In the early to mid 1470s, George Ashby’s *Active Policy of a Prince* ranked the poet John Gower, his more famous contemporary Geoffrey Chaucer, and Chaucer’s successor John Lydgate as the ‘Primier poetes of this nacion’. Ashby celebrated them as vernacular writers, responsible for rhetorical, linguistic and formal innovations, which he associated with the formation of an English identity and saw as the starting point of a distinctive English literary tradition. Ashby’s views were not unique, and, although gradually tastes changed to Gower’s disadvantage, Gower, Chaucer and Lydgate continued to be viewed as a triumvirate well into the sixteenth century. But how accurate is Ashby’s appraisal of Gower’s achievement, and is he justified in linking his name not just to Chaucer, but to Lydgate, and thus implicitly to other of Chaucer’s disciples such as Thomas Hoccleve?

Relatively little is known about Gower’s life. We are not certain when he was born, (his birth date is taken to be 1330), or where he was brought up. We do not know anything definite about his education, or even about his choice of career, but the consensus, based largely on the evidence of ‘insider’ knowledge displayed in his poetry and of surviving records of various property dealings, is that he trained as a lawyer. We do know that in the 1370s he moved to the Priory of St. Mary Overeys in Southwark, that in 1378 Chaucer granted him power of attorney when he travelled to Italy, that in 1398 Gower married, and that shortly after he went blind, and that in 1408 he died. It is also clear that towards the end of his life,
Gower benefited from the patronage of Henry of Derby both before and after he became king. Gower’s surviving poetry seems to have been written in the second half of his life, up to around 1400.

Our lack of knowledge about Gower makes it more difficult to place his poetry. Critics have tended to locate Gower within a similar social milieu to Chaucer. Certainly, the official record indicates the two knew each other well. Furthermore, both poets refer to each other in their work. Chaucer dedicates his *Troilus and Criseyde* to ‘moral Gower’ (V.1856) and playfully alludes in the Introduction to the Man of Law’s Tale (78) to the sort of ‘wikke ensample’ found in Gower’s *Confession Amantis*, while Gower in turn in the unrevised *Confessio Amantis* (VIII.*2942) describes Chaucer as the ‘poete’ of Venus. But unlike Chaucer, Gower does not seem to have been employed by either the court or the government, and there is little solid evidence to connect him with other members of Chaucer’s circle. The exception is Thomas Usk, whose *Testament of Love* (which dates to the mid 1380s) advertises its dependency on Chaucer’s poetry at the same time as it borrows from without crediting Gower’s *Vox Clamantis*. Yet Usk, who was executed for in 1388, may have been at best a marginal member of Chaucer’s coterie. Furthermore, the literary projects of Chaucer and Gower followed significantly different trajectories. The most striking difference between the two is that Gower composed his poetry not just in English, but also in Latin and Anglo-French. In fact each of Gower’s three major poetic enterprises—*Mirour de l’Omme*, *Vox Clamantis*, and *Confessio Amantis*—is written in a different language.

Amongst Gower’s earliest poems is the *Mirour de l’Omme*, composed before 1378. It is an expansive treatise concerned with sin, salvation, and the ills of society. His other Anglo-French works are balade collections. The first, the *Cinkante Balades*, is a sequence of poems
describing a love affair and may be of a similar date to the Mirour. The second, the Traité pour Essampler les Amantz Marietz, includes Latin notes and seems to have been written after and in response to Confessio Amantis, from which it takes its exemplary narratives.

Gower’s most extensive Latin work is his Vox Clamantis, originally completed before 1381, but subsequently expanded sometime between the early and mid 1380s, and further revised in the 1390s. It shares with the Mirour a preoccupation with vice and corruption, and similarly focuses on questions of good governance and the failings of the three estates. In the form it has come down to us, revised after 1381, it includes in its opening book Gower’s famous nightmare vision of the Peasants’ Revolt. In his revisions, he becomes increasingly critical and condemning of Richard II. The Cronica Tripertita, written after Richard II’s deposition in 1399, is an overtly partisan political work written in support of Henry IV seizing power. It can be usefully considered alongside the English poem In Praise of Peace, written at the same time in justification of Henry IV’s claim to the throne. There are also a number of short Latin poems. But the work to have gained the most attention over the centuries is Confessio Amantis, completed between 1390 and 1393, which, like the Vox, was substantially revised by its author. This long poem is often referred to as Gower’s major ‘English’ work, even though large parts of it, including prose commentaries and verses that introduce sections and subsections throughout the poem, are written in Latin.

