

**Gower's 'Middel Weie':
The Poetic Breadth of the *Confessio Amantis***

by

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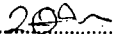

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to demonstrate that John Gower's *Confessio Amantis* is a work of great philosophical and poetic sophistication which is worthy of greater critical attention and esteem than it has so far received. It attempts to do this in a number of ways: firstly, it outlines some of the reasons that Gower's poem has been somewhat neglected; secondly, it looks at Gower within his literary context; thirdly, it examines the poem in the context of the poet's social, religious and political milieaux. By examining the poem from these perspectives, it is hoped that some critically useful indications of the intellectual *breadth* of Gower's poem will have been delineated.

Chapter One: Place and Time

Other critics have traced the development of Gower's adverse critical reputation, but it is Gower's proximity (poetically, linguistically and socially) to his more famous contemporary, Geoffrey Chaucer, which has contributed most to Gower's denigration. While his works have been more closely scrutinised in recent decades, a full appreciation of Gower's work can be achieved only by examining Gower in his own right. An analysis of the *Confessio* in relation to Gower's most probable intended audiences indicates a poet striving to produce a work to which a wide range of people could respond to and make use of on a number of levels. Similarly, Gower's view of himself as an author, as indicated by the Prologue of the poem, is further evidence of the breadth and seriousness of his endeavour.

Chapter Two: Modes and Styles

The ways in which Gower chose to frame and to present his ideas are further indications of the poem's sophistication. His use of confession, an analytical dialogue between two people with carefully defined roles, was an innovation which presented many rich poetic and philosophical possibilities. An examination of the role of the sacrament of confession in late fourteenth-century society shows that Gower had chosen a mode of discourse which was not only highly familiar to his audience but which was the most powerful tool for psychological analysis available at that time. Gower makes rich use of that tool to examine his major character, Amans, and, through this 'Everyman' figure, to examine humanity in general. As a 'lover's confession' the *Confessio Amantis* is an examination of human sexuality on one important level, but Gower simultaneously examines 'love' in its

broad, social aspects and so explores aspects of human nature on a macrocosmic level

also.

Chapter Three: Voices and Characters

The focus of this analysis is the central figure, Amans. The way in which Gower presents this figure is vital to an understanding of the breadth of Gower's achievement in this poem. Amans is an Everyman figure both as an archetypal lover and as an archetypal human being. Iconographical and textual evidence is surveyed to examine the presentation of this vital figure, as are relevant calendrical schemes and the *topos* of the Twelve Ages of Man. The breadth of possible interpretation built into the figure of Amans is another indication of the breadth of meaning in the poem. The relationships between Amans and the other major poetic figures in the work, Genius, Venus and Nature, show that Gower aimed to present a carefully considered, well constructed and intellectually challenging vision of love and its roles in the cosmos.

Chapter Four:- Findings and Outcomes

The confessional dialogue and its conclusion which make up the bulk of the poem are devoted to these microcosmic and macrocosmic concerns. They are framed and complemented by the poem's prologue and epilogue, which reinforce the poem's social and political concerns. Gower was highly concerned with the politics of his time, and wrote the poem to *inform* those politics by showing a path towards a 'common good'. By examining the political environment in which the *Confessio* was written, we can get some idea of what motivated him to write this poem and why he conceived of it as he did. The total structure of the poem makes it clear that he wished it to be both a poem which could be enjoyed and a proposal of a 'middle way' which could be *used*, by people of his own time and in times to come. He attempted to write a poem for everybody. The conclusion of the study serves to indicate further areas of study which this kind of analysis of Gower's poem could make possible.

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Dedicated to the memory of Brian Michael O'Neill
(1939-1990)

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Prefatory Note

This study grew out of a feeling, on reading the *Confessio Amantis* for the first time (after having read brief references to it for several years), that John Gower has been grossly misrepresented. He is a poet who is often referred to, but seems to be rarely read. The overwhelming impression which a student of medieval literature who has not read the *Confessio* gains from these many references is that Gower is, at best, a rather narrow poet, particularly compared to Geoffrey Chaucer. When I actually read the *Confessio*, however, my impression was one of the poem's extraordinary breadth. It was intriguing to discover a poem which was so rich and to find a poet who manages to achieve so much without being ostentatious. It was even more intriguing that this writer, and this poem, could be so widely misrepresented and, often, denigrated.

One thing which is consistent across almost all critical studies of the *Confessio*, including quite recent ones, is that they seem to approach the poem with a certain narrowness of focus. The emphasis of the majority of these analyses is almost invariably on the poem's *exempla*. The reasons for this emphasis, and my objections to it, are discussed at greater length below, but I have striven to avoid such a focus in my study. My intention is to look at the breadth of Gower's conception: to look at the total poem. I would argue that we can begin to understand what Gower was trying to achieve through his *exempla* only by looking at the wholeness of the *Confessio*. This is not to say that I believe the tales to be unimportant - they are, of course, integral - but the context in which they are placed has been ignored or dismissed too often. For example, Russell Peck's abridged edition of the poem manages to fit the work into 493 pages largely by omitting almost all of the non-tale material: the 'frame' of the work and the 'digressions'.¹

This study aims to examine the breadth of Gower's poetic achievement by analysing it from what is, I trust, a broader perspective: to look at it as a confessional dialogue with a wide range of utilities rather than tales framed by a narrative device. It is for this reason that it concentrates almost entirely on the poem's non-tale material. It is also for this reason that I attempt to use both historical and literary evidence to examine Gower's social environment, his audience and other writers who he may have known. In this way I hope to indicate that Gower's breadth stems from the remarkable literary and social milieu in which he worked.

Gower's conception of himself as an author is another indication of the philosophical seriousness of the *Confessio*, and of the breadth of the author's concerns.

¹*Confessio Amantis*, Russell A. Peck (Ed.) (Rinehart and Winston: New York, 1968).

Finally, analyses of the complexities involved in the major characters in the poem and their interrelations, and of the work's fundamental political themes attempt to further indicate the breadth and wholeness of the *Confessio Amantis*. I believe that it is only by broadening our critical focus that we can truly appreciate this remarkable poem, rather than regarding it as the *Canterbury Tales*' poor relation.

CHAPTER ONE - Place and Time

Living in Chaucer's Shadow

In the opening line of his chapter on John Gower in *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis observes, with a certain degree of understatement, that 'The artistry of the *Confessio Amantis* has not always been recognised.'¹ Indeed, Gower's largely adverse critical reputation is something which no critic dealing with the *Confessio* can possibly avoid or ignore. There have been several accounts of the evolution of Gower's critical reputation, most notably that of John H. Fisher² - with the earlier period examined in greater detail by N. W. Gilroy-Scott³ - which trace the transition from the almost formulaic praise of the fifteenth-century to his equally formulaic condemnation and dismissal by critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries.

Fisher demonstrates convincingly that, for the most part, Gower's fall from high literary esteem was due more to personal criticisms of Gower himself, based on pseudo-historical evidence, rather than on actual analysis of his poetry:

The logic by which one proceeds from personal to literary denigration is well illustrated in "On Gower, the Kentish Poet, His Character and Works, " by W. Warwick, Esq. (1886) in which it is asserted that Gower was (1) a shady businessman, (2) a bad friend (3) a disloyal subject (4) an inferior poet, and eventually (5) a model for the Merchant in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale!⁴

Virtually all the adverse criticism from the late eighteenth-century onwards analysed by Fisher is based on Gower's supposed 'falling-out' with Chaucer and his apparent change of political allegiance. He places less emphasis on the other complaint against Gower which developed in

¹C.S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1936). p. 198.

²J.H. Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (Methuen Publishing: London, 1965) pp. 1-36.

³N.W. Gilroy-Scott, 'John Gower's Reputation: Literary Allusions from the Early Fifteenth Century to the Time of *Pericles*', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 1 (1971), pp. 30-47.

⁴Fisher, p. 28.

the nineteenth century, and which has persisted to this day, in a way in which the personal criticisms have not: namely, that Gower's poetry is dull and lifeless.

This most enduring criticism of Gower would seem to owe its origins to the fact that, over the last six centuries, he has appeared 'almost constantly in the company of Geoffrey Chaucer'⁵. In the fifteenth-century Gower was consistently held up for (rather uncritical) praise alongside Chaucer as poets who, in James I's words:

on the steppis satt
Of rethorike, quill thai were lyvand here,
Superlatiue as poetis laureate,
In moralitee and eloquence ornate.⁶

In the sixteenth century, they became widely recognised and praised as the founders of English poetry; in the seventeenth, they were posthumously (and erroneously) declared England's first poets laureate; by the eighteenth century, Gower was condemned for his supposed quarrel with Chaucer; and, in the nineteenth century, he was further condemned for his supposed disloyalty to Richard II which, apparently, stood in contrast to Chaucer's supposed loyalty.

Regardless of the turns his critical reputation has taken, discussion of Gower appears to be impossible without mentioning him with, and comparing him to, Geoffrey Chaucer. There is, of course, no denying that Chaucer is the greatest English literary figure of his day and it is inevitable, therefore, that he will always loom large in any analysis of fourteenth-century literature; but circumstances make it unavoidable that this will be more the case with Gower than with Chaucer's other literary contemporaries. The two men were friends who both lived in London; they were, generally speaking, of the same social class; they were both widely read; they were both associated with the Court; both wrote 'frame narratives'; and each commented on and to the other in their poetry. As a result, the links between Chaucer and Gower are far closer than those between any other English literary figures of the time.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, criticism has slowly come to terms with the immense range of ideas and perspectives which Chaucer's poetry offers. Attention has turned to other works of the period: *Piers Plowman*, the works of the Cotton Nero-Poet, the Harley

⁵Fisher, p. 1.

⁶James I of Scotland, *The Kingis Quair*, ed. J. Norton-Smith (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1971), ll. 197-202.

Lyrics, the *Alliterative Morte Arthur* and so on. For a variety of reasons, these other great works of the fourteenth-century all seem to stand far enough away from Chaucer's work to avoid being dwarfed by him. They can be, and have been, usefully compared to Chaucer's poetry; but, at the same time, those other poets' works have been studied in their own right in a way which, until recently, Gower's work has not.

The result of this close association with his contemporary would appear to be a persistent and unspoken expectation that John Gower should somehow be *like* Geoffrey Chaucer. Many critics turn from the 'Wife of Bath's Tale' to the 'Tale of Florent', from the 'Man of Law's Tale' to the 'Tale of Constance' and, indeed, from *The Canterbury Tales* to the *Confessio Amantis*, expecting to find in Gower's work something similar to Chaucer's wit, zest and urbane virtuosity; but it is as unrealistic to expect this of Gower as it is to expect it of Langland, or the Cotton Nero-Poet. Gower's close association with Chaucer should not and, indeed cannot be avoided; but a full and rich appreciation of this skilled, careful and sophisticated writer can be achieved only if his work is analysed in its own right.

The first steps in such an endeavour were made by C. S. Lewis in the *Allegory of Love*. Lewis argues, with characteristic eloquence and with an authority based on careful and sympathetic reading, that the *Confessio* is a courtly work in the mould of the *Romance of the Rose*; a work with a broad scope and with a number of intentions, which is combined into a sometimes encyclopædic whole by an interest in tale-telling. He is the first major critic to recognise and examine Gower's unique style, and declares that he is 'our first considerable master of the plain style in poetry, and he has the qualities and defects that go with such a style. He can be dull: he can never be strident, affected, or ridiculous.'⁷ While Chaucer chose satire, comedy and realism as his foci, Gower chose moral philosophy, complaint and analysis (of both the self and society) as his. Lewis is fair: he does not fall into the trap of overpraising Gower, yet he manages to show the previous critics' *under* praise of him for the superficiality that it is.

After 1936, 'a continuous, though small, stream of sympathetic interpretation'⁸ ensued, though this has grown considerably in volume in more recent years, particularly with the

⁷ Lewis, p.201.

⁸ Fisher, p.35.

publication of collections of Gower studies by A. J. Minnis⁹ and R. F. Yeager¹⁰. Many of Lewis' conclusions may now seem less plausible than they did and his omissions are now more obvious in the light of this more recent work¹¹; but all who have subsequently written on the *Confessio* owe him an immense debt. Gower's qualities — his seriousness, sympathy, compassion, and intelligence — are now more widely recognised. His is a quiet and discerning wisdom, but one without severity or prejudice: precisely the qualities Fisher and Yeager have identified in Chaucer's epithet 'moral Gower'¹².

It is ironic that this rich phrase of Chaucer's which is, effectively, the first ever comment on Gower and (implicitly) his poetry that we have, should have been used so often as a stick with which to beat him. Typical of such an interpretation is that of S. A. Brooke who wrote in 1917, 'It is with pleasure that we turn from the learned man of talent (Gower) to Geoffrey Chaucer - to the genius who called Gower, with perhaps some of the irony of an artist "the moral Gower" [sic]'¹³. The image of Gower as a dour, humourless moralist is another which has been very slow to disappear.

Fisher, by examining Chaucer's other uses of the word 'moral', concludes that he meant that Gower embodied what Aristotle called 'moral virtues': liberality and temperance. Similarly, he refers to Aquinas' definition of moral virtue, which is any virtue which affects a man's 'appetitive part'. Fisher concludes that Gower is presented as an exemplary master of the principles of human conduct. Yeager's study examines Chaucer's dedication in connection with Gower's 'public image' at the time of the writing of *Troilus*. He argues that we can see what motivated him to submit his work to Gower's and Strode's correction, by examining the way in which Chaucer's audience would have seen Gower at that time, and the way in which they would have interpreted the word 'moral' — used in this passage for the first time in recorded English. He concludes:

⁹ Gower's '*Confessio Amantis*': *Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A.J. Minnis (D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, 1983).

¹⁰ *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. R.F. Yeager (Western Michigan: Kalamazoo, University, 1989).

¹¹ For example, his dismissal of Gower's epilogue as 'a long and unsuccessful coda' (Lewis, p. 221-222.) and his seeming unawareness of the political and macrocosmic dimensions of the *Confessio*.

¹² Fisher, p.225-227 and R.F. Yeager, ' "O Moral Gower:" Chaucer's Dedication of *Troilus* and *Criseyde*', *The Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984), pp.87-99.

¹³ S.A. Brooke, *English Literature from A.D. 670 to A.D. 1832* (Macmillan: London, 1917). p. 41.

What Chaucer meant by "moral" Gower, then, is probably to be derived from four elements of Gower's poetic reputation as it would have been familiar in London in the mid-1380's: personal and social reformism; conscious (and conscientious) classicism; an advocate's stance; a thorough consistency in his approach to questions of evil and good.¹⁴

While, as Yeager points out, the nascent *Confessio* may have been only a few words on parchment when Chaucer wrote his dedication to *Troilus*, this is the John Gower who emerges as the intellectual force behind his great English work: a sympathetic wisdom, a discerning yet kindly intellect, able to be moral without falling into the merely moralistic.

This modern misunderstanding of Chaucer's expression 'moral Gower' has given rise to a false dichotomy: a contrast between a staid, moral Gower and a merry, lively Chaucer. Chaucer has a popular reputation as simply a teller of ribald tales. This superficial analysis is certainly not accepted by critics nor can it be taken seriously by anyone who has read 'The Knight's Tale', 'The Clerk's Tale', 'The Monk's Tale' or, especially, 'The Parson's Tale'. Despite this, however, many critics are quite prepared to accept Gower's equally superficial reputation as a dour moralist. Just as there is, obviously, far more to Chaucer than merry ribaldry, so there is more to Gower than systematic moralism.

One example of an aspect of his work which is too easy to overlook in the dim light of his critical reputation is his sense of humour. This is almost certainly the result of his being overshadowed by 'merry Chaucer', for Gower's humour is of a far quieter and, in many cases, more delicate nature than that of his friend. There is a great deal of gentle comedy in Gower's presentation of Amans, who is earnest, eager and more than a little naïve. The passages in which he describes his behaviour when in the company of his lady have been recognised by several critics as being both touching and amusing. In his reply to Genius' questioning about the sin of Somnolence, Amans replies by describing his sleeplessness after he has been with her; he tells Genius of dancing with her in her chamber:

For whanne I mai hire hand beclippe,
With such gladnesse I daunce and skippe,
Me thenkth I touche noght the flor;
The Ro, which renneth on the Mor,

¹⁴ Yeager, 'O Moral Gower', p.97.

Is thanne noght so lyht as I:¹⁵

He describes how he delays his departure from her with long good-byes, and sometimes even pretends to have forgotten something to put off leaving still further. This passage, and several others like it, are reminiscent of Chaucer's depiction of the languishing of Troilus; but Gower steers a deliberately careful course between pathos and bathos which allows the reader both to sympathise with Amans' love-sickness and to appreciate its light comedy.

Gower is also capable of more direct humour, such as when Genius advises Amans not to be slothful in love and late for appointments with his lady. He replies that this is not difficult because he is never assigned any time or place 'wher yit to geten eny grace' (Bk IV, l. 272). Earlier, he thanks Genius for the *exemplum* of Daphne's metamorphosis into a tree, saying:

Mi fader, grant merci of this:
Bot while I se my ladi is
No tre, but halt hire oghne forme
Ther mai noman me so enforme. (Bk. III, ll. 1729-32)

This is, of course, worlds away from the robust comedy of 'The Miller's Tale' or the sustained parody of 'Sir Thopas', but it is a characteristically 'Gowerian' humour which is at once quietly comic and carefully sympathetic.

