

LOVE & ETHICS
IN GOWER'S
CONFESSIO AMANTIS



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Peter Nicholson

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PREFACE



PERHAPS THE WORST THING that can be said about a new book on medieval literature nowadays is that it could have been written forty years ago. My excuse for offering this study of Gower at the present time is that it should have been, but wasn't. During the period when Chaucer, Langland, and the *Gawain*-poet were all receiving the close and sustained attention associated with formal criticism, Gower, by comparison, was almost entirely neglected. The study of fourteenth-century English poetry has since moved on to other concerns, but the best of the most recent work on Chaucer and his contemporaries still rests on a shared understanding of the text, both philologically and structurally, including its inherent paradoxes and ambiguities, that is the product of a preceding generation of scholars, and we don't have such a critical foundation for the *Confessio Amantis*. The most important monument of Gower criticism during this rich period, that of John Hurt Fisher,¹ treated the *Confessio* as the third part of a trilogy that included both of Gower's two earlier long poems, *Mirour de l'Omme* and *Vox Clamantis*, and thus passed over not only the differences in language but also the vast differences in form and content among these works; and it treated Gower himself less as a poet than, in the words of Fisher's subtitle, as a "moral philosopher." Later, when a serious and sustained critical discussion of the *Confessio* began, it was marked first, under the influence of Fisher, by a greater concern for the poem's political themes than for what it had to say about its ostensible subject, human love, and then, among those who recognized that it offered a serious treatment of love, by a kind of watered down neo-Augustinianism that still placed the poem in the shadow of the *Mirour* and the *Vox*.

There were many exceptions to this very broad characterization, of course:

J. A. W. Bennett, Derek Pearsall, H. A. Kelly, and J. A. Burrow, to cite only those who have had the greatest influence on the present study, saw the poem very differently and presented their readings both articulately and forcefully. Despite their efforts and those of other scholars, however, a received view of the *Confessio* emerged that has four principal components: first, that the poem is a reflection of Gower's political concerns during the troubled period of the late 1380s and 1390s; and then, to the extent that the poem is actually concerned with love, that Amans, the character who is designated by the title, is presented to us as an embodiment of human sinfulness; that the task of Genius, his confessor, is to win him away from his love; and that the underlying moral structure of the poem is the opposition between *caritas* and concupiscence, or in broadest terms, between the love of God and human love. These assumptions do not answer every question about the poem; in fact even among who share the received opinion there is still no agreement over whether Genius is the spokesperson for Gower's views on these matters or for the mistaken views that Gower demands that we reject. But these propositions themselves have become so prevalent in current writing on Gower that most feel no need either to analyze or to defend them. It is one purpose of this study to offer a different view of the poem: to argue that the principal subject of the *Confessio Amantis* is human love; that Amans is a quite ordinary mortal with his share of virtues as well as sins; that the issue in the poem is not whether or not Amans should be in love but rather how he might become a more virtuous lover; and most importantly of all, that the moral structure of the poem is the fundamental harmony rather than opposition between God's ethical demands and love's.

These are rather large claims, but the issues that they raise are central not just to the most basic understanding of the poem but to virtually everything that one might want to say about it, and they also lead to some interesting conclusions on the ways in which the poem transcends mere ethical instruction, particularly in its depiction of Amans' moral alternatives and in the pervasive differences between his world and the world depicted in the tales. To demonstrate their validity, we have to return to some of the most traditional methods of literary study: to a close reading of the text; to an examination of precisely how the *Confessio* is like and unlike Gower's other two long poems; to an attempt to situate the work in contemporary literature by examining its relation to the generic traditions on which it draws; and to an examination of how the various elements in its unique and complex design, including Amans' confessions, his priest's exposition, and the many tales, interact in the creation of the poem's many lessons. The purpose is to discover what kind of moral work this is—both how its moral issues are framed and what kind of solutions it offers—and also what we can say about it as a poem. These questions are, of

course, linked, for the *Confessio* is the work that most shows Gower to be a poet rather than a philosopher, and the moral wisdom that it contains emerges as much from its form and from its diversity of materials as it does from any explicit statement that it presents.

