

“THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING:” JOHN GOWER, CHRISTINE DE PIZAN, AND THE TRADITION OF ELIJAH THE PROPHET

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Abstract

Although John Gower (ca. 1330-1408) and Christine de Pizan (1364/5-ca. 1429) may not have known each other's work, comparative study helps to elucidate the literary court culture to which they both belonged. One important commonality is their self-definition as the “voice of one crying in the wilderness,” or one who speaks moral truth to power, a phrase derived from the biblical prophets John the Baptist and Elijah. Gower wrote from this tradition in his Latin *Vox Clamantis*, including the *Cronica Tripertita*. He echoed the social justice themes of these prophets, especially their defense of the poor, but also their religious fanaticism, bellicosity, and support of violent regime change. Knowing that the role of prophet was biblically permitted to women, Christine created a feminized variation on the topos for her *Lamentacion sur les maux de la France*, a missive addressed to several royal figures in the hope of preventing civil war.

Keywords: John Gower, Christine de Pizan, John the Baptist, Elijah, Bible prophecy, religion and violence, women prophets, *Vox Clamantis*, *Cronica Tripertita*, *Lamentacion sur les maux de la France*.

One of the most interesting, quite recent developments in Gower and Christine¹ studies is just that, the comparative study of these near-contemporary,

¹ I call the two authors Gower and Christine because that is what they called themselves, for good reasons of their own. Gower called himself “John Gower” (e.g. *CA* VIII.2908), or just “Gower” (Yeager 2011: 56-57), and the Latin “Est Amor” (Yeager 2005:32-33), while Christine used “Christine de Pizan,” e.g. in her dedicatory epistle sent with the *Rose* debate documents to Queen Isabeau de Bavière (qtd. in McWebb 2007:110), or just “Christine,” as in her *Livre de l'Advison Cristine*. It seems that the Christian name “John” was too common for use as a by-line, while the more distinctive “Christine” was just the thing.

multifaceted poets and social commentators. Although a few valuable efforts had existed previously,² this field had its true beginning at Kalamazoo 2010, thanks to the session jointly organized by Benjamin F. Semple of the American Christine de Pizan Society and R. F. Yeager of the John Gower Society.³ A notable point of connection between Gower and Christine is their boldly revisionist treatment of literary misogyny, especially certain passages of the *Roman de la Rose*, and their remarkably similar *exempla* of good women.⁴ While Gower (ca. 1330-1408) and Christine (1364/65-ca. 1429) may not have known each other's work, their commonalities help to elucidate the lively interchange of ideas and approaches that took place in the Anglo-French court culture to which in historical fact they both belonged.⁵ Indeed, their active lives overlapped at the turn of the fifteenth century. Already famous for her *Cent Balades*, Christine was invited to visit Gower's patron Henry IV shortly after he usurped the throne, but she evaded the overture out of disgust for his treatment of Richard II. It is just possible that Gower presented his *Cinkante Balades* to the new king in competition with her, or as a consolation prize once she had declined to serve as an ornament to Henry's court.⁶

² To date, the bibliography of comparative studies on Gower and Christine is not extensive; of those that exist, most at least mention the authors' attitudes toward women. Some of the following are only glancing references. See Blamires *et al.* (1992:249, 292, and 292 n.38), Burke (1992), Brown-Grant (1998), Driver (1998:284, 284n.30), which discusses Elizabeth Woodville's ownership of a Caxton *Confessio* and also a MS of Christine's collected works; Fanger (1998, esp. 207 n.6), where she notes the similarity of Christine's Circe to Gower's, Mast (1999), Sylvester (2000), Bakalian (2004:64, 173 nn. 67, 68), Collett (2005:5-6), and Driver (2009: 85 n.28, 98). Sheila Delany (1992:198, 205 n.14) briefly noted the interest of both in examples of good women, and (to her disapproval) their conservative political theory.

³ 45th International Congress on Medieval Studies, May 13-16, 2010, Kalamazoo.

⁴ On revisionist borrowing from *Le Roman de la Rose*, especially addressed to refuting its misogamy, in the works of Gower, see Economou (1970), Yeager (1990:180-87), and Bakalian (2004:5-12). On the same practice by Christine, see for example Huot (1985), McRae (1991), and Brownlee (1988). On exempla of good women in both authors, see n. 2 above. The issue of women in Gower and Christine is discussed, if not in comparative terms, in Morse (1996:220-24) and Blamires (1997:57-57 *et passim*).

⁵ For discussion of royal patronage and "international court culture" with relation to Gower, see Mathew (1968:74-82), Bennett (1992), Minnis *et al.* (1995: 9-35), Eberle (1999), and Coleman (2007). On Christine's royal patrons, see Willard (1984:155-72), Blumenfeld-Kosinski (2003:18, 23 nn.29-31), McWebb (2007:192 n.9), and for Christine's relationship with Queen Isabeau, Adams (2005, 2008).

⁶ For the story on Christine's refusal to visit Henry IV, see Willard (1984:165). For the possible connection to Gower's *Cinkante Balades*, see Burke (2010).