To some of the few critics who have recognised the humour of these passages, they may seem rather like exceptions to the rule in Gower's writing¹⁶; but, as with so many of Gower's literary qualities, his use of comedy is not such that it is easily isolated through the quotation of single lines or brief passages. As Peter Fison observes:

C. S. Lewis . . . speaks of Gower's 'dim glory'. The appellation, which is excellent, has been misunderstood as 'gloomy splendour', though the sense of the word is 'diffuse' rather than 'unemphatic'. For if the basic brick of Gower's poetry is the block of lines rather than the individual phrase, it is unrewarding to pick out one sentence more striking than the rest; the overall effect is the object.¹⁷

¹⁵ All quotations from the *Confessio Amantis* from *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1901), Bk. IV, ll. 2783-87.

¹⁶ For example J.A.W. Bennett, who refers to Amans' comment on the 'Tale of Daphne' as 'a mere hint, a flicker' of humour: *Middle English Literature*, ed. J.A.W. Bennett (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1986) p. 413.

¹⁷ P. Fison, 'The Poet in John Gower', *Essays in Criticism*, 8 (1958), p. 21.

Fison concludes that, in Gower's poetry, the whole is far greater than its parts. Virginia Woolf says that no writer was more difficult to catch in the act of greatness than Jane Austen, and much the same could be said of John Gower, because he is a writer who is not prepared to risk the balance and flow of his work as a whole for the sake of short bursts of pyrotechnic virtuosity.

For this reason, Gower's humour, as well as his skillful characterisation, his deft use of descriptive passages and his pervasive sense of architectonics are often overlooked. Readers who look for the zestful brilliance of Chaucer, the ruggedness of Langland or the depth and detail of the Cotton Nero-Poet in the *Confessio* will be disappointed. Those who pause to listen to Gower's voice, however, will discover that it is just as self-aware, controlled, informed and *individual* as those of his contemporaries.

Indeed, as J. A. Burrow argues in *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet*, each of these writers of the late fourteenth-century can be appreciated far more fully if they are viewed synoptically. These Ricardian Poets are certainly all very different, each writing in his own metrical style and dialect, but they also have a number of attributes in common. Each exhibits great technical skill, seriousness, perception and, most of all, sympathetic and compassionate intelligence. They also share a number of important themes: for example, Gower and Chaucer are both concerned with the contrast between the glory of ages past and the decline of their own times, as expressed in the Prologue to the *Confessio* and in Chaucer's *The Former Age*. Both poets also examine the relation between love and marriage.¹⁸ Langland and Gower are both concerned with political matters generally and the state of the Kingdom of England in particular. Both Gower and the Cotton Nero-Poet are concerned with the close examination of human psychology and motivations, as can be seen in the similarities between the dialogue of the Pearl Maiden and the Jeweller in *Pearl* and that of Genius and Amans in the *Confessio*.

In some ways, however, Burrow's thesis does not go quite far enough. He insists, correctly, on the whole, that the Ricardians cannot be seen as a 'school' or connected group of poets and, instead, sees them as writers associated by the fact that they shared a 'period'.¹⁹ He

¹⁸ This common theme in Gower and Chaucer has been ably examined by Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1975).

acknowledges that Gower and Chaucer knew each other, but rarely refers to this fact in his comparative analysis of their works. The extent to which Chaucer and Gower discussed and shared ideas concerning their poetry can never be known; but Fisher's analysis of the relationship between the writings of the two poets²⁰ would certainly seem to indicate a far higher degree of mutual awareness of literary concerns than Burrow's discussion admits.

Burrow also goes to some lengths to emphasise the differences between the poets of the alliterative tradition and their 'metrical' contemporaries. More recent research, however, seems to show that the gulf between these two traditions was not as wide as has often been claimed. No-one can deny that dialectal variations did act as a barrier to complete cultural cohesiveness in fourteenth century England, as John of Trevisa's comments on the language of the period would seem to indicate:

þerfore hyt ys þat Mercii, þat buþ men of myddel Engeland, as hyt were
parteners of the endes, vnderstondeþ betre þe syde longages, þan
Norþeron and Souþeron vnderstondeþ eyþer oþer.²¹

Despite this, however, Elizabeth Salter makes a strong case for a far greater degree of cohesion.²² Through her examination of manuscript evidence, linguistics and demographic movements in the late fourteenth century, Salter shows that the alliterative poets and their contemporaries in London were probably not just aware of each other, but were familiar with each other's work. Furthermore, if Michael Bennett's conclusions in his article on the historical background to the alliterative writers of the North-West Midlands are correct, then the ties between Gower, Chaucer and the Cotton Nero-Poet may well have been closer still.²³ Bennett argues that the one great nobleman who held estates in Cheshire, had a great interest in the area, and who is known to have sponsored and encouraged poets (including Gower), was King Richard II himself. The possibility that the Cotton Nero-Poet worked with Richard's

¹⁹ J. A. Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1971), p. 141.

²⁰ J. Fisher, pp. 204-302.

²¹ From 'John of Trevisa's Translation of Higden's *Polychronicon*' (53-56), in *Fourteenth Century Verse and Prose*, ed. K. Sisam (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1921).

²² E. Salter, *Fourteenth Century English Poetry: Contexts and Readings* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1983), pp. 52-85.

²³ M. Bennett, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the literary achievement of the North-West Midlands: the historical background', *Journal of Medieval History*, 5, (1979), pp. 63-89.

encouragement (or even patronage), and that he may have worked at Court in London, certainly cannot be proved conclusively, but Bennett's extensive research shows that verse of the *Gawain*-Poet's tradition would have been far from alien to Richard's Court.

A highly defensible case can be made, therefore, for saying that these great fourteenth-century poets may have been far more knowledgeable about each other, their styles and even their work, than Burrow's thesis allows. An awareness that John Gower was part of this remarkable flowering of literature in English in the late fourteenth-century is absolutely essential to a true appreciation of his literary work. Similarly, an awareness that his is a powerful, individual and important poetic voice, in the midst of the others which characterise this period of literature, is essential to a true appreciation of *all* the Ricardian writers. A sound understanding of the poetry of the late fourteenth century can be achieved only by bringing John Gower out of Geoffrey Chaucer's shadow.

Social Gower

The scarcity of documentary material makes any definite analysis of Gower's circle and audience almost completely impossible. The examinations of the poet's life records, mainly records of business transactions, by Macaulay and Fisher²⁴ throw very little light on his literary activities or on his friends and associates. It was, however, an important part of the medieval rhetorical tradition that a work should presuppose an audience, and that it should be shaped to fit that hypothetical audience's tastes, needs and expectations. For this reason, some idea of Gower's literary associations, social circle and probable audience is likely to be a useful guide to the interpretation of his poetry.

Gervase Mathew depicts Gower as a man of two worlds:

Like Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower would seem to have had a double public in London and at the Court; as with Chaucer it was probably Gower's Court public that gave him most of his prestige;²⁵

More recent research into the social order in late fourteenth-century England would seem to modify this view. Much of Paul Strohm's investigation into Chaucer's social position is equally

²⁴ Macauley *Complete Works*, (Vol. 4), vii-xxx and Fisher, 37-69.

²⁵ G. Mathew, *The Court of Richard II* (London: John Murray, 1968), p. 74.

interesting to the student of Gower's work.²⁶ Strohm identifies an increasing awareness of changes in the accepted social structure during the late fourteenth-century. Many of the more conservative thinkers continued to stratify their society according to the traditional divisions of the Three Estates. Gower can certainly be counted among these, at least in that he uses the convention of the Three Estates in his complaint on the present state of the world which forms the bulk of the Prologue to the *Confessio*.

Others, however, began to recognise the social position of a newer class of men. Phillipe de Mézières postulated a hypothetical Fourth Estate of 'nobles non chevaliers et de bourgeoisie' - i. e. 'non-knightly noblemen and the bourgeoisie'²⁷ The Apparel Statute of 1363 classified knights, lords, esquires and other 'gentil gentz' more or less together, but its inclusion of the miscellaneous 'gentil gentz' indicates an awareness of members of a class who were certainly not common, but who were also not quite in the same class as the nobles. The Poll Tax legislation of 1379, on the other hand, takes account of four categories of these 'gentil gentz'. It refers to (i) esquires with an income comparable to that of a knight, i. e. over £100 per annum; (ii) esquires with a lower income; (iii) those who have gained the status of esquire through bearing arms²⁸; and (iv) esquires who were 'en service'. It would seem that these men were certainly considered 'gentil', but not quite noble.

According to Strohm, therefore, Chaucer and Gower were not individuals who straddled the worlds of the bourgeoisie and the Court in a rather uncomfortable manner but, rather, were part of a growing class of men who were beginning to occupy that social position legitimately by reason of their service, talents and abilities, and by means of a new kind of secular, non-feudal and contractual relationship with the nobility. Gower probably belonged to the first of the Poll Tax legislation's categories. His income would seem to have been over £100 a year²⁹ and he was certainly a man of independent means and considerable business acumen.

²⁶ P. Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge [Mass.], 1989).

²⁷ Strohm, *Social Chaucer* p. 4.

²⁸ In this case, the bearing of arms probably refers to having served in a knightly retinue during the Scottish, French or Castilian Wars, rather than to the right to armorial bearings. It is probably in this former sense that Chaucer said he had been 'in arms' during his testimony in the Scrope-Grosvenor Case in 1386.

²⁹ He was able to bequeath £100 in cash to his wife when he died; see Macaulay, *Complete Works*, Vol. IV, p.xviii.

Chaucer's income was rarely above £50 a year, and so he seems to fall into the second category, but his service with Prince Lionel in France in 1359-60 and his administrative and diplomatic appointments in later years place him in the third and fourth categories as well.

Mathew, and other older critics, are happy to describe Gower as a courtier and to see him as a Court artist working under the patronage of the King and other magnates. More recent scholarship has been more sceptical about the relationship between Gower, Chaucer and their contemporaries and the Court. V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne have both examined the evidence regarding the Court Culture in England in the late fourteenth century.³⁰ Sherborne does not consider Gower to have been a courtier, but concludes that he was certainly associated with the Court enough to have been asked to write the *Confessio* (or, at least, 'som newe thing') by Richard II. He points out that Richard must have enjoyed reading English, otherwise Gower would have written the work in French³¹, but further concludes that there is little in the *Confessio* which would indicate that Richard was a man of unusual or sophisticated literary tastes.³² He sees the commission of the *Confessio* by Richard as 'a spontaneous request' which 'indicates some liking for literature, but to see it as an act of patronage, in more than a loose sense, would be unsound.'³³ Similarly, Pearsall concludes that Gower 'held no office and received patronage only late in life from the future Henry IV.'³⁴

Scattergood also examines the evidence for literary patronage at the Court of Richard II.³⁵ He admits that it is possible to argue that Richard and other magnates did directly patronise writers such as Gower and Chaucer, and mentions Gower's first recension dedication to the *Confessio*, the Corpus Christi *Troilus* frontispiece, *The Book of the Duchess*, and the 'Complaint to his Purse' as examples of possible evidence for this position. In his survey of the manuscripts and works identifiably associated with members of the Court, however, he draws

³⁰ *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne (Duckworth Press: London, 1983)

³¹ This would seem to argue against the fact that all of Richard II's vernacular books were in French; a point which has been used to argue against the popularity of English verse at Court.

³² J. W. Sherborne, ' Aspects of English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages' in Scattergood and Sherborne, pp. 1-28.

³³ Sherborne, 'Aspects of English Court Culture', p. 21.

³⁴ D. Pearsall, *Old and Middle English Poetry* (Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1977), p.209.

³⁵ V.J. Scattergood, 'Literary Culture at the Court of Richard II' in Scattergood and Sherborne, pp. 29-44.

attention to the lack of works in English. Latin works, French romances and French translations predominate in the recorded collections of Richard II, his family and his circle. He notes that none of Richard's books can be proved to have been bought by him; in fact, all seem to have been inherited by him from his grandfather, Edward III. Only three of Thomas of Woodstock's eighty books were in English, and these were all biblical translations or commentaries. Of the twenty-two books owned by Richard's tutor, Simon Burley, only a hunting treatise was in English. He concludes that of the books which we can definitely say were owned by the king and his circle very few were in English and none were in Italian. The remainder were in Latin or French, and even the French works were rather old-fashioned. He concludes:

There does, however, appear to have been a good deal of literature of one sort or another . . . circulating in and around the court of Richard II. Though there is little evidence of widespread patronage, the circumstances for the production and dissemination of literature were obviously not unfavorable.³⁶

Jeanne E. Krochalis has produced a similar survey of the books owned and associated with Henry V and his contemporaries, though her conclusions are considerably different to Sherborne and Scattergood's.³⁷ The evidence she discusses is interestingly ambiguous: for example, the *Livre de Seyntz Medicines* of Henry, Duke of Lancaster, Henry V's great-grandfather, is often cited as important evidence of literary activity within the nobility itself. While this is certainly true, she points out that the work may not have been widely known or even highly esteemed at the time. Another of Duke Henry's great-grandsons, Henry V's brother Humphrey of Gloucester, had to buy a copy of his forebear's book, implying that his family did not have a copy of its own. On the other hand, she mentions Walter of Peterborough's Latin poem in celebration of John of Gaunt's Spanish Campaign of 1367 which was addressed to Gaunt's treasurer, John Merton, in a fairly overt, though finally unsuccessful, attempt to receive some financial reward for it.³⁸ That Peterborough thought that he might be rewarded for his work would seem to indicate some kind of occasional patronage at the hands of magnates like

³⁶ Scattergood, 'Literary Culture', p.41.

³⁷ J. E. Krochalis, 'The Books of Henry V and his Circle', *The Chaucer Review*, 23 (1988), pp. 50-77.

³⁸ Krochalis, p. 53.

Gaunt.

Henry's father, Henry IV, also demonstrated an interest in literature. He tried to persuade Christine de Pisan to come and work at the English Court, and Gower, Chaucer and Hoccleve all address him in various works. Chaucer's 'Complaint to his Purse' certainly has an air of comfortable familiarity in its tone of address to the king, and it is possible that it achieved its objective. 'But', Krochalis writes, 'the vernacular poet pre-eminently associated with Henry [IV] is Gower.'³⁹

Gower re-dedicated the *Confessio* to Henry in 1393, when the then Earl of Derby was still but a rising political star. A. I. Doyle argues that the Ellesmere manuscript of the *Confessio* (Huntington Library EL 26 A.17), which bears a swan badge, was actually the 1393 presentation copy from Gower to the Earl, but this is far from certain.⁴⁰ There is no doubt, however, that the *Cinkante Balades* and *In Praise of Peace* were dedicated, and possibly presented, to him.

Gower's literary relationship with Richard II is less certain. His passage in the Prologue to the first version of the *Confessio*, where he describes his meeting with the King on the Thames, is much-quoted and often referred to, but there tends to be some scepticism about how literally we should take Gower's account. It is interesting that Chaucer's briefer and far more oblique reference to presenting *The Legend of Good Women* to 'the quene/ On my byhalf, at Eltham or at Sheene.'⁴¹ is rarely treated with the same wariness. Similarly, Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* depicts the poet-narrator and another character deciding to write a work on the duties of a ruler and present it to Prince Henry. This, too, is far less explicit in terms of evidence about patronage and literary support than Gower's passage and, taken on its own, would probably not encourage the belief that Hoccleve ever presented his work to the Prince. Yet we know that Hoccleve *did* present his work to the young Henry, because the presentation copy, with its miniature depicting the poet and the prince, has survived.

So, even if Gower's reference to his meeting with Richard were more ambiguous than it is,

³⁹ Krochalis, p. 55.

⁴⁰ A. I. Doyle, 'English Books In and Out of Court.' in Scattergood and Sherborne, pp. 169-170.

⁴¹ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., general ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). *The Legend of Good Women*, ll. 496-497.

this would still hardly justify the degree of critical scepticism which this passage has attracted. There seems little reason to doubt Gower's word regarding King Richard's request, though whether or not Gower received any reward for his work, or even whether Richard received a copy of it, is unknown.

Krochalis' results indicate a far greater degree of acceptance of vernacular poetry than Scattergood and Sherborne's analyses would seem to indicate. A brief survey of the English vernacular poems dedicated to members of the Court and aristocracy may not settle the vexed question of patronage, but certainly indicates that this circle was amongst the intended (and, probably, the actual) audience of writers like Gower and Chaucer. As mentioned above, Gower's 1390 version of the *Confessio* was dedicated to Richard II, while the 1393 version, the *Cinkante Balades* and *In Praise of Peace* were all dedicated or addressed to Henry. To these can be added Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, probably directed to John of Gaunt, *The Parliament of Fowls*, possibly written for some occasion associated with the success of the negotiations for the marriage of Richard II and Anne of Bohemia,⁴² 'The ABC' and *The Legend of Good Women* directed to Queen Anne, 'The Lack of Steadfastness', addressed to Richard II and the 'Complaint to his Purse' addressed to Henry IV. If we then consider Henry Scogan's *Moral Balade*, which he sent to Prince Henry and his brothers while they were 'at supper among the merchants of London in the Vintry',⁴³ Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*, and Lydgate's *Troy Book*, which was requested of him by Henry V, it can be seen that there are quite a number of English vernacular works associated with, dedicated to, or commissioned by the kings and nobility of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

It must be concluded, therefore, that these people certainly were among those whom Gower had in mind when he was writing, and that, occasionally at least, they were also among the actual reading or listening audience for these works. Richard II and Henry IV should be counted among Gower's 'intended audience', to use Paul Strohm's terminology.⁴⁴ Strohm

⁴² For the recent revival of this theory see L.D. Benson, 'The Occasion of *The Parliament of Fowls*' in *The Wisdom of Poetry: Essays in Early English Literature in Honour of Morton W. Bloomfield*, ed. L.D. Benson (University of Western Michigan Press: Kalamazoo, 1982), pp. 123-144.

