THE DISORDER OF OPERATIONS:
ILLUMINATORS, Scribes, AND JOHN GOWER’S
CONFESSIO AMANTIS

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Abstract
This article proposes a new model for examining illuminated manuscripts of Middle English literature. While the standard operating procedure for manuscript production involved the inscription or copying of text prior to illumination, the reality was at times messier. I examine a number of episodes in illuminated manuscripts of Middle English verse by John Gower which illustrate indecision and hesitation on the part of both scribes and illuminators. Not only did both change their minds in the middle of their work, but there is ample codicological evidence of scribes who revised texts in anticipation of the images that would be provided and illuminators pressed into the service of accommodating altered plans. This argument complicates the unidirectional model of visual translation, whereby scribes write out text to which illuminators respond. Instead, manuscripts leave traces of the overdetermined acts behind their production by multiple individuals as well as the circuits of interaction that run contrary to the mechanical order of operations in manuscript production.

Key words: manuscripts, illumination, John Gower, Confessio Amantis, Middle English, scribe, illuminator.

A copy of John Gower’s Confessio Amantis now in Cambridge University Library features an anomaly that is entirely typical for a manuscript of Middle English poetry: a vacant rectangle of space between verses, waiting perpetually for an image to fill its imaginary frame (fig. 1).1 Someone, possibly the main scribe, has even written helpfully, ‘hic imago’ to indicate what should be here – once an instruction or aide mémoire, but now something of a poetic label for what it lacks.2 Such windows into the text, as Phillipa Hardman has called them,

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1 Cambridge, University Library MS Dd 8.19, fol. 8v.
2 On such instructions, see K.L. Scott, ‘Limning and Book-Producing Terms and Signs in Situ in Late-Medieval English Manuscripts: A First Listing’, in R. Beadle and A.J. Piper, eds,
Fig. 1. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*
Cambridge, University Library MS Dd 8.19, fol. 8v, detail
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have long attracted speculation, leading scholars to surmise a range of reasons for their vacancy, including the ‘death of the commissioning patron, the patron’s running out of money … a failed speculative venture’ or ‘the difficulty of obtaining suitable models for the artist to follow’. Any one of these explanations would be appropriate for this copy of the _Confessio Amantis_, and their suitability would even seem to be affirmed by the rows of verse above and below this ‘window’: neat and complete, they show the scribe to have executed his job with dexterity and care. Only the availability of a model and finances were required for the illuminator to fulfil his brief.

Yet such explanations rely on a consistent and predictable order of operations, as well as the assumption of a division of labour: word first, image later; scribe as one individual, illuminator as another. Michael Camille summarises this position and frames it within a hostile relationship of difference between media:

Such antagonism or ‘difference’ between text and image is due to important changes in manuscript production. Whereas in the previous [i.e., twelfth] century the text-writer and artist of a book were often one and the same, increasingly the two activities were practised by different individuals and groups. The illuminator usually followed the scribe, a procedure that framed his labour as secondary to, but also gave him a chance of undermining, the always already written word.

But this tidy sequence of events does not always follow, and the relationship between word and image is not always so straightforward, as a broader view of this page from the _Confessio_ manuscript illustrates (fig. 2). Rupturing the neat, letter-filled tracts of verse in the adjacent column is another cleft in the parchment, this time one intended for text, much narrower but no less yawning in its vacancy than the pictureless lacuna to the right. There, a picture is missing; but here, a verse is absent. Is it possible that the verse intended to fill this blank line awaited a picture to inform its composition? This question is not one that I intend or have the ability to answer; rather I ask it as a provocation.


In 1990, Stephen Nichols published a defining statement for a new era of bibliographical inquiry in the field of manuscript studies. In the introduction to a special issue of *Speculum* devoted to the ‘New Philology’, he characterised the ‘old philology’ as a practice that ‘sought a fixed text as transparent as possible, one that would provide the vehicle for scholarly endeavour but, once the work of editing accomplished, not the focus of inquiry’. If this characterisation sounds familiar to historians of print it is because the same impulse guided bibliographers of the Greg and Bowers schools of thought, which applied rigorous standards to the analysis of physical evidence in order to arrive at knowledge about how a text came to be produced; interpretations of a text’s meaning or significance ‘would be suspect if they contradicted any facts that could be established through examination of the material objects carrying the texts’. To this older brand of philology, Nichols opposed a new scholarly enterprise that worried far

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less about authorial intention or the recovery of an ideal text. Instead, this programme demanded attention to the ‘radical contingencies’ of the manuscript matrix as well as respect for the integrity of each book as a unique artefact with its own expressive forms, visual features, and histories of reception. In the quarter century since this announcement of New Philology’s arrival, scholars have followed its protocols with gusto, and the manuscript (or ‘material text’) has moved to the centre of textual studies, bringing the pictorial and visual features of the book along with it.