This article is concerned with just one of the many Gower and Christine coincidences: their common self-definition as the “voice of one crying in the wilderness,” Gower in his Latin poem *Vox Clamantis/The Voice of One Crying*, including its sequel the *Cronica Tripertita/Tripartite Chronicle*,⁷ and Christine in a much shorter work, her *Lamentacion sur les maux de la France/Lament on the Evils of the Civil War*.⁸ They had other, related commonalities as political poets; both Gower and Christine wrote works in praise of peace and seriously questioned the violence of their time, although neither was a pacifist;⁹ both sought for patronage and mostly found it, especially among the royal;¹⁰ and both sympathized with the poor –as long as they kept quiet and stayed in their place.¹¹ Both expressed a strong opinion on the deposition and death of English King Richard II, although their opinions were not the same.¹² Both Gower and

⁷ For the Latin text of the *Vox Clamantis*, see Gower (Macaulay 1899-1902, vol.4); for the English, see Carlson and Rigg (2011), where the first book of the *Vox* is published in dual language format under the title *Visio Anglie*; for a complete English translation of the *Vox* (all seven books), see Stockton (1962). For a dual language version of the *Cronica Tripertita*, see Carlson and Rigg (2011); the *Cronica* has also been translated by Stockton (1962). In this article, all citations to the Latin *Vox* Books II-VII are taken from Macaulay (1899-1902, vol. 4); all quotations from Book I of the *Vox*, also called *Visio Anglie*, and the *Cronica Tripertita* are taken from the dual language Carlson and Rigg edition (2011); and all translations from the *Vox* Books II-VII, as well as the Dedicatory Epistle, are taken from Stockton (1962).

⁸ My citations refer to the user-friendly dual language edition of the Christine’s *Lamentacion* (Wisman 1984). The text has also been edited by Angus J. Kennedy (1998) and translated by Willard (1994) and Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Brownlee (1997).

⁹ On peace advocacy in Gower, see Yeager (1987) and Livingston (2005); for Christine, see Green, Mews, and Pinder (2008); for an overview, see Saul (1997:206, 206 nn. 2, 3). As explained in this essay, Gower condoned violence in support of what he considered to be a good cause; Christine subscribed to the ideology of “just war”; see Forhan (2002:133-54), a concept which emphatically did not include civil war, as confirmed by her *Lament* (Wisman 1984).

¹⁰ For a recent review of Gower as royal protégé, see Saul (2010); for Christine, see Willard (1984:155-71) and Margolis (2011:13-28.)

¹¹ For a review of Gower’s repressive views on the “gent petit” and his horror at the Peasants’ Revolt as expressed in the *Vox Clamantis*, see Epstein (2004:53, 53 nn.43, 44). For Christine’s sympathy with the poor, while believing that they should accept their lot, see Willard and Cosman (1989:219-23) and Margolis (2011:107-109); for her fear of poor people’s efforts to challenge the status quo, especially the Cabochien uprising of 1413, see Oexle (1994:216-20), the nuanced discussion by Dudash (2005), and Margolis (2011:108). However, Christine would fully sympathize with ordinary people caught in the crossfire of the Hundred Years War; see n. 43, below.

¹² Gower lost faith in Richard II and supported the usurpation by Henry IV; for a review, see Saul (2010). On Christine’s sympathy for Richard and disgust for the usurper, see Campbell

Christine wrote prolifically as advisers to royalty in the *de regimine principum* or “mirror for princes” tradition.¹³ In a related genre, each poet wrote on the “estates” or classes of society, both on the ideals appropriate to each, and on their gross contemporary failures.¹⁴ It was in their self-appointed role as moral teacher, especially to the powerful, that each poet assumed the mantle of a biblical prophet, specifically the “voice of one crying.”

Before exploring how Gower and Christine interpreted their role as “*vox clamantis in deserto*,” to use the Vulgate phrase, it is necessary to review the biblical concept of the prophet in general, and “the voice of one crying” in particular. The discussion should begin with a caveat—foretelling the future was not the most important part of the prophetic mission, and it is not the concern of this essay. Above all, the prophet speaks “the word of the Lord” (e.g. Micah 1:1), especially truth to power, often at the risk of his freedom or his life. The Bible has several examples of a prophet confronting a king, generally face to face, with a stark indictment for some particular outrage and a notice of judgment from God.¹⁵ The prophet may be threatened (e.g. 1 Kings 19:1-2), imprisoned (e.g. 1 Kings 22:26-27; Jer. 20:1-2; Luke 11:49-51), forced into exile,¹⁶ or even killed¹⁷ for his bold and unflattering words. Along with religious

(1925), Laidlaw (1982), and Willard (1984:65); for Christine’s own words on the subject, see Reno and Dulac (2000:112-13), and Solente (1959-1966: lines 4400-4404, 4541-54).

