

**CONTROLLING
THE
UNCONTROLLABLE:
LOVE AND FORTUNE IN
BOOK I OF THE
CONFESSIO AMANTIS**

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Sunt in agone pares amor et fortuna, que cecas
Plebis ad insidias vertit vterque rotas.

Confessio Amantis I.i.5-6¹

Abstract

This article explores the connections between the views of Love and Fortune in the *Confessio Amantis* and in works by Guillaume de Machaut. It demonstrates Machaut's anti-Boethian views that the worthy lover may escape Fortune's control through the exercise of virtue and applies those views to Gower's presentation of both love and political fortunes. In the Prologue and Book I, in particular, Gower establishes Love and Fortune as essentially interchangeable, preparing the reader to understand each as the product of reciprocal relationships between people, rather than the result of Fortune or Love capriciously turning a wheel. The *Confessio* thus aims to enable readers to adopt virtuous behaviors, not to court love but rather to court good fortune more broadly.

Keywords: *Confessio Amantis*, Guillaume de Machaut, Fortune, anti-Boethian views, politics, ethics, self-governance.

The opening Latin gloss to Book I of the *Confessio Amantis* evokes the inherent instabilities among nature, love, and harmony, as other scholars have noted (Peck 2000:303 n.1; Wetherbee 1991), but it also draws a crucial parallel

¹ "Equal in the contest are Love and Fortune, both of which turn their blind wheels to entrap the people." All quotations and translations from the *Confessio* derive from Peck (2000-2004).

between Love and Fortune. Both are “equal” and blindly operate wheels that create problems for mankind. Of course, the equation of Fortune and Love is familiar from French *dits amoureux*, but I should like to focus on a particular precedent in works of Guillaume de Machaut that explores how a lover can prevent Fortune from affecting his pursuit of a lady. Machaut has often been cited as a source whose narrator personae influenced Gower’s portrayal of Amans/John Gower, but the question of how his views of Fortune affect Gower’s *Confessio* has yet to be explored.

As several scholars have pointed out, Machaut’s work provides models for Gower’s ethics of love and for the portrayal of his fictional poetic persona (Burrow 1983; Zeeman 1991; Butterfield 2004:172-78; Nicholson 2005:9-32). These studies lay the foundation for considering how other aspects of Machaut’s poetry influenced the *Confessio*, such as how Machaut’s views on Fortune may have shaped Gower’s political and ethical perspectives. In his courtly poetry, Machaut’s revisions to the Boethian view of Fortune are essential to constructing a fantasy in which the lover may control Fortune (and thus Love) through virtuous actions. As I will argue, Gower applies Machaut’s imaginative conception of Love and Fortune not only to amorous pursuits but also to political and ethical aspirations. My epigraph lines bridge the political discourse of the Prologue and the courtly framework of Book I to signal that the notion of Fortune ties the political and amorous content of the work together. Thus, the fantasy of controlling Fortune binds the two seemingly distinct discourses of the *Confessio* together and ultimately produces a sense of continuity between the Prologue’s political discourses and the lover’s confession in Book I. Gower’s representation of the ties between love and Fortune demonstrates his close engagement with and careful response to Machaut’s ideas, in opposition to prevalent Boethian concepts of Fortune.

MACHAUT’S CONSOLATION OF LOVE

The late medieval view of Fortune stems from the Boethian model in which the goddess assails all of mankind, and men can only escape her by transcending earthly travails to focus on spiritual fulfillment. As Sylvia Huot (2002) has demonstrated, much of Machaut’s poetry challenges the Boethian perspective to console a lover by asserting that he may escape Fortune’s control and win his earthly reward (his lady).² These notions are perhaps most clearly developed in the *Jugement dou Roi de Behaingne* (c. 1330s) and *Remède de*

² See also Calin 1974:61; Brownlee 1984:50-51; Phillips 1999:130-32.

Fortune (1340s-1350s), but they also appear in the *Confort d'Ami* (1356-1357), where they coexist with political consolation for Machaut's imprisoned patron Charles of Navarre.³ Over the course of these works, Machaut challenges Boethianism by interpreting Fortune not as an uncontrollable capricious force but rather as the consequence of a lover's immoral choices.