Even so, this openness to the idiosyncrasies of the singular manuscript page has not entirely dismantled the hierarchy between text and image that the antipictorialist tradition of the eighteenth century made all but academic orthodoxy. Nichols himself – a champion of the intellectual value of both the pictorial and decorative components of a manuscript – chastises scholars who have ‘seriously neglected the important supplements that were part and parcel of medieval text production: visual images and annotation of various forms (rubrics, “captions,” glosses, and interpolations)’. While allowing that images are ‘important’, they are still treated here as ‘supplements’, a classification that enshrines their subordination and reinscribes the ‘textist valuation of art [which] would have images follow, not lead’. This attitude would seem to resonate with Gregory the Great’s oft-cited description of pictures as the books of the illiterate. But, as Aden Kumler’s more recent, revisionist account goes, the Gregorian dictum was not so much a concession to the necessary supplementarity of the picture as an endorsement for its communicative competence. She writes:

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The very analogy employed by the Gregorian dictum, however, opened up a new horizon of possibility for the power of images in the medieval context, claiming in a deeply ambiguous fashion that images could take the place of books for the illiterate. Some scholars have seen this as a definitive denigration, a defence of the image that damns it with faint praise, relegating it to the provincial and provisional sidelines of logocentric Christian culture. To compare an image with a book, however, is to grant to the image the considerable authority associated with text and with codices, in particular, within this religion of the book.12

And, indeed, Kumler goes on in her erudite study to examine in depth the ways in which medieval images arrogated to themselves the privilege of translating truth itself, and not simply word. While my purpose here is not to craft an apologia for the intellectual verve of pictorial media, it is nevertheless an important reminder that Ernst Robert Curtius’s pronouncement that ‘knowing pictures is easy compared to knowing books’ is a typically modern dismissal of visual media. It was certainly not an officially sanctioned position held uniformly by pre-moderns.13 Sympathetic to this pre-modern attitude, scholars who share Nichols’s sympathy for pictures and ornament have laboured to recuperate the role of the visual within bibliographical inquiry through theories of translation – often termed ‘visual translation’ and defined as ‘the creation of manuscript images to picture and interpret verbal texts’.14 The premise of visual translation is not only logical, but it has also produced invigorating studies in the area of literary manuscripts, studies which address the many ways in which images do indeed reflect and inflect the texts they accompany between the covers of a book.15

Yet because translation is itself a concept that requires a particular order – and in this case moves from word to image – its bibliographical utility is not universal. Taking the page of the *Confessio Amantis* with which I opened as an emblem of a broader phenomenon, my purpose in this essay is to offer an alternative to visual translation as a guiding impulse and programmatic method in the study of literary manuscripts. This alternative is not intended to supplant a valuable methodology. Rather, it offers another technique for achieving insights into manuscript production by instating expectation as a method that drove manuscript producers’ decisions. Acknowledging that the operations by which a manuscript came to be were sometimes more disorderly than we have assumed encourages bibliographical inquiry to consider new possibilities for the production of meaning. Specifically, foreknowledge of an image that was to be supplied or provision for a decorative scheme that would only later be painted tested the scribe’s professional decorum and impelled him to act with editorial and even authorial license. The mechanics of practice are not as formative as interpersonal expectation, or even an individual’s anticipation of what he himself might accomplish over the course of staggered production.