It should then be clear from this brief summary of Gower’s works that Gower, unlike Chaucer or Lydgate, was not only or even primarily an ‘English’ poet, in the sense of writing poetry through the medium of English. Nicholas Watson’s observations about Chaucer in relation to vernacular poetry are useful: ‘What made Chaucer so important … may have had less to do with any belief he had in himself as the founder of a self-conscious vernacular poetic tradition than with his invention as a founding figure’.⁶¹ Taken out of context, these
comments seem all the more apposite when applied to Gower, who, in choosing to write throughout his literary career in Latin and Anglo-French as well as English, surely conceded some of his status as literary and linguistic ground-breaker. Yet at the same time, Gower, even more than Chaucer, recognized the connection between vernacular poetry, politics and patriotism that would be picked up on and celebrated by later writers such as Ashby. In the revised opening of *Confessio Amantis*, Gower explains his decision to compose in the medium of English:

> And for that fewe men endite  
> In oure englissh, I thenke make  
> A bok for Engelondes sake.  
> (Prologue, 22-24).

By means of such careful self-fashioning as an English poet, Gower guaranteed the survival of his reputation into the fifteenth-century and beyond. But did he also succeed in securing the preservation of his poetry, or, for later poets, was his name simply one with which to conjure? Having considered further the *Confessio Amantis* itself, I will go on to examine the extent to which the poem influenced the work of Hoccleve and Lydgate.

> ‘wisdom … and pley’

According to the first version of *Confessio Amantis*, the poem was written at the request of Richard II, to whom Gower says ‘belongeth my ligeance / With al myn hertes obeissance’ (Prol.*25-26). Gower recalls how he once chanced upon the king on the river Thames.
Having been invited aboard the royal barge, Gower was instructed by the king to write ‘som newe thing … / That he himself it mihte loke’ (Prol.*51-52). This sort of commissioning claim is conventional enough, and there is no way of knowing if the episode is based on an actual event. It is perfectly in keeping with the end of the unrevised poem which includes a prayer for Richard II, ‘my worthi king’ (VIII.*2986) in whom are combined the virtues of justice, pity, largesse and charity (VIII.*2989-2990). When Gower reworked the poem, he removed the lines in praise of Richard, and replaced them with a dedication to Henry of Derby, the future Henry IV. It is now that Gower reports that he decided to compose his poem, apparently on his own initiative, ‘for Engelondes sake’ (Prol.24). Gower also changed his conclusion, replacing the prayer for Richard with a prayer for the country.

The prologues and conclusions to Gower’s poem, with their foci on the evils of division, the corruption of society, and the duties of kingship, bear a close relationship to the structurally foregrounded Book VII. The Confessio is organized in eight books, each corresponding to a different ‘deadly sin’ with the exception of Book VII, which gives an account of Aristotle’s education of Alexander the Great, and which conforms to the popular medieval genre of the ‘mirror for princes’ or Fürstenspiegel. Yet, although the inclusion of dedications in a poem such as this is quite standard, their content is less so. As Larry Scanlon explains, ‘Normally the occasion for the compiler of a Fürstenspiegel to display his dependence on the prince he is advising, these dedications tend to show the opposite, both in their content, and by the very fact there are two of them.’ While Gower may owe ‘obeissance’ to Richard II, he presents himself as dependent on neither the king, nor for that matter Henry of Derby. His celebration of the earl is almost curt: Henry, we are told, is ‘Ful of knythode and alle grace’ (Prol.89). Gower is primarily concerned with developing his own role as a patriotic vernacular poet and as a bluff, honest advisor. His main interest is the state of the nation, and he is willing to
speak on matters of kingship and self-governance, even though he has to do his best ‘With rude wordes and with pleyne’ (VIII.*3068, cf.3122).

