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Agency and the Poetics of Sensation in Gower's *Mirour de l'Omme**

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PERHAPS the most consistent theme over the course of Gower's writing career is his resistance to the idea of Fortune. In the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Confessio Amantis,* he repeatedly argues that the notion of Fortune is a fraud, a way of dodging responsibility; as he tells us in the Prologue to the *Confessio,* "man is overal / His oghne cause of wel and wo. / That we fortune clepe so / Out of the man himself it groweth."[1] These negations enable Gower to put forth a distinctive vision of human agency and its relation to sin and punishment: because the sorrows of the world are directly caused by the actions of sinners (who have free will), uncovering the causes for worldly sorrow reveals agency, manifested by the free acts of autonomous individuals. But neither the figure of Fortune nor the theology of free will is as simple as that definition of agency implies. This essay focuses on the *Mirour de l'Omme,* one of Gower's earliest attempts to grapple with the complexities of

1. *Confessio Amantis,* Prologue, lines 546–49, in *The Complete Works of John Gower: The English Works,* ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899–1901), 2:19–20. Subsequent references will be in the text by book and line number.

Fortune, free will, and the human relationship to the divine. In particular, it examines a mode of expression that might be termed a "poetics of sensation," a mode that allows Gower to experiment formally with questions of agency, contingency, and free will. As I will show, he carries out these experiments while testing the limits of the discourses he has inherited, discourses ranging from the didactic to the sublime to the beautiful.

The *Mirour* is thirty thousand lines long and written in twelve-line stanzas of octosyllabic Anglo-Norman verse; it exists in a single manuscript, Cambridge, University Library Additional MS 3035.[2] It appears as the *Speculum Meditantis* on Gower's tomb at Southwark Cathedral, where an effigy of Gower lies with its head on three books that represent his three major works. The *Mirour* has an important role to play in assessing the emergence of late 14th-century literary culture, not only because it was written quite early—during the waning years of Edward III's reign—but also because it was written in Anglo-Norman rather than English, thus narrowing its readership to those social groups most likely to read French: the aristocracy, these gentry and the clergy. The *Mirour* reveals a tentative poet seeking to forge an authorial identity out of various cultural materials, including genres, images, discourses, and figures, and doing so in a fairly conventional way; the text comprises three successive genres: a didactic sermon on virtues and vices, an estates satire, and a Marian *vita,* or "Life of the Virgin." What exceeds the conventions, however, is the way in which Gower's identity is riven between two discursive modes, the didactic and the sensual. These modes play significant roles in all three of Gower's major works, but they are made particularly explicit in the *Mirour,* where didactic genres are juxtaposed to a descriptive mode that mimics the human experience of contingency and divinity, in the figures of Fortune and the Blessed Virgin. As I will show, even this opposition between didactic and descriptive modes breaks down; both figures themselves are constituted by a tension between their didactic function and the sensual materiality of the language with which they are described.

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2. Introduction to *Mirour de l'Omme,* trans. William Burton Wilson (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992), xv–xvi; xxii–xxiii. See also Macaulay, *Complete Works,* 4: vii–xxx; and John Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 37–69. Quite by chance, the *Mirour* is an unfinished literary work; its single manuscript breaks off suddenly near the end, making any conclusions about its overarching goals difficult to sustain. But perhaps the loss is not really a loss, in that Gower's larger literary project has barely begun when the *Mirour* ends; even if the text were finished, it would still represent only Gower's preliminary thoughts about Fortune and agency, chance and fate. At the same time, however, the combination of conceptual work, formal experimentation, and a mixture of genres calls to mind similar fourteenth-century works, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Langland's *Piers Plowman* (not to mention Gower's own *Confessio Amantis*). I discuss the role of Fortune in *Piers Plowman* in my essay, "The Fortunes of *Piers Plowman* and Its Readers," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 20 (2006): 1–41.

Because the figure of Fortune is primarily a literary or aesthetic device—an image that functions symbolically by clothing an abstraction in a concrete and tangible physical form—it also brings to the fore questions about the relationship between the aesthetic (as a mode of expression, a set of techniques, that calls upon bodily sensation) and human agency. This essay seeks to disentangle the knotty relationship between the didactic and the sensual in the *Mirour* by exploring the way in which the abstract qualities evoked by Fortune (contingency, change, and agency) and by the Blessed Virgin (divinity, the sacred) are manifested in language via specific aesthetic techniques that depend upon sensory, material, and physical perceptions of the sublime and the beautiful. Parsing the relationship between didactic and sensual modes of writing is a first step toward an anatomy of Gower's vision of poetics over the course of his career, one that takes into account both his obsessive concern with agency and his turn to a poetics of sensation.

Classical, Boethian, Aristocratic Fortunes

In his major works, Gower mines the Fortune tradition that begins with Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* in order to exploit—even as he alters—its representation of human agency and temporal contingency. In the *Vox Clamantis* and *Confessio Amantis,* he repeatedly negates the idea that chance plays a role in human history. Instead of using Fortune as a shorthand for "contingency" or "chance," Gower invokes the figure as an example of false consciousness or deliberate self-deception by constructing a straw man, an amorphous "everyone," whom he blames for using Fortune to evade responsibility for sin. An intertextual network of writing about Fortune lends verisimilitude (though not philosophical content) to his claims, particularly the French poetry of figures like Jean de Meun and Guillaume Machaut, as well as Latin texts like Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus.*[3] Having established the

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3. For examples, see Reason's description of Fortune in *Le roman de la rose,* ed. Armand Strubel (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1992), lines 5897–6173; Guillaume de Machaut, *Le livre du voir dit,* ed. Paul Imbs, Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet, and Noël Musso (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1999), lines 8606–717. An important source for Gower in the *Confessio Amantis* and for the Fortune tradition in general was Alan of Lille's *Anticlaudianus,* especially book 8; see Alain de Lille, *Anticlaudianus,* ed. R. Bossuat (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1955), 173–83. In general, Gower draws on the popularity of Fortune in the later Middle Ages, made manifest in the many visual representations of the figure that have survived; see Yoshiaki Todoroki, *An Addition to Miniatures of the Goddess Fortune in Medieval Manuscripts* (Tokyo: Seibido, 2000), which is a sequel to the very-difficult-to-obtain volume by Tamotsu Kurose, *Miniatures of the Goddess Fortune in Medieval Manuscripts* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1977). A large proportion of these illustrations are found in manuscripts of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium* (vol. 9 of *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio,* ed. Vittore Branca [Milan: Arnoldo

premise in both the *Vox* and the *Confessio* that citing Fortune is a way of shirking responsibility, Gower proceeds to mount sustained and careful arguments against using Fortune in either a factual or a fictional way, arguments that have at their core a notion of individual responsibility and agency that ascribes to human beings the capacity to control their own destinies as well as the fate of the world.[4]

This interest in agency plays an important role in the *Miour* as well, though Fortune does not appear until midway through the second genre in the compilation, the estates satire, when Gower describes the place of sovereigns and the role of the nobility in society. Having described the estate of Holy Church, he tells readers that he will now turn to "l'estat de cex qui ont le siecle en governance" [the estate of those who have the world in their governance].[5] Ironically enough, because of the vagaries of Fortune, a leaf of the manuscript has been lost at this point, leaving a gap of 192 lines just after Gower introduces his theme and immediately before readers encounter Fortune for the first time, in the story of Nebuchadnezzar, whom Fortune placed atop her wheel: "Fortune estoit de son assent / Et sur sa roe en halt l'assist" [Fortune was on his side and seated him in the high place on her wheel] (lines 21983–83, Wilson, 291). By introducing Fortune in the section of his estates satire devoted to the nobility, Gower asserts her class-specific rhetorical status and emphasizes her function as a specialized mode of aristocratic self-understanding, one he contrasts with other modes in the *Miour,* such as the clerical discourse of the treatise on the vices and virtues and the hagiographical language of the Marian *vita.* The Fortune passage consists of seventy lines of conventional language and images:

Mondadoro, 1983]). For an account of these manuscripts and images of Fortune, see Phyllis Anina Nitze Thompson, "The Triumph of Poverty over Fortune: Illuminations from Boccaccio's *De Casibus Virorum Illustrium*" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1994). Alan Nelson gives a series of examples of mechanical wheels of Fortune that appeared in pageants and performances in his "Mechanical Wheels of Fortune, 1100–1547," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 43 (1980): 227–33, with illustrations on pp. 28–29. The Wheel of Fortune was also the subject of wall paintings, both at royal residences and at Rochester Cathedral; Henry III had the image painted above the king's seat in the hall at Winchester and on the fireplace in the chamber of the king at Clarendon. See Tancred Borenius, "The Cycle of Images in the Palaces and Castles of Henry III," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 6 (1943): 40–50, 44 (plate 10a shows the Wheel of Fortune at Rochester Cathedral).

