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A Brief History of the John Gower Society

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Abstract

R. F. Yeager is the current president of the John Gower Society and the professor *emeritus* at the University of West Florida. This essay covers the history of the Society, exploring its long and extensive foundation from its early formation all the way to the present day. The John Gower Society ultimately is dedicated to the study of the fourteenth-century poet John Gower and promote scholarship in various forms of pedagogy.

In 1980, Russell A. Peck of the University of Rochester and R. F. Yeager of Warren Wilson College organized a special session on the poetry of John Gower for the December meeting of the Modern Language Association.¹ Subsequent to brief papers presented by Peck, Yeager, and Peter G. Beidler of Lehigh University, a general discussion ensued concerning the state of Gower studies in the United States and abroad.² It was agreed by general consensus that another special session should be planned for the MLA meeting the following year, and that a channel of communication of some sort should be created to share ideas and information about Gower's work, as well as to indicate work in progress, and on what topics. The following December at MLA in New York, the group sponsored a special session, "John Gower: Themes, Tradition, and Audience," with speakers Thomas Hahn of the University of Rochester, John Fyler of Tufts University, John H. Fisher of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and Linda Barney Burke of Elmhurst College. Yeager and Peck presided.

That year also saw planning begin for a *John Gower Newsletter* [*JGN*], the first issue of which was produced in July 1982, and disseminated via the US Postal Service to interested scholars by Yeager, acting as ad-hoc secretary. The mailing list, derived from names collected at the MLA session the previous December, had forty-two names. At that time, as recorded in *JGN* I no. 1: Many had expressed the desire to form an informal society, noting that

the loose organization might come in handy at some point. (A meeting at Kalamazoo in a year or two was suggested, among other possible future projects.) Toward this end, notices of the formation of the ad-hoc society have been mailed to various places by the ad-hoc secretary. These publications include the *MLA Newsletter*, *Ralph*, *Nuntia* (Newsletter of the Medieval Association of the Midwest), and the *SEMA Newsletter* (Southeastern Medieval Association). The text of the announcement is as follows: "Following the highly successful special session on John Gower's poetry at the Modern Language Association in New York last December, it was suggested by several that there might be interest in forming a loosely knit society, for the purpose of sharing information about John Gower, and furthering the study of his work. Currently, the "John Gower Society" exists in an ad-hoc state: a mailing has gone out, containing news and annotated bibliography of publications and works-in-progress, including dissertations, during 1981-82. Those interested in receiving copies of the *Gower Newsletter*, or in joining the Society (membership is presently free) should notify the ad-hoc secretary.

The next issue of *JGN* (II, no. 1 February 1983) recorded the addition of twenty-eight members, for a total of seventy in the Society. This number included several from Great Britain, due largely to efforts by Alastair J. Minnis, then of the University of Bristol, who had become ad-hoc British secretary. *JGN* also noted that: "It now seems likely that there will be some sort of Gower gathering at the meeting

¹ During the weeks this short history was being readied for publication, we learned the news of Russell Peck's death. His numerous contributions to medieval studies are partially enumerated in this remembrance: <https://www.rochester.edu/newscenter/medievalist-russell-peck-remembered-552632/>.

² We also learned about Peter Beidler's death. His contributions to the scholarship and pedagogy of medieval studies are legion, far more than suggested by his obituary: <https://obituaries.seattletimes.com/obituary/peter-beidler-1087421597>.

of the Medieval Institute in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in May 1984.” Members’ views were solicited on three topics: 1) whether a business meeting should be scheduled, “for the purpose of electing officers, creating a charter”; 2) the format, length, and possible topic(s) of papers to be offered in such a session; and, 3) suggestions for a session chair. This issue of *JGN* saw the initiation of a “Notes and Queries” section, since then a regular feature, with a question regarding the proper pronunciation of Gower’s name. (The question was debated over the next two issues, with responses from—among others—Fred C. Robinson, J. R. Hall, and John K. Bollard, Pronunciation Editor of the Miriam-Webster Dictionaries and Reference Books, before being settled finally via a poem entitled “O Mortal ‘Gower’” by Peter G. Beidler.

That only a boor
(Linguistically poor)
Pronounces it Gower.

