

**VERNACULAR  
ACCESSUS: TEXT AND  
GLOSS IN GOWER'S  
CONFESSIO AMANTIS  
AND CHRISTINE DE  
PIZAN'S ÉPÎTRE OTHÉA**

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*Abstract*

This paper considers how Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and Christine de Pizan's *Épître Othéa* function as vernacular *accessus ad auctores*, as critical introductions to the classical narratives that they repurpose as models of moral behavior. By examining these works, I investigate how the type of learning associated with the study of Latin texts becomes an *exemplum* that inspires the development of the vernacular's literary capacities. A comparison of the two suggests that the former theorizes the vernacular's potential as a literary language to identify the interpretive skills that it still needs to acquire, while the latter demonstrates such an acquisition. Together, Gower and Christine demonstrate the rise of a more "learned" vernacular in the late Middle Ages, primed by skills taken from Latinate practices and ready to stake its claim on literary excellence.

*Keywords:* John Gower, Christine de Pizan, Latin learning, vernacular literary theory, translation, exemplum, *accessus ad auctores*.

This paper argues that John Gower and Christine de Pizan use elements of medieval academic prologues—*accessus ad auctores*—to parse the authority of Latin and reveal ways for it to benefit vernacular writing. In Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the representation of Latinity as a labored course of learning serves as an *accessus* for the language itself, a derivation of cultural authority that Gower aspires to replicate in the vernacular. In Christine's *Épître Othéa*, the representation of Latinity has greater subtlety but more directness because she uses the vernacular to

create an alternative, but no less effective, *accessus* form.<sup>1</sup> A comparison of the two suggests that the former theorizes the vernacular's potential as a literary language to identify the interpretive skills that it still needs to acquire, while the latter demonstrates such an acquisition. Together, Gower and Christine vividly illustrate the rise of a more "learned" vernacular in the late Middle Ages, primed by skills taken from Latinate practices and ready to stake its claim on literary excellence. Their respective interactions with Latinity show that Latin need not be regarded as an inimitable onus, but as an ally and a source of intellectual equipment that supports and enriches vernacular literary endeavors.

I will begin by examining a passage from Book IV of the *Confessio Amantis*, one in which Gower treats Latin literary history as an *exemplum* with consequences for writing in the vernacular as well as for a moral lesson. The *Confessio*'s Middle English text and Latin apparatus work together to represent this history as Gower's aspiration for writing in the vernacular. The relationship between text and such a form of gloss calls to mind the distinctive three-part structure of the stories contained in the *Épître Othéa*—text, gloss, and allegory (*texte, glose, allégorie*). In particular, Christine's *glose* and *allégorie* components incorporate Latin quotations drawn respectively from intellectual and biblical authorities, and they demonstrate the different types of writing that Latin learning supports in the vernacular. These structural similarities suggest that both authors use Latin to "prime" their vernacular works in order to produce an educated and skilled literary language. By comparing the works of Gower and Christine and their respective uses of the elements of the *accessus*, we see that the vernacular can assume a moral and instructive position as that is usually ascribed to and coded in Latin. Gower's text and gloss reveal the skills and knowledge that can be transferred from Latin, while Christine exemplifies the types of vernacular literature that such transference makes possible.

## GOWER'S "POETICS OF LEARNING" IN THE *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

In Book IV of the *Confessio*, Gower uses several milestones in the history of the Latin language to show the skills and knowledge that Latin has to offer

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<sup>1</sup> Written in Latin, the *accessus ad auctores* functions as a critical introduction to important Latin school-texts in the Middle Ages. Alastair Minnis identifies three types of "academic prologue" used in the Middle Ages and focuses on their presence in advanced school texts (e.g., patristic texts and biblical exegesis). For an introduction to these types of academic prologues, see Minnis (1988:15-39). For an overview of Middle English prologues, see also Galloway (2005:291-93).

