

ARGUING FROM FOREIGN GROUNDS: JOHN GOWER'S LEVERAGING OF SPAIN IN ENGLISH POLITICS

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Abstract

This essay analyzes why John Gower set the “Tale of the Three Questions,” the concluding story in Book I of the *Confessio Amantis*, in Spain. Written during a time of intense parliamentary concerns over money apparently wasted by Richard II’s uncles on military campaigns against Castille-Leon, the tale argues for the relevance of Spain to England and for the relevance of poetic counsel in domestic politics. The question of Spain in English politics in the 1380s offered Gower a way into debates among the magnates and parliaments of England by evoking past and present Anglo-Castilian relationships. He imagines a situation in which the strategy of good counsel works, suggesting a more acceptable set of choices: alliance and realignment instead of the absolutism of either conquest or avoidance.

Keywords: *Confessio Amantis*, counsel, England and Spain, John of Gaunt/Duke of Lancaster, John Gower, Parliament, political commentary, *Westminster Chronicle*.

Of all the puzzles that John Gower suggests in the “Tale of the Three Questions,” one of the most tantalizing is the enigma of its geographic placement. Why would Gower, with his preference for more classical settings for tales in the *Confessio Amantis*, set the “Tale of the Three Questions” in medieval Spain? To answer this question, it is necessary to explore aspects of Spain’s connotative meanings for Gower and his English readers, and to consider what kind of power this localization could have contributed to the *Confessio*. In particular, the choice of setting could have been inspired by Lancastrian interventions on the Iberian Peninsula and recurrent parliamentary discontent about funding these expeditions. The most intense period of these debates was in 1385-1387, by which time Gower had begun writing the

Confessio.¹ This synchronicity is provocative because Gower reveals certain political interests throughout his writing. He wants to support the potential for good governance, first by offering advice to the young king Richard II, and subsequently by supporting the promise he saw in John of Gaunt's family. In this political context, even the act of keeping the setting of the "Tale of the Three Questions" in Spain could be read as an argument for the relevance of Spain to England and for the relevance of poetic counsel in domestic politics.

Establishing the grounds for leveraging one tale to engage with two political arguments involves adapting the voice of social commentary. Certainly, many poets in late medieval England were not shy about making diagnoses of social ills and insisting on moral remedies, but they often take the position of the *vox clamantis*: the prophetic voice crying in the wilderness.² This figure, who may be anonymous, pseudonymous, or named, comes from the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament³ and was also adopted by Gower in his Latin social critique *Vox Clamantis*. Judith Ferster points out, though, how many of these poems are anonymous or shy away from leveling specific charges for fear of prosecution under "scandal laws" or even the 1352 Statute of Treasons, or for fear of other reprisals (1996:31-38). This kind of voice is often direct but distanced; it urges social correction but laments entropic corruption. In contrast, the "Tale of the Three Questions" personalizes the danger of royal arrogance and provides a cure for the immediate case, thus imagining a remedy for the universal social problem. In this tale, Gower seeks engagement: a way into debates happening at the time among powerbrokers. The question of Spain in English politics in the 1380s offered Gower the chance to address both goals at once.

It is possible that Gower chose the fictional Spanish setting based on the precedent of an analogue or source for the tale. This influence would be especially pressing if his immediate source had been a story in a version of the *Disciplina Clericalis* by Petrus Alfonsi, as suggested by R. F. Yeager.⁴ It seems likely that Gower could have gathered the story from the writings of Alfonsi, an

¹ I follow here the chronology suggested by Russell A. Peck (2006:21, 40) in his introduction to the TEAMS edition of the *Confessio Amantis*, which I also use when citing the text. R. F. Yeager (2004) argues for the plausibility of some circulation of at least some of the manuscripts by 1386, which would be especially likely for Book I.

² Many political poems have been edited by Ginsberg (1992), Dean (1996) and Kail (2006), and discussed by Ferster (1996) and Coleman (1981).

³ "The voice of one crying in the wilderness" appears first in Isaiah 40:3 and then is quoted by John the Baptist in the gospels of Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, and John 1:23.

⁴ Yeager (2007:199-202) has discussed the scope and influence of this work and similar Iberian tale collections.

