THE AUTHOR PORTRAITS IN THE BEDFORD PSALTER-HOURS: GOWER, CHAUCER AND HOCCLEVE

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An inscribed portrait of John Gower (fig. 1), literary champion of Lancastrian kingship, provides the key to the reading of the unique illustrative programme of the Duke of Bedford’s Psalter-Hours, Add. MS. 42131, the only manuscript he is known to have commissioned in England. Two hundred and ninety of the 300 minor text divisions are illustrated with portrait heads; a national portrait gallery of Lancastrian friends and foes is concealed in the initials of carefully selected texts. Many of the portraits are repeated, creating distinct subtexts; Gower himself appears ten times as prophet, preacher, and penitent lending the weight of his moral authority to the imagery. The depiction of contemporaries within the text of the Psalter is almost without precedent in the Middle Ages; the exception is in a Bible which was probably made for the Duke’s father, Henry IV, by the artist of the inscribed portrait of Gower. This invasion of scriptural text defies convention and, it might be argued, good taste.

The contemporary author portrait is an invention of the fourteenth century: the genre appears in Italy circa 1375 where Dante and Petrarch are the first to be commemorated. Such portraits vary widely in the degree of verisimilitude displayed. While some variation may be due to the technical capability of the artist, another factor may be the reliability of the model, possibly a copy several times removed from the sitter. While the Bedford portraits are so vividly modelled that they appear to have been ‘evidently drawn from life in most cases’,1 most are in fact replicas of other images rather than portraits from life.

Among London illuminators of the period a portrait image seems to be associated with a prototype by an individual artist which becomes the standard: a particular facial shape, idiosyncratic features, details of hair or beard styles, and distinguishing costume are combined and adjusted to create the formula that becomes a portrait. The artist’s personal style is apparently a factor in perceived authenticity since pictures from the same hand look alike. The serial portraits in the Bedford manuscript are usually repeated by the same hands; some of them match portraits found elsewhere so closely that the existence of a portrait tradition of certain individuals by particular artists can be confirmed. The sitter may be someone he has never seen, but whom he can seemingly
bring to life with his mastery of the brush. The exact likeness, the character study that captures the soul of the subject and provides a true record of his facial features, was not the aim of these artists and is not an appropriate criterion to apply to the portraits.

A more fruitful line of enquiry is to determine the intention of portraiture. For the contemporary reader representation was enough; the Duke of Bedford did not require assistance in identifying portraits of his regal relations. Emotional response, especially in the context of a devotional book such as this, springs from recognition of the subject portrayed rather than from technical or aesthetic excellence. For the modern viewer identification depends on inscriptions, written descriptions, comparison with reliable known portraits, and context. Fortunately the artists of the Bedford Psalter-Hours have left some indications of the identities of the individuals portrayed in the decorative gold brushwork; in one significant instance the ornament is also a legible inscription which provides the key to the identification of some of the most important portraits in the manuscript.
An explicit label on the background of the portrait on f. 209v at Psalm 141 (142) identifies the elderly, balding and bearded subject; he is John Gower, poet and mentor to royalty. The partly overpainted bilingual inscription reads ‘effigies GOWER/ un esqui[e]r’. The ‘e’ and two ‘f’s and first ‘i’ are clearly visible, but the descender of a tiny angled ‘g’, an even tinier cursive ‘ie’ and the lower curve of the descender of the ‘G’ in Gower have been overpainted in the thick pink modelling of his pink cranium. The ‘W’ has four minims; the faint medial stroke of the ‘E’ of Gower requires magnification. Only the first two of the four minims and the foot of the third in ‘un’ are unobsured; the fourth is occluded by the white curling hair near the subject’s neck. To the right of his face an abbreviated ‘es’ and the bowl of the ‘q’ are likewise hidden by his beard. Of the final four minims of ‘esquier’, the second and third have separate strokes for the feet and heads. The ‘e’ is a looped stroke on top of the ‘i’. The final ‘r’ is a single short stroke trailing into the black outline between the background of the miniature and its initial frame.

