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Social Healing in Gower's *Visio Angliae*

Kara L. McShane

While we have many chronicle accounts of the Great Rising of 1381, Book I of John Gower's *Vox Clamantis* is the only major literary presentation of these events. Like the rest of this first book, the *Visio Angliae* has occasionally been received by scholars as an example of everything that is wrong with Gower's poetry.¹ Eve Salisbury aptly summarizes previous observations by scholars and editors of Gower's works: "Described as 'wearisome,' 'lachrymose,' 'pessimistic,' a paratactical political treatise of little or no literary value, the *Vox* has been relegated to the margins of literary study. Moreover, Gower's rigid elitist position, conservatism, and contentious condemnatory tone have rendered him an easy target for allegations of political inconsistency, ethical contradiction, cowardice, self-interest, and a notable lack of artistic integrity, originality, and skill" (125).²

Yet a fresh reexamination of the *Visio* demonstrates that its reforming goals are in keeping with those of Gower's later *Confessio Amantis*. I rely here on Russell Peck's definition of common profit, or "the mutual enhancement, each by each, of all parts of a community for the general welfare of that community taken as a whole. It applies to the community of faculties within an individual man as well as the state of England with its individuals and its three estates" (1). While *Vox Clamantis* is indeed conservative, its main concern is common profit—that is, social welfare and the restoration of order. I argue that Gower uses metaphorical images common from vernacular romance—particularly the image of the rudderless ship—to help himself and his readers process the upheaval of the Great Rising. As a healing narrative, the *Visio* is meant as a public, political text that can begin healing at both personal and communal levels. The *Visio* is reforming, but it is not radical. In Gower's worldview, social reform must begin with the highest levels of society and move downward.

Medieval readers understood that constructing narratives can potentially help readers (and/or writers) process the difficult events they experience. Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* both employ such models, wherein the process of constructing a metaphorical narrative allows a character to articulate the traumatic events they have experienced; this narrative construction is itself an act of processing that leads to healing. Laurence J. Kirmayer suggests that successful healing narratives function primarily through

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metaphor, which provides the sufferer with an image to visualize and thus work through trauma. He explains that “narration may heal by allowing symbolic closure” (595); and “it may build solidarity with others through shared accounts of suffering in socially understandable and valorized terms” (595). Through narrative, then, the sufferer might create closure in an attempt to recover from an event where such closure is denied. As Cecilia Bosticco and Theresa L. Thompson argue, “[t]hrough the use of storytelling, [bereaved individuals] begin . . . to take control of events formerly beyond their power of influence” (391). The *Visio* reimagines the recent past to construct a coherent narrative and create a consensus reality through which readers can make sense of their own experience of the Great Rising—an essential process indeed before the reforming estates satire of the rest of the *Vox* can begin. Thus, the text itself becomes an intermediate step in the process of healing: it provides a shared narrative of trauma for a community of readers, who may engage with it as individuals to process their own experiences of these events.

Two of the central metaphors at work used to describe the experience of trauma in the *Visio* are voicelessness and bodily fragmentation. These images simultaneously show both the physical suffering of the narrator and the larger social illness or injury. While the narrator’s voicelessness is closely linked to his fragmentation (as if he himself is representative of the whole social body),³ this voicelessness is the most crucial component of his injury, one represented frequently in the *Visio*. Judith Ferster suggests that “The oppositions between voice and clamor and between godliness and insanity define two important poles for Gower” (129); in Ferster’s view, the lack of voice—its replacement with noise—suggests discord and emphasizes the chaos and trauma of the Rising (129–30). The narrator writes that “Pes, manus, osque silet; oculus stupet et dolet auris; / Cor timet et rigide diriguere come. [Foot, hand, and mouth all stopped; eyes glazed, ears ached / I feared at heart; my hair grew stiff on end]” (16.1393–94).⁴ This description both limits the narrator’s motion and also emphasizes the voicelessness. This image of voicelessness, however, is one among a great many, particularly in Chapter 16 of the *Visio*, the same passage in which the narrator wanders through the wilderness. The narrator is isolated from recognizable social structures in this section—yet even when he seems to be accompanied, he is not capable of speaking with others.