Iberian physician who had converted to Christianity from Judaism, immigrated to England, and wrote in the early twelfth century, or from a similar tale collection. It even seems probable, based on the spread of popular narratives, that some part of the story could have traveled to Western Europe (initially to Spain) along trade routes from the east and up through North Africa, because there are multiple variants of the tale type attested to in Egypt and India.⁵ Alice Lasater has pointed to similar tales in the *Thousand and One Nights* and *El Conde Lucanor* to argue that “the setting of Gower’s story in Spain and the use of King Alfonso suggest oral transmission of an Arab tale which would have been common in Spain with the Spanish setting substituted for an Eastern one” (1974:127). This observation of context and probable lines of transmission seems reasonable, given what is known about the circulation of tales and the motifs in the “Tale of the Three Questions.”⁶ However, I argue that Gower’s emphatic placement of the tale in Spain goes beyond a simple acceptance of an oral tradition. Even given the localization of the source material that Gower might have read, placing this version in a Spanish kingdom was a deliberate choice.

The “Tale of the Three Questions” has increasingly received critical attention, especially for its construction of a (pre-)queenly intercessor.⁷ This story imagines the kind of counsel that might be effective by showing a young woman (and future queen) persuading a capricious king into good rule. A king puffed up by vainglory threatens to kill a knight unless he can answer three riddles.⁸ The knight’s daughter Peronelle answers for him before the king and the court; and, to assure the stability of the court, she uses logic to persuade the king to marry her. This persuasion develops in three ordered steps. First, the

⁵ The “Tale of the Three Questions” shares significant characteristics with the folktale “The Clever Peasant Girl” (AT 875) but ends halfway through the progression of the tale type. Two versions (875B, sub 1 and 3) from India are about a daughter helping her father, an adviser to the king, answer an impossible task. The summaries of the Indian variants do not include marriage, but they emphasize the girl’s ability to enlighten the king (Aarne and Thompson 1987:293-95).

⁶ Gower focuses on the girl’s proof of cleverness. The folk tale type summary is: “Through the proof of her cleverness she becomes the king’s wife. He becomes angry and banishes her. She takes him home with her as her dearest possession” (Aarne and Thompson 1987:293).

⁷ Significant work has been done on the role of the queen as intercessor in particular by Fradenburg (1991), Strohm (1992), Nelson (1999), Parsons (1995a, 1995b), and Schieberle (2007).

⁸ Briefly, the riddles are: what needs help least yet receives the most (the earth), what is worth the most but costs the least (humility), and what costs the most but is of least value (pride) (CA I.3099-3106, 3244-3321).

king says that he would marry her if not for her lack of lineage; next, she responds to his offer of reward by asking him to make her father an earl. Finally, she points out that as the daughter of an earl, her lineage is now high enough for the king to marry her. This narrative construction valorizes Peronelle's cleverness and audacity over the malfunctioning court culture.

Gower only identifies the geographical setting and characters by name at the end of the tale, when Genius summarizes it for the petitioner Amans:

And over this good is to wite,
In the cronique as it is write,
This noble king of whom I tolde
Of Spaine be tho daies olde
The kingdom hadde in governance. (CA I.3387-91)

The placement of "The Tale of the Three Questions" in Spain echoes the heroine's shift from domestic to political space. Kurt Olsson has commented on a similar kind of political framing in Book VII of the *Confessio*, where Gower's presentation of the tales of Apeme and Alceste constructs the political question of royal honor in such a way that "the king is seemingly left with a single choice" (2009:167). This kind of poetic intervention into politics that imposes a particular narrative on a political issue is a way to leverage the influence of the poet through the impact of stories in a real-world context. Gower's presentation of Spanish domestic politics contributes to a medieval political heritage that England's contemporary powerbrokers could access.