A cretinous knower
From Harvard or lower
(Linguistically slower)
Pronounces it Gower.

A bard of the hour
Sweet-spoken not sour
(Of linguists the flower)
Pronounces it Gower.)

By September 1983 the Society reported growth to 170 members, and the session of papers for the Nineteenth International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo had been confirmed for May 1984. The tentative topic was to be “The Poetic Art of John Gower,” with John H. Fisher of the University of Tennessee as chair. In January 1984, the Society became formally incorporated in the state of Utah, listing as its (statutorily required) four officers R. F. Yeager, President; Alastair J. Minnis, Vice-President; John H. Fisher, Treasurer; and Peter G. Beidler, Secretary. Yeager and Minnis continued to act as corresponding secretaries for the US and the UK, respectively. The first meeting of the officers took place at the York meeting of the New Chaucer Society in July 1984.

In May 1984 two sessions of papers were sponsored by the Gower Society at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, establishing a precedent that has held for thirty-nine years (with the fortieth proposed for 2024). The sessions were (1) “Poetic Style, Poetic Reputation,” chaired by John H. Fisher, with papers from Jennifer Goodman, Texas A & M University (“Gower and the Romances”), C. A. J. Runacres, University of Bristol (“Art and Ethics in the ‘Exempla’ of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*”), and R. F. Yeager, Warren Wilson College (“The Renaissance Gower”) and (2) “*The Confessio Amantis*: Aspects and Sources,” chaired by Yeager, with papers from C. David Benson, University of Connecticut (“The Problem of Incest in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*”), Nancy P. Pope, Washington University, St. Louis (“Gower’s Adaptations of Ovid, Compared to Chaucer’s”), and Winthrop Wetherbee, Cornell University (“Genius and Love in the *Confessio Amantis*”). A drinks reception/cash bar for members was also held for the first time—another precedent set at the 1984

meeting in Kalamazoo that has continued. In 1984 as well the Society welcomed its first members from Japan.

1985 brought three significant events in the history of the Society: recognition as a 501(c) (3) non-profit organization by from the Internal Revenue Service; an issue of the *Chaucer Review* (19, no. 2) dedicated solely to articles on Gower; and the establishment of the Publications of the John Gower Society Series, in agreement with Boydell & Brewer. Volume I of the Series, *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, edited by J. D. Pickles and J. L. Dawson, appeared in 1987. As of 2022, Publications of the John Gower Society includes fifteen titles.

Vol. I: *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis*, ed. J. D. Pickles and J. L. Dawson (1987)

Vol. II: R. F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for New Arion* (1990)

Vol. III: *Gower's Confessio Amantis: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Peter Nicholson (1991)

Vol. IV: Kurt Olsson, *John Gower and the Structures of Conversion: A Reading of the Confessio Amantis* (1992)

Vol. V: María Bullón-Fernández, *Fathers and Daughters in Gower's Confessio Amantis: Authority, Family, State and Writing* (2000)

Vol. VI: T. Matthew N. McCabe, *Gower's Vulgar Tongue: Ovid, Lay Religion, and English Poetry in the Confessio Amantis* (2011)

Vol. VII: David R. Carlson, *John Gower, Poetry and Propaganda in Fourteenth Century England* (2012)

Vol. VIII: Conrad Van Dijk, *John Gower and the Limits of the Law* (2013)

Vol. IX: Matthew W. Irvin, *The Poetic Voices of John Gower: Politics and Personae in the Confessio Amantis* (2014)

Vol. X: Ana Sáez-Hidalgo and R. F. Yeager, eds., *John Gower in England and Iberia: Manuscripts, Influences, Reception* (2014)

Vol. XI: Russell A. Peck and R. F. Yeager, eds., *John Gower: Others and the Self* (2017)

Vol. XII: Stephen H. Rigby, ed., with Siân Echard, *Historians on John Gower* (2019)

Vol. XIII: Martha W. Driver, Derek Pearsall, and R. F. Yeager, eds. *John Gower in Manuscript and Early Printed Books* (2020)

Vol. XIV: Susannah M. Chewning, ed., *Studies in the Age of Gower: A Festschrift in Honour of R. F. Yeager* (2020)

