

## The Standardization of English in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*

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### Abstract

**Objectives:** This paper aims at showing how the metrical regularity of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* contributes to the standardization of Middle English language, which is known for its irregularity and lack of authority compared to French and Latin.

**Methods:** The paper analyzes the metrical structure of the *Confessio* in an attempt to provide several textual pieces of evidence showing how the poem's deceptive regularity and monotonous repetitiveness reflect the poet's definition of his own poem as "A bok for Engelandes sake".

**Results:** The paper confirms that the poem is a novel project at the service of England through its contribution to the standardization of lewd Middle English. Also, it finds that Gower uses the techniques of rich rhyme, sight rhyme, rhyme repetition, and sentence inversion to regularize the varieties of Middle English and pave the way for its standardization.

**Conclusion:** Against the conventional viewpoint concerning the overt regularity of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the paper concludes that Gower deploys several linguistic and stylistic devices to incorporate the several variations of Middle English into one harmonious linguistic system, which explains why the poem is identified by its own poet as "A bok for Engelandes sake".

**Keywords:** *Confessio Amantis*, John Gower, Middle English, rhyme, repetition.

### تفصيح الإنجليزية في "اعتراف عاشق" لجاور

مالك جمال زريقات

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، كلية الآداب، جامعة اليرموك، إربد، الأردن.

#### ملخص

الأهداف: تهدف هذه الورقة إلى إظهار كيف يساهم الانتظام العروضي لقصيدة "اعتراف عاشق" لجاور في تفصيح اللغة الإنجليزية في العصور الوسطى، والتي تُعرف بعدم انتظامها وافتقارها للمصداقية مقارنة بالفرنسية واللاتينية. المنهجية: تقوم هذه الورقة بتحليل البناء العروضي للقصيدة في محاولة لتقديم الأدلة النصية اللازمة لإظهار كيف أن انتظام القصيدة المخادع واستخدامها لقوالب تركيبية تقليدية يعكس تعريف الشاعر بالقصيدة على أنها "كتاب في خدمة إنجلترا" من الناحية اللغوية.

النتائج: تؤكد هذه الورقة على أن القصيدة المذكورة مشروع أصيل يخدم إنجلترا من خلال إسهامها في تفصيح اللغة الإنجليزية في العصور الوسطى. كما تصل الورقة إلى حقيقة أن الشاعر وظف تقنيات القافية الغنية، وقافية البصر، وتكرار القافية، والجملة المعكوسة لتنظيم اختلافات اللغة الإنجليزية في العصور الوسطى وتمهيد الطريق لوصول تلك اللغة حالة الفصاحة. الخلاصة: خلافاً للنظرة التقليدية المتعلقة بالانتظام المفرط لقصيدة "اعتراف عاشق" لجاور، تخلص هذه الورقة إلى أن الشاعر وظف العديد من الأدوات اللغوية والأسلوبية لدمج العديد من اختلافات اللغة الإنجليزية في العصور الوسطى في نظام لغوي متناغم، وهو ما يفسر سبب تقديم الشاعر للقصيدة على أنها "كتاب في خدمة إنجلترا". الكلمات الدالة: اعتراف عاشق، جون جاور، اللغة الإنجليزية الوسطى، القافية، التكرار.



