

HE FOND THE SCHIP OF GRET ARRAY: IMPLICATIONS OF JOHN GOWER'S MARITIME VOCABULARY

Abstract: The maritime vocabulary of the London poet, John Gower, provides a link between his artistic creation and its foundation in the vibrant experience of a medieval agent living within a city defined by its connection to trade and the sea. A survey of phrases and terms that refer to nautical technology in Gower's *Confessio amantis* reveals familiarity with a primarily Anglo-French large-ship tradition while hinting at a possible direct experiential connection with elements of Iberian or Mediterranean trade networks. By contextualizing Gower's words within the seafaring culture of fourteenth-century London, this article explores the implications of the maritime vocabulary used in *Confessio amantis* for our understanding of the poet and his audience. **Keywords:** John Gower, *Confessio amantis*, ships, technology, London, maritime culture, Iberian trade, topsail.

Resumen: El vocabulario marítimo del poeta londinense John Gower enlaza su creación artística con su origen en la vibrante experiencia de un agente medieval que vive en una ciudad definida por su relación con el comercio y el mar. Un estudio de las frases y términos que se refieren a la tecnología náutica en la *Confessio amantis* revela la familiaridad de Gower con una tradición primariamente anglofrancesa de grandes barcos a la vez que sugiere una conexión surgida de la experiencia directa con elementos de las redes de comercio ibéricas o mediterráneas. Al situar las palabras de Gower dentro de la cultura marinera del Londres de siglo XIV, este artículo explora las implicaciones del vocabulario marítimo usado en la *Confessio amantis* en nuestro entendimiento del poeta y sus lectores. **Palabras clave:** John Gower, *Confessio amantis*, barcos, tecnología, Londres, cultura marítima, comercio ibérico, gavia.



NOT WHANNE HE BERTH LOWEST THE SEIL THANNE IS HE
swiftest to beguile The womman” (I, 704–706). The
charm of this image from John Gower's *Confessio amantis*
rests in its quaint and seaworn character. It speaks simultaneously
of two threads of experience, of love and of the sea. Who but a
sailor would visualize the suitor humbling himself as a ship, with
sails low, before the object of his affection? Who but a sailor,
indeed. I should like to suggest the existence of a maritime Gower,
an elusive figure that reveals himself in text through words and
phrases drawn from nautical life. The nature of the vocabulary
used in *Confessio amantis* provides a link between Gower's artistic
creation and its foundation in the vibrant experience of a medieval
poet living within a space defined by its connection to trade and
the sea.

I have limited my survey of Gower's maritime vocabulary to the *Confessio amantis*, written at some point between 1386 and 1390 (Fisher 1964: 88). Using the concordance prepared by Pickles and Dawson (Pickles & Dawson 1987), I have isolated all phrases or terms that refer to nautical technology and practice as well as a class of general terms that repeats only within explicitly maritime contexts. These terms have then been cross-referenced with their cultural and historical contexts to highlight probable first-appearances in text. The picture that I will develop is one of a poet conversant with the technological underpinnings of the maritime engine that drove London and, by extension, medieval England.

John Gower's connection to fourteenth-century nautical life is significant on three fronts. For those involved in Gower studies, such research provides an opportunity to contribute to Gower's biography as well as our understanding of the maritime dimension of his poetry. On a more general level, it is useful for students of England's medieval literature and history to re-emphasize the influence of seafaring culture on the lives of inhabitants of port cities like London. As Keith Muckelroy first made explicit within the context of maritime archaeology, "In any preindustrial society, from the Upper Paleolithic to the 19th century A.D., a boat or (later) a ship was the largest and most complex machine produced" (Muckelroy 1998: 23). During the Middle Ages, the ship was, at times, an object of high technology, high status, high fashion, and high art. This observation underpins the ultimate goal of my research into the development of a framework for mapping cultural expression and transmission of technological concepts within their historical and geographical contexts.

Details of Gower's extra-literary life, outside of a few probable real estate transactions, are scant. There is evidence to suggest he worked in law and had a connection to the wool trade (Echard 2004: 24–25; Fisher 1964: 54–55). This absence of material facts about Gower makes a close reading of his work even more tempting. In fact, the experimental reconstruction of a maritime Gower in

this article follows in the wake of earlier attempts to expand the poet's biography beyond the obvious documentary evidence. The existence of the legal Gower is derived from a section of his poem *Mirour de l'Omme*, in which he writes of himself as wearing the striped sleeves that are associated with court officials in 15th century illuminations (Fisher 1964: 55). In the end, it is Gower's own words that are likely to tell us the most about his life.