4. In these texts, Gower repeatedly comments on figures who try to account for history by invoking Fortune; in the *Vox,* Gower tells us "Fortunam reprobat nunc omnis homo" [Every man now reproves Fortune] (*Vox Clamantis,* book 2, chapt. 1, line 47, in Macaulay, *Complete Works,* 4:85), and in the *Confessio,* he explains that: "For man is cause of that schal falle./Natheles yet som men wryte/ And sein that fortune is to wyte" (*Prologue,* lines 528–30).

5. Macaulay, *Complete Works,* 1:246, heading; the translation is from Wilson, *Miour,* 291. All subsequent references will be given in the text by line number and page number. I have occasionally modified Wilson's translations for clarity.

O tu Fortune l'inconstante,
Du double face es variante,
L'une est en plour, l'autre est en ris; . . .
O tu Fortune la nounstable,
En tous tes faitz es deceivable . . .
Trop est ta roe ades muable,
Le dée du quell tu jueras
Ore est en sisz, or est en as. . . .
O tu Fortune la marage,
Ore es tout coye au sigle et nage,
Menable et du paisible port;
Ore es ventouse, plein du rage,
Des haltes ondes tant salvage,
Que l'en ne puet nager au port . . .
Fortune, endroit du courtoisie
Tu ne scies point, ainz malnorrie
Par droit l'en te porra prover:
Car qui plus quiert ta compainie
Et plus te loe et magnifie,
Tu plus celluy fais laidenger,
Et qui fuïr et aviler
Te quiert, celluy fais honourer.
(lines 22081–83; 22093–94; 22101–3; 22105–10; 22117–24)

[O inconstant Fortune, you are variable with your double face. One face is
in tears, the other in smiles . . . O unstable Fortune, you are deceptive in
all your doings. . . . Your wheel is very changeable; the die with which you
play is sometimes a six, sometimes an ace . . . O vexatious Fortune, now
you are quiet for sailing and voyaging, pleasant and of peaceful demeanor,
now you are windy and full of such savage storm with high waves that one
cannot sail to port. . . . Fortune, you can do nothing by right of courtesy,
for you can be rightly proven to be badly brought up. He who most seeks
your company and most lauds and exalts you is the one whom you abuse
the most. And he who seeks to flee and revile you is the one whom you
honor.] (Wilson, 293; lines 22081–117)

Gower's description of Fortune is clearly drawn from a variety of Boethian
accounts, including the long discussion of Fortune in the *Roman de la Rose;*
he includes a very similar account in Book 2 of the *Vox Clamantis.*[6] The dif-

6. See *Vox Clamantis,* book 2, lines 145–216; Gower also describes Fortune as having two hand-

ference between the account of Fortune in the *Mirour* and those in the *Vox* and the *Confessio* does not lie in their representations of the goddess herself, but rather in the contexts in which those depictions are embedded. In the *Vox* and the *Confessio,* Gower explicitly rejects Fortune from the very beginning; readers are never allowed to rest comfortably within the aristocratic discourse of random Fortune and her arbitrary wheel. But in the *Mirour,* Gower's description of Fortune is not accompanied by claims like "That we fortune clepe so / Out of the man himself it groweth" (*Confessio,* Prol. lines 548–49); it stands alone, just as the other genres in the *Mirour* stand separately, and is modified only by its juxtaposition with other models of causality and other ways of determining what is wrong with the world.

Taken by itself, Gower's representation of Fortune in this early text gives the impression that the image of the goddess functions as a reasonable shorthand for the operation of chance in the lives of people and realms. Gower is still parsing the grammar of historical causation here, reproducing the models he has inherited (the didactic and devotional genres that make up the *Mirour*) rather than reshaping and rewriting them in order to forge his own poetic mode. This method of juxtaposing genres has both formal and thematic implications. Because Gower keeps each genre intact formally, he also retains the vision of causation that each implies, moving from one to another without explicitly challenging their generic worldviews. Readers inevitably compare the genres as the text progresses, but Gower never authoritatively articulates a single vision of the world. Instead, he forces readers to recognize the capacity of form to shape experience and perspective by aligning genres and discourses under the loose rubric of the narrative "I"—a figure so vaguely defined that only the first-person pronoun provides the illusion of a consistent voice.

As I have suggested, Gower's understanding of Fortune in his later work is based on his insistence on human agency: human beings have the power to make and remake the world, but they are anxious to disavow that power by invoking Fortune in order to escape responsibility for their own sins. The Fortune thus invoked, however, is not quite the same as the figure that appears in the Boethian model, in which Fortune represents an aspect of God's providence—providence as seen through human, fallible eyes. Instead, when members of the aristocracy gesture to Fortune, they are using the term as a shorthand for chance or fate. That is, either Fortune is random and

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maidens, "Renomée" and "Desfame," which recall Chaucer's description of Fortune in the *House of Fame* as commanding Eolus' two "clariouns"—"Clere Laude" and "Sclaundre" (lines 1573–82). J. S. Tatlock also points out this link in his *Development and Chronology of Chaucer's Works* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1907), 38–40.

contingent—her wheel spins arbitrarily—or, in the classical sense, Fortune represents destiny, the fate that human beings cannot escape and for which they bear no responsibility. Neither of these vernacular uses of the concept reflects the sophistication of the Boethian relationship between providence and fate, which accounts for the problems posed by suffering innocents and prosperous sinners by suggesting that God's providence is a mystery to human beings. For Boethius, all that humans can see is the working of fate, which is providence as it unfolds in time.[7] Were humans able to comprehend God's providence, they would understand how all things, even punishment for the innocent and reward for the guilty, work together to produce an ultimate good. When Gower critiques the ideas about Fortune that are deployed in the world around him—Fortune as contingency and Fortune as destiny—he is in part critiquing the failure of those ideas to encompass a notion of providence. At the same time, Gower suggests that such failed models of Fortune constitute refusals of agency and culpability, to which he responds by insisting upon human responsibility for the condition of the world. Unlike Boethius, who emphasizes the mystery of providence, Gower imagines a world of direct causation in which human beings are specifically punished or rewarded for bad or good acts. Within this structure of causation, it is human sinfulness that accounts for the degradation of the world, its sorrow and misery, its horror and despair. At the start of the *Mirour,* Gower has not yet reached this conclusion. But as the text progresses, the idea of direct causation begins to take shape, emerging from his meditation on the problem of agency—only to be superseded by a set of formal and

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7. See the *Consolation of Philosophy,* Book IV, pr. 6: "Nam providentia est ipsa illa divina ratio in summo omnium principe constituta quae cuncta disponit; fatum vero inhaerens rebus mobilibus dispositio per quam providentia suis quaeque nectit ordinibus. Providentia namque cuncta pariter quamvis diversa quamvis infinita complectitur; fatum vero singula digerit in motum locis formis ac temporibus distributa, ut haec temporalis ordinis explicatio in divinae mentis adunata prospectum providentia sit, eadem vero adunatio digesta atque explicata temporibus fatum vocetur. . . . illud certe manifestum est immobilem simplicemque gerendarum formam rerum esse providentiam, fatum vero eorum quae divina simplicitas gerenda disposuit mobilem nexum atque ordinem temporalem" [For providence is the divine reason itself, established in the highest ruler of all things, the reason which disposes all things that exist; but fate is a disposition inherent in movable things, through which providence binds all things together, each in its own proper ordering. For providence embraces all things together, though they are different, though they are infinite; but fate arranges as to their motion separate things, distributed in place, form and time; so that this unfolding of temporal order being united in the foresight of the divine mind is providence, and the same unity when distributed and unfolded in time is called fate . . . this surely is clear, that the unmoving in simple form of the things that are to be enacted is providence, and fate is the movable interlacing and temporal ordering of those things which the divine simplicity has disposed to be done]. See Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy,* in *The Theological Tractates and the "Consolation of Philosophy,"* ed. and trans. H. F. Tester, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), book II, prose 2 and prose 1; subsequent references will be in the text by book and meter or prose number. I have modified this translation slightly.

aesthetic questions attending Gower's representations of Fortune and the Blessed Virgin.