Vol. XV: Derek Pearsall and Linne Mooney, eds. *A Descriptive Catalogue of the English Manuscripts of John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (2021)

Members of the Editorial Board of the Series as of 2022 are:

David R. Carlson, University of Ottawa, *emeritus*

Helen Cooper, University of Cambridge, *emerita*

Siân Echard, University of British Columbia

Andrew Galloway, Cornell University

Brian W. Gastle, Western Carolina University

Linne Mooney, University of York, *emerita*

Peter Nicholson, University of Hawaii, *emeritus*

Russell A. Peck, University of Rochester, *emeritus*

Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, University of Valladolid

Nicholas Watson, Harvard University

Series General Editors are Alastair J. Minnis, Yale University, *emeritus*, and R. F. Yeager, University of West Florida, *emeritus*.

Until 1987, membership in the Gower Society was free to all who wished to join. At the business meeting in that year, however, it was decided to begin charging dues, initially set at \$5.00 per year, or the equivalent in pounds sterling for UK members. Members were encouraged to become “Contributing Members” by paying sums beyond basic dues; these would be tax deductible, given the recently acquired non-profit status of the Society. (Although some dozen became Contributing Members, many others—particularly in Britain, where Tory government action was reportedly constricting salaries, and countries with different currencies—chose to leave the Society rather than pay dues. This decline continued throughout 1988-89.) Also at that meeting, Peter Nicholson of the University of Hawai’i was appointed Society Bibliographer to gather and report on new and emerging studies of Gower’s life and poetry. It was decided as well that the Society should seek formal affiliation with the Modern Language Association, via the established process of the MLA, with the goal in mind of presenting an annual session of papers devoted to Gower. (Ultimately this effort extended over four years, before being abandoned in the face of insurmountable bureaucratic twaddling by the MLA.) Suggestions were also put forward, whether the Society should have official T-shirts for sale, and whether the *Newsletter* should begin publishing full-length articles, thereby becoming a journal. Both ideas were rejected by the attending members. An important advance in 1989 was the design of the Society logo—a hart lodged, superimposed, on Fortune’s wheel, surmounting the word “FORTUNA” [fig. 1]. The logo first appeared publicly on the dust jacket of Publications of the John Gower Society, volume II, in 1990.



In the latter year, working with the New Chaucer Society, the Gower Society officially sponsored a paper session at the New Chaucer Society [NCS] congress in Canterbury. “Gower and Chaucer: Evidences of Interaction” included papers from Chauncy Wood, McMaster University (“Chaucer’s most ‘Gowerian’ Tale”), A. J. Minnis, University of York (“De vulgaria auctoritate: Chaucer, Gower, and the Men of Great Authority”), and Carolyn Dinshaw, University of California, Berkeley

(“Chaucer, Gower, and the Uses of Rape”). In addition to that NCS session, in 1990 the Gower Society sponsored two sessions of papers at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo—a tradition that has carried on unbroken, into 2023. Notable “firsts” in that sequence of ICMS meetings: a session devoted to “Gower and Women” (1990); a “global” session on “Gower in the Iberian Peninsula” (2000) with presenters Francisco Javier Grande Quejigo and Bernardo Santano Moreno from the Universidad de Cáceres, (and similarly “global” in 2003, with papers on “Gower’s Mediterranean” and “Gower and the Non-Christian World”); a joint session with another Society (Society of the White Hart) (2000), which brought a paper on “Religion, Race, and Nation as Genealogy in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*” by Diane DeLauro of Rutgers University—a “first” on Gower’s treatment of race. Subsequent sessions have been offered jointly with the Lollard Society (2001), Societas Magica (2002), the Early Book Society (2017), and Societas Ovidiana (2021).

Notably as well in 1990, the Society established the John Hurt Fisher Prize “for outstanding contributions to the study of Gower’s life and work.” The first Fisher Prize would be awarded at the Society-sponsored paper sessions at Kalamazoo in 1991—a tradition that remains in place through 2023. (In years in which Society Congresses take place, the Prize is given at that venue.) A committee of Russell Peck, Alastair Minnis, and R. F. Yeager decided that Derek Pearsall of Harvard University should be the initial recipient of the Fisher Award in May 1991. Subsequent award-winners have been.

