from the purely amatory discourse to one that weaves together love and politics. They introduce, in fact, Book 7, which is the *speculum principis* within the poem. I want to argue that Book 7 is important because it provides a key to read the whole poem. It is connected with the Prologue for the treatment of the political topic, and it helps us see the link between ethics and politics in Gower’s didactic project. Eventually, Gower may want to suggest an understanding of kingship as a term that has a double connotation: politically speaking, it is the function of the king, who is expected to govern his kingdom with justice. On the other hand, kingship can be understood as a psychological concept that concerns all subjects. Individuals are in fact a reflection of the broader social hierarchy, where everyone, letting themselves be guided by Reason, contribute to common profit.¹ In order to understand the transition to Book 7, I will first summarize the two stories and then I will present my argument.

The Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus and the Tale of Nectanabus mark a shift in the structure of *Confessio Amantis*. Even though in the first five books of the poem political matters may be implicit in the stories told by Genius, the main focus is on the concupiscent love of

¹ See Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. XXI. In *Vox Clamantis*, the critic explains, King Richard is made responsible for the moral welfare of his kingdom; whereas in *Confessio Amantis* the lover is told that he should take care of his moral integrity by looking after his individual parts. Amans is seen as the king of his microcosm. Peck maintains, therefore, that “in both works, kingship is viewed as a form of maturity.”

Amans. By reading the poem as fundamentally centred on love matters, however, and neglecting the equally significant political theme, G. C. Macaulay argued that Book 7 deals with “quite irrelevant matters.”² From his point of view, Aristotle’s education of Alexander and his (Aristotle’s) division of the sciences³ are irrelevant matters to the main argument of the poem, namely love. Macaulay even argues that:

The most noteworthy point of *Confessio Amantis*, as compared with Gower’s former works, is the partial renunciation by the author of his didactic purpose. [...] at the beginning of the first book, he announces the discovery that his powers are not equal to the task of setting the world to rights.⁴

In order to support his criticism of Gower’s partial renunciation of his didactic purpose, the critic then quotes a passage from the beginning of Book 1, when the narrator introduces love as the topic of the poem after the general prologue had opened the poem with political issues. The passage cited by Macaulay is the following:

It stant noight in my sufficance
So grete thinges to compasse,
Bot I mot lete it overpasse
And treten upon othre thinges. (1. 4-7)

He interprets these lines as an avowal on the part of Gower of his incapacity, for the lack of sufficient powers, to set “the world to rights.” Moreover, after asserting his inability to deal with such universal and high matters, i.e. political matters such as the peace in the world, Gower seems to fall back on love issues; issues which are still universal, but can be treated with a more popular style, i.e. through tales.

It seems to me that Macaulay’s criticism of *Confessio Amantis* puts much emphasis on the incongruences of the poem, but with little effort to solve them. For instance, one could argue

² Macaulay, G. C., “John Gower”, in Ward, A. W., Waller, A. R., eds., *The Cambridge History of English Literature. The End of the Middle Ages*, vol. II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 147.

³ The term “sciences” is not used here in the modern sense, instead, it is to be understood in the medieval denotation. The sciences were the various branches of knowledge; for instance, theology, physics, rhetoric, etc. were all sciences for medieval men and women. Moreover, the various medieval sciences went all under the label “philosophy”, which identified not only the single subject, but had the *lato sensu* of knowledge. In this study, both terms “sciences” and “philosophy” are used with the medieval denotation.

⁴ Macaulay, pp. 145-146.

that he did not attempt to consider the political prologue and Book 7 in his comment on the general design of the poem, and to find a link between the amatory and political discourses. I believe that with the lines from Book 1 cited above, Gower does want to highlight his lack of sufficient powers to undertake such things, but we should also ask what “so grete thinges” are. In the first three lines of Book 1, he writes:

I may nocht strecche up to the hevene
Min hand, ne setten al in evene
This world, which evere is in balance. (1. 1-3)

Lacking sufficient powers to extend his hand to the heaven and to set the whole world in peace is the kind of things Gower feels unable to do. But I think we can hardly blame him for being unable to do that, since it might require God’s powers to set the whole world in peace. Instead, what he can do is “speke of thing is nocht so strange” (1. 10), namely love, which in Gower’s view is not simply individual love, but a strong natural force that no living creature can escape. Hence, instead of attempting to withdraw from this force, human beings can learn to tame their erotic impulse through the rational soul. From this point of view, Gower’s admission is not to be interpreted as a renunciation of his didactic purpose, but rather as a change of style and language to reach that didactic purpose; he decides, in fact, to compose a collection of tales in the English language. By means of this decision, he probably hoped to reach a wider audience, hence remove some limits typical of his previous didactic works, which were addressed to an *élite* group. Moreover, this *incipit* proposes again the traditional modesty trope that we find at the beginning of the Prologue, as if Gower was aware that by introducing a new topic in Book 1, he needed a second, smaller prologue beginning with protestations of literary modesty.

Another criticism that has been moved to Gower is that he is not properly an author, but only a collector and organizer of tales written by other, possibly older, authors. For instance, Alastair Minnis, within the discussion of the medieval form of *compilatio*, writes that “Gower

was a compiler who tried to present himself as an author.”⁵ Although Gower tended to be encyclopaedic in his work, I do not think of him as a compiler. As Russell A. Peck has explained:

What seems initially to be compilation – a treasury of lore for a culture-hungry audience – becomes upon reflection something much more “original.” Every act of memory is a step toward originality as details of the past are reviewed. Gower must have been acutely aware of this creative dramatic process from the outset. I can think of no instance in which a “story” is simply retold as it is found in its source. Sometimes the transformations are broad, like his rewriting of the Tale of Narcissus; sometimes they are subtle, as in his adapting of biblical accounts.⁶

The numerous sources that Gower used were not merely catalogued within the poem, instead, the author worked to adapt them to his didactic project.

I disagree with Macaulay’s opinion of Book 7 and with his perplexity towards the plan of *Confessio Amantis*. I take the view that Gower had a precise project in mind when he wrote the poem, and that project was no less didactic than his previous works; *Confessio Amantis* may be considered, instead, a highly effective didactic poem. The effectiveness is due to the use of the English language which, unlike French and Latin, was spoken and understood by the whole population of England. The treatment of the sins and their remedies through popular tales is also highly effective; this literary form could talk through a narrative to all people, even to the lower estates, and instruct them in both wrong and right behaviour. I agree with Simpson’s argument that the poem may be regarded as “a *Bildungsroman*, where the literary form of the poem is designed to bring its readers to an ideal form.”⁷ By means of a poem that illustrates the development of a character, the author aims to achieve the same development in its readers. An essential part in this development is indeed Book 7 with its Aristotelian division of the

⁵ Minnis, Alastair, *Medieval Theory of Authorship. Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 210.

⁶ See the introduction to Peck’s edition of *Confessio Amantis*, vol. 1, p. 16.

⁷ Simpson, James, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry. Alan Of Lille’s Anticlaudianus and John Gower’s Confessio Amantis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 7.

sciences.⁸ When we reach Book 7, we understand in fact that the author's focus is on the practical sciences, even though the theoretical sciences, especially theology, were considered most valuable in Gower's time. Gower's emphasis on the practical sciences is due to his interest in teaching his readers good conduct and correct action both individually and in the social context. In this study, I am particularly interested in the governance of self and the realm, i.e. ethics and politics. The two fields of knowledge are treated in the poem by means of the topics of love and kingship. The topics are strictly connected in the poem: the king's good governance requires him to be able to govern himself when seized by love's frenzy. Moreover, knowledge of the human sciences is an integral part of self-knowledge as a human being. The Aristotelian scheme of the sciences in Book 7 is therefore fundamental to achieve self-awareness of one's soul, since human beings are the reflection of a greater macrocosm created by God. Moving on now to consider the two tales that conclude Book 6 and introduce Book 7, I will briefly describe the context in which the two tales appear.

Book VI deals with gluttony. It starts with the treatment of "that maladie of lovedrunke" (6. 110-11), i.e. drunkenness of the lover, then it continues with the delicacy⁹ of the lover, claiming that "though he [the lover] hadde to his hond the beste wif of al the lond, or the faireste love of alle, yit wolde his herte on othre falle" (6. 667-70). While considering drunkenness and sensuality in love, Genius remarks once again a point that he has been emphasizing throughout the poem so far: that no one can resist love. Love is such a strong force that nobody can avoid being subdued by it, and Genius's belief resurfaces in the last section of Book 6 which deals

⁸ In the Aristotelian division of philosophy, the various sciences were divided into three main groups: theoretical, practical and rhetorical. The theoretical sciences were physics, mathematics, and theology; the practical sciences were ethics, economics, and politics. In this scheme, the arts of Quadrivium – arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy – were all incorporated in mathematics. The theoretical sciences were devoted to investigation for its own sake; the practical sciences were useful to learn good conduct and action, both individually and in society. The third group, the rhetorical sciences, comprehended the arts of the Trivium.

⁹ Delicacy is to be understood as sensuality, one of the subcategories of gluttony, which excites the imagination and serves bodily pleasure.

with sorcery and witchcraft. The introductory Latin lines of the section, here reported in their English translation by Andrew Galloway, state as follows:

Dum stimulator amor, quicquid iubet otra voluptas,
Audet et aggreditur, nulla timenda timens.
Omne quod astra queunt herbarum siue potestas,
Seu vigor inferni, singula temptat amans.
Quod nequit ipse deo mediante parare sinistrum,
Demonis hoc magica credulus arte parat.
Sic sibi non curat ad opus que recia tendit,
Dummodo nudatam prendere possit auem. (6. *iii*)

Everything that the stars or the power of herbs may do, or the force of the infernal regions, the lover tries them all. What sinister things he is not able to perform with God's help, he performs what he can by believing in the devil's magic art. Thus he gives no care to what things his net gathers for the work, provided that he might be able to seize the bird plucked naked.

From these lines we understand the impossibility for the lover to get away from Love, which is so strong that it will provoke the lover to use any means in order to achieve his lady's favour. Hence, Genius makes a list of arts of divination, such as astronomy, divination with bones, necromancy, by means of which the lovers are persuaded to satisfy their erotic desire. The confessor introduces the Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus with a warning: "for often he that wol beguile is guiled with the same guile, and thus the guilour is beguiled" (6. 1379-81). Witchcraft is a dangerous tool, because it affects not only the victims of the wizard or the witch, but even the one who uses magic.

Ulysses is introduced as a well-known figure in Troy and all over the world, a hero who "was a worthi kniht and king and clerk knowende of every thing" (6. 1397-98). He is well-read in physics, rhetoric, magic, astronomy, interpretation of dreams, and a lot more. While coming back home from Troy, he and his men have to stop in Sicily because of the stormy weather, and there he meets Circes and Calypso. Both women are powerful sorceresses, but we are told, "thei couthe moche, he couthe more" (6. 1441). Circes and Calypso attempt to force Ulysses to love them by using any incantations they know, but they are only able to transform his men, while they cannot subdue him. Ulysses is able, on his part, to bewitch Circes with love, and she

eventually gives birth to a child, Telegonus; Ulysses leaves Sicily to go back to Ithaca without even seeing the child and stealing Circes's wealth. Thus, he returns to his faithful wife Penelope and to his people; they are so happy to see him again that they decide to offer their goods and riches to the king, even if not required. Genius says that "hath Uluxes what he wolde, his wif was such as sche be scholde, his poeple was to him sougit, him lacketh nothing of delit" (6. 1505-08). One night, Ulysses dreams about meeting a male figure bearing a spear with the symbol of a foreign realm: three fishes disposed as to compose a tower. The young man tells him that they are bound by genuine love, but one of them must eventually die. Ulysses cannot think of what the dream means, hence, to protect himself, he imprisons his son Telemachus in the castle and locks himself in a separate tower. When Telegonus arrives in Ithaca and the guards bar him from seeing the king, they start fighting and the war lets Ulysses come out of his tower with anger. Eventually, Telegonus strikes him with his spear, not knowing that he is the king, hence his father. When Telegonus hears that the man he has killed was king Ulysses, he starts complaining about his unfortunate fate. Ulysses, on the other hand, understands the prophecy contained in the dream; in fact, he even recognizes the three fishes embroidered on Telegonus's spear as the same symbol that he had seen in his dream.