⁴³ J.E. Krochalis, p. 62.

⁴⁴ P. Strohm, 'Chaucer's Audience(s): Fictional, Implied, Intended, Actual', *The Chaucer Review*, 18, (1983),

points out, however, that an intended audience can be a very wide one. That Gower could change his dedication to the *Confessio* without substantial revision shows that he had a wider audience than Richard alone in mind when he began the poem. The reference to Chaucer in Book VIII of the first version of the *Confessio* indicates that his friend was also among those for whom the poem was intended and, by implication, that Gower also had friends and literary associates in mind as he wrote.

Specifically who these friends were can really only be guessed at, given the paucity of surviving evidence. At the end of his survey of the evidence of literary culture at Richard's court, Scattergood concludes that there was a circle of career diplomats, administrators, officials and civil servants who 'appear to have been open to [this] new, serious-minded poetry dealing with philosophy and love, [and] often written in the vernacular.'⁴⁵ Strohm comes to a similar conclusion, and examines the evidence for this enthusiasm among Chaucer and Gower's peers and colleagues.⁴⁶ Of those known to be associated with Chaucer, Simon Burley, Thomas Usk, Thomas Hoccleve, John Clanvowe, Ralph Strode and Gower himself are known to have been writers. Strode, Gower, Philip la Vache, Henry Scogan and Peter Bukton were all mentioned in various poems, making it likely that they were among their intended readers. Several others had literary associations, such as Lewis Clifford who appears to have been a literary go-between for Chaucer and Deschamps, and Richard Stury who was a friend of Jean Froissart. Strohm adds William Beauchamp and William Nevill to this list of Chaucer's probable friends and literary associates.⁴⁷

It is impossible to tell which of these mostly hypothetical literary associates of Chaucer's were also part of Gower's social and literary circle. It is highly likely that, in a city as small as late fourteenth-century London, Gower knew most if not all of these men. The likelihood that he did is increased by the fact that the number of 'gentil gentz' in Chaucer and Gower's social position in London was reasonably small, and those who were associated with the Court or with the City were almost certain to know each other well. The surviving evidence certainly indicates

pp. 136-145.

⁴⁵ Scattergood, 'Literary Culture', p. 40.

⁴⁶ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, pp. 44-46.

⁴⁷ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 45.

that the social circles in which these writers moved were both small and highly interlinked. John de Cobham, who bought Aldington manor from Gower, was associated with Chaucer on several royal commissions. Similarly, Simon de Burgh, who was involved with Gower in the Septvauns Affair, was possibly the esquire of the king's household of that name who is mentioned in five of Chaucer's Life Records.⁴⁸ John de Stodeye, a witness to a business deal of Gower's in 1367, was a friend of John Chaucer, the poet's father. Thomas Hoccleve mentions 'my maistre Gower' in his *Regement of Princes*, and was probably amongst the scribes who worked on Trinity, Cambridge MS R III 2 (581) which includes the *Confessio* and other works by Gower. Gower's address by Venus to Chaucer in the *Confessio* bids him to make his 'testament of love', a possible reference to Thomas Usk's poem of the same name and Usk's *Testament* shows signs of familiarity with both Chaucer and Gower's work.

There is a good chance, therefore, that Gower was associated with a similar group of writers and literary-minded men as his friend Chaucer: a group of educated, able and intelligent men who were able to appreciate 'sentence' as well as 'solaas', and to recognise the 'doctryne' in a poem while admiring its 'mirth'. Gower (and, we can assume, his poetry) is praised by Chaucer for moral excellence, and Usk calls Chaucer 'the noble philosophical poete in Englyssh', but these men admired poetic style as much as didactic or philosophical content. Scogan explicitly admires Chaucer's 'curious' use of language, and Lydgate praises his 'gaye style'.⁴⁹ Strohm argues that the kind of poetry which Gower and Chaucer wrote was likely to have appealed to the others in their social class.⁵⁰ Poetry which was characterised by the juxtaposition of strongly-held views and conflicting ideas, such as the 'middel weie' of the *Confessio Amantis* or the riot of individual opinions presented in the *Canterbury Tales*, is likely to have been appreciated by an audience which not only lived in a period of great change, social mobility and new ideas, but also belonged to a class which stood to benefit greatly from these conditions.

They were also capable of absorbing and experimenting with these new ideas, such as Lollardy in the case of Lewis Clifford and Richard Stury, or Italian forms of poetry in the case

⁴⁸ Fisher, p. 54.

⁴⁹ E. Reiss, 'Chaucer and his Audience', *The Chaucer Review*, 14 (1980), pp. 390-402.

⁵⁰ P. Strohm, 'Chaucer's Audience' *Literature and History*, 5, (1977) pp. 26-41.

of Chaucer. They seem to have been well read and aware, through their connections with the court, of the wider world outside England. If Gower and Chaucer are any indication, then this group's intellectual tastes were catholic and could range from scientific fields to questions of poetics and rhetoric. They were interested in philosophical questions, particularly those which cast some light on the political and social turmoil of their time. Strohm claims that this class of upwardly-mobile esquires, administrators and civil servants who had attained a new social position which lay between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie was very much a phenomenon of the second half of the fourteenth century; a phenomenon which had come to an end by the second quarter of the following century.⁵¹ It is perhaps significant that this same period witnessed an increase of skilled and serious vernacular poetry, emanating largely from this very class of men, which also declined in the early fifteenth century.

Many critics have been happy to picture Gower as a dour, solitary moralist who sat secluded in his rooms at St Mary Overeys pouring out torrents of complaint poetry. If, however, we see him as one of these 'new men' of the late fourteenth-century, moving in a circle of well-read, talented associates, discussing ideas with friends such as Chaucer, with similar literary and intellectual interests, and writing with this informed and vigorous audience in mind, then the *Confessio Amantis* must be seen in a very different light. It becomes one of a considerable number of poetic attempts to come to terms with the juxtaposed and often conflicting values which seem to have fascinated these late-fourteenth century writers.⁵² They attempted to examine love and lust, reason and desire, selfishness and unselfishness, and to work towards some kind of reconciliation of these ideas which, on a wider social level, would lead to the common good.

This broad perspective and context makes it difficult to dismiss the *Confessio* as another of Gower's sermons on the Seven Deadly Sins, as some critics in the past have been inclined to do. With this probable intended audience of kings and magnates on one hand and intelligent, widely read 'gentil gentz en service' on the other, Gower's poem must be seen as a complex and

⁵¹ Strohm, *Social Chaucer*, p. 46.

⁵² The poems of Cotton Nero A x may also be among this group of works, though whether their writer (or writers) was of a similar social position to Gower and Chaucer, or whether he was known to them, is impossible to determine. See n. 23.

carefully considered attempt to answer a number of his audience's moral, intellectual and imaginative needs. The great popularity of his work, as evidenced by both the large number of surviving manuscripts and commendatory references from the early-fifteenth century, would indicate that his attempt was largely successful.

The fact that no fewer than forty-nine manuscripts of the *Confessio* have survived shows that the work had a large reading and listening audience. Twenty-five of them have been identified by Fisher as dating from the early fifteenth-century or, in a few cases, the last years of the fourteenth century,⁵³ indicating that the work achieved great popularity during or very soon after Gower's lifetime. Analysis of the manuscript evidence by Macaulay and Fisher⁵⁴ shows that the fifteenth century manuscripts were derived from several late-fourteenth century versions of the poem which seem to have been quite widely circulated in the last decade of the poet's life. The fact that such a long poem could have been so popular — indeed, almost as popular as the *Canterbury Tales* — comes as a surprise to some critics, particularly to those who are not favourably disposed towards Gower's poetry. The sheer bulk of this manuscript evidence is impossible to ignore, however, and it is clear that Gower's reading audience was a comparatively large one.

Another group of manuscripts which gives us some evidence about a second kind of reading audience which was attracted to Gower's work are the thirteen manuscripts from the fifteenth century which contain individual tales and extracts from the *Confessio*.⁵⁵ Obviously, alongside those in Gower's reading audience who appreciated the work as a whole was another reading audience who appreciated certain sections of the *Confessio* in particular.⁵⁶ This audience may well have come to know these passages through reading or listening to the entire work and, later, have had a copy made of favourite passages. Others may have come to know Gower's work through extracts alone. Some sections of the *Confessio* seem to have been more popular as extracts than others: the 'Tale of the Three Questions' is to be found in five of these

⁵³ Fisher, pp. 303-307

⁵⁴ Macaulay pp. cxxxviii-clxvii and Fisher pp. 303-307.

⁵⁵ C. Brown and R.H. Robbins, *The Index of Middle English Verse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943) pp. 419-20, and R.H. Robbins and J.L. Cutler, *Supplement to the Index of Middle English Verse* (University of Kentucky Press: Lexington, 1965) p. 306.

⁵⁶ It is quite likely that these two audiences overlapped.

thirteen miscellanies,⁵⁷ 'Nebuchadnezzar's Dream' is in three⁵⁸ and the tales of 'Apollonius',⁵⁹ 'Adrian and Bardus',⁶⁰ 'Constance'⁶¹ and 'Tereus'⁶² are all found in two. That some of the tales from the *Confessio* should find their way into miscellanies is not surprising; many of Chaucer's tales from the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Legend of Good Women* can also be found as extracts. It is interesting, however, that sections of the so-called 'frame' of the *Confessio* should also be found in extract form, because this is not paralleled in extracts from Chaucer's frame-narratives.⁶³ These include the passage on Nebuchadnezzar's Dream, as mentioned above; Genius' encyclopædic monologue on the religions of the world; Amans' and Genius' dialogues on somnolence and covetousness; and the conclusion of the poem in Book VIII, l. 2377-2970.

It would seem that the *Confessio* was both a work which was appreciated as a whole and was read as such, and one which could be read (possibly aloud to a listening audience) in short extracts, or 'dipped into' for both pleasure and profit. The two-hundred-line 'Tale of Rosiphelee' could be read to pass a few idle moments; 'The Tale of Constance' could be read aloud to entertain a audience; 'Nebuchadnezzar's Dream' could be meditated on in a more serious moment; Genius' account of the religions of the world could be consulted as a work of reference; and the richness of the poem's conclusion could be returned to and savoured in isolation by someone who had already read or heard the entire work.

The *Confessio*, therefore, was a work which not only had a wide and varied audience, but was also one which seems to have been put to many uses by its readers and listeners. The evidence of the poem's audiences shows that they were aware of both the 'lust' and the 'lore', both the lyrical and the instructive elements which Gower clearly tells us he had built into the work and that they made *use* of them. The uses, needs and expectations of Gower's primary

⁵⁷ Balliol 354 f. 171^b, Cam. Un. Ff. I. 6. f. 45^a, Harley 7333 f. 126^a, Penrose 10 f. 3^a, Cam. Un. Ee. 2. 15 f. 45^a.

⁵⁸ Trin. Ox. 29. f. 190^a, Balliol 354 f. 89^b, Penrose 10 f. 158^a.

⁵⁹ Trin. Ox. 29 f. 55^a, Cam. Un. Ff. I. 6. f. 84^b.

⁶⁰ Trin. Ox. 29 f. 81^b, Penrose 10 f. 13^a.

⁶¹ Trin. Ox. 29 f. 70^b, Harley 7333 f. 120^a.

⁶² Cam. Un. ff I. 6. f. 3^a, Harley 7333 f. 120^a.

⁶³ This point will be discussed at greater length below; see Ch. Two, pp. 38 ff.

audiences of royalty and courtiers, and of friends and literary associates, probably differed markedly from those of his wider, secondary audience; an audience probably entirely unknown to him, who took up his poem in manuscript copies circulating both before and after his death. The fact that Gower's poem was capable of answering the needs of both his primary and secondary audiences is a telling indication of the broad scope of his conception.

Far from being simply an occasional poem written at the behest of Richard II, the *Confessio* is a work which was conceived by its writer as having a broad range of imaginative, moral and intellectual utilities for all three of the audiences identified above. It is a poem which was intended to be shared with a circle of friends and associates with similar æsthetic and philosophical concerns. It was also intended to be directed at those in a position of power; the king and magnates, both for their entertainment and, perhaps more importantly, for their instruction. Finally, it allowed itself to be read by a wider, secondary audience and utilised as a serious attempt to deal with some of the more pressing psychological and social concerns of the late-fourteenth century or, indeed, of any century. The fact that John Gower's work continues to entertain, intrigue and instruct a secondary audience six centuries later is a further indication of the success of that attempt.

Gower as Author

Anyone examining Gower's authorial role is deeply indebted to A. J. Minnis' research on this subject.⁶⁴ Minnis argues that, while Gower saw his authorial role in the *Vox Clamantis* as that of a preacher or prophet, in the *Confessio* he saw it as 'a *sapiens*': a man 'who was wise in the secular sciences of ethics and politics'.⁶⁵ In writing the *Confessio* Gower was making a claim for the authority, in both senses of the word, of those who obeyed the advice that Aquinas had derived from Aristotle, *sapientis est ordinare* ('It is the function of the wise man to order'). As has been emphasised above, it was his intention both to instruct and to entertain, but it is obvious that he always considered the 'earnest' in his poem to be of greater importance than the 'game'. Minnis claims that Gower modelled his work on the commentaries

⁶⁴ In both his *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (Gower Press: Aldershot, 1984) and 'John Gower, *Sapiens* in Ethics and Politics' *Medium Ævum*, 49, (1980) pp. 207-229.

⁶⁵ Minnis, *Theory of Authorship*, p. 177.

on the Sapiential Books of the Old Testament which were made extremely popular in the fourteenth century by theological writers such as Robert Holcot, John Lathby and Thomas Ringstead.⁶⁶ It is highly likely that Gower was familiar with these commentaries, not only because the Scriptural books they analysed were considered to be philosophical works of the greatest importance, but also because they contained a great many useful references to classical philosophers and poets, including Ovid. To the Sapiential Commentators, Solomon, Aristotle and Ovid were all men who were concerned with the same philosophical questions; thus they could all be used to illuminate one another's thoughts.

It may seem strange to the modern reader that medieval writers should have used an erotic poet such as Ovid in a commentary on Scriptural books such as *Wisdom* or *Ecclesiastes*, but the medieval intellectual, including Gower, tended to know Ovid through the *Ovid Moralisé*, and thus saw his work as collections of ethical *exempla* on the subject of love. His tales were seen as upholding legal and chaste love while condemning foolish or unlawful unions. To the medieval thinker, therefore, Ovid was a philosophical writer whose primary concern was the highly important field of sexual ethics. It is for this reason that Ovid is the most important of Gower's sources, much to the consternation of modern readers who come to the *Confessio* with modern rather than medieval preconceptions about Ovid.

According to Minnis, Gower's use of the Sapiential Commentaries went further: he also provided his work with both an intrinsic and an extrinsic prologue, just as the fourteenth century commentators tended to do. In these commentaries, an extrinsic prologue was where the subject to which the text belonged was identified and systematically analysed, while the intrinsic prologue or element was where the text itself was introduced and discussed in terms of the author's intention (*intentio auctoris*), the title (*nomen*) of the text, its essential subject matter (*materia libri*), its intended uses (*utilitas*) and so on.⁶⁷ The Prologue of the *Confessio* falls into Minnis' definition of an extrinsic prologue in that it identifies that the general subject to which the treatise which follows belongs is 'wisdom', while the treatise itself will focus on 'love':

For this prologe is so assised

⁶⁶ Minnis, 'Gower, *Sapiens*', p. 218.

⁶⁷ Minnis, *Theory of Authorship*, p. 30.

That it to wisdom al belongeth:
What wysman that it underfongeth,
He schal drawe into remembrance
The fortune of this worldes chance,
The which noman in his persone
Mai knowe, bot the god al one.
Whan the prologe is so despended,
This bok schal afterward ben ended
Of love, which doth many a wonder
And many a wys man hath put under.

(Prologue, ll. 66-76).

Gower laments that man has turned away from wisdom and has thus fallen into discord and misery. He then analyses the ways in which the Three Estates have abandoned wisdom and the consequences this has had. The primary consequence has been division and discord, and Gower uses the story of Arion's harping to contrast the discord of his day with the accord of times gone by:

Bot wher that wisdom waxeth wod,
And reson torneth into rage,
So that mesure upon oultrage
Hath set his world, it is to drede;
For that bringth in the commun drede,
Which stant at every mannes Dore

(Prologue, ll. 1078-1083)

Finally, however, he concludes that only God has the wisdom to understand the world and he opens the first book of the poem by seeming to turn from the subject of wisdom and 'treten upon othre thinges'. Lines 1-92 of Book I form what Minnis has identified as an intrinsic prologue, also modelled on those to be found in Sapiential Commentaries. Gower tells the reader that he realises that he cannot set the world in order and so he will discuss a subject which 'is noght so strange': the topic of love. He then goes on to make his intentions for doing so clear to the reader and to discuss the essential aspects of his chosen subject, thus establishing his *intentio auctoris* and his *materia*, to use the terminology of the intrinsic prologue. The Latin commentary makes this

passage's function even more explicit since it uses some of the terminology of the intrinsic prologue, *intendit auctor* and *matera libri* for example. It also tells the reader the name of the work, which was another important function of these prologues.⁶⁸ He tells the reader that he intends to demonstrate the nature of love by describing his own situation since he himself is 'on of tho/ Which to this Scole am underfonge'. He intends to use his own case as an *exemplum* for the reader so that they may 'ensample take'. In doing so he makes the purpose, use or *utilitas* of the poem clear.

