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Sarah NOVAK

Braying peasants and the poet as prophet: Gower and the people in the *Vox clamantis*

Gower's public writings target the "common people," whom the Ricardian poet hopes to reform while embodying its very voice. In the *Vox clamantis* II-VII, Gower's poetic *persona* is that of a strident reformist, who records the complaints of the *vox populi* "in general." In the allegorical vision of the 1381 upheaval (Book I), Gower adopts a different prophetic mode. As he foresees the labourers' rebellion, the peasants morph into wild animals, London turns into a wasteland, a new Troy. The peasants' voices become mere animal grunts, and the voiceless rebels are excluded from the "common people," for whom Gower normally writes.

Gower, écrivain public, s'adresse au « peuple tout entier », qu'il espère réformer tout en lui empruntant sa voix. Dans Vox clamantis *II-VII, Gower parle en réformiste acharné, qui retranscrit les lamentation de la* vox populi *dans son ensemble. Au livre I, vision allégorique des troubles de 1381, Gower adopte un mode prophétique modifié. Il prétend annoncer la rebellion ; les paysans sont métamorphosés en animaux sauvages ; Londres n'est plus qu'un champ de ruines, une nouvelle Troie. Les paysans émettent des grognements bestiaux : ces rebelles sans voix sont exclus du « peuple tout entier », pour qui Gower se donne mission d'écrire.*

> *Vox populi de civitate vox de templo vox Domini reddentis retributionem inimicis suis*. (Isaiah 66:6)
>
> [A voice of the people from the city, a voice from the temple, the voice of the Lord that rendereth recompense to his enemies.]

It has often been remarked that, typically for the Ricardian period in which he lived, John Gower's poetic style is essentially public: public, in the sense that it is written on behalf of what he calls the people, for their moral edification, their "common profit," and usually in the form of direct address to the nation as a whole or class by class. It is

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pious but not devotional, not occasional nor for the entertainment of a small group of people; his subject matter is always social values and the improvement of the nation and, even in the courtly love stories of his *Confessio amantis*, individual human love is used as an *exemplum* to teach good leadership and social harmony (Middleton 105-107, 113-14). Even his love *balades* and stories of courtly romance are packaged in sermons to the estates or mirrors for princes.

Gower is always careful to indicate that his criticism comes not from himself but from the "voice of the people." This claim may be found in nearly all his public poems, long and short. The best known example is in the prologue to his last major work, the English *Confessio amantis*. As he catalogues the nation's problems and allots blame for them, he says that he is merely recording "the comune vois which mai noght lie" (124). This voice speaks for the common good, presses for the restoration of love and order between the different estates and calls the king to order, in particular by reminding all classes and individuals of God's will and urging them to repent. In Gower's French *Mirour de l'omme*, written earlier, c.1377, the poet claims that his scathing criticism of the clergy comes from the "commune temoignance/ Du people" (21776-7), the universal consensus of the people, and not his own humble and non-clerical self. The people's voice, whether *vox populi*, *commune dictum*, "comun worldes speche" or "vois commune" is a positive, infallible authority that echoes God's voice (Peck 1978, xxiii-xxiv, 12-13; Aers 1999, 439-44).

In his Latin poem, the *Vox clamantis*, and especially in the "Visio," an account of the Peasants' Revolt that he added to the *Vox clamantis* in 1381, Gower writes in various voices—those of the people, of the poet himself and of God. Who, exactly, is behind the "vox populi" that Gower names as his ultimate source? When the commons revolt against the social order that is so dear to Gower and that he has been defending in their name, how does he handle the discord between his own authorial voice and the voice of the people? Where, in all the noise, can the voice of God be heard?

The *Vox* as public poetry

The *Vox clamantis* is an estates satire in seven books, a moral diatribe similar to much of Gower's other work, ending with a warning that the world's end is near and a call for everyone to convert. It was composed in many layers and Gower continued to add to his chronicle until the fall of Richard II. However, its core section, Books II-VII, was completed before the popular uprisings of the summer of 1381, provoked in part by the Poll Tax of the previous year, which was the third such tax levied under King Richard in an already difficult economic period.