¹³ Book VII of the *Confessio Amantis* is a “mirror for princes” or a book of moral instruction for a king. All citations to the *Confessio* are taken from Peck (2000-4). For a review of advice to royalty in the works of Gower, see Peck (2004:224 *passim*); for a review of Christine’s many works in the *genre*, see Forhan (2002:27-44) and Collett (2005). For brief comparison of Gower’s and Christine’s mirrors for princes, see Brown-Grant (1998) and Collett (2005:506).

¹⁴ For a review of estates topoi in the works of Gower, see Mann (1973: *passim*); Christine discusses the estates in her *Livre du Corps du Policie/Book of the Body Politic*, (Kennedy 1998, trans. Forhan 1994); see discussion in Collett (2005) and Margolis (2011:107-109).

¹⁵ E.g., see Exodus 5-10 (Moses and Pharaoh); 2 Sam. 12:1-24 (Nathan and David); 1 Kings 13:1-10 (unnamed prophet and Jeroboam); 1 Kings 16 (unnamed prophet and Baasha); 1 Kings 14 (Ahijah and the wife of Jeroboam); Jeremiah 19:3 (Jeremiah to the king and high priests.) Elijah confronted Ahab over his worship of Baal: 1 Kings 18:17-18, and he pronounced a terrible judgment on Ahab for the judicial murder of Naboth for the sake of his vineyard: 1 Kings 21:20-24. Elijah rebukes Ahab’s son Ahaziah at 2 Kings 1:15-16.

¹⁶ E.g., Elijah fled the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel: 1 Kings 17:8, 19:4.

¹⁷ E.g., see 2 Chronicles 24:21-21, the example of John the Baptist, and Jesus’ comment at Matthew 13:57, Mark 6:4, and John 4:44.

apostasy, abuse of the poor and vulnerable¹⁸ is the sin most often exposed and condemned by the prophet. Thus, the prophet is almost invariably at odds with the powerful. He depends on his coterie of sympathizers, often poor people themselves, for a subsistence lifestyle at the margin of society.¹⁹ Not only is the prophet no respecter of persons, but anyone can be called by God to prophesy, even a woman (as Christine knew well)²⁰ or an imperfect man.²¹ Unlike the true prophet, the false prophet tells his people, and especially his king, what they want to hear, and is duly rewarded for his flattery.²²

“The voice of one crying” represents a particular stream in the biblical tradition of prophecy. Although the phrase originates in Isaiah 40:3, it is quoted in all four Gospels in connection with John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3, Mark 1:3, Luke 3:4, John 1:23), the last of the prophets to foretell the advent of Jesus the Messiah. Surviving in the wilderness on a meager natural diet (Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:6),²³ John preached his uncompromising gospel of sin and repentance to all around him, but especially to King Herod, whom he reproached for marrying his brother’s wife Herodias, as well as for other abuses (Matthew 14:3, Mark 6:17, Luke 3:19). In retaliation, Herod had John the Baptist thrown into prison, where the prophet was beheaded as the result of a stratagem devised by Herodias, and carried out by her daughter Salome (Matthew 14:3 and Mark 6:17-28).

¹⁸ For an example of prophetic invective against paganism, see Elijah’s furious hostility to the worship of Baal, cited in n.15, above. The prophetic books contain many warnings of punishment for those who abuse the poor; e.g., see Micah 2:1-5 and 3:1-3.

¹⁹ E.g., Elijah sought refuge with a widow who had barely enough to feed herself and her son, 1 Kings 17:8-12; the itinerant Elisha seems to have relied on the kindness of strangers, 2 Kings 4:8-10.

²⁰ Christine provides examples of biblical women prophets (Deborah, Elizabeth, Anna, and the Queen of Sheba) in her *Book of the City of Ladies*, (Richards 1998:104-106). For a review of women prophets in the Bible and medieval discussion of the topic, see Watt (1997:15-36), and Minnis (2008:200-09); on medieval views of contemporary women in the prophetic role, see n. 39, below.

²¹ Balaam the prophet (Numbers 22) was a bad man; also see Matthew 7:22. For a review of biblical and patristic discussion on whether a sinful man may truly prophesy, see Minnis (2008:200-201); also see Dante’s “Epistle to Can Grande,” where Dante claims to have written a true vision despite his personal imperfections (Alighieri 2006: paragraph 28). By uttering prophecy in the *Vox*, Gower did not claim to be a great man; Minnis (1988:173) notes his careful “protestations of humility.”

²² For a description of the people-pleasing false prophet contrasted with rejection and punishment of the true, see, e.g., Micah 3:5-6. Gower was intrigued with this dichotomy; see his story of Micaiah, the false prophets, and King Ahab, *CA* VII.2527ff., from 1 Kings 22.

²³ John’s ascetic lifestyle is noted by Jesus at Matthew 11:7, 18 and Luke 7:24, 33.