- 1992 Masayoshi Ito (Shizuoka University)
- 1993 Russell A. Peck (University of Rochester)
- 1994 William Burton Wilson (Independent Scholar)
- 1995 Kurt Olsson (University of Idaho)
- 1996 Winthrop Wetherbee (Cornell University)
- 1997 jointly Siân Echard and Claire Fanger (respectively, University of British Columbia and Independent Scholar)
- 1998 Peter Nicholson (University of Hawai’i),
- 2000 R. F. Yeager (University of North Carolina at Asheville)
- 2001 María Bullón-Fernández (University of Seattle)
- 2002 NO AWARD
- 2003 James Simpson (Harvard University)
- 2004 Diane Watt (University of Aberystwyth)
- 2005 Siân Echard (University of British Columbia)
- 2006 Russell A. Peck (University of Rochester)
- 2007 Peter Nicholson (University of Hawai’i)
- 2008 J. Allan Mitchell (University of Victoria)
- 2009 Andrew Galloway (Cornell University)

- 2010 Kurt Olsson (University of Idaho)
- 2011 John Burrow (University of Bristol)
- 2012 David R. Carlson (University of Ottawa)
- 2013 Georgiana Donavin (Westminster College)
- 2014 Bruce Holsinger (University of Virginia)
- 2015 Jonathan Hsy (George Washington University)
- 2016 Sebastian Sobecki (University of Groningen)
- 2017 Matthew W. Irvin (Sewanee, the University of the South)
- 2018 Robert J. Meindl (University of California at Sacramento, *emeritus*)
- 2019 Brian W. Gastle (Western Carolina University)
- 2020 The Gower Project
- 2021 Jointly Derek Pearsall (Harvard University, *emeritus*) and Linne Mooney (University of York, *emerita*)

Fisher Award selection committees consist annually of the winner of the previous year's prize, a graduate student member elected at the business meeting, and the Society President. (It should be noted that—as in 2002—the Fisher Prize need not be given if in the opinion of that year's committee no work recommends itself.)

In 1999, the Society membership established a new dues structure to help offset rising costs of printing and postage for the *Newsletter*. Regular membership was set at \$10.00 (or the equivalent in pounds sterling), graduate student membership remained at \$5.00, and for the first time an institutional subscription rate was offered, at \$15.00. Initially six institutions (one in Japan) took out subscriptions.

2004-2005 brought two other milestones: a website (www.JohnGower.org) was developed for the Society by Brian W. Gastle at Western Carolina University (where it currently remains), with Gastle designated official webmaster. Initially the website was to provide a permanent locus for information related to the Society, and a forum for sharing [pedagogical approaches](#) and [texts to promote Gower in classrooms](#); in recent years the website has expanded to include [digitized manuscripts and early printed texts](#). No less importantly, under the supervision of Mark Allen, then also bibliographer of the New Chaucer Society, [an online bibliography of Gower studies](#), eventually to supersede printed versions, was voted into being, hosted by the University of Texas-San Antonio (where it currently remains, available to all in open access). The goal of the bibliography—an ongoing and continual project—is to include brief summary/reviews of all published scholarship, past, present, and future, related to the life and/or work of John Gower, in a format readily searchable by key-words. Allen constructed the site during 2006, unveiling the initial entries, and the system of access, at the Society business meeting at Kalamazoo in 2007. As of December 2022, the publicly available bibliography houses 1826 reviews and summaries of monographs, essays, journal articles, dissertations, and the occasional M.A. thesis, including (or referencing) items written in French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. All entries are, of course, in English.