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## 1. Introduction

Due to the undeniable instability of Middle English language and its consequent lack of rhetorical authority in comparison to Latin *auctoritas*, which is integrated into several Middle English texts to "lend [them] authority and sophistication" (Yeager, 1991: 122), Gower's use of Middle English as the main language of the *Confessio Amantis* is either a vainglorious showing of his exceptional trilingualism or an attempt to serve the greatness of England. R.F Yeager (2005) argues that Gower's use of three different languages potentially implies "proud trilingual mastership (whether by Gower or no) [...] The idea that his linguistic uniqueness could establish his claim on posterity by earning him a place among poets ancient and contemporary probably evolved along with Gower's career" (94). Likewise, Kimberly Fonzo (2016) contends that the Englishness of the *Confessio Amantis* reflects the poet's plan to show "his gifts as a poetic counselor—not merely to the king but to the nation" (2). Different from this perspective, some critics view Gower's use of English in the *Confessio Amantis* as a stance of courtly patronage and political orientation. In his introduction to *The Complete Works of John Gower*, G.C. Macaulay (1970) affirms, "There is no reason to doubt the statement in the first version of the Prologue about the meeting of the author with Richard II on the river, and that he then received suggestions for a book, which the king promised to accept and read. It may easily be supposed that Richard himself suggested love as the subject, being a matter in which, as we know from Froissart, he was apt to take delight" (xi). Similarly, Matthew W. Irvin (2017) emphasizes that the *Confessio* is directed towards the greatness of England represented by its royal figures. He writes, "The book is directed toward the 'grete' (powerful; CA Pr. 78) of England; in most manuscripts, it is dedicated to Richard II, and in others, to the future Henry IV" (1). Likewise, David K. Coley (2019) writes,

It is important to remember, however, those the poem was initially intended for a much more specific dedicatee: its first recension specifies the *Confessio* not as a book for England's sake but rather 'a book for King Richardes sake / To whom bilangeth my ligeance / With al myn hertes obeissance' [a book for King Richard's sake, to whom my allegiance belongs with all my heart's obedience] (\*Pro. 24–26). Indeed, Gower outlines in the 'Ricardian prologue' a mode of courtly patronage in which he is constrained. (179)

The viewpoints of Yeager and Fonzo as well as that of Macaulay, Irvin, and Coley attribute Gower's use of English in the *Confessio* to purely personal or political reasons: either the poet is interested in proving his trilingualism, or he is trying to express his submission to Richard II's decree. Either way, the poet's declaration that his *Confessio* is "A bok for Engelondes sake" (CA Pro., 24) remains opaque, which inspires the paper's argument that the *Confessio* is mainly to serve England through standardizing its national linguistic identity represented by English. The paper contends that the *Confessio Amantis* aims at embellishing the lewdness of Middle English language, thus setting the foundation for its standardization. I believe that John Gower, whose reputation as a poet is well established through his French *Mirour de L'Homme* and Latin *Vox Clementis*, is identified as the "garnisher of our English rude" due to the *Confessio*'s contribution to standardizing the "gret diversitee" (Chaucer, *TC V*, 1793) of Middle English that "fewe men endite" (Gower, CA Pro., 21). To better showcase this understanding, the paper investigates certain linguistic features of the *Confessio* as represented by "the tale of Jason and Medea", which runs into about a thousand lines hosting most of Gower's linguistic techniques and features, contending that Gower's couplet in the "tale of Jason and Medea" is an independent linguistic unit with a self-contained regularity that homogenizes the pronunciation, spelling, and meter of Middle English whose "principles of versifying were yet to be decided" (Duffell and Billy, 2004: 395).

## 2. Review of Related Literature

In view of England's trilingual medieval culture and "the separate roles played by different languages – French the language of the law courts and the nobility, Latin the language of the Church, English the language of the masses—" (Dutton, 2010: 3), Gower's Englishness and overt regularity in the *Confessio* have always been a controversial issue for several medievalists. For example, R. F. Yeager (1990) acknowledges Gower's concern with the linguistic accuracy of his poems

concluding that the structure and language of Gower's manuscripts testify to the poet's personal involvement in the process of editing and modifying French, Latin, and English. Yeager (1990) writes,

it was Gower who in the end seems to have been the more actively involved to ensure the accuracy of the copies of his poems. Unlike his friend and fellow poet [Chaucer], Gower has left us no direct statement of his attitude toward either form of 'myswriting.' [...] This, and other physical properties of the manuscripts (armorial, insignia, elaborate decoration) have brought one recent reader to conclude that 'These alterations can only have been made under carefully prepared instructions which are ... most easily attributed to the poet. (2)

Pointing to the "gret diversitee in Englissh" (Chaucer, *TC* V, 1793) and the influence of the Great Vowel Shift on medieval languages, Yeager praises Gower's unique composition of his poetry using consistent language and constantly revising and editing his manuscripts. He suggests that Gower's copyediting practices support the plausibility of Ben Jonson's comparison of Gower's regularity with Shakespeare's "when the latter was adapting *Pericles* from Book VIII to make it the most frequent source of examples of his English Grammar" (Yeager 1990: 3).