The designation ‘esquire of Kent’ is connected to a John Gower in property transactions in 1382 and probably refers to the poet. An order preserved in the 1393 accounts of the Duchy of Lancaster records the delivery of a collar of esses from Henry of Lancaster ‘a un esquier John Gower’ and certainly refers to him. Gower was born circa 1330 and, by his own description, was blind, old, sick and utterly wretched in 1400; he died in 1408. There is no other verifiable portrait of him to compare with this; his effigy in Southwark Cathedral is restored and seems to have been an idealized youthful image. Two surviving copies of the Confessio Amantis have what may have been intended as author portraits; both are tiny miniatures inside initials, one of a figure on a bed and the other a standing figure defaced by a hole in the parchment. The inscribed image in the Duke’s manuscript does however bear a general resemblance to the balding, bearded and broad-faced senex amans of Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 290 and Cambridge, Pembroke College MS. 307 (fig. 2), the elderly lover of the Confessio Amantis.

Although the inscribed Gower portrait could not possibly have been a life-study, it could have been done from memory. As the first English author whose works were regularly illustrated Gower must have been personally known to publishers; his attention to the production of texts is well known. The Master of the Great Cowchers, the artist who painted and inscribed the ‘effigy’ in the Bedford book, could have known Gower for he was in London in 1406–8 and well established. Like Gower, he enjoyed the patronage of Henry IV whose portrait he also painted in the Great Cowchers (copies of the titles to his estates, P.R.O., D.L. 42/1, 2), in the Big Bible (BL, Royal MS. r E. IX), and in the Bedford Psalter-Hours.

Gower’s portrait on f. 209v at Psalm 141 (142) fills the initial ‘V’ of the opening words Voce mea domine clamavi (I cried with my voice to the Lord), the personalized equivalent of Vox Clamantis, the title of Gower’s poem. The work takes the form of a series of ad status sermons to address English society at all levels with a message which expounds upon its moral decline and promises doom. In the last version of the poem (which
underwent several revisions), the source of society’s evil is finally located in its head, in the very person of the king. Together with Book One, the earliest addition to the poem, which describes the English Uprising of 1381, and the later Cronica Tripartita, which purports to chronicle the events around the fall of Richard II and the succession of Henry IV, the *Vox Clamantis* is the authority for many of the most important portraits in the manuscript. By entitling his work *Vox Clamantis* (the voice of one crying) Gower associated himself with John the Baptist, who was the *Vox clamantis in deserto* (the voice of one crying in the wilderness). Gower’s task, like his namesake’s, was to prepare the way for his lord.

At Psalm 141 (142) the psalmist despairs for his life; his persecutors have laid a trap for him and there is no one who cares for him and no place of refuge. The superscription for this psalm identifies it as ‘an [utterance?] of David when he was in the cave’. At chapter 16 of Book I of Gower’s poem, the dream vision of the Uprising of 1381, the narrator changes voice to the first person to intensify the description of terror suffered by those who took refuge from the mob in the woods and in caves; at this point the poem becomes a personal lament. Gower is the one crying and the wilderness is England. In this position, opposite the pathetic image on f. 210 (fig. 4) of the fallen king who refused to listen to Gower’s advice, the ‘voice’ may also be understood as the *vox plebis*, the voice of the people, which Gower equates with the voice of God:
What I have written is the voice of the people,
But you will also see that where the people cry out, God is often there.\textsuperscript{13}

It is perhaps no coincidence that Richard II, to whom Gower once dedicated the \textit{Vox Clamantis} and addressed so much good advice, claimed John the Baptist as his patron saint.

Richard, whose portrait appears across the opening at Psalm 142 (143), has lost everything and is praying for the salvation of his soul. The two portraits on opposing pages represent individuals who are opposites in character and temperament. At the most elementary level Gower represents good and Richard evil. Both are alike in their despair: Gower appears at a psalm which is an appeal to a Lord who does not heed his prayers and Richard II illustrates the psalm of a soul in torment, a sinner who is facing eternal damnation. The backgrounds of both images depart from the standard vine scroll pattern of most of the other portrait heads in the manuscript, indicating that this pairing was planned early in the manuscript's production. Where Gower's portrait ground is inscribed, Richard's deep blue background with a gold teardrop-like repeat pattern may be associated with the coronation – or funerary – regalia. This coupling represents the final appearance of both individuals in the manuscript and the final statement of their roles in the narrative overlay.