Fortune and Narrative; Lyric and the Blessed Virgin

In the *Mirour,* exploring the causes for sin and for worldly troubles in the genres of the treatise and the estates satire leads Gower closer to the conclusion that human sin causes the evils that afflict the world. In the *Vox* and the *Confessio,* this idea produces a particular kind of narrative voice. In the former, Gower's narrator takes up a persona of public authority, a "voice crying in the wilderness" as he deploys the genre of the estates satire; in the latter, the narrator of the Prologue and its estates satire speaks with a similarly uncompromising force. But the *Mirour* presents a very different narrator and thus a very different mode of representation for problems of agency. After giving voice to his Anglo-Norman estates satire, this narrator behaves more like Amans than Genius:

> Jadis trestout m'abandonoie
> Au foldelit et veine joye,
> Dont ma vesture desguisay
> Et les fols ditz d'amours fesoie,
> Dont en chantant je carolloie:
> Mais ore je m'aviseray
> Et tout cela je changeray,
> Envers dieu je supplieray
> Q'il de sa grace me convoie;
> Ma conscience accuseray,
> Un autre chançon chanteray
> Que jadys chanter ne soloie.
> (lines 27337–48)

> In olden days I gave myself freely to wantonness and vain joy. I decked myself out in fancy clothes and composed foolish love ditties, which I danced about singing. But now I will take thought, and I will change all that. I will beg God to accompany me with His favor. I will accuse my conscience, and I will sing a different song from the one I used to sing. (Wilson, 358)

Gower uses his narrator to demonstrate the effect of his sententious text by showing us a speaker who has absorbed the lessons of the treatise on virtues

and vices and the estates satire. This speaker has applied those lessons to his own life and claims to have been profoundly transformed. He asserts that he has left love poetry—"ditz d'amours"—and its performance behind in order to sing a new song, one that will transform listeners by making them feel sorrow at the beginning and spiritual joy at the end, "Au commencer dolour avras / Et au fin joye espirital" (lines 27353–54). This new song is a song of the heart, "un chançon cordial" (line 27351), and it describes the reform of a single person—the narrator—as he prays to the Blessed Virgin for help. The introduction of this confessional mode retrospectively frames the entire project, making the three genres that comprise the *Mirour* part of a highly personalized narrative of sin and forgiveness.

Despite his confident assertion that "Un autre chançon chanteray" [I will sing a different song], the narrator comes close to despair; he is so overcome with shame that he fears God—"Comment vendray mon dieu devant?" [How shall I come before my God?] (line 27403)—and turns to the Virgin Mary for help: "je supplie nepourqant / Ma dame plaine du pité" [nevertheless I pray to my Lady full of pity] (lines 27407–27408). The account of the Virgin's life that follows is intimate and subjective; the narrator interjects his own pleas for mercy and assistance into the story, repeatedly reminding readers of his anxieties about his own sinfulness and inadequacy.[8] In contrast, the didactic and satirical modes of the first two-thirds of the *Mirour* are typically rationalistic, with distanced or highly conventional narrators, and objective rather than affective sensibilities; these modes are designed to convince readers through reason and logic rather than emotional identification. Gower's introduction of the first-person complaint, in which the speaker solicits the affective identification of listeners or readers, occurs just as his exploration of the problems of blame and causation—initiated by his discussion of Fortune—becomes urgent. The narrator's profound shame at his own culpability for the condition of the world disrupts the forward progress of the *Mirour,* making it essential that he assuage his guilt for the text to continue. The remedy for disabling guilt is, unsurprisingly, prayer and repentance; the "Life of the Virgin" offers the narrator the chance to engage in both, particularly as it reaches its conclusion.

This emergent tension in Gower's conception of poetics, between its didactic function and its sensuality, becomes most pronounced as the narrator engages in prayer, a mode both exemplary (designed to model the proper attitude to divinity) and mimetic (as it strives to reproduce the experience of

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8. See, for example, lines 27901–12 and lines 28585–96.

encountering the divine). As a result, I have chosen to focus here on the lyrical prayer with which Gower concludes the *vita*. Although the larger narrative of the Virgin's life—especially its representation of the Annunciation, in which Mary is asked to submit to the will of God—persistently engages the problems of agency and consent, the concluding prayer forges a striking link between the discourse of agency and the discourse of sensibility, one that makes it possible to specify the relation of poetry to Fortune.[9] In so doing, it anticipates the aesthetic concerns of the *Vox* and the *Confessio,* and makes an important claim for the domain of the sensual as the proper domain of poetics.

As Gower's narrator tells us, for the Virgin's "remembrance / De ton honour et ta plesance" [remembrance of [her] honour and [her] pleasure] (line 29905), he will write down her various names. He then constructs an elaborate apostrophe, comprising a series of names and metaphors without any narrative or commentary:

> O dame, pour la remembrance
> De ton honour et ta plesance
> Tes nouns escrivre je voldrai;
> Car j'ay en toy tiele esperance,
> Que tu m'en fretz bonne alleggance,
> Si humblement te nomerai.
> Pour ce ma langue enfilerai,
> Et tout mon cuer obeierai,
> Solonc ma povre sufficance,
> Tes nouns benoitz j'escriveray,
> Au fin que je par ce porray,
> Ma dame, avoir ta bienvuillance.
>
> O mere et vierge sanz lesure,
> O la treshumble creature,

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9. I discuss the Virgin's life in a longer version of this article. Gower turns to the Marian *vita* because it is a narrative that highlights a distinct moment of human choice: Mary's acquiescence to God's will when she agrees to bear his son. Significantly, that positive choice is in fact a decision to become the passive object of God's action; the Virgin accepts God's wishes by saying "thy will be done," thus placing herself in divine hands and allowing herself to be impregnated. For Gower, it is essential that the Virgin consent to the use of her body as a staging ground for the redemption of humankind, because Christianity itself is thus founded upon an initial act of free will. This display of free choice enables Gower not only to explore the nature of positive action, but also to meditate on the relationship between poetry and the theology of free will.

Joye des angles gloriouse,
O merciable par droiture,
Restor de nostre forsfaiture,
Fontaine en grace plentevouse,
O belle Olive fructuouse,
Palme et Cipresse preciouse,
O de la mer estoille pure,
O cliere lune esluminouse,
O amiable, o amourouse
Du bon amour qui toutdis dure.

O rose sanz espine dite,
Odour de balsme, o mirre eslite,
O fleur du lys, o turturelle,
O vierge de Jesse confite,
Commencement de no merite,
O dieu espouse, amye, ancelle,
O debonaire columbelle,
Sur toutes belles la plus belle,
O gemme, o fine Margarite,
Mere de mercy l'en t'appelle,
Tu es de ciel la fenestrelle
Et porte a paradis parfite.

O gloriouse mere dée,
Vierge des vierges renommée,
De toy le fils dieu deigna nestre;
O temple de la deité,
Essample auci de chastité,
(lines 29905–45 [end])

[O Lady, for the remembrance of your honor and your pleasure, I should like to write your names. For I have such hope in you that if I thus name you humbly, you will alleviate my burdens. Therefore, I will prepare my tongue, and I will completely obey my heart; I will write your blessed names as best I can, according to my poor ability, to the end that I may have, my Lady, your good will.

O Mother and unblemished Virgin, O very humble creature, glorious joy of the angels, O justly merciful restorer of what we forfeited, fountain plentiful in grace, O beautiful fruitful olive tree, palm and precious cypress, O

pure star of the sea, O bright luminous moon, O lovable, O loving with the good love that lasts forever!

O rose named without thorns, fragrance of balsam, O finest myrrh, O flower of the lily, O turtledove, O Virgin of Jesse's line, beginning of our merit, O spouse of God, beloved, handmaiden of God, O gentle dove, the most beautiful above all the beautiful, O gem, O fine pearl, mother of mercy you are called; you are the window of heaven and gate to perfect Paradise.