for the English vernacular. Genius teaches Amans about labor as part of a discourse on sloth, the vice that forms the main theme of Book IV, and as he exemplifies virtuous labor, he outlines the rich literary capacities that Latin writers have accumulated and practiced since antiquity. In order to see the breadth of the literary history that Gower calls to the reader's attention, with each stage being integral to the others, the passage needs to be considered in full:

Bot toward oure marches hier,  
 Of the Latins if thou wolt hier,  
 Of hem that whilom vertuous  
 Were and therto laborious,  
 The ferste lettres of Latin,  
 Carmente made of hire engin  
 Of which the tunge Romein cam,  
 Wherof that Aristarchus nam  
 Forth with Donat and Dindimus  
 The ferste reule of scole, and thus,  
 How that Latin schal be componed  
 And in what wise it schal be soned,  
 That every word in his degré  
 Schal stonde upon congruité.  
 And thilke time at Rome also  
 Was Tullius with Cithero,  
 That writen upon Rethorike,  
 Hou that men schal the wordes pike  
 After the forme of eloquence,  
 Which is, men sein, a gret prudence.  
 And after that out of Hebreu  
 Jerom, which the langage kneu,  
 The Bible, in which the Lawe is closed,  
 Into Latin he hath transposed;  
 And many an other writer eek  
 Out of Caldee, Arabe, and Grek  
 With gret labour the bokes wise  
 Translateden. And otherwise  
 The Latins of hemself also  
 Here studie at thilke time so  
 With gret travaile of scole toke  
 In sondri forme for to boke,  
 That we mai take here evidences  
 Upon the lore of the sciences,  
 Of craftes bothe and of clergie;  
 Among the whiche in poesie  
 To the lovers Ovide wrot  
 And tawhte, if love be to hot,

In what manere it scholde akiele.  
 Forthi, mi sone, if that thou fiele  
 That love wring thee to sore,  
 Behold Ovide and take his lore. (CA IV.2633-74)<sup>2</sup>

The literary history of Latin begins with elementary spelling and grammar (Carmente, Donatus, and Dindymus) and progresses to high rhetorical style (Cicero), translation and exegesis (Jerome translating the Bible from Greek and Hebrew sources), and finally the love poetry of Ovid and the wider medieval tradition of moralizing allegory associated with his works. Gower extols Latin's variety of forms and styles and its sophisticated interpretive skills as instances of virtuous labor. By valorizing Latin's ability to articulate eloquence, sacred truth, and wise counsel, he exemplifies Latin as a literary language worthy of respect and emulation. Latin's versatility of expression and rich interpretive capacity represent the apex of its accomplishments and constitute both a cultural benchmark and an authority.

Although the grounds for Latin's authoritativeness may seem obvious, Gower's particular iteration deserves closer examination because it functions as an *exemplum* for the vernacular. He represents the vast tradition of Latin learning through its versatility and interpretive skills in order to target his *exemplum* at Amans and at the English vernacular reading public. These efforts are visible from the start of the passage, where Genius tells Amans that his discourse on Latin's history marks a move "toward oure marches." According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the term "marches" carries the sense of coming to one's home ground or proper station.<sup>3</sup> In other words, Gower's use of this term signals that the proper subject, or the *materia*, of the discourse is the linguistic and cultural exchange between Latin and English. As for the *utilitas*, or the usefulness, studying Latin inspires and equips the vernacular with an array of interpretive skills—grammar, rhetoric, biblical exegesis, translation, versification, and allegory—that expand the literary capacities of Middle English and "primes" it for becoming a full-fledged literary language.<sup>4</sup>

If we take Larry Scanlon's definition of *exemplum* as "a narrative enactment of cultural authority," then inventing a vernacular equivalent of Latin learning becomes the means to re-enact the cultural authority of classical

<sup>2</sup> All citations to the *Confessio Amantis* (as well as the Latin translations) are taken from Peck (2000-4, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>, s.v. "marche."