The Tale of Nectanabus is about the homonymous king of Egypt. He is also a well-read man, in particular he knows the art of magic and he can foresee the future. When he predicts that his realm will be attacked by enemies, he flees his own land for fear. As he arrives in Macedonia and is informed that the king is away at a war, Nectanabus tricks the queen, Olimpias, into making love with her. We are told that through sorcery, he is able to let Olimpias dream of the god Hammon of Libya, who asserts his will to lie in bed with the queen to beget a child from her. This child, says Nectanabus reporting the god's will to the queen, "with his swerd shal winne and gete the wyde world in lengthe and brede" (6. 1936-37). Nectanabus successfully deceives Olimpias, who gives birth to Alexander – indeed a great emperor in later

times. Nectanabus is the first instructor of young Alexander, who, nonetheless, does not know that his instructor is his father. One night, while the two are on the top of a tower to learn about the stars, Alexander asks his teacher whether he knows how he will eventually die; Nectanabus answers that, if the prediction of the stars is correct, he might be killed by his son. Doubting his answer, Alexander thinks he is lying, and to prove Nectanabus's theory wrong, he pushes him down from the tower pronouncing these words: "Ly doun there apart: whereof nou serveth al thin art? Thou knewe alle othre mennes chance and of thiself hast ignorance" (6. 2311-14).

As we have seen, both tales have kings as a protagonist, who do not act for the good of their own people, but to fulfil personal desires. In the case of Ulysses, we are clearly told in the story that "him lacketh nothing of delit," but he cannot restrain his erotic desire when he is with Circe, and the consequence of his inability to govern his wilfulness is his death, provoked by his unknown child. Ulysses's death has of course negative consequences for his realm, which is now without a head. A crucial problem is that he was not able to interpret the dream about his fate, in that he does not know himself sufficiently. Nectanabus acts even worse than Ulysses, because he not only deceives Olimpias and begets a child, Alexander, who eventually kills him, but he had even fled his land in the first place for fear of the coming enemies. To abandon the kingdom exactly when it is most in need of its guide is utterly against the ideal figure of a Christian king. As we have seen in chapter one of this study, the king was, in medieval political theory, the harmonizing principle and the prime example for his people. Furthermore, the scene of Alexander killing Nectanabus is a peak of tragic irony: Alexander accuses his teacher of the uselessness of his art, and he pushes him from the tower to prove that his prediction is wrong, but by doing so he proves the opposite, namely that the prophecy was right. Self-ignorance is hence on both parts; Alexander ignores his own past, who he is and where he comes from; Nectanabus, although in part able to read his future in the stars, is unable to see that he is going

to die that very night. He cannot avoid his death, and eventually, he is the victim of his sinful past.

The two tales illustrate two negative examples of king. Both Ulysses and Nectanabus are guided by their Will, and because they are blinded by the passion of erotic love, they end up exploiting evil means to fulfil their desire. By using sorcery in love, Ulysses and Nectanabus do exactly what Gower had illustrated in his Latin lines at the beginning of the section on sorcery and witchcraft: “Everything that the stars or the power of herbs may do, or the force of the infernal regions, the lover tries them all” (6. *iii*). The issue here is that Reason has been disregarded in favour of Will. Ulysses and Nectanabus are themselves the cause of their unnatural deaths. At the end of the Tale of Ulysses, in fact, Genius explains:

Thurgh sorcerie his lust he wan
Thurgh sorcerie his wo began,
Thurgh sorcerie his love he ches,
Thurgh sorcerie his lif he les;
The child was gete in sorcerie,
The which dede al this felonie.
Thing which was agein kynde wrought,
Unkindeliche it was aboght:
The child his oghne fader slowh,
That was unkindeschipe ynowh. (6. 1769-78)

The lines above inform us that Ulysses pursued his aims through sorcery, obtaining thus both pleasure and woe; the first four anaphoric lines rest on contrasting situations: winning pleasure, beginning of woe, choosing one’s love, losing one’s life. The anaphora emphasises sorcery to remark that it was the cause of Ulysses’s misfortunes. It allowed him to deceive Circe in order to lie with her; hence he satisfied his lust. But it also provoked the beginning of his decline and death. Even the birth of the child is not perceived as properly positive, since it “dede al this felonie.” The concluding epigrammatic lines summarize what has been said immediately above: the child slew his father, which is in fact unnatural, as the consequence for the unnatural way Telegonus was conceived.

Like the Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus, the Tale of Nectanabus ends with a similar message:

And thus Nectanabus aboghte
The sorcerie which he wroghte. (6. 2337-38)

His olde sleythes whiche he caste,
Yonge Alisandre hem overcaste:
His fader, which him misbegat,
He slouh: a gret mishap was that.
Bot for o mis another mys
Was yolde, and so fulofte it is. (6. 2355-60)

Even Nectanabus pays for his use of sorcery to fulfil his lusty desire, and the price is indeed very high: his death by the hand of his son. The stories seem to imply that an unnatural act leads inevitably to an unnatural response from the cosmos, as if it was the only way to re-establish a balance in nature. I do not mean that this is a general principle in *Confessio Amantis*, but rather that a significant idea contained in the poem is that Fortune is determined by individuals, who are free to choose. In the Prologue, Gower writes that “the man is overall his oghne cause of wel and wo” (Prologue 546-47) and that what “we fortune clepe so out of the man himself it groweth” (Prologue 548-49).

We have seen that both Ulysses and Nectanabus are introduced as educated men, well-read in various fields. However, we are informed, they lack self-knowledge. After telling Ulysses’s dream, Genius states: “men sein, a man hath knowleching save of himself of alle thing” (6. 1567-68); whereas Alexander, before pushing his father from the tower, utters: “thou knewe alle othre mannes chance and of thiself hast ignorance” (6. 2313-14). It may be argued that the tales encourage self-knowledge by means of highlighting bad consequences deriving from the lack of it; besides, the topic may be relevant to explain the presence of Book 7 – which illustrates the division of philosophy – within the poem. Therefore, we should now attempt to understand what knowing oneself could mean in the later Middle Ages. The *nosce te ipsum* is a very old issue disputed since the time of the ancient Greeks. However, we do not need to go

that far for our purpose. An important document for the conception of self-knowledge in the Middle Ages is the *Monologion* by Anselm of Canterbury, where he explains that:

The more the rational soul tries to know itself the more it approaches the knowledge of God. The soul is a mirror in which the image of God can be contemplated.¹⁰

There are two fundamental aspects in this definition: the first one, in the first sentence of the quotation, is that the more a person knows oneself, the more that person knows God. Here Anselm is associating self-knowledge with knowledge of God. The second sentence introduces another aspect, which is that of the soul as a mirror of God. It is explained, hence, that by looking within oneself and contemplating the soul, one can know both oneself and God. This quotation clearly implies a relationship between microcosm and macrocosm. Furthermore, Augustine had already talked about self-knowledge as a “journey homeward to oneself,”¹¹ and the same will do Achard of St. Victor (abbot of the abbey of St. Victor in Paris in the twelfth century) defining the soul as the promised land. The idea of *nosce te ipsum* as a journey back home became very popular throughout Europe by the later Middle Ages, and in fact Gower uses this allegory at the end of his *Confessio Amantis*, when Amans – who has now identified himself with John Gower – “homward a softe pas y wente” (8. 2967). The fact that he walks home means, metaphorically, that he is closer to his psychological integration than he was at the beginning of the poem, and thus he is closer to God. Even John of Salisbury, bishop of Chartres, argues that it is pointless to know many things about the world, if one is ignorant about the most important thing, namely oneself. Besides, John of Salisbury writes in his *Metalogicon* that whoever contemplates their imperfect soul, “endeavours diligently to form again in himself the image of God, which has been disfigured by vice.”¹²

¹⁰ Quoted in Bennett, J. A. W., “Nosce te ipsum: Some Medieval Interpretations”, in Salu, Mary, Farrell, Robert T., eds., *J. R. R. Tolkien, Scholar and Storyteller. Essays in Memoriam*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979, p. 141.

¹¹ Bennett, p. 141.

¹² Cited in Bennett, pp. 144-45.

We have seen so far how self-knowledge was understood in the Middle Ages. It could be argued that, unlike today, when knowing oneself means being intimately aware of who you are individually, in the Middle Ages self-knowledge was a matter of being aware of oneself as a human being created by God. Looking inward for self-reflexion is a fundamental part of the process now as it was in later medieval times; but if today the focus is on the individual as a unique human being, then it was on individuals conceived as equal human beings with the same rational soul. Indeed, the soul played a central role in the process, because it was conceived as divine trace that God had provided to human beings only. By looking inward, one could trace back one's soul to its original source, i.e. God, and ultimately reconsider oneself as a microcosm connected to a macrocosm. Confession helped to achieve awareness of the state of one's soul. Once individuals recognised their soul as the image of God disfigured by sin, then they could start the process of healing.

Even though Genius tells the Tale of Ulysses and Telegonus and the Tale of Nectanabus to Amans to warn him against the use of witchcraft in love affairs, he also emphasises self-knowledge, which is a central topic not only in that book, but in the whole poem. It is in fact part of the aim of Amans's confession. As regards Book 7, however, the relationship between the knowledge of self and the division of the sciences that we find in that book may be a bit ambiguous. I would like to clarify that ambiguity through the opposition of self-knowledge to *curiositas* for the sciences. I have already said above that John of Salisbury considered it pointless to know many things if then one did not know oneself. He was also convinced that "the pagan philosophers, preoccupied with investigating all things under the sun, became vain in their thought."¹³ This statement seems to illustrate a popular dichotomy in the Middle Ages. The dichotomy is between self-knowledge, that requires a movement inward, and knowledge of the world, which requires, instead, a movement toward the outside. This opposition, found

¹³ Quoted in Bennett, p. 144.

in various texts of the monastic tradition, e.g. the pseudo-Bernardine text *Meditationes piissimae de cognitione humanae conditionis*, seems to have been quite often used to discredit knowledge of the sciences in favour of knowledge of the soul, especially in the pseudo-Bernardine maxim “plures plura sciunt et seipsos nesciunt.”¹⁴ The concept expressed by this maxim is also expressed in Gower’s tales at the end of Book 6. In Genius’s comment on the fact that Ulysses is unable to interpret his dream – “men sein, a man hath knowleching save of himself of alle thing” – and in the scene of Nectanabus viewing the stars with Alexander; though Nectanabus is able to read the stars, he cannot predict that Alexander will kill him that very night.

However, even though the two tales pose the dichotomy between self-knowledge and *curiositas*, Book 7 deals with the division of the sciences. The point may seem contradictory, but it is not if we accept the fact that perhaps Gower did not want to follow the typical monastic tradition – discrediting, at least in part, knowledge of the sciences in favour of self-knowledge – in his *Confessio Amantis*. I agree with Simpson who argues that:

Gower is working broadly within the same tradition [of the *Anticlaudianus*], according to which knowledge of the human sciences is integral to knowledge of the self; the soul can achieve an integration of its different faculties only through specifically ‘scientific’ information.¹⁵

In this passage, Simpson argues that in *Confessio Amantis* the study of the sciences is not an obstacle to the knowledge of the soul. In fact, the former helps achieve the latter. At the end of Book 6 it is Amans who, driven by *curiositas*, asks his confessor to know more about Alexander’s instruction by his teacher – not by Nectanabus, the negative example, but by his later teacher Aristotle. At the beginning of Book 7, Genius states that “wisdom is at every throwe above alle other thing to knowe in loves cause and elleswhere” (7. 15-17). Knowledge is hence paramount in love affairs and other matters. Genius then proceeds to explain the

¹⁴ Quoted in Simpson, p. 204.

¹⁵ Simpson, p. 205.

division of philosophy in three branches: theoretical, practical and rhetorical. The scheme proposed by Genius is the Aristotelian division of philosophy, one of the three pedagogic programmes known in the Middle Ages.¹⁶ While reading Book 7, it is difficult not to notice that Genius does not dedicate equal space to expose the various parts of philosophy. For what concerns theology, which was deemed the highest of the sciences, he basically just explains quite briefly what that science is about. Then, he continues with physics and astronomy (two subdivisions of mathematics), on which he lingers a bit longer. Beside explaining the objects of investigation of these fields of knowledge, Genius illustrates quite clearly how God shaped the matter into the four elements, the creation of the universe, of human beings and their soul; he also dwells on human complexions, the creation of planets and stars and their influence on human beings. As observed by Simpson:

what interests Genius in the theoretical sciences is the creation of the cosmos and the human soul by God; the complexion of physical bodies; and the astrological influences of the heavens on those bodies.¹⁷

Being familiar with physics and astronomy can help mankind to know its origin and the interconnection between the microcosm of the individual and the macrocosm of the universe. Mankind and universe were in fact generated from the same original matter, then shaped into the four basic elements – water, earth, air, fire. In the physiological theory of the four humours, in fact, we can find connections between the human temperaments and the external conditions of the environment. A case in point could be the choleric humour, or complexion, which was associated to an excess of yellow bile; the yellow bile was thought to be hot and dry, therefore the choleric individual was associated with the summer season and the natural element of fire. These connections between micro- and macrocosm made it fundamental to know the cosmos

¹⁶ In the Middle Ages, the broad field of knowledge was organised by means of three pedagogic structures: the Liberal Arts, the Platonic division, and the Aristotelian division. The Liberal Arts divided knowledge into seven parts organized in the Trivium and Quadrivium. For the Aristotelian division of philosophy see n.7 above. According to the Platonic division, the three parts of knowledge were physics, ethics and logic. For a brief treatment of the topic see Simpson, pp. 32-33.