The narrative's broad base for influence is suggested in the passage following the passage locating the tale in Spain. After Gower's narrator Genius names the setting, he names the main characters:

And as the bok makth remembrance,
Alphonse was his propre name:
The knyht also, if I schal name,
Danz Petro hihte, and as men telle,
His dowhter wyse Peronelle
Was cleped, which was full of grace. (CA I.3392-97)

Less explicitly named, in addition to the "cronique," are his sources: "the bok," "I," and "men" (CA I.3388, 3392, 3394, 3395). These sources are, admittedly, generic, both in the sense of not having specific identifiers and in the sense of being typical of vernacular tales. However, the density of lining up three different sources in four lines invites the consideration of several possible interpretations. First, the source phrases could be dismissed as merely formulaic; but Gower has avoided mentioning sources entirely for most of the tale, and has no formal reason to repeat sources three times at this point. Second, the other two sources could be traced back to the book, as both the

source of Genius's knowledge and as the representative and ongoing source of popular stories (as the *Confessio* itself would be). The rhetorical effect of distinguishing among these three imagined sources seems rather to assert that the differences are significant whether or not the sources depend on each other or emerge independently. Following that line of thought, a third interpretation would be that the multiplicity of witnesses adds weight to the tale's authority. Gower creates a new lineage in the frame of the tale for the tale itself, establishing for it a place in history.

The reinforced construct of verifiable authority provided by the listed sources also emphasizes a sense of depth and historicity to the tale. They are part of the act of creating cultural memory that requires an awareness of distance through time as well as across space. The different time settings Gower juggles in this tale are like a set of theatrical scrims that can overlie each other in different combinations to obscure or reveal. There is the vague English near-present inhabited by Amans and Genius; the Spanish past of Alphonse and Peronelle; and the in-between period during which the "croniques" were written. Behind these scrims is the lived experience of contemporary England and northern Iberia. Spain was even more politically fractured in the fourteenth century than England, and this difference invites the question of why Gower would locate a tale displaying community unification through negotiation in such a divided land. The tale focuses tightly on King Alphonse's court, with only a gesture to the broad context of "Spain." An atmosphere of disunion permeates the tale until the resolution, and both the insecurity of despotism and the accord brought by reason and humility must be equally plausible for the success of the tale as the capstone to Book I of the *Confessio*. A Spanish setting in an earlier medieval past could balance exoticism and familiarity in that it was distant enough to be interesting and safe, but close enough to be relevant.

Social commentary is more allusive and indirect in the "Tale of the Three Questions" than in Gower's Latin works. A.G. Rigg and Edward S. Moore argue that Books II-III of the *Vox* and the *Carmen super Multiplici Viciorum Pestilencia* are "politically motivated works that attempt to persuade the reader through the analysis of contemporary society and the review of historical events" (2004:162).⁹ One of the interpretive layers of "The Tale of the Three Questions," I argue, is its capacity for political engagement through evoking cultural connections in the historicizing tale. Gower's concerns about contemporary political culture are encoded in ambivalent moments in the tale

⁹ Rigg and Moore (2004:160) set this focus in a broader frame involving the poetic use of history: "Gower's Latin works, like those of his contemporaries, all concern political history in some fashion or another." Peck (2004:216) goes further to assert that "the whole of Gower's writings concern themselves with humankind's personal responsibility to rule well."

when the triumph or failure of good governance seems equally possible. For example, the king is irrationally arbitrary, but he can be instructed and brought to his senses. Gower emphasizes these moments by raising the stakes for the clever girl: she is not arguing only for herself, but rather for her father's life and the whole future of her family. Peronelle's story takes place at the origin of a new governing family. Intermingled with the subject of family lineage is Gower's formulation of the heritage transmitted by a medieval political lineage. This issue is dramatized when King Alphonse blames Peronelle's lack of lineage for his initial refusal to marry her: he does not see the potential of a newly created lineage. The tale implies that the English royal family's traditions of government are inherited more broadly from Continental sources, in addition to the obvious insular and Norman heritage. Gower reveals this through a potentially unnerving analogy to Spain not only through how Peronelle constructs her redeeming lineage, but also in the potential depths of English governance.

By the late Middle Ages, England had developed multiple connections to Spain, the term which English writers frequently used to refer to the territories held by Castille-Leon. Other realms, like Navarre and Aragon, are referred to by their regional names. In the *Confessio*, Spain appears as a setting twice outside of the "Tale of the Three Questions." The "Tale of Galba and Vitellus" describes the title characters' drunken lechery across Spain (*CA* VI.542 ff.), and the only other significant construction of Spain comes in Book II with the "Tale of Constance." When Constance and her child are set adrift from Northumberland, her ship "Estward was into Spaigne drive/Riht faste under a Castel wall" (*CA* II.1088-89). This castle is held by "an hethen Amirall" (*CA* II.1090) whose evil steward attempts to rape Constance but is prevented by God who causes a storm that throws the steward overboard and pushes the ship out to sea again (where Constance meets the fleet of the Roman senator who takes her to Rome). These short mentions suggest a Spain that, through the actions of men, is predatory and dangerous to women, native inhabitants as well as a foreign Christian woman. This geographical affect is so different from the impression of Spain in the "Tale of the Three Questions" that they seem to belong to different patterns of reference. What all three images convey, however, is danger, proximity, and exoticism.

