

BEARERS OF PUNISHMENT AND REWARD: AHAB'S  
PROPHET IN GOWER'S *CONFESSIO AMANTIS*

Stephen Yandell

Court poets walked a precarious line in the late fourteenth century. They depended on patronage from the ruling Plantagenets but risked falling out of favor as the house began to fracture with competing candidates for the throne. Punishments and rewards served as a primary currency of power for the English throne trying to control its subjects, and yet because a court poet functioned as spokesman for God, especially when retelling Biblical narratives, his power could trump the king's. Like a prophet, a court poet could be a bearer of rewards and punishments himself, announcing to his patron what God had declared as folly. For John Gower, surviving the transition from Richard II to Henry Bolingbroke was especially difficult and took political and rhetorical savvy. A work like *Confessio Amantis* proved an ideal forum in which he could blur the lines between court poet and prophetic advisor, and between secular and spiritual courts. Well-chosen Biblical tales in the poem proved opportunities for subversion in which Gower could both support the king's decisions (thus assuring ongoing monetary rewards) and challenge the justice behind his actions (without exposing himself to treasonous punishments).

*Confessio Amantis* resembles many of the narrative compilations of the period, and it served multiple purposes, just like Chaucer's and Boccaccio's collections. The breadth of the chosen narratives helped attract a wide audience while at the same time allowing Gower to display his varied skills: creative imagery, clever moralizing, and a familiarity with diverse sources. However, *Confessio Amantis* also reveals an ambition that pushes beyond many of Gower's contemporaries. The poem offers more stories than the *Canterbury Tales*, *Legend of Good Women*, or *Decameron*; it claims a more extensive thematic unity; and it promises to address the full spectrum of human moral failings. Through eight books Gower reveals the dangers of the seven deadly sins as well as the best advice for proper kingship.

However, by including one particularly problematic biblical tale in *Confessio Amantis*, that of King Ahab and the prophet Micaiah, Gower forces his audience into a clever interpretive dilemma. Acknowledging the inherent rightness of kingly power in either the secular or spiritual

realm simultaneously undermines it in the other. On the surface one finds respectful support for decisions made by human kings (including England's) and God (the King of Kings), but only slightly below the surface one discovers a tale that takes risks both politically and exegetically. The Hebrew king Ahab and Jehovah are both shown to be trumped by counselors who read signs more effectively, and Gower is able to suggest through this a kind of power for poets that rivals the king's. He reminds readers that while prophets have long borne the brunt of kingly punishment and reward, for just as long they have also served as bearers of similar messages from God to humanity. The poet's role in an English court mimics that of the prophet within the Hebrew court and of angelic counselors around the heavenly throne; and as a bearer of divine messages, the poet carries a weight that surpasses human rulers. His message is ultimately more substantial than human law and extends potentially to a wider audience.

One reason Gower earns the title of "moral," most famously in Chaucer's dedication of *Troilus and Criseyde*, is that his collection is so aggressively conservative in its interpretations. Biblical, classical, and historical sources are all glossed with traditional Christian explication. However, even a casual reader must concede Gower's occasional liberalism in *Confessio Amantis*. For example, because some of the stories he wants to tell do not fit nicely into the prescribed rubric of the seven deadly sins, he simply massages them into place with creative editing and flexible summaries. The tale of Philomela becomes for Gower a chance to warn readers of the dangers of robbery (V.5551-6047), and Icarus's ambition is cast as an anti-sloth message (IV.1035-1071). By the time we get to the final book on lust, Gower seems to have used up his best stories on sexuality, and we are offered the single, extended retelling of one of the most famous anti-incest tales in the Middle Ages, Apollonius of Tyre (VIII.271-2008). The tale is appropriate here, of course, but one cannot help but question the validity of the nicely balanced whole promised at the beginning of the work.