<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of referring to *accessus* in this paper, I focus on *materia* and *utilitas* because they are shared by the three types of academic prologues that Minnis describes (1988:21-23).

narratives in the vernacular (1994:34).<sup>5</sup> Both Amans and Gower's vernacular readers stand to benefit from acquiring specific skills that Gower emphasizes in his representation of Latin's authority, and both need to transfer the benefits of studying Latin to their respective conditions, which are perceived as having inherent shortcomings that need to be "confessed" in order to be redressed. When Gower subjects the Latin language to being treated as an *exemplum*, Latin confers onto English the substance of its long tradition of learning: the critical and interpretive skills that it exemplifies.

Gower therefore creates a "poetics of learning" that theorizes the vernacular treatment of the narratives, morals, and concepts that has its origin in Latin learning. Writing on education in Early Modern England, Jeff Dolven devises the term "poetics of pedagogy" to signify "a repertory of representational conventions that both structure and constrain fictions that themselves profess to teach" (2007:15-16). By representing Latin as an *exemplum* for English, Gower's Genius proposes a similar set of conventions in using the narrative of Latin literary history to teach readers about the vernacular's capacities as a literary language. He treats Latinity as the seed for higher learning and more advanced intellectual endeavors and anticipates its reception by vernacular writers trained to recognize that the skills inherent in the study of Latinity can inspire new literature. As Nicholas Orme (1999:451-52, 455-57) has shown in his work on medieval schools, children in medieval England were sent first to schools that taught them how to read and pronounce Latin properly before progressing to more advanced tracks of learning, which would then involve varying combinations of Latin and vernacular training.<sup>6</sup> By likening the very process of medieval schooling to the growth and development of a literary language, Gower suggests that Latin learning enriches and primes the production of literature in English.

We see this priming effect of the Latin *exemplum* as Gower's reference to Carmente recalls the verse heading to the Prologue. He reveals that the course of Latin literary history occupies a fundamental place not only in reenactment of Latinity as an exemplary cultural authority, but also in the essential design of his multilingual work.

Torpor, ebes sensus, scola parua labor minimusque  
Causant quo minimus ipse minora canam:

<sup>5</sup> Here, Scanlon associates notions of invention with the status of an *auctor* and the "cultural power" that such a status entails.

<sup>6</sup> Orme discusses how the precise course of schooling depended on whether a child was destined for a lay or a clerical career. However, in either case, Latin schooling begins with the learning of proper spelling and pronunciation—the same process that inaugurates Gower's notion of the course of Latin learning.

Qua tamen Engisti lingua canit Insula Bruti  
 Anglica Carmente metra iuuante loquar  
 Ossibus ergo carens que conerit ossa loquelis  
 Absit, et interpres stet procu loro malus.<sup>7</sup> (*CA Prol.i*)

Writing in Latin, Gower issues an anathema that shows his anxiety that the *Confessio* may not be taken seriously because it is written in the vernacular—the product of “listlessness, dull discernment, little schooling and least labor.” However, he now transfers the *utilitas* of learning Latin to the production of vernacular literature. Invoking the help of Carmente to write English verse, he translates a fundamental stage in learning Latin—the recognition of letters—into a departure point for composing literature in English.<sup>8</sup> The fourth line of Latin verse heading reinforces Gower’s vision of Carmente’s inspirational role by using interlocking word order to interweave “English verse” together with “Carmentis’ aid” and suggest their consonance and mutual compatibility through metrical harmony.<sup>9</sup> For Gower, it is daring to claim a comprehensive account of medieval Latinity as the labor necessary for breaking new literary ground in the vernacular. As a shared starting point for Latin and the vernacular, Carmente symbolizes the transfer of learning from Latin into English, which Gower sees his *Confessio* as facilitating.