The Peasants' Revolt seemed to Gower to fulfill all the worst apocalyptic prophecies that he had made in the *Vox*, so that he decided to change

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the focus and argument of the already massive poem. In its new form, the *Vox clamantis* opens with an allegorical vision in which the peasants are transformed into wild animals and London becomes a wasteland, a new Troy. This became the new Book I and subsequent books were renumbered and labeled as a commentary on the causes of the rebellion. When I mention the *Vox* proper, I mean that part of the text written pre-1381.

The *Vox* proper is written in the mode of the Old Testament prophets, addressing God's chosen people and urging them to behave better. Gower gives the title in the prologue to what later became Book II:

> Vox clamantis erit nomenque voluminis huius,
> Quod sibi scripta noui verba doloris habet. (Book II, Prologue, 83-4)
>
> [And the name of this volume shall be the The Voice of One Crying, because the work contains a message of the sorrow of today.][1]

The "voice of one crying" in the title announces Gower's moral project for the English nation. The speaker becomes not merely John Gower, already known as the author of moral works, but also John the Baptist, who answers the crowd's question as to whether he is a prophet by quoting Isaiah 40:3 "Ego vox clamantis in deserto: 'Dirigite viam Domini,' sicut dixit Isaias propheta" (John 1:23). Making straight the ways of the Lord, showing to England and to its rulers "viam qua peccator transgressus ad sui creatories agnicionem" [the path by which the sinner may return to the knowledge of his creator]: as in the Latin colophon to *Confessio amantis* (1:278), similar intentions are voiced in all of Gower's other socially useful texts.

Within the *Vox* itself, we see that this multi-layered voice crying out in the desert is also the voice of the people, calling for social reform on all levels. Gower reuses *clamare* and *clamor* a great deal in order to make the connection with the voice in the title even more explicit, for instance in Book VI line 15:

> Hoc ego quod plebis vox clamat clamo
>
> [I cry out what the voice of the people cries out]

or in the Heading to Book II ch. 2:

> Hic dicit, secundum quod de clamore communi audiuit, qualiter status et ordo mundi precipue [...] in peius multipliciter variantur.
>
> [Here he tells, according to what he has heard from the general clamoring, how the course and condition of the world are being changed in many ways for the worse.]

1. All translations from the *Vox clamantis* are from Eric Stockton's prose translation, all other modern English translations are mine.

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In the *Vox clamantis,* Gower speaks as his usual measured public persona, the same as in the *Mirour de l'omme*, an almost anonymous social commentator, a vessel for communicating God's will and the will of the "people." He insists repeatedly that he is recording the *vox populi*. Here are just a few of the examples to be found in the *Vox*:

> Hec ego que dicam dictum commune docebat,
> Nec mea verba sibi quid nouitatis habent. (Book III.1269-70)
>
> [Common talk has taught me what I shall say, and my words contain nothing new.]

> Est nichil ex sensu proprio quod scribo, set ora
> Que michi vox populi contulit, illa loquar. (Book IV.19-20)
>
> [Nothing that I write is my own opinion; rather, I shall speak what the voice of the people has reported to me.]

> A me non ipso loquor hec, set que michi plebis
> Vox dedit, et sortem plangit vbique malam. (Book III, Prologue 11-12)
>
> [I am not speaking of these things on my own part; rather, the voice of the people has reported them to me, and it complains of their adverse fate at every hand.]

Gower defends the validity of his source with the proverb *vox populi vox Dei* ("The voice of the people is the voice of God"): Gower puts down the voice of the people in written Latin, thus doing his best to make it reach the ears of those in power. This is another commonplace of Gower's political poems, including the *Vox*:

> Vox populi cum voce dei concordat, vt ipsa
> In rebus dubiis sit metuenda magis. (Book III.1267-8)
>
> [The voice of the people agrees with the voice of God, so that in critical times it ought to be held in greater awe.]