It is not certain whether Gower himself wrote the Latin commentary which accompanies the text. Macaulay believes that he did, and many later scholars have treated it as though he did.⁶⁹ If so, this is a further indication of the kind of status Gower wanted his work to attain. Not only did he equip it with intrinsic and extrinsic prologues in the tradition of Sapiental Commentaries, but he also provided it with a scholarly apparatus to enable learned readers to find their way around the work, and to summarise and supplement the meaning of the text. Even if the commentary were not by Gower, the fact that it appears in all of the earliest manuscripts of the poem shows that it was added to the work very early, and the fact that it can be found in so many manuscripts indicates that it was considered an appropriate and useful addition to the work. The Latin commentary is certainly far more extensive and systematic than the similar Latin sidenotes which were added to the *Canterbury Tales*.

It would seem that Gower was making a claim to a certain kind of authority, or *auctoritas*, in the *Confessio* by adopting a particular authorial role. In the *Vox Clamantis* he adopted the role of the preacher/prophet; someone who did not write on his own authority as an *auctor* but who simply related what the 'voice of the people' put in his ear. In the *Confessio*, however, he did write as an *auctor*: as one who was in a position where he felt it his duty to dispense wisdom. For this reason, he devoted his extrinsic prologue to the subject of wisdom and to the discord which results when it is abandoned. He then *seems* to change his direction in the work's intrinsic prologue, and discuss a

⁶⁸ Minnis, *Theory of Authorship*, p.181.

⁶⁹ J.A. Burrow, for example.

much simpler topic: love. As the treatise on love which follows proceeds, however, it becomes clear that love and wisdom are actually closely connected. Genius' *exempla* serve to differentiate between wise and unwise love and, furthermore, to deal with love in its wider aspects. Genius instructs Amans in *caritas* across the whole range of human relationships: personal and societal. As his extrinsic prologue had made clear, the subject of his book was wisdom in ethics and politics. The treatise itself makes it obvious that the key to this wisdom was *wise love* on all levels.

Gower was aspiring to a similar level of *auctoritas* to that given by medieval authorities to Ovid and Solomon, who were both seen as wise men who dealt with questions of ethics. He provided the *Confessio* with the apparatus which was to be found in works by these *auctors*, and seems to have intended that those who read his work for its 'earnest' would recognise the work's philosophical status.

CHAPTER TWO - Modes and Styles

Medieval Confession

The concept of penance is one with a long history in Christianity. In its earliest forms, it required no confession or priest but, simply, an outward show of public penitence.¹ Those who had sinned and wished to be reconciled to the Christian community adopted conventional outward signs of their repentance, such as wearing ashes on their heads, garments of sackcloth or goatskin and publicly declaring their guilt and bewailing their sinfulness. When the bishop considered that their penitence was sufficient they were accepted back into the community in a public ceremony. This form of penance was not common and it was considered highly inappropriate for a Christian to go through it more than once after baptism; a convention soon to become formalised in the doctrine of *pænitentia una*.

While this rare and formal penitential system remained dominant throughout most of the Christian world, a markedly different system evolved within the Celtic Church in Ireland. It was here that the concept of private confession to a priest first appeared. Where the Continental system placed its emphasis on the outward display of sorrow, the Celtic system concentrated rather on the penitent's internal motives and on the circumstances of the sin. Such a system necessarily concentrated on the psychology of sin and, therefore, of repentance. The major difference between the Celtic system and later medieval practice was that the penances imposed were laid down in books called Penitentials, rather than being left to the discretion of the confessor.

The Celtic system soon gained popularity and, eventually, dominance throughout Christendom. By the early thirteenth century, however, it was agreed that the entire sacrament of penance was in need of reform. The Penitentials which were used tended to vary from region to region, and the penances they imposed could differ markedly. Priests were often less than

¹The following account of the history of confession is based on the analysis of M. Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner* (Associated University Press: London, 1983) pp. 19-35 and T.N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1977) pp. 3-22.

thorough in their examination of the penitent, and the doctrinal ignorance of both priest and penitent was a consistent problem. These were amongst the issues which Innocent III had in mind when he placed the sacrament of penance on the agenda of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. The result was Canon XXI of that Council: *Omnis utriusque sexus*.

The Canon required that all men and women of sound mind go to a priest to have their confessions heard at least once a year, preferably before receiving communion at Easter. That penances should be left to the discretion of the confessor had been established at the Council of Worms in 868 and this doctrine was reinforced by its inclusion in Gratian's *Decretum*. The new Canon stressed this point and laid an even greater emphasis on the mutual efforts of the confessor and the penitent to effect a psychological and spiritual change in the penitent. This change in emphasis constituted what can only be described as a revolution in the practice of Catholic Christianity. As Braswell says, ideally the 'reformed penitent is self-aware; his encounter with the priest has taught him something about himself, and he determines to make a change in his life'.²

The result of *Omnis utriusque sexus* was a concerted effort by the Church, from 1215 onward, to ensure that the new teaching on penance should filter down even to the most theologically unsophisticated of the laity. The triumph of these new doctrines was largely the achievement of the schoolmen of the University of Paris, so it is not surprising to find that Dominican and Franciscan friars were at the forefront of those who worked to develop the mechanics of the new form of the sacrament. The thirteenth century saw an explosion of literature on the subject of confession.³ Handbooks for confessors were, initially, most common; such as the *Summæ* of Raymond de Penafort and John of Freiburg and the *Liber Pœnitentialis* of Robert of Flamborough. Bishops such as Robert Grosseteste of Lincoln and Peter Quivil of Exeter issued instructions to their priests on how to administer the sacrament most effectively.⁴ Handbooks for pious and literate lay-people were soon to follow, such as the popular *Manuel des Pêchés* and its English translation and amplification, *Handlyng Synne*

² M. Braswell, *The Medieval Sinner* (Associated University Press: London, 1983) p. 23.

³ For a chronological analysis of the penitential literature of the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries see T. N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1977), pp 28-53.

⁴ M. Bennett, 'Confession in Late Medieval England' (unpublished paper). pp. 3-4.

by Robert Mannyng of Brunne (Bourne).⁵

Several of the historians who have sought to examine late medieval confession have commented that while there is a wealth of information on the ideals, theory and mechanics of the medieval confessional, there is far less evidence on how these ideals were put into practice, and on how intensely they were absorbed into late medieval culture. Those who took on the momentous task of putting the principles of *Omnis utriusque sexus* into practice seem to have been largely successful in conveying the essential elements of the new doctrine to the laity, and establishing the annual (Easter) confession as a normal practice.⁶ The overwhelming evidence for an upsurge in lay piety in the fourteenth century, however, and the proliferation of the penitential literature mentioned above, would indicate that there were many who embraced the revitalised sacrament with far greater vigour and regularity. For many, the sacrament of penance became an important part of their devotional life, and for many more it became a regular if not an habitual aspect of their day-to-day existence.

The fact that so much of the literature of the Ricardian poets was influenced by the language and psychology of the penitential tradition is a further indication of the way in which the idea of penance permeated the culture of Gower and his contemporaries. *Piers Plowman* features an analysis and personification of the Seven Deadly Sins. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* ends with 'The Parson's Tale' and 'Chaucer's Retraction' which are both obviously influenced by the penitential tradition, though the motivations behind 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', 'The Pardoner's Prologue' and 'The Canon Yeoman's Tale' are also informed by the psychology and mechanics of confession. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains three confession scenes, and *Pearl* consists of a highly analytical dialogue between an enlightened mentor and an all too fallible if, eventually, penitent pupil. Gower's choice of a confession as an articulating and organising principle in the *Confessio* becomes far more explicable to the modern reader in this context.

⁵ Braswell, p. 19.

⁶ Even Langland's Sloth manages to be shriven at least once a year, though it is significant that he only fulfils the bare minimal canonical requirement.

As the outline of the history of penance in Christianity presented above indicates, the changes wrought by the Fourth Lateran Council were momentous. The entire emphasis of penance was shifted from public acknowledgement of offences to private contemplation and analysis of personal vices. The earlier penitential tradition concentrated on reconciling the penitent to the Christian community; the new sacrament laid its emphasis on reconciling the penitent both to God and to himself. This remarkable shift in orientation from the *forum externum* to the *forum internum*⁷ required some revolutionary changes in the roles of both the penitent and the confessor. Peter Lombard had taught in the twelfth century that true contrition alone was sufficient to bring forgiveness of sin, but thirteenth century theologians were rather more sceptical about the ability of the laity to be genuinely contrite. The literature of the penitential tradition sought to enable both the confessor and the penitent to be systematic, thorough and careful as they strove to explore the penitent's conscience *together* psychologically. The fact that the confessor and the penitent had to work as a partnership, through related psychological techniques and with common spiritual goals, is something which becomes apparent after even the most cursory reading of the literature of the penitential tradition. The tact, sympathy, diplomacy and care which are constantly stressed as being vital to the role of the confessor are complementary to the trust, honesty, humility and piety recommended to the penitent. When combined with the kind of exhaustive psychological frameworks based on the Five Wits, the Seven Deadly Sins or the Ten Commandments offered by the authors of the various *Summæ*, this relationship between confessor and penitent had the potential to become intimate, delicate and powerful.

This intimacy is to be found in the rural, communal, parish-based expressions of the sacrament. The original idea that the penitent was to be reconciled with the whole Body of Christ, the Christian community in general, and the local community in particular, was one which was preserved in the new penitential practices. Parishioners were strongly encouraged to receive the sacrament from their own parish priest so that he could use his own knowledge of his parish and its people the better to assess their situation. The annual pre-Easter penance was also an

⁷ M.Bennett, 'Confession', p 2.

opportunity for the priest to use the sacrament to heal disputes and facilitate a communal reconciliation before the celebration of Easter. This intimacy is likely to have been far greater, however, in the other of the two late-medieval 'confessional cultures' identified by Bennett, that which was 'urbane, serious-minded, individualised and centred on the household.'⁸

It is this 'confessional culture' which is of direct relevance to a proper appreciation of the *Confessio*. Great households (including the Court) and religious houses had confessors who were attached or associated with them on a long-term basis. These men were usually friars, who were certainly popular as confessors. This may have been (in some cases) due to the easy examinations and light penances which they gave, as the anti-fraternal literature of the period repeatedly suggests; though it is more likely that it was due to the higher level of education and of 'penitential skill' which these men demonstrated. It is easy to imagine that a friar attached to a large household, such as the confessor who shrives Gawain in Bercilak's castle, or a cleric associated with a religious house, such as the Nun's Priest, would come to know his regular penitents intimately. Indeed, the relationship between the penitent and the confessor could easily have become as close and as powerful as that between a psychoanalyst and a regular patient. The mechanics of the sacrament were such that it would have been difficult for a rapport not to have developed between the two over a series of confessions.

The relationship between Richard II and his personal confessor, Thomas Rushook, is something of an indication of the intimacy and trust which would tend to grow between a confessor and his regular penitent. Rushook had been appointed as Richard's confessor sometime previous to May 5 1379,⁹ and Richard seems to have helped his career on several occasions. When he was deposed as provincial of the Dominican order in England, for example, Richard intervened to prevent other members of his order from impeding his appeal to the Pope. As a result of his friendship with the King and his active support for Richard's policies he came under attack in the 'Merciless Parliament' of 1388, and it was only the intervention of the other clergy which saved him from execution. Richard continued to support him financially even after

⁸ M. Bennett, 'Confession', p 10.

⁹ *Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. L. Steven and S. Lee (Oxford University Press: London, 1921) Vol. XVII, pp. 417-418.

his impeachment and banishment to Ireland.¹⁰

It is not unlikely that Gower may have developed a similarly intimate relationship with his own confessor; probably one of the canons at St Mary Overeys. It is difficult to find a modern analogy for the kind of shared experience which the late medieval confessor-penitent relationship provided. The analogy of the relationship between a therapist or psychoanalyst and a long-term patient may give the modern reader some idea of its trust and intensity, but such a partnership is experienced only by a fraction of our society. Regular and close relations between confessor and penitent would have been a familiar part of life to a significant proportion of the population of medieval Europe and, therefore, to a large proportion of Gower's audience.

The Etiquette of the Confessional Dialogue

As Tentler comments, 'There was an etiquette for confession because it was a difficult business.'¹¹ The manuals for confessors set out the etiquette in detail to facilitate the right frames of mind for both participants from the outset, while also setting the penitent at their ease. Confessions were to be heard in an open and public place¹² which did not necessarily have to be in a church, so it is not surprising to find Genius hearing Amans' confession in a 'swote grene pleine' (Bk. I, l. 113). The confessor usually sat (Bk. I, l. 201) with the penitent kneeling, bareheaded, to one side.¹³ The question of how Amans could have knelt for the entire time that it took to hear his thirty thousand line confession is as nonsensical as asking how the Canterbury Pilgrims could all possibly have heard each tale as they rode along the road. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that a few authorities direct the penitent to kneel initially and then to sit to one side or at the feet of the confessor.¹⁴ There were regular warnings to the confessor that he should not look the penitent in the face, to avoid 'the tendency to inhibit and confuse the telling of sins',¹⁵ but also, when the penitent was female, to avoid temptation. The

¹⁰ Rushook comes under attack from Gower in Chapter IV, ll. 723-730 of the *Vox Clamantis*. The closeness of his relationship with Richard was both well known and widely condemned.

¹¹ Tentler, p. 82.

¹² This was to avoid any suspicion, especially when the penitent was female. (The confessional box did not make its first appearance until the sixteenth-century; see Tentler p. 82.)

¹³ That Amans kneels is never actually mentioned in the text, but he is invariably depicted as kneeling in the accompanying illuminations.

¹⁴ *Tractatus de instructionibus confessorum*, Antonius de Burito, *Speculum de confessione*, *Directorium ad confitendum* and *Summa rudium*. Tentler p. 83.

¹⁵ Tentler, p. 83.

priest was instructed to begin with the greeting 'Benedicite', as Genius does (Bk. I, l. 205), while the penitent was to reply 'Dominus sit vobiscum' as Amans implies in line 215.

The confessor was then required to discover to which bishopric and parish the penitent belonged, in order to ensure that he had jurisdiction over the penitent according to canon law. Venus has already been assured that Amans is a member of her court and retinue (Bk. I, ll. 168-169), so Genius simply reminds Amans that he is Venus' priest 'touchende of love.' (Bk. I, l. 236). He assures him that he will guide him to make a good confession (Bk. I, ll. 280-288), as was often recommended,¹⁶ and Amans replies that he will (Bk. I, ll. 290-294). Now the confession proper was usually begun, and confessors could let the penitent confess their sins in whatever order pleased them, though it was usually encouraged that their memory be aided by using some system of examination of conscience; usually by analysing their lives in relation to the Ten Commandments, the Five Senses, or the Seven Deadly Sins. Gower has Amans and Genius use the latter two systems to facilitate a thorough psychological analysis.

It is clear that much of this etiquette was designed to put penitents at their ease from the outset, and to establish an appropriate combination of trust, honesty, humility and contrition. It was constantly stressed that the confessor must not be too stern, overbearing or judgmental but, rather, he must strive to speak as Genius does:

Tho he began anon to preche,
And with his wordes debonaire
He seide tome softe and faire.... (Bk I, ll. 230-232)

The fifteenth-century *Alphabet of Tales* tells two stories which encourage confessors to be 'softe and faire'. In one, a monk who has committed a carnal sin confesses to an older monk, who 'tuke not his confession tendirlye, bod chiddid hym, and said he was unworthi to be a monke'.¹⁷ As a result the monk leaves his monastery, but is found on the road by his abbot who leads him back. The abbot gives him more humane spiritual advice and chastises the older monk. A later tale tells of a sinful man who confesses successively to a hermit and to the pope: both of them treat him harshly and are killed by the angry penitent as a result. A third confessor,

¹⁶ Tentler, p. 84.

¹⁷ *An Alphabet of Tales: An English Fifteenth-Century Translation of the 'Alphabetum Narrationum' of Etienne de Besançon*, Macleod Banks (ed.) Part I (A-H) (EETS: London, 1904). p. 1.

however, 'hard hym mekelie and spak frendlie vnto hym', and enjoins him to true contrition.¹⁸

It was equally necessary for the confessor to ensure that the penitent understood the nature of their sin; a task which would not have been easy in many cases. A confessor might well try to use the Seven Deadly Sins as a penitential framework for the confession dialogue, but this would come to nothing if the penitent did not understand the seven sins or their various branches. The confessor must, then, instruct the penitent, much as Genius does Amans:

The ferste is seid Ypocrisie.
If thou art of his compaignie,
Tell forth, my Sone, and schrif the clene. (Bk. I, ll. 585-587)

To which Amans replies:

I wot noght, fader, what ye mene:
Bot this I wolde you beseche,
That ye me be som weie teche
What is to ben an ypocrite;
And thanne if I be forto wyte,
I wol beknowen, as it is. (Bk. I, ll. 588-593)

Genius then discusses hypocrisy in the religious sphere, in secular life and amongst lovers and asks Amans whether he has ever feigned true love and thus been a hypocrite in love.