### CHRISTINE DE PIZAN’S RE-ENACTMENT OF LATINITY IN THE *ÉPÎTRE OTHÉA*

Gower’s use of Latin literary history as an *exemplum* reenacts the origins of Latin’s literary authority in order to envision the potential development of vernacular literature. It also shows that Gower views his *Confessio* as a part of the development of vernacular writing—a move towards gaining the literary

<sup>7</sup> “Listlessness, dull discernment, little schooling and least labor are the causes by which, I, least of all, sings things all the lesser. Nonetheless, in the tongue of Hengist in which the island of Brutus sang, with Carmentis’ aid I will utter English verses. Let then the boneless one that breaks bones with speeches be absent, and let the interpreter wicked in word stand far away.”

<sup>8</sup> See the passage from Book IV cited above, in particular lines 2634-39, “Of the Latins if thou wolt hier,/Of hem that whilom vertuuous/Were and therto laborious,/The ferste lettres of Latin,/ Carmente made of hire engine/Of which the tunge Romein.”

<sup>9</sup> The fourth line reads “Anglica Carmente metra iuuante loquar,” with the terms “Anglicametra” (“English verse”) appearing in alternating order with “Carmente iuuante” (“Carmentis’ aid”).

capacities that have long been both associated with and coded in Latin. In the *Épître Othéa*, Christine de Pizan's reenactment of Latinity as *exemplum* can be viewed as a response to that of Gower because she illustrates the forms of vernacular writing that learning Latin makes possible. While Gower uses Latin literary history to highlight the skills that are to be acquired by "training" or "educating" the vernacular, he does not articulate the specific types of writing to which skills such as rhetoric or exegesis correspond in English. On the other hand, the *Épître* provides some possible means for vernacular writing to realize Gower's vision. Christine's work dispenses with the Latinate trappings of the *Confessio's* apparatus and instead incorporates Latin citations into the French text so that the two languages and the types of writing that they embody are in direct contact. It consists of one hundred classical narratives that she retells in French as chivalric *exempla*, with each *exemplum* consisting of a verse *texte* followed by prose *glose* and *allégorie* sections. As strictly defined parts in Christine's interpretation of classical myths, the sections represent distinct literary capacities –philosophical commentary and allegorical exegesis among them– that the vernacular acquires through its engagement with Latin learning.

Similar to Gower's use of Latin in the *Confessio's* Prologue to inspire vernacular literary production, Christine also uses the Prologue of the *Épître* to posit the priming effect of her work, with the aim of spurring further intellectual and literary endeavors. In prefaces dedicated to Charles VI of France and to Henry IV of England, she compares her work to a small bell that makes a great sound:

Car petite clochete grant voix sonne,  
 Qui moult souvent les plus sages reveille  
 Et le labourd'estude leur conseille.  
 Pour ce, prince tres louable et benigne,  
 Moy, nommee Christine, femme indigne  
 De sens acquis, pour sit faite oeuvre entreprendre,  
 A rimoier et dire me vueil prendre  
 Un epistre qui a Hector de Troye  
 Fu envoyé, si coml'istoire ottroye.<sup>10</sup> (*Épître* ll. 48-56)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For a little bell makes a great sound,/Which, very often, wakes up the most wise/And advises them to study hard./For this reason, most praiseworthy and benign prince,/I, named Christine, unworthy woman,/But having the judgment to undertake such a work,/Will begin to rhyme and tell about/A letter that was sent to Hector of Troy,/Just as the history books inform us (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1997:ll 31-39).

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise stated, the French text is cited from Parussa (1999) and the English translation from Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1997). For their respective editions, Parussa and Blumenfeld-Kosinski use different versions of Christine's prologue to the *Épître Othéa*, hence the slight difference in line numbers for the corresponding passages above. Parussa's

In re-enacting Latin as a cultural authority, Christine claims to offer an account that can be validated by history and that calls upon the wise to devote their labor to their studies. She represents the letter to Hector —effectively a narrative situated in classical antiquity— as a figurative example that encourages scholarly pursuits, as Gower does with his *exemplum*. However, whereas Gower refers to actual works and specific writers that form part of Latin’s long literary tradition and whose skills are adaptable by the vernacular, Christine constructs the goddess Othéa, a fictional authority that appears to contradict her claim of historical authenticity.