Although Richard is depicted in his youth, the psalm text can be connected to circumstances surrounding the end of his life. God's servant is in a state of spiritual torment: he has sinned and cannot find his way back to his God. He does not want to be judged by standards different from those applied to any other man. Enemies have crushed his life into the ground, he is imprisoned in darkness, humiliated and fearful of eternal damnation. Richard submitted to arrest on 25 July 1399; he was deposed by
Parliament on 30 September and spent his last days imprisoned in Pontefract Castle. A fortnight after a failed coup in January 1400 he was executed. Gower, however, seems unaware of the true circumstances and, in agreement with the partisan sources, reports that Richard wept constantly and died of starvation and hopelessness.

This culminating portrait of Richard is the only one in a series of five where he is shown beardless: he is depicted in his final hour, yet he appears to be in the flower of his youth. The superscription to the psalm refers to the traditional association of Richard with Absolom, the beautiful but treacherous son of David: ‘A psalm of David when his own son Absolom pursued him’. Gower referred to Richard as ‘most beautiful king’ and ‘flower of young boys’ in the first version of *Vox Clamantis*, which must pre-date the Uprising of 1381 when Richard was fifteen years old. In a chapter-heading which survives through the final version Gower ‘absolves our king’s innocence of the sins and injustices now going on because of his minor age’. The apparent pictorial solecism solves two problems at once: the young Richard’s soul has a prospect of eternal salvation that the mature king could not hope to realize, and Richard’s later kingship and its ugly end, for which Henry of Lancaster must have been responsible, is obliterated.

The closest comparison to this short-haired, beardless profile image of Richard is the Wilton Diptych (fig. 3), which may have been the source for it. Despite heraldic evidence of a *terminus post quem* of 1395, stylistic evidence linking the diptych with the style of the Bedford Psalter-Hours which must be dated after 1414, and a plausible explanation for the circumstances of the creation of the diptych, historians have been curiously reluctant to accept a date for the diptych outside Richard’s reign. The portrait of Richard at Psalm 142 (143) supports the theory that the diptych commemorates the translation of his remains to Westminster Abbey in 1413. The context of the manuscript illustration indicates that the Duke of Bedford intended to pray for the soul of Richard II: the similarities of the two images suggest that the panel was also the product of Lancastrian patronage. The same pairing of visual and conceptual opposites that shapes the opening in the manuscript can be detected in the panel.

A dialogue between two divine children, both enveloped in cloth of gold, is the narrative substance. The gestures of their hands – supplication and blessing – are a question and answer. The Crown of Thorns incised in the Christ Child’s halo and the arrow held by Richard’s royal sponsor St Edmund allude to their shared earthly destinies. The young monarch is to die for his own sins, but the Christ Child’s sacrifice will redeem mankind. Richard is asking for entry into Heaven: the answer is yes. That the success of Richard’s petition is to be attributed to divine grace and mercy, rather than good works, is assured by the details of the contrasting environments and the emotional responses of the secondary figures.

Gower’s *Vox Clamantis* may have served as the source for both the concept of the youthful, redeemable king and the prominence of John the Baptist as Richard’s sponsor. The rocky, barren earth and the ‘wilderness’ beside the Baptist and to the right of the eager royal supplicant identify the location as England, contrasting with the fertile paradise garden of Heaven. The solemn harmony of Richard’s sponsors is not apparent
in the supernumerary figures in the second scene: some of the angels are engrossed in a heated debate as they apparently discuss the merits of the petitioner's case. Two angels on his right side address the Child directly; one holds a banner of the resurrection and points to Richard, poised to deliver it to him, while just below her another kneels with hands upturned as if in disbelief or dissent. Three angels in the left back row smile sweetly towards the king, but just behind the Virgin's back dissension smoulders. A disgruntled angel sullenly crosses her arms as one neighbour turns to console her, while the other raises a hand over her heart to register shock and is similarly comforted. Two angels in the right foreground engage in an animated discussion while pointing to the petitioner. The overall impression is that Richard was finally received in Paradise but his welcome, despite the fact that all the angels wear his badge, was not unanimous.

The ten Gower portraits (ff. 34v, 35, 46v, 55, 56v, 90v, 115, 120, 149v, 209v; see figs. 1, 5) conform in type to the inscribed miniature: an elderly balding man, whose usually modest clothing distinguishes him from the flamboyant haberdashery of most of the other secular types. Unlike the other portrait series, which are fewer in number and painted usually by only one or two artists, Gower's portrait has been painted by several hands. His moral authority is a unifying motif in the overall plan of the illustration.