¹⁷ Simpson, p. 212.

in order to know oneself. Besides, as already mentioned above, human beings were believed to be the only creatures to have a special bond with the creator, since they had a rational soul, a divine trace that imitated the image of God.

Moving on to the practical sciences, which is the next philosophical division thoroughly treated by Genius, it is clear that this is the most significant division for the confessor. His exposition of rhetoric is very brief, and he totally ignores ethics and economics. Particular emphasis is put on Politics and its five subcategories: truth, liberality, justice, pity and chastity. Why does Genius move so quickly to get to the treatment of Politics? Why is this science so important to him? In order to answer these questions, we should first look at Genius's understanding of love in the first part of the poem. Love is considered an irresistible force as far as Book 6. At the beginning of Book 1, for instance, the narrator says: "it hath and schal ben everemor that love is maister wher he wile" (1. 34-35). A significant example of the power of love and the frailty of humankind in front of it is in the Tale of Mundus and Paulina in Book 1. Mundus is presented as a Roman worthy knight, and yet his strength does not help him oppose love. Not only does Genius depict love as unavoidable, he even "excuses participants in stories precisely for their helpless submission before the strength of love."¹⁸ This is well illustrated with the Tale of Canace and Machaire in Book 3. The short story is about Canace and Machaire, the daughter and son of Eolus, who are won by Love, which does not answer to "lawe positif" (3. 172), but to Nature which "enchanted" (3. 178) them. The two siblings make love and Canace becomes pregnant. This causes the wrath of their father, king Eolus, who orders that his daughter kill herself. After writing a touching letter to her brother, who has left the kingdom for fear of Eolus, Canace kills herself with the sword given by her father. Genius's comment on the story is unexpected: readers may spontaneously look at Canace and Machaire, in particular the first, as the protagonist of the story; Genius wants us, instead, to pay attention to

¹⁸ Simpson, p.164.

Eolus as a wrathful character and to his actions. The tale is told, in fact, within the book dedicated to wrath; therefore, Genius excuses the siblings, in that they just followed a natural force that cannot be opposed, namely love. Instead, he suggests to Amans:

If thou evere in cause of love
Schalt deme, and thou be so above
That thou miht lede it at thi wille,
Let nevere thurgh thi Wraththe spille
Which every kinde scholde save. (3. 339-43)

The advice is not to go against natural law, otherwise “ther hath befalle gret vengance” (3. 359).

The love discourse from Book 1 to 6 depicts love from the point of view of the theoretical science of astronomy. We are informed that love is an invincible natural force; it is the macrocosm that influences the microcosm of the individual. In the treatment of astronomy, in fact, Genius illustrates the seven planets and the stars and how they influence human beings. Libidinous behaviour may be an inevitable reaction to the natural influence of the planet Venus, “for that lawe ther mai no maner man withdrawe” (7. 793-94). Whenever love strikes a person, it cannot be ignored. However, when Genius shifts to chastity, one of the subcategories of Politics, the love discourse changes, to be now centred on the microcosm and the rational soul of the individual. As a consequence, Genius starts to contemplate “the necessity and possibility of constraining sexual desire.”¹⁹ He affirms that “he [Alexander] schal mesure his bodi, so that no mesure of fleishshly lust he scholde excede” (7. 4235-37). The fifth point of Politics, chastity, is in fact the ability to measure one’s behaviour and not to exceed the rule. This understanding of chastity that Aristotle is teaching to Alexander – and Genius to Amans – is quite different from the other understanding of the word, which was in fact a synonym to virginity. As illustrated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the use of the word chastity with the meaning of “abstinence from all sexual intercourse; virginity, celibacy,” has been attested in three writers from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. One is the anonymous writer of *Ancrene Riwe* of

¹⁹ Simpson, p. 213.

the thirteenth century; the second is John Wycliffe who lived in the fourteenth century; and finally, Reginald Pecock, a Welsh prelate of the fifteenth century. Here, it is not total abstinence from sensual love; instead, it is the ability to govern one's concupiscence to stop it from exceeding a certain limit. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in fact, shows that the word was mainly used, from the fourteenth century onward, with this latter sense. Genius explains that chastity can be realized, for instance, through marriage: "forthi scholde every good man knowe and thenke, hou that in marriage his trouthe plight lith in morgage, which if he breke, it is falshode" (7. 4226-29). Marriage is depicted as a vow of truth, or a pledge of one's good faith. Quite significant is the use of the word "morgage," which was the Middle English word for the modern mortgage. Even in Middle English it was part of the judicial and contractual language; marriage was in fact a contract, very often motivated by economic reasons, but it was also a serious vow one made with another person and thus it had, as it still does now, profound moral implications. For that reason, chastity and marriage are to be achieved by looking inward; human beings have to recognise that their God-like soul has been perturbed by sin, hence the need to contemplate it, through penance, to restore in themselves the image of God. In *Confessio Amantis*, we are informed that there is no need to back out of Love, which would be however an impossible task, since Love cannot be resisted. Through Genius's political discourse we are showed the possibility to measure ourselves, even under the influence of love, by means of rational control of our behaviour and actions through the Intellect.

Man's rational control, Genius explains, is his own responsibility, and the woman cannot do anything: "for in the womman is no guile of that a man himself bewhapeth; whan he his oghne wit bejapeth, I can the wommen wel excuse" (7. 4266-69). He continues by saying:

Bot what man wole upon hem muse
 After the foole impression
 Of his ymaginacioun,
 Withinne himself the fyr he bloweth,
 Wherof the womman nothing knoweth,
 So mai sche nothing be to wyte. (7. 4270-75)

Beside remarking that women are not to blame at all for man's fool imagination, I would like to draw the attention to the first four lines of this passage. Here Genius clearly states that when men fantasize about women, they follow the foolish impression²⁰ of their imagination; in other words, men contemplate false images created by their imagination.

We have seen in the previous chapter that the rational soul imitates the form of the Trinity with Memory, Intellect, and Will. Moreover, the human brain was divided into cells, each dedicated to different functions. The frontal lobe contained the cell for Common Sense and Imagination. All the information collected from the outside through the senses was first processed by Common Sense, which “discriminated modalities of perception from each other, such as whiteness from sweetness [...] it also compared and summed information received [...] from the different sense modalities.”²¹ In the same frontal cell, immediately behind Common Sense, was the faculty of Imagination, which was believed to be the place where images were stored. However, Imagination was not only a place to store images; it even allowed human beings to combine the information perceived from the outside through the senses to create new images. In the first function, the faculty is harmless and passive: it just contains images. In its second function, Imagination, or *ingenium*, can be allied either to Will or Intellect. As a consequence, if the faculty serves Reason, then it supports the process of reflection and reasoning through images; but if *ingenium* cooperates with Will, we contemplate images without any goal apart from pleasure. As explained by Simpson, Imagination “can be fixed on sensual pleasure, where it becomes a kind of skin to the reason, clouding and overshadowing rational activity.”²² In other words, when Imagination cooperates with Will, it helps raise

²⁰ The word *impressioun* clearly derives from Latin *imprimere*. Even *MED* reports as first meaning “the act or process of indenting a surface; reproducing the shape of an object by pressing it into wax or the like; the carving or writing of symbols.” Therefore, when discussing the imaginative faculty in medieval theory, we may want to consider that images were believed to be actually imprinted in the brain. In medieval anatomical theories, the rear part of the first cell, where Imagination resided, was thought to be drier than the front, slippery part. For that reason, forms could be imprinted easily as it happened with wax. For a treatment of the topic see Kemp and Fletcher.

²¹ Kemp and Fletcher, p. 563.

²² Simpson, p. 187.

pleasure and thus enhance desire by the supply of images. This is what Genius illustrates, in the passage above, with the expression “the fyr he bloweth.”

There is also a bit of irony in the four lines we are dealing with. When Genius says that man muses upon woman “after the fool impression of his ymaginacioun,” he is depicting a *mise en abyme* of Amans’s story. Amans is incapable of ruling himself, because his tyrannical Will is governing his action; besides, his imaginative faculty is cooperating with Will, by stimulating it with images. By reporting a teaching of Aristotle to his disciple Alexander, Genius reproduces the scene in an attempt to make the lover aware of his condition. But the irony lies in the fact that Genius, while discussing imagination, is in fact talking about himself.

Genius is an ambiguous character in *Confessio Amantis*, since he has a double nature. He appears in Book 1 as the priest of Venus and servant of the god of love with the main duty of instructing Amans in the art of love. Indeed, this is what he attempts to do in the poem, but he is also a priest in the Christian sense, which renders him the right person to listen to Amans’s confession. Genius occupies a strategic position; if on the one hand “under the influence of will, *ymaginative* can combine forms into new forms not found in nature,” on the other hand “in Gower, Genius is the principal agent of therapy as he presents tales to the wilful Amans in hope of engaging his intellect.”²³ By its own nature, Genius can work together with both Will and Intellect, and even though his position may appear contradictory, it is nonetheless useful in the poem, in that he is the one who can restore Amans’s psychological integration. In fact, in the allegorical interaction between faculties, Imagination is an intermediary between Will and Intellect, with the ultimate aim of helping the second to restore order in Amans’s microcosm through the taming of Will. Now, instead, it is Will who “willfully makes them [the senses] see what he wants to see.”²⁴

²³ See the introduction to *Confessio Amantis* edited by Russell A. Peck, vol. 1, p. 8.

²⁴ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 127.

However, we may wonder, how can Genius instruct Amans, if he is connected to the concupiscent Will as the one who feeds it with images not found in nature? In other words, if Genius, in the role of Imagination, spurs Amans to achieve his concupiscent love, then how can he help, at the same time, restrain his Will? It seems that Genius is performing two contradictory functions at the same time. Simpson's opinion can be illuminating in this sense:

Rather than it being the case that Genius cures Amans of his problem, it is more that Amans and Genius share a problem; through the interaction of these two faculties, Amans can move towards being more of a rational will, and, at the same time, move towards the psychic reintegration which reconstitutes John Gower.²⁵

This passage is significant in that it describes both characters as personifications of faculties of the same rational soul. As we have seen in chapter one of this study, Amans represents the concupiscent Will and Genius the Imagination; they represent two faculties of the same person, i.e. John Gower. The fact that they are part of the same soul means that they share the problem of a divided soul. In order to heal the division, and achieve a psychological integration, the two need to interact, so that Genius, who naturally serves also Reason, can bring Will back under the control of Intellect. The exemplary tales told by Genius are fundamental in this sense, since they meet the curiosity of Will, but at the same time they engage the Intellect. Genius is the point of mediation between the two and, as noted by Simpson, "even if the will remains held in his obsessive desire, it will no longer have the help of a concupiscent imagination."²⁶

To conclude, Book 7, through the selectivity of the sciences, is a guide in the reading of the poem. Once we get to it, we see that a *psychomachia* of body and soul is represented throughout the poem. By means of the theoretical sciences, in particular Astronomy, we get to know the way human beings originated and how their bodies are composed. Men and women are made of the same matter as the rest of nature; the combination of the four elements in human beings produces the four complexions, hence our subjection to the influence of the cosmos. In

²⁵ Simpson, pp. 198-99.

²⁶ Simpson, p. 216.

the first part of *Confessio Amantis* (from Book 1 to 6), Genius follows Nature in his instruction of Amans; in fact, his conception of mankind is inevitably influenced by the heavens, so that Love becomes a strong planetary force and man is helpless in front of it. However, with the treatment of Politics in Book 7, another important aspect of human beings is remembered, and that is of course the soul. Men and women are not only matter and a physical body, but they even have a soul that tends to God, its creator. This is the passage in Book 7 where Genius explains the double and conflicting nature of human beings:

And thus nature his pourveance
 Hath mad for man to lieven hiere;
 Bot God, which hath the soule diere,
 Hath formed it in other wise.
 That can no man pleinli devise;
 Bot as the clerkes ous enforme,
 That lich to God it hath a forme,
 Thurgh which figure and which liknesse
 The soule hath many an hyh noblesse
 Appropred to his oghne kinde.
 Bot ofte hir wittes be mad blinde
 Al onliche of this ilke point,
 That hir abydinge is conjoint
 Forth with the bodi for to duelle.
 That on desireth toward helle,
 That other upward to the hevене. (7. 490-505)

The situation of *psychomachia* depicted here remains unresolved with the only support of the theoretical sciences. The practical sciences let us know that man has a soul, which was created by God himself. It is by means of our rational soul that we can find a mediation with the body. In love, marriage is the “middel weie” between erotic desire and “honeste love.” Moreover, metaphorically speaking, marriage could also indicate harmony within a kingdom; hence we can talk about marriage in a political sense. Politics is the science that instructs humankind in good governance according to reason and justice. In Book 7, Genius tells Amans how Aristotle instructed Alexander to be a reasonable and just king, so that his kingdom could live in peace.