The inspirational style, showing how to manage courtly danger, of the Spanish setting in the "Tale of the Three Questions" could have been designed to recognize the position of the Lancastrian family in contemporary Spanish politics.¹⁰ John of Gaunt's second wife, Constanza (also called Constance), was

¹⁰ Edward, Prince of Wales, had engaged in campaigns with Pedro I in the 1360s, and these Spanish incursions were one of the examples Gower used when he urged the young Richard

the elder daughter of Pedro I (also known as Pedro the Cruel, king of Leon and Castile, 1350-1369).¹¹ They were married in September 1371, two years after the deposition and death of her father. Gaunt assumed the title “King of Castile,” lent his authority to a court of exiles in English-held Bayonne, and launched an invasion of Castile in 1386, accompanied by his family and their court. After negotiations with Juan I (the son of Enrique I, Pedro’s illegitimate half-brother and usurper), Gaunt’s and Constanza’s daughter Catalina (Catherine) was married to the future Enrique III in 1388.

Gower may have been particularly interested in these contemporary Iberian echoes of his tale while he was writing the *Confessio* in the mid- to late-1380s because of his interest in the Lancastrian affinity. Gower and most of his readers would also have been aware of earlier connections between Spain and the English royal family, not least through the presence of three tombs and twelve memorial crosses (Parsons 1995a:209). A Spanish princess was an important foremother of Richard and John of Gaunt’s family, as Peronelle is imagined in the “Tale of Three Questions.” Eleanor, a sister of Alfonso X “el Sabio” of Castile, married Edward I in 1254. This marriage provided stability for the English position in Gascony and established an alliance between England and Castile (Parsons 1995a:14-15). John Carmi Parsons suggests that markers of her southern foreignness were visible to the English during her lifetime: her importation of carpets, her preference for olive oil and fruit, and her encouragement of Castilian merchants in England (1995a:64). Eleanor then became the grandmother of Edward III, great-grandmother of John of Gaunt, and great-great-grandmother of Richard II, Henry IV, and Catalina, who married back into the Castilian monarchy. Eleanor was herself a great-granddaughter of Leonor, the middle daughter of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, who had married Alfonso VIII in 1170.¹² In addition to John of Gaunt and his brother Edmund’s own marriages to the daughters of Pedro I, this blood tie to a Spanish grandmother gave the English royal family a certain purchase on a Spanish medieval past.

Looking back to England, this connection gave Gower an opening into interpreting the past of the royal family, especially for Richard II, his uncles, and his cousins. Certainly, Plantagenet intermarriages with French royal and noble families were more dynastically significant and more frequent. Even

II to imitate his father’s valor: “France felt the effects of him; and Spain, in contemplating the powers with which he stoutly subjected her, was fearful of him” (*Vox Clamantis* I:13, 242).

¹¹ Constance’s younger sister Isabella later married Edmund, Earl of Cambridge, another son of Edward III, in July 1372 (Goodman 1992:48-50).

¹² For a discussion of Eleanor and Leonor, see Walker (2007).

Eleanor of Castile was half French and inherited the county of Ponthieu from her mother, Jeanne de Dammartin (Parsons 1995a:33, 35). But that intimacy created its own problems: disputes over inheritance and territory, allegiance and precedence during periods of both active conflict and tense truce. In contrast, the limited but ultimately productive Anglo-Iberian intermarriages provide a more specific and controlled set of allusions for Gower to access, primarily allusions to Iberian queens revitalizing a royal family and expanding the range of English trade and influence.