Not surprisingly, maintaining a consistently ordered scheme proves difficult for Gower, and the past several decades of scholarship on the poem have in many ways revolved around questioning the degree to which Gower's didacticism and narrative unity can be taken at face value. The suggestion that subversive aspects appear in *Confessio Amantis* is certainly not new. Perhaps most effectively among critics, Diane Watt argues in *Amoral Gower* that while Gower does not ever

seem to sidestep ethical principles, “the tensions, contradictions, and silences in [his] text expose the limitations of the ethical structure available to him and open up his text to multiple interpretations.” From this she concludes, “the poem destabilizes accepted categories..., [which] has a profound impact on Gower’s treatment of ethics and politics, as well as language and rhetoric, and knowledge and power... [It] deliberately encourages its audience to take risks in interpretation, to experiment with meaning, and to offer individualistic readings” (xii).

As productive as readings like Watt’s remain, one key episode of *Confessio Amantis* that escapes Watt’s scrutiny—very few Gower scholars, in fact, have discussed it—is King Ahab’s interaction with the prophet Micaiah found in book 7. This retelling of events from First Kings 22 (and also Second Chronicles 18) is a useful example of subversion in the poem that is hard to reconcile with Gower’s public moral image and with his role as poet and spiritual advisor both to English kings (Richard II and Henry IV) and a larger English audience. This oversight is unfortunate, because the tale is intriguing for many reasons. First, it is not one of the traditional biblical tales that medieval audiences frequently heard and would therefore have known well; second, most scholars concede that Gower’s version of this episode is more of a recollection of the original Vulgate than a conservative retelling; and third, it is beautifully problematic as a model of proper morality and of proper interaction between rulers and counselors as they negotiate a shared space (and shared power) between God and humanity.

Few modern readers picking up an abbreviated edition of the poem even reach Ahab’s tale, as many versions simply gloss large chunks of book 7, which focuses on advice for kings. An overview of the plot may thus be in order, and Russell Peck’s summary is useful in this regard. As Peck explains, Ahab’s story appears in book 7 primarily as a warning about flatterers. Kings should not surround themselves with people who do not tell them the truth; in fact, rather than reward such counselors, they should punish the sycophants and keep them out of court. As Peck explains, the tale opens with Ahab King of Israel’s having had land stolen by the Syrian king Benedab, and Ahab’s contacting King Josaphat of Judah to join him for consultation on getting it back. He also summons prophets who can provide divine counsel. Peck continues:

Ahab called on Sedechie, a notorious flatterer, who came dressed up like a bull, ramped about thrusting his horns here and there, asserting that Benedab would fall before Ahab without resistance. Josaphat asked for further counsel, so Micaiah, a prophet whom Ahab hated and had thrown in prison, was summoned. Micaiah told how he saw in a vision the king surrounded with flatterers who advised him to go into the field against Benedab when the time was not right. He next saw the people of Israel scattered about the hills like sheep without a keeper. Then a voice said: "Go home to your house again until I have ordained better for you." When Micaiah finished, Sedechie rose in anger and struck him on the cheek, and the king had him cast again into prison. So Ahab ignored the truth and went into the field where Benedab killed him and dispersed his people. A king does well to love those who speak true, for flattery is worth nothing. (Ed. *Confessio Amantis* 382-83)

Peck's summary reveals where some points are left unclear. Whether reading Gower's poem or the biblical original, audiences are not given clear reasons why the visiting Josaphat does not trust the initial group of prophets, and we are never told why the two kings, who have made an effort to procure extra prophetic counsel, ultimately do not take Micaiah's advice to avoid battle or face certain loss.

The details of Peck's summary are revelatory here because they reflect a significant elision that more than one scholar has made—and at the very point in the narrative that is perhaps most crucial for understanding it. The key vision described, that of counselors surrounding a throne, is, in Gower's original, not a vision of Ahab at all, but of God; Micaiah is miraculously permitted to overhear the negotiations taking place in the heavenly court. This point is admittedly minor, certainly in the scope of a scholar's work glossing Gower's entire tome, but Peck's casual merging of royal and secular throne rooms seems symptomatic. Other readers might easily do so as well. Thematically this seems to be something Gower encourages in the work. English kings should take the King of Kings as their primary model for proper behavior.