For a different perspective, Steven Justice (1994) contends that using English to compose the *Confessio* reflects the poet's interest in expressing the voice of *vox pupili*. He confirms, "Gower imagines himself a prophet who declares the consensus of the realm. Eventually, in the *Confessio amantis*, Gower would speak for this general constituency in its own language, the English vernacular" (209-210). This viewpoint complies with Siân Echard's statement that "Gower himself was highly conscious of his trilinguality"; nevertheless, "the poetic voice has abandoned both the Latin language and the Latinate literate culture of the *Vox* in order to become the 'burel' vernacular writer of the *Confessio*—that Gower finds both his poetic voice, and unproblematic access to the truth, in the voice and forms of the common folk" (2003: 132; 145). In the same vein, Elisabeth Dutton confirms that composing the *Confessio* in English challenges the authority of French and Latin in the English culture, considering that "it is [...] not the power of French and Latin which Gower challenges, but rather any exclusion of English from sharing that power" (2010: 4).

Elaborating on the same topic, Steele Nowlin (2012) states that "Gower links *cronica* and *inventio*—an authoritative form of historiography with the formal processes of poetic invention—to generate a new kind of poetic chronicle that forwards the *Confessio*'s larger project of cultural renewal" (183). This implies that the Englishness of the *Confessio* is part of Gower's plan to empower the English vernacular against the cultural authority of Latin, thus promoting England's national identity. Nowlin (2012) explains, "his various dedications of the *Confessio*—to Richard II, Henry Derby, and England itself— indicate an effort to position his English work within both political and literary history" (184), which potentially contributes to establishing the prestigious status of English. A similar perspective is adopted by Matthew W. Irvin (2017) who states, "The book is directed toward the 'grete' (powerful; *CA* Pr. 78) of England" at the level of politics, power, language, history, and culture.

In a book chapter entitled "Hengist's Tongue: Remembering (Old) English in John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*", Matthew W. Irvin (2021) contends that Gower mingles "vernacular English, whose lack of grammatica means that it changes over time (certainly since the time of Alfred or Hengist) and Latin, which remains consistently intelligible. [...] to present to the reader a formal concept of language for the *Confessio*, through which a reader learns a new kind of historical reading process" (251). Irvin views the *Confessio* as Gower's project of historicizing English despite its linguistic instability or creole-like states. This viewpoint partially explains Gower's statement: "I wolde go the middel weie/ And wryte a bok between the tweie, / somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore" (*CA* Pro., 17-19). Besides, it points to the truth behind the poet's declaration that the *Confessio* is "A bok for Engelondes sake" (*CA* Pro., 24). Irvin's evaluation of the *Confessio* is accurate, but it is too general—it does not decipher the poet's linguistic strategy to make the *Confessio* a nation-oriented project. Emphasizing that the poem represents an independent English identity by deviating from the exemplar-oriented structure of its classic sources is fine, but it does not emphasize the *Confessio*'s role in standardizing the creole-like nature of Middle English. Thus, this paper discusses the several linguistic techniques deployed by Gower

to standardize the pronunciation, spelling, and meter of lewd Middle English. This reading is significant for scholars of English literature and linguistics, as it contributes to historicizing the journey of English from a state of instability into a standard tongue.