Many critics believe that the revised dedications reveal Gower’s changing political allegiances and it is certainly true that in the 1390s Gower became disaffected with Richard II. Throughout *Confessio Amantis* the king is implicitly compared to Alexander the Great, an ambiguous figure, who is a mighty conqueror, a chaste and honest ruler, and at the same time a rash tyrant. While Richard II is mirrored in Alexander, Gower’s alter ego is Genius, the priest to whom Amans (the lover referred to in the title and the poem’s protagonist) makes his confession. On a number of occasions the voice of Genius slides into that of the poet-narrator, especially in his discussions of the authority of the church (II.2803-3071), and world religions and Christianity (especially V.738-1830), with its attack on Lollardy (V.1803-19). In Book VII, Gower/Genius plays Aristotle to Richard’s Alexander. Nevertheless, as such Gower reveals his awareness of his responsibilities and his sense of his own inadequacies in such a role. Aristotle may be a philosopher teacher worthy to advise his prince, but he is not without flaws (especially VIII.2705-13). In the climax of *Confessio*, Gower further undercuts his own status as disinterested councillor when he identifies himself with Amans (VIII.2321), now finally exposed as an old man and incapable of love, and describes himself as ‘feble and impotent’ (VIII.3127).

While possible to resolve to some extent, the tension between the dedication to Richard II and that to the man who was to overthrow him is indicative of other conflicts within the poem. In the opinion of some readers, *Confessio* uneasily combines political and ethical concerns with the conventions and subject matter of courtly romance and with lurid stories taken from classical and other ancient writings. Book 1 begins as if it were a dream vision, but recounts
events that take place when Amans, its narrator, is awake. It opens with a discussion of love, which holds sway over the world. Amans declares that he will tell of his own encounter with love, and goes on to describe how he set out walking in a wood one day in May, and came upon ‘a swote grene pleine’ (I.113). Lamenting because he was ‘further fro my love / Than Erthe is fro the hevene above’ (I.105-6), he fell to the ground in despair. Upon waking, he uttered a prayer to Cupid and Venus, only to find them standing in front of him. Eyes averted in fury, Cupid picked up ‘a firy Dart’ (I.144) and pierced him through the heart, before vanishing. No less angry, Venus demanded to know what he was and what ailed him, and, remaining doubtful about his claim to be one of her own servants, deserving of pity and reward, instructed him to make his shrift. *Confessio* then continues as a dialogue between Amans and Genius, with Genius illustrating various classifications and sub-classifications of sins against love and also many virtues with an encyclopaedic series of exemplary narratives.

While Gower himself tries to resolve the apparent disunity in his poem—the dual foci on the ethical-political and the erotic—by making explicit the connection between microcosm and macrocosm, between ‘this litel world’ that is the individual and ‘the grete world’ of the cosmos (Prol.957-58)—many internal contradictions remain. The penitential scheme of the work is interrupted by the analysis of good government and self-conduct in Book VII. It is then further disturbed when ‘Lust’ is replaced by ‘Incest’ as the topic of Book VIII. At no point is this substitution mentioned, far less, explained, although the theme of incest is clearly crucial to *Confessio* as a whole. Genius, for example, is compromised in his position of priest to Venus and Cupid, when he finds himself not only describing but also condemning their incestuous relationship in his account of the pagan gods (V.1382-1446). Gower’s versions of the Tale of Apollonius of Tyre (VIII.271-2008), which begins with a father’s seduction of his daughter, and the Tale of Canace and Machaire (Book III.143-336), which tells of an affair
between a brother and a sister, seem to have very quickly achieved some notoriety. Chaucer’s Man of Law dismissed both stories as immoral and disgusting, ‘swiche unkynde abhomynacions’ (88).