The example of John the Baptist had its often-cited Old Testament prototype, the equally outspoken, brave, and abstemious Elijah the Tishbite.²⁴ Like John the Baptist, but unlike other biblical prophets such as Joseph and Daniel, this ancient prophet never engaged with dreams or visions, nor did he speak in other than the plainest of terms. The career of Elijah, along with the parallel achievements of his chosen successor Elisha,²⁵ was extremely well known to Gower, who clearly (at least in the *Vox*) identified his role with both prophets as described in the Bible. Morally, however, Elijah and Elisha present a mixed and questionable record. On the one hand, both in some ways exemplified the social justice advocacy so admired by Martin Luther King and other liberal students of the prophetic tradition.²⁶ They assisted widows (1 Kings 17:14-24; 2 Kings 4:1-7), the poor (1 Kings 17:8-13; 2 Kings 4:1-7, 8:5-6), and the ill (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37, 5:1-14) even across ethnic lines,²⁷ and they stood up to the Israelite King Ahab, his queen Jezebel, and their successors, without fear or favor. One of the most famous actions of Elijah, and one several times cited by Gower,²⁸ was his blunt confrontation with the monarch over an egregious abuse of royal power. King Ahab had coveted the vineyard of Naboth, an ordinary citizen whose property abutted his own, but Naboth, correctly claiming religious authority, refused to sell. While Ahab gave in to depression over his neighbor's intransigence, Jezebel took action by arranging the murder of Naboth through a corrupt judicial proceeding, thus allowing her husband to seize the property. Elijah spoke God's righteous judgment face-to-face with Ahab, even though the king and his consort had repeatedly threatened to kill him (1 Kings 21).

On the other hand, neither Elijah nor Elisha was ever an advocate of the "swords into ploughshares" (Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3) component of the prophetic tradition. With their God's approval, and at times his miraculous aid,

²⁴ The story of Elijah is told in 1 Kings 17:1 and 2 Kings 2:18. Both Elijah and John the Baptist were identified in the gospels with the "voice of one crying;" see above. John the Baptist was also associated in Christian theology with the divine messenger (who will "prepare the way before me," see Malachi 3:1 and Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 1:17, 76, and 7:27); and the miraculous return of Elijah before "the great and terrible day of the Lord," (Malachi 4:5-6 and Matthew 11:7-15, 17:10-13; Mark 6:14-16; and Luke 1:17.) For a medieval review of Elijah as a type of John the Baptist, see Ryan (1993:1:328-36, cap. 86, "The Birth of John the Baptist").

²⁵ On Elisha as Elijah's spiritual heir, see 1 Kings 19:19 and 2 Kings 2:9, 13, 15.

²⁶ E.g., see Wallis (2005) for a discussion of social justice teachings in the prophetic books of the Bible as reflected in the works of Dr. King.

²⁷ The aid of Elijah and Elisha to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman, neither of them fellow Israelites, is approvingly noted by Jesus at Luke 4:25-27.

²⁸ *Mirour de l'Omme* (Macaulay 1899-1902: 1.4958, 6778, and 17637) and n. 30 below.

they killed their opponents as freely as did Ahab and Jezebel, both in defense of religious purity (1 Kings 18:40; 2 Kings 1:9-12), and even in revenge for a verbal insult by a group of children (2 Kings 2:23-24). They not only warned of violent regime change in punishment for royal sin; they actively encouraged it, and at one point Elisha even participated in outright deception to bring it about (2 Kings 8:7-15 –cf. 1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 9:1-37 –cf. 1 Kings 19:16). God’s judgment on Ahab (for the judicial murder of Naboth) was fulfilled with a coup d’état in which his 70 male descendants all were killed; this punishment, so callously endorsed by Elijah, must surely have terminated some completely innocent persons (2 Kings 10:11; cf. 1 Kings 21:21). Both prophets accepted their kings’ habitual warfare against neighboring city-states and at times encouraged it outright (1 Kings 19:15-18; 2 Kings 3:16-27).

Gower identified strongly with “the voice of one crying,” albeit in his own strategic and selective fashion. His works often allude to Daniel and other biblical prophets as exemplary and instructive figures; in the opening lines of the *Vox*, he compares himself to the visionary prophets Daniel, Joseph, and his namesake John of the Apocalypse.²⁹ However, it was only in French and Latin, and specifically in the *Mirour*, the *Vox*, and the *Cronica*, that the poet gave notable place to the stories of Elijah and Elisha, while explicitly channeling the voice of such a prophet in the Latin poems, even going so far as to equate his (former) king with the murderous figure of Herod.³⁰ He clearly chose not to draw upon the medieval tradition that emphasized Elijah’s escape to the desert as the foundation of monasticism, especially the Carmelite order, while passing over in silence his often violent political engagement as described in the Bible.³¹

As did Gower, I have treated all seven books of the *Vox* and the *Cronica Tripartita* as a unified “voice of one crying.” The *Vox* has a complicated textual history; briefly, Books II-VII were written first, some time before 1378, with an introductory paragraph identifying the text as a “vox clamantis” addressed to the boy king Richard II. Book I, also known as the *Visio Anglie*, was added a short time after the event it describes, the Peasants Revolt of June 1381. In

²⁹ For a review of Gower’s allusions to the biblical prophets and his writing in a prophet-persona, see Minnis (1988:168-77), Peck (1989), Watt (2003:107-13), and Edwards (2010:66-70); for comment on the opening lines of the *Vox*, see Carlson and Rigg (2011:24-25, 28-29, ll. 7-8, 57-58), and Peck (1989:168).