O glorious Mother of God, famed Virgin of virgins, the Son of God deigned to be born of you; O temple of the Deity, and example also of chastity . . .] (Wilson, 395)

The apostrophe is purposeful: as the narrator tells us, "Que tu m'en fretz bonne alleggance, / Si humblement te nomerai" (lines 29900–10) [if I thus name you humbly, you will alleviate my burdens] (Wilson, 395). These names function as praise: they are metaphors drawn from the natural world that honor the virgin by suggesting that she resembles the items catalogued: flowers, trees, fragrances, birds, gems, and the sea. Each of these items is characterized by stasis; the olive tree is ever in fruit, the rose blooms perpetually, the pearls glow and the ocean shines forever. This stasis contrasts markedly with the natural images from the apostrophe to Fortune earlier in the *Mirour:*

O tu Fortune la marage,
Ore es tout coye au sigle et nage,
Menable et du paisible port;
Ore es ventouse, plein du rage,
Des haltes ondes tant salvage,
Que l'en ne puet nager au port:
Tu es d'estée le bell desport
Flairant, mais plus sodain que mort
Deviens utouse et yvernage;
Tu es le songe qant l'en dort,
Qe tous biens par semblante apport,
Mais riens y laist de l'avantage.
(lines 22105–16)

[O vexatious Fortune, now you are quiet for sailing and voyaging, pleas-
ant and of peaceful demeanor, now you are windy and full of such savage

storm with high waves that one cannot sail to port. You are the fine fra-
grant entertainment of summer, but, more sudden than death, you become
turbid and wintry. You are the dream when one sleeps that brings the
appearance of all good things but leaves nothing of value.] (Wilson, 293)

Fortune's sea is windy and changeable; her fragrance fades and her flowers
are covered with snow. Unlike the metaphors describing the Blessed Virgin,
these images embody variation and alteration; they are active predicates that
create change and motion. All of the action, in fact, resides in the goddess
and her wheel: Gower's narrator can do no more than represent her, not in
the hope of creating a changed world, but rather as a way of illustrating the
perils of attributing causes to Fortune rather than to human agency. For-
tune's variability is the source of her danger, and the representation of that
variability requires an aesthetic mode that is adequate to its magnitude, a
magnitude that seems to be beyond human measurement and comprehen-
sion. That mode is the sublime. Immanuel Kant describes the sublime as
having "a magnitude that is equal only to itself," by which he means that the
greatness of the sublime consists not in the measurement of something very
large, but rather in a "striving to advance to the infinite" that originates in
the human mind.[10] In other words, Fortune represents an attempt to come
to terms with the sublimity of contingency, the degree to which chance *seems*
infinitely variable and overwhelmingly powerful—though of course, in Boe-
thian and providential terms, nothing about chance is random. The fact that
human beings experience chance in that way is a measure of their distance
from God and their inability to grasp his larger plan.

The metaphors through which Gower describes Fortune are all illustra-
tions of nature's power and changeability—the storm at sea, the dying flow-
ers—and they arouse sensations in the reader that mimic the experience of
the sublime, the human encounter with radical contingency and uncertainty.
As Edmund Burke explains, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the
ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is
conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to ter-
ror, is a source of the sublime."[11] Fortune's description—the way in which
she is likened to a "savage storm with high waves," so violent that she traps
sailors at sea, "more sudden than death" and "turbid and wintry"—exploits
the sensations of pain and danger brought about by uncontrolled natural

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10. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment,* ed. Paul Guyer and trans. Paul Guyer and
Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Book II.25, p. 134.

11. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beauti-
ful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1767), Part I, section 7, page 58.

forces in order to create in the reader the feeling of the sublime—the feeling of being faced with the arbitrariness of life in the world. The aesthetic of the sublime, the metaphors for Fortune, mediate between the sensuous experience of "pain and danger" and the mental experience of the sublime, the human confrontation with the idea of a contingency beyond comprehension. Fortune stands in for this idea, lending it a human shape and a form made legible by the aesthetic of pain and danger, the mode of the sublime. It is a mode mistakenly associated with Fortune, whose infinity—her infinite variability, her inhuman power—is fundamentally deceptive; she may seem like a goddess, but she is at root a metaphor, firmly yoked to a providential understanding of human history. But as Gower recognizes, the expressive mode of the sublime is essential to representing the human *perception* of contingency, even if that perception is a false one.

In Gower's description of Fortune in the *Mirour,* the sublime functions descriptively but does not incite action; it evokes emotion as a warning, but never implies that it can produce change in the world. In contrast, the prayer to the Virgin has a purpose; it is designed to convince Mary to act in favor of the supplicant. Paradoxically, it is the purposefulness of the "naming" of the Virgin that explains why the list of names—unlike the predicate-laden apostrophe to Fortune—is unchanging and still. The act of nominalizing the Virgin transfers energy from Fortune's apostrophe to the exchange between supplicant and divinity. The narrator creates a lyrical object in order to give it to the Virgin as a gift, an act of piety that engages the recipient in a process of give and take. Though Fortune is described in active and forceful images, the genre of complaints to Fortune is sterile; there can be no exchange, because Fortune does not engage in bargaining. She is either relentlessly arbitrary or subordinate to God's will, in which case she lacks the power to act.[12] As a result, complaints to Fortune, no matter how forceful, lack efficacy; the complainant is powerless to effect change because Fortune herself is unchanging in her changeability. In contrast, the Virgin's names, layered atop one another in elegant and pleasing fashion, offer the devotion and praise that can compel her to act in favor of the narrator.

As a formal matter, the contrast between Fortune and the Virgin represents a clash of discursive modes. It is a clash concealed by the sheer size

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12. Indeed, when Boethius' Lady Philosophy ventriloquizes Fortune in book 2 of the *Consolation,* the first thing she says is "Quid tu homo ream me cotidianis agis querelis?" [Why, man, do you daily complain against me?]; Philosophy herself explains: "Fortunae te regendum dedisti; dominae moribus oportet obtemperes. Tu vero volventis rotae impetum retinere conaris? At, omnium mortalium stolidissime, si manere incipit, fors esse desistit." [You have given yourself over to fortune's rule: you must accommodate yourself to your mistress's ways. Will you really try to stop the whirl of her turning wheel? Why, you are the biggest fool alive—if it once stop, it ceases to be the wheel of fortune].

of the *Mirour* as a whole, which surrounds these two female figures with literary and religious conventions and obscures their significance. In large part, the *Mirour* describes effects rather than causes—responses to events in the world (vices and virtues) and the degraded condition of social groups (estates satire). Even the Virgin's "Life" is a narrative of effects, the consequences of God's decision to save humanity. The descriptions of Fortune and the Virgin stand in stark relief against this background, highlighted as attempts to account for the *causes* of events and conditions in the world. Fortune demands the mode of the sublime; the Virgin requires a poetics of beauty. Fortune wreaks havoc; the Virgin answers prayers. In so doing, the two figures function in diametrically opposed ways. Fortune enables a poetry of action and motion; the very act of representation requires the poet to mimic her variability, changeability, and force. The Virgin, in contrast, demands a poetry of images and names; representing her requires a poetics that resists temporality and embraces stasis *even though* (or perhaps *because*) it is designed to elicit a response. These are two very different poetic modes, particularly when considered in relation to the tension between didacticism and sensibility that structures the *Mirour* throughout. The overall shape of the work, which leads up to the apostrophe to the Virgin, seems at first glance designed to illustrate the foolishness of trusting Fortune and the virtue of praying to Mary, showing how human beings are paralyzed by a model of causation that is subject to Fortune, but enabled by a model that includes an intermediary and rewards supplication.

But this conclusion is not, in formal terms, really a conclusion; the text simply breaks off part way through the list of names, making it difficult to interpret the *Mirour* in this progressive, linear way. The sudden ending leaves intact the two modes that are embodied by the apostrophes to Fortune and to the Virgin, which might usefully be labeled "narrative" and "lyric" (one signifying action, the other temporal stillness). The *Mirour* is suspended rather than concluded; Fortune is never completely abjured and the Virgin never takes action as a mediator or intercessor. Instead, several of the manuscript's final leaves are missing, making it impossible to determine how Gower would have ended the text, or what he would have concluded after his prayer to the Virgin. Despite this accident of textual history, the opposition the *Mirour* creates between narrative and lyric remains critical to understanding Gower's attempts to juggle the competing elements of his poetic identity. The fact that the two modes remain in suspension at the end of the *Mirour* may be an accident, but it is a prescient one; as the *Confessio Amantis* will show, Gower discovers that he cannot accomplish his poetic

tasks without narrative—and it is narrative that is Fortune's province, her special discursive form. The final book of the *Confessio,* which tells the story of Apollonius of Tyre, illustrates the dependence of the romance genre on the twists and turns of Fortune; romance requires unexpected events, unpredictable disasters, and chance encounters in order to function. Even though individual stories within the romance genre might be told and re-told, becoming familiar to their audiences, events within the narrative are still described as sudden, random, and surprising for the characters, who are subject to the vicissitudes of Fortune. The romance genre thus relies on Fortune to create narratives of suspense and fulfillment, and functions very differently from the kind of narrative found in genres like the saint's life or the Marian *vita,* particularly when the story being told is familiar to every Christian.