**The Evasive Text and the Elusive Author**

The *Confessio Amantis*, believed to have been completed c.1393, is not only a monument of Middle English poetry but is also an ideal candidate for exercising the commitments of a critical bibliography that eschews a dependence on bibliographical norms. In brief, the 33,000-line poem is a compilation of over 140 narrative exempla offered up as sources of wisdom and entertainment to King Richard II (d.1399) and, in another version, to Henry Bolingbroke, eventual

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16 Stephen Partridge also notes that ‘scribes and others responsible for finishing a book did not always work in sequence through a given work…nor should we assume that a scribe had to complete the copying of his text before he began to finish his manuscript. Without impairing his efficiency, a scribe might finish a quire or set of quires after he copied the text, and then continue with writing and finishing another portion of the book’. S. Partridge, ‘Designing the Page’. in A. Gillespie and D. Wakelin, eds, *The Production of Books in England 1350-1500*, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 79-103 (85-88).

Henry IV (d.1413). The poem also features an extensive Latin apparatus comprising four main elements: sixty-eight elegiac verses usually of four to six lines, at the head of major sections; prose commentaries before or alongside each tale; glosses and character markers for dialogues between the poem’s two central figures; and an extended colophon at the end. Moreover, the poem survives in forty-nine complete or near-complete manuscript witnesses; twenty copies contain both decorative and figural illumination; and not only are there three different main versions of the text with countless minor variations between, but, in addition, the disposition of the Latin and Middle English on the page varies widely across these versions. Derek Pearsall has argued for an incipient attempt at standardisation across these copies, and a casual glance at the manuscript


19 Despite early questions regarding the authorship of the gloss, the consensus is that they were written by Gower. For a full list of sources that have made the case for Gower’s authorship of the Latin see: S. Echard, ‘With Carmen’s Help: Latin Authorities in the *Confessio Amantis*’, *Studies in Philology*, vol. 95, 1998, pp. 1-40 (4-5, n. 8).


corpus confirms this characterisation. Closer examination, however, disrupts this sense of stability. Everything about the Confessio Amantis, in this respect, is grist to the critical bibliographer’s mill.

Compounding the complexity of the poem’s material survival is the text’s metaphorical assassination of its own author and, in turn, his agency over his own poem. Before the 140 exempla are related, the Confessio opens with two prologues that function together as a frame narrative justifying the compilation of so many stories: the first is an external prologue that describes the circumstances of the poem’s genesis and its intention to restore order to the decadent and divisive world that was prophesied in the Old Testament by Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of the metallic statue. The second is an internal prologue that occupies the first 202 lines of Book One. In this second prologue, the narrator scales back his ambitions. He concedes that it is not within his power to set the world at harmony, and so he will speak instead of love, a harmonizing force among individuals. At this point, the author/narrator is met by both Cupid and Venus, the former striking him with his arrow, and the latter accosting him with the demand that he identify himself. These verses are at the epicentre of the analysis to follow, and so they are important to quote in full:

And eft scheo asketh, what was I:
I seide, A caitif that lith hiere:
What wolde ye, my ladi diere?
Schal I ben hol or elles dye? (l. 160-163)

The once recognisable figure of the author has crumbled to the ground and died. Resurrected in his place is someone who can’t even identify himself, admitting only that he is a wretch or captive (‘caitif’), laid out on his back. It is at this stage that the eponymous confession of the lover begins. From this point forward

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22 Derek Pearsall describes this standard as follows: ‘There is a type of manuscript of the Confessio which is so frequently found among the surviving copies that it can almost be characterised as ‘standard’. Such a manuscript was copied during the first quarter of the fifteenth century, or just before, by a good professional London scribe. It consists of about 180-200 folio-size parchment leaves of good quality, in quires of eight with catchwords, and the text is sparsely written, almost always by one scribe only, in double columns, with forty-six lines per column. The manuscript has two miniatures and the decoration is organised according to a regular hierarchy, with vinets (full floreate borders) or demi-vinets (two- or three-sided borders), decorated initials (champs) of different sizes, pen-flourished colored initials, and decorated or undecorated paraphs, used to mark out different elements in that hierarchy and to indicate the divisions of the text for the reader’. D. Pearsall, ‘The Manuscripts and Illustrations of Gower’s Works’, in S. Echard, ed, A Companion to Gower, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 73-97 (80).

23 Daniel 2:19-45.
the narrator assumes the role of a lover (Amans), making his confession to Genius (Confessor), the priest of Venus. And this moment is accompanied by a miniature in fourteen medieval copies of the poem. The second prologue sets the agenda for the rest of the work, divided into seven books organised according to each of the Deadly Sins. These books contain numerous stories told by the Confessor to Amans as exempla in order to teach the latter the proper ways of love and, by extension, provide moral counsel to the poem’s successive royal dedicatees.