For example, the jilted male lover of the *Jugement dou Roi de Behaingne* undertakes a process of self-evaluation in which he considers all those he might blame for his lady leaving him for another man. He begins to conflate Fortune and Love, seeing himself first as the victim of Fortune's instability and then of Love's urging his lady to love another (725-70). Next he recognizes that his failure cannot be attributed to Fortune (for she treats everyone with equal indifference) or to Love (which he targeted to avoid blaming his beloved); he almost recognizes that his decision to love caused his suffering (820-31). Yet he ultimately refuses to blame anyone (for the only options left are God and Nature), and he simply resolves to continue suffering (859-60). He is distracted from his fleeting moment of clarity by his devotion to a lady who is beautiful and nearly perfect, except for her betrayal. He lacks the guidance that Machaut provides in the *Remède de Fortune* to imagine the world differently.

As its name implies, the *Remède* strives to free a lover from Fortune's control. The image of the goddess is particularly threatening, for she is not simply indifferent but also actively hostile in that "en trebuchant/Tousdis s'aplique" (999-100).⁴ In addition, Machaut describes her as stronger than all earthly courts of pope, emperor, and king, none of which may withstand her because "Fortune tous leurs desroys/Freint et abat" (1181-84).⁵ One lament conflates Love and Fortune by complaining that Love has "m'as abatu/De haut et bas" as if on Fortune's wheel (1227-28).⁶ The consistent threat raises the important question of how one might combat such a potent force.

The solution to Fortune lies in the notion of choice, which is articulated by Esperance (Hope). She observes the commonplace Boethian ideas that Fortune is ever-changing and that her wheel affects men of all status positions (2535-58). Where Esperance departs from Boethianism lies in her suggestion that the lover placed himself on Fortune's wheel by choice: "Et quant tu bien la [Fortune's wheel] congnoissoies/Di moy pourquoy tu i montoies?" (2559-60).⁷

³ For the dating of these works, see Wimsatt and Kibler (1988:4-5) and Palmer (1992: xxii).

⁴ "[...] she's always/Trying to knock you down." All citations of the *Remède* are from Wimsatt and Kibler (1988).

⁵ "Fortune breaks and overthrows / all their resistance."

⁶ "[...] knocked me/from high to low [...]."

⁷ "And since you know it [Fortune's wheel] well, tell me why you climbed upon it?"

The resulting misfortune, then, derives from the lover's choice, not from Fortune's instability. To avoid Fortune and protect himself, the lover must refuse to submit to her. Esperance advises him, "Or tien donc son pouoir si vil/Qu'aies de toy la seigneurie" (2484-85).⁸ For Machaut, this mastery occurs through the exercise of virtue. Esperance urges the lover:

Encor te prie trop de cuer
 Que tu n'oublies a nul fuer
 Les .ii. precieuses vertus
 Que je t'ay nommé cy dessus:
 L'une est Souffissance la belle,
 L'autre est Pacience, s'ancelle.
 Se tu les as, tu n'as regart
 De Fortune au double regart,
 Car ells sont si vertueuses
 Si dignes, et si precieuses,
 Que riens ne present le dangier
 De Fortune, ne son changier,
 Ains mettent l'omme a seürté
 En chemin de Bonneürté. (2773-86)⁹

In other words, man can escape Fortune by practicing virtues, which will allow him to achieve amorous fulfillment, as the *Remède* lover eventually does (4067-4107). Machaut's consolation does not reject the worldly in favor of spiritual fulfillment but rather focuses on worldly love as the impetus for a shift in the lover's perspective that makes hope and virtues central components in his success (Huot 2002:176-79). The *Remède* allows us to clarify how misguided the lover in the *Behaingne* is in his continued devotions, for he has utterly given up control rather than taking action (825-30). By contrast, Esperance gives the *Remède* lover motivation to become a virtuous and worthy suitor so that he can control his fortunes in love.

A parallel understanding of controlling Fortune appears in the *Confort d'Ami*, which begins to transfer such ideas about Fortune in love to the notion of a ruler's fortunes more generally. The *Confort*, written with knowledge of Charles' impending release from prison, contains three interrelated sections: the consolation, advice through exempla (including select classical love stories), and general advice to princes (Hoepffner 1908-1921:3.2; Palmer 1992: xxviii).

⁸ "Then hold Fortune's power in contempt and be your own master."