It would be wrong to place much faith in the opinions of Chaucer’s Man of Law or to assume from his words that Gower’s stories lack conventional moral frameworks. Nevertheless, Gower’s portrayal of Canace is famously sympathetic to the plight of the woman who, after her relationship with her brother has been discovered, is forced by her father to kill herself, knowing her baby will almost certainly die. In other medieval versions Canace’s story is told under the heading of ‘mad passion’, viii but Genius introduces it to illustrate the sin of wrath: Amans is to learn from the error of Canace’s father (III.134-142). Genius goes to considerable lengths to exonerate Canace and her brother, who, we are told, are young and isolated and are driven by natural urges to engage in a relationship that is contrary to nature (III.148-78). Karma Lochrie contends that even while he explores sexual ‘perversions’ Gower adheres to a conservative gender ideology. ix Yet in his sensitive and complex portrayal of Canace as victim of her own actions, circumstance, external forces, and unjust and inequitable punishment, Gower is not so anti-feminist as Lochrie implies. Furthermore Gower offers no easy solutions to the problem of sex. In his discussion of chastity (VII. 4215-37), Genius explicitly praises heterosexual desire, exclaiming ‘The Madle is mad for the femele’ (VII.4215), and goes on to praise marriage and condemn adultery. Nevertheless, the resolution offered in Book VIII, following the completion of lover’s confession, seems sadly inadequate. At the end of the poem, Amans—now identified as John Gower himself—does not find himself a wife or even a lover, but remains aged and alone, ‘And in this wise, soth to seyn, / Homward a softe pas y wente’ (VIII.2966-7). Marriage may be answer, but not, it seems, for Amans.
Chaucer, in applying the epithet ‘moral’ to Gower, and then effectively taking it away again when the Man of Law decries his stories as immoral, can be seen to be responding to Gower’s own poetry. ‘Divisioun’, sin or evil, is a recurring concern of Gower (cf. Prol.849-1052) and the corruption of society and humanity is reflected in the fissures in *Confessio Amantis* itself. In other words, the poem, like the world, is divided. Nevertheless, some of the unresolved difficulties in *Confessio* can also be understood in terms of Gower’s playfulness. Such playfulness, or *ludus*, combined with the sort of moralizing we might more readily expect to find in such instructive works, is inherent in the genre of the mirror for princes. Gower simply develops it to its fullest extent in his own poem. From the start Gower warns that wisdom ‘dulleth ofte a mannes wit’ (Prol.14) and again and again he stresses that he is concerned with ‘ernest and game’ (VIII.3109, my italics). This is after all a poem that from its first conception was intended as ‘wisdom to the wise / And pley to hem that lust to pleye’ (Prol.*84-85). But to what extent did Chaucer’s literary sons follow their father’s lead and identify in Gower’s works both wisdom and play?

‘Hast þou nat eeke my maister Gower slayn’

The posthumous influence of *Confessio Amantis* is first seen in Hoccleve’s *Regiment of Princes*, written between 1410 and 1412. Hoccleve represents himself as an unworthy heir to Chaucer, who ‘fayn wolde han me taght; / But I was dul, and lerned lite or naght’ (*Regement of Princes*, 2078-9). For Hoccleve, Chaucer is ‘The firste fyndere of our faire langage’ (4978). His death is lamented (1961-1974 and 2080-2107), and Hoccleve determines to preserve his image (4992-4998). Yet while Gower is praised for his ‘vertu’ (1976), his demise is passed over quickly—‘Hast þou nat eeke my maister Gower slayn’ (1975)—and
there is no acknowledgement of Hoccleve’s debt to his poetry. Yet this debt is manifest in the body of Hoccleve’s *Regiment*, which, like *Confessio Amantis* VII, takes the form of advice offered to a prince, sharing some of the same sources and exemplary tales. Furthermore, the overlap between Gower and Hoccleve can also be seen in the extended prologue to the *Regiment*, which resonates with the penitential frame of *Confessio Amantis*, combining wisdom with sardonic humour.

Similarly to *Confessio Amantis*, the prologue to Hoccleve’s *Regiment* sets up expectations that it is a dream vision only to confound them. Here the narrator tells how his troubles prevented him from sleeping, and on the following morning he set out walking in the fields where he was engaged in conversation by a beggar. This ‘poore olde hore man’ (122) resembles Gower’s Genius. In *Confessio Amantis*, Book I, Amans pleads with Venus, asking whether she wants him to be healed or to die, and Venus, having asked him to reveal his ‘maladie’ (I.164), entrusts him to Genius’ care. In Hoccleve’s *Regement*, the beggar offers to ‘cure’ the poet-narrator’s suffering (Prol.161), playing on the medical and pastoral senses of the word. From early in their dialogue, the beggar addresses Hoccleve, as Genius addresses Amans, as ‘My sone’ (Prol. 143), and insists that if Hoccleve follows his teaching he will escape from his melancholy (Prol.214-217). Eventually Hoccleve shares the cause of his distress, and explains that at its root are financial problems, exacerbated by the fact that he has a wife to support. In this respect Hoccleve’s poetic persona, who otherwise is reminiscent of Gower’s youthful and frustrated Amans, seems quite distinct from his antecedent.