### 3. Discussion

In his Latin verse epistle, *Eneidos*, *Bucolis*, Gower declares his desire that "The speech of [his] birth, completes more potent work" (trans. McCabe, 2020: 567) despite his awareness of the lewdness of Middle English in comparison to courtly French and liturgical Latin. Martin Duffell and Dominique Billy (2004) state: "[by] writing in Latin, Gower was playing safe... French, too, was a comparatively safe bet for future reputation" (384). Thus, Gower's project "To wryte and do my businesse" (*CA Pro.*, 52, 63) in English seems risky due to the second-rank status of Middle English compared to Latin and French in terms of rhetoric and sophistication. Aware of this jeopardy, Gower rewrites several classic tales in English, assembles them in one English volume entitled *Confessio Amantis*, and dedicates that compilation to England. This implies that the poet composes the *Confessio* to educate his English audience about ancient civilizations and cultures; simultaneously, it potentially points to the poem's invaluable contribution to standardizing Middle English. I contend here that the main value of the *Confessio* stems from its contribution to standardizing Middle English through the use of rich rhyme, sight rhyme, rhyme repetition, and sentence inversion that are evident almost in every single couplet of the poem represented by "the Tale of Jason of Medea".

Interestingly, there is no need to quote any certain excerpts from the tale under discussion to prove Gower's gift in controlling the structure and sounds of his rhyme. It is one of the richest rhymes a reader may find in English (Zuraikat 2023). Usually, Gower uses monosyllabic rich rhyme where the two lines of the couplet deploy the same syllable, such as 'king/knowledge', 'Peleus/thus', 'ladde/hadde', etc. In other places, the same word rhymes with itself as in "That also wiss god scholde him helpe, / That if Medea dede him helpe" (V 3487-3488). In some other places, the grammatical variations of the same word rhyme with each other as in "Youre heste, whil mi lif mai laste./ Thus longe he preide, and ate laste" (V 3455-3456). 'laste' in the first line, which is a verb, rhymes with the adverb 'laste' in the second. Similarly, the verb-form of the word may rhyme with its noun form as in "Than mot he to the goddess preie/ And go so forth and take his preie" (V 3535-3536). Such rhyme constructions may seem normal in modern English; nonetheless, they represent an attempt to standardize the grammatical form of Middle English lexicon. Introducing the same word in different derivational forms inspires its grammaticization process while using the same grammatical form of the word to rhyme with itself makes the word look familiar, acceptable, and regular.

To achieve a similar purpose, Gower constructs disyllabic rhyme through rhyming either disyllabic words or compound monosyllabic words. This is evident in several couplets such as, "Tho was Medea most deceived. / For he an other hath received" (V 4193-94); "That nou he stod and nou he fell: / For longe time it so befell" (V 3703-04). In the first excerpt, 'deceived' and 'received' are disyllabic words rhyming with each other, thus creating a state of self-contained stability at the level of spelling and pronunciation. In the second excerpt, the monosyllabic words 'he' and 'fell' rhyme with the disyllabic word 'befell'. The monosyllabic words are used as a compound that equals the disyllabic rhyme of the second line, which implies that the pronunciation of the two adjacent words guides the pronunciation of the monosyllabic word and that the 'e' sound in 'he fell' controls the duration of the 'e' sound in 'befell'. In other examples, a three-syllable word loses its initial syllable to rhyme with a disyllabic word as in "To his bataile which belongeth, / Tok ore on honde and sore him longeth" (V 3687-88). The word 'belongeth' rhymes with 'longeth', which implies that the initial 'be' in the former is dropped in favor of the disyllabic structure of the later. Such a structure may seem simple, but it is very influential in organizing the stress system as well as pronunciation of words. Considering the initial stress of 'longeth', the first syllable of 'belongeth' can never host the stress because the syllable itself is already dropped. The same reciprocal influence appears in more complex words as in 'impossible' and 'invisible' found in "Such thing as semeth impossible, / And made hirselves invisible" (V 4027-28). In this excerpt, each of the rhyming words has four syllables the second of which is stressed, which suggests that rhyming such words with each other guarantees standardizing the place of the stress in these words and the

way such words are pronounced.