⁹ "Moreover, I beg you from the bottom of my heart never to forget the two precious virtues that I named for you above: one is beautiful Sufficiency; the other is Patience, her handmaiden. If you possess them, you needn't concern yourself with two-faced Fortune, because these virtues are so powerful, so worthy, and so precious that they can ignore Fortune's dominion and fickleness and safely set man on the road to Happiness."

Palmer argues that the poem's purpose was the public affirmation of Charles' importance to the kingdom during a time that it needed strong leadership, not advice for Charles himself (1992: xxxi). Machaut constructs Charles not as the victim of political intrigue (or political mistakes) but rather of erotic desire (Huot 2002:187), with Fortune as the opponent he must overcome:

Si n'est homs vivans qui se exente
 De Fortune, ne qui se vente
 Qu'en ses mains ne soit, qui exenter
 Ne s'en porroit homs, ne vanter
 Par raison, s'il n'est de vertus
Et de bonnes meurs revestus.
 Mais qui bien est moriginez
 Et en vertus enracinez,
 Fortune n'a nulle puissance
 De lui faire anui ne grievance
 Quant aus meurs; car s'elle a l'avoir,
 Les vertus ne puet elle avoir. (1927-38, my emphasis)¹⁰

In Machaut's formulation, virtuous living protects a man's reputation and allows the well-educated man to escape Fortune's control. This perspective in the *Confort* seems the culmination of Machaut's previous challenges to Boethianism, in which the exercise of virtues becomes the means to forestall Fortune. Even in the *Confort*, a text with the political purpose of extolling Charles' kingly virtues, courtly desire remains Machaut's focal point as he addresses Charles' current misfortune and seeks to enable the king to regain control upon his escape.

Machaut distinguishes himself from other courtly meditations on love by suggesting that to avoid the pitfalls of Fortune, one must become a worthy lover. That is, he defines success not as winning a beloved but as becoming worthy of love, which in turn allows the lover to succeed, as in the *Remède*. By combining this view with politics in the *Confort* (indeed, Machaut tells Charles at l. 2248 to go read the *Remède*), he implies that the same practice of virtues is essential to kingship, though he conveniently displaces political concerns onto amorous ones. Though he does not directly state it, Machaut begins to suggest the perspective that Gower adopts in the *Confessio Amantis*, in which the notion of controlling political fortunes and controlling fortunes in love become intertwined.

¹⁰ "So there's no man alive exempt/From Fortune, none who can boast/ He's not in her hands, for no man/ Can escape her, nor be proud/ Justifiably, *unless he's re clothed/ Himself with virtues and good habits.*/But the well-educated man/In whom the virtues have taken root/Is not subject to Fortune's power./For she can do his character/No hurt or harm; though hers are/His goods, she can't have his virtues" (quotations of *Le Confort d'ami* from Palmer 1992).

GOWER'S FORTUNES

While the conflation of Love and Fortune is not itself new, Gower is original in that he uses discussions about controlling one's amorous fortunes to assert that man can control his political fortunes. The political framework of the Prologue and the shift to viewing Love and Fortune as interchangeable in the Books, and in Book I in particular, are essential to this transference of ideas from the consolation of Love that we find in Machaut to the political consolation suggested by Gower's framing Prologue and conclusion.¹¹ Gower's emphasis on man's responsibility for his fortunes suggests his careful close reading of Machaut's approach to Fortune.

On the surface, the Genius-Amans exchanges share the goal of the *Remède* of encouraging a lover to govern himself virtuously to achieve love. But, of course, that neglects the political framework of the lover's confession. As scholars generally acknowledge, Gower's Prologue creates the sense that man's actions govern not only his own fortunes but also the fate of the realm more broadly (Porter 1983). In oft-cited lines, Gower asserts that,

For after that we falle and rise,
The world arist and falth withal,
So that the man is overal
His oghne cause of wel and wo.
That we fortune clepe so
Out of the man himself it growth [...] (CA Prol.544-49)