Nevertheless, in the beggar’s digression on marriage, he expands of the theme of marriage found in *Confessio Amantis*. Hoccleve’s beggar examines much more explicitly than Genius the nature of matrimonial love itself (Prol.1555-1764). In so doing, he addresses an omission
in Gower’s poem, resolving some of its difficulty, but sacrificing some of its playfulness in the process.

Hoccleve’s *Regiment* also answers Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* on a political level. In the *Regiment*, it is the Beggar who commissions the poem, for the benefit of the future Henry V. He instructs Hoccleve to pen a poem ‘fresh and gay’ (1906) that might amuse the prince, and also bring the poet the patronage he so desperately needs. He goes on to suggest that Hoccleve should translate a ‘tretice / Groundid on his estates holsumnesse’ (1949-50).

Compared with *Confessio*’s unusual reticence, the *Regiment* is much more conventional in its fulsome address to its patron (2017-2030). However, Hoccleve also indirectly compares Alexander to Prince Henry, and in so doing he, like Gower, introduces a note of warning, as, for example, in the story of the knight who reproaches Alexander for his ‘lust, bestial and miserable’ (3503). While Alexander may acknowledge his sin, and resolve to reform himself, he is clearly also mortal rather than divine, capable of ill as well as good. As the *Regiment* moves towards its climax, the advice given to the prince becomes more urgent as it merges into a request for favour. At the same time Henry blurs with the beggar (who, we have been told, spent his youth in the tavern playing dice, swearing oaths and womanizing (610-58)). When Hoccleve finally acknowledges his follies and repents of his ‘mysrewly lyfe’ (4376) he does so not to the beggar but to the prince.

On the whole, Hoccleve’s political position is more straightforward than that of the Gower responsible for *Confessio*, and closer to that of the Gower of the late, pro-Lancastrian propaganda poem, ‘In Praise of Peace’. In the latter poem, Gower declares to Henry IV, shortly after his overthrow of Richard, that ‘Thi title is knowe uppon thin ancestrie,’ (12). Hoccleve details Prince Henry’s lineage through references to Henry IV (816-26, 1835, 3352-
John of Gaunt (3347-51 and 3353), Henry of Lancaster (2647-53) and Edward III (2556-2562). The ill-fated Richard II is only alluded to when the poet-narrator records how ‘Me fel to mynde how that, not long ago, / ffortunes strok doun threst estaat royal / Into myscheef’ (22-24). However even here Hoccleve’s mention of Richard’s fall actually has the effect of bringing his poem much closer to Confessio Amantis. Overtly, Hoccleve’s narrator is drawing a parallel between his own position and that of the former king. But as Scanlon observes, the allusion draws our attention to the uncertainty of the prince’s own future, ‘for it not only makes Hoccleve and Richard indistinguishable, it also makes Henry and Richard indistinguishable’.xiv As in Gower’s poem, the complex play with doubles and alter egos has a serious message.

‘Another thynge, bookis specefie…’

John Lydgate’s longest work, the Fall of Princes, was written between 1431 and 1438 or 1439.xv Like both Gower’s Confessio and Hoccleve’s Regiment it follows the advice to princes format. It is claims to have been commissioned by the younger brother of Henry V, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, Protector of England during Henry VI’s minority. Lydgate describes his poem as a translation of a French version of a poem by the Italian author, Giovanni Boccaccio,xvi but its genesis is in reality more complex and it draws on a range of other sources, including the work of Chaucer and Gower.