These prologues complicate the identity of the work’s author in a number of ways that parallel the complexities of the prefatory miniatures that accompany numerous copies of the poem. Moreover, the coincidence between the figurai
tive death of the author and his absence from the site of production has generated some commentary by scholars that is of interest to bibliographical inquiry. While Gower’s first modern editor assumed that the poet maintained a scriptorium that turned out copies of his works, the publication of a landmark study by A.I. Doyle and Malcolm Parkes revealed that a far more haphazard, commercial strain of scribal labour was responsible for producing these manuscripts. Scholarship in

24 Nineteen of the surviving forty-nine copies of the Confessio Amantis contain prefatory miniatures for the poem, whether an image of the confession (which appears in fourteen manuscripts) or Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (which appears in sixteen manuscripts) or both. And one manuscript (Oxford, New College MS 266) contains an illustrative cycle without prefatory miniatures. The manuscripts with prefatory miniatures are: Cambridge University, Pembroke College MS 307; Cambridge University, St. Catharine’s College MS 7; Cambridge, University Library MS Mm.2.21; London, British Library, Egerton MS 1991; London, British Library, Harley MS 3869; London, British Library, Royal MS 18.C. xxii; New York, Columbia University, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Plimpton MS 265; New York, Morgan Library & Museum MS M.125; New York, Morgan Library & Museum MS M.126; New York, Morgan Library & Museum MS M.690; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 294; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 693; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 902; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 3; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc. 609; Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 67; Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum & Library MS 1083/29; Princeton University, Firestone Library MS Taylor 5; San Marino, Huntington Library MS EL 26 A 17. A further seven have blanks where miniatures were to have been painted: Private Collection (formerly Mount Stuart, Rothesay, Marquess of Bute, MS I.17); London, British Library, Egerton MS 913; Cambridge, St. John’s College MS B12; Nottingham, University Library, Middleton Collection MS Mi LM 8; Geneva, Bodmer Library MS 178; London, Society of Antiquaries MS 134; Cambridge, University Library MS Dd.8.19. One manuscript had a miniature, presumably (based on placement) of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, which was cut out: London, British Library Add. MS 22139; and the leaves where the miniatures of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and Amans’s confession would have appeared have been cut out of Oxford, Christ Church MS 148.

the forty years since has not only confirmed this view but has also failed to turn up evidence for authorial supervision over the surviving Confessio manuscripts, few of which seem to pre-date Gower’s death in 1408. In short, the disappearance of the author from the poem that he initiates in the first-person, autographic mode thematises the absence of the author from the site of textual production, a condition common to literary production and dissemination in fifteenth-century England.

While scholars have been silent about the window into the text with which I opened this essay, they have produced an abundance of commentary on the verses it accompanies – at least, as they appear in modern printed editions of the poem. These, the verses which I quoted above, track the author’s amnesia of himself and his figurative death as he metamorphoses into the figure of a man.

To reiterate, Venus demands that the narrator identify himself, and instead he equivocates, referring to himself only as a ‘caitif’ (wretch or captive). This equivocation is abetted by a gloss that appears in most manuscripts, roughly one hundred lines before this event occurs: ‘Hic quasi in persona aliorum, quos amor alligat, fingens se auctor esse Amantem, varias eorum passiones variis huius libri distinctionibus per singula scribere proponit’ [Here the author, fashioning himself to be the Lover as if in the role of those others whom love binds, proposes to write about their various passions one by one in the various sections of this book]. Interrupting the unremarkable language of first-person narration, a commentator punctures the narrative scrim to tell the audience that, now, the author is (or at least fashions himself to be) one of the characters in the fiction to ensue. Combined, this Latin gloss and the Middle English verses that follow

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26 Debates about Gower’s participation in the creation of manuscripts of his works do continue. For a recent consideration, see P. Nicholson, ‘Gower’s Manuscript of the “Confessio Amantis”’, in R.F. Yeager and T. Takamiya, eds, The Medieval Python: The Purposive and Provocative Work of Terry Jones, New York, 2012, pp. 75-86. Currently, the only manuscripts that have been associated with Gower’s hand and ownership are the Trentham Manuscript (British Library, Add MS 59495), containing a collection of Gower’s texts in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and English, but not the Confessio Amantis; and British Library, Cotton MS Tiberius A iv, which contains his Vox clamantis and other Latin poems. For the most recent discussion of these issues, see S. Sobbecki, ‘Ecce patet tensus: The Trentham Manuscript, In Praise of Peace, and John Gower’s Autograph Hand’, Speculum, vol. 90, 2015, pp. 925-959.