Rather than blaming Fortune, he emphasizes personal responsibility – man causes his own well or woe. Placed alongside the lover's confession, this ethical view constitutes an application of precisely Machaut's concept of counteracting Fortune in love to political discourses. Just as fortunes in love are determined by man's choices, so the world's fortunes grow out of each man's decisions, and this is the central comparison upon which Gower relies in the *Confessio*. By addressing the virtues Amans needs to control his fortunes in love, Gower simultaneously provides lessons in virtuous behavior that will allow man to control his Fortune more broadly and respond to the needs articulated in the Prologue for men to live virtuously and improve the state of the realm. By conflating Love and Fortune, Gower makes it possible to see his references to

¹¹ Wetherbee (1991) reads Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose* as a key mediating text between Boethius and Gower, but I believe that Machaut's views on escaping Fortune's power while maintaining and improving one's worldly position are equally important to understanding Gower's work.

controlling Love in the lover's confession as directly relevant to controlling the Fortune of the Prologue that determines the fate of men, kings, and kingdoms.¹²

James Simpson (1995:146-48) has argued that Love and Fortune in the *Confessio* exist in a "philosophically hostile" relationship because men can be excused for submitting to Love but not to Fortune. Yet Love and Fortune are each established as man's antagonists, and they are remarkably similar, both in the terms Gower employs and in the way he depicts them in narratives. Moreover, the submissions required of Amans and illustrated in Genius's tales are less to the abstractions Love or Fortune and more to specific virtues such as obedience, humility, and patience, or occasionally to another person so that a character can demonstrate that he possesses virtue. The goal of these submissions is to prepare another party to respond favorably, and love is easily understood in these reciprocal terms: virtues persuade a beloved to look well upon her suitor (Mitchell 2004:49). The love relationship is thus ideal for arguing that moral virtues are necessary, although success can never be fully guaranteed. By blurring the lines between Love and Fortune, Gower implies that the advice to our lover-protagonist Amans equally increases chances for good fortune more generally. In effect, he re-orientates the view of Fortune as an uncontrollable force toward a more nuanced reading that makes room for both man's actions and arbitrary grace. Love relationships become a metaphor for man's more general fortunes, and this metaphor suggests that practicing virtuous behavior is more efficacious than submitting to Love and Fortune.

As my epigraph demonstrates, Gower yokes the political discourses of the Prologue to the matter of love within the frame narrative by depicting Fortune and Love as both commanding "blind wheels" that ensnare people. This wheel image is important because it evokes the *de casibus* tradition, shoring up the Prologue's political discourse and allowing even the lover's confession to be read as concerned with broader ethical and political advice. Rather than simply comparing Love's treatment of the lover to Fortune's wheel as in Machaut and the *Roman de la Rose*, Gower offers the recurring image of Love operating a wheel which is just as unpredictable:

For love is blind and may nocht se,
 Forthi may no certeineté
 Be set upon his jugement,
 Bot as the whiel aboute went
 He gifth his graces undeserved,

¹² When I refer to Fortune in Gower, I mean not only fortune in love but also fortune in the general sense and the specific politicized sense referred to in the Prologue. Machaut's Fortune is inseparable from Love, but Gower's Fortune in the frame narrative is independent of amorous love.

And fro that man which hath him served
 Ful ofte he takth aweye his fees,
 As he that pleieth ate dees;
 And therupon what schal befall
 He not, til that the chance falle,
 Wher he schal lese or he schal winne. (CA I.47-57)

Bot sche which kepth the blinde whel,
 Venus, whan thei be most above,
 In al the hoteste of here love,
 Hire whiel sche torneth, and thei felle
 In the manere as I schal telle. (CA I.2490-94)

In the first selection, Gower compares love to gambling, as if the lover submits to be placed at the mercy of blind love's spinning wheel, never knowing whether he will win or lose. In the second, Venus keeps the blind wheel and casts men down when they are in ascent. Gower continually reminds the reader of the similarities of Love and Fortune through the wheel image, not only in Book I but also elsewhere in the *Confessio* (e.g. III.1129-53, VIII.2880). Love does not supplant Fortune; but rather the two inhabit the same spaces and images so that Love's fortunes and the politicized Fortune of the Prologue are inseparable.

