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**Masahiko Kanno: Confessio Amantis—Prologue**

Longing for peace is the everlasting desire of the human beings. With what eyes did people living in England of the fourteenth century see and think about the state of affairs of their age? **John Gower** (1330—1408), who was contemporary with **G. Chaucer** (1340?—1400), longed for peace and desired to return to the situation as it should be. How was the world experienced through the standpoint on which he was placed? It is not only his purpose but his true intention that he wanted to write a book about the ages, present and past, 'burel clerk' as he was. All the conditions have changed and books have not been cherished as before, and that he had a comprehension that there would be lost the fames and good examples of many virtuous people if good books ceased to be read. What was the state, society, church, court and public feeling which he had in his mind as an ideal, and what was the target against which he turned his attack? They are plainly represented in the prologue of **Confessio Amantis**. By contrasting the state of present with that of past, we can understand the former more clearly. Though the society he conceived as an ideal may be medieval if seen from the modern point of view, his keen eyes for things corrupted are still bright.

In old times all things went well, the world flourished and the life of human kind was healthy. Not only riches but also respect for noble deeds, the properties of each person and station in life were placed as they should be. No debates occurred on the cities, justice was exalted and people were faithful to their rulers. The true minds of men appeared on their faces and their true thoughts were expressed by means of words. Virtue was respected and vice was despised by all. Such was his glorification for the past.

Now it is the time in which that is putting the cart before the horse. In the odd similetic expression he states.

Now stant the crop under the rote. (118)

The conditions in the world have completely changed. More than anything else 'love is falle into discord', and hate is introduced instead of love. At present there exists no steadfast peace, or justice, or 'ryhtwisesse.' 'Ther is no regne of alle ourrake.' It goes beyond man's power. 'The hevne wot what is to done.' In order to save such a state of affairs, how did he think? He thought it is the only rescue that the rulers in the world receive good advice and are obeyed by their people. However clever one man may be, twelve men are more clever. If the king and the council were united in a body, the war may be come to an end. The discrepancy between the king and the council at that time is represented. It is the war that is contrary to the peace in Christianity, and the people do not receive any profit from it. What attracts our especial attention to consists in the fact that it was both Gower's voice and that of common people.

And that I take to record

Of every lond for his partie

The comun vois, which mai noght lie; (122—124)

The voice of common people is mirrored in those passages. G. C. Macaulay notes as follows: 'This appeal to the common voice, the **'comune dictum,'** is characteristic of our author, who repeats the proverb 'Vox populi vox dei' several times in various forms.<sup>1</sup> His own opinion and the opinions of common people at once. Naturally their eyes were directed toward the churches at that time. The state of churches was contrasted by means of present and past. The consciousness of comparison and contrast may be characteristic in Gower's expression. Of course, an emphasis is placed on the present state. As soon as the men begin to think that 'the hevene is ferr, the world is nyh,' its result is obvious to us. What they have in their minds are only vain glory and covetousness. Tithe ('disme') is immediately brought to the war, and the keys of the church are turned into the sword. G. C. Macaulay notes as follows: 'The allusion is the circumstances of the campaign of the Bishop of Norwich in 1385.' Their desire and covetousness are destroying charity, and delicacy has pushed abstinence away. Etna, that is the fire of envy, is burning in the clerks' minds. While they are eating and drinking idly, the fire is spreading on and on. The 'scisme' of the churches gives rise to the Lollard and many pagans among the clerks. In 1381 Wat Tyler's rebellion occurred. As to these revolts G. R. Coffman states: 'He (Gower) did not see the revolt as 'a popular front.' He saw it only as an uprising that was destroying the established order, the only one he could imagine. In this respect he was a spiritual brother of the author of **Piers Plowman**: both wanted merely spiritual conversion of individuals, with no social upheavals.' Whenever I think about Gower and Chaucer, I find how different their characters are. As stated aptly in Poole's **Medieval England**, Chaucer, for all his satire and coarseness, is at every point the unquestioning believer, at home with the devotion of his time and admiring simple piety wherever he sees it.<sup>2</sup> They are very different in mind and character. 'Lollardie' is the name by which a group of Wyclif (1320?—84) was called with somewhat contemptuous intentions. With greater vehemence Gower preaches to the audience.

