Gower and the Incestuous Father:
The Intimate Author in *Pericles*

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The title page of George Wilkins’s *The Painful Adventures of Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1608) is adorned with the familiar picture of John Gower standing sentry over the text. He appears in a marginally textual location—not in the text but before it. Most intriguing is the open book on the table next to him. Gower is gazing directly at the reader, almost as if he has emerged from that book, perhaps the *Confessio Amantis*, to become the frontispiece of Wilkins’s novel. This illustrated Gower, who is “meta” textual—alongside, above, or transcending a text—is an apt image for a metatextual reading of the dramatized Gower of Shakespeare’s *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*.1 Highly aware of his textual status, Shakespeare’s Gower anxiously attempts to reconsider, renegotiate, and finally redefine his choric role. His anxious performance of this role is thematically linked to the play’s pervasive distaste for and retreat from too-intimate sexuality. Gower shifts from his choric and paternal role just as Pericles runs from incest in his travels.

Critics such as Cynthia Marshall have dealt with a metadramatic Gower. In her study of Shakespeare’s last plays, Marshall has proposed a particularly Gower-centric reading of *Pericles*, suggesting that “Gower is charged with mediating temporal and eternal perspectives on the action in Pericles. . . . Yet he is a partially unstable and in many ways unsatisfactory mediator. The patent inadequacy and impracticality of many of his interpretive suggestions prompt the audience also to consider other perspectives for interpreting the actions on stage” (65). Certainly Gower is aware, in the most metadramatic way possible, of his marginal-yet-mediating position. He analyzes the significance and insignificance—the textuality and the physicality—of his own body and voice (Weimann 415-417). Gower muses upon himself as actor, author, mediator, fictional textual object, and, finally, unnecessary dramatic entity.

F. David Hoeniger’s seminal “Gower and Shakespeare in *Pericles*” contrasts the *Henry V* Chorus with Gower, noting that though the *Henry V* Chorus “whets our appetite for the heroic action” and “strives to infect us with his nationalistic enthusiasm,” there is “nothing about him that is particularly unusual, at least in a Shakespearean drama” (463). Gower,
on the other hand, surprises us with "his quaint, archaic, moralizing lines" and, probably, his quaint appearance as well.\(^2\) Hoeniger in his preface to the New Arden *Pericles* notes that Gower's shift from an archaic style with stiff, metrical regularity is accompanied by a change in attitude toward his audience: "Gower no longer merely presents the scenes to our eyes and judgment: he asks us to co-operate imaginatively with the actors" (lv). Although Hoeniger is persuasive in his focus on the dramatic line of Gower's character, Gower's movement from being the sole, all-powerful storyteller of *Pericles* is more subtly informed by anxiety over his narrative role than by the jovial collaborative mode used by the *Henry V* Chorus.\(^3\) When the *Henry V* Chorus requests the troupe be permitted to work "on your imaginary forces" and asks the audience to "suppose within the girdle of these walls / Are now confin'd two mighty monarchies," the purpose is to overcome a practical theatrical limitation (1. Cho.18-20). This mode is very different from Gower's request that the audience "Be attent" and "With your fine fancies quaintly [echo]: / What's dumb in show I'll plain with speech" (3. Cho.11-14). Gower's declaration reflects more than theatrical insufficiency and his humility. He asks the audience to share the authorial position for the duration of the dumb show. "Quaintly" here has none of the modern sense of "old-fashioned" but instead of "innovative and new." Gower will "plain," gloss or explain if anything was unclear, but the audience's "fine fancies" are necessary adornments upon the dumb show.

Gower's desire to shift authorial responsibility onto the playgoers is often viewed as charming and kindly collaborative; there are moments, however, when his desire to share presentational authority seems more informed by anxiety and distaste for his material and his choric position. Gower's displacement of authorial and narrative focus begins in his opening speech as he refers to the play as "my rhymes" and a few lines later notes, "I tell you what mine authors say" (1. Cho.12, 20).\(^4\) While a reference to source material is generically appropriate for a romance, Gower's defensive tone and the positioning of this self-excluding interjection are notable, particularly when he's just called the play "my rhymes" (12). This moment of authorial slippage occurs as Gower is about to set out the incest plot. His awkward removal of himself at that moment suggests a squeamishness about the subject matter, an anxiety that thematically underscores the prime anxiety of the play--the fear of becoming too intimate.

Deanne Williams has argued that Gower's "efforts to moralize the narrative are . . . consistent with the exploits of tyrants such as Antiochus: just as Antiochus supplies a verbal 'gloze' to obscure his own