According to the authorities on confession, the confessor required both the 'key of power' (he had to be an ordained priest with jurisdiction over the penitent) and the 'key of knowledge' (knowledge of sins and their remedies and the skill to uncover them).¹⁹ The former key was required of all confessors, the latter was considered preferable but not entirely essential. There were almost certainly many priests whose understanding of the complex machinery of confession was as meagre as that of their parishioners, but Gower's characterisation of Genius suggests that there were others whose knowledge of the intricacies of the various vices and virtues could border on the encyclopædic. Few readers could imagine that Genius' eagerness to instruct Amans is not inspired by his devotion to his role as confessor and mentor, but the length and complexity of many of his *exempla* lead readers to find in Genius a figure who also loves

¹⁸ *Alphabet*, p. 128.

¹⁹ Tentler, pp. 96-97.

telling stories, and enjoys sharing and displaying his learning.

This is not to say that Genius ever loses sight of the object of the confession, and it is important to remember the corrective intention which lies behind each *exemplum*. Genius follows Andreas de Escobar's advice to confessors and is always 'dulcis in corrigendo / prudens in instruendo'.²⁰ Genius is always sensitive to his penitent and he manages to combine attentiveness and sensitivity, while ensuring that Amans is always aware of the point of the exercise. As Tentler points out:

The greatest danger in the standard form of confession undoubtedly came from the interrogations. Interpreted too literally or unimaginatively, some of these programs of inquisition could surely have led to psychological and spiritual disaster. At the very least they could have led to inordinate tedium.²¹

Genius is never unimaginative or tedious.

While medieval confession was certainly a dual effort, the confessor was held to be but an earthly instrument of God. The penitent was the person who actually brought about a good confession. To do this, penitents had to conform to three standards: they had to perform adequately in their outward aspect, in what they actually said to the priest, their willingness to co-operate in the confession process and their attentiveness to the confessor's instruction and correction; they had to be genuine in their inner emotions, truly sorrowful and contrite; finally, they had to be aware of their possible future failings, and committed to avoiding the repetition of their sins. The accent in guides for confession was on a combination of sorrow and amendment. As with so much else associated with confession, there were mnemonic jingles to remind the penitent what was required of them. Aquinas advised:

Let the confession be simple, humble, pure, faithful,
And frequent, unadorned, discreet, willing, ashamed
Whole, secret, tearful, prompt,
Strong and reproachful, and showing readiness to obey.²²

The task of the penitent was a daunting one, even with the help of a confessor of Genius' skill.

²⁰ 'Soft in correcting / Prudent in instructing' (Tentler, p. 95).

²¹ Tentler, p. 103.

²² Tentler, p. 106.

Part of Genius' job was to teach Amans to be a good penitent.

Some critics believe that he is an exemplary subject from beginning to end.

Kinneavy claims:

The penitent's good will and intent to eschew his former offences are unmistakable throughout Gower's poem. Constantly the penitent expresses his intent to accept his penance and to amend.²³

A close look at the beginning of Amans' confession reveals that he actually expresses no such sentiment. He agrees that he needs some form of guidance, 'for I am destourbed/ In al myn herte', (Bk I, ll. 221-222) and so seems suitably humble, but he does not admit any sins against love or make any show of contrition. Instead, his explanation is simply that he realises that he cannot help himself in his plight, and that an expert who has 'experience / in love' (ll. 217-218) may be of some assistance:

Bot if thou wolt my schrifte oppose
Fro point to point, thanne I suppose,
Ther schal nothing be left behinde.
Bot now my wittes ben so blinde,
That I ne can miselven teche. (Bk I, ll. 225-229)

His motivations are far from selfless and penitent. It becomes clear, however, that this attitude is not due to arrogance or willfulness but, rather, to ignorance. It is not until Genius discusses sinning through the five senses that Amans realises that he is at fault, and thus Genius resolves to lead him through the Seven Deadly Sins to examine, to educate and to cleanse his conscience thoroughly. Even at this early stage of the poem, Amans is very much a *character*; far more so than the puppet-penitents we find in the idealised confession dialogues of the penitential manuals. Amans learns slowly, and it is not until the Second Book of the poem that he can say:

I am al redy forto bere
Mi peine, and also to forbere
What thing that ye wol noght allowe...; (Bk II, ll. 537-539)

and later:

Mi fader, I schal do my peine:

²³ G. Kinneavy, 'Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials.', *The Chaucer Review*, 19 (1984), p. 153.

For this ensample which ye tolde
With al myn herte I have witholde,
So that I schal for evermore
Eschuie Envie wel the more.... (Bk II, ll. 3508-3512)

Kinneavy also maintains that Amans is consistently and appropriately meek, willing and ready to obey. Amans, he tells us, 'demonstrates an admirable meekness in depending on the confessor for guidance in mending his ways.'²⁴ While it is true that Amans does not actually seek to avoid any aspect of Genius' questioning, there are times when he does not seem to exhibit the element of shame which was so stressed in guide for a good confession. When Genius questions him on disobedience, for example, Amans replies at some length that he would certainly disobey her if she were to tell him not to speak of his love for her, or to choose another mistress (Bk. I, ll. 1274-1342). He seems to be almost proud of this disobedience and stresses how strongly he feels:

Bot therof woll I disobeie;
For also wel sche myhte seie,
'Go tak the Mone ther it sit,'
As bringe that into my wit:... (Bk. I, ll.1315-1318)

In the final six lines of this passage, however, Amans appears to remember that what he is talking about at such length is a sin against love, and adopts a humble attitude once more (ll.1337-1342); but little of what he has to say before this can be said to be unadorned, ashamed or tearful.

In Book Four Amans is even more bold. When Genius mentions that men should labour for love, Amans asks him what he means. Genius explains that he means that lovers should prove themselves through deeds of arms and Amans' reply is anything but humble and obedient. For when Genius says to him:

Nou schrif thee, for it schal be sene
If thou art ydel in this cas.... (Bk. IV, ll. 1646-1647)

He replies with some pride:

My fader ye, and evere was... . (l. 1648)

He goes on to actually argue against his confessor's position with passion and conviction. He

²⁴ Kinneavy, p.154.

presents several arguments; some theological:

This finde I writen, hou Crist bad
That noman other scholde sle; (Bk. IV, ll.1662-1663)

and others based on the concerns of Love:

What scholde I winne over the Se,
If I mi ladi loste at hom? (ll. 1664-1665)

Then, in a remarkable reversal of roles, he proceeds to instruct Genius by telling *him* an *exemplum* about Achilles and Polixena. Having pointed out that a man's luck in love is determined by blind Cupid whether he crusades in Prussia and Rhodes or not, Amans goes on to lament once again about how little success he has been granted.

Genius responds to this extraordinary speech by comforting Amans and advising him against becoming despondent. He then strives to regain control of the dialogue by telling Amans no less than nine tales in rapid succession of the conflict between 'worldes ese' and 'worshipe'. Amans barely has the chance to say a word as Genius gives example after example to bolster his original position. In the end, his unruly pupil is certainly more subdued; however, Amans does not back down from his arguments but diverts the conversation onto a related but less sensitive topic. Genius tells him that prowess is desirable in a lover because:

...comunliche in worthi place
The wommen loven worthinesse
Of manhode and of gentilesse,
For the gentils ben most desired. (Bk. IV, ll. 2196-2199)

To which Amans responds:

...I wot no weie
What gentilesce is forto seie,
Wherof to telle I you beseche, (Bk. IV, ll. 2201-2203)

which prompts a characteristically full discussion on Gentilesse by Genius. It is as though Amans has come to know his confessor well enough to be able to use his enthusiasm for instruction to divert the dialogue away from a difficult point, without having to retreat from the position he has adopted.

So it would seem that Amans is far from the puppet-like penitents of the penitential

manuals, despite what Kinneavy would have us believe.²⁵ The dialogue between Genius and Amans is far richer, more human and more real than such a penitent would allow. Similarly, Genius, while certainly a very good confessor by the textbook standards, is presented as a person rather than as the personification of a penitential treatise. His propensity for (usually useful) digressions, his indefatigable enthusiasm for instruction and his careful attentiveness to what Amans has to say make him very much a character rather than a figure or a mechanism. By the end of the confession Amans has certainly changed; he has learned a great deal, and he has admitted his fault on many points. As Braswell points out, however:

In the final analysis, it is not Genius who brings about the humiliation of the penitent, though by his questioning he has prepared Amans for it.²⁶

Amans interrupts the usual order of the confession as Genius' analysis of the Seven Sins comes to an end to ask exactly how he should act so that his desires may be satisfied. Genius tries gently to steer him to the realisation that his cause is hopeless, and tells him:

...set thin herte under that lawe,
The which of reson is governed
And noght of will. (Bk. VIII, ll. 2135-2137)

Amans insists on presenting his case to Venus directly. It is only after Venus has shown him his true position and situation that he achieves the destruction of pride which was the ultimate aim of confession, and thus achieves true contrition and lasting peace.

That Gower makes use of the penitential tradition is quite beyond question and it is certainly useful to examine the *Confessio* in the light of this context as critics such as Kinneavy have done. It is not so readily recognised, however, that Gower did not just follow the works of this tradition slavishly. His application of the penitentials in his work of literature was informed and enlivened by his own experience of confession in practice. It is due to this intimate experience of the dialogue of confession, an experience he would have had in common with his audience, that his characters avoid artificiality. Genius and Amans behave as real people rather than as archetypal figures: they behave as people must have done in many fourteenth-century

²⁵ Braswell gives several other examples where Amans is a less-than-perfect penitent: see pp. 81-87.

²⁶ Braswell, p. 85.

confessions rather than as artificial figures behaved in fourteenth-century penitentials.

Gower's use of such a confessional dialogue in order to examine love, sexuality and human character was a stroke of innovative genius. It is interesting that this innovation of Gower's has so often in the past been a butt of critical scorn. The confession in which the tales are embedded has been seen as a creaking device, a contrived and clumsy attempt by Gower to create a frame for his tales, and one which falls far short of Chaucer's far more famous 'framed' narrative, the *Canterbury Tales*. It is not clear, however, whether this comparison is either valid or just.

The *Confessio* as a 'Frame Narrative'

It is not surprising that the majority of critics have seen the *Confessio* as a 'frame narrative' in the tradition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Sercambi's *Novelle* and other such works of the period. All these works present a situation in which their main characters relate stories. In the *Decameron* it is a group of nobles sheltering from the plague, and in Chaucer's work it is a group of pilgrims whiling away the hours of their journey. Similarly, it seems 'obvious' that Amans' confession to Genius is 'simply' Gower's way of framing a collection of tales. The confession is, therefore, a literary device; and, for many critics, it is a rather dubious device at best.

Macaulay effectively established the idea that the *Confessio* is a frame narrative with a rather ill-fitting frame. In the introduction to his edition of the poem, he describes how the narrator turns from a highly moralistic Prologue to find 'his true vocation ... as a teller of stories. The rest is all machinery, sometimes poetical and interesting, sometimes tiresome and clumsy, but the stories are the main thing.'²⁷ When he was writing in 1950, therefore, G. K. Anderson reflects a long-established critical orthodoxy when he assumes that the poem is a frame narrative and comments that 'the framework of (the *Confessio*) is ... clumsy and often inappropriate';²⁸ and, as recently as 1983, Derek Brewer characterises Gower's poem as having

²⁷ Macaulay, p. x.

²⁸ G.K. Anderson, *Old and Middle English: From the Beginnings to 1485* (Collier: New York, 1950) p. 227.

a 'simpler, more rigid, less naturalistic structure than the *Canterbury Tales*'.²⁹ Even those critics who are much less disparaging about Gower's structure tend to ignore it and concentrate their analysis on the individual tales. There is a continuing expectation that Gower's tales should be like those of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims;³⁰ that they should exhibit the same variety of subject, style, attitude and voice. This expectation is unreasonable in that it not only ignores the fact that Gower is a very different poet who is worthy of study in his own right, but also that Gower's tales are told in a completely different context from Chaucer's.

Through a combination of this concentration of critical focus on Gower's tales, and a lingering tendency to consider the confession-device to be 'simple' and 'rigid', the 'frame' of the *Confessio* has been generally neglected. Those critics who have examined the character of Genius have, of course, had to take some account of the way in which the confession 'works' on a dramatic level, as have those who have analysed the ending of the poem. For most critics, however, the dynamics of the Lover's Confession has been without interest.

C. S. Lewis makes the first truly illuminating comment on the relationship between the 'frame' and the tales in his ground-breaking section on Gower in *The Allegory of Love*.

(The tales) are not the sole end and aim of the poem, for which all the rest exists. . . . To read the tales alone, or the framework alone, is to miss the variety which the poet has taken pains to provide for us; and then 'it dulleth ofte a mannes wit'. (p. 208)

Lewis makes this observation in passing, but it is no less significant for that. The tendency to concentrate critical focus on the individual tales is yet another hangover from the fact that Gower has languished in Chaucer's shadow for so long. It would make more sense to examine the *Confessio* as something which would have been familiar to all of Gower's contemporary audiences: a confessional dialogue. The *Confessio* is very different from the multi-voiced cavalcade of the Canterbury pilgrimage; it is a conversation between two people who are working, in a highly systematised manner, towards a common goal. This is not to deny that the *exempla* are not an important part of the work, or even that the *Confessio* is not substantially a vehicle for a large number of fine tales; but it is important to realise what Kurt Olsson makes

²⁹ D. Brewer, *English Gothic Literature* (Macmillan: London, 1983) p. 128.

³⁰ See also Ch. One, p. 2, above.

clear in the end of his article on Gower's use of the *exempla*: that the most important *exemplum* of all is Aman's Confession itself.³¹

Neither the *Confessio* nor the *Canterbury Tales* can be considered to be straight 'frame narratives' in the style of the contemporary Italian works of this kind; but, even given this distinction, there is an important difference between the way in which these two English works use their respective articulating principles (pilgrimage and confession) to organise their narrative structures. This difference between the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio* is essentially one of method. While the *Confessio* is a framed collection of tales and these tales can be read as individual narrative units,³² it is primarily a single dialogue punctuated by *exempla*, digressions on religion, science and politics and anecdotal material. Similarly, while the *Canterbury Tales* can and should be read as a whole, a representation of the pilgrimage of humanity toward the Heavenly Jerusalem,³³ it is primarily a vehicle for the expression of the riot of voices, opinions and characters which make up that humanity, as embodied in the pilgrims' individual tales.

The titles of the two works go some way towards indicating this difference. In his 'Retraction' Chaucer refers to his work as 'the tales of Caunterbury' and retracts 'thilke that sownen into synne'³⁴. If this can be considered to be a title (in something like the modern sense of the word), then its emphasis is certainly on the *tales*; Chaucer does not call the work *The Canterbury Pilgrimage*, or *The Canterbury Pilgrims* for example. In the Latin *explicit* which follows the *Confessio* on the other hand, Gower's third major book is specifically referred to as the 'Confessio Amantis' (Explicit, l.30). This *explicit* is generally regarded as being a section of the work which is both authorial and of some significance to the way in which Gower wished his works to be seen.³⁵ If this is so, then it is significant that this title places its

³¹ K.O. Olsson, 'Rhetoric, John Gower and the Late Medieval *Exemplum*', *Medievalia et Humanistica*, 8 (1977), p. 198.

³² This is indicated by the fact that many of Gower's tales were extracted and copied into miscellanies; see Ch. One, pp. 16-17 above.

³³ D.R. Howard, in his *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1976), is the magisterial exponent of this kind of reading.

³⁴ *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. L.D. Benson (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1988) p. 328.

³⁵ In a later version of the *explicit* Gower changed the Latin name of the *Mirour de l'Omme* from *Speculum Hominis* to *Speculum Meditantis*. This change would seem to indicate that Gower wished his three major

emphasis on the *confession*. Gower does not call his work *Tales for Lovers*, for example.

The fact that sections of the *Confessio* were popular as extracts has already been discussed. It is significant, however, that it was not only tales from the poem which were copied as extracts, but also elements from the 'frame'. These include Genius' digression on the religions of the world, his expositions on somnolence and covetousness, the Prologue's account of Nebuchadnezzar's Dream and the conclusion of the confession.³⁶ Extracts from the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Legend of Good Women* were equally popular; but sections from the 'frames' of these works are never found in extract form, even from sections which would probably lend themselves to extraction quite happily, such as the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue'. It could be argued, therefore, that Gower's reading audience saw some kind of difference between the structures and intentions of the *Confessio* and those of Chaucer's framed narratives; that, for them, Chaucer's tales and his frame were far more distinct than those of Gower. This is not to say that the relationship between the frame and the tales in Chaucer's works was a simple one. For example, the distinction between the Pardoner's introductory material, his sermon and his tale is complex, and the intrusion of the Knight into his own tale just as it is beginning ('The Knight's Tale', ll. 885-892) is rather unexpected; but while the links between the tales and their frame are often complex, or even ambiguous, the two are substantially distinct.