Despite the narrator’s presence in the wilderness, a presumably isolated space, his moments of voicelessness provide clues that he is not alone; it would be a relief to speak to another, yet he cannot do so. He explains that “Non michi libertas cuiquam secreta loquendo / Tunc fuit, immo silens os sua verba tenet. [I wasn’t free to share my secret

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thoughts / With anyone: my silent mouth kept mum]” (16.1493–94). The narrator cannot convey meaning through speech, demonstrating not only the narrator’s personal breakdown, but the breakdown of social order. Yet the word “anyone” implies that there is someone present to whom the narrator could speak if his fear/injury did not prevent him; he writes that

Sepeque cum volui conatus verba proferre,
Torpuerat gelido lingua <retenta> metu.

...

Sepe meam mentem volui dixisse, set hosti
Prodere me timui, linguaque tardat ibi.

I often wished and tried to utter words,
But then my tongue grew stiff with freezing fear.

...

I often wanted to reveal my thoughts;
I feared betrayal, and my tongue stood still.

(16.1511–12, 16.1515–16)

The narrator’s physical body behaves directly at odds with his desire to speak, so that his body overrules his mind. Carlson and Rigg’s translation emphasizes this division between the narrator’s “I” and his body: in these lines, the body part—the tongue—is the subject of one phrase, and the “I” is the subject of the other, demonstrating the lack of connection between physical and psychological components of the narrator’s identity. The bodily fragmentation of the narrator emphasizes his injury and voicelessness; lips and tongue act independently of the narrator’s first-person identity. Yet these examples demonstrate not only the narrator’s personal breakdown, but the breakdown of social order, a breakdown made literal as the narrator recounts the transformation of various social classes from animals into hybrid monsters.⁵ In each case, the unnatural nature of this new state is emphasized.

After the narrator flees the city, his struggle to speak becomes yet more pronounced as trauma disrupts his access to language. When he wanders, frightened, through a wilderness, he writes that

Fine carent lacrimae, nisi cum stupor obstitit illis,
Aut similis morti pectora torpor habet.
Tunc partier lacrimas vocemque introrsus abortas,
Extasis exemplo comprimit ipse metus.
Brachia porrexi tendens ad lumina solis,
Et, quod lingua nequit promere, signa ferunt;

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Cumque ferus lacrimas animi siccauerat ardor,
Singultus reliquas clamat habere vices.

Tears fall unchecked except in stupor's grip
When death-like numbness takes and holds the heart.
Then fear itself, a kind of ecstasy,
Restrains the voice and tears that swell inside.
I stretched my arms towards the sun's bright light
And showed by signs what tongue cannot express;
When tears of mind were dried by burning heat,
Then sighing laid its claim to have next turn. (16.1467–74)

This moment of silencing, the physical inability to speak, presents the breakdown of language as a manifestation of psychological trauma. As social order breaks down, the narrator's ability to speak breaks down into signs, using the body to capture what he cannot express with words. He no longer has language to describe what he sees or to explain his plight. Elaine Scarry has remarked that "Pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). Though the author has had sufficient time and distance from these events to construct this narrative, the narrator in the moment of the Rising is limited to pre-linguistic noises, signs and wordless sighs—and both of these are seemingly disembodied, fragmented, as though the narrator's body is no more under his control than are his words. This non-linguistic response positions the narrator's experience outside the logical, ordered structures of language and marks the poet, too, as part of the "noise" of the Rising.

Yet even when the narrator does control his physical body, the breakdown of order still prevents communication. Though his noises are perhaps readable, words remain beyond him. The narrator writes,

Verbis planxissem, sed viscera plena dolore
Obsistunt, nec eo tempore verba sinunt.
Obice singultu vocis stetit impetus horrens
Aduentu lacrimae; lingua refrenat iter.