I FOUR CONTEXTS FOR NAUTICAL IMAGERY IN *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

In *Confessio amantis*, Gower uses nautical images and vocabulary in four contexts: in the setting of the Ricardian prologue; when retelling maritime scenes drawn from earlier sources; as imagery of love; and in incidental observations. The most discussed maritime scene in the poem is the autobiographical description from the poem's original prologue and dedication of Richard II meeting Gower on the Thames and charging him to write "Som newe thing" (P, 51*) that would become *Confessio amantis*.

In Temse whan it was flowende
As I be bote cam rowende,
So as fortune hir tyme sette,
My liege lord par chaunce I mette;
And so befell, as I cam nyh,
Out of my bot, whan he me syh,
He bad me come in to his barge (P, 39*-45*).

The scene is stripped of the extraneous and messy life of the Thames, leaving only the boat and barge, Gower and Richard, and the river itself. Frank Grady has remarked on the way in which Gower's construction of this patronage scene echoes nautical episodes within the poem as well as in the life of Richard (Grady 2002: 5-6), thus situating the authoritative and autobiographical

elements of the prologue within the explicitly maritime context of contemporary fourteenth-century London.

Apart from this invocation of the maritime in the Ricardian prologue, the bulk of the poem's developed nautical imagery is to be found in the context of older stories that are retold by Gower, such as the tales of Constance and Apollonius of Tyre, the latter being the source of this paper's title (VIII, 1629). Though much of Gower's source material already included nautical imagery, as shall be discussed, his versions of these scenes differ from those written by his predecessors in both their emphasis and their description of ship technologies.

The third most frequent context for Gower's use of nautical vocabulary is in love imagery like the lover-as-ship metaphor previously quoted that occurs in a meditation on the hypocrisies and deceits of lovers which is devoid of any other references to ships or the sea (I, 672-760).¹ Similarly, when discussing Cupid's tendency to "set the things in discord" (IV, 1734), Gower, in the role of the lover, writes, "So wot I noght riht wel therefore, on whether bord that I schal seile" (IV, 1740-1). When used in the context of love imagery, the nautical digression is never expanded upon, being only raised and dropped as needed.

The final and least common context for nautical vocabulary or imagery is in incidental asides. Though infrequent, these instances of appeal to the nautical are often of a sort more explicitly technical than those employed in love imagery. A striking example of such an authorial interjection comes at the conclusion of the "Tale of Mundus and Paulina" in which after the action of the story has ended, Gower advances its moral in these terms:

And ek to take remembrance
Of that Ypocrisie hath wroght
On other half, men scholde noght

¹ Chaucer also occasionally invokes nautical symbolism in love imagery, though these metaphors are less developed than Gower's. For acknowledgement of one such example from *Troilus and Criseyde*, see Jun Sudo 1993.

To lihtly lieve al that thei hiere,
Bot thane scholde a wisman stiere
The Schip, whan suche wyndes blowe:
For ferst thogh thei beginne lowe,
At ende thei be noght menable,
Bot al tobreken Mast and Cable,
So that the Schip with sodein blast,
Whan men lest wene, is overcast;
As now fulofte a man mai se:
And of old time how it hath be
I finde a gret experience,
Wherof to take an evidence
Good is, and to be war also
Of the peril, er him be wo (VI, 1060–1077).

Within these four limited contexts, Gower deploys seafaring terms of varying complexity and pedigree. To understand the elements of Gower's nautical vocabulary, it is helpful to briefly review the several sources—historical, technological, commercial, and etymological—that contributed to it.

2 MARITIME LONDON: LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY, AND TRADE

Gower's London was the financial and mercantile heart of an island kingdom, soon to become an island empire. Ships, boats, and barges crowded the Thames, the waterway that facilitated the bulk of English trade. This conduit between the city and the sea had been vital to London's development as far back as its pre-Roman genesis; indeed, it is likely that the settlement sprang up in consequence of the area's maritime resources (Robertson 1968: 1–2). Sixty percent of all English exports passed through London during the fourteenth and fifteenth century (Friel 2003:63). Wool was England's primary export during the period, and the activity at Woolwharf, where the wool was weighed, underwrote the rebuilding of the Custom House in 1390—supervised by Geoffrey Chaucer in his capacity as Clerk of the King's Works (Pendrill 1971: 112–113; Robertson 1968: 52). In the fourteenth century, England

had developed a strong Iberian trade that not only brought in goods like olive oil, iron, and skins, but also established enclaves of Castilian and Portuguese traders within the city (Yeager 2004: 505–506). Exotic goods from around the known world, such as almonds, cinnamon, and rare furs, entered London, but the import that overshadowed the rest was wine (Pendrill 1971: 108–109).