Indeed, kingship, the *leitmotiv* in *Confessio Amantis*, may be referred to both individual and public spheres. When Genius introduces the second part of Politics, liberality, he explains that “the worldes good was ferst comene,” (7. 1991) but then, when the number of people

increased, everyone began to look for their private profit and be envious to each other. This resulted in the necessity of kings as defenders of common profit. As put by Genius:

And thus above hem alle stod
The king upon his regalie,
As he which hath to justifie
The worldes good for covoitise.
So sit it wel in alle wise
A king between the more and lesse
To sette his herte upon largesse
Toward himself and ek also
Toward his people. (7. 2010-18)

Kings were created to occupy a social position higher than his subjects, and their duty is to “justifie”²⁷ – a verb that means to rule or govern, but also to protect, defend – common profit. Significant is also the specification that the proper position of a king (“so sit it wel”) is, from a conceptual point of view, “between the more and the lesse.” As argued by Peck, “the king should look after both himself and his people.”²⁸ The king should carry out his duty, however, through liberality, which is a concept that implies the ability to create a balance between two extremities. Even here, using Peck’s words, “a king must learn to measure what is right.”²⁹

What I have just argued about kingship as referred to the king and the social sphere can be applied as well to the microcosm of the individual. Every human being is a reflection of the macrocosm. In fact, as in an orderly society every individual participates in common profit by acting according to his social estate, in the same way the human body is a hierarchic community of parts. Every organ contributes to performing a function important for general common profit; e.g. the stomach is the cook of the community, while the mouth is the mill and the tongue is the miller. *Confessio Amantis* aims to educate the so-called philosopher-king and all subjects alike,

²⁷ Beside its basic meaning “to govern, rule,” the Middle English verb “justifie” has obvious connections with the noun “justice”. As the *Middle English Dictionary* indicates, justice in Middle English contained also the reference to divine law. As a case in point to illustrate this connotation of the word, I would like to cite a short passage from Chaucer’s *Boece*: “But o lord and o king, and that is God, that is lord of thi cuntre, whiche that rejoisseth hym of the duellynge of his citezeens, and nat for to putten hem in exil; of the whiche lord it is a sovereyn freedom to ben governed by the brydel of hym and obeye to his justice.” (1. pr.5. 20-25)
The duty of the king to govern his kingdom had to be carried out, at least in theory, obeying the law of God.

²⁸ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 144.

²⁹ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 145.

with “the herte principal, to whom reson in special is gove as for the governance” (7. 487-89). Genius gets back to this double sense of kingship, political and ethical, in the last book where he claims that “every man for his partie a kingdom hath to justefie” (8. 2111-12). The confessor claims that when a man misrules his kingdom, he inevitably loses himself and everything he owns with it. Genius warns the lover that Love, “which that blind was evere, makth alle his servantz blinde also” (8. 2130-31). His advice is hence to stop following cupidinous desire generated by Will, and place his heart, site of the noble rational soul, under the law of Reason. In other words, Genius is pushing Amans toward his full psychological integration.

CHAPTER 3

CONFESSIO AMANTIS AS A MIRROR FOR PRINCES

And forth withal she tok me tho
A wonder mirour for to holde,
In which she bad me to beholde
And taken hiede of that I sye.
(*Confessio Amantis* 8. 2820-23)

In the previous chapter of this study, I have outlined briefly the structure of Book 7, explaining that the longer section of it is devoted to the treatment of the practical sciences, in particular politics. In Book 7 Gower illustrates his idea of the perfect prince, thus making the book part of the *speculum principis* genre. In section two of this chapter, I will attempt to highlight the main characteristics of Gower's ideal prince as outlined in that book. I will also suggest that Book 7 is important within the poem's design since it reflects the image of the ideal prince as opposed to the evil princes presented in the rest of the poem. For this interpretation, I have found support in Russell A. Peck¹ and Peter Nicholson.² However, before delving into the five points of politics in Book 7, in section one I would like to suggest that even the whole poem can be described as a mirror for princes, even though, in this case, resting on a slightly different understanding of kingship. When referred to the books of *Confessio Amantis* other than the seventh, the term has to do with the private sphere of the individual, hence acquiring the sense of good governance of one's microcosm. Arguably, Gower's poem has a pedagogic goal addressed to all individuals. A. G. Rigg and Edward Moore noticed that Ricardian literature presents a pronounced personal quality, originating from the authors' self-awareness.³ Instead, Simpson has argued for the informative (understood as shaping, moulding) structure

¹ Especially Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*.

² Nicholson, Peter, *Love and Ethics in Gower's Confessio Amantis*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

³ Rigg, A. G., Moore, Edward S., "Latin Works: Politics, Lament and Praise", in Echard, Siân, ed., *A Companion to Gower*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004.

of *Confessio Amantis*.⁴ Both points are here explained and put together in the attempt to explain the presence of both personal and public spheres within Gower's vernacular mirror for princes. In order to provide a better understanding of Gower's political writing, however, I will start by describing the general context of the political writing of the late fourteenth century.

3.1 A mirror for common people

Rigg and Moore have argued that Gower, like his contemporaries, tended to write about historical and political topics using Latin instead of the vernacular (the critics take into account, in particular, Gower's first book of *Vox Clamantis* and *Cronica Tripartita*, a versified chronicle appended to *Vox Clamantis*). The use of Latin for works concerning public and political issues was certainly because the language was most apt for such serious matters, especially if one wished for literary immortality. And Gower was certainly one of those writers who expected his works to be passed on to future generations. Moreover, there may be another reason why Latin was preferred to English and French, the other two languages of medieval England. Indeed, English was "socially and intellectually inferior to French and Latin,"⁵ even though it was raising its status during Gower's lifetime. French was the language of the nobility, used in the law courts and Parliament, hence it was undoubtedly socially superior to English. However, despite the high value of French, the language began its decline in the fourteenth century, when it started to be gradually replaced by vernacular English. Finally, Latin was the language for science, philosophy, and theology. Latin "remained secure as the language of serious endeavour in all areas;"⁶ besides, it could claim together with French an established literary tradition that English had not. For instance, Rigg and Moore noticed that the English literary tradition had nothing like *Roman de la Rose*, a thirteenth-century romance that would have a great influence

⁴ Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*.

⁵ Rigg and Moore, p. 154.

⁶ Rigg and Moore, p. 154.

on later English vernacular literature.⁷ For what concerns Latin, needless to say, it was bound to the ancient Roman tradition and the writings of the fathers of the Church.

Using Latin allowed English writers to engage with the great heritage of Latin literature, both classical and early medieval. As suggested by Rigg and Moore:

By virtue of its language alone, a work could associate and interact with the most respected works of the Western literary tradition, through the use of tropes and intertextual references.⁸

As a case in point, a trope widely used by Roman authors was the invocation of the Muses when starting a poem or before crucial passages.⁹ This trope became quite popular in medieval writers writing in Latin, even though in medieval Christian literature the muses were quite often replaced by the soul.¹⁰ Furthermore, since Latin was the international language at Gower's time, a work written in this language could be read by anyone, no matter his or her place of origin. Thus, the language allowed for international recognition. However, I would like to focus here on one feature of Anglo-Latin writers, who seem to have been particularly interested in writing about political matters. It appears that political writing was a favourite form for both continental and Anglo-Latin writers.¹¹ Popular writers from the continent were, for instance, Walter of Châtillon, Bernard of Cluny, and John of Hauville; among the Anglo-Latin authors, Nigel Wireker with his *Speculum Stultorum* appears to have been famous at the time.¹² However, A.G. Rigg's list of English writers who wrote about historical and political matters in Latin in the medieval period is much longer,¹³ including important names like Anselm of Canterbury, Geoffrey of Monmouth, John of Salisbury; other names are Henry of Avranches, Michael of Cornwall, Walter of Wimborne, John Pecham, and many others. Latin writers exerted great

⁷ Rigg and Moore, p. 154.

⁸ Rigg and Moore, p. 155.

⁹ Curtius, especially pp. 228-46.

¹⁰ Curtius, p. 234.

¹¹ Rigg and Moore, p. 160.

¹² Rigg and Moore, p. 161.

¹³ The list I am referring to is a book: Rigg, A.G., *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 1066-1422*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

influence on fourteenth- and fifteenth-century political literature in western Europe. Lester Kruger Born, for instance, argues that Thomas Hoccleve wrote his *De Regimine Principis* resting on three main sources – in addition to the Bible, of course: one is *Secreta Secretorum*, a letter by Aristotle to Alexander the Great; another is *De Regimine Principum* by Aegidius Romanus; finally, *The Game of Chess Moralized* of Jacobus de Cessolis – the latter was written in French.¹⁴ No doubt at Gower's time the linguistic situation of England was a very complex one and it was undergoing changes that would impact upon future literary developments. On the one hand, Latin was losing its primacy in the literary production to let its place to English; on the other hand, the vernacular language of England had not yet developed a sufficient literary heritage, especially in political matters, to become the full substitute of Latin and its old tradition. Political satire, for example, continued to use Latin as its preferred language.¹⁵

Gower wrote his major works, and a few minor poems, about political issues. Today among scholars he is often praised for his trilingual *oeuvre*, which gives insight not only into the literary but also into the linguistic situation of the times. Besides his three major works – *Mirour de l'Omme*, *Vox Clamantis*, and *Confessio Amantis* – he composed other minor poems on political issues, such as *O Deus immense*, *De lucis scrutinio*, *De Carmen super multiplici viciorum pestilencium* (to cite just a few titles). In writing political satires, Gower could act within a well-established popular tradition. Rigg and Moore argue that both the interest in political issues and the satirical genre became distinctive features that fourteenth-century English literature had inherited from its Anglo-Latin past. Traditional political satires

Ranged from the general lament of the shortcomings of the various estates to discussion of particular events such as the murder of Becket, the reigns of Richard I and John, and the Wars of the Barons.¹⁶

¹⁴ Born, Lester Kruger, "The Perfect Prince: A Study in Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Ideals", *Speculum*, 3 (1928), p. 499.

¹⁵ Rigg and Moore, p. 155.

¹⁶ Rigg and Moore, p.161.

Gower indeed lived in a turbulent century, during which a great deal of social and political events occurred and had a great impact on the English people. The changes Gower and his contemporaries had to face may have stimulated the employment of political satire not only to express lament for an agitated age, but even to discuss, and possibly assess, the events occurring at the time. One of the ways political Latin poetry was used was “for public and political ends,”¹⁷ such as giving first-person reports of the Hundred Years War or praising Richard II while entering London during his triumph. Such works tended to report specific events dramatically and often emphasised the writer’s view, attempting to make it persuasive and let the reader agree with their view.¹⁸ However, Gower’s vernacular works *Confessio Amantis* and *Mirour de l’Omme* seem to take another direction, unlike his Latin works.¹⁹

In *Confessio Amantis* there is no description of particular historical events, even though contemporary history constitutes a background for the poem. None of the facts of the century appears as the protagonists of the poem; instead, Gower identifies an individual, Amans, as the main character and the central issue is his confession in the form of a dialogue. Significantly, Scanlon suggests using the expression ‘medieval humanism’ for the period between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries. He supports his claim by the fact that many writers in those centuries, including Alan of Lille and John Gower, had a profound confidence in the powers of human reason and believed in the productive powers of human nature; they respected the ancient texts of literature and philosophy and were eager to engage with them; finally, they thought of politics as a pivotal science. The claim of a period called medieval humanism is indeed debatable, however, as far as Gower is concerned, there is no doubt that the poet had deep confidence in the powers of human reason and respect for the values passed down to his contemporaries by antiquity, even though often mediated by Christianity.²⁰ These two elements

¹⁷ Rigg and Moore, p. 161.

¹⁸ Rigg and Moore, p. 162.

¹⁹ Rigg and Moore, p. 161.