27 See A.C. Spearing, Medieval Autographies: The “I” of the Text, Notre Dame, IN, 2012. Spearing defines autography as, ‘the first-person writing in which there is no implied assertion that the first person either does or does not correspond to a real-life individual’ (ibid, 7).


29 Alastair Minnis has been particularly engaged in the complications of these verses and the accompanying gloss. See A.J. Minnis, ‘Authors in Love: The Exegesis of Late-Medieval
have galvanized such debate because they are at once frank and coy about their metafictional qualities, deploying two languages to confound the author’s identity. They cause readers to ask themselves, ‘Exactly whose confession is this?’ What I will be arguing here is that the crisis of authorial identity staged in this passage is not only a crisis for manuscript readers and modern scholars. The people who were involved in the actual production of the *Confessio Amantis* — meaning, illuminators and scribes — were the first people to be flummoxed by this metafictional device. Is the lover the old man we encounter at the beginning of the poem? Is he just the blushing youth that comes to mind when one hears the word ‘Amans’? Or is he in fact the historical John Gower? These queries were not a simple matter of arcane speculation but, far more importantly, they exerted pressure on manuscript producers’ professional obligations.

**Expectation**

When it came time to produce a miniature adjoining this passage, illuminators were recruited into the poem’s essential hermeneutic challenge. In one such miniature, the illustrator has accessorized the confessing Amans with a collar of esses (fig. 3). Because Gower received the Lancastrian livery collar of esses from Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) sometime in the 1390s, it seems reasonable to suggest that this accessory is a gesture towards consolidating the identities of the lover and the historical author.\(^{30}\) In several other miniatures, "There were not a simple matter of arcane speculation but, far more importantly, they exerted pressure on manuscript producers’ professional obligations."

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\(^{30}\) The wardrobe accounts of Henry, Earl of Derby (later Henry IV) list, c. 1393, the gift of a collar of SS to be given to ‘un Esquier John Gower’ (Fisher, *John Gower*, p. 68; pp. 341-342 n.5). This collar seems to have originated with the Lancastrians, although the precise meaning of the ‘SS’ has yet to be determined. See D. Fletcher, ‘The Lancastrian Collar of Esses: Its Origins and Transformations Down the Centuries,’ in J.L. Gillespie, ed., *The Age of Richard II*, New York, 1997, 191-204; and N. Morgan, ‘An SS Collar in the Devotional Context of the Shield of the Five Wounds’, in J. Stratford, ed, *The Lancastrian Court: Proceedings of the 2001 Harlaxton Symposium*, Donington, 2003, pp. 147-162. Macaulay noted the SS collar on Fairfax the miniature, remarking that it has ‘somewhat the appearance of having been added after the original painting was made’ (*Complete Works*, clvii). It was difficult to corroborate this from my examination of the manuscript, but given the heavy emendation of the manuscript throughout, it is certainly possible.
Fig. 3. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*
Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Fairfax 3, fol. 8r
By kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries

Fig. 4. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*
Cambridge, Pembroke College MS 307, fol. 9r
By permission of the Master and Fellows of Pembroke College, Cambridge
the illuminator has aged the lover with hoary hair and beard, something of a compromise that conflates the opening narrator’s elderly persona with that of the kneeling lover (fig. 4). As one might imagine, these miniatures have motivated commentary that musters evidence of illuminators’ confusion or inattentiveness to the poem’s conceit, a typical response that is symptomatic of longstanding biases against the alleged intellectual poverty and illiteracy of illuminators who were ‘simply not educated enough to impose interpretation on the texts they illuminated’. Leaving aside illuminators’ responses to these verses, I want to examine here how scribes engaged with the verses to which these images were linked.