In Gower's text, as we see also in the Vulgate, Micaiah stands before God's throne and sees a full heavenly court. Gower's Micaiah

explains to Ahab what he sees in the negotiations and its implications for Ahab's possible campaign:

I was tofor the throne on hih,  
Wher al the world me thoghte stod,  
And there I herde and understod  
The vois of god with wordes cliere  
Axende, and seide in this manere:  
“In what thing mai I best beguile  
The king Achab?” And for a while  
Upon this point thei spieken faste.  
Tho seide a spirit ate laste,  
“I undertake this emprise.”  
And god him axeth in what wise.  
“I schal,” quod he, “deceive and lye  
With flaterende prophecie  
In suche mouthes as he lieveth.”  
And he which alle thing achieveth  
Bad him go forth and don riht so. (7.2640-55, ed. Macaulay)

This is the God of the Hebrew scriptures that moral Gower—indeed any poet reproducing the Bible—might have difficulty explaining. This God occasionally needs advice in tough situations; he wants Ahab to be killed in the upcoming battle, but wonders by what method he can best convince him to join the fight. The Vulgate's 1 Kings 22.20 presents the dilemma succinctly: “et ait Dominus quis decipiet Ahab regem Israhel ut ascendat et cadat in Ramoth Galaad et dixit unus verba huiuscemodi et alius aliter” ‘And the Lord said, “Who will deceive Ahab, king of Israel, so that he may go up and fall at Ramoth Galaad?” And one spoke words of this manner, and another of that manner.’ After the spirits murmur together for a while, with no one offering a suggestion, one spirit finally comes forward and provides good advice that leads to a resolution: “I will go down and deceive the flattering prophets and tell them that God says they will have victory in battle.” The Vulgate also makes clear in verse 23 that a lying spirit, by God's direction, has been put in the mouth of the other prophets: “nunc igitur ecce dedit Dominus spiritum mendacii in ore omnium prophetarum tuorum qui hic sunt et Dominus locutus est contra te malum” ‘Now, therefore, behold the Lord has given a lying spirit in the mouth of all your prophets who are here, and the Lord has

spoken evil against you.' Whether this spirit is part of God's court or simply a visitor, willing to do God's dirty work, is not made clear; the fact that God allows the deceiving spirit to complete his plan, however, is clear.

Micaiah's vision is problematic on multiple levels. It shows God doing questionably moral things for the sake of the end result, all to humble a king who has marked himself earlier as disobedient (though because Ahab is actually killed in the battle, "to humble" is perhaps too euphemistic a phrase for God's lesson). It also shows God's calling for suggestions by his court and using messengers to enact a punishment indirectly, a method that perhaps allows him to distance himself from its messiness. The subsequent battle is messy not merely because of the violence enacted on the disobedient king, but because, as we later learn, many of the king's people are also punished by the defeat even though we have no evidence they engaged in disobedience.

Some might say the tale is not at all morally vexing. In fact for centuries the majority of biblical commentators have made such arguments. Some gloss over the dilemma of an all-knowing God's consulting with counselors, for example, by saying that God knew exactly what to do in this situation but was simply interested in having multiple opinions voiced. In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Frank Gaebelain argues that the presence of a counsel of God "in no way need be construed that they meet to counsel God or to intercede for those on earth" (165). He also argues that "'the lying spirit' is...the personified spirit of prophecy...that works in accordance with the sovereign will of God. That the prophets were under evil influence is true; but their delusive prophecies only fed the king's own self-destructive ends. The Lord used all these conditions to effect his will in the situation" (165). Others argue that because God knew Ahab wanted to be deceived, the flattering prophets deserved any false visions they might have received (as well as the subsequent punishments for themselves and their advisees). Similarly, some theologians have maintained the position that any action God takes is, by definition, good and right. *The Pulpit Commentary* poses God's request for counsel as hardly controversial: "The meaning is that Ahab's death in battle had been decreed in the counsels of God, and that the Divine Wisdom had devised means for accomplishing His purpose" (535).