²⁰ Scanlon, pp. 18-19.

make the poem much more introspective and personal than Gower's Latin works, which are instead "declarative and decidedly more public."²¹ And yet *Confessio Amantis* is a poem concerned with political matters. The particularity of the poem is that it mingles the traditional political satire of Latin heritage with elements of the shorter, but not inexistent, English literary tradition. One of the elements of the vernacular tradition is the "interest shown in the validity of dreams,"²² which is perhaps more evident in Gower's *Visio*²³, but it is present even in *Confessio Amantis*. At the beginning of Book 1, the lover describes himself running into the woods one day in May, and as he gets to a plain, he faints and seems to have a vision or a dream. Gower's dream in *Confessio Amantis* has no clear boundaries at all; at the beginning of Book 1 he says:

So hard me was that ilke throwe,
That ofte sithes overthrowe
To grounde I was withoute breth;
And evere I wisshide after deth,
Whanne I out of my peine awok. (1. 117-21)

Towards the end of Book 8, before the prayer for England and after Venus has left, Amans says:

And with that word al sodeinly,
Enclosid in a sterred sky,
Venus, which is the qweene of love,
Was take into hire place above,
More wist y nought wher she becam. (8. 2941-45)

And thus bewhapid in my thought,
Whan al was turnyd into nought. (8. 2955-56)

The quotation from Book 1 illustrates the opening of Amans's dream about Venus and Cupid, who appear after the lover "awoke out of his pain." Of course, the expression is unclear and raises doubt about Amans having a dream or not; moreover, it is not clear whether he was

²¹ Rigg and Moore, p. 161.

²² Rigg and Moore, p. 163.

²³ *Visio* is the name given to the first Book of *Vox Clamantis* by Maria Wickert in her *Studien zu John Gower* (Cologne, 1953).

sleeping, had fainted, or was awake (hence daydreaming) while having that vision. On the other hand, in Book 8 we are told that Venus just disappeared at the end of the poem, the passage concluding with a reference to the planet Venus. The second quotation from Book 8 does not clarify the situation; if anything, readers may be bewildered, doubting what “all that turned into nothing” could be. Although the limits of the dream or vision are blurred, it seems to me that the whole dialogue between Amans and Genius, hence the whole poem, can be interpreted as an experience that Amans is having in his mind.

However, the fact that the poem hinges on a personal occasion like a confession does not hinder the treatment of the political topic. In other words, my argument is that such a topic as Amans’s love, which pertains to the private sphere, is connected to the public, political sphere using two threads. On the one hand, Gower shows that love is not simply the exclusive relationship between two individuals, but it is an unopposable natural force; human beings cannot escape love, nor can they hope to succeed if they decide to push it away once caught by his bolt. This leaves only one choice to human beings, i.e., to learn how to govern their body and behaviour even when possessed by this natural force. After all, God bestowed a rational soul on men and women, the image of God himself. This leads us to the other link between love and politics: the first provides human beings with the opportunity to engage with the activity of ruling their microcosm through justice and measure; an activity that one has to master well, in particular when seized by love, just as a king has to govern his people during a war or another critical situation. Falling in love is a situation that could occur to individuals from all social estates, hence it can be used, which is what Gower does, as a testing ground to learn proper governance of the self. Eventually, self-rule will influence positively communal life. In other words, by learning correct moral discipline, one can become a good citizen.

The description of a pleasant day, usually at the beginning of spring, is another typical element of English dream-visions, which tended to start with “the common topos of the *locus*

amoenus.”²⁴ However, the striking feature of Ricardian literature was, using Rigg and Moore’s words, the “increasingly personal quality.”²⁵ It seems in fact that Ricardian writers liked to include themselves in their works as characters, even citing their names. This happens in Chaucer, who makes himself a pilgrim in *Canterbury Tales*, but it is a strategy used by Gower, too. In *Confessio Amantis* he is in fact Amans, who reveals his newly found identity in Book 8 clearly stating: “John Gower” (8. 2321). While this personal quality was not alien to Anglo-Latin literature, it became a distinctive feature of English literature, which made wide use of dream-visions. Gower, in *Confessio Amantis* in particular, exploits the dream-vision first to “enforme” (1. 276) himself as the character of the poem, and then also his readers. A significant analysis of the concept of *informatio*, *enformacioun* in Middle English, is presented by Simpson.²⁶ The critic distinguishes two principal ways to understand the informative process:

On the one hand, the word [information] denotes the artistic shaping both in and of the poem (i.e. Genius’s act of shaping stories for Amans, and Gower’s act of giving literary form, or shape, to the poem as a whole). On the other, we should understand the word as referring to the act of transmitting knowledge in and by the poem (i.e. both Genius’s act of teaching Amans, and Gower’s act of teaching us).²⁷

Simpson recognises on the one hand the artistic sense of the process: Gower is the artist that writes, hence shapes the poem; Genius, from within the poem, manipulates the stories that he has found in ancient books to form new stories. On the other hand, the word *information* can acquire a pedagogic value, if we decide to consider the fact that in the poem Genius is the instructor of Amans, and outside the poem, Gower is the instructor of his readers. From this perspective, “enformacioun” refers to both the external, physical form of human beings and objects, and the internal qualities that define their nature.

²⁴ Rigg and Moore, p.163.

²⁵ Rigg and Moore, p. 162.

²⁶ The analysis of the concept is carried out by Simpson in *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*, especially in the introduction, pp. 1-10. The concept is the basis of his interpretation of both Alan’s *Anticlaudianus* and Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*.

²⁷ Simpson, p. 2.

A couple of passages from the poem may help us clarify further this difference. In Book 7, Genius tells how God created the world from *hyle*, the pre-existing shapeless matter:

Riht so the hihe pourveance
Tho hadde under his ordinance
A gret substance, a gret matiere,
Of which he wolde in his manere
These othre thinges make and forme.
For yit withouten eny forme
Was that matiere universal,
Which hihte ylem in special.
Of ylem, as I am enformed,
These elementz ben mad and formed. (7. 209-18)

This passage depicts God's act of creation of all things in the world by giving form to shapeless matter. In fact, in the two concluding lines, Genius states that a human being was created out of the same matter used for the creation of the elements. Later in the same book, Genius tells how God created the soul of human beings:

And thus nature his pourveance
Hath mad for man to liven here;
Bot God, which hath the soule diere,
Hath formed it in other wise.
That can no man pleinli devise;
Bot as the clerkes ous enforme,
That lich to God it hath a forme,
Thurgh which figure and which liknesse
The soule hath many an hyh noblesse
Approped to his oghne kinde. (7. 490-99)

Here, Genius is always describing a process of information, but not of bodily formation as in the first quotation, rather the shaping of the soul. After Nature has shaped the human body for men and women to live on earth, God created the soul to his likeness, hence giving it "hyh noblesse" proper to His kind.

Taking into account the personal quality typical of Ricardian literature and Simpson's analysis of the process of information in Gower's poem, *Confessio Amantis* can be regarded as a *speculum principis* addressed to any individual, notwithstanding his or her social status. The poem works as a mirror that reflects the image of the reader's soul; moreover, Book 7 is a smaller mirror for princes reflecting the image of a would-be king. Even Born explains that the

numerous medieval works on the training of the prince could either be “prepared for the use of a particular prince and follow what seemed expedient for him,” or they could have a distinct pedagogical form “intended for the use of the children of all nobility.” Then he adds that “still others theorize on the subject of government in general.”²⁸ I believe that in the case of *Confessio Amantis* we are dealing with a poem with a clear pedagogical form²⁹, whose aim is to instruct on the subject of government; however, its addressees are not simply the children of the nobility, but every individual.

In the case of Gower, we need to distinguish between kingship with proper political sense and kingship with a psychological connotation. Indeed, the king was considered by the poet the head of the body politic and therefore the prime example to his subjects. The political idea of kingship is expressed in Book 7, which is specifically addressed to the prince. I am going to present Gower’s ideal prince below in this chapter. However, the whole poem centred on Amans’s confession may indicate that every individual was believed to be a sovereign with a kingdom, their microcosm, under their control. Thus, when used in a more general sense, kingship is a condition of maturity that the individual can achieve by means of his moral integrity.³⁰ Furthermore, good governance of the microcosm has a fundamental consequence on the whole community, i.e. the maintenance of the common good.³¹ I would like to suggest that Gower possibly thought that the chaotic history during his lifetime may not have changed but with better political management, both on the part of rulers and subjects. Considering the

²⁸ Born, pp. 470-71. The critic carries out a general survey of influential medieval writers in the advice-for-princes literature. His study includes John of Salisbury, Giraldus Cambrensis, Gilbert of Tournai, Thomas Aquinas, William Perrault, Aegidius Romanus, Jacobus de Cessolis, the anonymous *Liber de Informatione Principum* and *Speculum Dominarum*, Marsilio of Padua, Thomas Hoccleve.

²⁹ The idea of a pedagogical form for Gower’s poem comes from Simpson, *Sciences and the Self in Medieval Poetry*.

³⁰ The ascription of a psychological understanding (maturity) to the political concept of kingship is expressed in Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. XXI. Moreover, the idea of moral integrity is linked to the typical organic metaphor of the Middle Ages; the soul was constituted of three parts that had to be harmonized into a whole, just like the human body was a group of limbs governed by the rational soul.

³¹ Here, again, Simpson’s claim of humanism can be useful to define Gower’s confidence in the human rational soul.

Prologue of *Confessio Amantis*, Gower makes a distinction between social estates, not between different species of human beings, since human beings are all alike in their soul; Gower's main focus is the individual and their interiority. History depends on the decisions and actions of all individuals from any social estate. It seems to me that for Gower, the more single individuals can govern themselves through discipline and act according to their social estate, the better will be for the whole of humanity.

In conclusion, harking back to the initial lines of Book 1 commented in the previous chapter of this study, we may see that Gower's attempt to help humanity to live in peace is carried out through the education of individuals on kingship, i.e. good governance of the self and compliance with the hierarchical subdivision of society into estates. Having defined *Confessio Amantis* as a *speculum principis* concerned with the individual subjects of a realm, I will now move on to discuss the five points of politics in Book 7, which outline the author's ideal Christian prince.

3.2 Gower and the ideal prince

From a political point of view, the fourteenth century in England was a precarious one. We may remember that it began with the deposition of King Edward II in 1327 and closed with the deposition of another king, Richard II, in 1399. As Antony Tuck pointed out, "political stability [...] depended upon the maintenance of good relations between the king and the nobility,"³² which was not the case at all in Richard's reign. The instability of political authority during the Ricardian reign is highlighted by Lynn Staley:

During the reign of Richard II, the prestige of the English crown and the terms used to define that crown were in flux. The Rising of 1381, the challenge to the church voiced by John Wyclif that escalated from the early 1370s on, the tensions of war with France, and the personal and political difficulties Richard had in assuming a position of true

³² Tuck, Anthony, *Richard II and the English Nobility*, London: Edward Arnold, 1973, p. 1.

sovereignty after his accession to the throne as a child in 1377 were all factors in what has been described as a long crisis of authority.³³

The passage above is particularly interesting in that it emphasises the challenge to church authority on the part of John Wyclif, which indeed added more instability to the already changing times. Such political instability largely influenced contemporary writers, among whom the nature of kingship became a preferred theme. Rayner's study – which focuses on four main authors: Gower, Langland, the Gawain-poet and Chaucer – is a great example of their interest in the topic.³⁴

By 1390, when the first version of *Confessio Amantis* came out, Gower had already written other poems on political matters. Siân Echard observes that “it is obvious that Gower concerned himself with right rule, of the individual and of the state, throughout his poetic career and in all his languages.”³⁵ One of the features of Gower's idea of the right rule is his understanding of it from both a private and a public point of view: sovereignty is to him the right rule of a state, the duty of the king; but it is also the governance of self, a skill that any individual should learn. He can put together the private sphere with the public one: the first is represented, in *Confessio Amantis*, by amatorial discourse, the latter by political discourse.

The quest for self-knowledge and the ability to govern oneself are related topics in *Confessio Amantis*; moreover, the “emphasis on wisdom is linked inextricably to the ideas of governance and kingship.”³⁶ Rayner explains that “the idea of man as a microcosm within a macrocosm [...] derives ultimately from classical thought, and was later discussed in the *Secretum Secretorum*.”³⁷ Gower, however, relied on other works to elaborate his ideas on topics like this; for instance, other significant works for governance and kingship were Brunetto

³³ Cited in Rayner, Samantha J., *Images of Kingship in Chaucer and his Ricardian Contemporaries*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008, p. 3.

³⁴ Rayner, *Images of Kingship in Chaucer and his Ricardian Contemporaries*.

³⁵ Echard, Siân, “Introduction: Gower's Reputation”, in *A Companion to Gower*, Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004, p. 7.

³⁶ Rayner, p. 7.

³⁷ Rayner, p. 9.

Latini's *Trésor* and Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*. What I would like to point out here, however, is that the understanding of man as a microcosm within a macrocosm generates a political doctrine in which self-rule is the basis of good kingship; once governance of the self has been acquired, the right rule of the household and the realm become natural consequences. The social dimension seems to characterise even medieval confession, which structures the poem.