In 2006 as well, planning began on the [first International Congress](#) of the Society, set for London in 2008 in recognition of the 600th anniversary of Gower's death in 1408. John Hines, of the University of Cardiff, was to co-ordinate local arrangements; eventually, when Queen Mary, University of London, was selected as the venue, he was joined in organizing by Elisabeth Dutton, then of Worcester College, Oxford University, and Julia Boffey and Rosamund S. Allen, both of Queen Mary, who co-ordinated logistics on-site. The Congress—“The Age of Gower: 1408/2008”—included walking tours of “Gower's Southwark” guided by Martha Carlin of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and “Gower's London” with John Schofield, of the Museum of London; and a reading of Gower's poetry, in all three languages, in Southwark Cathedral, the site of Gower's tomb. Readers were Ardis Butterfield, now of Yale University (French), Terry Jones, formerly of Monty Python's Flying Circus (Middle English), Andrew Motion, then Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom (Middle English), and David R. Carlson, of the University of Ottawa (Latin). The ceremony concluded with a special collect read by the Cathedral Dean for “Brother John Gower.”

Attendance at the first Congress numbered 128, drawing from Great Britain, Canada, the Netherlands, Japan, and the United States. Based upon this success in London, it was decided subsequently that the Society would convene in Congress mode every three years, while continuing to meet regularly in Kalamazoo. The [II Congress](#) (“John Gower in Iberia: Six Hundred Years”) thus took place in 2011, hosted in Spain by the University of Valladolid, with organization co-ordinated by Ana Sáez-Hidalgo of that institution. Thereafter, following the example of the New Chaucer Society, JGS established a rotation of venues between North America and Europe. Thus in 2014 the [III Congress](#) (“John Gower: Language, Cognition, and Performance”) met at the University of Rochester (organization directed by Russell A. Peck), and in 2017 the [IV Congress](#) (“John Gower in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books”) took place at the University of Durham, jointly with the meeting of the Early Book Society, on-site co-ordination by Elizabeth Archibald and Corinne Saunders. The V Congress in [2020](#) (“Gower in Contexts: His Words, His Books, His Heritage”), set for the University of Notre Dame, was cancelled in light of the Covid-19 pandemic; [it will instead take place in July 2023](#) at the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland. Currently, scheduled participants hail from fourteen countries: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, Spain, Israel, Germany, India, Japan, Jordan, France, the People's Republic of China, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, a graphic demonstration of the global reach of modern Gower studies, and the Gower Society generally.

In 2008, a “Yearbook of Gower Studies” was proposed, but ultimately tabled over concerns that possibly sufficient new work of first quality couldn't be guaranteed annually. As well, there remained strong interest in keeping membership dues low. Costs of producing and distributing a Yearbook would require a dues increase that members found unappealing. Nonetheless, the idea resurfaces from time to time, particularly as the quantity and quality of recent scholarly studies of Gower and his work has increased dramatically—a fact readily apparent via the online Gower bibliography. 2009 saw the production, as one of the fruits of “Gower in Iberia,” of a CD-ROM—“Royal Entertainments: English, Portuguese, and Castilian Courts: The Poetry of John Gower in the Fifteenth Century”—featuring readings by Brian W. Gastle (*Confessio Amantis* in Middle English), Clara Pasqual Argente (*Confisyon del Amante* in Castilian), and Tiago Viúla de Faria (*Livro do Amante* in Portuguese), accompanied by appropriate music of the period arranged and performed by the traditional maestro Luís Delgado. In 2011, cognizant of the importance of placing Gower's poetry more often in

classrooms, the Society engineered the inclusion of a volume, *Approaches to Teaching the Poetry of John Gower* (ed. Brian W. Gastle and R. F. Yeager), in the MLA series “Approaches to Teaching World Literature.” Also in 2011, reflecting rising expenses associated with Congresses and production/distribution costs of *JGN*, the *Gower Newsletter*, annual dues were raised to \$20.00 US (or equivalent in pounds sterling) for regular members and \$25.00 for institutions. Graduate/research student dues remained at \$5.00 per year.

In 2013, the *John Gower Newsletter (JGN)* went fully electronic, becoming *eJGN*, and consequently moving from print and distribution by post to distribution online to Society members in good standing. In 2018, following the death in 2015 of John H. Fisher, who had served as Treasurer from the inception of the Society, a shift in officers took place, with Roger Ladd (University of North Carolina at Pembroke) replacing Fisher, and Kara McShane (Ursinus College) becoming Secretary following Natalie Grinnell (Wofford College). Subsequently Brian Gastle, while maintaining his role as Society webmaster, shouldered new responsibilities as Vice-President for Outreach, and as did Alastair Minnis, taking the title Vice-President for Publication—positions all hold at present. Ladd’s welcome innovation—bringing the Society into the twenty-first century via the establishment of a PayPal account—has streamlined dues payments, and will, it is hoped, encourage further international membership by obviating the need for paper checks and cumbersome currency conversion.