Because I think it crucial to emphasize that the *Confessio Amantis* does not switch gears from politics in the Prologue to love in the books, I focus on Book I. I aim to show that Gower instead shifts the level of discourse to speak of one uncontrollable force (Fortune) in terms of another (Love or Love's fortunes). In Book I, Gower provides ample evidence that human agency may render less effective the wheels of Love and Fortune. His "Tale of Acteon" is a prime example: Gower's Ovidian source blames Fortune for Acteon happening upon Diana bathing at an inopportune moment, but Gower blames Acteon for the sin of "mislokinge" (CA I.333) (Peck 2000: line 333n.; Ovid 1984: 3.130-259). In the counter-example to Acteon, the "Tale of Medusa," Genius emphasizes that Perseus succeeded because of his "wisdom and prouesse," manifested as self-control:

For so wys man was nevere non,
 Bot if he wel his yhe kepe
 And take of fol delit no kepe,
 That he with lust nys ofte nome,
 Through strengthe of love and overcome. (CA I.440-44)

Thus, Genius presents the exercise of virtue as efficacious in preserving Perseus' life, and he implies that the hero actively prevented himself from falling victim to the sins of vision and, crucially, that Amans may do likewise.

Elsewhere, Gower plays with the notion that Fortune or Love possesses control only to undermine it in the narrative. The Latin gloss that precedes the “Tale of Florent” echoes Machaut’s *Remède* by representing the tale as a struggle between “*spes in amore*” and “*fortune*” (*CA* I.vii.3-4).¹³ In the English text, Gower claims that “*Fortune*” causes Florent’s capture, when the narrative is quite clear that a human agent, Branchus’ grandmother, has been plotting against him (*CA* I.1418-24). When Genius claims that obedience may “*fortune*” a man to love (*CA* I.1859), Gower cleverly uses the verb to describe not an accident but a cause and effect relationship in which obedience facilitates love. One of the most intriguing places where he coyly invokes Fortune to instead question her power appears in *Albinus and Rosemund*. When Rosemund’s maid Glodeside persuades Albinus’ manservant Helmege to murder Albinus and avenge his offense against Rosemund, Gower writes of Helmege:

Anon the wylde loves rage,
 In which no man him can governe,
 Hath mad him that he can nocht werne,
 Bot fell al hol to hire assent:
 And thus the whiel is al miswent,
 The which Fortune hath upon honde;
 For how that evere it after stonde,
 Thei schope among hem such a wyle,
 The king was ded withinne a whyle. (*CA* I. 2620-28)

He presents the conventional idea that no man can govern himself in love as an explanation for Helmege’s lack of self-control, although his previous treatments of self-control in “*Acteon*” and “*Medusa*” cast doubt upon that claim. After such prior lessons and the Prologue’s emphasis on personal responsibility, it appears instead that Fortune’s wheel “*is al miswent*” because of Helmege’s inability to govern himself, not because of a random turning. And the homonyms for the “*wyle*” shaped by the plotters and the “*whyle*” in which the king dies echo Fortune’s wheel only to subvert her power since Albinus’ personal flaw of pride and the reactions of human agents ultimately shaped his fate.

Moreover, Gower challenges the notion of submission to either Love or Fortune because all of Book I encourages the reader to forego Pride and submit to the virtue of Humility. Rarely do we see a positive exemplar when a character such as Helmege or Mundus chooses to give in to love’s passions. By contrast, when characters *do* submit to virtuous behavior –as do Florent, Nebuchadnezzar, and Petro and Alphonse in “*The Tale of Three Questions*”– troubles are resolved and stability is restored, as a brief survey will show.

¹³ “[...] ready hope in love” and “fortune.”

Florent exemplifies obedience –and in contrast to his rapist counterpart in Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, he needs reinforcement, not reform, of his behavior. The central question of Gower’s tale is less “What do all women most desire,” and more “Will Florent behave with the obedience that he *knows* is virtuous?” He keeps his word and returns to Branchus’ grandmother, and he never considers another option; however, when he deals with the hag, Gower provides some humorous insight into Florent’s all-too-human desires to escape her required obligation. Initially, he imagines the old hag’s eventual demise and ponders whether he might exile her to an island until she dies (*CA* I.1575-80). To highlight his plight, Gower delays the detailed description of her physical deformities and impressive ability to curtail a man’s lust until the moment Florent goes back to collect his fiancée, justifying the knight’s horror at his prospects (*CA* I.1672-97). Yet despite her hideousness, Florent keeps his word and even demonstrates respect for her by heeding “th’ouour of womanhiede” and treating the hag with *gentillesse* (*CA* I.1719-21).¹⁴ In the bedroom, his choice to let her decide her appearance confirms his obedience to his wife and to her counsel that sovereignty is what all women desire. As R. F. Yeager has argued, the fact that Florent never debates within himself before giving in to his wife demonstrates that he has fully accepted an obedient role (1990:139-40). Florent chooses to embrace obedience, which is distinct from submitting out of an inability to decide. By electing to exercise virtue, especially one that puts his reputation and marital happiness at someone else’s mercy, Florent lifts his wife’s curse, stabilizes her appearance, and wins a beautiful bride.