While discussing how confession changed from the Middle Ages to the age of the Reformation, John Bossy remarks that originally the sacrament of penance was not conceived as an individual act, but rather as a collective one.³⁸ Penance allowed for a reconciliation with the Church, hence with the Christian community, and not directly with God. The process was constantly mediated by the church, with the confessor that prayed to God that He may forgive the penitent, but only after the penitent had been forgiven by the church and restored to a condition of charity.³⁹ The scholar also maintains that the sacrament determined a reconciliation with the community and it usually occurred in a church within a short distance from other people's ears. Most of those people were neighbours of the penitent, who was aware that they could listen to his or her confession, hence they normally told the priest about the neighbours' sins and not about their own.⁴⁰ Even though Bossy's opinion may be excessive, common people could have understood confession, at least in part, not only as good action for their private relationship with God, but also for the community.

I have already discussed the meaning of kingship according to the self. Now I would like to look at the concept of kingship in a political sense, meaning right rule and the figure of the ideal Christian prince as tackled in Gower's poem, through the focus on the five points of politics in Book 7. As explained before, Gower divided the sciences into three categories

³⁸ Bossy, John, "The Social History of Confession in the Age of the Reformation", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 25 (1975), p. 22.

³⁹ Bossy, p. 22.

⁴⁰ Bossy, p. 24.

following Aristotle's scheme: "Theorique," "Rethorique" and "Practique." The most important to the author seems to be the third, which is "the science of human behaviour"⁴¹ and includes ethics, economics and politics. Ethics is the area of personal governance, economics pertains to the governance of the household, and finally politics has to do with the governance of the realm. As maintained by Rayner: "what rapidly becomes clear is that it is Policie that particularly interests the poet, as the first two parts of Practique are disposed of in a rather summary way."⁴² The reason why Gower decides to give more room to politics could be that, in his multi-level understanding of governance, starting from the self, the family, and ending with the broader kingdom, this last strand can give the widest possible sense of kingly virtues apt for all contexts.⁴³ These kingly virtues are truth, largesse, justice, pity, and chastity.

As far as Truth (7. 1711-1984) is concerned, Genius tells Amans that among all five virtues it "is chief" (7. 1723), and that "it is lief to God and ek to man also" (7. 1724-25), describing this virtue as a common trait of both God and humankind. By introducing truth as a virtue both divine and human, Genius is making clear that he understands truth as the main goal of knowledge and learning. He begins this section on the virtue with these words:

To every man behoveth lore,
Bot to no man belongeth more
Than to a king, which hath to lede
The poeple; for of his kinghede
He mai hem bothe save and spille. (7. 1711-15)

Learning is necessary to all men and women, but in particular to a king, on whom depends the fate of his people. A king may either save or destroy his kingdom depending on his willingness either to achieve truth through knowledge or use sorcery and flattery to manipulate reality and pursue personal goals, just like Nectanabus did in the previous book. Nicholson noticed that

⁴¹ Rayner, p. 11.

⁴² Rayner, p. 12.

⁴³ This idea is suggested by Peck in *Kingship and Common Profit* when he explains that human beings move and realise their human nature in three distinct contexts: personal, domestic, and social.

both Genius and Nectanabus are keen on the sciences; however, the critic remarks on a fundamental difference between the two:

Though Genius, like Nectanabus, takes an interest in the sciences, he does so for a specific purpose and with full knowledge both of their excesses and of their limitations. The study of the physical laws of the universe is valuable to the extent that it leads back to God, a lesson that Nectanabus obviously failed to master.⁴⁴

In Book 7 of *Confessio Amantis*, an important passage dealing with the significance of truth in a monarch is the following:

For if men sholde trouthe seche
And founde it nought withinne a king,
It were an unsittende thing.
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. 1734-40)

If the subjects could not find truth in their king, it would be an “unsittende thing,” which does not simply mean “unfitting” as argued by Macaulay,⁴⁵ but a thing “without a proper place, something alien, or something that might provoke revolution or displacement of right order”.⁴⁶ Without truth, which also means without a reasonable use of knowledge, the head of the state is overthrown; and “if the throne falls vacant, the kingdom staggers headless.”⁴⁷ Moreover, the way a king speaks (his word) is the token of his microcosm, hence the way he governs himself (ethics) and his household (economics). The constant reference to the king’s ability to rule both his public and private spheres may suggest that to Gower a monarch is a two-bodied figure: he is the head of the body politic, hence a public figure; but he is even the head of his private body, like any other individual. I disagree with Nicole Reinhardt who, while discussing the issue of the double-figure of the prince, asserts that the problem “is not so much that of the king’s two

⁴⁴ Nicholson, p. 338.

⁴⁵ Cited in Rayner, p. 13.

⁴⁶ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 143.

⁴⁷ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 143.

bodies, but rather that of two souls in one body.”⁴⁸ In relation to Gower’s poem, the issue is exactly that of the king’s two bodies and one soul. Being himself a human being, he has one soul like any other human being; the circumstance that differentiates him from the other individuals is his office. Because he is a king, he is also in charge of the political body, on which all subjects depend; therefore, he has to be extremely careful to take care of his rational mind, on which both bodies rely.

The symbol adopted by Gower to depict good rule is the crown (7. 1751ff.). He starts by describing the material it is made of, which is gold and stands for excellence; “for the good king must be the most excellent of people in order that the people revere him with allegiance.”⁴⁹ The gems embedded in the crown represent three royal virtues: their hardness signifies constancy; their clarity stands for honesty, “for the king’s word must be true;”⁵⁰ the bright colours signify fame, “for the king’s ‘goode name’ should shine as a bright example of virtue.”⁵¹ Finally, the round shape of the crown represents the hierarchically ordered kingdom.

The second part of politics is largesse (7. 1985-2694), which Genius declares to be the virtue that “serveth to the worldes fame in worshipe of a kinges name” (7. 1987-88). It is thus connected to the king’s good image, who receives allegiance from his subjects in return. Albeit largesse as a word is still part of present-day English, I would like to point out its different connotation in Middle English. In contemporary English, largesse means: “the willingness to spend freely; (the virtue of) generosity, liberality, munificence.”⁵² In Middle English, the denotation of the word was the same, but it also included a connotation not present in today’s word. In fact, the *Middle English Dictionary* gives two main senses for the entry: a) willingness

⁴⁸ Reinhardt, Nicole, “Spin Doctor of Conscience? The Royal Confessor and the Christian Prince”, *Renaissance Studies*, 23 (2009), p. 570.

⁴⁹ Peck, Russell A., “The Politics and Psychology of Governance in Gower: Ideas of Kingship and Real Kings”, in Echard, Siân, ed., *A Companion to Gower*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004, p. 238.

⁵⁰ Peck, “The Politics and Psychology of Governance in Gower”, p. 238.

⁵¹ Peck, “The Politics and Psychology of Governance in Gower”, p. 238.

⁵² *Oed.com* [accessed 5 April 2022].

to give or spend freely; liberality, generosity, munificence; b) the virtue whose opposite is avarice, and whose excess is prodigality.⁵³ Comparing the modern entry with the medieval one, one can see that largesse in contemporary English is essentially a positive characteristic: it is giving money to those who need it, i.e. generosity. The Middle English entry even includes the possibility of an excess of generosity; indeed, giving a part of your money to someone in need is praiseworthy, but granting the wrong amount of money, or giving it to an undeserving person, may be irresponsible.

On the question of kings being generous, Genius explains the issue to Amans clearly. This quality can “Avarice abregge” (7. 1990), and this is of course something that a monarch has to pursue. However, he also says:

A king behoveth ek to fle
The vice of Prodegalité,
That he mesure in his expence
So kepe, that of indigence
He mai be sauf; for who that nedeth,
In al his werk the worse he spedeth. (7. 2025-30)

A good king needs to measure his generosity. He should restrain his avarice and give money to those who most need it or pay those who have shown true allegiance to him. Nonetheless, he should pay attention not to give too much or concede his riches to flatterers who show false allegiance to the monarch in order to pursue self-reward. The issue of largesse is a complex one, in that it is connected to the previous virtue of truth, and it implies a great ability on the part of the monarch to judge his supporters and to measure his generosity. Rayner suggested that:

In following the teachings about truth, this section benefits from the narrator’s earlier conclusions, for here the ability to see through flattering supporters who give praise only to prompt greater rewards for themselves is clearly linked to the careful judgement needed to ascertain truth from self-serving avarice, and to give only to those who truly deserve it.⁵⁴

⁵³ *Middle English Dictionary* (accessed 23 April 2022).

⁵⁴ Rayner, p. 14.

A king needs careful judgement to recognise false supporters like Nectanabus who deceived Olimpias and convinced the king of a divine revelation to his wife. Moderation helps the king avoid “Prodegalité, which is the moder of poverté” (7. 2162-63). In order to warn the king against flattery and pride, Genius tells about the Roman triumphs when an emperor came back victorious from war. The law prescribed that the returning emperor entered Rome the following way:

Foure whyte stiedes scholden drawe [the chariot];
Of Jupiter be thilke lawe
The cote he scholde were also;
Hise prisoners ek scholden go
Endlong the charr on eyther hond,
And alle the nobles of the lond
Tofore and after with him come
Ridende and broghten him to Rome,
In thonk of his chivalerie
And for non other flaterie. (7. 2371-80)

The Romans were aware, however, that the pompous acclaim could inflate the emperor’s spirit with pride, hence the law prescribed another element in the triumph:

Wher he sat in his charr real,
Beside him was a ribald set,
Whiche hadde hise wordes so beset,
To th’emperour in al his gloire
He seide, ‘Tak into memoire,
For al this pompe and al this pride
Let no justice gon aside,
Bot know thiself, what so befall. (7. 2382-89)

The man beside the emperor on the chariot had the function of reminding him that even though he was now victorious, one day the wheel of fortune may turn, and he might be overthrown.

Not only is careful judgement significant to recognise flattery and remain humble, but even to measure the quantity of money to bestow on those who truly deserve it. “To give too much is as bad as to give too little,”⁵⁵ and to illustrate this concept Genius tells Amans the tale of Antigonus and Cinichus. The short story tells about the poor knight Cinichus who asked for

⁵⁵ Rayner, p. 15.

too great an amount of money to his king Antigonus. The king answered that the sum required was way too great; hence the knight modified his request and “axeth bot a litel peny” (7. 2125). Even this little amount of money is refused by the king, since “it was to smal for him, which was a lord real” (7. 2127-28). The tale is told by Genius to explain the sense of measure proper to a king in bestowing his riches. If he gave too little, his image would be tarnished because a small amount is unworthy of a king; however, if he gave too much, he could go bankrupt. Gower’s discussion of liberality, measure, and flattery provides a link between the “concern with proper governance in England” and “the irresponsible youth, Amans, who has such trouble being a stable person.”⁵⁶ The problem with good governance in England may well refer to young king Richard II, who probably gave up easily to flattery and struggled to act with humbleness. Concerning Amans, his problem is that “he flatters himself with thoughts of his lady.”⁵⁷

The third point of politics illustrated by Genius is justice (7. 2695-3102). Justice is the base of common good and the essence of a monarchy. The Latin lines that introduce this section state: “Lex sine iusticia populum sub principis umbra deviat” (Law without justice makes the people deviant under the shadow of the ruler) (7.ix).⁵⁸ In other words, without justice, a king may become a tyrant. The section on justice begins with a series of questions that underline the importance of the relationship between the king and his subjects. As maintained by Genius:

For wher the lawe mai comune
The lordes forth with the commune,
Ech hath his propre dueté. (7. 2709-11)

Justice, here identified with the law, defines the social positions of the individuals within a society and creates harmonious relationships by establishing order. This political virtue is to be found within the king, who “must have a strong, personal sense of justice.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 147.

⁵⁷ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 147.

⁵⁸ The translation into English is by Andrew Galloway, from Peck’s edition of *Confessio Amantis*.

⁵⁹ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 147.

His social position bestows on him great power, the inherent right to govern, which means that he can decide the fate of his subjects. However, he must “himself ferst justefie towards God in his degré” (7. 2730-31), since he is the main administrator of justice in his kingdom. Genius maintains that there exists a connection between just laws and the maintenance of peace within a society:

If lawe stonde with the riht,
The poeple is glad and stant upriht.
Wher as the lawe is resonable,
The comun poeple stant menable,
And if the lawe torne amis,
The poeple also mistorned is. (7. 2759-64)

If the law is just, then people are happy and live in peace; but if the law is unjust, it can cause the breaking out of revolts and insurrections on the part of the citizens. However, it is the king’s duty not only to create good laws, but even to make sure that his judges apply them to rich and poor alike. As noticed by Rayner, “Genius emphasises an even-handed nature of true justice,”⁶⁰ which is the duty of the judges as applicators of the law, but it is the king’s responsibility to appoint the right people for the duty. And if they turned out to be unfit for the position, he must be ready to prevail over them.⁶¹

Gower is imagining a king who acts through impartial justice, one that is above everything. Paradoxically, the king has great power but must restrain himself from using it improperly. Furthermore, he is subject to the laws of his kingdom just like his subjects. One can be a bit confused by this fundamental paradox at the basis of kingship: if on the one hand, the king was on the top of the social pyramid, on the other he was there to serve his subjects. Janette Dillon remarks that “monarchs before the twelfth century, after all, sometimes referred

⁶⁰ Rayner, p. 18.