I would have mourned in words, but pain-filled guts
Resisted: not a word they'd let me say.
My voice's force was blocked by sighs, in fear
That tears would come; my tongue held back its course.
(16.1579–82)

Though the narrator here has no language, he is able to sigh; much like Peter Travis writes of Chaucer's *Nun's Priests Tale*, the "noise" of sighing here resists interpretation (204, 262).⁶ Yet in Gower's use, I suggest that the sighs, the noise, prevent the narrator from expressing himself in words at the moment—much as the animal noise earlier in the *Visio* operates to replace the actual complaints put forward by the rebels—yet the audience understands something of his meaning, reading the sighs as markers of sadness, mourning, and frustration. While there is no concrete explanation of his fears here, they have been articulated earlier in the narrative; compare, for example, the earlier instance when the rebels/oxen will not pull the plow, and the narrator articulately expresses his fear: "Prothdolor! O! (dixi) cessabit cultus agrorum, / Quo michi temporibus est metuenda fames. [Alas, I said, the tilling of the fields / Will cease, and famine must be feared henceforth]" (III.297–98). In this much earlier passage, the narrator has a specific concern in response to what he sees. In contrast, after the siege of the city when the narrator sighs, there is no explanation of his fears—simply noise in lieu of voice, leaving the audience to fill in the linguistic gap, perhaps with their own anxieties.

While these earlier portions of the *Visio* express the narrator's voicelessness, it is eventually resolved through a new metaphor: the image of the ship at sea which immediately follows this detailed imagery of silenced narrator. The ship metaphor fits into the larger motif of the rudderless ship, a motif that appears in many Middle English texts and is used here to respond to the narrator's voicelessness. Helen Cooper has defined such repeated motifs as memes, that is, "a unit within literature that proves so useful, so infectious, that it begins to take on a life of its own . . . an idea that behaves like a gene in its ability to replicate faithfully and abundantly, but also on occasion to adapt, mutate, and therefore survive in different forms and cultures" (3). While Cooper's focus is on romance, V.A. Kolve observes that the motif is by no means limited to the vernacular; rather, it is also present in William of Malmesbury's *De gestis regum Anglorum*, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, among the over one hundred versions of the life of St. Brendan, and other works (325, 333). Thus, the motif of the rudderless ship is both religious and historical, the genres yoked together in the *Visio* as a whole. The repetition of the meme, and this motif in particular, is particularly productive for the healing process because it simultaneously provides language to talk about a traumatic event and opens up adaptive possibilities to help the storyteller. Like the rebel animals and the destruction of New Troy earlier in the *Visio*, the ship too has an explicit analogue; the narrator writes: "O quam tunc similis

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huic naui Londoniarum / Turris erat, quod eam seua procella quatit. [How like that ship the Tower of London was, / Since savage storms assailed both tower and ship]" (ll. 1743–44). Andrew Galloway and others have identified the *Visio's* ship as the floundering ship of state (343).⁷ On one level, then, the ship in a storm is the Tower, surrounded by the noise and rage of the city outside it, the logical terminus of the *Visio's* metaphors given the prevalent storm imagery throughout. At another level, the ship of state is under attack as the structures of social order are overthrown. And, of course, the ship is a particularly apt metaphor for insular England—those traveling to or from England must always travel via boat.

The narrative of the ship at sea begins while the narrator is lost in the wilderness, frightened and silenced. He explains that "Haud procul aspexi nauem, properansque cucurri, / Sors mea si forte tucior esset ibi [Close by I saw a ship; I ran in haste / To see if there my luck would be more safe]" (1599–1600). At first, this choice to board the ship seems to be something of a critical error. The ship is decidedly not safer; it encounters a storm at sea so strong that no one can steer it. Yet the decision to board the ship suggests the narrator's emotional state. Cooper has observed that the rudderless boat in medieval narratives often suggests death for its occupant, since "The very danger of being adrift in a rudderless boat was so extreme as to make death likely, and survival therefore almost the only worthwhile narrative option" (107). The journey on the ship conveys the narrator's fear of death in the face of the Rising. Yet paradoxically, it also sets up for his survival because of the way the metaphor is used in other contemporary literature.