More explicitly, the Latin gloss to “Nebuchadnezzar’s Punishment” juxtaposes stability and uncertainty:

Humani generis cum sit sibi gloria maior,
 Sepe subesse solet proximus ille dolor:
 Mens elata graues descensus sepe subibit,
 Mens humilis stabile molleque firmat iter.
 Motibus innumeris volutat fortuna per orbem;
 Cum magis alta petis, inferiora time. (*CA* I.xi.1-6)¹⁵

Such Latin glosses are crucial to tying the lover’s confession to the broader discourses of Fortune evoked in the Prologue. Here, even in a statement about the dangers of Fortune, Gower asserts that stability is possible through the

¹⁴ In the analogous tale in Chaucer, *gentillesse* is the crucial trait that the knight must learn; Gower’s tale clearly demonstrates that Florent already possesses it.

¹⁵ “Even when the human race possesses a greater glory, sorrow often is likely to lie very nearby. An exalted spirit will often drop down dangerous descents; a humble spirit establishes a reliable and gentle path. Fortune turns with innumerable movements through the world-wheel; when you seek the greater heights, fear the places that are all the lower.”

“reliable and gentle path” of humility, through the exercise of virtue, rather than ambition. He creates tensions between the commonplace metaphor in which Fortune absolves man of any blame and the Prologue’s practical, ethical view that man’s activities determine his stability or misfortune. In the tale, Nebuchadnezzar initially functions as anti-exemplar who refuses to “soffre humilité” (CA I.2491). Tellingly, the narrative features no amorous desire and has no direct connection to constructing a worthy lover; rather, it concerns Nebuchadnezzar’s kingship and personal vanity, issues linked more directly to the Prologue’s concerns with kingship than to the courtly framework of Amans’ reeducation. When he is turned into a beast, Nebuchadnezzar learns to repent and reform, to finally choose the path of humble stability instead of pride.

By contrast, the “Tale of Three Questions” presents savvier men who more readily choose to practice humility as an antidote to pride. Both Pedro and Alphonse, through their interactions with Peronelle (Pedro’s daughter), demonstrate humility in their willing exchanges of masculine authority for a more humble position. Pedro gives up authority over Peronelle to let her speak for both of them at court so that he will not risk offending their proud king Alphonse. Allowing her to lead him into court to the marvel of all present further emphasizes Pedro’s humility in public. Moreover, when Peronelle negotiates her marriage to Alphonse, she usurps her father’s role and also boldly demands that the king marry her. What makes her demand forgivable and brilliant from a story-telling perspective is that it allows Alphonse the opportunity to enact humility. He may simply be entertaining a silly girl when he initially lets her speak, but when he agrees to marry her, he chooses to submit to her and adopt the humble position her words have just praised (Schieberle 2007). Submissions bring about the mutually beneficial conclusions to this narrative, as well as the stabilizing endings to “Florent” and “Nebuchadnezzar.” But they are not blind submissions to Fortune or Love. Rather, as I have been suggesting, they are choices to enact virtue –and choice is crucial here.

Effectively, Gower plays with the commonplaces that both Love and Fortune are uncontrollable personifications who spin wheels capriciously while arguing precisely that man’s choices determine his successes or failures.¹⁶ He treats both Love and Fortune as “uncontrollable” forces that may nevertheless be controlled to some extent through the exercise of virtues. Yet virtues alone do not guarantee success; rather they should predispose others to the outcome

¹⁶ Kuczynski (1989:189-92) argues convincingly that Gower’s text is concerned with metaethics –the exploration of the process of making moral decisions– rather than prescriptive ethics. My point expands this view to assert that Gower thus establishes the significant theme of personal responsibility for the outcome of one’s choices.

the individual desires in a reciprocal relationship. In love, a man's worthiness should persuade his beloved to accept him. The same perspective may be applied to political fortunes since other agents must approve of and support a king, prince, counselor, or whomever; thus, Fortune stands in for any force outside man's control, in love or in general. In the case of Fortune, however, there is no simple, clear equation of the lover to whom an agent must convince that he is worthy.