⁶¹ Rayner, p. 19.

to themselves, like the Pope, as the *servus servorum dei* (servant of the servants of God).⁶²

Moreover, this paradox was highlighted by the ceremony of coronation, which:

Represented the monarch as subject to God, the laws and his people, and reminded him of his duties even as it raised him to the throne and crowned him. Indeed the *Liber Regalis* (the form of coronation finalized c.1375 and remaining virtually unchanged until 1685), advised the prince to spend the night before the coronation in prayer and meditation.⁶³

We should not forget, after all, that the king is the head of the body politic, and as such he is a public figure whose first aim is to administer the common good. Genius explained it clearly in the introduction to the first part of politics, largesse. The good of the world was once held in common, he says, but as people started to rise in number, they began to quarrel over common profit; people began in fact to look for private good. Since wars and feuds did not seem to stop, “withinne hemself the poeple fond that it was good to make a king, which mihte appesen al this thing and give riht to the lignages” (7. 2004-07). The regal figure stands on top of the social hierarchy, but originally, he was created by the common people for the sake of the community; this, in my view, renders the paradox an inherent feature of the king himself.

Genius turns then to pity, the fourth point of politics (7. 3103-4214). Like justice, this virtue helps a king to stop himself from becoming a tyrant. The virtue is introduced by the greatest example of pity: Jesus Christ who was sent by God on earth to show “physical manifestation of pity for humanity.”⁶⁴ Genius is convinced that this virtue is fundamental in a king as it can make him successful. Furthermore, pity makes a king “courteis” (7. 3120), hence stimulating a relationship of reciprocal appreciation between the king and his subjects. On the one hand, the subjects should fear their king and honour him; in Genius’s words: “it sit wel every liege drede his king and to his heste obeie” (7. 3122-23). On the other hand, a king should govern inspired by pity to get love and respect from his citizens:

⁶² Dillon, Janette, “The Monarch as Represented in the Ceremony of Coronation”, in Petrina, Alessandra, Tosi, Laura, eds., *Representations of Elizabeth I in Early Modern Culture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 126.

⁶³ Dillon, p. 126.

⁶⁴ Rayner, p. 21.

It sit a king to be pitous
Toward his poeple and gracious
Upon the reule of governance,
So that he worche no vengeance,
Which mai be cleped cruauté. (7. 3125-29)

Peck argues that as Genius “gets further into his discussion of this kingly virtue, we see that Pity, like Liberality, is a virtue which requires discriminating judgement.”⁶⁵ As generosity has to be measured by just reasoning to avoid a disproportionate waste of money, so pity should be driven by judgement to avoid that “Pité mesure exceed” (7. 3529). The issue is put clearly by Peck who writes: “Truth and Justice are superlative virtues. One cannot be too True or too Just. But one can be too Liberal or too Piteous.”⁶⁶ As a case in point, Genius explains that uncontrolled pity can become cowardice: “Bot ells, if he be doubtous to slen in cause of rihtwisnesse, it mai be said no pitousnesse, bot it is pusillamité, which every prince scholde flee” (7. 3524-28). Gower always emphasises control of the self in the first place; only then can a king intervene to govern his subjects.

Moreover, through the negative example of the biblical king Rehoboam, Gower seems to refer directly to Richard II. When the young English king received the throne from his predecessor Edward III, he found himself surrounded by a group of older counsellors who had been working at the court of the previous king; however, he dismissed those counsellors and decided instead to listen to a group of younger men, who were his favourites. This act caused the discontent of the Lords Appellants (the established nobles at the previous court), who protested against the king and his counsellors’ unpopular decisions for the nation – for instance, they wanted to stop the war with France. Richard II is here depicted like the biblical king Rehoboam, who “chose to listen to the advice of the younger men, and in so doing alienated his people, who revolted against him.”⁶⁷ Gower in fact states:

Lo, thus the yonge cause wente:

⁶⁵ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 149.

⁶⁶ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 149.

⁶⁷ Rayner, p. 24.

For that the conseil was nocht good,
The regne fro the rihtfull blod
Evere afterward divided was.
So mai it proven be this cas
That yong conseil, which is to warm,
Er men be war doth ofte harm.
Old age for the conseil serveth. (7. 4130-37)

Richard emphasised throughout his reign his divine right to rule over England and for that reason he made wide use of images and symbols to link his kingship to historical kings of the past; the Wilton Diptych is a remarkable example of his attempt to exploit political symbolism to bestow sacredness on his kingly figure.⁶⁸ But justice and mercy were fundamental in the medieval conception of kingship, a fact that can be demonstrated even by the coronation ceremony when the monarch swore to serve God, the laws and his people.

The last kingly virtue is chastity (7. 4215-5397). As noticed by Peck, chastity is to Gower something slightly different from what we mean today; he defines it as “the proper maintenance of just marriages.”⁶⁹ As I have explained in chapter two, chastity was understood as the ability to restrain one’s concupiscence to avoid exceeding reasonable limits. Genius’s discussion of chastity rests on a specific idea of love:

It sit a man be weie of kinde
To love, bot it is nocht kinde
A man for love his wit to lese. (7. 4297-99)

Since the beginning of the poem, Genius has been defending love as a natural force that human beings cannot oppose, an idea which he still supports here, but in Book 7 he argues that it is unnatural for a man to lose his reason for love. Peck writes that:

A man indeed should be vigorous in love; his stomach, kidneys, liver, and so on, have their rights and need their exercise. But not at the expenses of his wit, for then the king is overthrown and the whole estate ruined.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ See Theilmann, “Political Canonization and Political Symbolism in Medieval England”. In his essay, the critic explains very clearly Richard’s attempt to strengthen his position using political symbolism and by emphasising his connection with heroic and saint kings of the past, like Edward the Confessor.

⁶⁹ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 150.

⁷⁰ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 152.

If Amans risks losing his wit, it is not his lady's fault; the "fool impression of his ymaginacioun" (7. 4271-72) is to be held responsible for his wit's deposition. This idea of the lover's limitation of his concupiscence can be applied to the king as well.

The monarch must support monogamy and take care of his marriage. Genius begins his discussion of chastity arguing against adultery. He declares that "the madle is mad for the femele" (7. 4215), but when a man wishes for many women, "that nedeth nocht be weie of kinde" (7. 4217). When a man finds his wife, he should not want to have the wife of another man, since "in mariage his trouthe plight lith in mortgage, which if he breke, it is falshode" (7. 4227-29). Arguably, the point made by Genius refers also to the fact that the king, during the coronation ceremony, was sanctified through his anointing and became "as a prelat" (7. 4246). Indeed, as explained by Dillon:

The second and most important part is the anointing, the process by which the prince, in becoming king, ceases to be fully a layperson and becomes a *persona mixta*, part layman and part cleric.⁷¹

The anointing of the prince was a fundamental part of the ceremony because the prince became partly a cleric. Dillon notes that this part of the ceremony was in fact similar to the consecration of a bishop, with the difference that there was no imposition of hands on the prince.⁷² Thus, the coronation ceremony elevated the prince to a higher state: not only did he become the monarch of his kingdom, but also in part cleric, and as a consequence "he mot be more magnified for digneté of his corone, than scholde another low persone, which is nocht of so hih emprise" (7. 4248-51). Chastity becomes for the king a fundamental value that defines his position. As he becomes a *persona mixta*, he gets closer to God and he becomes the full representative of God on earth; ultimately, this is the process to become a guide for one's subjects.

⁷¹ Dillon, p. 130. See also Theilmann, "Political Canonization and Political Symbolism in Medieval England", especially p. 258ff., for the importance of anointing the prince in the medieval coronation ceremony.

⁷² Dillon, p. 130.

To conclude, in the structure of *Confessio Amantis* chastity is linked to the sin treated in Book 8, lechery. If chastity is right measure in love and in life in general, lechery is a violation “of the laws of “measure” and marriage that occupy Genius’ treatment of Chastity.”⁷³ As observed by Nicholson, who is quoting Fisher, Genius’s treatment of chastity in Book 7 and the entire Book 8 on lechery constitute “a single coherent lesson.”⁷⁴ If this was true, it would create a strong cohesion in the poem and allow us to see Book 7 not as an illogical digression, but as one of the books with a specific function, just like all the other parts of the poem. Rayner cites Macaulay who called Book 7 “one of Gower’s ‘most serious faults [of] plan and execution’ and judged it damningly as useful ‘apparently for no reason except to show the author’s learning’.”⁷⁵ Of course, I cannot agree with Macaulay’s interpretation of Book 7, which seems to be a bit too superficial. I tend to agree with Peck, instead, who considers Book 7 “the most important in the *Confessio*,”⁷⁶ noticing that if on the one hand Book 1 to 6 and Book 8 illustrate the various sins, on the other hand, Book 7 – in particular politics and its five points – represents the “remedy for all vice.”⁷⁷ Arguably, Book 7 stands in a dialectical position with the rest of the poem. As a case in point, I would like to note the fact that many issues discussed in Book 6, like nature, fate, self-knowledge and knowledge of God, are found again in Book 7. However, as explained by Nicholson: “where the tales at the end of Book 6 illustrate the consequences of a lack of understanding, Book 7 fills in what the characters in Book 6 are missing.”⁷⁸ Sin is indeed antithetical to good kingship, and since the five points depict the good ruler or the ideal Christian prince, one needs to confess before being enthroned.

In conclusion, *Confessio Amantis* is a mirror for princes and commoners. Essentially, the two do not differ in the constitution of their soul; however, their social status is not the

⁷³ Nicholson, p. 335.

⁷⁴ Nicholson, p. 335.

⁷⁵ Rayner, p. 7.

⁷⁶ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 140.

⁷⁷ Peck, *Kingship and Common Profit*, p. 142.

⁷⁸ Nicholson, p. 335.

same. Both bear responsibilities for the commonweal, but in slightly different ways: common people need to know themselves (through confession) and be able to rule themselves according to the doctrine of the Church; this will make them good citizens for the community; a prince, besides self-knowledge and self-rule, needs knowledge of the external world and the sciences, because good governance means to him also governance of the kingdom. In other words, while for a common person self-rule is essentially a personal matter, even though with consequences for the community, a prince will become, after his enthronement, the head of the public body. His private body inevitably becomes part of the body politic; indeed, the most important one. Even his behaviour in private love matters becomes of public interest since it can show the nature of the prince. For example, if he can control himself in love matters, he will probably be able to measure himself and be just in political affairs.

This research has also shown that Gower's poem is a mirror metaphor with a double function: as all common mirrors do, it reflects things as they are, hence it is an informative mirror; however, as an exemplary mirror, it does not seem to have proper reflective function but shows the way things should or should not be.⁷⁹ Considering the informative mirror, we look in it every time Genius explains to Amans the meaning of the various sins; or when in Book 7 Genius gives encyclopaedic illustration of the creation of the world and humankind and the division of the sciences. Moreover, Amans looks in a mirror in Book 8. Venus gives him an actual mirror so that he can look at his reflected image and see that he is now an old man. It is after this moment of self-revelation that he "homward a softe pas y wente" (8. 2967). With regard to the exemplary mirror, it constitutes an essential part of the poem, which has positive and negative examples showing what Amans, and the readers, should or should not do. Eventually, I would like to argue that the whole poem can be claimed as an exemplary mirror:

⁷⁹ This differentiation comes from Herbert Grabes, *The Mutable Glass* (see especially ch. 3, pp. 38-63). The critic elaborated a classification of four types of mirrors to study metaphorical mirror titles. Besides informative and exemplary mirrors, he also identifies the prognostic mirror which shows the way things will be, and the fantastic mirror, which shows things that only exist in the writer's imagination.

Amans's confession represents an instance of exemplary behaviour that should be imitated by any individual.

Confessio Amantis o Confessio Principis: *Confessio Amantis* di John Gower come specchio dei principi

La presente tesi è uno studio di *Confessio Amantis* scritto in medio inglese da John Gower. Tuttavia, data la lunghezza del poema che consta di più di 30.000 versi suddivisi in otto libri, ho scelto di prendere in esame due racconti alla fine del libro sesto e una parte del settimo. I racconti analizzati sono quello di Ulisse e Telegono e quello di Nectanebo; del libro settimo, invece, ho considerato la sezione dove l'autore spiega i cinque punti fondamentali della politica. La scelta di queste parti è stata motivata dall'interesse per il tema politico, oggetto dello studio, anche se non sono le sole all'interno del poema a riguardare questo tema.