The *wine prise* was a customs charge on the wine trade that was first enforced in London in 1130. It divided imports into two classes for customs purposes based on the type of ship in which the wine was transported: *ceols*, flat-bottomed descendants of the ships first described and Latinized as *cyulis* by Gildas in his *De excidio et conquestu Britanniae* c. A.D. 525 (OED *s.v.* keel, n.2), and *hulcs*. In the twelfth century the *ceol* was the larger of the two ships and therefore paid a higher rate, but by the fourteenth century, the *hulc* had grown so much larger than its predecessor that its name became, in the sixteenth century, a byword for extreme size (OED *s.v.* hulk, n.2). The *ceol* or *keel* continued to shrink until it was something more on the order of a large punt or barge, and one thousand years after Gildas it would have been unrecognizable to the early historian. In Gower's day, the term *hulc* had already been stretched to include the famous trading cogs of the Hanseatic League (McCusker 1966: 279–281). The codified language of law and bureaucracy, unlike the fluidity of speech, was unable to evolve at a rate similar to that of the technology it described and so labored under a vague and chimerical system for classifying ships.

These changes in the meanings of words relating to specific ship technologies hint at a wider restructuring of the maritime world that began towards the end of the Viking Age. The centuries following Rome's withdrawal from its colonies and the resulting deterioration of European ports favored the Scandinavian style shallow-drafted longship—a vessel capable of transporting a respectable volume of goods or booty that could follow rivers and be safely beached. Around A.D. 1000, ports throughout Europe began to be reinvigorated, which reduced the advantage of

longships as the primary vehicles of trade (Unger 1980: 111). A.D. 1000–1500 saw a sharp increase in European sea trade as well as the development of a new maritime infrastructure. Much of this activity was in response to the adoption of the cog as the preferred trading ship in the mid-thirteenth century. The oldest illustration of a cog dates from 1226 and the oldest excavated dock from 1213 (Unger 1980: 138; Hutchinson 1994: 110). The cog was a round-bottomed ship built for the sea. It required docks and coastal ports to unload its goods and could not be simply dragged aground in an estuary or run as close to shore as could the longships of the Northmen, but it could carry five times the cargo of previous vessels. The deep waters of the Thames made London an ideal port for this burgeoning shipping revolution of the thirteenth century and the city was firmly established as a premier trading center by the close of the fourteenth century. The potential for technological innovation unlocked by London's geographic advantages, when coupled with its insatiable appetite for wine as a market, led to a shift in the size of ships that would influence trade across Europe. Cogs engaging in the Anglo-Gascon wine trade in the thirteenth century rarely reached one hundred tons, but by the publication of *Confessio amantis*, that had become the average tonnage, with some vessels reaching two or three hundred tons (Unger 1980: 163). Of course, this was not simply a lot of wine changing hands—it was about money.

Part of the larger shift in England's economy that began in the fourteenth century after the Black Death was the gradual rise of the nautical merchant class. Ship owners and ships' crews had real stakes in their cargo for better or worse. Profits, as well as losses, were shared at various levels by all the parties involved in trade. This communal speculation could result in amazing wealth or total penury, though certain items were protected, such as the ship's captain's neck chain and, should he have one, his silver cup (Pendrell 1971: 126–127). Fortunes were built on shipping, and by extension, so was political power. When, in 1299, Edward I needed

to repay a loan of £1,049 to the merchants of Gascony, the money came from the merchants of London, to whom those same Gascons were already indebted (Pendrell 1971: 129). The independence of London's merchant class was built on similar exchanges of currency for expanded liberties (Pendrell 1971: 249).

All of these factors conspired to influence the language of London. The thirteenth-century expansion of cog-carried trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries introduced into English an assemblage of terms related to the process of docking a ship. *Quay* (as *key*) was first recorded in 1306 and was from the Old French *kay*. *Moor*, *v.* entered the language in the latter half of the fourteenth century, and was first written down in 1378. *Hawser*, referring to a line used to tie or tow a ship, appeared in 1380 and is suspected of being Anglo-Norman in origin. *Buoy*, from either French or Dutch, pops up in 1466 (OED *s.v.* quay, n.; moor, v.; hawser, n.; buoy, n.; dock, n.). In part because of the different languages and dialects spoken by its transient maritime populations, London was the preeminent location for linguistic change in England, and Gower's writing reflects the heterogeneous nature of London's English.

Confessio amantis was written during a period in which the maritime infrastructure, both technological and linguistic, was transitioning from the Scandinavian-dominated innovations of the Viking Age toward the more diverse traditions that would produce the Age of Discovery. To understand Gower's use of nautical vocabulary, it is necessary to view it within a context of flux created by the adoption of a suite of linked and self-reinforcing nautical technologies. Behind each of these sea terms exists a technological concept and, behind that, a functional and environmental necessity. Just as the evolution of seafaring jargon in English reflects changes in sailing practices generally, the words of *Confessio amantis* provide insight into the maritime world of medieval London.