In seeking to provide some answers to these questions, I hope not just to dispose of what I perceive to be misconceptions but also to open up the study of the *Confessio* in ways that haven't been seriously considered before. I do so fully conscious of the fact that this book cannot and should not have the final word. I am also aware of the limitations in the methods that I have used. In seeking to describe the poem, for instance, as I think Gower himself might have understood it, I knowingly stop short of several other sorts of questions that one might justifiably raise, for instance about the ways in which it is either subversive of or blind to its own ideological foundations. I may wish to participate in that discussion too, but I offer the present study of the poem's more ostensible purposes in the hope that it will be a useful foundation for the examination of these and other issues in the future.

In quoting from the text of Gower's poems, I have used the standard four-volume edition of G. C. Macaulay, *The Complete Works of John Gower* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899–1902), the second and third volumes of which were published (and are more commonly available) as *The English Works of John Gower*, Early English Text Society, e.s. 81–82 (1900–1901; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1969).² Particularly with the *Confessio Amantis*, however, I have freely revised both the punctuation and the capitalization for what I perceived to be the sense (in which case I have sometimes included a note on alternatives) and for the purpose of bringing the presentation of the text more in line with modern practice. Since I hope to reach an audience not already familiar with Gower, I have added marginal glosses for words that might cause some misunderstanding, which I hope will not be too distracting for more experienced readers. There is also another feature of Gower's language that can cause some initial confusion: in addition to some more common and familiar shifts of word order, his Latinate habit of moving words and phrases, particularly modifiers and direct objects, to a position before the conjunction or pronoun with which the clause to which they belong would ordinarily begin.³ In his description of Paulina's grief, for instance, he writes:

And thus wepende ^o sche compleigneth,	<i>weeping</i>
- Hire faire face and al desteigneth ^o	<i>stains</i>
With wofull teres of hire yē.	

(1.965–67)

The expected order for the second line would be “And al desteigneth hire faire face.” When such a transposition occurs, I have signaled it, as in this example, with a discreet tilde.

I naturally owe a great deal to all those who have written on Gower before me, from most of whom I have profited even when I have disagreed. Since my debt to those who wrote before 1987 is fully recorded in my *Annotated Index*, I have tried to limit my notes to that which is most strictly relevant and to studies that have appeared more recently. Two portions of this book originally appeared elsewhere. The chapter on Book 1 is a much revised version of my essay “The ‘Confession’ in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*,” which appeared in *Studia Neophilologica* 58 (1986): 193–204; and part of the chapter on Book 2 appeared in different form in “The *Man of Law’s Tale*: What Chaucer Owed to Gower,” *Chaucer Review* 26 (1991): 153–74. I wish to express my gratitude to the publishers of these two journals for permission to reprint this material.

My more personal debts are many, but I would like to record just two. Robert F. Yeager not only gave some needed direct encouragement to this project but also, through his many years of efforts to encourage the study of Gower more generally, provided the context in which a book like this could even be imagined. And my colleague Miriam Fuchs, in her own gentle but no-nonsense way, saved me from slipping into despair more often than she realizes.

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ABBREVIATIONS



<i>Alerion</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Dit de l'Alerion</i>
<i>Behaigne</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Jugement du roy de Behaigne</i>
<i>CA</i>	Gower, <i>Confessio Amantis</i>
<i>CB</i>	Gower, <i>Cinkante Balades</i>
<i>CT</i>	Chaucer, <i>Canterbury Tales</i>
<i>DPN</i>	Alain de Lille, <i>De Planctu Naturae</i>
<i>Fonteinne</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Dit de la Fonteinne amoureuse</i>
<i>Her.</i>	Ovid, <i>Heroides</i>
<i>LGW</i>	Chaucer, <i>Legend of Good Women</i>
<i>Lyon</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Dit dou Lyon</i>
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
<i>Met.</i>	Ovid, <i>Metamorphoses</i>
<i>MO</i>	Gower, <i>Mirour de l'Omme</i>
<i>Navarre</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Jugement du roi de Navarre</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>Remede</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Remede de Fortune</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Le Roman de la Rose</i>
<i>T&C</i>	Chaucer, <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>
<i>VC</i>	Gower, <i>Vox Clamantis</i>
<i>VD</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Livre dou Voir Dit</i>
<i>Vergier</i>	Machaut, <i>Le Dit dou Vergier</i>