The "Life of the Virgin" has no room for Fortune; all of its events are familiar and all were accomplished according to the will of God. The narrative mode I have linked to Fortune is inimical to such stories; even though Marian lives consist of a sequence of events, those events are never presented as the shocking or surprising interventions of Fortune that characterize the romance. Instead, readers experience the story as the unfolding of God's plan; even Mary's response to the Annunciation—certainly a surprising moment, from her perspective—firmly emphasizes the intention at work in the Angel's announcement by invoking God's will: "thy will be done." Because the "Life of the Virgin" is so permeated by this sense of intention, its narrative sequence has a ritualized quality, made even more pressing by the repetition of the story in a variety of media in medieval culture—in the liturgy, in multiple Marian *vitae,* in cycle plays, and elsewhere. It is this predictability that produces Gower's turn to the lyrical list of names at the end of the *Mirour.* The lyrical mode allows him to experiment with the sensuality of devotional language and to push the voice of the moral poet to its aesthetic limits. It also, retrospectively, reveals that the opposition between Fortune and the Virgin—narrative and lyric, motion and stasis—is merely part of a larger poetic division in the *Mirour* between the didactic and the sensual or mimetic. This division lies at the heart of Gower's efforts to forge a poetic identity out of the materials available to him, materials ranged along a spectrum from what Chaucer would later call "sentence" to "solaas," the Horatian model of "use and delight."[13]

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13. *Riverside Chaucer,* ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), *General Prologue,* I:798. Subsequent references will be in the text by fragment and line number.

Use and Delight, Didacticism and Mimesis

Throughout the *Mirour,* Gower juxtaposes genres of "useful" writing—the treatise on vices and virtues, the estates satire, and the Marian *vita*—and raises the question of their relationship to the public and to the individual. The narrator moves from the opening treatise, which focuses on individual sin, to an indictment of the realm and the estates that comprise it, before breaking down and lamenting his sinful condition. This movement allows Gower to demonstrate his thesis that man is a microcosm, responsible for all of the ills that afflict the world; in the narrator, he shows readers the proper response of individuals to sinfulness: they must accept responsibility for the effects of their actions on the world, and attempt to remedy sin through prayer. The three genres that make up the work are each characterized by their use of the first person, but it is not until Gower introduces the confessional mode as he turns to the "Life of the Virgin" that those speaking subjects retroactively become one voice. This narratorial voice makes it clear that the individual is the key to changing the world, thereby producing the impression that the function of writing is to create reform; as long as a text can inspire individual change, it has fulfilled its task.

There are three crucial moments in the *Mirour,* however, at which this purely functional model breaks down. These moments of breakdown suggest that Gower has begun to envision a poetics capable of doing more than advising and admonishing its readers. The first of these, Gower's apostrophe to Fortune, suggests that representing difficult and ambiguous concepts demands a special kind of language. Without poetic images like Fortune's double face, her wheel, her dice, and metaphors like "bad weather" or "calm seas" for her actions, ideas like contingency, arbitrariness, and chance would have to be explained to readers using a conceptual—and thus difficult—vocabulary. Gower's goal of writing for lay people makes it clear that he plans to write in nontechnical, nonphilosophical language; like Boethius' Lady Philosophy, he offers "gentle and pleasant" ["molle et iucundum"] medicine, the "sweet persuasiveness of rhetoric" ["Rhetoricae suadella dulcedinis"] (book 2, prose 1)—and like Philosophy, Gower's rhetoric concerns Fortune. The danger of such sweet rhetoric is that it can be directed at the wrong object, as when a man "loe et magnifie" [lauds and exalts] Fortune (line 22121; Wilson, 293)—a foolish kind of praise that results in abuse and suffering at Fortune's hands (not because Fortune responds specifically to individuals, but because all individuals dependent on Fortune must endure eventual suffering). In contrast, Gower's apostrophe, like Lady Philosophy's

description of Fortune, functions as a way of countering that praise—not as its opposite, which would be denigration, but as an instructive and descriptive mode of discourse that negates Fortune by exposing her true nature with the help of the "sweet persuasiveness of rhetoric." Boethius explains why Fortune must be described in this way by using the metaphor of medicine; similarly, the poetically pleasing qualities of Gower's description are designed to prepare the reader for the strong medicine—i.e., the instructions for reform—to follow. This combination of the sensual and the didactic, in which aesthetics are subject to instrumental ends, is familiar to readers of Gower as the presumptive poetic model on which he relies (or seems to rely) throughout his career.

However, when Gower warns against praising Fortune—against using rhetoric for delight, as when a man "loe et magnifie" Fortune (line 22121; Wilson, 293)—he opens the door for the idea that poetic language exceeds instrumentality. This latter suggestion comes to the fore in two subsequent passages, one from the beginning and one from the end of the "Life of the Virgin," which make explicit the metapoetic subtext introduced by the apostrophe to Fortune. These passages deploy a language that specifically conceptualizes what I have called the "poetics of sensation," the appeal to the senses with which a poet can mimetically re-create certain forms of experience for readers. It is from this language that Gower derives a definition of the poet as supplicant, agent, and creator all at once—a definition not limited to usefulness or to the poet's capacity to reform his audience. In the first of these passages, the narrator describes his own sinfulness and seeks a remedy for his spiritual ill-health:

> Pour ce, ma dame, a ta *plesance*
> Solonc ma *povre sufficance*
> *Vuill conter* ta concepcioun,
> Et puis, ma dame, ta naiscance;
> Sique l'en sache ta puissance,
> Qui sont du nostre nacioun:
> Les clerc en scievont la leçoun
> De leur latin, mais autres noun,
> Par quoy en langue de romance
> J'en fray la declaracioun,
> As lays pour enformacioun,
> Et a les clercs pour *remembrance.*
> (lines 27469–80; emphasis added)

> [Therefore, Lady, at your pleasure, according to my poor gifts, I want to
> tell of your conception, and then, Lady, of your birth, so that the people
> of our nation may know your power. The clerics know about it from their
> Latin, but others do not know. Therefore I will make the declaration of it
> in the French tongue for the information of the lay folk and as a reminder
> to the clerics.] (Wilson, 360)

I have already mentioned the significance of Gower's choice of Anglo-
Norman, which is effectively a choice of audience—the people of "nostre
nacioun" who read French but perhaps not Latin, the gentry and aristocracy.
Gower makes it clear here that he is writing for readers both secular and elite,
a group for whom the text functions as an exemplar of right action. This pas-
sage sets in place crucial terms for understanding Gower's poetic vision by
highlighting the relationship between the Virgin and the self-conception of
the narrator. First, the speaker addresses the Virgin directly, indicating condi-
tionally that he "would like to tell" ["vuill conter"] about her conception and
her birth. The uncertainty he expresses by using the conditional phrase rests
on two aspects of the implicit dialogue between the narrator and the Virgin:
first, Mary's "pleasure" ["plesance"] and second, the inadequacy of the narra-
tor, his "povre suffance," meaning his "poor intellectual capacity," his "poor
gifts." These two terms, "plesance" and "suffance," seem at first to be part
of a conventional humility topos, a means for the narrator to emphasize his
inadequacy in the face of the Virgin's great power, her "puissance." However,
they also suggest that "pleasure" and "sufficiency" are crucial notions for
Gower's poetics, dedicated here to efficacious praise.

Unlike the apostrophe to Fortune, the "Life of the Virgin" includes exal-
tation, properly directed praise to a divinity with the power to act. Where
Fortune is arbitrary, the Blessed Virgin responds to prayer; while Fortune
rejects those who praise her, Mary intercedes for her suppliants with great
authority. The narrator must have "suffance," a word that refers to both
"intellectual capacity" and "satisfaction" or "sufficiency"—in other words,
enough.[14] This quality of sufficiency markedly contrasts with the victims of
Fortune, who are either excessively wealthy and powerful or utterly abject,
at the top or bottom of her wheel. It suggests that Gower understands the
role of the poet as a moderating figure, a figure able to mediate between the
divine and human as well as between the clergy and laymen. Even if it is

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14. *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (1330–1500) <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf> (last accessed Sep-
tember 14, 2012), s. v. "suffisance," article 3/12, B ("contentement, satisfaction") and C ("aptitude,
capacité intellectuelle").