On f. 34v the first of the Gower portraits illustrates Psalm 130 (131) in the Hours, an exhortation to the people of Israel to trust in the Lord. The superscription associated with this short psalm connects it with the 'prophet's humility' and it opens in a tone of lamentation that befits the author of the *Vox Clamantis*. The portrait is by Herman Scheerre, a specialist in liturgical manuscripts, who may have been a Carmelite from Cologne and who was based in Paternoster Row, near St Paul's Cathedral. His greatest talent is the depiction of extremes of spiritual and emotional states; his devotional mode and linear style both contrast with and complement the Cowcher Master's narrative approach and robust painterliness.

At Psalm 44 (45) the psalmist writes, 'My heart hath uttered a good word: I speak my works to the king. My tongue is the pen of a scrivener...'; Gower's remedy for the ills of society was ethical self-governance, or 'personal kingship' which should be practised by everyone and Scheerre has portrayed Gower here (f. 115) as a 'personal king', deep in thought. The effect of meditation is achieved through the closed composition; he looks down and away from the viewer, focusing inwardly, his head burdened by the weight of his symbolic crown. Gower had advised Richard in the *Vox Clamantis*, 'You who subdue others, work to subdue yourself. If you wish to be a king, rule yourself and you will be one.'

Scheerre's drawing on f. 56v at Psalm 26 (27) has been finished by an artist working under the Cowcher Master. The psalmist, like the narrator of the account of the Uprising, is hiding in a secret place and seeks God's protection from his enemies. In the tradition of Psalter illustration this psalm, which marks a major liturgical division, is often illustrated with a figure pointing to his eyes; the opening words, 'the Lord is my light and my salvation', have here been associated with Gower's blindness. Blindness is also a metaphor of passion that overcomes reason in the late poem *De Lucis Scrutinio*.
where Cupid and lovers are blind and various other kinds of blindness are contrasted with the light that comes from God. This portrait was copied by an assistant of Scheerre on f. 120 to illustrate Psalm 50 (51) in the Psalter; his drawing is wooden and stiff, the head is smaller, and the expression duller. In this penitential psalm the speaker
pleads with ‘a contrite and humble heart’ for forgiveness for an unspecified sin which the superscription identifies as David’s adultery: ‘A psalm of David when the prophet Nathan came to him after he had sinned with Bethsabee’. The psalm, like Gower’s best known work, the *Confessio Amantis*, is a lover’s confession.

The same ungifted assistant illustrated the Canticle of Simeon on f. 35 with another Gower portrait; this time he copied the portrait on f. 34v. Simeon (Luke 2. 25ff.) had much in common with Gower: great age, devotion, concern for society, prophecy, and a death following soon after seeing the redeemer of the nation.

At Psalm 119 (120) on f. 46v in the Office of the Dead, the author wears black. The opening words, *Ad Dominum cum tribulari clamavi* (In my trouble I cried to the Lord) link with the title of the *Vox Clamantis*. On f. 55, a more expensively dressed, balding older man was painted by an associate of the Cowcher Master. The psalmist, at Psalm 24 (25), pleads for pardon for his sins and for moral guidance and prosperity, ending with a prayer for the redemption of Israel. A parallel may have been understood with Gower’s prayer for England which in the final revision of the *Confessio Amantis* replaced a prayer for, and expression of allegiance to, Richard.80

The wild animal imagery of Psalm 21 (22) on f. 90v evokes Gower’s dream vision of the rampaging mob of the Uprising. Like the narrator of the *Vox Clamantis*, the psalmist is forsaken by God and endangered. He cries throughout the day while bulls, lions, dogs, and wild oxen threaten. Another portrait on f. 149v at Psalm 78 (79), primarily the work of Scheerre, may also relate to the Uprising, for Jerusalem lies in ruins.