What has passed without comment is the difficulty that the author’s moment of oblivion produced for scribes. In addition to my opening example, a further eight manuscripts of the Confessio Amantis divulge scribal discomfort with the identity of the poem’s protagonist/author: and since there are 49 manuscripts of the Confessio Amantis, that number amounts to almost one-fifth of all medieval witnesses of the poem. Returning to the image with which I opened, what the scribe left blank was a critical verse. When Venus demands that the narrator identify himself in the lines that I cited above, the scribe of this manuscript did not write out the author-narrator’s evasive response, ‘a caitif that lith hiere’ (I.161). Nor did the scribe match the author’s own evasion and simply gloss over the line. Instead, the scribe left a blank, a suggestion that he either intended to return to it at some point or that he hoped a reader would supply the second line of the couplet. Perhaps this blank is merely the result of eyeskip, since the verse ‘What wold ye with me my lady diere’ comes first. But perhaps the scribe felt that this was a perfect opportunity to give the lover or his alter ego John Gower a name, and that something so equivocating would not do. Likewise, the scribe of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Arch Selden B 11 left a wordless lacuna


33 In a note on this line, Macaulay records its variations and omissions in eight manuscripts. See Macaulay, English Works, I, 40.
in his wake for the same verse, also in the wrong order, where ‘what wold ye with me my lady dere’ precedes the missing verse (fig. 5). It is possible that this manuscript merely follows its exemplar, and the scribe felt no need to compensate for this lack or correct it; this copy is, after all, on paper, a medium that doesn’t allow erasure. But unlike his counterpart in the Cambridge University Library manuscript, this scribe left behind an index of his momentary indecision about this wordless space: at the beginning of the blank line, the scribe appears to have made a hesitant stroke with his pen but had second thoughts and let the gap remain. Daniel Wakelin has written a compelling study of gaps like this one and remarked that, ‘[g]iven the effort needed to let the pen jump forward, not writing thus looks like a conscious choice. As such, the gaps raise a larger question about how far scribes exercised agency in their work, and about the forms that agency might take in concentration, attention, precision, improvisation,

34 No comprehensive description of the Confessio manuscripts has been written since Macaulay’s 1901 edition, although one is in progress by the John Gower Society. See <<http://www.wcu.edu/johngower/scholarship/PearsallMS/index.html >> John Fisher produced a stemma that requires updating, but he does locate Arch Selden B 11 and Cambridge University Library MS Dd 8.19 close to one another. See Fisher, John Gower, Appendix A (pp. 303-309).
intellection, invention’.\textsuperscript{35} He later goes on to argue that ‘the intention in not writing is not to disrupt the text nor to rewrite it but to preserve it better without rewriting’.\textsuperscript{36} Examined independently, these two manuscripts with blanks would seem to substantiate Wakelin’s case; yet when examined as part of a corpus of manuscripts with different revisions of this same line, the gaps in the page present a compelling case for the interpretative capacity of the individuals who left them behind. Perhaps the scribes in both of these instances felt that the unwritten verse offered a perfect opportunity to give the lover or his alter ego John Gower a name, and that something so equivocating as a ‘a caitif that lith hiere’ was inappropriate. Perhaps the scribes had multiple exemplars with conflicting verses and left a blank line rather as a sign of their reluctance to choose among them.

The gap left by the scribe in Arch Selden B 11 is an important exception that proves the rule I aim to devise here: of the nine manuscripts that betray scribes’ uneasiness with the narrator’s cagey response, it is the only one that lacks an illustration of the confession or a space for it. In other words, it seems hardly a coincidence that every single revision of this verse but one co-occurs with pictorial representations of the lover’s confession. In two manuscripts, the scribes were determined enough that author and protagonist are one and the same to replace ‘a caitif that lith here’ with ‘Ma dame I sayde John Gowere’.\textsuperscript{37} In both of these manuscripts, this revised verse abuts the image of the youth kneeling at the feet of his confessor (figs. 6 and 7). The scribe of British Library, Royal MS 18 C xxii simply omitted the line, maybe inadvertently; but then again, in this manuscript, the image of the lover’s confession is placed in a large historiated initial on the first folio of the poem, over one thousand lines or eight folios before the actual confession occurs. This location is typically where an image of the author is found.\textsuperscript{38} To me, the accommodation for a confession scene in


\textsuperscript{36} Wakelin, ‘When Scribes’, p. 252.