³⁰ For the matter of Elijah and Elisha in *Mirour de l’Omme*, see n. 28, above, and Macaulay (1899-1902:1.4957, 6775, 7461, 11155, 12592, 18925). In the *Vox*, see VI.1235-36, 1361-62, and nn. 57 and 58, below. For the comparison of Richard II to Herod, see the *Cronica Tripartita* III.9 ff. (Carlson and Rigg 2011:294, 295).

³¹ For the non-literal and anachronistic medieval reading of the biblical Elijah as a desert-dweller by choice and founder of monasticism, see Ackerman (2003:17, 100-105.)

reaction to Henry IV's usurpation of the throne in 1399, Gower reworked the *Vox*, replacing material addressed to Richard with praise for the new king; probably in early 1400, he added the *Cronica Tripertita*, a propaganda piece denigrating Richard's rule as abusive and justifying Henry's usurpation. In a late-life summary of his major works, as most recently explained by Carlson and Rigg (2011:6-7), Gower referred to his expanded *Vox* and the *Cronica* collectively as the *Vox Clamantis*, the second of his three major *opera* on which he desired his reputation to rest.

Christine spoke forth in the manner of Elijah –“moy, povre voix criant en ce royaume/me, a poor voice crying in this kingdom” (Wisman 1984:94, 95)– in her 23 August 1410 *Lament on the Evils of the Civil War*. In keeping with the tradition, she addressed her moral outcry to the powerful, especially the Duke of Berry and Queen Isabeau de Bavière, who (as she hoped and pleaded) would avert the threat of civil war by mediating between the rival factions of Armagnac and Orléans.³² Also channeling tradition, she deploys a rhetoric of in-your-face intensity, especially her famous wake-up call to Isabeau: “Oh, crowned Queen of France, are you still sleeping? Who prevents you from restraining now this side of your kin and putting an end to this deadly enterprise?” (Wisman 1984:88, 89).³³ As did Gower, however, she composed her prophetic voice as an artful blend of different streams from the biblical tradition. For example, addressing the clergy of France, she writes: “For you resemble Nineveh, which God condemned to perish, and which received his wrath because of the great sins which were many there [...]” (Wisman 1984:88, 89). Here she strategically channels Jonah, one of the few prophets whose warnings were heeded in time to avert disaster, as she fervently hoped would be the case for France.

In addition to his carefully titled *Vox Clamantis*, Gower's self-construction as a prophet may be coded in the well-known frontispiece illumination found in British Library MS Cotton Tiberius A.iv and other MSS of the *Vox Clamantis*:³⁴ an image of the poet aiming the arrow of his moral condemnation at a distant earth, while standing off to the side on a mysterious piece of sparsely tufted ground. The archer's foothold surely represents the “wilderness” of the “vox clamantis in deserto.” In the *Vox* especially, Gower maintained the *persona* of a social outsider, or at any rate a nonconformist, despite his comfortable residence

³² For an overview of the historical circumstances, see Leppig (1992:141-42) and Adams (2005:178-79).

³³ Compare Elijah mocking the prophets of Baal at 1 Kings 18:27.

³⁴ For discussion of the *Vox* MSS and this miniature, see Yeager (2005:10-11).

in the outskirts of London³⁵ –he is a wilderness-dweller in a nonliteral sense of the term. In Book I of the *Vox*, he also describes how he, or at least his fictional alter ego, quite literally fled to the forest in order to hide from the marauding peasants of June 1381; his prose introduction to the episode reads, “Here, according to the vision of his dream, he laments, as though in his own person [quasi in propria persona], the griefs of those who, out of fear of that time, protected themselves by hiding in woods and caves.”³⁶ His flight has several echoes of Elijah’s escape to the desert after Jezebel had threatened to have him murdered in retaliation for his mass killing of her protégés, the prophets of Baal; indeed, the English poet may be said to have retold the story in the form of a *cento*. As noted by Carlson and Rigg (2011:212), some details of the story are drawn from Ovid’s account of Achaemenides (*Met.* 14.154-222), the Greek sailor accidentally left behind on the island of Polyphemus and rescued by Aeneas. By the very conventions of the *cento*, however, such extracts from classical poetry may be reassembled to construct a biblical narrative.³⁷ Channeling Elijah in exile, “John Gower” prostrates himself in exhaustion and so yields to despair that he wishes God would allow him to die. The divine response both to “John” and Elijah is not rejection or death, but encouragement and instructions on how to carry on with their lives.³⁸

Speaking as a prophet, Christine defines her marginal status in the opening phrase of her *Lament*: “seulette a part” (Wisman 1984:84), which might best be translated “a little woman all by myself.” Far from a simple humility topos, this is her elegantly feminized version of the image discussed above: a male prophet standing apart as “vox clamantis in deserto.” By placing his image out of doors, in full public view, Gower presents himself as a preacher as well as a prophet; as explained by Maria Wickert (1989), the *Vox* is organized in large part as an elaboration on the sermon of John the Baptist in Luke 3:1-14 (Wickert 1981: 70-72). Although a layman, Gower had the right to declaim in public, if only by his pen. A woman, any woman, was forbidden to preach, but permitted (if not without reservations) to prophesy. By voicing her speech to power in the

³⁵ On Gower’s longtime residence in Southwark at the priory of St. Mary Overie, see Hines, Cohen, and Roffey (2004:28-33).