3 THE MARITIME VOCABULARY OF *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

A few trends are immediately apparent in Gower's use of nautical language in *Confessio amantis*. Some words in English (such as *anchor*) derive originally from Latin (*ancora*) and spawn a whole family of cognates across the Roman world and even into Scandinavia (OED *s.v.* anchor, n. 1; Jesch 2008: 166). *Anchor* was first recorded in Old English as *ancor* in Alfred's translation of Boethius at the end of the ninth century, but the word later succumbed to academic "correction" and became afflicted with a silent *b* after the fashion of sixteenth-century misreadings of the Latin original as *anchora* (OED *s.v.* anchor, n. 1). It appears as *anker* in *Confessio amantis* (II, 1136). Many elements of Gower's nautical vocabulary, like *anchor*, possess classical antecedents, but were re-introduced into contemporary shipping through French. In Gower's day, French was linguistically dominant among the north Atlantic's seagoing community. English sea law, based on the Rolls of Oléron, was conducted almost entirely in French. The Rolls of Oléron, probably first written in the twelfth century, provided the framework for maritime law well into the sixteenth century. In the fourteenth century, an Anglo-Norman version of the laws became the basis for subsequent reproductions. From the Angevins until the Tudors, the language of sea law, like the language of trade, was French. Sailing masters, if not the sailors themselves, would, out of necessity, have been conversant in French (Kowaleski 2009: 103–106, 111–112, 116). Thus it is no surprise to find that a majority of Gower's words have Old French or Anglo-Norman French origins such as *aboard*, *barge*, *cabin*, and *lodesman* (Kowaleski 2009: 115–117).

Gower's use of nautical terms, however, often shows a level of technical awareness surprising in a landsman. Though most of the technological terms in *Confessio amantis* could be applied

equally well to any class of seamanship, all of Gower's type-specific vocabulary refer only to technologies that would have been used on the large sailing ships of the time. For example, the word *rudder* originally referred to an oar used to propel a small vessel and then later became synonymous with the steering-board (from which we have received *starboard*), also a type of oar. *Rudder* would not be differentiated from *steering-board* until the proliferation of the cog ship-type and the extension and straightening of the sternpost, which, in the thirteenth century, allowed for the attachment of a central rudder (Unger 1980: 141–143). In the fourteenth century this sense of the steering oar was in the process of being discarded. When Gower wrote, “The Schip of love hath lost his Rother” (II, 2494), he did so with the meaning of a central rudder that controlled the course of a ship.

When describing traditional nautical scenes, Gower did not slavishly follow past models, but was instead an innovator. In the early-fourteenth century work, *Les Cronicles*, Nicholas Trevet provided the template for Gower's “Tale of Constance” (II, 587–1598). Trevet describes the ship in which Constance is imprisoned as being “sanz sigle et sanz viron et sanz chescune manere de eide de homme” (110–111). The *viron* was a rowing oar, so in mentioning the absence of both it and the sail, Trevet is describing a vessel without control over propulsion. Gower describes the same scene with the words “A naked Schip withoute stiere,” an image he reinforces a few lines later in the action of the Divine Being: “Hire Schip to stiere hath take in honde” (II, 709–716). Gower makes explicit the removal of the steering oar, emphasizing the loss of

control over direction rather than over movement. Chaucer, in writing *The Man of Law's Tale*, chose to retain Gower's alteration of Trevet's scene, though he would have had both texts before him, and so describes Custance as placed "in a ship al steereless" (II, 439).² Gower used his familiarity with nautical technology to inform his artistic process and so deviated from his source material when necessary.

The image of John Gower that emerges, then, is one of a man thoroughly familiar with a primarily Anglo-French large-ship tradition, though a notable exception to this idea will be discussed shortly. This picture fits the trend of English maritime vocabulary generally, which, as Sandahl suggests, reflects a pool of common words used by mariners of countries bordering the North Sea and English Channel (Sandahl 1951: 23).³ Along with rudder, topsail and its compounds in Gower's usage offer intriguing examples.

4 OUTLIERS OF EXPERIENCE: *TOPSAIL*, *LUFF* AND *REEF*

Of all the nautical terms used by Gower in *Confessio amantis*, one in particular stands out: *topseilcole*. *Topseilcole* is a nautical compound comprised of *topsail*, often the second sail up from the ship's deck (Kemp 1988: 877), and *cool*, a word that lives on in certain dialects of Irish English, meaning a *breeze* or *light wind* (OED *s.v.* cool, n. 1). The most striking thing about *topseilcole*'s appearance in *Confessio amantis* toward the end of the fourteenth century is that, as far as we know, English ships—indeed all the ships of the Northern

² For a discussion of Chaucer's use of both Trevet and Gower as sources for *The Man of Law's Tale*, see Correale 2005.