There are other elements in the two works which illustrate this important difference. The very brief *exempla* which can occasionally be found in the *Confessio*, such as the twenty-seven line tale of King Saul (Bk. IV, ll. 1935-1962) or the ten-line tale of Jupiter and Laar (Bk. III, ll. 820-830), are often related so rapidly, smoothly and succinctly in the onrush of Genius' arguments that they could almost be classified as illustrative anecdotes in the course of conversation rather than tales proper. Such brief 'tales' are certainly not to be found in the framing apparatus of the *Canterbury Tales* or the *Legend*. Of course, it would be as incorrect

works to be seen as a kind of trilogy, and that this should be reflected in their rhyming titles; *Speculum Meditantis*, *Vox Clamantis* and *Confessio Amantis*. Such a concern is in keeping with other surviving evidence about the extent to which Gower strove to determine the manner in which his works would be received and interpreted. The fact that the title *Confessio Amantis* appears on one of the volumes which lie under the poet's head on his effigy is another indication of both the title's importance and its probable authorial origin.

³⁶ See Ch. One, p. 19.

to claim that Gower's narrative is completely seamless as it would be to say that Chaucer's tales are rigidly and uniformly separated from his narrative frame; but it cannot be denied that the way in which Genius' *exempla* punctuate the flow of his confessional dialogue with Amans is substantially different from the way in which the pilgrims' tales punctuate the progress of the Canterbury pilgrimage. Examining the *Confessio* in this manner — as a single, sustained dialogue, structured and informed by both the literary penitential tradition and the author's own experience of confessional analysis — goes some way toward resolving some of the poem's critical difficulties.³⁷ It also enables the reader to focus on the effect of the poem as a whole.

A confession is an examination of an individual. The questions which the confessor asks are intended to examine the nature of the penitent's acts; to determine their culpability, to explore the circumstances and the consequences of the act. The penitential guides with which Gower was so familiar also make it clear, however, that sin is universal as well as individual. It is in man's fallen nature to sin and the classification of the Seven Deadly Sins shows that, however individual the circumstances and contexts of any given sinful act, the sin itself is neither new nor unique but ancient and common to all humanity. Thus, a confession is an examination of an individual manifestation of a universal constant. The sin of an individual penitent is a reflection of the universality of human sinfulness and, therefore, the examination of the circumstances of an individual sinner is effectively an examination of one manifestation of the entire human condition. As such, a systematic confessional analysis is an examination of human action and motivation in microcosm.

Gower recognises this fact in the *Confessio* and uses the confessional dialogue between Amans and Genius as a microcosmic reflection of wider universal principles. Firstly, Gower focuses on sexual love: he has Amans come to a better understanding of the place of sexuality in his life through the dialogue and in doing so examines human sexuality generally. Secondly, he examines 'love' in the sense of 'caritas', the kind of unselfish, non-sexual love which Genius advocates as the source of all harmony. Finally, Gower examines the application of this form of love as the basis for just rulership and harmony within society. It is for these reasons

³⁷ Such as the roles of Genius and Venus and the place of Genius' 'digressions'; see below.

that Gower decided to examine love (in its many aspects) through a confessional analysis. By exploring an individual, microcosmic manifestation of the principles of love, he is able to elucidate its wider, universal, macrocosmic elements.

By making use of the personal and systematic analysis afforded by the confessional dialogue Gower was utilising the most intense, and at the same time the most familiar, form of psychological analysis available in his period. His use of this device enables him not just to create a vivid character, as he certainly does with Amans, but also to draw a map of the 'universal man'. The *Confessio* is both an analysis of Amans and an analysis of Everyman, and, as such, an understanding of Amans and his progression through the confessional dialogue is essential to an understanding of Gower's complex poem of 'love'.

CHAPTER THREE - Voices and Characters

Amans

Gower's attempt at blending the seemingly incompatible 'courtly' and 'penitential' aspects of the *Confessio* was certainly ambitious. As J.A. Burrow writes:

Gower's new idea, of writing a lover's *confession* in this courtly manner, may at first appear distinctly unpromising. How could the heavy clerical schematising of the seven deadly sins and their subdivisions marry with the fluid and sophisticated manner of Machaut and Froissart? Yet the trick works. Gower's chosen framework does not accommodate the *rondeaux* and *virelais* which are such a characteristic feature of the French *dit*; but the scheme of sins... facilitates that psychological analysis with which the French poets were also concerned.¹

Burrow acknowledges that the *Roman de la Rose* was a major influence on the 'courtly' aspects of Gower's poem, something which has been a commonplace of Gower criticism since Macaulay,² but sees the *dits amoureux* of Machaut and Froissart as equally influential. These lyrical poems deal, like the *Confessio*, with *fin amor*. In them the lovers, like Amans, strive to gain the attention and affection of their ladies and, also like their hapless English counterpart, are almost entirely unsuccessful. The chronological order and context of the events they relate are entirely unimportant; it is the psychological effect that they have on the lovers in question which is the focus.³ Burrow observes that Gower's structure accentuates this emphasis on the psychology of the lover in his poem; indeed, it is clear that the figure of Amans is the focus of the entire poem.

But who precisely is Amans? Many critics are happy to accept a face-value identification: for them 'Amans' = 'the Narrator' = 'John Gower', and some even go so far as to refer to the subject of the confession as 'Gower' rather than Amans.⁴ A simplistic

¹ J.A. Burrow, 'The Portrayal of Amans in *Confessio Amantis*' in *Gower's 'Confessio Amantis': Responses and Reassessments*, ed. A.J. Minnis (D.S. Brewer: Cambridge, 1983) 5-24, p. 8.

² Macaulay, p. xi.

³ See R.A. Peck's Introduction to his abridged edition of the *Confessio* (Holt, Rhinehart & Winston: New York, 1968) pp. xi-xii., and M.D. Cherniss . *Boethian Apocalypse: Studies in Middle English Vision Poetry* (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1987).

identification of this kind is unlikely to do justice to a poem which is effectively about a search for identity and self-awareness. An understanding of the nature of the connection between the Narrator and Amans, their relation to John Gower, and the nature and role of Amans as a literary character, is essential to an understanding of the *Confessio*.

Medieval poets seemed to find no discomfort in the idea of featuring prominently in their own poems; a fact which has often been a source of critical controversy and, occasionally, confusion for modern investigators. Early Chaucer critics accepted that the pilgrim-character who is identified with Chaucer was fully and actually 'Geoffrey Chaucer the poet' and were thus greatly puzzled by the poet's seeming *naïveté*. Since Kittredge recognised this ironic self-portrait as a complex literary persona, however, scholars have been able to explore the richness of Chaucer's narrative, dramatic and authorial roles in the *Canterbury Tales*.⁵ It does not seem to have occurred to many critics that the relation of 'John Gower the poet' to the Narrator and to Amans could be similarly less than straightforward.

The poem begins without any overt identification of the narrative voice, though it does seem to presume some knowledge of Gower on the part of the reader. The narrator mentions that he proposes to write 'of newe som matiere' (Prologue, l.6) and observes that unrelieved 'wisdom' tends to 'dulleth ofte a mannes wit / To him that schal it alday rede' (Prologue, ll. 14-15). Gower proposes therefore to turn to something new which will tread 'the middel weie'. These references seem to assume some knowledge of Gower's previous work on the part of the poem's audience. In them we can perhaps see the author casting a wryly knowing glance at those who found the *Vox Clamantis* and the *Speculum Meditantis* overfull of 'lore' and lacking in 'lust'. There is certainly an element of wry humour here, and a quite deliberate self-consciousness.

The anecdote about meeting King Richard on the Thames is then recounted in the first recension of the poem, and this episode seems to further identify the narrator of the

⁴ G. Kinneavy makes such a face-value association in his article 'Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and the Penitentials.'

⁵ G.L. Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1929).

Prologue with 'John Gower' of Southwark. In the second recension the narrator tells us that he plans to write the *Confessio* despite the fact that he '... seknesse [has] on honde / And longe have had...' (Prologue 61-62); which also serves to strengthen the association between the poet and the narrator, since it is likely that at the time of writing Gower was living in retirement due to failing health.⁶ Having just spoken about how too much didactic matter can become tiresome, the Narrator goes on to take up the next thousand lines of the Prologue with a complaint about the state of the world, a discussion of the Dream of Nebuchadnezzar and an analysis of the failings of the Three Estates. This Prologue is effectively a summary of his last two poems. It is only after all this that he finally turns to a lighter matter: the question of Love.

Gower appears to be playing something of a game with his audience and, at the same time making a quiet joke at his own expense. 'I will try not to tax you with more unrelieved didacticism', he appears to be saying to his audience; and then proceeds to do just that. Having done so he resolves to do as he had formerly promised: to 'treden upon othre thinges' (Bk I, l. 7) which are 'noght so strange' (l. 10), by which he means Love. All this should lead the reader to question how much this Narrator can be taken at face value. The gamesomeness and light, self-aware humour of the Prologue would seem to indicate that the Narrator is an ironic persona not unlike the naïve 'Pilgrim Chaucer' of the *Canterbury Tales*. The Narrator-Persona is *meant* to be associated with John Gower the poet, since the self-deprecating humour of this section depends upon such an identification. Thus the Persona appears to exhibit some easily recognisable attributes of John Gower in much the same way that the 'Pilgrim Chaucer' is quite convivial and rather fat. But this does not mean that Gower was not writing with his tongue in his cheek or that the Prologue was not read to his circle of friends and literary associates with a twinkle in his eye.⁷

Gower's game and irony become more complex when he turns to Love in the beginning of Book I. The narrator argues that the examination of Love is an appropriate endeavour, since it is a force with universal impact and significance which is also governed by

⁶ Fisher, p. 65.

⁷ That the Prologue has this element of gamesomeness does not detract from the seriousness of the concerns it expresses, or from its function as an extrinsic prologue in the Sapiental Tradition: see Ch. One, p. 21 ff.

chance rather than reason, and is thus a cause of confusion to many. He goes on to say:

And forto proven it is so,
I am miselven on of tho,
Which to this Scole am underfonge. (Bk I, ll. 61-63).

He declares himself to be a lover, argues that he speaks from personal experience, and hopes that the reader can benefit from it. As J.A. Burrow has noted,⁸ this change in persona is indicated in a significant Latin sidenote which reads:

Hic quasi in persona aliorum, quos amor alligat, fingens se auctor esse
Amantem, varias eorum passiones variis huius libri distinctionibus per
singula scribere proponit.

('From here on the author, feigning himself to be a lover, as in the person
of those others whom Love constrains, intends to write about their various
passions one by one in the various sections of this book.')

That the 'Amans Persona' begins to be adopted by the Narrator at this point is clear, though the break between the two is not as sharp as both the sidenote and Burrow would have us believe. Gower habitually uses 'nou' or 'but' to mark disjunctions in his argument, whereas he usually uses 'and' to begin a point connected or closely related to what has gone before. The word 'And' begins the section where the 'Amans Persona' is taken up; the 'Narrator Persona' fades away slowly, and Amans begins to speak, without any discernible interruption in the flow of the narrative voice or its argument. It is also significant that lines 61 to 92 refer to the process of what is being expressed no fewer than twelve times in the course of expressing it. There are references to *writing* (ll. 74 and 84) and to the audience *reading* it 'hierafter' (l. 77). At the same time, Gower refers to *speaking* of 'this matiere' (l. 65), and to the audience *hearing* the story (l. 66). The reference to writing and reading is the authorial language of the Narrator, as used in the Prologue, but the reference to speaking and listening belongs to Amans. The voice of the Narrator fades gradually into that of Amans who then goes on, in the next section, to tell us to 'herkne' while he tells of his fortune. By this stage, the references to writing have ceased and it is the 'Amans Persona' who has the floor. Gower is wearing the mask of the Narrator who

⁸ J. A. Burrow, 'The Portrayal of Amans', p. 13.

⁹ Burrow's translation, p. 13.

has now put on the mask of Amans.

The nature of Amans as a character has been a source of some critical debate. According to the traditional reading of the poem, the first-time reader of the *Confessio* does not realise that Amans is old until the pivotal moment in Book VIII when Amans himself is made aware of his age. This revelation is meant to come as as much of a shock to the reader as to Amans himself and, like him, we must then reassess what has gone before in this new light. Donald Schueler has challenged this reading however, arguing Gower makes it clear that Amans is elderly throughout the poem, and that this adds to both the *Confessio's* artistry and its consistency.¹⁰ Schueler recognises that the Narrator of the Prologue is a persona, but maintains that this persona is maintained consistently throughout the poem. The Narrator is supposed to be associated (somewhat loosely) with the poet and, as a result, cannot possibly have been seen by his audience as a young man. 'When the narrator does begin to talk of love,' Schueler argues, 'there is not the slightest indication that he has in some mysterious way exchanged identities, that he has, in fact, become younger.'¹¹ Schueler continues by citing examples from the poem which make it clear that Amans is old. He points out that Cupid and Venus both look on him with 'no goodly chiere' (Bk I, l. 152), which is entirely consistent with the fact that he is a *senex amans*. He cites several passages where Amans refers to his youth as though it were long past, for example:

Bot, Sire, if I have *in my yowthe*
Don other wise in other place,
I put me therof in your grace (Bk I, 730- 732. My italics).

Similarly, according to Schueler, he contrasts himself with the 'yonge lusty route' (Bk II, l. 461) of his rivals for his lady's attentions. Schueler concludes that 'there is nothing in all the thousands of lines of the *Confessio Amantis* which contradicts the idea that the narrator is a man of advanced years.'¹²

Schueler's thesis has been criticised by Burrow,¹³ who argues convincingly against

¹⁰ D. Schueler, 'The Age of the Lover in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*', *Medium Ævum* 36 (1967), pp. 153-158.

¹¹ Schueler, p. 153.

¹² Schueler, p. 158.

most of Schueler's points. He maintains that there certainly is an indication of a change in identity at Bk I, l. 59 ff., as has been discussed above.¹⁴ He points out that Venus and Cupid are said to look with disfavour on *all* unrequited and unsuccessful lovers as a matter of convention, and that they do so regard Amans does not necessarily mean that he is elderly. He cites an example from Froissart's *Espinette Amoureuse* where a young lover describes the 'jone gent' who attend his lady, showing that a lover's rivals can be described as being young without the implication that the lover is therefore old. Burrow concludes that Gower strives to remain entirely ambiguous about Amans' age throughout the poem so as not to 'let the cat out of the bag'¹⁵ for the first-time reader while, at the same time, not actually contradicting the ending of the poem. Thus, for example, when Amans says '...if I have *in my yowthe* / Don other wise...' (Bk I, ll. 730-731) this can be interpreted as meaning 'in my present youthfulness' or 'in the youth of my past'.

Burrow also discusses, in relation to this question of the age of Amans, the illuminations which accompany the beginning of the confession in many manuscripts of the *Confessio*. He comments that these pictures presented their artists with 'a problem which proved insoluble. How, at this stage in the poem, was Amans to be portrayed?'¹⁶ If he were to be shown as being old the cat would indeed be out of the bag, and the revelation of Amans' age at the end would have little impact. If, on the other hand, he were depicted as being young the ending would still have its impact, but the artist would have lied to the reader. Jeremy Griffiths acknowledges this dilemma in his article on the illuminations in the manuscripts of the *Confessio*, and concludes that 'the Confessor picture may not have originated from Gower himself',¹⁷ but was an element added to manuscripts of the work by one of its early 'editors'. According to Burrow and Griffiths, Gower certainly did not want to give the game away.

¹³ J.A. Burrow, 'The Portrayal of Amans'.

¹⁴ J.A. Burrow, 'The Portrayal of Amans', p. 13, though Burrow characterises this transition in persona as a 'sharp distinction between the author-moralist of the Prologue and the lover he is now to pretend to be...'. As has been discussed above, however, the transition is not 'sharp' and the Narrator of the 'Prologue' cannot be associated with the Author so directly.

¹⁵ J.A. Burrow, 'The Portrayal of Amans', p. 12.

¹⁶ J.A. Burrow, 'The Portrayal of Amans', p. 12.

¹⁷ J. Griffiths, 'Confessio Amantis: The Poem and its Pictures' in *Gower's 'Confessio Amantis': Responses and Reassessments* ed. A. J. Minnis (D. S. Brewer: Cambridge, 1983) pp. 163-178.

It is interesting to look at the illuminations of the confession scene in the light of Burrows and Griffith's conclusions. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of illuminations of the confession scene show Amans as being young. The illumination which appears in the capital on folio 9^v of MS. Bodley 693, for example, shows what could be said to be the 'standard' presentation of the scene. (See Plate One) Amans kneels beside Genius wearing a reddish-pink houpelande with fashionable large sleeves and high collar. His hair is dark brown and is cut in the 'page-boy' style which was so fashionable among young men in the early-fifteenth century. He kneels with his hands crossed and his body inclined towards that of Genius, who is seated to his left. Genius wears a blue robe with a matching (or, perhaps, an attached) hood, and what appears to be a white surplice; he appears to be applying his liturgical stole to Amans' head in a gesture of benediction; his head is covered by his hood, but he appears less fresh-faced and is generally older in appearance.