Outside of the royal family, English people of several classes were aware of Iberian kingdoms and adventures either through their own pilgrimages, their neighbors' travels, or Anglo-Iberian trade. The most persistent connection was the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, although Ana Echevarría Arsuaga has pointed out that English travelers to Castilian territories, even the northwestern corner of Galicia, had to cope with unusually complicated restrictions between 1369 and 1393.¹³ The causes of these restrictions, tied up in the politics of the Hundred Years' War, the papal Schism, and usurpations, also significantly reduced the frequency of business exchange. Some men would also have had the experience of the various English military expeditions into northern Spain: with the Black Prince across the Pyrenees from Gascony, with the Earl of Cambridge through Portugal, and with John of Gaunt from La Coruña, the seaport closest to Compostela (Russell 1958:ch. 4, 10, 14, 17).

Furthermore, Anglo-Castilian piracy or privateering, excused by the war with France and her ally Castille-Leon, was a recurring issue disrupting shipping.¹⁴ Problems with piracy alone were not serious enough to hinder the increasing scope of exchange between Castille-Leon and Portugal with England before 1369 or after 1393, especially along the southern coast and into the major southwestern ports (Childs 1978:18-32). J. L. Bolton identifies Portugal and Spain as one of the major markets for cloth from Bristol in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a city that traded as much or more in cloth as London did (1980:253). Markets on the Iberian Peninsula "supplied England with iron ore, wool oil, soap for washing cloth, dyestuffs and citrus fruits" (1980:287). He also argues that during the Hundred Years' War "the French war spilled over

¹³ Echevarría Arsuaga notes in particular the need for safe-conducts along the pilgrimage routes in this period (2007:55-56). For more information about the different aspects of the experience of this pilgrimage, see Dunn and Davidson (1996).

¹⁴ *Westminster Chronicle* (Hector and Harvey 1982:64-66, 152, 181) and the *St Albans Chronicle* (Taylor, Childs and Watkiss 2003:I.218-20). Peck observes that "Gower is troubled by the brutalities of plunder, and, in the *Confessio*, speaks out strongly against foreign wars—even the crusades—which do nothing to advance the faith or the common good" (2004:225).

and damaged relations with Castile and Genoa,” in addition to its chaotic effects on trade with French and Burgundian lands (1980:289). Wendy Childs notes the reciprocal benefits of the trade, especially in regards to the importation of Spanish oil and dye pigments for the English processing of wool into fine cloth, and the export of a range of cloths to Spain with increasing profitability (1978:71-148). However, because of the delicate power balances in Iberia and Enrique’s alliance with France, which included providing ships to support French naval efforts, any regular trade was barred for almost two decades (1978:40-42).

Childs points out that the prolonged negative effects on shipping and trade were rooted in Gaunt’s assumption of Constanza’s claim to the Castilian throne. Enrique I could not tolerate the threat to his own newly established lineage: “Not only was England his enemy by the terms of his treaty with France but the Lancaster marriage made her his dynastic enemy also” (1978:41). She argues that Gaunt’s eventual settlement with Enrique’s son Juan and Catalina’s marriage to his grandson, the future king Enrique, “removed Castile’s strongest motive for supporting France” (1978:41). In terms of lessening hostilities enough to make regular trading relations viable again, a marriage in fact succeeded in softening the Spanish king’s policy. Once this tension was relieved, trade started growing again in 1389 (1978:43). The 1386 Treaty of Windsor had already established a still-unbroken alliance between England and Portugal that also specified the free exchange of merchants in the two nations (Yeager 2004:504). Cunningham summarized the changes in the trading relationship with Spain and Portugal around the turn of the century: “An agreement for the security of the subjects of the two contracting parties was made between England and Castile in 1403, by which freedom was given to them to go and stay for a time and return with their goods” (1910:414). Thus, most popular impressions in the late fourteenth century would have been formed out of the intensity of a challenging religious pilgrimage and the conflicts of trade and war.

Contemporary interests in –and concerns about– Anglo-Iberian engagement, which R. F. Yeager has called “Iberianism” (2004:503), offered Gower the opportunity to address a serious issue for the king, his uncle’s family, and Parliament through his poetry. The question on which a poet could most readily comment was what kind of posture England should take vis-à-vis Castilian Spain. This question has as much to do with the political systems of England as it does with the explicit question of foreign policy and the resulting arguments over financing, and thus emerges from Gower’s deep, fundamental concern for reforming the governance of the realm.¹⁵

¹⁵ Peck observes “Good rule, for Gower, always involves balanced negotiation amidst uncertainty and shifting terms” (2004:218).