³ Sir Thomas Malory, by way of comparison, writing less than 100 years after Gower and geographically removed from London, employs a vocabulary that evokes instead a Northern small-boat tradition. Malory provides the first use of the nautical verb *fake*, likely from the Scots, among other similarly derived terms, and he remains seemingly unconcerned about the type differences between *boats*, *barges*, and *ships* (Denton 2003: 18–19; OED *s.vv.* barge, n.1; boat, n.1; fake, v.1; ship, n.1)—a point on which Gower is, by contrast, meticulous.

European tradition—did not adopt topsails in their rig until almost fifty years after Gower’s death.

The attribution of a circa 1450 date for the adoption of topsails is based on the technology’s appearance on coins and in manuscript illuminations, so it is possible that topsails flew much earlier but were simply not depicted by artists. It is also possible that *topsail* meant something else in Gower’s time, though it is difficult to see what the utility of a specifically named “top sail” would be on, for the most part, single-sailed craft in northern waters. It is highly likely, I would suggest, that Gower had seen topsails on the wind rather than on the page and, though the technology was probably not common in Northern European shipbuilding traditions, there was an area in which topsails did fly.

In the Mediterranean, both military and trading ships had employed a triangular lateen sail as an alternative to the northern square sail since at least the War of the Sicilian Vespers toward the end of the thirteenth century (Mott 2003: 206–207), though the technology itself was almost certainly part of an unbroken lineage from the ancient world (Sandahl 1958: 114). It was during that war that the Catalan-Aragonese fleet proved its naval superiority repeatedly over its Angevin and Genoese adversaries. Although a great deal of the Catalan-Aragonese success can be attributed to careful planning, good leadership, and high morale, the ships themselves also played a determining role in the outcome. Unlike the single-masted, square-rigged ships of the Northern European tradition, the thirteenth-century Mediterranean warship of choice was a double-masted galley with two lateen sails (Mott 2003: 189). A specific innovation linked to this period was the addition of a small triangular topsail over the lateen sail on the second, or mizzen, mast (Campbell 1995: 10). Once adopted, the topsail over the lateen mizzen would remain an important feature of all shipbuilding traditions touching on the Mediterranean. It

would be used in both the Venetian great galleys and cogs of the fourteenth century as well as in later Iberian ships of discovery such as the caravel (Unger 1980: 169–171, 205, 212). By the middle of the fifteenth century both the topsail and the mizzenmast had been integrated into the Northern European shipbuilding tradition (Sandahl 1958: 115). In England, the supremacy of the lateen mizzen with topsail would last from the sixteenth century until it was phased out of royal ships in 1618 (Anderson 1994: 241). What was so advantageous about this array of sail that allowed it to spread from the Mediterranean and across Europe? Ships with lateen sails could luff (Campbell 1995: 10).

Confessio amantis contains the first known appearance in English of the verb *to luff* to describe the sailing practice of bringing the head of a ship closer to the wind—a usage that would not gain much currency until the sixteenth century (Sandahl 1958: 61). *Luff* had previously appeared as a noun as early as A.D. 1205 in *Lazamons Brut* and referred to a type of boom or spar. In that context, the word is almost certainly an adoption from the Norse. Bertil Sandahl argues, though, that Gower's use of the verb form is a borrowing from the French *louvoyer* rather than a direct descendant of the Old Norse antecedent. Interestingly, this possible French source does not itself appear in text until 1529 (Sandahl 1958: 61), yet before we discard Sandahl's assertion, it is useful to reiterate that Gower was very familiar with continental French and a quick adopter of French vocabulary. Indeed, some standard French words appear first in Gower's French poetry.⁴

If we look again at Gower's use of the verb *luff* in the wider context of Northern European seafaring history, then its outlier status becomes clear. There is an explanation for the scarcity of words related to *luffing* in English and French until the sixteenth century: square-rigged ships were not adept at sailing close to the wind. The term does not come into any real use until after the

⁴ For the character of Gower's French, see Brian Merrilees and Heather Pagan 2009.

integration of the lateen mizzen in northern shipbuilding (Sandahl 1958: 57–61). The only ships that probably *luffed* with any frequency in the fourteenth century were part of Mediterranean and Iberian traditions.

We must turn our attention, then, to the question of just how familiar Gower might have been with Iberian and Mediterranean shipping practices and technologies. Venetian galleys traded Mediterranean luxury goods for English wool in London (Hutchinson 1994: 84–85). Spanish traders on their way to Flanders stopped first, according to the documents of the time, in Southampton and London, but this trade would gradually fall off during the latter half of the fourteenth century (Hutchinson 1994: 80). It was Portugal that replaced the slackening French and Spanish trade and became a key purchaser of English cloth by the end of the century (Yeager 2004: 506). Sailors from Portuguese galleys caroused in Minchen Lane, only a few minutes' walk from Chaucer's Custom House (Robertson 1968: 58), and Portuguese and English merchants established trade colonies within the larger ports of both kingdoms (Yeager 2004: 506). Though we cannot say with any certainty just how visible these groups might have been to Gower, they did maintain a lasting presence throughout fourteenth-century London.