It were betre dike and delve  
 And stonde upon the ryhte feith,  
 Than knowe al that the bible seith  
 And erre as somme clerkes do. (352—355)

From these passages his utterance becomes more severe and he bitterly criticizes the church. In old time the life of clerks was the example and mirror of all the men. The spiritual life at that time is described

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- 1 In addition, the formula **vox populi, vox dei** had some political currency in the fourteenth century. A prince was to learn wisdom from the voice of the people. Though he is not wholly consistent about the maxim, **vox populi, vox dei** is essentially valid to Gower, and it is almost the last thought he leaves in the mind of the reader: (Eric W. Stockton, **The Major Latin Works of John Gower**, (University of Washington Press. 1962.)p.19.
  - 2 **Medieval England**, ed. by A. L. Poole, (Oxford 1958.)p.436.
  - 3 G. R. Coffman: **John Gower in his most significant role** in Middle English Survey, ed. by Edward Vasta (University of Notre Dame Press 1965.)p.228.

as follows: Nevertheless we can say that certain epochs have been notable for the external manifestation of spiritual power, and others for its absence. The period of awakening and reform from 1000 to 1250 was undoubtedly one of remarkable spiritual renewal and achievement; thenceforward, for more than two centuries, the August sunshine waned to December. Speaking very loosely, we may call the century and a half from 1070 to 1216 the monastic period of English spirituality.<sup>1</sup> There were no purchase and sale of ordination or struggles in the church and the vain honour on the earth was not desired. Modesty ('Humilite') was respected highly and pride, one of the Seven Deadly Sins, was regarded as vice. Alms ('Almesse') was given to the poor whoever want it. People were fair in word and deed.

And thus cam ferst to mannes Ere  
 The feith of Crist and alle goode  
 And sobre and chaste and large and wyse (236—239)

On the other hand how was the condition of the churches? In the words of Poole the fourteenth century saw neither monk nor friar nor bishop canonized.<sup>2</sup> There are prevailing the purchase and sale of ordination and worldly ignominious struggles. Especially now that even the clerks are participating in the war, who on earth can create peace?

But whil the lawe is reuled so  
 That clerkes to the werre entende,  
 I not how that thei scholde amende  
 The woful world in othre thinges,  
 To make pes betwen the kynges  
 After the lawe of charite,  
 Which is the propre duete  
 Belongende unto the presthode. (252—259)

If they only realize the virtue well which the Bible teaches to us, they need not dispute as to the Papacy. Each man is engaged only in his own worldly thing, but there is none who devotes himself to the common profit (L. **res publica**).<sup>3</sup> As is such a state, the fold of Crist is broken, the flock of sheep are devoured. The shepherds facinated by the earthly riches are hurting sheep, far from healing them.

The scharpe pricke in stede of salve  
 Thei usen now, wherof the hele  
 Thei hurte of that thei scholden hele (396—398)

His sharp words are uttered as follows:

And upon this also men sein,  
 That fro the leese which is plein

1 A. L. Poole, **op. cit.** p. 433.

2 Ibid. p. 435.

3 And ech of hem himself amendeth Of worldes good, bot non entendeth To that which **comun profit** were (375—377).

Into the breres thei forcacche  
 Her Orf, for that thei wolden lacche  
 With such duresce, and so bereve  
 That schal upon the thornes leve  
 Of wulle, which the brere hath tore;  
 Wherof the Schep ben al totore  
 Of that the hierdes make hem lese.  
 Lo, how thei feignen chalk for chese,  
 For though thei speke and teche wel,  
 Thei don hemself therof no del: (407—418)

Considering from the passages quoted above, the confidence in the church is never felt whatever. Here his anger has reached the climax as seen in 'Lo, thei feignen chalk for chese.' There are some virtuous people, but most of them follow after Simon. If we look into the church, we find that there is a great difference between word and deed.

Also thei sein, good is to save  
 With penance and with abstinence  
 Of chastite the continence;  
 Bot plainly forto speke of that,  
 I not how thilke body fat,  
 Which thei with deynte metes kepe  
 And leyn it softe forto slepe. (470—476)

G. R. Owst says that 'rehearsing the vices and corruption in Church and State once again, the poet decides not only that the days are evil, but that "the ends of the world are come."<sup>1</sup> Clearly the preacher's message had weighed all too heavily upon his mind. So much, then, for John Gower.' In this Prologue his remarks as to fortune and the stars are worth noticing. The conception of them has been introduced into the sphere of the medieval literature, along with the idea of courtly love. His attitude toward them is somewhat different from other writers.' He repeatedly insists that it is the man himself that causes a man to fall, not fortune nor stars. He, therefore, concludes as follows: 'So that the man is overal His oghne cause of wel and wo.' From such a viewpoint the salvation of the corrupted society, Gower thought undoubtedly, lies in the use of reason, that is, wisdom and virtue. It is clear that he regarded reason as a worthy element. Finally I cite the following statements from Coffman.<sup>2</sup> 'The rule of reason, to repeat, is the basic element in his conception of an ordered universe. The use of this God-given intellectual power will, he is convinced, result in a world of peace and harmony, in proper human relations, in worthy rulers, and in a prosperous England.'

1 G. R. Owst: **Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England**, p. 231.

2 G. R. Coffman: **John Gower in his most significant role**, in *Middle English Survey*, ed. by Edward Vasta (University of Notre Dame Press 1965.) p. 219.