But just how great are Lydgate’s borrowings from Gower? First, like Hoccleve’s Regement, the Fall of Princes makes use of a number of the same stories as Confessio Amantis, including the famous Tales of Lucrece and Virginia as well as other political narratives. Second, Lydgate, like Gower, includes lengthy discussions of vice and virtue. Third, as in
Hoccleve’s *Regiment* and *Confessio Amantis*, Alexander the Great features prominently in the *Fall of Princes*, but as a more flawed and less divine figure. In Gower’s Tale of Diogenes and Alexander (*Confessio Amantis*, III.1201-1330), Alexander listens to the old philosopher with courtesy and respect (III.1263-4 and 1293-97), and Diogenes is represented as having ‘enformed’ Alexander (III.1313), suggesting that Alexander is at least open to instruction. In Lydgate’s version (*Fall of Princes*, I.6224-79), Alexander is summarily dismissed as one whose reason was ‘vnder thobeisaunce / Off flesshli lustis fetrid in a cheyne’ (6254-5).xvii Not surprisingly, Lydgate carefully avoids suggesting comparisons between Alexander and Duke Humphrey.

This brings us to a further and more unexpected aspect of Gower’s influence on Lydgate: their shared fascination with salacious stories. In the *Fall of Princes*, Book I, Lydgate freely expands his named source in order to pick up on Gower’s preoccupation with incest. Lydgate does not make use of Gower’s Tale of Apollonius of Tyre, but retells the related story of Oedipus (I.3157-3815).xviii Moreover, Lydgate includes the story of Canace and Machaire (I.6833-7049), recounted only briefly in his main source, alongside other Ovidian narratives concerned with incest and the related sin of self-love: Narcissus, Byblis and Myrrha (I.5552-5775). Although Lydgate does not slavishly follow Gower’s version of Canace and Machaire—most notably he does not attempt to explain away the brother and sister’s relationship in terms of their youthfulness and the contradictions inherent in nature—there are clear parallels between the versions. Whereas in Ovid’s *Heroides*, XI, the entire story is narrated in epistolary form, both Gower and Lydgate make Canace’s letter to her brother only part of the story.xix Furthermore, Lydgate’s envoy follows *Confessio Amantis* in that the story ostensibly illustrates the sin of ire (*Fall of Princes*, I.7057-7063). Strikingly, Lydgate borrows
from Gower, albeit in simplified form, the poignant image of the child bathing in its mother’s blood (*Fall of Princes*, I.7033-35; *Confessio Amantis*, III.312-15).

It is then striking that Lydgate’s debt to Gower extends beyond the more obvious political and ethical aspects of his poetry, and includes a very real concern with sexual transgression. Although, as Maura Dolan points out, Lydgate represents Canace empathetically, he is, on the whole, much more aggressively hostile in his portrayal of women than Gower.  

Alexander’s mother Olympias is granted her own story (IV.2332-2569), but she is represented as a wolf (IV.2477), a serpent (IV.2481) and a fiend (IV.2565) and the envoy to the tale laments the unnaturalness of violence and vengeance in a woman (IV.2570-2639). Intriguingly, Lydgate alludes to the seduction of Olympias by the magician Nectanabus (which results in the conception of Alexander, although Lydgate does not mention this), but does not expand on it because his author ‘for to saue hir name, / Writ but a litil of hir sclaundrous diffame’ (IV.2344-5). Lydgate laments Olympias’s ‘wikked fame’ ((IV.2373) at the same time as he gestures towards what he misses out, when he says ‘Another thyng, bookis specefie / Troubled hir fame …’ (IV. 2367-8). Although Lydgate is referring here to the version of Boccaccio he is translating, it is worth observing that Gower retells of this very story (VI.1789-2366). In Gower’s tale, Nectanabus disguises himself as a god and renders a pious and humble Olympia the victim of sorcery and deception. Of course it would not have suited Lydgate to include this narrative—which has resonances of the Annunciation—because it would suggest that Alexander had a divinity Lydgate is keen to deny. But it would also not have suited Lydgate’s overt anti-feminism. Whereas Gower often holds back from condemning women outright just because they are women, Lydgate has no such reservations. He follows his principal source in including a long section on the malice of women in Book I (6511-6734), repeatedly holding them responsible for bringing down men. Exposed in
Lydgate’s diatribes is a far more conservative model of gender than that found in Gower’s poetry.