"povre," the narrator's "sufficance" is still *enough;* despite labeling himself in a humble way, he is able to recount the Virgin's life with authority.

"Plesance" functions in a similar way to define the role of poetics in relation to both divine and human enterprises. It means, very simply, "pleasure," but Gower's use of the word is not simple. "Plesance" carries with it the connotation of "approval," rendering "a ta plesance" something like "with your approval"—an appropriate phrase for a poet to use when embarking upon praise for a figure of great power like the Virgin. It also suggests "will" or "desire" and thereby implies that the will of the Virgin controls the "Life"; the narrator abdicates his own will by using the phrase "a ta plesance" [at your will], performing his submission to the Virgin even as he repeatedly engages in the powerful practice of naming.[15] It is a practice that comes to fruition in the second metapoetic passage from the "Life," a companion to the first, which appears near the end of the *Mirour:*

> O dame, pour la *remembrance*
> De ton honour et ta *plesance*
> Tes nouns *escrivre* je voldrai;
> Car j'ay en toy tiele esperance,
> Que tu m'en fretz bonne alleggance,
> Si humblement te nomerai.
> Pour ce ma langue enfilerai,
> Et tout mon cuer obeierai,
> Solonc ma *povre sufficance,*
> Tes nouns benoitz *j'escriveray,*
> Au fin que je par ce porray,
> Ma dame, avoir ta bienvuillance.
> (lines 29905–16; emphasis added)

> [O Lady, for the remembrance of your honor and your pleasure, I want to write your names. For I have such hope in you that if I thus name you humbly, you will alleviate my burdens. Therefore, I will prepare my tongue, and I will completely obey my heart; I will write your blessed names as best I can, according to my poor ability, to the end that I may have, my Lady, your good will.] (Wilson, 395)

In this second passage, Gower once again makes explicit the bargain between the Virgin and the narrator; he names her, and she takes away his suffer-

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15. *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français,* s. v. "plaisance," A ("agrément, plaisir") and B ("gré, volunté")

ing. But this simple notion of exchange does not account for the emergent discourse of poetics that characterizes the opening and concluding portions of the *vita.* The key terms—"plesance," "povre suffance," and "remembrance"—appear in both passages, creating a frame around the "Life" that gestures beyond an exchange-based model of prayer by introducing an interpretive vocabulary at the end of the *Mirour* that defines the sensual effects, the writerly qualities, and the narrative function of Gower's poetics. To start with the final term on the list, "remembrance" refers in the first passage to the narrator's original plan for writing the *vita*—as information for lay people and as a "remembrance," or "reminder" to clerics. In the second passage, the narrator once again claims that he is writing for "remembrance," in order to memorialize the "honour" and "plesance"—honor and pleasure—of the Virgin. These uses of "remembrance" point to Gower's investment in history; although the *Mirour* is not a particularly historical poem, Gower understands his writing to have an historical purpose, to be part of the record of the past—and he uses poetry to bring the past to a wider audience of both lay persons and clerics. But "remembrance" is more than the recapitulation of past events, more than simply the memorialization of what has been lost to time. The word itself comes from the Latin *memor,* "mindful, remembering."[16] A close analogue can be found in another Latin word, one which Gower would certainly have known: the verb *membro,* "to form limb by limb" and by extension, *re-membro,* "to form again."[17] Gower's "remembrance" revivifies and reanimates, making the dead live once again; it extends beyond the efficacy of the moral poet to reveal the author as creator, a notion that Gower has repeatedly put forward over the course of the *Mirour.*

Poets can create representations of absent persons, objects, and gods; they can produce imitations that both recall the past and inspire the emotions associated with it. This latter use of the word suggests that the list of names the narrator plans to compile will function like a painting or a statue, as a substitute for the presence of the saint; the Virgin's blessedness will be illustrated mimetically in both its content and its form. The literary devices used to structure the list of names, as well as the referents of those names—flowers, fragrance, stars, trees, gems—imitate the beauty and virtue of the Virgin by embodying her aesthetic values and arousing in readers feelings of admiration and devotion. Gower remakes the Virgin through remembrance, creating a literary object that mimics an encounter with her divinity through sensual experience. This mimesis is not a mode of instruction or reform. It

16. C. T. Lewis and C. Short, eds., *A Latin Dictionary* (http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/reso lveform?redirect=true&lang=Latin; accessed April 5, 2011), s. v. "memor, memoris," I.

17. Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary,* s. v. "membro, membrare," I.

is, rather, an invitation to an experience of sensual excess that articulates the purpose of poetry in a new way. The reader is not asked to change, but rather to remember her own sensory experiences as the poem calls them up and allies them to the divine. She sees again the beauty of a flower and scents its fragrance; the poem disciplines that sensation and its pleasure by transforming them into symbols of divinity, names for the Blessed Virgin.

Coupled with this notion of "remembrance" as a form of experiencing the divine is Gower's concept of writerly adequacy, which he highlights by repeating the phrase "ma povre suffance" at the beginning and end of the *vita.* This gesture of humility posits the notion of *sufficiency* as a human quality essential to poetics. In the first passage, "ma povre suffance" appears at the beginning of the stanza in which Gower describes his project; it governs his narration of the Virgin's conception and birth. This posture of inadequacy carries with it the notion of the poet as a mediator, a humble figure who stands between the Latinate world of clerical knowledge and the lay audience. By the time Gower turns to the list of names for the Virgin that concludes the *vita,* his repetition of the phrase "ma povre suffance" has moved from its governing position at the start of a stanza to its end, following a series of assertions by the narrator that he will take specific actions, summed up in a sequence of four verbs: "escrivre" [to write], "nomer" [to name], "enfiler" [to prepare; literally, to file], and "obeir" [to obey].[18] This sequence of verbs delays the humility topos, "ma povre suffance," until after the work of poetic creation has been broken down into a series of steps, with two primary effects. First, and most obviously, the delay implies that the narrator has become much more assertive over the course of recounting the Virgin's life; he no longer needs the protective cloak provided by his gesture of humility. Second, the list of poetic actions—obeying, preparing, naming, and writing—functions as an implicit definition of "suffance" itself. To have a sufficiency, for a poet, is to be capable of performing a series of poetic acts, here carefully set out one by one as a graduated map of the process of writing poetry. Part of what Gower wishes to accomplish in the "Life," it becomes clear, is to disambiguate poetry as a practice, producing a series of predicates that locates the poet's role in the performance of various discrete and identifiable actions. This focus on the poet as an active and forceful figure not only sets in place Gower's vision of the artist, but it also

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18. The expression "ma langue enfilerai"—"I will file my tongue"—is familiar from Chaucer's uses of it in *Troilus and Criseyde* (2:1681), referring to Pandarus ("This Pandarus gan newe his tong affile"), and in the *General Prologue* (I:712), referring to the Pardoner ("He moste preche and wel affile his tonge"). The *Riverside* notes to *Troilus and Criseyde* suggest that the expression refers to smoothing the tongue, rather than sharpening it, but it clearly means "preparing to speak" in either case.

seamlessly corresponds to the themes with which he has been concerned throughout the *Mirour:* the themes of agency, will, consent, and Fortune. The poet, like every other human being in Gower's model, must embrace agency and align his will properly—he must obey, as well as prepare, name, and write.

This nexus of agency and will is intimately connected to the final—and most significant—poetic term framing the *vita:* "plesance." In my discussion of Gower's first use of the term, I suggested that "plesance" implies both "pleasure" and "will" or "approval" in reference to the Virgin and her response to the narration of her life. Within the broader structure of the "use and delight" model of literature, the introduction of "plesance" marks one of the first times in the *Mirour* that Gower explicitly suggests that pleasure has a place in the text. Indeed, at the very beginning of the larger work, Gower addresses his audience as "amourouse sote gent" [foolish, loving people] (line 19; Wilson 3), and warns that:

> Car s'un soul homme avoir porroit
> Quanq' en son coer souhaideroit
> Du siecle, pour soy deliter,
> Trestout *come songe* passeroit
> En nient, et quant l'en meinz quidoit,
> Par grant dolour doit terminer:
> Et puisque l'amour seculer
> En nient au fin doit retorner,
> Pour ce, *si bon vous sembleroit,*
> Un poy du nient *je vuill conter;*
> Dont quant l'en quide avoir plenier
> La main, tout vuide passer doit.
> (lines 20–32; emphasis added)

> [For if any man could have whatever his heart desired of the world, for his delight, it would all pass away like a dream into nothing and, when he least expected it, end in great sorrow. And because love of the world must turn again to nothing in the end, I want therefore (if it seems good to you) to tell you a little about nothing. When one imagines he has a handful of it, he must go away completely empty.] (Wilson, 3).