In other words, Gower confronts his readership with a neat syllogism: Gower speaks for the people, the people speak for God, Gower speaks for God.

Gower's posture of speaking for the people, of merely echoing what everyone is saying, has a number of functions. It is part of a modesty *topos*—he often adds that he is an ignorant, elderly, half-blind layman who speaks only unpoetical Latin or bad French—but it also enables him to phrase his opinions with relative safety, in an impersonal manner. From behind this mask, he can comment on affairs of political and ecclesiastical corruption and, in particular, exhort and later condemn Richard II. His own voice is magnified, and comprises the authority of public opinion, the nameless multitudes who happen to agree with him, and to take on God's own authority.

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Vox populi and cacophony

The voice of the people is one of discontent. It complains, clamors, murmurs, laments and groans. The verbs c*lamare*, *plangere* are systematically associated with it. I have traced only two exceptions to this rule in the whole of Gower's works. In the first of these, the voice of the people is not the voice of God: vain knights want worldly fame and want the voice of the people to talk about them and their romantic conquests, and the people's voice becomes "vulgi vaniloqui sermones" [the words of the prattling mob] (Book V.282). In the second, the people sing happily for once instead of complaining. In a short Latin poem, "Rex celi Deus," all England sings joyfully in praise: "Concinat in gestis Anglia leta tuis" [Let joyful England sing your deeds] (line 40), because the saintly Henry IV has taken the crown.

The most important thing to note, however, is that Gower's people complain as one voice, all desiring the same thing: social harmony, to be achieved through good government. No one is fulfilling his divinely ordained role in society; the kings are either doddering or infantile, unable to reason for themselves, their counselors corrupt, the clergy worldly, the nobility helpless, and the peasants lazy. The poetry of social harmony in which all the people speak as one, and speak in God's name, is Gower's answer to this tower of Babel, the cacophony of England's current turmoil.

However, in the "Visio"—the new post-1381 prologue—, one group begins to sing off-key: the peasantry, who launch a discordant war cry against the other estates. In this new prologue, the tone is dramatically different and almost at odds with the pre-existing body of the work. "The common people" is no longer a general term for the whole nation. They become more concretely agricultural laborers, serfs, and Gower speaks not of their suffering but rather of their wickedness. When he directly confronts the masses in the *Visio* (figuratively, for he was not actually present in London during the scenes he describes) and comes into close imaginative contact with them, he transforms their voices into animal grunts, and manages to silence them and shut them out of the *vox populi*, which now cries out against them.

In the *Vox*, Gower neither specifically includes the laboring classes in his *vox populi* nor specifically excludes them from it. In the original literary project that was the *Vox clamantis,* Gower often speaks of what he calls the common people but in an abstract way, based on the traditional notion that the population suffers innocently from the sins of its rulers, like a body whose limbs are affected by a disease in its head (Salisbury 159). This idea is found in one of Gower's favorite proverbs, originally from Horace's *Epistles* (1.2.14), which he may or may not have known: "Quicquid delirant Reges, plectuntur Achivi" [The Achæans, i.e., the Greeks, the common people, are punished for whatever folly their kings commit]. It appears in the

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Vox clamantis in these words (Book VI.497) and in several other forms, for instance

> Si rex sit vanus, sit auarus, sitque superbus,
> Quo regnum torquet, terra subacta dolet (Book VI.1169-70)
>
> [If a king is vain, greedy, and haughty, the land subject to him suffers]

and verbatim at line 5 of a short poem in Latin, "O Deus immense," a warning to Richard about the divine judgment that awaits a bad king. The same Latin line appears again as one of Gower's own marginal glosses to his *Confessio amantis,* in Book VII (the mirror for princes section of the work), next to these lines:

> The comun poeple is overlein
> And hath the kinges senne aboght,
> Althogh the poeple agulte noght. (Book VII.3930-2)
>
> [The common people is brought low,/ And has paid for the king's sin,/ Although the people is not guilty.]