We must return to the Prologue to understand the reciprocity that determines the fortunes of mankind and the world, and that connects love to political stability. Gower implies that the "unenvied love" of the former ages developed from the prioritizing of virtue and suppression of vice; now that "love is falle into discord," other destabilizations of society have followed (*CA* Prol.115-34). He then identifies love as "al the chief/To kepe a regne out of mischief" (*CA* Prol.149-50). By "love" he may mean the love of virtues or of the common good, rather than amorous love, but the recurrence of the term prepares us to see not only political stability in terms of love but also Gower's advice about love as intimately connected to political fortunes. These lines indicate the reciprocal relationship of his ideal body politic: "That unto him which the heved is/The membres buxom scholden bowe,/And he scholde ek her trowthe allowe/With al his herte and make hem chiere" (*CA* Prol.152-55). Such concerns about establishing a body politic in which the members obey the head and the head respects the members suggest that the exercise of political virtues will afford a prince stability in the face of uncertain, divisive times. A ruler must act prudently to prepare his fellow men to accept him or continue to support him – to "love" their leader. If we consider the Prologue's "love" to be the people's love for the prince and vice versa, we have a very political sense of "love", so that even the lover himself may evoke a figure for the prince.¹⁷ In other words, by extolling the virtues necessary to win love, the *Confessio* also teaches its readers how to court good fortune.

While Gower acknowledges the popular view of Fortune as capricious and the fact that man cannot fully know what the outcome of actions will be, his Prologue nevertheless insists that virtues benefit mankind, and that, explicitly, "man is cause of that schal falle" not Fortune or some planetary influence (*CA* Prol.528).¹⁸ Even when he attributes worldly fortunes to the judgment of God in a parallel gloss, he frames prosperity or adversity as predicated on the "merita et

¹⁷ Of course, when Amans is revealed to be "John Gower," the poet eliminates this potentially unflattering image of an aristocratic reader as foolish Amans.

¹⁸ Porter (1983) clarifies the interrelation of man's and mankind's fortunes, and, thus, Gower's argument that self-improvement will improve the fate of the realm.

demerita hominum” (CA Prol. 529).¹⁹ This is a potentially harsh claim, as it implies that those suffering adversity somehow deserve it. I am not persuaded that Gower’s invocations of Fortune’s wheel quite soften this blow, but it is useful to assert that earthly fortunes are dependent upon being judged morally sound. Certainly these challenges to the traditional view of Fortune are necessary to Gower’s project. They would offer small consolation to those who have suffered misfortune unjustly, like Boethius for instance, but Gower’s primary goal is not to judge those who have fallen; instead, he warns those who have not that their actions will affect their fortunes. Indeed, if meritorious behavior did not improve man’s state, what incentive would there be for men to act virtuously? The *Confessio* combines amorous, political, and spiritual motivations to persuade readers to follow its moral advice, stressing the implied multiple threats of falling short in the eyes of one’s beloved, one’s polity, and God.

In essence, Gower underscores the importance of preparing oneself for forces one cannot control completely –yet he argues that control of Love and Fortune is possible on some level through the exercise of virtue. That is, one may not be able to prevent heartbreak or death, but perhaps one can forestall each through virtuous actions. Further, the comparison of Love, ideally a reciprocal relationship, to Fortune implies that Fortune is not determined by one man or by a capricious deity alone. Instead, Fortune becomes a different kind of courtship: the outcome of both the actions by one party and the reactions of those around him.

In Gower’s formulation, good love and good fortune are rewards for living virtuously, but the sense of reciprocity allows for both the idea that virtuous actions are efficacious and also the reality that occasionally good men fail for reasons beyond their personal control. I do not mean to insist that one can control Fortune completely, for there is always the chance of radical accident, and even the savviest ruler must fall at some point.²⁰ I do, however, mean to claim that because Gower views actions as efficacious, the advice of the *Confessio* aims to allow the reader to exert control over his Fortune to the extent that doing so is humanly possible. The work meditates on personal responsibility to expose blind love and capricious Fortune as merely literary tropes and, at best, metaphors that explain human failures. As we read through most of the *Confessio*, we do not yet know if Amans will take control and

¹⁹ “merits and demerits of human beings.”