Most of the other illuminations of the scene follow the same set of postures, gestures, expressions and colours with small variations. British Museum MS. Egerton 1991, fol. 7^v, MS. Corpus Christi College, Oxford 67, fol. 9^v, and MS. Bodley 294, fol. 9^r all depict the scene in this way.¹⁸ All these illuminations also make some attempt to depict the confession as taking place outdoors, though this is usually simply by representing some grass dotted with flowers; the background in all of these pictures is red with gold floriation. All these manuscripts are similarly connected by their association with the Scheerre and Siferwas schools of illumination and the fact that they shared copyists.¹⁹

It would appear, therefore, that the majority of early-fifteenth century 'editors' chose to depict Amans as being young so as not to disclose the ending of the poem for the first-time reader. The artist who worked on MS. Mm. 2 21 fol. 8^r, however, chose a different tack. This

¹⁸ Amongst the other MSS. which show Amans as being young are Pierpont Morgan MS. M 125, Pierpont Morgan MS. M 126, St Catherine's College Cambridge MS. 7, Harley MS. 3869, Royal MS. 18.C. XXII, and Laud MS. 609.

¹⁹ G. M. Spriggs, 'Unnoticed Bodleian Manuscripts Illuminated by Herman Scheerre and his School', *The Bodleian Library Record* 7 (1962-1967), pp. 193-203. For a discussion of the scribal connections between manuscripts of the *Confessio*, see A.I. Doyle and M.B. Parkes 'The Production of Copies of the *Canterbury Tales* and the *Confessio Amantis* in the Early Fifteenth Century' in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts and Libraries: Essays Presented to N.R. Ker*, ed. M. Parkes and A.G. Watson (Scolar Press: London, 1978).

rather damaged confession-illumination demonstrates some familiarity on the part of the artist with the illuminations in the manuscripts of the Scheerre-Siferwas school; the positions of the two figures are the same as in those already discussed, and Amans and Genius are dressed in a manner similar to that depicted in the Scheerre-Siferwas examples. However, in this illumination Amans is depicted with the shoulder-length hair and pointed beard which was common among young men in the late-fourteenth century, but which tended to be found among middle-aged men in the period in which the manuscript was produced. It may be that, in doing so, the artist was trying to keep the age of the Amans figure ambiguous; in that the figure could either be an unfashionable young man or fashionable mature man. It could also be that, since middle age lies between youth and old age, the artist was attempting a kind of visual compromise.

The manuscripts which seem to have decided to show Amans as being obviously old are Pembroke College MS. 307 fol. 9^r and MS. Bodley 902 fol. 8^r. This appears to let the cat out of the bag, as Burrows suggests, but a more careful examination of the Bodley 902 illumination proves interesting. (See Plate 3) It is a product of the Scheerre-Siferwas school and, as such it exhibits the common characteristics of the confession scenes examined above: a pink-robed Amans kneels beside a seated Genius who wears a hooded blue robe and stole; Amans' hands are crossed and Genius is applying the stole to the penitent's head. In this example, however, the scene is flanked by trees and the background is diapered rather than floriated. At first sight, Amans appears old, since he has the long pointed white beard which is iconographically associated with advanced age in other illuminations of the period. The illuminations of the Great Khan in the *Livre de Grand Cam* ²⁰, which was also produced by the Scheerre school in this period, shows a very similar beard. Unlike the Khan, however, the Amans-figure depicted in Bodley 902 has light brown hair, much like the 'young Amans' depicted in the majority of other illuminations of the scene discussed above. Indeed, his hair is shown to be in the bowl-shaped 'page-boy' style of the 'young Amans' figures. Should the beard

²⁰ MS. Bodley 264

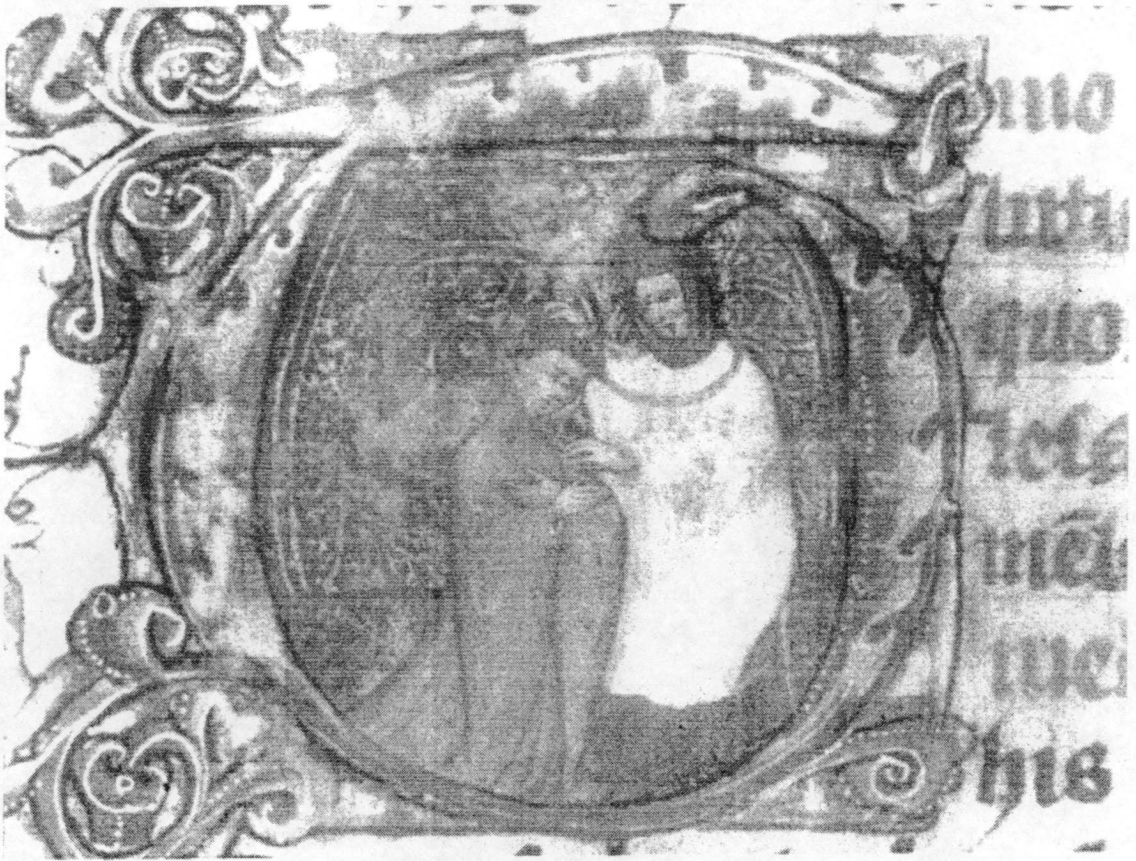


Plate One: MS Bodley 693 fol. 9v

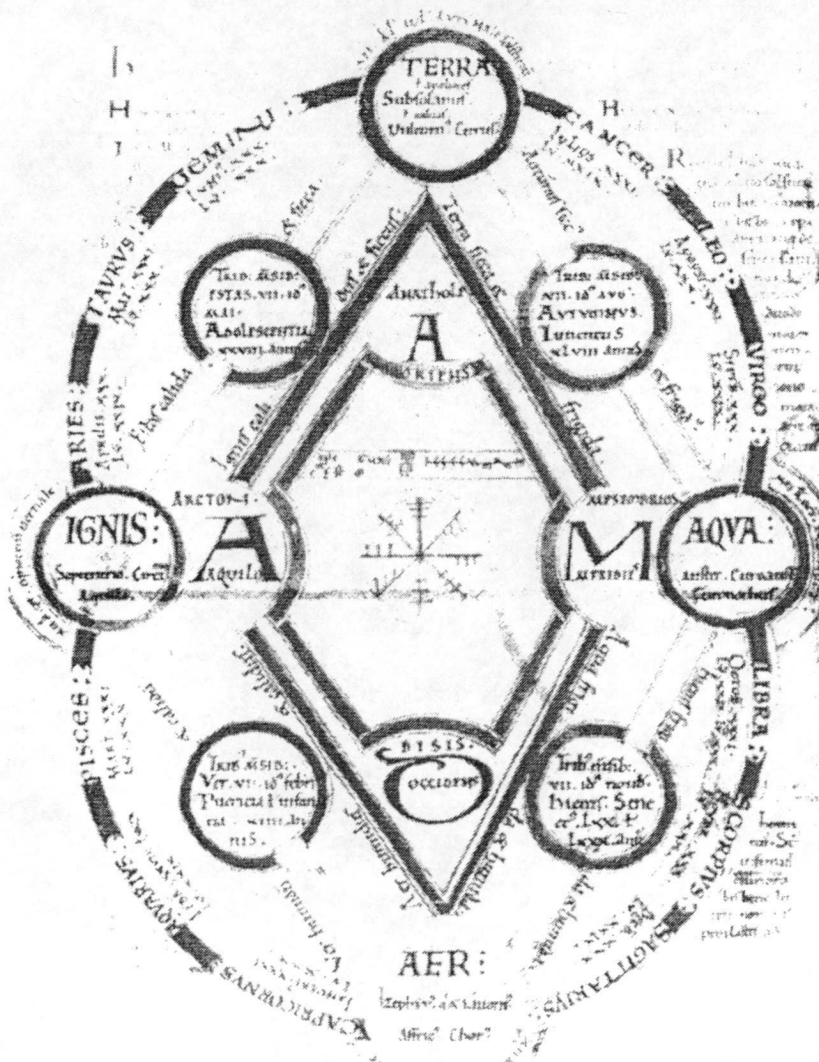
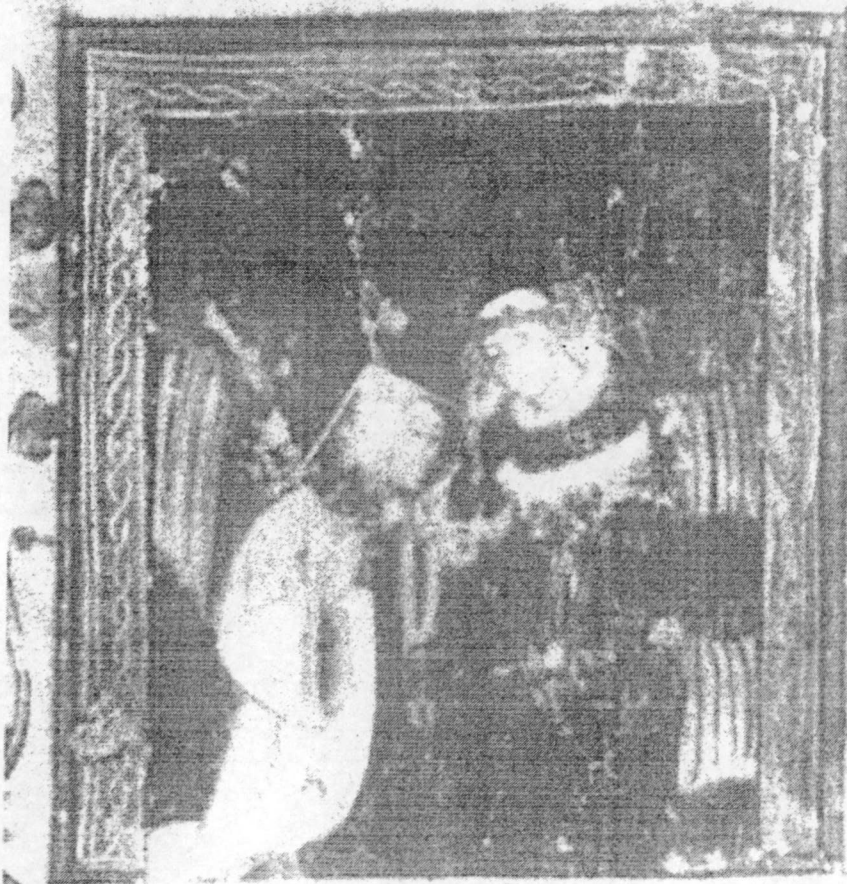


Plate Two: Diagram from *Byrhtferth's Manual*, MS St John's College, Oxford 17, fol. 7v



Plate Three: MS Bodley 902 fol. 8^r



Dilectio amor natur legib
 Subst et suauiter conuenit

Plate Four: MS Fairfax 3 fol 8^r

on the Bodley 902 figure be covered, one can see that this Amans is in all other ways like the 'young Amans' figures. In other words, this Amans has a young man's hair and an old man's beard.

This strange duality can be explained in a number of ways: the beard may have been added to the picture at a later stage when the artist, or another artist, decided that an 'old Amans' figure was more appropriate in light of the end of the poem; it is likely that the collar seen on the Amans figure found in Fairfax 3 fol. 8^r was added later in this manner, perhaps to enhance the association between the Amans figure and John Gower, who was depicted in his effigy wearing such a collar.²¹ Gower's effigy also depicts him with a pointed beard not unlike that in the Bodley 902 illumination, and Burrow suggests in a footnote that the illuminators of this manuscript (and possibly MS. Mm 2 21) were influenced by Gower's effigy. This explanation is not entirely convincing, because the Gower effigy also shows him with long, flowing, collar-length hair. It is hard to see why the artist who added the white beard would not have also adjusted the youthful hair colour and hairstyle.

An alternative explanation is that the artist set out quite deliberately to depict Amans as being both old *and* young at the same time; not to maintain an ambiguity, as the illuminator of MS.Mm 2 21 seems to have attempted, but to convey a sense of duality overtly. This leads directly to the earliest and most interesting of the confession miniatures, that found in Fairfax 3 fol. 8^r. (See Plate Four) Here Amans and Genius are shown in their usual respective positions in an outdoor setting. Several of the elements found in the Scheerre-Siferwas miniatures can also be found here: Amans wears a wide-sleeved houpelande, Genius a blue hooded robe, and the grass is dotted with small flowers. This illumination is strikingly different from those already discussed, however. Genius has his hood pushed back to reveal a tonsured head adorned with a chaplet of flowers. Amans, by contrast, wears his hood up; something which goes entirely against the accepted etiquette of confession.²² The painting is damaged, so that the details of

²¹ Probably the 'collar of esses' presented to the poet by King Henry IV; see Macaulay p. clvii and Burrow 'The Portrayal of Amans' p. 12n.

²² See Ch. Two, p. 30 above.

the lower part of the face are uncertain, but the raised hood serves to obscure enough of the penitent's head to make it entirely unclear what his age might be. Once again, as in Bodley 902 and Mm 2 21, the artist appears to be striving to maintain either an ambiguity or a duality regarding the age of the Amans figure depicted.

It is particularly significant that Fairfax 3 should contain an example of these deliberately ambiguous miniatures, or, indeed, any illustration showing the confession and Amans at all. As has been mentioned above, Griffiths has concluded that 'the manuscript evidence and the critical differences attendant upon any portrayal of the Lover ... suggest to me that the Confessor picture may not have originated from Gower himself.'²³ It is widely accepted that Fairfax 3 is a very early copy of the poem; indeed, that it is probably the earliest extant copy and, as such, was used by Macaulay as the copy-text for his edition of the poem.²⁴ Furthermore, the fact that the passages which Gower revised to produce the second version of the poem were erased from Fairfax 3, and the corrected passages copied in their place, suggests that the production of Fairfax 3 was quite possibly supervised by Gower himself, or was closely derivative from a manuscript which was. It would seem, therefore, that this manuscript, which features a large illumination of the confession scene, had a high degree of proximity to the poet himself. If this is so, then Griffiths' conclusion becomes less convincing. It could be argued that Gower had no objection to an illumination of the confession scene which preserved the ambiguity regarding Amans' age which he had deliberately worked into his poem.

The fact that the Fairfax illumination pre-dates the products of the Scheerre-Siferwas school, and that it shares some of their general characteristics could indicate that the later miniatures were influenced by the Fairfax example, or other illuminations similar to it. The colours of the two figures' robes, their orientations and positions and other small elements, such as the colours of the flowers in the grass, are consistent across the Fairfax and the Scheerre examples. The trees which form the background in Fairfax are found in residual form at the edges of the Bodley 902 illumination, which also maintains Fairfax's ambiguity or duality. By

²³ J. Griffiths, p. 174.

²⁴ Macaulay pp. clxx ff.

the time the other Scheerre examples were produced, this duality had gone unnoticed, and artists were forced to choose between depicting Amans as being either young or old. If this is true, then the earlier illuminators of the confession scene understood that it was important to keep Amans' age ambiguous as the confession begins, an understanding which may well have been impressed upon them by Gower himself.

So what was Gower hoping to achieve by this duality? According to the traditional reading of the *Confessio*, at the end of the confession Genius urges Amans to set himself under reason's law; but Amans insists that he be allowed to present a supplication to Venus: he understands Genius' advice, but he cannot bring himself to follow it:

Mi resoun understod him wel,
And knew it was soth everydel
That he hath seid, bot noght forthi
Mi will hath nothing set therby. (Bk VIII, ll. 2191-2195)

The instruction and analysis he has just completed in his confession gives him a wider view of love and the world and thus a better understanding of his own position and identity. When he had last met Venus she had asked him, 'What art thou, Sone?' (Bk I, l. 154) to which he had replied:

... 'A Caitif that lith hiere:
What wolde ye, my Ladi diere?
Schal I ben hol or elles dye?' (Bk I, ll. 161-163).