This linguistic experiment is more fascinating when apparently simple words are rhymed with complex ones. Gower writes, "Tuo sondri puttes faste by/ Sche made, and with that hastily" (V 4043-44). In this excerpt, 'faste by' is rhymed with 'hastely', an apparently 'sight rhyme' that does not produce any musicality due to the medieval pronunciation-based ambiguity of the 'y' and 'e' sounds. The medieval pronunciation of the final 'e' sound and the duration of the vowel sound in the final 'y' inspire a controversial debate among medievalists as well as linguists. Acknowledging this complexity of Middle English meters, a blog on the official website of Harvard University confirms, "The meter was ruined; though Shakespeare greatly admired Chaucer, he and his contemporaries thought that Chaucer was an archaic poet who could not write a smooth and pleasing meter in those distant early times" (2022: para. 3). Nevertheless, Gower's lines quoted above resolve the whole issue. According to the *Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, 'by' rhymes with different words such as "T IV 665, IV 1171, V 2762, and VII 2467 and 'cry' VII 4979, Viii 1071 and Viii 1389". It rhymes also with ('ladi' III 558, 'forthi' V 1003, 'mercy' V 4518, etc.) (Pickles and Dawson, 1987: 1098-99). In brief, 'by' rhymes with different words that vary in terms of the 'y' pronunciation, which implies that its sound of 'y' has more flexibility than that in 'hastely' in terms of pronunciation. Therefore, 'hastely', which appears in the poem one time rhyming with 'by', maintains its pronunciation and guides the pronunciation of 'by'. If the 'y' sound is shortened as in the modern 'y' of 'happily', the 'y' sound of 'by' is to be shortened as well. If the sound is lengthened as in modern 'cry', then the 'y' sound of 'by' is to be lengthened as well. The same logic applies to pronouncing the 'e' sound in 'faste' compared to the 'e' sound in 'hastely'. The final 'e' sound in 'faste' is pronounced or ignored in light of what happens to the 'e' sound in 'hastely'. If the latter is pronounced, then the former is to be pronounced. If not, then the latter is not. In short, the second line's disyllabic or trisyllabic rhyme controls the pronunciation of the first line's rhyme due to the flexibility of the 'e' and 'y' sounds found in the first line.

Dealing with more difficult rhymes sheds more light on Gower's fantastic use of rich rhyme in favor of standardizing English language's pronunciation and meter. Gower rhymes "in present" with "oignement" which in its turn rhymes with "enchantement." In "Which sche ther tok him in present, / And was full of such oignement" (V 3595-96), the way of pronouncing 'in present' guides the pronunciation of 'oignement'. Besides, since 'in present' consists of three syllables, then 'oignement' becomes qualified to have three syllables as well. Eventually, the first 'e' letter in 'oignement' is metrically required to be pronounced. This viewpoint is applicable to the use of 'oignement' as a rhyme: in "That if ne were his oignement, / His ring and his enchantement" (V 3713-14). The 'e' sound in 'oignement' anticipates the metrical necessity to pronounce the 'e' sound in 'enchantement'. Metrically, "in present," "oignment," and "enchantement" have equal and identical syllables, thus their standard pronunciation is guided or established by rhyming them with each other. The two main components of such rich rhyme are bound interchangeably; consequently, they guide each other's pronunciation and shield themselves against Middle English variety. As Yeager (1990) says, "we ought to see in the unbroken regularity of his English rhymes evidence of deliberate and judicious choices. Clear, true, and strong rhyme defines his style, and it represents one thoughtful response to a shifting English language" (34).

Another fascinating aspect of Gower's poetics is the recurrence of the same rhyme in several couplets. For example, eight couplets in the "tale of Jason and Medea" are rhymed by 'lond' and 'hond'. Although the repetition of this specific rhyme does not probably stress certain images or meanings, it spreads the same musical closure among many different couplets, thus adding more coherence and symmetry to the narrative. Some readers may view the recurrence of rhyme as a phase of poetic limitation that buckles the tale's metrical or musical creativity; nevertheless, it is undeniable that Gower deploys that rhyme only "when the context and meter require it" (Yeager, 1990: 34). A quick look at the couplets rhymed with 'lond' and 'hond' reveals the mastery of the poet over his language: "Begat, the which in every lond/ Alle other passede of his hond" (3257-58), "Welcomed him into that lond,/ And softe tok him be the hond" (3373-74), "Wher so he be on See or lond,/ Which hath that ring upon his hond" (3569-70), "With which he brak a piece of lond/ And sieu hem with his oghne hond" (3721-22), "And whan Jason cam to the lond/ The king himselve tok his hond" (3775-76), "To wynd, to Air, to See, to lond/ Sche preide, and ek hield up hir hond" (3979-80), "Sche tok up turves of the lond/ Without helpe of mannes hond"