—variations on this theme appear constantly in his political works.

Gower deals more specifically with the peasantry in Book V of the estates review in the *Vox* proper, after the clergy and nobility, and there, the common people are guilty of their conventional sins: idling about, demanding high wages, not respecting the nobility enough, and coveting the leisures and luxuries and especially the food and wine of noblemen. One line from this section sums up Gower's view of them:

> Sunt etenim tardi, sunt rari, sunt et auari. (Book V.577)
>
> [They are sluggish, they are scarce and they are grasping.]

In Book V, Gower mentions the threat of the people rising up against the nobles and says that there are dangerous rabble-rousers among them (Aers 1988, 31-32). Here are some of his claims:

> Inter quos plebis magis errat iniqua voluntas,
> Sulcorum famulos estimo sepe reos. (Book V.575-6)
>
> [An evil disposition is widespread among the common people, and I suspect the servants of the plow are responsible for it.]

—this may be a reference to "Piers Plowman," a catchword for the rebellious serfs.

> Vulgi cardones lex amputet ergo nociuos,
> Ne blada pungentes nobiliora terant.
> Nobile quicquid habent seu dignum, rustica proles
> Ledit in ingenuis, sit nisi lesa prius. (Book V.605-8)

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> [Let the law accordingly cut down the harmful teasels of rabble, lest they uproot the nobler grain with their stinging. Unless it is struck down first, the peasant race strikes against freemen, no matter what worth or nobility they possess.]

However, these statements in Book V remain conventional and hypothetical. Gower's attacks against the clergy, the knighthood and the king are direct and specific, whereas in the main body of the *Vox* the peasants are never singled out for bringing about the Apocalypse; if anything, the ruling classes are guilty of the greatest sins, in quality and in quantity—over fifty chapters are devoted to the sins of different clerical ranks, and only five describe the sins of laborers. Of course, the peasant race did rise up soon after prophetic Gower wrote this passage, and because he is indeed writing backwards, Gower's predictions in Book V eventually come true . . . in Book I.

Gower's Apocalypse—The *Visio* of 1381

Not content with having predicted something that actually came to pass, Gower writes the *Visio* as if the Peasants' Revolt had yet to happen and he is foretelling it. He opens Book I of the *Vox* with an invocation to John of Patmos, author of the Apocalypse, and then describes a dream that he had—"vigiles sompni," a waking dream-vision. This is a *visio*, a "true dream," like those of Joseph and Daniel (Peck 1989, 129), a message from God showing the future, not a meaningless *insomnium* or nightmare. Before fleeing in terror, the dreamer sees the curse of God strike bands of peasants, who are all transformed into domestic and wild animals, such as donkeys, pigs, poultry, dogs and flies (Nolan 118) and then descend upon London. They leave their cozy heaps of dung—a number of the groups of animals are described as sleeping contentedly in their own filth, *fimum* (e.g., Book I.407), before they leave it to join the crowd. The morphed animals deviate from their nature: the newly-formed pigs are like wild boars, the dogs like wolves, the chickens like vultures and so forth. Thanks to this dream device, Gower can give free range to hyperbole and has no obligations to fact or even to verisimilitude: rivers flowing with blood, Gog and Magog, the race of Cain, Cerberus and Ulysses' former companions all join in the peasants' march. Gower can speak in his own voice at last.

The voice of the people no longer speaks through the narrator: he is recounting his dream, as if he were experiencing these things himself: "quasi in propria persona," as he repeats in the headings to ch. 16 and 17. At the end of his vision, just before he wakes up, a mystical voice comes down from the sky and tells him to write down what he has seen because it is full of meaning (ch. 20); Gower gives thanks to God. Then begins the *Vox* proper, whose prologue states that the voice of the people has requested Gower to write this account. Gower welds his two

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texts together and precariously unites the voice of God with that of the people, both urging him to record the unspeakable crimes of the serfs.