³⁶ For the author-persona’s flight to the woods, see *Vox* in Carlson and Rigg (2011:1.1359-1592; prose passage at 120-21). Stockton (1962:362) echoes Macaulay in noting that Gower does not claim to have personally experienced such a flight, although some Londoners did flee the city in the way he describes.

³⁷ For a discussion of possible *cento* in Gower, although not this passage, see Yeager (1989); for the most complete notes on borrowings from Ovid in this passage of the *Vox*, although not with reference to *cento*, see Carlson and Rigg (2011:212-26).

³⁸ Cp. 1 Kings 19:3-9 and Carlson and Rigg (2011:123-33, ll. 1359-1592, esp. 1381-82, 1442, 1525-1545ff.).

unthreatening persona of a “seulette,” Christine keeps her outcry well within the bounds of orthodoxy,³⁹ while clearly identifying with “the voice of one crying” outspoken truth to power.

Gower uses his *Vox* repeatedly to channel Elijah (and other biblical prophets) as advocate for the helpless against the depredations of the mighty. He excoriates the abuse of widows and the poor by powerful prelates, nobles, lawyers, and judges (Stockton 1962:118, 143,149, 208, 221-22) and he admonishes his king to deal justly and mercifully with the downtrodden (Stockton 1962:237). As he did several times in the *Mirour*,⁴⁰ the poet alludes to the theft of Naboth’s vineyard through a trumped-up criminal charge and a vicious charade of a trial. Such abuses, he claims, are ubiquitous in England:

As [the corrupt judge] lies on his feather bed, his sleepless mind suffers torments, for it is seething, stirred up by various plots. He says, ‘I want to get the land of the wretch next door, for that field is next to mine.’ Thus he drives orphans from their paternal homes; he pursues widows and harasses them with lawsuits. He enjoys the satisfactions of the poor man’s property, but he reckons the misfortunes of another as nothing.⁴¹ (Stockton 1962:227)

For Gower, the charity of Elisha (and other ancient worthies) is now passé, while the greed and corruption of their enemies rule the land (Stockton 1962:250-53).⁴²

In a stunning variation on the peaceable kingdom topos as set forth by Micah and Isaiah, Christine rebuked the nobility of France by evoking the plight of ordinary farmers and city dwellers caught up in a civil war for which they are not to blame:

Famine, because of the wasting and ruining of things that will ensue, and the lack of cultivation, from which will spring revolts by the people who have been too often robbed, deprived, and oppressed, their food taken away and stolen here and there by soldiers, subversion in the towns because of the outrageous taxes which will have to be levied on the citizens and dwellers to raise the needed money [...].⁴³ (Wisman 1984:86, 87)

³⁹ Based on biblical precedent, women were viewed as capable of prophecy, although contemporary female prophets such as Bridget of Sweden were expected to share their insights only in private, and might be met with skepticism; see Watt (1997:1-15, 27-36) and Minnis (2008:202-204).

⁴⁰ See n. 28, above.

⁴¹ The lines also allude to the corrupt judge of Micah 2:1-2.

⁴² The reference to Elisha (who refused payment for curing Naaman, in contrast to the avaricious clergy of today) is at Stockton (1984:250).

⁴³ Christine alludes to the scene of peace and social equality in Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3-4.

Here, in the prophetic tradition affirming human equality before God, Christine identifies with the truly oppressed and marginalized in her condemnation of civil strife inflicted by the powerful to serve their selfish ends.⁴⁴ The endorsement of violence by Elijah and Elisha has no echo whatsoever in her *Lament on the Evils of the Civil War*.

As "the voice of one crying," Gower recycles the more unsavory components of the Elijah paradigm, including his bellicosity, religious bigotry, and unseemly delight in politically motivated killing and violent transfer of power. In the *Vox* proper, despite finding fault with Richard, he praises the appalling violence of his father, Edward the Black Prince, in war against Spain and France:

He pursued and destroyed them, he cut them down and killed them just as a wolf driven by hunger scatters a sheepfold. He was always sober in his actions but his sword was often drunk with the blood of the enemy. (Stockton 1962:242)