(4031-32), and finally "Tho cam Medea to Jason/ With bothe his sones on hire hond,/ And seide, 'O thou of every lond/ The most untrew creature'" (4210-13). The words 'lond' and 'hond' constitute the musical closure of different situations, which testifies to the poet's ability of articulating his ideas and chiseling his images through using whatever words he prefers. Gower uses many different words, sentences, images, and ideas to establish the music and rhythm of different couplets, thus proving that his poetic talent is not enslaved by any word limitations or linguistic constraints.

Interestingly, the last excerpt (4210-13) points to a unique technique used by Gower to produce certain metrical and rhetorical effects, namely sentence-inversion. The sentence, 'O thou of every lond the most untrew creature' in the last excerpt is the inverted form of 'O thou the most untrew creature of every lond'. This inversion in Gower's poetry is a functional technique that is deployed to produce certain musical effects without violating the thematic unity of sentences. The inversion rhymes 'lond' with 'hond' without overshadowing the structure or meaning of the couplet, a structure that reflects the poet's linguistic talent in using various grammatical forms to achieve certain metrical purposes without disturbing his lines' spontaneity. Relying on Yeager's belief that Gower integrates one language's syntax, grammar, linguistic techniques, diction, and cultural expressions into other languages (1990: 4), the use of inverted sentences can be attributed to the poet's multilingual background: the poet's knowledge in French and Latin creeps into his English and contributes to standardizing it. Matthew McCabe (2020) explains, "Gower's practices in English are not diametrically opposed to his practices in French and Latin [...] the *Confessio*, aided no doubt by Chaucer's example as well as by Gower's own growing sense of achievement, marks the culmination of these processes" (573). In Yeager's words, "*The Mirour de L'Omme*, the two ballade sequences (*Cinkante Ballades* and *Traitie*) and the *Vox Clamantis* were all experiments in setting standards for English letters" (1990: 4).

#### 4. Conclusion

Gower deploys rich rhyme, sight rhyme, rhyme repetition, and sentence inversion to incorporate the several variations of Middle English into one harmonious linguistic system, which contributes to stabilizing or standardizing Middle English language. In fact, the *Confessio* is "Gower's most polished poem" (Yeager 2005, 81) for which the poet is acknowledged by his contemporaries as the refiner or guardian of Middle English. In *Commentarii de Scriptoribus Britannicis* (1709), John Leland states,

[Gower is] the first refiner of our native language. For before that time the English language lay uncultivated and nearly wholly raw. Nor was there anyone who could write, in the vernacular, works suitable for a discriminating reader. Thus the value of [Gower's] works lies in their careful cultivation, that, the rude weeds stamped out, instead of thistles arise the pliant violet and purple narcissus. (qtd. in Yeager, 1990: 4)

Considering Gower as "the first garnisher/refiner" by Skelton and Leland is fascinating, as it acknowledges the linguistic and literary achievement of an individual living at the linguistic reign of Chaucer, the father of English poetry. It potentially points to the man's creative construction of self-contained linguistic units represented by rhymed couplets to inspire the regularization of English pronunciation, meter, vocabularies, and other linguistic components against the harmful linguistic diversity of the Middle Ages. This finding complies with the fact that Gower is known by his free manipulation of classic references and originals to serve national objectives, i.e. establishing moral exemplar and linguistic identity (Zuraikat and Rawashdeh, 2019: 235). Thus, when reading Gower's concise definition of the *Confessio* as "A bok for Engelondes sake" (CA Pro., 24), it becomes unfeasible to ignore that the poem's nationalism is not necessarily political or patron oriented, but linguistic: the poem is dedicated to standardizing the national tongue of England and viewing it as one of the authoritative languages of that time.

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