CHAPTER 5

The Spectral Advocate in John Gower’s Trentham Manuscript

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“Lo! here am I, lawe, of me ye may nat mys.”
—“A Dramatic Monologue By Law”

Harley MS 2251

If any medieval English poet could show us what it meant to think like a fourteenth-century lawyer, it would be John Gower. Ample evidence allows us to imagine not only the shape of his legal career but also how that career shaped him. Through serious reading, studious observation, and reiterative performance at England’s courts, he would have learned the arcane and privileged knowledge of the nation’s various legal systems, mastered the technicalities of procedures and the art of pleading, and absorbed the detailed doctrine and general modes of thought and discourse of common, canon, and manorial law. Well before retirement he would have crossed a point where he no longer

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had to think hard or refer to an authority to know which court should hear his case, which writ to use, which terms to deploy, or which forms of pleading to call upon. Instead, these legal habits of mind and procedural reflexes would have come easily—seemingly naturally—to him. As theories of performativity and social reproduction suggest, his career spent at court, immersed in the legal profession's intricacies and unforgiving demands, would have shaped him into the habitus of a man of law, making it difficult for him to avoid performing within these authoritative, naturalized parameters. In exploring the ramifications of these legal gestures, certain questions follow: What habits of mind would Gower have brought from his legal practice to his poetic practice? Which "processes of legal thought and practice" shaped Gower's self-presentation and his poetry? And which precepts, protocols, and procedures from England's various judicial systems would have formed an identifiable constellation of gestures associated with each system? In short, how did England's multifarious legal procedures exert their control outside the legal setting of the courtroom and infiltrate the aestheticized text?

In order to understand the habits of mind that would have defined the legal self in medieval England, I limit my study to Gower's last collection of work, the trilingual poems published in the Trentham manuscript. And in looking at these poems, I limit myself to three species of gesture: lexical, procedural, and illocutionary. For the lexical, I will examine the legal residue clinging to the languages and terms associated with England's courts. And for the procedural, I will examine the ways semantic choices are arrayed to form an argument. Once these first two gestures are identified, then we have a purchase on the third, the illocutionary, which presupposes the effect a legal advocate working within that system would expect the other two gestures to have on his audience. Together these gestures provide a sense of the larger purpose behind collections of terms, arguments, and verse that otherwise seem haphazard and