Meanwhile, before this heavenly voice intervenes, the only voice to be heard is that of the mob of peasants, and they do not speak as one—they roar, bray, hiss, snort flames, and most of all, they act. They pillage, burn, hunt down innocent prey, and commit gory murders in hordes. When all these creatures are assembled, their collective noise convinces all who hear it that the Apocalypse is at hand:

> Ecce rudis clangor, sonus altus, fedaque rixa,
> Vox ita terribilis non fuit vlla prius. (Book I.815-7)
>
> [Behold the loud din, the wild clangor, the savage brawling—no sound was ever so terrible before.]

The cacophony of Babel has returned: as Gower announces in a chapter heading, these peasants all have "horrible *different* voices":

> Hic dicit secundum visionem sompnii qualiter auidiuit nomina et eorum voces diuersas et horribiles. (Heading to Book I ch. 11)
>
> [Here he tells how he heard their names and their horrible different voices in the vision of his dream.]

Gower catalogues carefully all these animal voices: the terrifying *sternutacio* or "hee-haw" of the donkeys (Book I.189), the pigs whose *grunnitus* or grunting is like the lion's roar (Book I.375), the horrible "cackling" of the goose that frightens even the dead in their graves (Book I.809-10).

This is the high point of the beast allegory. The best fable framework then falls apart and merges confusingly into the sack of Troy but, even in restored human form, the peasants only utter a few monosyllabic imperatives: "Kill," "Burn," "So be it" (Book I.715). They do not negotiate nor communicate any demands to the rulers of the city, they do not hope to achieve anything; they kill for the sake of killing. Without words to explain or justify it, their behavior is not political action but only meaningless animal violence.

The longest speech from the insurgents is Wat Tyler's address to the crowd:

> O seruile genus miserorum, quos sibi mundus
> Subdidit a longo tempore lege sua,
> Iam venit ecce dies, qua rusticitas superabit,
> Ingenuosque suis coget abire locis.
> Desinat omnis honor, periat ius, nullaque virtus,
> Que prius extiterat, duret in orbe magis.
> Subdere que dudum lex nos de iure solebat,
> Cesset, et vlterius curia nostra regat. (Book I.693-700)

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> [O you low sort of wretches, which the world has subjugated for a long time by its law, look, now the day has come when the peasantry will triumph and will force the freemen to get off their lands. Let all honor come to an end, let justice perish, and let no virtue that once existed endure further in the world. Let the law give over which used to hold us in check with its justice, and from here on let our court rule.]

Wat Tyler speaks out of character, as an enemy to his own cause ("periat ius"). These are obviously Gower's own words, a mere echo of the condemnations voiced throughout the *Visio* by the narrator's persona. Even in a fictional dream-vision, Gower cannot bring himself to fashion a credible speech for Wat Tyler.

Similarly, Gower's peasants do not have much to say because the author wants to control their discourse; he knows how dangerous it is to allot too much direct speech to the villain—in any given work of fiction. Other chroniclers dramatize the insurgents' voices with more imagination, if still with disapproval and horror. But Gower is careful to avoid the very risk that other chroniclers take, such as Jean Froissart, who has John Ball speak at considerable length in his *Chroniques*, to the point that readers have wondered whether Froissart supported his cause. Henry Knighton dangerously incorporates into his Latin *Chronicon* various cryptic English texts, apparently written by insurgents, such as "John Ball's Letter" and other "Addresses to the Commons," for example:

> Jakke Mylner alloquitur socios sic: Jakke Mylner asket help to turne hys mylne aright. He hath grounden smal, smal; the Kings sone of heven he schal pay for alle. Loke thi mylne go aright, with the four sayles, and the post stande in steddefastnesse. (Knighton 136)

Walsingham, in his *Historia anglicana,* also provides versions of Ball's letter, and the only direct quote we have from the crowd, their famous chant, a quote from Ball's sermons: "Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span, / Wo was thanne a gentilman?" (2:32).