\textsuperscript{37} British Library Egerton MS 1991, fol. 7r; Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 294, fol. 8r. Macaulay notes similarities between the texts in the two manuscripts (\textit{English Works}, I, cxlvii and clv), but they are the only two that alter the line in this way.

Fig. 6. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*
London, British Library Egerton MS 1991, fol. 7v
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Fig. 7. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*
Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 294, fols. 8v-9r
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an initial at the beginning of the poem indicates that the scribe was at least somewhat invested in introducing the text with the face of the person responsible for it; it is one of only three manuscripts of the *Confessio Amantis* that open with a historiated initial, and while the scribe and the illuminator may have been different individuals, it was nevertheless the scribe’s decision to leave sufficient space in the initial ‘O’ to house a figural image. In other words, having already thought about the possibility that an authorial image might initiate the poem, the scribe of the Royal manuscript may have had second thoughts about the author-narrator’s response to Venus’s interrogation. Rather than acquiesce to its troubling equivocation, the scribe simply glossed over it. The scribe of Bodley 693 reacted similarly to the verse, and the interruption to the rhyme scheme that this omission causes is visible directly across from the adjacent image of the confession (fig. 8).

Other scribes ease this contentious moment by completing the couplet with commentary on the narrator’s countenance. Across the page from the image of the confession in Laud Misc. 609, the amnesiac narrator’s response to Venus provides the necessary second verse for the couplet, but it evades her demand for his identification, reading, ‘And I answered wiþ ful myld chere / what wolde 3e wiþ me my lady dere’ (fig. 9). This revision also appears across from the miniature in Morgan MS M.126, a much later copy of the poem. Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 67 also completes the couplet, although it endows the narrator with greater solemnity: ‘And I answerde wiþ drery chiere’, on the recto, while the verso of the same leaf shows the scene of the lover’s confession. In the case of these verses, the scribes have deployed a canny tactic for hedging their bets. On the one hand, they refuse to cooperate in the narrator’s occlusion of himself; but on the other hand, they direct the reader’s attention to the very face that is being occluded. While the transmission from exemplar to copy could certainly explain why some of these examples exist in duplicate, mere scribal error cannot account for the variety of differences across all of the examples I have discussed.


39 The others are Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library MS 1083/29, fol. 1’; and Princeton University Library MS Taylor 5, fol. 1’.

40 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 294, for example, opens with a decorated initial, which is nearly as tall as the historiated initial in the Royal copy, but which is substantially narrower.
Fig. 9. John Gower, Confessio Amantis
Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Laud Misc 609, fols. 9v-10r
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So, how do these examples coax us to produce an alternative to a model of practice that has become institutionalized in manuscript studies? Conventionally, images are provided after the text has been copied. The expectation that images might have a formative impact on the words that preceded them would seem to be an absurd anachronism. And yet this ostensible anachronism is precisely what I am advocating. As I mentioned above, all but one of these examples of scribal revision coincide with pictorial representation. And I think we can assume that when the scribe revised or left a blank for the verse in question, the image was not even on the page. But the scribe knew that such an image would appear or be expected to appear because he was the individual responsible for furnishing the space on the page that would later be filled with an image. Perhaps he was even copying his text from an exemplar that did in fact have a representation of the confession. Whatever the case may be, each scribe revised with the foreknowledge that whatever his revision was, an adjoining image that depicts the individual whose line of dialogue he inscribed would produce a moment of pictorial reckoning for which he would be held to account. In other words, the pleasing uncertainty that Gower’s metafictional play with personas stimulates would be mitigated by a picture that, by necessity, would have to come down on the matter of who the protagonist is, or at least, what he looks like. Knowing that this moment of pictorial reckoning was imminent, scribes took measures to participate or respond in advance of its future consequences. And so, if we would like to speak of translation between media, then in these cases, we are speaking of textual translation of images that do not yet exist. While scholars have debated the origins of illuminators’ actions in varying the visage of the confessing man, what I have shown here is that the images they were charged with producing had an impact on the scribes who copied the text before these images were executed. This formulation sounds like a misguided form of prolepsis. But my aim in this study is to endorse a less doctrinaire form of bibliographical analysis, in which principles are not presumed to precede the practicalities of the page. Such principles include the customary order in which a manuscript is made; and the practicalities include decisions made in the process of making, sometimes informed by the expectation of what is to come next.