Still others have suggested that the messenger sent out from God is Satanic in nature, and therefore this loosed demonic tool is free to act according to its nature without reflecting negatively on God. As long as

its actions result in the just retribution of Ahab, God can be held responsible only to the extent that he allows evil to exist anywhere in the world. H. Donald M. Spence and Joseph Exell are among those theologians willing to concede that God's sending out a spirit of false prophecy "has presented almost insuperable difficulties," but go on to assure readers that "this difficulty vanishes if we remember that this is anthropomorphic language.... Ahab wished to be guided by false prophets, and the justice of God decreed that he should be guided by them to his ruin. Sin is punished by sin" (535). With similar reminders not to underestimate the poetic nature of Micaiah's vision, many recent biblical scholars argue that what the prophet sees is merely a symbolic representation of activities in the heavenly court, necessarily translated into imagery humans can understand.

The image of God behaving in morally questionable ways in order to pass out necessary punishments and rewards has a precedent elsewhere in the Hebrew scriptures. We are told in Exodus 7.3, for example, that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to bring about the Egyptian plagues as a way of more effectively displaying his power. That seems very reasonable in an historical context in which God has made a series of covenants with the Hebrew people regarding their survival but is perhaps less reasonable if one is a common Egyptian worker who ends up dying (or having a first-born child die) as a result of the plagues. This is a punishment meted out for no fault by the Egyptian commoner, and for questionable fault on the part of the Pharaoh, at least as far as the hardened heart is concerned.

One can invoke a great deal of creative hermeneutics in stories of divine punishment, but it is ultimately very difficult to distinguish God's handling of Ahab from other examples in religious narratives when gods behave like powerful humans, plagued by humanity's emotional foibles. Other studies have addressed more effectively these biblical difficulties, and literary discussions of medieval biblical narratives risk moving too far afield when such broad theological questions are introduced; however, the topic of problematic ethics cannot be avoided when divine rewards and punishments are considered in a work like *Confessio Amantis*, especially in the contemplation of Gower's mere choice to retell the Ahab narrative.

God's membership in a pantheon of deities, one from which he might occasionally seek counsel, is a controversial proposal, but it should not surprise readers who encounter it in the Hebrew scriptures any more than when they find it in other religious texts. As scholar

Robert Wright explains in *The Evolution of God*, the image occurs in a wide range of holy texts, including the Hebrew scriptures (see, for example, Job 1.6; Psalms 82.1; Isaiah 6.1-8). He also argues that such instances reveal the growing pains nomadic, hunter-gatherer cultures typically experienced when they began settling down and establishing themselves as fixed agricultural societies. So although these seemingly out-of-place biblical texts contribute to our understanding of the “scattered, cryptic clues about Yahweh’s origins” (110), examples from other cultures regarding other gods are numerous (86). The general trend Wright observes over time is of cultures centralizing governmental structures under individual leaders; as agricultural chiefdoms emerged, shamans initially played the most important role followed by increasingly powerful rulers who began to surround themselves with a court of advisors. At the same time, and not coincidentally Wright argues, cultures became poised to make similar shifts in how they envisioned their gods (31). In many cases this was when, amidst a full pantheon, a singularly powerful god emerged as leader over the others. According to Wright, the worship of polytheistic courts evolved into monotheistic religions as cultures developed governmental structures that allowed monotheism to make greater sense to the people—as secular and spiritual courts were seen through similar eyes.

By choosing to relate an Old Testament narrative such as that of Ahab, Gower thus inherits one of those texts in which the evolution of a monotheistic God seems to have left its mark. Gower chooses this tale in part as a way of showing that the decisions of a proper ruler, like God, are always justified, even in situations where the method of achieving justice might be questionable; rulers may, and do, employ deception to accomplish ultimately good ends. The tale also reinforces a ruler’s need for advice from the court around him, perhaps finding good answers only in those willing to come forward and speak boldly. For God, that figure is the spirit who steps forward with a creative idea and is willing to execute it for him; for Ahab that figure is Micaiah, another bold, lone speaker; and for the reigning Richard II and Henry IV, it is Gower himself.