But there is also the possibility that the insurgents only grunt because Gower is incapable of imagining how they might speak. Gower's peasants are unreasoning, bestial creatures, according to his long-held belief stated in his early work, the *Mirour de l'omme* and the earlier parts of the *Vox clamantis*:

> Hec est gens racione carens vt bestia, namque
> Non amat hec hominem, nec putat esse deum. (Book V.631-632)
>
> [This is a race without power of reason, like beasts, for it does not esteem mankind nor does it think God exists.]

Gower perhaps cannot enter into their characters any more than he can write a speech for a pig or a goose. The metamorphosis of the peasants into animals thus merely reveals their inner nature. It is a com-

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parison that is extended into an allegory. Gower had already described rebellious serfs as being like animals in reference to earlier revolts in his *Mirour*:

> Qant pié se lieve contre teste,
> Trop est la guise deshonneste;
> Et ensi qant contre seignour
> Les gens sicomme salvage beste
> En multitude et en tempeste
> Se lievent, c'est un grant errour. (27229-34)
>
> [It is a very wicked thing when the foot rises up against the head and it is likewise a great sin when the people, like wild beasts, rise up in stormy masses against their lords.]

If we look very briefly at the same events as they are found in the *Chronicles* of Gower's contemporary Jean Froissart, we find a similar metamorphosis. As mentioned above, Froissart, true to his fetish for reported speech, records the peasants' theological arguments against serfdom and their demands for fair wages without commentary:

> Ches meschans gens […] se commenchièrent à eslever pour che que il dissoient que on les tenoit en trop grande servitude, et que au commenchement dou monde il n'avoit esté nuls sers ne nuls n'en pooit estre, se il ne faisoit traïson envers son signeur, enssi comme Lucifer fist envers Dieu mais […] il ne estoient ne anges, ne esperits mais hommes fourmet à la samblance de leurs signeurs et on les tenoit comme bestes. (9:387)
>
> [These wicked people ... began to rise up, saying that they were held in very severe bondage, and that at the beginning of the world there were no serfs and could be none unless one committed treason against his lord, as Lucifer did to God, but … they were neither angels nor spirits but men formed in the same image as their lords, and they were treated like beasts.]

Their own words turn against them when, a few pages later, Froissart describes them marching on London like herds of beasts:

> Et sachiés en vérité que bien les III pars de ces gens ne savoient que il demandoient, ne qu'il quéroient mais sievoient l'un l'autre, enssi que bestes… (9:390)
>
> [And note well that most of these people did not know what they were demanding or seeking but were following one another like beasts…]

Language itself—especially the Latin and French languages familiar to the upper classes—seems to be hostile to the insurgents (Crane 201-21). No chronicles were ever written by the people who marched on London that June of 1381, and their actions and words have to be parsed from official, often ecclesiastical or clerical chroniclers.

So when Gower speaks with the voice of the people, he means people like himself: educated, owning land, namely the rising middle estates, who are worthy of counseling and passing judgment on the upper end

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of the hierarchy. He does not credit serfs and artisans with speaking in God's own voice, and there is no reason to believe that anyone in his time understood the proverb to include them. Walsingham's *Historia anglicana* records that, in 1327, just after Edward II's deposition, the Archbishop of Canterbury preached a sermon whose theme was this very axiom, "Vox populi, vox Dei" (1:186). By "people," he probably meant Parliament, the nobles, the clergy, in any case not the masses who had nothing to do with forcing the king to abdicate, not those farm laborers who later marched on London and murdered a different archbishop.

In the *Vox*, as in most of his literary production, Gower cultivates the voice of a general social commentator, unbiased, altruistic, and speaking for all the people. In the *Visio* he becomes, briefly, an individual citizen with a recognizable name, a specific social class and all its values and prejudices, a victim of the uprising who recounts his personal experience, albeit allegorically. For a revealing moment, he is no longer writing for *all* England; he slips into the role of a victim of the commoners and speaks only to the other victims. Gower believes in the power of language to repair the ills of society, to compose peace. However, just as God denies wealth and freedom to the peasant class for the common good—because someone must work the land—Gower deprives them of language, which would prove too dangerous in their mouths.

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