Passengers on a rudderless boat adrift at sea exist in a state of limbo; these figures are often considered to be guided by divine providence, as in the Constance narrative in Gower's own *Confessio Amantis*. Kolve observes that the rudderless ship is perhaps the most striking and memorable image from the *Man of Law's Tale* (302), and this is certainly true of Constance narratives more generally and of the later part of the *Visio Angliae*. Given how common this motif is, it functions as a very recognizable metaphor appropriate for social use; however, the boat does not always serve the same purpose or carry the same meaning. As Cooper writes, "The originality lies in an author's handling of his materials, his . . . ability to disrupt, to startle, to shock" (21). Memes simultaneously draw on tradition, on the collected fact of their frequent use, and productively depart from that tradition to shake audience expectations and construct a new narrative.

Gower's assumption as author is that the reader of *Vox Clamantis* would have a framework with which to interpret the boat adrift at sea; however, the predictability of the boat metaphor's resolution does not

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make it less powerful. As Cooper says, “Exposure at sea constitutes a *iudicium Dei*, a judgment made not by men but by God” (110). Indeed, these exposures long predate the medieval period, and the motif of setting a figure adrift has been “traced back as far as the ancient Greeks, who thought the sea an arbiter of sin and innocence” (Kolve 325).⁸ Kolve further observes that people were generally set adrift “when guilt could not be conclusively determined by human investigation, when men wished to combine severity with some possibility of mercy, or when . . . society wished to expel an unwanted person from its midst” (326). The narrator’s voyage holds all these possibilities as society itself is subject to the *iudicium Dei*; the narrator explains that while on the ship, lost in a storm,

Brachia cum palmis, oculos cum menteque tristi
In celum tendens, postulat omnis opem.
Non tenet hic lacrimas; stupet hic, vocat ille beatos,
Proque salute sua numina quisque vocat.
Rector cuncta deo commendans talia dixit,
“Celestis celestem det michi rector opem.”

Each stretched his hands and arms and, sad in mind,
His eyes to heaven he prayed for help.
None check their tears; one gapes, one calls on saints,
And each one begs salvation from the gods.
The captain puts his hope in God and cries,
“May heaven’s ruler grant me now swift aid.” (1733–38)

This moment when the ship’s crew stops steering and turns to prayer places the social upheaval of the Great Rising in religious terms, perhaps providing a sense of purpose for the trauma experienced by Londoners, who are directly invited to identify with the ship through its continual positioning as the Tower of London. The tower (or ship) is not the problem in Gower’s telling, but the storm is; circumstances make navigation impossible. The image of the ship on a stormy sea takes the agency for the suffering from the rebels and restores a familiar social order by placing everything back in God’s control. Kolve notes that the storm at sea often refers to sin and temptation, active on the sea of the world: “waves and tempests, as symbolic signs, can be readily internalized, to suggest storms of passion and concupiscence within” (336). The storm is thus an especially apt metaphor for the Rising, an event often described in terms of disorder and chaos. In his analysis of Walsingham’s account of the Rising, Stephen Justice writes that “[Walsingham’s] narrative happens in a swirl of noise that

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obscures agency and ignites violence as an impersonal force” (205). The meme thus suggests both internal and external disorder, drawing on both social and religious discourses.

Memes are thus particularly productive for narrative healing since, as Kirmayer observes, “systems of meaning, and specific meanings, have social origins and functions along with their significance for the individual” (162). Moreover, the use of this common metaphor may be especially helpful to healing via narrative. Kirmayer suggests that such a metaphor “may be apt when bodily-felt conviction or social concern brings it alive” (177). In the case of the *Visio*, the use of this motif makes the traumatic events of the Great Rising readable to its audience. Its frequency, and its varied metaphorical resonances, give the metaphor force.⁹ The process of retelling the narrative, and the use of the ship as healing metaphor, has begun to provide the narrator with the tools to regain his voice. Moreover, the narrator is not the only occupant of the rudderless ship; the society adrift with him, readers who see his experience as their own, are also given an account to describe what happened to them, while readers who did not experience the Rising first hand now have the metaphorical tools that Kirmayer describes. As Cooper observes, the use of this metaphor begins to make the narrator’s experience comprehensible to his audience.¹⁰