By retelling myths through a constructed goddess figure, Christine releases classical narratives from any form of authoritative retelling, such as those written by Ovid, whose work is the source for many of the stories that make up the *Confessio*. When we compare Gower’s “poetics of learning” to the fictional Othéa (the counterpart for Latin learning in the *Épître*), we find that such poetics propose an idea of vernacular literary practice more rigidly structured than Christine’s. Writing on the use of classical myths in the *Épître*, Marilyn Desmond and Pamela Sheingorn describe a process called “remythization” by which Christine opens classical narratives to different forces of interpretation and “defies the closure to which mythographic interpretation aspires” (2003:45). The crucial difference between Gower and Christine suggests that “remythization” is precisely what is at stake. Gower’s “poetics of learning” seeks to expand vernacular literary capacities but simultaneously limit their use. By embodying rhetoric, exegesis, and other skills in specific Latin writers and their works, Gower constrains the exercise of such skills to the model set by these writers, and he elaborates upon the application of these skills accordingly.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Christine’s approach opens classical narratives to different methods of reading and interpretation and provides for more freedom in the way that classical narratives are adapted to fit the needs of her vernacular narrative —Othéa’s instruction of chivalric virtues to Hector. She grants the vernacular greater prominence in its interaction with Latin learning so that it may develop literary capacities that are more independent of their Latin precedents.

The application of new methods becomes visible in the distinctive three-part structure with which Christine retells the classical narratives of the *Épître*.

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edition of the prologue includes an additional passage in which Christine dedicates her work to Louis I, Duke of Orléans and son of King Charles V of France.

<sup>12</sup> This idea of constraint forms part of Gower’s “poetics of learning.” See the passage cited above from Book IV of the *Confessio*. For example, Gower uses Ciceronian terms to define rhetoric when he writes, “And thilke time at Rome also/Was Tullius with Cithero,/That writen upon Rethorike,/Hou that men schal the wordes pike/After the forme of eloquence,/Which is, men sein, a gret prudence” (CA IV.2657-42).

For the one hundred narratives contained in Christine's work, she first produces a set of short verses called the *texte* and includes two further sections in prose: the *glose*, which cites philosophical authority to explain the narrative's content and meaning, and the *allégorie*, which cites Scripture to read the narrative as a figuration of Christian principles. To indicate more clearly the typical structure of the *Épître*, Christine's retelling of the Arachne story is given in abbreviated form below in order to emphasize her citations of intellectual authority in the *glose* and *allégorie* sections:

*Texte*

Ne te vantes, car mal en prist  
A Yragnes quitant mesprist  
Que contre Pallas se vanta,  
Dont la deessel'enchanta.

*Glose*

[...] comme ce soit moult laide chose a chevalieres trevanteur et qui trop peut abaissier le loz de sabonté. Et semblablement dit Platon: «Quant tu feras une chose mielx que un autre, gardnet'envanter, car tavaleur en seroit trop mendre».

*Allégorie*

Vantance [...] est vice de l'ame perverse qui aime la louange humaine et despise la vraye tesmoignance de sa propre conscience. A ce propos dit le sage: «Quid profuit nobis superbia aut diviciarum jactancia quid contulitnobis?». Sapiencie .v.o capitulo. (*Épître* 1999:289-90)<sup>13</sup>

To adapt Arachne's hubris as a lesson on the dangers of pride, Christine parses the story into strict textual categories that re-enact Latin's cultural authority. It resembles Gower's treatment of Latin literary history in that both writers signal important interpretive skills that can and should be transferred to the vernacular. Christine goes a step further and demonstrates the vernacular use of these skills by having the verse *texte* undergo two types of reading. *Glose*

<sup>13</sup> "*Text*: Do not boast; for evil ensued from it/ For Arachne, who so misjudged things/ That she boasted against Pallas/ For which the goddess put a spell on her.