La tesi è organizzata in quattro parti: un'introduzione e tre capitoli. L'introduzione spiega le motivazioni della scelta di concentrarsi sulle due storie esemplari alla fine del Libro 6 e sui cinque punti della politica nel Libro 7. Qui viene inoltre spiegata la tesi sostenuta, ovvero che *Confessio Amantis* può essere considerato un poema-specchio indirizzato sia a principi che a individui di ogni stato sociale, e la struttura dello studio in tre capitoli.

Il primo capitolo inizia introducendo il poema attraverso la descrizione della sua struttura e dei principali manoscritti esistenti per poi dividersi in due sotto-capitoli. Il primo riguarda il bene comune come valore fondamentale nella cultura medievale, e viene messo in contrapposizione all'amor cortese. La tensione verso l'armonia sociale e il desiderio erotico sono in realtà due tipi di amore che la cultura medievale cerca di regolare con la dottrina cristiana: per mezzo dell'educazione al buon governo in un caso, attraverso il codice etico nell'altro. Essi però si contraddicono nel momento in cui il bene comune tende verso la sfera pubblica o sociale, mentre l'amor cortese è fundamentalmente privato, riguarda un rapporto tra due persone e per di più il codice che lo regola ne richiede la segretezza. Partendo da questo confronto, in questa sezione sostengo l'idea per cui il poema mi sembra più orientato a educare

sui valori del bene comune e dell'armonia sociale. Una riprova di ciò potrebbe essere data dal fatto che all'inizio del Libro 1 il disperato amante accetta di confessarsi con Genius nella speranza di avere successo in amore, ma alla fine lo vediamo ritirarsi dalla corte di Venere dopo aver preso consapevolezza della sua veneranda età e prega per il bene dell'Inghilterra.

Questa conversione dall'amor cortese alla *caritas* contiene in sé la discussione sulla Volontà, una delle tre facoltà costitutive dello spirito umano. Essa è la forza che muove l'uomo ad agire e a mettere in atto i suoi comportamenti, ma essenzialmente non si può definire né buona né cattiva. È l'essere umano che attraverso il libero arbitrio può utilizzarla per muoversi verso comportamenti virtuosi o peccaminosi. Il poema *Confessio Amantis*, a mio avviso, ci spiega cosa succede quando la perfetta gerarchia tripartita dello spirito viene corrotta dal peccato, che distoglie Volontà dalla buona guida di Intelletto. Se la perfetta gerarchia interiore degli individui viene corrotta, ovviamente, questo si ripercuote sull'armonia esteriore del contesto sociale, dove ogni individuo agisce travalicando i confini del proprio stato sociale.

Il sotto-capitolo 1.2 considera la forma di racconti esemplari ai fini educativi ed edificanti. Partendo dalla definizione dell'*exemplum* come di un racconto che unisce la narrazione con l'esperienza vissuta, ho voluto evidenziare il carattere persuasivo di tale genere narrativo. Gower ne fa uso nel suo poema per educare i suoi lettori a perseguire comportamenti virtuosi ed evitare il più possibile il peccato, dimostrando così di avere in mente un progetto didattico che potesse davvero aiutare la società del suo tempo a superare quegli anni turbolenti e caotici e ritrovare una certa stabilità politica e sociale. Per raggiungere tale scopo, l'autore utilizza fonti classiche e testi sacri dai quali raccoglie personaggi ed esperienze autorevoli che possano legare il suo libro a valori e credenze presenti nella memoria storica e culturale di tutti. Inoltre, radicando la narrazione all'esperienza concreta, i lettori possono figurarsi più vividamente ciò che viene loro raccontato, come se ne avessero diretta esperienza nel mondo reale. Il processo richiama i lettori all'azione, chiedendo loro di fare scelte e prendere decisioni

man mano che la narrazione prosegue, così da coinvolgerli attivamente e renderli protagonisti nel confermare e agire credenze e valori.

Nel capitolo 2 mi occupo principalmente della storia di Ulisse e Telegono e di quella di Nectanebo. I due temi importanti del poema sono quello politico e quello amoroso, tuttavia le due storie segnano un vero e proprio momento di passaggio nella struttura generale dell'opera: con esse vengono raccontati due esempi di cattivo monarca e viene introdotto il libro settimo che fornisce, al contrario, un modello positivo di sovrano. Nel Libro 7, che rientra nel genere *speculum principis*, l'amante si tace e lascia illustrare a Genius, il suo confessore, l'educazione di Aristotele del giovane Alessandro Magno. Il focus si sposta dal tema amoroso a quello politico e la confessione in forma di dialogo diventa un'omelia politica. Per lo scopo di questa tesi, dunque, le due storie sono interessanti perché introducono in maniera evidente la figura del monarca e il discorso sul buon governo. I cinque punti della politica, invece, tracciano un profilo chiaro del principe ideale di Gower, argomento che occupa il capitolo 3.

Le due storie sono significative, inoltre, per la mancanza di conoscenza di sé che caratterizza i due protagonisti. Ciò li porta ad agire per conseguire uno scopo personale, ovvero soddisfare il loro desiderio erotico, guidati da una volontà corrotta dal peccato che li distoglie dal principale dovere di sovrani: il bene della comunità. Il fatto che i due conoscano perfettamente le arti magiche e i vari ambiti della conoscenza umana (così ci vengono presentati da Genius) non gli impedisce di agire in maniera cattiva, anzi, questo li penalizza perché sono privi di una consapevolezza profonda di sé stessi in quanto esseri umani; peraltro, essi sfruttano la magia per ingannare e raggiungere i loro fini. Ulisse e Nectanebo ignorano il loro intelletto in favore del desiderio del momento, facendo uso di ogni mezzo a loro disposizione e non curanti della forzatura che stanno imponendo sulla forza naturale di amore. La conseguenza del loro agire è una morte innaturale: sia Ulisse che Nectanebo muoiono uccisi per mano dei loro stessi figli, inconsapevoli anch'essi di stare per uccidere il padre.

Nella cultura tardo medievale conoscere sé stessi implica essere in grado di guardarsi dentro e riconoscere che l'anima dell'essere umano riflette, anche se in maniera imperfetta, l'immagine di Dio. L'anima è imperfetta rispetto alla perfezione di Dio in quanto corrotta dal peccato, ma è proprio attraverso la contemplazione di questa anima corrotta che l'uomo può sperare di riavvicinarsi a Dio. La confessione aiuta l'essere umano ad acquisire consapevolezza dello stato di peccato in cui si trova la sua anima, primo passo per la sua guarigione; il successivo dovrà necessariamente essere un sincero pentimento. Il fatto che il Libro 7 riguardi la suddivisione delle scienze (intese come ambiti della conoscenza), e quindi la conoscenza del mondo esterno anziché della propria interiorità, non è in contraddizione con la confessione di Amans. Per Gower, infatti, microcosmo e macrocosmo sembrano essere uno il riflesso dell'altro. Un esempio calzante è la corrispondenza tra i quattro elementi naturali, acqua, terra, aria, fuoco e i quattro umori dell'essere umano nella teoria medievale. Dal momento che amore è per Gower una forza naturale che si impone sull'uomo, esso rappresenta un altro esempio di come il macrocosmo influenza il microcosmo. Tuttavia, l'uomo ha dentro di sé una traccia divina, la sua anima razionale, che gli permette di governarsi anche in tal caso; in questo senso, la politica illustrata nel Libro 7 diventa una scienza pratica di grande valore perché agita attraverso di essa.

Per ultimo, il terzo capitolo fornisce una chiave di lettura di *Confessio Amantis* come libro-specchio, ma non indirizzato soltanto ai principi, bensì ad ogni individuo della società. L'autore ebbe la possibilità, grazie alla situazione di trilinguismo dell'Inghilterra tardo medievale, di ereditare elementi delle tradizioni francese e latina (inclusa quella anglo-latina); dalla prima l'amor cortese, dalla seconda il genere della satira politica. Questi due vengono utilizzati da Gower insieme a un terzo elemento, tipico invece della più giovane tradizione inglese: l'autore mette sé stesso nella sua opera come personaggio protagonista, come del resto fa anche Chaucer nella raccolta *The Canterbury Tales*. Il gusto per una spiccata qualità

personale nella poesia riccardiana è spesso legato ai sogni o alle visioni; e infatti Gower, seguendo questo stile caratteristico, sfrutta la visione onirica per in-formare il proprio personaggio prima, ma anche i propri lettori. *Confessio Amantis* contiene due processi formativi: in senso artistico, c'è la creazione del poema da parte di Gower e, all'interno di esso, Genius che crea storie per Amans; da un punto di vista pedagogico, invece, questa informazione si traduce in due momenti educativi paralleli: Genius, all'interno del poema, è chiaramente l'educatore di Amans; all'esterno del poema, invece, Gower educa i suoi lettori attraverso il poema stesso. In tal senso potremmo descrivere *Confessio Amantis* come un progetto didattico e formativo con cui l'autore intende dar forma all'interiorità dei suoi lettori e, dunque, interpretarlo come uno specchio anche per le persone comuni.

Per quanto riguarda il termine *sovranità* in riferimento alla posizione del sovrano si potrebbero attribuirgli due significati. Il primo è strettamente politico e si riferisce al sovrano che occupa la posizione più alta nella gerarchia sociale: è il signore del regno, la testa del corpo politico, l'esempio principale per i suoi sudditi. In un'altra accezione, e soprattutto riferita al resto della comunità, tale posizione può essere letta in senso allegorico, in quanto ogni individuo è sovrano del proprio microcosmo. In altre parole, la sovranità diventa maturità psicologica la quale, in senso medievale, si raggiunge attraverso l'integrità morale. In ultima analisi, Gower considera sia il re che i suoi sudditi entrambi responsabili dell'attività politica per determinare gli esiti della storia. Al fine di contrastare la crisi che l'Inghilterra stava sperimentando sotto diversi fronti nella seconda metà del quattordicesimo secolo, l'autore si propone come educatore all'auto-governo, così che l'armonia interiore possa rispecchiarsi nella pace della comunità.

Il sotto-capitolo 3.2 prende in esame i cinque punti sui quali, secondo Gower, si fonda l'attività politica del sovrano giusto. Essi sono verità, liberalità, giustizia, pietà e castità. Verità è la prima virtù che i sudditi devono trovare nel proprio sovrano, il quale dovrebbe sempre agire

con essa come obiettivo. La seconda è liberalità, che influisce sull'immagine pubblica del sovrano. Egli dovrebbe essere generoso con le sue ricchezze, ma sempre nella giusta misura: non dovrebbe donare né troppo né troppo poco rispetto a quanto richiedono la situazione del momento e la sua stessa regalità. Giustizia, inutile a dirsi, è alla base del buon governo. Essa consiste, per Gower, nella creazione di leggi giuste e determina il rapporto tra sovrano e sudditi; oltretutto, è attraverso la giustizia che si ottiene una società pacifica e ordinata. Ovviamente il monarca è il principale amministratore della legge nel suo regno, e dovrebbe inoltre ricordarsi che un giorno dovrà rendere conto della sua attività di monarca di fronte a Dio. Pietà è la quarta virtù del buon sovrano; in maniera simile alla generosità, essa dovrebbe essere accuratamente misurata in quanto determinante nel rapporto tra monarca e sudditi, che devono sempre temere e onorare il proprio re. Per esempio, un sovrano non dovrebbe rifiutarsi di giustiziare un suddito se ritiene che la causa di ciò sia giusta. Per ultima castità, virtù rappresentativa della misura, del giusto contenimento. Genius spiega chiaramente che amare è del tutto naturale, ma perdere la ragione a causa di esso è cosa innaturale per l'uomo. In amore, castità significa mantenere matrimoni giusti.

Confessio Amantis è quindi uno specchio per principi e sudditi, poiché anche se appartenenti a diverse classi sociali, entrambi sono essenzialmente esseri umani e possiedono la stessa anima a immagine di Dio. Entrambi sono responsabili del bene della comunità, anche se secondo modalità diverse. Lo scopo ultimo del poema *Confessio Amantis* in quanto poesia didattica è di istruire principi e sudditi secondo i dettami della dottrina cristiana, in particolare attraverso l'espiazione dei peccati e il perseguimento delle virtù, per costruire una società basata sul bene comune. È in questo senso che ho qui cercato di unire discorso amoroso e discorso politico. L'educazione al buon governo si pone come questione necessaria sia nella sfera privata che pubblica: nel primo caso, un individuo in pieno controllo del suo microcosmo è in grado di tenere a bada la passione e l'ardente desiderio che inevitabilmente accompagnano il sentimento

amoroso; nel secondo caso, un principe che si presti a diventare re, e in quanto tale responsabile del destino del proprio regno nei confronti di Dio, dovrebbe non solo avere il pieno controllo di se stesso come ogni suo suddito, ma essere anche in grado di amministrare il regno secondo virtù cristiane. Tra l'altro, considerata la sua posizione di testa del corpo politico, egli diventa l'esempio principale per i suoi sudditi e quindi principio unificatore.

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