John of Gaunt's Iberian military engagements began and ended with marriages, and so on literal and historical levels, marriage seems to be a feasible political strategy. In the "Tale of the Three Questions," Gower is evoking a positive image of involvement with Spain that could respond to English concerns over money wasted on Spanish campaigns. The *Westminster Chronicle* notes for the Oxford assembly in November 1382 that

concessum fuit regi dimidia decima dum cederet in usus regni magis necessarios; asserebant enim quod decime actenus concesse pocius cedebant in comodum inimicorum quam regni, quod concludebant ex expedicione facta in Hispaniam per comitem de Cantebrigia, que fuit circa festum Sancti Johannis Baptiste anno Domini M^o. CCC.lxxxj^o.¹⁶ (*Westminster Chronicle*, Hector and Harvey 1982:29)

Edmund, the earl of Cambridge, had tried to invade Castile from Portugal, but the Castilian forces had invaded Portugal instead.¹⁷ Gaunt's interest in Spain had considerable parliamentary resistance to overcome.

The authors of the *Westminster Chronicle* observe the resistance of members of parliaments on different occasions to Spanish engagements, while also encouraging campaigns in France and the Low Countries. In January 1383, "it was feared that if the duke of Lancaster [...] once laid hold of these funds he would speedily be off to Spain instead of against the French, from whose resistance greater peril loomed over the realm."¹⁸ Several times, they even offer a financial incentive: they promise a significant levy on the condition that it should be applied to war with France. The parliament threatened to withhold half of the money if Richard did not send forces to France. However, although the lay and clergy members had granted this subsidy at the end of 1384 on the condition that Richard should launch an invasion of France in 1385, they

¹⁶ "The king was granted a half-tenth on condition that it should be applied to the more pressing national purposes; for it was maintained that tenths hitherto granted had been applied to the interest of its enemies rather than to those of the nation, this being an inference drawn from the expedition to Spain undertaken by the earl of Cambridge at Midsummer 1381."

¹⁷ P.E. Russell comments that in February 1383 "the Commons had the temerity to request that neither the king, nor the Castilian Pretender, nor the wretched Edmund should on any account leave the realm" (1955:344).

¹⁸ "Timebant ne dux Lancastr' [...] optentis pecuniis illuc omni expedicione transiret et non contra Gallos, ex quorum rebellione majus regno imminebat periculum." (*Westminster Chronicle*, Hector and Harvey 1982:34). Russell further describes Parliament in February-March 1383 as "hostile [...] to the theory of the *chemin d'Espagne*" and showing "alarming proof of the great weariness of public opinion over the Spanish question" (1955:344-45).

allowed him to substitute “an expedition to Scotland.”¹⁹ Parliaments seem to have treated fighting with Scotland like an ongoing, unpredictable condition to be treated with appropriations as necessary. In contrast, the disinclination to commit even fractions of levies to any activity in Iberia despite Castille-Leon’s alliance with France and the effects on trade is pronounced. At most, they were willing to grant part of a levy for Gaunt’s last expedition to Iberia in 1386. The chronicler reports that Gaunt won the support of the lords and the commons assembled in November 1385 by promising that his expedition would attract knights from Scotland and Bordeaux, reasoning that these lands “would in consequence probably enjoy peace the sooner.”²⁰ Therefore, he was arguing that a well-funded force could not only win peace with Spain (Castille-Leon) but also win peace in the conflict areas that concerned Parliament more. Even if this respite would only be temporary, in the political climate of 1385-1386 it was clearly necessary for Gaunt to find a persuasive link to a possible abatement of tensions with Scotland and France to justify his return to Iberia.²¹ His proposed invasion of Spain could not appear to damage the fragile stability of the other two disputed regions.²²

Given this acceptance and even encouragement of these ongoing conflicts by the members of Parliament, their complaints about involvement with Spain and sometimes even Portugal is a marker of parliamentary exclusion of Iberia from the proper concerns of the realm. The relationship between king, council, and the estates of Parliament (lords, bishops, and commons) was a heated issue while Gower was working on the *Confessio* in the 1380s. In “Richard II’s Councils,” Anthony Goodman outlines the persistent interest of the lords and the commons of Parliament in proposing schemes for reforming the King’s Council, and how some of these plans were actually implemented. In 1386, Parliament imposed a specific consiliar form that was vehemently opposed by Richard and his “court party” (1999:69-70). This action was especially problematic because fourteenth-century English kings needed parliaments to raise money for conducting wars and maintaining their courts.