If the narrator is meant to be read as a stand-in for the reader, then, the rudderless ship sets up for the reader’s survival—and acknowledges that the land where the narrator arrives will not be the same as the one he left behind. When the narrator speaks to an old man on the shore, the man identifies the island: “Exulis hec dici nuper solet Insula Bruti [Its name is now ‘the Isle of Exiled Brut’]” (1963). Though the narrator returns to England, it simultaneously is and yet is not the same England as the one he has left. He has journeyed from New Troy to the island of Britain; and yet both of these places are England. Both old and new, this island is the “logical destination,” and the narrator’s arrival (and return) suggests that the island post-Rising is in a moment at which change is possible. This return at the end of the *Visio*, then, sets up the estates satire of the rest of the *Vox*.

The poet can reflect only after the traumatic events that transform him. The narrator’s account thus becomes a way of speaking his unspeakable experience. Because of the silencing chaos of the events, this written speech act must be retroactive; once the events have passed, the narrator gives voice to the experience and to his emotions that he could not express in the moment. When the narrator finally reaches a (somewhat) safe harbor at the end of the *Visio*, he declares that “Vt michi vox alias que vidi scribere iussit, / Amplius ex toto corde vacare volo. [The voice [from heaven] commanded me to write what I / Had

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seen: with all my heart I'll give my time to this]" (2147–48). The narrator's noisemaking is juxtaposed with the text itself as a very articulate response to his experience. To that effect, it is worth noting, that the *Visio* circulated within a larger text that the narrator names, at the start of Book II, *Vox Clamantis*.

The ship itself is, of course, a metaphor with considerable resonance elsewhere in Gower's work. (Kolve notes its presence in *Confessio* V.1871, the Prologue 234–35 and in *Vox* Book III, Chapter 14 (332)). Yet one particular reference to a ship, I suggest, most clearly demonstrates its power as a metaphor for social healing and order for Gower:

And every man for his partie
A kingdom hath to justefie,
That is to sein his oghne dom.
If he misreule that kingdom,
He lest himself, and that is more
Than if he loste schip and ore
And al the worldes good withal. (CA 8.2111–17)

The ship of the *Visio* is a metaphor both for and of the community, the representative of change at God's hand. Yet the ship is also the individual's way through the world. To lose both the ship and the rudder—to be without the vessel that offers some small protection as well as the means to guide it—is a problem of self-governance that spills over into the common good. If the ship elsewhere represents the community, the Ship of State, then each individual's self-governance becomes essential to common profit. The work of each enhances each: not only do social and political classes have a role to fulfill, as Gower outlines in the rest of the *Vox Clamantis*, but individuals are drawn into a relational network of equivalent systems. The ship of state is also the ship of common profit, requiring each of its members working together to stay afloat. The ship may list and lean, showing the trauma of the quelled Rising, but Gower observes that the ship's path cannot be set right, that society cannot heal, without its individual members working together to perform their jobs. As "the voice of one crying out," Gower the narrator turns the fact of trauma into reflection, distancing readers and allowing them the perspective they need to pull the ship up right.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Kristi J. Castleberry, Kyle Ann Huskin, Valerie B. Johnson, Russell Peck, Laura Whitebell, R.F. Yeager, and Pamela M. Yee for feedback on earlier versions of this argument.