*Gloss* [...] for it is an ugly thing for a knight to be boastful and this could lower the esteem of his goodness. And similarly Plato says: 'When you do one thing better than someone else, be sure not to boast of it, for your worth would be diminished by this.'

"*Allegory*. Boasting [...] is a vice of the perverse soul which loves human praise and despises the true testimony of its own conscience. On this topic the sage says: "What has pride profited us or what advantage has the boasting of riches brought us?" [Wisdom 5:8]. (Blumenfeld-Kosinski 1997:36).

indicate the influence of scholastic commentary as a model for explaining and understanding the subject of a literary work and the instructiveness of its content. *Allégorie* refers to the allegorization of classical narratives with the aid of biblical exegesis. Both identify the content that is specifically relevant to the education of Hector and use such *materia* for the purpose of articulating the *utilitas*, the benefits for a knight who knows not to be boastful. Rather than pointing to a long tradition, Christine directly demonstrates the Latinate practices that further the literary capacities of the vernacular so that the performances of commentary and allegory become concrete models for her French readers. This is the “clochette,” the “little bell” mentioned in the prologue, with which she intends to spur further study. She re-enacts a familiar and well-respected form of cultural authority in order to show the depth of intellect that is possible in the vernacular.

The three-part structure suggests that Christine provides a more detailed account of the vernacular’s literary capabilities. She develops the different parts with reference to Latin learning but without the constraints imposed by the sort of *exemplum* that lies at the core of Gower’s “poetics of learning.” The structure of the *Épître*’s chapters thereby allows the vernacular to assume the instructive position usually ascribed to Latin, and it establishes the different types of vernacular writing developed through the influence of Latin learning. First and foremost, the voice and style of the *Épître* change in rapid succession as each chapter unfolds, and these changes reveal a range versatile enough to cover condensed verse, philosophical justification, and religious guidance. Christine shows that the vernacular can produce literature with meaning that is sophisticated enough to warrant the treatment of commentary and allegory. In other words, by gaining the respective skills of *texte*, *glose*, and *allégorie* for a pedagogical and moral imperative, the vernacular can unfold the *materia* and the *utilitas* of a classical narrative. Although they may not have the same structure as the usual form of the *accessus* in Latin, the components that perform discourse on the content and on its moral consequences are present and are arguably more potent for the reader because of the familiarity of the vernacular. For example, with the freedom provided by the fictional authority of Othéa, the authoritative anchor of the *glose* is not necessarily an actual source verifiable through writing. It could instead take the guise of a proverbial and perhaps more accessible form of authority, as in the tone of the quotation from Plato in the *glose* on Arachne. In any case, compared to Gower’s *Confessio*, Christine enables greater freedom in vernacular literary practice by showing that the vernacular can employ a range of interpretive practices in non-Latinate and non-conventional forms.

## CONCLUSION

In the above comparison of the *accessus*'s influence on the writings of Gower and Christine de Pizan, Gower's *Confessio* represents an attempt to theorize the relationship between Latinity and the ascending vernacularity of the late Middle Ages, while Christine's *Épître* serves as a foil for Gower by showing how her work affirms and complements the ideas found in the *Confessio*. The *Épître* performs Gower's theories about vernacular literary capacities by showing that a vernacular language can successfully articulate commentary and exegesis with success. Both works have often been associated with the "mirror of princes" genre, which emphasizes their moral content and likely aristocratic destinations. However, the gravity of moral instruction should not obscure the dynamic shift of linguistic and intellectual registers that takes place in the works of Gower and Christine de Pizan and formulates an imperative for writing in the vernacular.

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