¹⁹ “Postea, quia transivit in Scociam, [...] accepit omnia sibi concessa condicione rejecta.” (*Westminster Chronicle*, Hector and Harvey 1982:102-104)

²⁰ “cicius pace verisimiliter fruerentur” (*Westminster Chronicle*, Hector and Harvey 1982:142).

²¹ Goodman comments, “The Commons became adept at bargaining over fractions and multiples of subsidy. Their concerns about value for money, failures to win an honourable peace, enemy attacks on shipping, and threatened invasions—even of England itself—were causes of discontent” (2003:201).

²² Part of the attraction for foreign knights would have been the chance to gain indulgences thanks to the pope’s declaration of a crusade under Gaunt’s leadership against the Castilian usurpers (Hector and Harvey 1982:164-65, n. 1).

Continuing well into the 1380s, parliaments tried to devise ways to direct funding and account for the money. Goodman comments, “the Commons became adept at bargaining over fractions and multiples of subsidy. Their concerns about value for money, failures to win an honourable peace, enemy attacks on shipping, and threatened invasions –even of England itself– were causes of discontent” (2003: 201).²³ The parliament preceding John of Gaunt’s last campaign in Castile, which met from October 20 – December 6, 1385, allocated a levy of 1½ lay subsidies, proceeds from which “were appropriated to Lancaster’s expedition to Castile “the defence of the Marches of Scotland, the relief of Ghent and the keeping of the sea” (Sherborne 1990:98). Parliament required two “supervisors of taxation” and two receivers who were supposed to keep weekly accountings of receipts and disbursements (1990:99). James Sherborne explains that these attempted controls were “the result of distrust in the way the king and his council were believed to be indiscriminately spending extraordinary receipts” (1990:99). He points out that in 1386 England had a justified fear of an invasion from France, and that tensions ran so high about the management of financial and military resources that the Commons meeting in October impeached the chancellor, Michael de la Pole, for mismanaged funds (1990:112-13).

Clearly the relationship between king, council, and estates of Parliament (lords, bishops, and commons) was a heated issue while Gower was writing the *Confessio* in the late 1380’s. It also appears that commands were less effective with Richard II than was individual persuasion, at least when it came to paying attention to advice. Goodman argues that the careful management of these dynamics increasingly bore fruit: “In the 1390s Richard came to appreciate better that a Council with a high and prestigious profile, clearly defined responsibilities, good business practices, and close, harmonious relations with the Chamber, added to the lustre and effectiveness of his authority” (1999:73). This is not to claim that Richard’s reign was transformed by good counsel, as the tale presents the transformation of Alphonse, but rather to suggest that these intermediate steps were understood as a protection against the appearance of arbitrary rule and its negative consequences for governmental relations.²⁴

²³ According to Goodman, the Speaker became the petitioner to the Crown in 1376. The Commons were “seventy-four knights of the shire and about 200 urban representatives” (2003:200-201). The Lords were the major officers (like Chancellor) and temporal and spiritual magnates, who assembled less frequently.

²⁴ Goodman suggests that in Richard’s own council procedural agreements following his political success in 1389, Richard “may have been following seriously for the first time the advice of eminent servants of his grandfather [...], who had been heavily involved in conciliar reform programmes since 1376, and who now saw the implementation of parts of them as the foundation for restoring the king’s battered personal authority” (1999:71-72).