However, while Lydgate owes as least as much to Gower as does Hoccleve, he is even less willing than Hoccleve to admit it. In the Prologue to Book I, praise of Lydgate’s ‘maister Chaucer…cheeff poete off Breteyne’ (I. 246-7) appears alongside an extensive list of Chaucer’s works (I.274-357). His appreciation of Chaucer finds its fullest expression at the poem’s climax in his envos to his patron and closing farewell to his book. In an elaborate reworking of the famous ending to *Troilus and Criseyde* (‘Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye…’ (V.1786ff.)), Lydgate alludes to Chaucer’s moral Gower (*Fall of Princes*, IX.3410). In this, the only direct reference to Gower in Lydgate’s entire poem, Lydgate is more concerned with imitating and responding to Chaucer, and with establishing his own place within the same classical and vernacular tradition, than with actually admitting his own literary genealogy. In fact, Lydgate makes it clear that within the emergent English canon at least, Chaucer is the only ‘Laureat’ poet whom he is willing to acknowledge. When Lydgate celebrates Chaucer as one who ‘excellyd al othir in our Englyssh tounge’ (IX.3407), he wilfully overlooks Gower.

‘In englesch forto make a book’

It is tempting to attempt to understand Hoccleve’s and Lydgate’s failure to acknowledge Gower in terms of literary competitiveness. Rather than recognize Gower as their antecedent, Hoccleve and Lydgate trace their genealogy directly to Chaucer, seeing themselves as inheriting and going beyond the tradition they ascribe to him. Perhaps it is because they judge Chaucer to be the better poet that they want to claim him as their predecessor, but a more
convincing explanation lies in the interaction of vernacularity, politics and patriotism discussed earlier. As critics such as David Lawton and Scanlon have shown, Gower, Hoccleve and Lydgate adopt very similar stances as poets, and share common political and ethical concerns. Gower’s authorial representation as a forthright councillor and his claim to lay rather than clerical textual authority had a significant impact on his fifteenth-century followers when they came to write about kingship and government. Furthermore, Gower, Hoccleve and Lydgate all share anxieties about the threat to the security of the nation offered by Lollardy and by war, and actively promote suppression of heresy and the maintenance or establishment of peace.

Nevertheless, in one crucial respect, Hoccleve and Lydgate diverge from Gower. It is clear that when Gower resolved ‘In englesch forto make a book’ (VIII.3108), he saw Confessio Amantis as a development of his previous work in French and Latin, not as a break from it. The Latin colophon to Confessio envisages Gower’s three major works as part of a single design. For Gower, writing in three languages does not detract from his undertaking or achievement. On the contrary, it adds to it. For Hoccleve and Lydgate, however, writing in English is presented as the only option. In the Regiment, the poet-narrator has to be cajoled into writing in English, having refused the beggar’s demand that he ‘Endite in frensch or latyn’ (1854). In the Fall of Princes, Lydgate claims, as part of his apology for the flawed state of his ‘translation’, that he is not particularly skilled in French (IX.3329-30). Underlying such modesty is an awareness of the nature of their audiences, Hoccleve’s ‘Lettered folk’ (Prol.155), whose literacy might well not extend beyond English. But, in Lydgate’s poem at least, there is also a hostility to France (see IX.3134-3238), and thus implicitly to the French language, that reflects the political climate of the fifteenth-century and the on-going struggle for the French throne. Hoccleve and Lydgate were concerned with policing the linguistic as
well as ideological borders of fifteenth-century literature. Chaucer represented a vernacular integrity that Gower, despite his willingness to intervene in politics and his engagement with ethics, was seen to compromise, at least by those poet’s most indebted to his ‘English’ poem. Nevertheless, in terms of real, if unacknowledged influence, Gower remained second to none.

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xi References to Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes* are to Frederick J. Furnivall (ed.), *Hoccleve’s Works*, vol. 3, EETS e.s. 72, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1897.

xii Hoccleve acknowledges two direct sources which he shares with Gower: the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Secretum Secretorum* and *De Regimine Principium* of Giles of Rome, but, whereas Gower also makes use of the *Livres dou Trésor* of Brunetto Latini, Hoccleve’s third source is the *Ludus shachorum* of Jacobus de Cessolis.


xvi The immediate source is Laurence de Premierfait’s *De cas des nobles hommes et femmes*, a reworking of Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De casibus*.


See Nolan, ‘Lydgate’s Literary History: Chaucer, Gower and Canacee’, forthcoming in *Studies in the Ages of Chaucer*, 27 (2005). I am grateful to Professor Nolan for allowing me to read this essay prior to publication.