Setting aside the wider Mediterranean world for a moment, it is possible to connect Gower specifically to the Iberian Peninsula. As mentioned previously, *Confessio amantis* was translated into both Portuguese and Spanish during the early fifteenth century.⁵ R. F. Yeager, in "Gower's Lancastrian Affinity: The Iberian Connection," explores the political and social networks that might have facilitated the introduction of Gower's work onto foreign soil while gauging the poet's foreign readership. Gower's Lancastrian sympathies would have perhaps provided an entrée to the world of the Iberian

⁵ Indeed, Gower's Iberian manuscripts have become the focus of much recent scholarly work. See particularly Pérez-Fernández 2012 and Peebles 2012.

courts, pervaded as they were by alliances and obligations formed around John of Gaunt (Yeager 2004: 483).

Most suggestively, in light of the development of extensive trade with England during the period when *Confessio amantis* was being composed, it is in Portugal that Gower's work is first translated. The Portuguese translation, from which the Castilian copy was modeled, is attributed to the English canon of Lisbon, Robert Payn (Yeager 2004: 483). Payn rendered Gower's English poetry into Portuguese prose and, strikingly, omitted *topseilcole* in both instances where it would have occurred in the original. This editorial decision was respected in the Castilian. Terms for topsail existed in both Portuguese (*vela da gávea*) and Spanish (*velas de gavia*) by the fifteenth century and were in use earlier (Smith 1993: 108), so it is not the case that the *topsail* reference needed to be excluded on those grounds. Though the absence of *topseilcole* does not negatively impact the message of the lines, we are unable to say whether Payn chose to avoid translating the term for the sake of efficiency or because he was unfamiliar with the meaning of the English technical term or its Portuguese equivalent. This raises the question of just how esoteric Gower's nautical vocabulary might have been even among English speakers of his time.

For a poet with no known connection to maritime affairs, Gower employs technical and obscure sailor's jargon with precision. His usage is specific rather than general and I would argue that some of it would require a first-hand acquaintance with shipping practices within a rich maritime environment like fourteenth-century London. A constant source for dialectical variation among the urban population at that time would have been the presence of sailors drawn to the city not just from abroad but also from within England itself (Denton 2003: 17). The presence of "riff" or *reef* in *Confessio amantis*, one of the few nautical terms used by Gower that comes directly from the Old Norse, is almost certainly a product of domestic maritime trade connections (VII, 1983; OED *s.v.* reef, n.1; Jesch 2008: 163). Indeed, remnants of the

Norse influence—for example *oar*, *aloft*, and *row*—were kept alive predominantly through their descendants in areas like Normandy and York (Kowaleski 2009: 115–117).

Confessio amantis contains the first known use of *reef* to describe a section of sail that has been folded and tied down to lessen the action of the wind upon the plane of the cloth. Reef-points, the spots where the sail was actually fastened down, are visible in ship iconography beginning in the twelfth century. The reef was a visible technology that could be observed on vessels entering or leaving port as well as those that were docked (Sandahl 1958: 89). To know that a reef existed, Gower would simply have needed to see one and ask a more knowledgeable party for the correct name to apply to it. To use it properly in the statement, “The wynd was good, the See was plein, Hem nedeth nought a Riff to slake” (VII, 1983), the poet would require at least some additional understanding of the mechanics of sailing and related nautical practice (Kemp 1988: 695–696), which he demonstrates through his choice of the verb *slake* (OED *s.v.* *slake*, v.1). Gower is not only aware of reefing technology, he is also familiar with its purpose in controlling the tension of the sail against the wind.

5 MARITIME INFLUENCE IN GOWER AND CHAUCER

The practice of luffing can really only be observed from the deck of a ship. It is a technique developed and understood through experience. Similarly, the appreciation of a *topseilcole*, that faint breeze ruffling a topsail, is something that is noticed when a ship is underway. It is a memory retained by a sailor and not a landsman. These are the words and thoughts of a participant in maritime life, not those of an outsider. We might ask if the experience needed to develop such a vocabulary belonged personally to Gower or if he had an informant within the sailing community. Certainly, Southwark played host to a transient population of sailors enticed to the suburb by its reputation for entertainment, but immersion in the company of seamen might not be enough to account for the

authoritative nature of Gower's maritime knowledge. Chaucer had grown up in a neighborhood rife with sailors (Robertson 1968: 42), but the sea terms he employs are of a general and superficial nature. We must assume also that Chaucer, in his position as Comptroller of the Customs, would have come into at least some degree of contact with merchants and shippers. If the example of Chaucer is anything to go by, then seamanship-by-osmosis was not a necessary product of life in medieval London.