²⁰ For this perspective, I am indebted to Nolan (2005:147-52), who demonstrates that Lydgate’s work can both celebrate the possibility of forestalling Fortune and acknowledge the problem that even the most prudent ruler must fall eventually. Lydgate drew on Gower, and this view may be the extension of his predecessor’s ideas.

succeed, but as he learns about virtues, Gower offers us hope that like Machaut's *Remède* lover, he may be set on the path to happiness.

The end of the *Confessio*, however, shifts back to the register of the Prologue, making it clear that the path Gower constructs aims at accomplishing widespread political stability, not an individual's amorous conquest. Gower's conclusion in Book VIII rejects courtly love but does not invalidate the work's advice or imply that virtues fail to win love. Rather, when Amans turns into John Gower, he must give up the pursuit of love and the creation of love poetry because his age is an impediment (which is rarely an issue in the *dits amoureux*).²¹ This invocation of old age allows Gower to turn our attention back to the political discourses of the Prologue. The long trajectory in which Amans learns about virtues in order to become a worthy lover only to be declared too old enables Gower to close the frame narrative on a philosophical and political note rather than an amorous one, suggesting that the outlined virtues also have prepared his fictionalized persona to engage political concerns more thoughtfully. In other words, the experiences of Amans/"John Gower" and the rejection of courtly love prepare him to take on the role of "*sapiens* in ethics and politics" that Alastair J. Minnis (1980) identifies for Gower. As evidence of the return to political topics, the first recension notes specifically that a prince's virtues "maake his regne stable" (CA VIII.3036*), and the Lancastrian recension urges that with the practice of virtue, "This londis grace schulde arise" (CA VIII.3053). The Lancastrian recension also expressly cites humility as the virtue that enables a king to eschew vices, to inculcate other moral virtues, and to lead his people into prosperity (CA VIII.3096-3105). In other words, in the final analysis, Book I's meditations on humility and self-control are essential to enabling someone not only to control Love but also to harness Fortune for the benefit of his kingdom.

In an early gloss to Book I, Gower expresses an ostensible purpose for his writing: "Me quibus ergo Venus, casus, laqueait amantem,/Orbis in exemplum scribere tendo palam" (CA I.ii.7-8).²² He selects "orbis" ("world"), rather than conveying specifically "mankind" or "all lovers." This significant choice reminds the reader that Gower aims to teach the world, not lovers exclusively, about virtuous living as a means to avoid the turning wheels of Love and Fortune. The *Confessio* itself operates as a sort of turning wheel that moves from political fortunes to the lover's fortunes and back to political fortunes to emphasize that

²¹ See Zeeman, who argues that even though poets like Machaut and Froissart acknowledge that old age and love are incompatible, the advanced age of their narrators "does not prevent the love narrative and text from occurring" (1991: 225-26).

²² "Therefore, those disasters by which Venus ensnared me as a lover I strive to write, publicly, as example for the world."

man's moral choices allow him some control over his fate. Whether or not Gower believed that Fortune could really be controlled, he constructs for the *Confessio* a convenient world in which man's actions are efficacious. The anti-Boethian sentiments of Machaut's poetry make this world seem plausible in courtly narrative. Gower takes the notion of combating Fortune one step further to encourage his countrymen to live virtuously and to court good fortune, for themselves and for the realm.

Thus, the *Confessio* extends Machaut's ideas about rejecting Fortune in favor of practicing virtues in order to address simultaneously both amorous and political ventures. Gower's treatment of Fortune evidences that he engaged not only with the image of the lover-narrator in the *dits amoureux* but also with Machaut's challenges to the Boethian view of Fortune. Machaut's claims that the lover may prevent Fortune's interference through virtuous living enable Gower to underscore man's responsibility for his own moral choices and, therefore, for his fortunes. Rather than emphasize the Boethian view that man should turn from the world to spiritual benefits, much like Machaut before him, Gower provides a worldly motivation that should drive his reader to embrace the counsel in the *Confessio*: the fantasy of controlling the uncontrollable.

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