Gower offered his advice on governance and kingship to multiple audiences. The *Confessio* was addressed first to Richard II in the late 1380s (and in the first two recensions of the prologue, imagined to be solicited advice), and then to Henry of Lancaster, Earl of Derby (John of Gaunt's son and the future Henry IV) in 1393. Although the frame narrative is the lover Amans being confessed and counseled by Venus's priest Genius, the content and organization of the tales and advice is similar to the mirror-for-princes genre. This similarity suggests that Gower fundamentally wants to carve out a place for poetic advice in the deliberations of the king and his counselors (Ferster 1996:118-19). However, as Misty Schieberle discusses, the advice in the "Tale of the Three Questions" is not primarily —much less exclusively— addressed to the king, Richard II (2007:105-107). After all, the moral of the tale for a ruler boils down to "don't be evil." That is to say, that he should not let vainglory and arrogance lead to arbitrariness, injustice, and tyranny. The advice to people interacting with the ruler, however, is more strategic in how it suggests ways of dealing with a king suffering from "surquiderie," the pride of vainglory and arrogance.²⁵

The *St Albans Chronicle* records a moment requiring the application of this counsel immediately following the success of Gaunt's negotiations with Juan I and his daughters' Iberian marriages. Richard convened a council at Reading in December 1389 and, Thomas Walsingham reports,

Eo tempore apud Redyngum rex Anglie proceres ad consilium conuocauit, ad quod dux Lancastrie eo celerius properauit quo percepit regem non rectis oculis quosdam de proceribus uelle respicere, et metuit orituras eo tempore simultates, quas omnino sedare disposuit in aduentu suo. Neque frustra quidem laborauit, set id effecit ut et pacem cordi regis, pacemque magnatum pectoribus, infunderet graciose.²⁶ (Taylor, Childs and Watkiss 2003:I.894)

This episode shows an interesting shift in the depiction of John of Gaunt, who was excoriated in the first version of the beginning of the *St Albans Chronicle* (the "Scandalous Chronicle"), to the figure of elder statesman (Taylor, Childs and Watkiss 2003:lii-iv, lxxiii-iv). This depiction also echoes Gower's image of the mature knight who does his best to minimize the impact

²⁵ This term is used in other tales, including that of Nebuchadnezzar, but not in the "Tale of the Three Questions" itself (CA I.1973, 2960).

²⁶ "The duke of Lancaster did all he could to get there as quickly as possible because he was aware that the king was unwilling to show a proper regard for some of the nobles, and afraid that quarrelling would break out at that time. It was his intention to restore complete harmony on his arrival. In fact his efforts were not in vain, for he had the pleasure of pacifying the king's feelings, as well as calming the heartfelt resentment felt by the magnates."

of his king's arrogance. This incident is the next item in the chronicle after the settlement of the Lancastrian Iberian adventures. It also presents an eerily faint reduplication of both the "Tale of the Three Questions," which had almost certainly been written well before this time, and Spanish historical circumstances on the English court. But there is no Peronelle for Richard II in this instance, and so Gaunt enacts the role of the wise counselor.

This performance of good counsel is ultimately directed to everyone participating in the world of Parliament and the court. Yeager describes Gower's ideal audience as defined more by interest than by position alone—these would be people with "the capacity to read (or to be read to), followed closely by access, and the potential, to wield power to improve society" (2004:491). While these characteristics would probably describe more men than women, it seems certain at this point that women were also actively interested in the *Confessio*, especially Philippa of Lancaster, John of Gaunt's daughter who became Queen of Portugal.²⁷ Women might have had less "potential to wield power" directly or on a large scale, but many women with interest in and time for Gower's books would likely have had spheres of influence.

The pointed advice that the tale offers is that members of a court should avoid direct challenge or pacifying acquiescence in favor of calming voices expressing an insistent logic that the king can accept. Peronelle does this by both solving the king's riddles and posing her own. In the more immediate English political context, this strategy has relevance to the endemically tense relationship among Richard, the magnates, especially his former regents and Gaunt, and Parliament. Gower is using the Spanish setting of the tale to gain leverage for advisors not, perhaps, possessing great innate power in that relationship. He imagines and communicates a situation in which the strategy works, and that imaginative power offers a way to reframe the Spanish political situation and domestic politics in a way that suggests a more acceptable set of choices: intermarriage, alliance, and realignment instead of the absolutism of either conquest or avoidance. Thus, the Spanish setting of the "Tale of the Three Questions" both reframes the political argument over Lancastrian Castilian engagements and models a role for counsel in domestic concerns.

²⁷ For more details about Philippa of Lancaster's probable commissioning of the *Confessio Amantis* MS Real Biblioteca II-3088, see Moreno (1991), Yeager (2004), and Coleman (2007:151-57).

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