When imagining a specifically maritime character like the Shipman in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer writes him as hailing from Dartmouth in the developing trade hub of Devon rather than London (Friel 2003: 62). *The Shipman's Tale* notably contains no nautical imagery or vocabulary. Of the twenty-two lines describing the Shipman in the *General Prologue*, only a dozen touch directly on his maritime exploits:

If that he faught and hadde the hyer hond,
By water he sente hem hoom to every lond.
But of his craft to rekene wel his tydes,
His stremes, and daungers hym bisides,
His herberwe, and his moone, his lodemenage,
Ther nas noon swich from Hulle to Cartage.
Hardy he was and wys to undertake;
With many a tempest hadde his berd been shake.
He knew alle the havens, as they were,
Fro Gootlond to the cape of Fynystere,
And every cryke in Britaigne and in Spayne.
His barge ycleped was the Maudelayne.

(*Gen Prol*: 398–410)

The Shipman, it is implied, has connections to the wine trade (“Ful many a draughte of wyn had he ydrawe fro Burdeux-ward, whil that the chapman sleep,” *Gen Prol*: 396–397) and is well travelled, but apart from the suggestion of piratical naval tactics, such a description could have applied to almost any fourteenth-century shipmaster. *Tempest*, *lodemenage* and *barge* are all derived from French. *Harbor*, the exception to this Anglo-French trend,

is an Old English term repurposed for maritime contexts. It was first recorded in a strictly nautical use in the thirteenth century in *Lazamons Brut* in rough conjunction with the gradual shift from beachable shallow-draft vessels to deeper-draft ships that required more specialized shelters. All of these terms, save *barge*, existed in the language before they acquired a maritime connotation (OED *s.vv.* tempest, n.; lodemanage, n.; barge, n.; harbor, n.). Thus, in connection with the Shipman, Chaucer only superficially employs any maritime vocabulary.

An interesting example of the difference between Chaucer's and Gower's use of nautical terminology can be seen if we return to their treatments of "The Tale of Constance" in *The Man of Law's Tale* and *Confessio amantis*. Chaucer used both Gower and Trevet as sources for his version of this story of a Christian maiden who finds herself repeatedly set adrift in a directionless ship by her enemies. In his telling of the Constance story, Chaucer again uses very general maritime vocabulary, with *ship* appearing throughout, *sail* or *sailing* in three instances (440, 445, 968), and an isolated but gratifying occurrence of *overboard* (922).

Gower, by contrast, in addition to introducing the image of the "Schip withoute stiere" (II, 709), finds time to differentiate between a *boat* and a *ship* (II, 1108), as well as incorporate *port*, *navy*, *vessel*, *fleet* and *anchor* into the narrative (II, 1119, 1129, 1133–1136). The bulk of these terms are used in the scene wherein Constance is rescued at sea, for which Gower writes:

Hire Schip was drive upon a dai,

Wher that a gret Navye lay
Of Schipes, al the world at ones:
And as god wolde for the nones,
Hire Schip goth in among hem alle,
And stinte noght, er it be falle
And hath the vessel undergete,
Which Maister was of al the Flete,
Bot there it resteth and abod.
This grete Schip on Anker rod (II, 1127-36)

Chaucer reduces the same scene to four lines:

This senatour repaireth with victorie
To Rome-ward, saillynge ful royally,
And mette the ship dryvyng, as seith the storie,
In which Custance sit ful pitously.
(*Man of Law's Tale*, 967-970)

Both poets depart from their source, Trevet's *Les Cronicles*, though Gower's version is the more faithful of the two. Trevet's scene, as translated by Robert M. Correale, exhibits its own beauty, but its imagery is absent in both Chaucer and Gower:

Then Constance [...] as she was floating on the sea, saw far off what appeared to her to be a wood. And as God, her very good and courteous guide, steered her boat nearer and nearer, she at last perceived that it was the masts of a large navy which lay in the harbor of a city by the sea. And when the sailors saw a boat floating so wondrously on the sea, they supposed it had been a ship abandoned by its crew in a storm. But when they came nearer, they found a woman and a five-year old

child richly provisioned in treasure but very lacking in food
(Correale 2005: 320).⁶

Gower chooses to emphasize the materiality of the fleet and dispenses with Trevet's illusionary forest of masts. In Gower, this passage contains the highest concentration of nautical terminology recorded in the "Tale of Constance" presented in *Confessio amantis*. Gower takes pains to paint the scene of the solitary ship sailing in amongst the grand navy—a scene that Chaucer hurries past as if eager to get the action back on land as quickly as possible.