In these very first lines of the *Mirour,* the logic of sin that pervades the text is already very clear: those who love the world and who take delight in the world are doomed to lose everything and to end in great sorrow. In this

model, the poet describes the sinfulness of the world in order to expose the foolishness of worldly desires to "whoever wishes to flee evils" ["quiq' en voet fuïr les mals"] (line 10). The *Mirour* thus begins by establishing the narrator as an arbiter of morals, firmly placing pleasure on the side of sin and insisting that delight is "come songe" [like a dream] (line 23); the individual imagines ["quide"] that his hand is full ["plenier / La main"] (lines 31–32) of whatever he desires in the world. The human imagination, according to this logic, is a treacherous thing; it deceives human beings by convincing them that delight in the world is satisfying—that their hands are full—when in fact they are bereft, completely empty, with no real goodness (the goodness of God) to give them lasting satisfaction. The narrator offers his text as a demystification of the imaginary plenitude offered by worldly delight, saying to readers, "I want to tell you a little about nothing" ["Un poy du nient *je vuill conter*"] (line 30).

This process of demystification seems to promise a negation of pleasure and delight, a demonstration that the imagination and its fruits are fundamentally unreal: "nient" [nothing], "vuide" [empty]. However, one clause hints at the metapoetic discourse that will emerge as the frame for the "Life of the Virgin": "je vuill conter" [I want to tell] (line 30). Here, the narrator addresses the audience using the same construction he will later use to address the Virgin, "je vuill conter," a phrase that appears at the start of the *vita:* "*Vuill conter* ta concepcioun, / Et puis, ma dame, ta naiscance (lines 27471–72). The narrator's use of the phrase at the beginning of the *Mirour* is part of a gentle address to his readers, which solicits their consent for the sermon to follow and asks them to judge the quality of his wish—whether it "sembleroit bon" [seems good] (line 29) or not. This gesture to the critical faculties of his readers is echoed at the start of the *vita,* when the narrator addresses the Virgin by saying "a ta plesance" [at your pleasure] (line 27469), "vuill conter" [I want to tell] (line 27471). In both cases, the act of telling depends on the assent of the audience; either human readers find the narrator's plan "bon," or the Blessed Virgin finds "plesance" in the prospect of hearing the narration of her own life. The difference between "bon" [good] and "plesance" [pleasure] lies in the relationship of human beings to the category of pleasure, which is inextricably bound up with the body and thus with sin. When Gower chooses the term "bon," he deliberately selects a word that suggests spiritual good rather than pleasure. He proleptically informs readers that what he has written is designed to be judged by the higher faculties of human beings, those faculties that assess the virtue of the text by evaluating what "seems good" in it. In contrast, although delight and pleasure, enjoyment and "solaas," are poetic qualities, they are also dangerously

linked to lechery, overindulgence, and physical excessiveness of all kinds, as Gower's lengthy treatise on the vices repeatedly reminds his audience. That is why, when "plesance" appears in the text, it is firmly linked to the Virgin; the dangers of pleasure do not afflict her as they afflict human beings, who must be reminded to seek out the good.

"If it seems good to you" ["si bon vous sembleroit"] is one of two references in this passage to "seeming," to the deceptiveness of the world and to the uncertainty of human perception. In the second reference, Gower explains that if man could have all that he desired, "Trestout *come songe* passeroit / En nient" [it would all pass away *like a dream* into nothing] (lines 23–24). The anxiety expressed here about the human capacity to judge reality, to know when dreams are real and when they are false or to assess the virtue of a text, is assuaged at the end of the *Mirour* by the narrator's request for the Virgin's approval before writing the *vita*. For Gower, this request is a poetic device, designed to authorize his text and to introduce the notion of "plesance" without the implication of licentious desire or worldly delight. In neither of the framing passages from the "Life" quoted above is "plesance" associated with any being but the Virgin herself. It is "at her pleasure" that the *vita* begins, and when the narrator turns to the list of names at the end, he claims that it is "pour la remembrance / De ton honour et ta plesance" [for the remembrance of your honor and your pleasure] (lines 29905–6). This syntax offers more than one potential meaning for the line. While it is possible to see "ta plesance" as subject to "remembrance" (so that what is remembered is the Virgin's "honor and plesance"), it is also possible to read "remembrance" and "plesance" as a pair, coupled inside the prepositional phrase begun by "pour" (so that the line might be translated as "for the remembrance of your honor and for your pleasure"). In the first case, what is remembered is the Virgin's honor and her pleasure, meaning either her approval of the *vita* or her pleasure at bearing Christ. In the second case, it is the narrator's recitation of her names that is associated with the Virgin's pleasure; "pour . . . ta plesance, tes nouns escrivre je voldrai" [for your pleasure, I would like to write your names] (lines 29905–7). This latter interpretation suggests that the purpose of writing is to give delight, to create pleasure for the listener or reader, who is represented here by the Blessed Virgin. In some ways, the *Mirour* has traveled a great distance from the anxious "si bon vous sembleroit" [if it seems good to you] with which it began. But Gower's solution to this original anxiety about the delights of the world, "l'amour seculer" [love of the world] (line 31), is not a human solution. He can make room for "plesance" only by projecting it onto a divine creature, one whose identity is premised on her freedom from the desires of the flesh, the Virgin Mary.

There is a great gulf between this "plesance" and the "moost solaas" (I:798) of Chaucer's ebullient Host in the *Canterbury Tales.* At the same time, however, the emergence of "plesance" at the end of the *Mirour* represents Gower's recognition that the aesthetic value of poetry is in part dictated by its sensuality, by the ways in which it uses language mimetically to arouse emotions and feelings and to reproduce beauty and sublimity, here, in the figures of the Virgin and Fortune. This recognition makes explicit a change in the *Mirour's* understanding of poetics that gradually emerges over the course of the poem, a shift made manifest by a difference in Gower's use of self-referential language between the poem's opening verses and the concluding list of names for the Virgin. Until the final passage from the *vita,* Gower primarily uses the verb "conter," "to tell," to refer to his literary practice; as I have noted above, he deploys the phrase "je vuill conter" [I want to tell] to introduce both the Virgin's life and the *Mirour* as a whole. At the very end of the text, however, Gower twice describes his naming of the Virgin using the verb "escrivre," "to write." This movement from "conter" to "escrivre" alters the discursive mode that has dominated the *Mirour.* No longer is Gower instructing, teaching, or preaching; no longer is the text didactic. Instead, moralizing poetry—telling—is replaced by writing, a particular way of using language to create a site for contemplation and reflection.

Gower's emphasis on writing evokes the materiality of the text, the way in which something written is an object as well as a sequence of words. In writing, language acquires a solidity that it lacks in telling. As the spoken word is transformed into marks on paper, the temporality of language is altered; what is ephemeral is captured and preserved, the fleeting utterance becomes the long-lasting page. In contrast, Gower's use of "conter" aligns his text with the exemplary tradition, a kind of writing that perpetually recalls its relationship to spoken forms like the sermon, in which the exemplum is recounted in the service of a moral. How the exemplum is told hardly matters; the audience listens for its *sentence* and extracts the lesson from its form. But when Gower highlights the writtenness of the naming passage, he explicitly invites readers to linger over it, to attend to the profusion of names without being goaded to a conclusion by the forward-driving force of narrative. Indeed, the naming passage goes in no direction and proceeds to no end; it repeats the same gesture over and over as the list of names grows, all with the same referent. It is as if Gower engraves a memorial with a series of epitaphs, covering the top and bottom and front and back of the stone in order to instantiate divinity from every angle and perspective.