In all three of these spheres, the Ahab tale suggests readings in which both parties win in the complex relationship between ruler and advisors (each depends on the other for support), but both also lose (the mere dependence reveals weakness in each). The dependency that the system reproduces is also cyclical: King Ahab provides rewards to



prophets who in turn provide advice to the king. This loop is most problematic as a closed circuit because it quickly lends itself to the kinds of flattery and abuse book 7 highlights. Kings provide rewards so that counselors will tell them exactly what they want to hear, and typically prophets happily oblige. However, multiple kinds of entries from outside the circuit help deter meaningless flatterers. For example, an infallible God may inject himself into the conversation as the source of the prophets' messages, and the messages coming from prophets' mouths may seep out to an audience beyond the king; divine messages of reform were typically meant to reach a whole kingdom. A similar cycle within the heavenly realm is revealed through God's dependence on a court of counselors echoed in contemporary England with Richard II's and Henry IV's dependence on poets like Gower to provide advice for kings. The poets, in turn, depended on support through patronage. External input is also injected into the circuit when outside messages are allowed into God's court. (The presence of lying spirits is one example.) Consequently, the same solution to flattering counselors also introduces a subversion of the king's power. God himself may provide a prophetic message that is false; God may require advice himself; Gower may provide messages that are both supportive and subversive of his king; and a message warning the king of improper behavior may have huge ramifications for the general public who, despite anticipating danger themselves, may be required by the king to carry out his orders—and their own demise.

Ahab's tale thus allows three concurrent narratives to emerge: that of Ahab interacting with his court of prophets, God interacting with his court of spirits, and Britain's own ruler (initially Richard II and later Henry IV, both patrons of the arts) interacting with court poets. In all three of these, individuals are subject to punishments and rewards from rulers while simultaneously maintaining various forms of influence over the individuals they serve. The existence of the divine court challenges the validity of the justice of the outside influences: God and God's spokespersons. Similarly, the royal patron can support or punish a court poet but also depends on that court poet who has a wider audience and who speaks for an authority perhaps greater than himself.

However, while defending the king's power, this narrative also allows Gower to remind his royal patron that the role of the prophet/poet ultimately supersedes other voices. The prophet/poet is able to provide advice when no one else can, and when multiple, conflicting messages from God are in circulation, only the best advisor

is able to rank their value. The most skilled advisor may not even be able to determine their veracity because God allows both truthful and lying messages to be sent. We see in these lead prophet/poet figures that each has his own, broader audience that extends beyond the king. He is in a mediating scribal position; in the language of Carolyn Dinshaw we see that his pen-wielding power allows him to write messages for the king and the people, yet he is also always written upon by God, the source of the message. This is an aspect of Gower's career about which he seems to want to remind his royal patron and larger public audience; he is providing the king with advice for good ruling, and this information comes from God. The narrative even has a built-in level of protection for Gower—he is truly an authority for the king, but if for any reason his advice proves false or not useful, one is reminded that God himself might choose to deceive his spokespersons—the prophet/poet may not be the one to blame. As we see in Zedekiah, a prophet, spirit, or poet may be both right and wrong at the same time.

The narrative in 1 Kings might have appealed to Gower initially because of one aspect of the depiction of the poetic voice, Micaiah's subtle defiance. Micaiah does not merely stand up to Ahab, revealed ultimately to have been right, he employs a kind of sarcastic glee:

And he therto anon ansuerde,  
And seide unto him in this wise:  
“Mi liege lord, for mi servise,  
Which trewe hath stonden evere yit,  
Thou hast me with prisone aquit;  
Bot for al that I schal noght glose  
Of trouthe als fer as I suppose;  
And as touchende of this bataille,  
Thou schalt noght of the sothe faile.  
For if it like thee to hierre,  
As I am tauht in that matiere,  
Thou miht it understonde sone.” (7.2626-37)

Gower's interest in the overlapping messages of the Ahab tale are also reinforced by the changes he makes to the original. Most importantly, he reverses the order of Micaiah's two visions and describes the vision of God's court first, downplaying the second almost completely, as 1 Kings 22.17 reveals: “et ille ait vidi cunctum

Israhel dispersum in montibus quasi oves non habentes pastorem et ait Dominus non habent dominum isti revertatur unusquisque in domum suam in pace” ‘And he [Micaiah] said, “I saw all Israel scattered on the mountains, like sheep that have no shepherd”; and the Lord said, “These have no master; let each one go home in peace.’ Second, he casts the tale in terms of medieval patronage by showing Ahab giving gifts out to his court members—something not made clear in the Old Testament source. As Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman argue, patronage is a topic that arises in the discussions of almost any extent medieval work: “[One cannot] isolate cultural patronage from the larger system of patron-client relations that organized social, political, and economic relations at every level of medieval society.... [V]irtually all goods and services—whether manuscripts, or political offices—circulated more or less interchangeably within an amorphous and informal system of patronage” (479-80). They also remind us that this intimacy inevitably had overtones of a literary romance: “[Patron-client bonds] were often structured as private erotic relationships with love as a medium for the distribution, exchange, and circulation of wealth” (480).