The portrait of another elderly gentleman who wears a white linen cap tied under the chin and who has a distinctive, somewhat long, face appears three times in the manuscript (fig. 6). Two of the miniatures match the portrait of Geoffrey Chaucer on f. 88 of Harl. MS. 4866, Thomas Hoccleve’s *Regement of Princes*; they are the work of the same master. Hoccleve expends forty-six lines in praise of Chaucer as poet and twenty-six lines lamenting his death;31 the first portrait appears on f. 16 in the Hours of the Virgin, most appropriately at Lauds, for the portrait is in the initial of Psalm 150, one of the most lavishly adulatory passages in the Bible. The third appears in the Office of the Dead at Psalm 37 (38) which, although a penitential psalm, describes the afflictions of old age. The second portrait by another, less competent, artist is paired with one of Gower; the text, Psalm 128 (129), in the Hours of the Virgin refers to old age.

Hoccleve, who was still very much alive (a relative youngster in his late forties), and who could list the Duke of Bedford among his patrons, also appears three times in the manuscript. His face is known from the miniature in Arundel MS. 38, f. 37,32 the so-called presentation copy33 of the *Regement of Princes*. Despite the somewhat botched modelling, a recognizable triangular facial type can be discerned which is also found in the Bedford manuscript. In each of the three portraits he is dressed in red.

At Psalm 48 (49) on f. 118 the psalmist instructs the inhabitants of the world to incline their ears to his proverbs. Hoccleve, who worked in the office of the Privy Seal, relates in the *Balade to John, Duke of Bedford* that his ‘custumed bysynesse’ was employment as a ‘humble clerke’. He appears in the initial wearing his work clothes: his hooded and
cowled robe matches the costume of the scribes in the large illustration of David composing the Psalms. The words of Psalm 122 (123) on f. 199 well befit the writer of a manual for the guidance of a ruler and would even form a reasonable caption for the presentation miniature: ‘To thee have I lifted up my eyes... Behold as the eyes of the servants are on the hands of their masters.’ The portrait might depict a slightly older man, but he wears the high-necked collar of the courtier’s houppeleande of the Arundel portrait. In the text of Psalm 137 on f. 206 the psalmist praises the Lord for he ‘hath heard the words of my mouth’. The larger-scale face here is the closest to the Arundel manuscript made five years earlier. However, the hair which had just begun to grey in the Arundel portrait is now totally grey and Hoccleve is also showing signs of incipient baldness. The image has been cast in a familiar, authoritative mould: he is the new Gower for a new age. But the Duke of Bedford’s hopes were not to be realized in Hoccleve who suffered a mental breakdown in 1416, never to regain his health. The mantle of chief Lancastrian court poet, when finally assumed by John Lydgate, took the form of a black monk’s habit. Although Lydgate was commissioned to write the Troy Book for Henry V in 1412, the Duke – later to be his main patron – must have been unaware of him, for Lydgate’s face does not appear in the Bedford Psalter-Hours. None of the six portraits of Benedictines in the manuscript can be connected with Lydgate either by context or resemblance to the three known portraits elsewhere.34

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3 Macaulay, op. cit., p. xvi, n. 7.


7 J. A. Burrows, ‘The portrayal of Amans in Confessio amantis’, in Minnis, op. cit., pp. 5-24. The Pembroke portrait was painted by Johannes, one of two main artists of Marco Polo’s Livre du Grant Cuan, Bodleian Library, MS. Bodl. 264.


11 There are no superscriptions in the Bedford Psalter, but they are found in the Big Bible, Royal i E. IX, which was created by the same artists. The superscription on f. 187 reads: ‘Erudico[n] [sic] D[avi]d cu[m] e[ss]et in spelunca’.


15 Stockton, p. 325.


17 Stockton, p. 230; Macaulay, p. 243, heading of ch. vii of Book VI.


20 Millar, op. cit. The inscription on f. 21 is addressed to the Duke of Bedford; John of Lancaster was created duke in 1414.

21 Wormald, art. cit.


23 Wormald, art. cit.

24 Wright, pp. 187-209, 296-312.


27 Elizabeth Porter, ‘Gower’s ethical microcosm and political macrocosm’ in Minnis, pp. 135-62.

28 Stockton, p. 234; Macaulay, p. 248, ll. 606-7.

29 Fisher, p. 130; Macaulay, pp. 35-7.


32 Andrew Watson, Catalogue of Dated and Datable Manuscripts c. 700-1600 in the Department of Manuscripts, the British Library (London, 1979), vol. i, p. 88.