Religious certitude leading to persecution of dissenters is another prominent theme of the Elijah tradition. In a disturbing claim of moral superiority, apparently devoid of ironic intent, Gower uses his *Vox* to assert that God causes even the physical world to obey the will of a righteous man; witness, among other examples, how Elisha's prayer caused iron to float – especially convenient, as the submerged axe was borrowed (2 Kings 6:1-7; Stockton 1962:105). For Gower, Wycliffe is a rank heretic, another Arius or Jovinian (Stockton 1962:251; Yeager 2005:18-19, l. 32). It was probably his hatred of the Lollards that inspired the poet to compose his fawning epistle to Bishop Arundel, complete with a laudatory pun on his name, glossed as "T[w]o mas" or "twice male."⁴⁵ This same Arundel, a proponent of burning at the stake for heretics, was recently included in the *BBC History Magazine*'s Ten Worst Britons List for creating the "system of [religious] persecution [...] used by [English] rulers for centuries" (Rubin, qtd by Stansfield *et al.* 2005).⁴⁶

The entire *Cronica Tripertita* is an *apologia* not only for the deposition and fatal mistreatment of a king, but also for the indiscriminate slaughter of the king's supporters, a sort of ritual bloodbath. Just one example is his gleeful depiction of the physical abuse and murder of Simon Burley, a senior courtier whose only crime appears to be his allegiance to Richard and Queen Anne:

⁴⁴ For Christine's more usual dogma on the common people, see n. 11, above.

⁴⁵ Gower dedicated a MS of the combined *Vox* and *Cronica Tripertita* to Arundel, who had been exiled by Richard II and recalled by Henry IV; see Macaulay (1899-1902:4.1-2), translated in Stockton (1962:47-48); the pun is explained in Stockton (1962:341 n.10).

⁴⁶ Other "winners" are Jack the Ripper, Oswald Mosley, and Thomas à Becket.

“That ‘burel cloth’ fell to the sword, such was his fate;/His old age was not right, and thus was reprobate./The tearful queen for help of medicine implored./But he was overwhelmed; his head fell by the sword” (Carlson and Rigg 2011:260, 261).⁴⁷

Speaking of the queen, how did Gower respond to the strong component of misogyny in the Elijah tradition? If an author identifies himself with the prophet declaring God’s judgment on Ahab or Herod, then he needs a Jezebel or a Herodias to complete the analogy. Both of these biblical women were instigators of even worse evil than their royal husbands knew how to devise.⁴⁸ However, despite the use of conventional misogynistic topoi in the *Vox*, and even a reference to Jezebel (Stockton 1962:253),⁴⁹ that poem contains no ill-speaking of Richard’s Queen Anne apart from the passage quoted above. In the case of Anne, the poet’s former patron who had inspired his best work,⁵⁰ the facts were stubborn things. There was no truthful way that such a gentle, intelligent, and beneficent person could be cast as a Jezebel.⁵¹ In the *Mirour de l’Omme*, however, a poem of Edward III’s declining years, we find an anonymous but unmistakable reference to the king’s mistress, Alice Perrers, as a dominant influence corrupting her paramour (Macaulay 1899-1902: vol. 1.22802ff.).⁵²

Not surprisingly, the profeminist Christine expunged all trace of the Jezebel paradigm from her recreation of the “voice of one crying.” Her *Lament* excoriates Isabeau for failure to mediate a peace, but other magnates of the realm –royal cousins, clergy, the Duke of Berry– are reproached for the same inaction, with no suggestion that Isabeau is a mastermind of evil or especially to blame. Earlier, in her *Epistle to the Queen of France*, also addressed to Isabeau, Christine practiced gender equity by adapting the platitudes of the *de regimine principum* tradition to feature the exempla of virtuous queens: peacemakers Esther, Bathsheba, and Blanche the mother of St. Louis, contrasted with the infamous example of Jezebel (Wisman 1984:76, 77), who is notably not

⁴⁷ Burley (1336-1388) was a victim of the “Merciless” Parliament; for discussion of his death, see Saul (1997:192-5).

⁴⁸ See n. 113-114 above.

⁴⁹ Macaulay (1899-1902:4.402, n.1361f.) sees a possible allusion to Alice Perrers. For misogyny in the *Vox*, present but not a major theme, see Stockton (1962:176-77, 202-206).

⁵⁰ For the genesis of the *Confessio Amantis* in the court of Richard II, see discussion and review by Coleman (2007); also see n. 5, above. The centrality of Anne has been imperfectly recognized to date, but see Burke (2010).

⁵¹ For Anne’s unimpeachable reputation, see Taylor (1997); on her gentle personality, see Saul (1997:455-56).

⁵² For a review, see Peck (2004:226).

compared with Isabeau. Despite her role-playing a prophet, Christine was not a figure of exceptional political courage; she remained on good terms with patrons on both sides of the French civil wars (Green 2008:11-14). Although eloquent and morally serious, her pleas to Isabeau were most likely aimed at ratifying the queen’s already long-term efforts at diplomacy, rather than speaking unpopular truth to power.⁵³