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2. Salisbury draws here on editors Eric W. Stockton and G.C. Macaulay, as well as critics R.B. Dobson and David Aers; see especially p. 140, n. 3.
3. I expand here on the fragmentation and sacrificial discourses explained by Salisbury, "Violence and the Sacrificial Poet"; see also Kim Zarins, "From Head to Foot," who examines the fragmentation and reconstruction of the author's identity through the name puzzle in the Prologue (lines 19–24).
4. All translations are from Carlson and Rigg's 2011 edition and translation.
5. Compare, for example, *Visio* III.241–260; IV.299–318; and IV.321–342.
6. Travis suggests that "Chaucer focuses his critical attention on noise, not only as a signifier of social discord but also as a potential site of epistemological transformation, poetic pleasure, and the liberating opportunities of social change. Or, to put the matter much more carefully, Chaucer is fascinated by the resistance of noise to our understanding" (204). For Travis, Chaucer's reference to the Rising is deliberately slippery, and I would suggest that the same is true of Gower's allegory. Both the narrator and the rebels are often reduced to noise in the *Visio*, which suggests that a reexamination of the *Visio* with special attention to the problems of voice undercuts the clean binary between the poet's highly-literate audience and the rebels themselves that critics have long accepted.
7. See also Zarins, p. 144. Kolve also aligns the rudderless ship with the ship of the church: as he observes, the largest space in a church, the nave, takes its name from the Latin *navis*, ship. He suggests that these sea journeys rely on the simultaneous destructive and salvific power of water in Christianity (315–22). Thus, the rudderless ship journey represents a kind of death, much like baptism, which presumably leads to a changed existence.
8. In fact, there is a strong tradition of classical ships—after all, the language Gower employs in the *Visio* is often borrowed from Ovid. Cooper suggests that the rudderless ship is in some ways a "distinctively English tradition" given its presence in English texts as early as *Beowulf* (108). In some ways, however, this very claim undermines her view that these motifs are limited to romance and begin in twelfth-century France. These supposedly vernacular romance tropes appear across lines of both language (as in French romances and Latin works written in England) and genre (*Beowulf* is unquestionably not a Middle English romance). The meme's usefulness should not be limited to Middle English romance, especially not when considering an author such as Gower, who writes across these boundaries of both genre and language. The motif is especially active in religious and historical works, and Kolve insists that the motif "should not be thought a 'romance' motif in any sense that would restrict its seriousness or credibility to literature alone" (325).
9. Indeed, V.A. Kolve identifies four levels at which the metaphor functions in the *Man of Law's Tale* alone (301). The rudderless ship thus provides a variety of interpretive levels for the *Visio*'s readers.
10. The question of Gower's audience is, of course, governed in part by the *Visio*'s language, as well as by its bookishness. It has been well-established that

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much of the *Visio* draws heavily on classical sources, particularly Ovid; while it is impossible to know how many of these allusions and references Gower anticipated that his audience would know, both the language and the literariness of the text suggest that he imagined a highly literate, well-read audience for his work. As Siân Echard observes, “For Gower, language itself is a means by which he effects a mimesis of the political uncertainties of his age. It is also potentially, *but always uncertainly*, a means by which he might influence the political realm” (129–30). Echard and Ferster both observe that Gower’s social and political critique is often more direct in his Latin writings (Echard 129; Ferster 111–12). Thus, the *Visio* must employ “trickle-down healing,” as I have called it here, in part because of the audience that it imagines; at the same time, Gower’s choice of language allows for a more direct critique because Latin is, to some extent, a closed system. For further discussion of Gower’s Ovidian allusions, see Zarins; Bruce Harbert, “Lessons from the Great Clerk”; Maura Nolan, “The Poetics of Catastrophe”; Yoshiko Kobayashi, “The Voice of an Exile”; the introduction and notes to Stockton’s translation, available in *The Major Latin Works of John Gower*; and the notes to Carlson and Rigg’s *John Gower: On Contemporary Events*. On Gower’s use of *cento*, see Yeager, “Did Gower Write *Centos*?” and Salisbury, “Violence and the Sacrificial Poet.”

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McShane is the general editor of *Visualizing Chaucer*, a Robbins Library Digital Project, and has contributed to *The Camelot Project* and *Once and Future Classroom*, an open-access journal dedicated to teaching the Middle Ages. She also serves as an assistant editor for *medievally speaking*, an open-access review journal supported by the International Society for the Study of Medievalism (medievallyspeaking.blogspot.com). Email: kmcshane@ursinus.edu.