Probably it is fair to say that in the course of its existence over forty-one years, the John Gower Society has succeeded in achieving many of its original purposes. It has sponsored four successful international Congresses (with a fifth upcoming in 2023), as well as double sessions at the International Congress on Medieval Studies annually since 1984, sustained a substantial and highly respected publication series, regularly circulated the *John Gower Newsletter* (now *eJGN*), two issues per year since 1981, and grown a solid, dues-paying membership base of approximately 150 at any given time. In 1963, of Gower’s trilingual works only two—the *Vox Clamantis* and *Cronica Tripertita*—were available in modern English, in the prose translation of Eric W. Stockton. At the end of 2022, to this have been added verse translations by A. G. Rigg (as edited by David R. Carlson) of the *Vox* Book I (*Visio Anglie*) and the *Cronica*, and translations in prose of the minor Latin poems by R. F. Yeager, of the *Mirour de l’Omme* by William Burton Wilson, and the *Cinkante Balades* and *Traitié pour les amantz marietz* in two versions (by Peter Nicholson and R. F. Yeager). Forthcoming are two new translations of the *Vox Clamantis*, one in prose by Stephanie Batkie and Matthew W. Irvin, and another in verse by Robert J. Meindl, Mark Riley, and R. F. Yeager (the latter including for the first time the “Epistle to Arundel”). The *Confessio Amantis* has also been rendered into modern Japanese by Masayoshi Ito, and into contemporary English verse by Catherine Carter and Brian W. Gastle. The latter provides a valuable companion to the popularly priced three-volume TEAMS edition of the *Confessio Amantis*, the work of Russell A. Peck, intended to increase accessibility beyond the standard edition of G. C. Macaulay. Teaching the *Confessio*, and for that matter all of Gower’s oeuvre, for long a goal of the Gower Society, has never been more readily accomplishable—a task which the MLA *Approaches* volume also facilitates.

Similarly, resources for the scholarly study of Gower’s poetry have been enhanced. Concordances to the *Confessio Amantis* (Pickles and Dawson 1989) and the French verse and prose (Yeager, Mark West, and Robin Hinson 1997) are in print; research *Companions*, edited respectively by Siân Echard (2004) and Ana Sáez-Hidalgo, Gastle, and Yeager (2017), have appeared; the Castilian translation of the *Confessio* has been carefully edited (Elena and Manuel Alvar 1990), and reprinted in a combined

edition with the Middle English *Confessio* and the Portuguese translation (Elena Alvar, Antonio Cortijo Ocaña, and Manuela Faccon 2018); in 2021 *A Descriptive Catalogue of the English Manuscripts of John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Pearsall and Mooney) appeared, providing full descriptions of the extant manuscripts of the poem, complete and fragmentary, along with what is known of former owners. All such work owes a significant debt to resources readily accessible through the Gower Society Bibliography, online (thanks to Mark Allen) in open access since 2007. And, although it could not have been envisioned when the Gower Society was founded in 1981, the JGS website (maintained by Gastle), with its information, digitized manuscripts and texts, guides and materials for teaching, and an archive of *Gower Newsletters* from Vol. I, no. 1, has been, and remains, invaluable.

Much is yet to do, however. Areas for future Society engagement include a descriptive catalogue of the manuscripts in French and Latin, a concordance to the Latin poetry, digitization of both the *Mirour* manuscript and the salient manuscripts containing the Latin verse in order to simplify their study in an age when global concerns over climate change may render travel to collections more difficult. Gaps in what we know of Gower's life—his lineage, Agnes his wife, his occupation and sources of income, as well as his inner and outer circles—all need to be researched further and filled so that a definitive biography can be written. And there are Gower's sources; some need more serviceable editions, others require translation, and all want closer examination. In future years the Gower Society's encouragement may facilitate some of these projects, and others.

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