6 GOWER'S AUDIENCE

Based on his conscious use of the technical vocabulary of seagoing, I believe that it is reasonable to assume that Gower had a deeper connection to nautical life than the average Londoner—though it is an admittedly strange world in which Geoffrey Chaucer must stand in for the average Londoner. If it is possible that some of the terms used by Gower were unfamiliar even to those charged with translating his work, what, then, might we infer about the level of understanding Gower expected from his audience?

There is a group of possible readers for Gower's work who could be expected to not only understand but also identify with the poet's maritime reflections. Like the Lancastrian faction, these individuals had connections to Iberia, though of a more vulgar sort. I refer, of course, to the London merchant class. Ships and shipping were viewed, according to Joe Flatman, as "the ultimate

⁶ "Puis ceste Constance [...] com ele fu flotaunte sour la mere, regardoit de loins lui apparut com un bois. Et com son trebon et curteis gyour, Dieux, gya sa nef plus pres et plus a la fin apparceut qe ceo estoient mastz de un grant navie qe reposa en le porte de une cite sur la mere. Et quant les mariners virent un nef si merveilousement sure la mere flotaunte soucherent qe ceo eust esté une nef par tempeste voidé de ses mariners. Mes quant estoient venuz adés, troverent une femme et enfaunt de cink anz richement estoffés de tresour mes trop povres de vitailles." (433–441)

technological embodiment of the upwardly mobile middle class” (Flatman 2009: 22). Artists working to order for aristocratic patrons happily provided nautical scenes that lampooned those merchants engaged in the coarse but profitable sea trade. Gower himself certainly aimed for a higher audience, but his message would have resonated with a class that was developing in the same milieu as his own. Just as Gower hoped to sway elites with his words and to improve his status through his connections with rulers, so too the newly minted London middle class were eager to get their feet on the first rung of the social ladder, and reading Gower’s poetry was a step in the direction of respectability. Gower may have written to the aristocracy, but he did so in a language of non-aristocratic experience.

7 IMPLICATIONS

Based on the direct connection between Gower and the Lancastrian elites capable of commissioning the transportation and translation of *Confessio amantis* for an Iberian audience, it is reasonable to assume that Gower’s works reached the Iberian courts through high-level aristocratic networks. It is also possible, though, that trade, the hidden engine that drove the economies and alliances of Europe, introduced the poet to his foreign audiences. As much as Gower desired and profited from his high-status connections, I suggest that his success could have been likewise achieved by a bottom-up approach relying on the emerging influence of the London merchant class in combination within an expanding Iberian trade network. The references to topsail technologies and the practice of luffing, when taken as a suite of related nautical innovations, point to a connection with Mediterranean or Iberian trade—an idea bolstered by the presence of Gower’s works in Iberia as well as

his own artistic exploration of Mediterranean mercantilism.⁷ The analysis of sources for sea terms in *Confessio amantis* is the first step in an attempt to establish alternative vehicles for the importation of Gower's writing into Iberian contexts.

The John Gower revealed in the maritime vocabulary of the *Confessio amantis* is thus a man who was conversant with the language and technologies of Anglo-French as well as Mediterranean ships and shipping. He was likely connected by both political and economic networks to the Iberian Peninsula, probably through his Lancastrian sympathies but possibly through the wool trade. It is reasonable to assume that both his language and the social status attributed to his work, as well as its content, would have appealed to the London merchants who were emerging at the time as a distinct sea-based economic power.

In this article, I have attempted to lay the groundwork for future study that I hope will expand and better define our understanding of the maritime character of John Gower, his work, and his city. Having focused primarily on the *Confessio amantis*, I realize that a great deal of Gower's poetry remains to be tackled. A similar examination of the vocabulary used in Gower's French and Latin works, taken in conjunction with a fine-toothed approach to the remaining English texts, should prove fruitful to researchers interested not only in Gower's personal history but also in the maritime and mercantile identities of medieval London. Increased attention on Gower's connection to both Iberia and the Mediterranean has the potential to shed light on larger issues of

⁷ Steven F. Kruger has written on Gower's apparent attempts to resolve the tensions between the moral and material characters of expanding medieval mercantilism. Of particular interest, in light of the previous discussion of topsail sources, Gower uses an imagined Mediterranean to create a "geopolitical space to think through questions of mercantilism and religious identity" (Kruger 2007: 8). The "Tale of Constance" is, according to Kruger, a meditation on an idealized Christian merchant for whom "a commercial transaction is also a spiritual one" (Kruger 2007: 11-13).

trade and political alliances in the Middle Ages while informing us about England's strategies for connecting to the rest of the medieval world.

The maritime Gower is a figure in whom the seafaring character of 14th century London is embodied. When taken as a product of the city's economic, technological, and social realities, the nautical vocabulary of the *Confessio amantis* must be seen as expression of the lived experience of an individual in the heart of a mercantile culture that was energized by shipping. The ship is not so much a symbol in Gower's poetry as it is a reflection on a way of life.

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