One Confessio manuscript illustrates a different relationship between text and illumination which is worth considering under the anachronistic rubric of disorderly operations that I am promoting. In a copy now in Cambridge University Library, the folio on which the confession appears retains the un-revised,

probably authorial, line of verse, ‘a caitif that lith here’, and was planned not to contain a scene of confession (fig. 10). Yet at some point during the manuscript’s production, someone went back and slipped into the margin a direction in red that has gone unnoticed: beside a caret mark are the directions, ‘hic fiat Gower’ [make here Gower].\footnote{Cambridge, University Library MS Mm 2.21, fol. 8r. Another manuscript also features the unrevised line and an illumination that was not originally planned but rather added into the lower margin after the text had already been written (Cambridge, St. Catharine’s College MS 7, fol. 8v).} They remain on the page, unscraped, unrubbed, and a testament to anyone who sees this manuscript of its producer’s opinion on the identity of the man behind the confession. More than merely an instruction for the illuminator, this note is an example of ekphrasis – if in the most skeletal sense – informed by the knowledge of a forthcoming image. Deciding that an image of the confession was critical enough to shoehorn the miniature into the margin, the person who wrote ‘hic fiat Gower’, had to project exactly what it was that scene
would represent. He didn’t write, ‘make here a scene of confession’, or ‘make here a man kneeling at the feet of a seated figure’. Instead he wrote, ‘make here Gower’, the name of the author of the work. While jotting this note, the scribe’s mind, in perhaps a split and subconscious second, shuttled forth to the image to come, unconcerned with the text that denies the identicality of author and persona. The text not only preceded the image literally, but it also dictated the illuminator’s actions. And yet, the nature of its directive was informed by a projection of what it was directing.

**Disorderly Operations**

Critical bibliography buttresses historical inquiry with a positivist backbone that can at times lean towards piety. And, as D.F. McKenzie famously showed, alternative avenues of research – in his case, archival – offer a refreshing antidote to orthodoxies that emerge from a faith in the authority of physical evidence. Unlike the work of McKenzie, my analysis does not muster any archival evidence in the form of logs, orders, receipts, and inventories. Yet what I have offered here is a suggestion that the manuscript can serve as an archive of the possibilities that its producers considered during the course of production. Critical bibliography posits that examining a book as a physical object can tell us how it was made. The preceding consideration of a group of *Confessio* manuscripts has shown that books can also tell us about concerns their producers had regarding what they might be while in the process of making them. In other words, a book bears traces of the future forms that its producers thought it might take. These forms are particularly evident when glitches interrupt the production process and allow the book to be glimpsed frozen in progress. Although a book is produced in a particular order, the lines of causality between each of its successive stages of production do not always follow that same order. The collaborative traffic that results in the production of a book never moves in one direction. Influence is a mutually reinforcing relationship. The encounter between media that make contact on the pages of a book is a relationship of contingence in which each is re-constructed simultaneously by the other in the expectation of what the other might demand. There is no source and target, no stable centre and vacillating periphery. There are, instead, celebratory volumes illuminated in

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43 Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 902, fol. 8 is one of the three manuscripts of the *Confessio* to contain notes to the limner. It remains in pristine condition in the margin, directing: ‘Hic fiat confessor sedens et confessus coram se genuflectendo’ [Make here a confessor sitting and a confessant kneeling in his presence].

Fig. 11. Coks’ Cartulary
London, St Bartholomew’s Hospital SBHB/HC/2/1, fol. 94r
© St Bartholomew’s Hospital Archives, Courtesy of St Bartholomew’s Hospital Archives
suspense of tributes and labels never penned, as in the representation of Queen Elizabeth Woodville in the Skinners’ Company Fraternity Book; and a cartulary with an illusionistic scroll set into the illuminated border, lined for but never filled by text (fig. 11). There are even ‘picture books’, the pictures of which preceded the texts that adjoin them, as in the Beauchamp Pageants. And, finally, there is the expectation for a line of verse in the Confessio Amantis, perhaps awaiting a visual verdict to dictate the content of its words. Against the unidirectionality and determinism that the word ‘translation’ dictates, these manuscripts demand that we resituate the position of the visual in our assessment of literary culture.

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45 London, Guildhall Library MS 31692, fol. 32v.