Readers experience this writtenness as an exercise in transforming the many into the one, as the incantatory sequence of names arouses a variety

of sense perceptions, each of which substitutes for direct experience of the divine. Readers see the "cliere lune esluminouse" [bright luminous moon] (line 22926, Wilson, 395), they smell the "odour de balsme" [fragrance of balsam] (line 22930), they feel the "rose sanz epine" [rose without thorns], and they hear the sonorous assonance and consonance of Gower's verse, "O amiable, o amourouse / Du bon amour qui toutdis dure" (lines 29927–28). The Blessed Virgin is thus made somatically real as she is translated into a series of bodily sensations that focus and intensify contemplation. The naming passage invites readers to read again, to let time stand still as they experience those sensations and thereby experience, through language, divinity itself. That experience is mimetic in a specific way: Gower's list of names does not itself imitate the Blessed Virgin, but rather mimics the human experience of the ineffable, that which is beyond language and rational understanding. This mimesis is an artifact of writing, as opposed to telling, and it represents a special kind of aesthetic practice. It is a practice unburdened by temporality or by contingency; it is instead ornamented, layered, and beautiful. It is designed to appeal to the senses. Gower may have displaced "plesance" from humans to the Virgin, substituting divine for worldly delight, but the naming passage belies this displacement by repeatedly calling upon sensory pleasure to represent the Blessed Mother. The list of names binds "plesance" to the discourse of devotion, producing a vision of poetics that can include both the moralizing narratives of the *Mirour* and its lyrical passages of praise. Indeed, "plesance" enables remembrance—the other function of poetry defined by the *vita*—by appealing to the sensual, embodied nature of human beings, fixing the Virgin in their minds by linking her to feelings of pleasure and enjoyment.

When the *Mirour* ends, it does so suddenly and reluctantly; the loss of its final leaves deprives readers of Gower's conclusion, which might have resolved some of the questions raised by the metapoetic gestures with which he frames his "Life of the Virgin." At the same time, however, it is clear that Gower seeks, at the very end of his text, to find a way to synthesize the concern for agency provoked by Fortune and the aesthetic values he finds essential to the production of verse. As I have suggested, Fortune can signify in multiple ways, as a principle of contingency, an artifact of providence, and as an excuse for human failings. In all of these cases, the remedy for Fortune is agency, the assertion of the human will and the refusal of bodily desire. Gower knows full well, however, the limits of agency within the Christian model of freedom derived from St. Augustine: acts of free will require the grace of God; such acts depend upon an acquiescence to God's will; and "freedom" does not mean *freedom to* act but rather *freedom from* the desires of

the flesh.[19] Because the Augustinian model understands agency to be derived from submission to God's will, not from the overt acts—good or evil—of human beings, it exerts an implicit pressure on Gower's vision of human sin as the source of the world's ills. This pressure accounts for the complexity of Gower's representations of agency in the *Mirour* and elsewhere; though he explicitly embraces an agency founded on action rather than on submission, he also repeatedly undermines that notion, either by exploring the relationship of human beings to the divine or by depicting Fortune as irresistible contingency, as a force of changeability that agency cannot remedy.

The contradictory and troublesome status of agency has an important bearing on Gower's attempts to craft a poetic identity and to negotiate his own understanding of the value and purpose of creative work. His embrace of an agency of acts seems to correspond with a vision of poetics that is didactic and functional; just as human actions have effects in the world, so too does moralizing poetry reform its readers. But Gower's turn to praise at the end of the *Mirour* belies the apparent functionalism of his philosophical statements. The sensory appeal of his praise for the Virgin, its determined engagement with embodied pleasure, divulges Gower's fascination with the capacity of the aesthetic to mirror and to evoke the divine. In contrast, Fortune represents an inverse aesthetic; whether she stands for contingency, for providence, or for fate, Fortune is herself an aesthetic device designed to communicate difficult concepts to people unfamiliar with abstraction. That is why allusions to Fortune are often accompanied by elaborate and vivid descriptions, much like the one that Gower includes in the estates satire portion of the *Mirour.* But the aesthetic qualities associated with praise or exaltation are turned upside-down by Fortune, whose image always includes oppositions like crying and laughing, high and low, stormy and calm, and so forth. Hers is an aesthetic of contradiction, one that is thoroughly committed to the body and to the variability of emotion and desire.

In the *Mirour,* this discourse of Fortune stands in tension with the language of praise for the Virgin. At the same time, both modes of expression

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19. See St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei,* ed. William Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), volume IV, Book XIV, for extensive discussion of free will. I use Henry Bettenson's translation: *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (London: Penguin Books, 1972). Augustine states that "the choice of the will, then, is genuinely free only when it is not subservient to faults and sins" (569), and later argues that "the retribution for disobedience is simply disobedience itself. For man's wretchedness is nothing but his own disobedience to himself, so that because he would not do what he could, he now wills to do what he cannot. . . . Even against his volition his mind is often troubled; and his flesh experiences pain, grows old, and dies, endures all manner of suffering. We should not endure all this against our volition if our natural being were in every way and in every part of obedience to our will" (575–76).

constitute aspects of the aesthetic that exceed the didactic (sublimity in the case of Fortune, beauty in the figure of the Virgin) and thereby produce a mimesis that goes beyond instrumentality to reproduce the human experience of the ineffable—of radical contingency or of divinity. This mimesis is not goal-directed; it does not recreate experience in order to compel readers to act in a particular way. Indeed, readers are not necessary to it. Rather, the poet's production of experience has significance in and of itself, because it creates an object in which the potential energies of contradiction, sublimity, beauty, and delight are stored—a kind of cultural battery that captures some of the power exerted by those forces to which human beings are subject, forces like contingency, unpredictability, God himself.

These forces are threats to human agency, reminders that human beings are surrounded by powers far greater than themselves. Gower's description of Fortune and his list of names for the Virgin represent two attempts to negotiate the relationship between that subjection and the desire for agency implicit in all of his work. In both cases, he turns to aesthetic modes of expression as a way of exerting control over the powerlessness endemic to human life. Such modes function by mimetically reproducing the human experience of contingency or the divine, sublimity or the beautiful. By establishing himself as the author of this mimesis, Gower begins to articulate a notion of literary authority that allows the poet to have agency while remaining committed to the ideals of didactic work. His representation of Fortune catches hold of contingency by deploying contradictory predicates, substituting mimesis for the kind of overt and didactic warning he deploys in the *Vox* and *Confessio.* In the list of names that concludes the *Mirour,* Gower produces a sensory aesthetic that mimetically reproduces an experience of beauty, which proclaims its subordination to divinity while also enabling him to take up the powerful position of the names. Just as the Virgin hails God in her answer to the angel Gabriel, so too does Gower hail the Virgin, defining her—indeed, creating her—in poetry. Though the Virgin inevitably supersedes Fortune, since it is through her intercession that human flaws can be overcome, the two figures remain bound together in the *Mirour* by the poetics of sensation through which they are represented. In his later work, Gower will confront Fortune, agency, and divinity many more times, and he will negotiate their demands in different ways. The solution he finds in the *Mirour* to the problems of poetic agency and poetic sensuality—its "plesance"—lies in his turn to lyric naming, but it is only a stopgap; he must still address his role as a public poet, negotiate the relationship of Latin and vernacular languages, and, finally, grapple with narrative and its relation to contingency.

What the *Mirour* demonstrates, however, is how Gower creates a space for sensation within the didactic poetic structure that he feels compelled to reproduce. It is a space that opens up in his later work in innovative and often surprising ways. Gower's use of the expressive modes of the sublime and the beautiful, transmitted through the poetics of sensation, reveals to us a poet far more complex than he seems at first glance, when his penchant for moral poetry tends to override the formal subtleties of his verse. Perhaps the word that best describes the *Mirour de l'Omme*—a word that captures the sense in which it is both didactic and sensual—is "experimental." It is a word that reminds us that Gower was surrounded by competing literary traditions in multiple languages, genres, registers, and styles, and that he understood his role as a poet to be a form of negotiation that could both reconcile and exploit those traditions' clashes and contradictions.

Identifying the experimental quality of the *Mirour* is a first step toward accounting for Gower's multilingualism, because it allows us to see that he was not simply imitating his literary predecessors. Gower sought, throughout his career, to build a body of work that persistently experimented with tradition—literary tradition, philosophical tradition, discursive tradition—by exploring the ways in which sensory data allow human beings to apprehend ideas and realities in language. This exploration, carried on in French, Latin, and English, repeatedly asks what poetry is *for*. As the *Mirour* shows, the answer to that question must be sought at the juncture of experience and ideation—the point at which the particular and the abstract make contact—and that juncture is only visible in modes of representation, such as poetry or other kinds of art. For Gower, the poetics of sensation I have described in the *Mirour* provides a means by which the fusion of sense data and abstraction can be mimetically reproduced. This mimesis is not an imitation of reality or of a past text, but a means by which experience can be reproduced again and again. Recreating the experience of the sublime or the beautiful, radical contingency or divinity, lies at the heart of Gower's aesthetic enterprise, beginning with the *Mirour* and persisting throughout his career, and always in tension with (but never subordinate to) his identity as "moral Gower."