A third change Gower makes is to describe Zedekiah’s stomping around like a lion:

He hath upon his heved on heyhte  
Tuo large hornes set of bras,  
As he which al a flatour was,  
And goth rampende as a leoun. (7.2568-70)

This switch to a leonine reference serves as a clear reminder to us that the tale is about bad kingly behavior. The biblical original does not refer to any specific animal being mimicked by Zedekiah, but he is traditionally represented as a bull because of the horns on his head. Doubtless this is why Russell Peck also adds it to his summary of the tale, although it is not in Gower. The actions of a bad prophet are likened to a lion’s making a ridiculous display. However, even this scene takes on a different tone after one understands at the end of the tale that Zedekiah’s message has also come from God. Any surface-level interpretation of the tale’s being about good prophets and bad prophets (or good-advice-giving poets and bad-advice-giving poets) hardly holds up once we learn that both kinds have been sent supernatural messages from God.

Finally, a subtle change Gower makes is to drop any reference to the eunuch guard sent out to bring Micaiah out of prison. One can see in the Vulgate verse 9 that this is a standard way Jerome translates “officers” in the Old Testament: “vocavit ergo rex Israhel eunuchum quendam et dixit ei festina adducere Micheam filium Hiemla” ‘Then the king of Israel summoned a eunuch and said to him, “Make haste and bring Micaiah, son of Imlah.”’ The term connotes someone in-between—standing between genders, serving as mediator between the worlds of the ruler and commoner. But by simply ignoring this figure altogether (Gower instead has a group of nondescript soldiers retrieve Micaiah from prison), he is able to keep his audience’s attention on the one key mediating figure in which he is most interested: the prophet/poet who is both a servant under the king and authoritative voice in his own right.

Gower’s inclusion of the tale of Ahab and Micaiah is ultimately subversive on many levels. While it supports both the king’s power to act as he chooses and the prophet/poet’s role to advise during difficult times, it cannot help but challenge power on both fronts. The justice of the king’s punishments and rewards is fundamentally questioned. The king is trumped by someone wiser than himself, and the advisor figures are ultimately informed by a source higher than themselves. The voice of the advisor, the final voice of authority, does come out slightly ahead in the narrative in terms of interpretive power, and through the safety of its being a biblical retelling, Gower is able to include the tale without looking subversive. However, when the ultimate source of knowledge, justice, and goodness is revealed as being able to tell both truth and lies to his followers, the playfulness of interpretation is made apparent. An audience is made aware in yet another way of the game of language, while being reminded, through the lens of reward and punishment, that kingly power brings very serious consequences to the game. Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* provides public support of Richard and Henry as a way of helping to ensure patronage from the throne, but at the same time it has the power to reach a wide audience with a message that questions the dangerous aspects of policies from the throne.

*Xavier University*

Works Cited

- Finke, Laurie A., and Martin B. Shichtman. "Magical Mistress Tour: Patronage, Intellectual Property, and the Dissemination of Wealth in the *Lais* of Marie de France." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 25.2 (2000): 479-503.
- Gaebelein, Frank E., ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988.
- Gower, John. *The Complete Works of John Gower*. Ed. G. C. Macaulay. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon, 1899-1902.
- Metzger, Bruce M., and Roland E. Murphy, eds. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Peck, Russell A., ed. *Confessio Amantis*. By John Gower. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997.
- Spence, H. Donald M., and Joseph S. Exell, eds. *The Pulpit Commentary*. Vol. 5. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.
- Watt, Diane. *Amoral Gower: Language, Sex, and Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003.
- Wright, Robert. *The Evolution of God*. New York: Little, Brown, 2010.