For his part, Gower’s deployment of “the voice of one crying” and the matter of Elijah was quite strategic and selective. He excluded every one of these tropes from the *Confessio Amantis*,⁵⁴ while foregrounding the biblical prophet Daniel and the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah 11,⁵⁵ all in order to serve the distinctive purposes of the English poem. It is well for his reputation that he did so, for in relation to Gower, the Elijah-*persona* was grandiose, self-serving, and at odds with reality. The English poet was a speaker of only limited truth to power, being careful to phrase his political satire in the safe generalities allowed by the conventions of the *de regimine principum* tradition.⁵⁶ He did not censure specific abuses unless the royal target of his arrows was safely deposed and dead. It is instructive to compare his harsh depiction of Richard’s foibles in the *Cronica*, with the tactful circumlocution of “In Praise of Peace,” offered as a work of advice to his patron Henry IV.⁵⁷ A certain William Norham, a contemporary of Gower, was not so prudent. He put on a hair shirt in the style of Elijah or John the Baptist and directly accused both Richard and Henry of actions displeasing to God, including the misappropriation of their subjects’ land. In response, Richard had Norham thrown into the Tower, and Henry had his head chopped off.⁵⁸ Gower, by contrast, was careful not to antagonize the dominant class. For example, in the *Vox*, he echoed the contemporary aristocrat’s misreading of the biblical tradition on human equality. As Abraham

⁵³ As explained by Tracy Adams (2008:40), Isabeau had long attempted to mediate between the hostile parties, in the manner endorsed by Christine, and was far from being the depraved manipulator of later legend.

⁵⁴ Ahab appears only once in the *Confessio* (VII.2527ff.), and the other *dramatis personae* of the saga not all.

⁵⁵ On Daniel in the *Confessio*, see n. 62, below. For the peaceable kingdom, see *Confessio* Prol.1053 ff. and discussion by Kendall (2010), who notes the contrast with the “doom-mongering” (48) of the *Vox* (esp. at 46 and 48).

⁵⁶ As noted by Pearsall, “the prince is exhorted [...] [by works such as Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes*] to be prudent, just, liberal, and receptive to counsel” (1994:386). Rulers accepted these vague and unthreatening works of advice as a form of political theater, not in a serious search for “instruction”.

⁵⁷ The cautious indirection of “In Praise of Peace” is noted by editor Livingston (2005:102).

⁵⁸ See Grady (1995:553, 553 n.8).

Lincoln so prophetically expressed it (I paraphrase), nowhere in the Bible does it say that in the sweat of *another* man's face shall you eat your bread,⁵⁹ but Gower did argue just that, by claiming that the mandate in Genesis for physical labor applies to the peasants especially (Stockton 1962:208). None of this is to deny that Gower could be honest or insightful in his poetic *mimesis* of human affairs; furthermore, much evidence indicates that his evolving political views were sincere and, arguably, well founded.⁶⁰

Unlike the *Vox* and the *Cronica*, the *Confessio Amantis* was conceived under peaceful conditions, as a tribute to Richard and Anne.⁶¹ For this context, the poet's choice of a prophet-role model is quite appropriate, for the biblical Daniel was a loyal and helpful courtier, a political peacemaker, and even, as luck would have it, on respectful terms with his queen.⁶² In the *Confessio*, while teaching lessons drawn from Bible prophecy, Gower addressed his public in the modest persona of a citizen,⁶³ and not in the vainglorious pose of a prophet speaking truth to power. This strategy liberated the poet to sympathize with individual women and men, tell their stories, and thus create a masterpiece of love, for which we honor him today.

In sum, comparative study of Gower and Christine yields important insight on their commonalities as poets who struggled to engage with the moral and political challenges of their troubled situation. Clearly, neither saw any contradiction between their role as poets crafting works of pleasure and instruction, and as prophets calling on the powerful to repent and mend their

⁵⁹ In his "Second Inaugural Address" (1865), alluding to Genesis 3:17-19. Lincoln's exegesis resembles the Genesis-based, egalitarian sermons of John Ball, the priest reviled by Gower with the phrase "Balle propheta" for his role in inciting the Peasants' Revolt: Ball would suffer a prophet's fate (*Vox* I.793, ed. and trans. Carlson and Rigg as *Visio Anglie* 2011:82, 83). For a contemporary report of his sermons, see Brereton's edition of Froissart (1978:212-13).

⁶⁰ For a sympathetic review on Gower's disillusionment with Richard and shift of allegiance to Henry, see Peck (2004) and Saul (2010).

⁶¹ For the genesis of the *Confessio* in the Ricardo-Bohemian court milieu, see nn. 5 and 50, above.

⁶² See *Confessio* (Prol.585 ff.) and analysis by Peck (1989) and Watt (2003:110, 113) who notes the peaceful, redemptive purpose of prophecy in the *Confessio* as compared with the *Vox*. In contrast with faith-based mass killings by Elijah and Elisha, see above. Daniel persuades King Nebuchadnezzar to spare the lives of the pagan soothsayers (2:19-18); later, he successfully advises the king on how he may be restored to his sanity and his throne (4:27-37.) For Belshazzar's wise queen-mother and her rapport with Daniel, see 5:10-12. Revenge and violent regime change happen in Daniel (3:22, 5:30, 6:24), but never enacted or incited by the prophet.

⁶³ A "burel clerk" (*CA* Prol.52).

ways, for the salvation of all their people. Indeed, they may have perceived the two roles as practically one and the same.

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