Then he had seen himself in general terms, as but one of Venus' many less favoured servants. Now, her question is slightly different and his answer indicates a greater honesty and self-knowledge:

Sche caste her chiere upon mi face,
And as it were halvinge a game
Sche axeth me what is mi name.
'Ma dame,' I seide, 'John Gower.'
'Now John,' quod sche.... (Bk VIII, ll. 2318-2322)

In both situations Venus knew Amans' situation before he replied, and framed her questions accordingly. 'What are you?', she asks him initially, in the full knowledge that, at that stage, he did not have the self-knowledge or understanding to see himself as anything other than part of a

generality. By the end of the confession dialogue, however, Amans has achieved a new perspective, one which is both more general and more specific. He has come to understand love in a wider sense and to understand his own situation better. Now Venus asks, playfully, '*Who are you?*', and Amans, 'the one who is loving', replies specifically, 'John Gower'.

Amans still has some way to go down the road of self-awareness; Venus soon confronts him with the one thing which he has been ignoring throughout the confession process. At the end of her reply to his supplication he advises:

Forthi mi conseil is that thou
Remembre wel hou thou art old. (Bk VIII, ll. 2438-2439)

Amans is confronted by the fact of his old age, and the effect is sudden and extreme:

...as a man the blase of fyr
With water quencheth, so ferd I;
A cold me cawhte sodeinly,
For sorwe that myn herte made
Mi dedly face pale and fade
Becam, and swoone I felle to grounde. (Bk VIII, ll. 2444-2449)

In his swoon, he sees the vision of the Companies of Lovers, both young and old; Cupid withdraws his fiery dart and Venus anoints his wound. When he wakes, however, he is shown something which finally forces him to realise his true position and identity: Venus hands him a mirror into which Amans looks with his 'hertes yhe'. He sees his true form:

...my colour fade
Myn yhen dymme and al unglade,
Mi chiekes thinne, and al my face
With Elde I myhte se deface...
I syh also myn heres hore. (Bk VIII, ll. 2825-2831)

His will rebels against what he sees, just as it had rejected Genius' advice at line 2195; but reason forces him to remember his 'olde daies passed'.

Confronted by the fact of his advanced years, Amans now compares his life to the progression of the months of the year in a salient passage which I shall quote in full:

And thanne into my remembrance
I drowh myn olde daies passed,

And as reson it hath compassed,
 I made a liknesse of miselve
 Unto the sondri Monthes twelve,
 Wherof the yeer in his astat
 Is mad, and stant upon debat,
 That lich til other non acordeth.
 For who the times wel recordeth,
 And thanne at Marche if he beginne,
 Whan that the lusti yeer comth inne,
 Til Augst be passed and Septembre,
 The myhty youthe he may remembre
 In which the yeer hath his deduit
 Of gras, of lef, of flour, of fruit,
 Of corn and of the wyny grape.
 And afterward the time is schape
 To frost, to Snow, to Wind, to Rein,
 Til eft that Mars be come ayein:
 The Wynter wol no Somer knowe,
 The grene lef is overthrowe,
 The clothed erthe is thanne bare,
 Despuiled is the Somerfare,
 That erst was hete is thanne chele. (Bk VIII, ll. 2834-2857)

Here, in a manner reminiscent of the calendars in the illuminated Books of Hours of the period, Gower paints a succinct picture of the progress of both the months and the seasons. First the grass, then the flowers and then the fruits of spring and summer appear, with these in turn giving way to the corn harvest and vintage of autumn. Autumn inevitably gives way to winter; 'to frost, to Snow, to Wind, to Rein'. The symbolic images of the winter months in particular seem to affect Amans deeply, and thus, thinking 'thoghtes fele', he awakens from his swoon.

The *topos* of the Twelve Ages of Man was well known in Gower's time, and seems to have been an extension of the earlier concept of the Four Ages, which were based on the four seasons.²⁵ In this older form of the motif, spring corresponded with childhood, summer with

²⁵ The Seven Ages of Man, which was popular in the Renaissance, was also medieval in origin, but does not seem to have developed until the twelfth century with the rise of Arabic astrology. For a full discussion of the various ancient, medieval and renaissance schemes of the *ætates hominum* motif see J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1988).

youth, autumn with maturity and winter with old age. Eventually, each of the three months which made up the seasons was given its own significance and the fourfold scheme became the twelvefold one to which Gower refers here. According to Burrow,²⁶ the earliest writer to expand the fourfold division in this way was the anonymous author of the fourteenth-century French poem *Les Douze Mois figurez*. This poem divides man's²⁷ life into twelve periods of six years duration, each period corresponding to a different month of the year. Burrow acknowledges that Book VIII lines 2837-2857 indicate that Gower was familiar with *Les Douze Mois figurez*, but goes on to say that:

in his ensuing reflections...Amans reverts to a simple binary division of the year into the summer months from March to September, which correspond to the 'myhty youthe' he no longer enjoys, and the winter months when 'despuiled is the Somerfare'.²⁸

If Gower's passage is examined more closely, however, it can be seen that his use of the twelve months motif is much more complex and much richer than Burrow would have us believe.

The republican Roman year began on the first of March, and the first of January was not firmly established as New Year's Day until the Gregorian reform of the calendar in the sixteenth century — which was not adopted in Britain until the seventeenth century — many country people continued to see the coming of spring in March as the beginning of a new year.²⁹ So Amans' figurative year can be said to begin in March: '...thanne at Marche if he beginne / Whan that the lusti yeer comth inne'. The 'year' of man's life can therefore be divided into twelve 'months', each of six years duration, as seen in Table 1. Life begins in March and progresses through its springtime until the age of eighteen, the end of May. Then it progresses through its summer 'til', as Gower says, 'Augst be passed and Septembre' which stand at the

²⁶ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, p. 76.

²⁷ The use of rather phallogocentric language here and elsewhere in this section is not due to ignorance but rather out of an acknowledgement of the historical idea of 'man' as the perfect human. This is perhaps sexist, but is also difficult to avoid for historical and cultural reasons.

²⁸ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, p. 78.

²⁹ A summary of the various beginnings of the medieval New Year can be found in C.R. Cheney *Handbook of Dates for Students of British History* (London: Offices of the Royal Historical Society, University College London, 1945) pp. 1-11. For an example of the difficulties these differences made for people in the period see the prologue to the 'Legend of Mary Magdalene' in Bokenham's *Legendys of Hooly Wummen* ed. M.S. Serjeantson (EETS: London, 1938) ll. 4982-5111.

SCHEME ONE

Season	Spring	Spring	Spring	Summer	Summer	Summer	Autumn	Autumn	Autumn	Winter	Winter	Winter
Month	<u>MARCH</u>	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	<u>AUG.</u>	SEPT.	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	JAN.	FEB.
Age	0 - 6	7 - 12	13 - 18	19 - 24	25 - 30	31 - 36	37 - 42	43 - 48	49 - 54	55 - 60	61 - 66	<u>67 - 72</u> (68)

Table 1

middle of the year, and at the middle of life; between thirty-six and thirty-seven years of age. This period marks the transition from the grass, leaves, flowers and fruits of spring and summer (the 'myhty youthe') to the 'corn' and 'wyny grape' of autumn. It is significant that many illuminated calendars in Books of Hours from this period conventionally represented August by a harvest scene and September with a scene of grape-picking. It is very likely that Gower had these conventional representations of the Labours of the Months in mind when he was writing this passage. If we consider then that in 1390 Gower would have been around sixty-eight years old, we can appreciate Amans standing in February, the last month of winter, and looking back, past the transition from summer to autumn, to his birth and childhood in March.

This application of the twelve months *topos* fits rather neatly with the traditional reading of the poem. Here Amans, like the first-time reader, suddenly faces the fact that he is old, and looks back over his life, seeing it in a new, truer perspective. Reason wins and he and the reader are both prepared for and receptive to Venus' subsequent dismissal of him from her service to go and serve 'vertue moral'. This new perspective has an effect on both Amans and the reader similar to that of Troilus' vision of the Earth from his supralunar position at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*; all the concerns which have gone before can now be seen in a new light.³⁰

One problem with this scheme, however, is that according to *Les Douze Mois figurez* the year begins in January rather than March. Lines 28-35 of the poem read:

Or vient avril et li bel jour
 Que toute chose s'esjoist:
 L'erbre croist et l'arbre fleurist,
 Li oysel reprennent leur chans.
 Et aussi a xxiiii ans
 Devient li enfes vertueux,
 Jolis, nobles et amoureux,
 Et se change en maint est gay.

³⁰ *Troilus and Criseyde*, Bk. V, ll. 1814-1822.

[Now comes April and the fine days, when everything rejoices: grass grows, trees blossom and birds begin to sing again. Just so up to twenty-four the young person becomes vigorous, gay, noble and amorous, and adopts every kind of cheerful activity.]³¹

In the scheme discussed above and represented in Table 1 the month of April ends at age twelve. It could only end at twenty-four if the 'year' had begun in January. Burrow claims that *Les Douze Mois* was the earliest expression of the twelve months *topos*; yet two of the many diagrams in the Old English *Byrhtferth's Manual* also show life divided into four stages (*pueritia*, *adolescentia*, *juventus* and *senectus*), with three of the twelve months corresponding to each of these broad divisions. The Byrhtferth diagrams make it clear that infancy or *pueritia* began in January.³² (See Plate Two) With this in mind the passage in the *Confessio* can be interpreted differently, as shown in Table 2.

Life now appears to begin in the depths of winter, in January, progresses through February and reaches spring in March at the age of thirteen. In this second scheme, 'Augst' and 'Septembre' mark the passage from summer to autumn once again, and life ends in the winter of December. How can this very different scheme, that both begins and ends in winter, be reconciled with a reading of the poem? The key lies in the lines:

And thanne at Marche if he beginne,
Whan that the *lusti yeer* comth inne,
(Bk VIII, ll. 2843-28440, my italics).

In Scheme One, 'the lusti yeer comth inne' can be interpreted as referring to the beginning of a new year which is 'lusti' because it is also the beginning of spring. In Scheme Two, on the other hand, the year proper begins in January, but the 'lusti yeer', the awakening of sexuality, comes with puberty around age thirteen. Thus Scheme One can be seen as a figural expression of a man's life from a purely chronological perspective; while Scheme Two concentrates on representing the stages and progressions of sexuality.

³¹ E. Dal and P. Skårup *The Ages of Man and the Months of the Year* (Copenhagen: 1980) pp. 42-50 cited in J.A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, p. 77. (Burrow's translation.)

³² *Byrhtferth's Manual* ed. S.J. Crawford (EETS: London 1929) See the frontispiece and the plate facing p. 86.

SCHEME TWO

Season	Winter	Winter	Spring	Spring	Spring	Summer	Summer	Summer	Autumn	Autumn	Autumn	Winter
Month	JAN.	FEB.	<u>MARCH</u>	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	<u>AUG.</u> = <u>SEPT.</u>	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	
Age	0 - 6	7 - 12	13 - 18	19 - 24	25 - 30	31 - 36	37 - 42	43 - 48	49 - 54	55 - 60	61 - 66	<u>67 - 72</u> (68)

Table 2

According to Scheme Two a man begins life in January, in the winter of sexuality. The spring thaw comes with puberty when 'the lusti yeer comth inne', with sexual power coming into full force in spring and summer, reaching sexual maturity at around thirty-one. Now the autumnal turning-point of 'Augst' and 'Septembre' comes at forty-eight to forty-nine and then comes a rapid return to the sexual winter of December. Amans now stands in that sexual winter, and looks back past the beginning of Autumn to his sexual awakening in March. He realises his true position, and the hopelessness and unreasonableness of his situation are finally clear to him. He sees that he now stands in the month of frost, snow, wind and rain; and that, no matter how much he may yearn for the heady days of his sexual summer and spring, he cannot escape the fact that 'despuiled is the Somerfare'. The humours which once gave rise to his sexual heat are now 'chele'.

It can be said, therefore, that where Scheme One represents the Twelve Ages of Man, Scheme Two symbolises the Twelve Ages of the Lover; furthermore, this second scheme also requires a reassessment of what has gone before. It can now be argued that the entire poem is to be interpreted, on one level, as a depiction of the life and progression of an archetypal lover. The poem begins with the Narrator taking on the persona of 'Amans' and proposing to tell us of his own experiences of love. He tells us that what he is going to describe to us happened only 'this enderday' when he went out to walk 'in the Monthe of Maii' (Bk I, ll. 100). This seems conventional enough, since a medieval audience would have been accustomed to adventures of love taking place in May. If this is interpreted according to Scheme Two, however, then the poem and Amans' experiences begin in 'May' and end in 'December'. Amans tells Venus in Book One that he has served her for a long time, which if Scheme One is applied is certainly and quite literally true. Alternatively, if Scheme Two is applied, then it is still true (allowing for a little exaggeration), as the lover in the month of 'May' has already served Venus since the beginning of 'March'. Amans is struck by the dart of love in the spring of his life and he must progress through the long process of the analysis of both love and himself before he can be

SCHEMES ONE & TWO COMBINED

Season	Spring	Spring	Spring	Summer	Summer	Summer	Autumn	Autumn	Autumn	Winter	Winter	Winter
Month	<u>MARCH</u>	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	<u>AUG.</u> — <u>SEPT.</u>	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	JAN.	FEB.	
Age	0 - 6	7 - 12	13 - 18	19 - 24	25 - 30	31 - 36	27 - 42	43 - 48	49 - 54	55 - 60	61 - 66	<u>67 - 72</u> (68)
Season	Winter	Winter	Spring	Spring	Spring	Summer	Summer	Summer	Autumn	Autumn	Autumn	Winter
Month	JAN.	FEB.	<u>MARCH</u>	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	JULY	<u>AUG.</u> — <u>SEPT.</u>	OCT.	NOV.	DEC.	
Age	0 - 6	7 - 12	13 - 18	19 - 24	25 - 30	31 - 36	37 - 42	43 - 48	49 - 54	55 - 60	61 - 66	<u>67 - 72</u> (68)

Table 3

healed of his wound, once he has re-entered the winter of sexuality. The entire poem, like the Lover's life, begins in spring and ends in winter.

It has already been stated that, contrary to Scheuler's claims, Gower is deliberately ambiguous in his handling of Amans' age. Similarly, some of the illuminators who illustrated early manuscripts of the poem seem to have striven to maintain a peculiar duality or ambiguity in their representations of Amans. Finally, in this important passage depicting Amans' life in terms of the Twelve Ages of Man *topos*, there is evidence of a potential dual reading of both this passage and, therefore, the entire poem. On one level it fits the traditional reading of the poem: Amans is old from the beginning but refuses to admit it to himself, Genius instructs him in love and life, and he comes to understand himself better as a result; but it takes Venus to make him realise that he is old and accept a life of contemplation before eventual death. It is this fairly literal reading which is represented by Scheme One and which would probably be recognised immediately by the first-time reader.

On another, less obvious, level Amans begins as a young man, in the springtime of his life and loves; as his life progresses, he learns more about love and himself until he comes to recognise his advanced years (albeit reluctantly), and accepts the winter of sexuality with dignity and grace. This more figural or symbolic level of meaning in the poem is represented by Scheme Two and embodies the *exemplum* of the *Confessio* as a whole. This is the reason for all the deliberate duality and ambiguity surrounding the nature of 'Amans': he is both old *and* young, an Everyman figure who is at once a vivid character and at the same time an archetype of all people (including lovers) who are on the path of self-awareness. The 'Amans' mask which the Narrator puts on in Book One is far more complex than it first appears, and Gower's Narrator achieves much while wearing it. Amans is perhaps the poem's greatest achievement, but a full understanding of the significance of this Everyman's analytical dialogue and its results cannot be achieved without looking at the character upon whom the entire confession pivots: Genius, the Priest of Venus.

Genius

Despite the fact that Amans is very much the focus of the poem, it is Genius who has tended to dominate critical attention. This attention has been due to the problems which seem to arise from the concept of a chaplain of Venus who appears to adhere quite strictly to orthodox christian teaching. Genius' unmistakable orthodoxy seems to conflict with the intentions of his mistress and, indeed, with the whole subject of the poem, as Macaulay notes in his introduction:

The scheme itself, with its conception of a Confessor who, as a priest has to expound a system of morality, while as a devotee of Venus he is concerned only with the affairs of love ... can hardly be called a consistent or happy one The Confessor is continually forgetting one or the other of his two characters, and the moralist is found justifying unlawful love or the servant of Venus singing the praises of virginity.³³

A reader looking over the *Confessio* with Macaulay's criticisms in mind could be forgiven for thinking that it is Genius rather than Amans who is the true sinner against Love. Amongst other things, he advises Amans to think about his approaching death and not just of love (Bk. I, ll. 2681-2720), he tells him to restrain his feelings and follow the path of Reason (Bk. III, ll. 1197-1200), he preaches against both jealousy and stealth (Bk. V, ll. 455-634 and ll. 6493-6960), he declares love-drunkenness to be 'meschief' (Bk. VI, ll. 75-92) and he condemns adultery (Bk. VI, ll. 665-672).³⁴ Genius condemns Venus' own lechery and adultery as most heinous of all, and tries to avoid mentioning her in his account of ancient religion in Book V (ll. 1382-1443). As a Priest of Love Genius appears to be something of a heretic.

Many critics have had little difficulty in dismissing these inconsistencies as yet further indications of Gower's inferior abilities as a writer. He attempted to turn from dull moralising to writing of love, we are told, but the inertia of his true concerns and prejudices proved too strong and Genius, the supposed Priest of Love, soon turns out to be yet another mouthpiece for Gower's inescapable moralism. It is unlikely, however, that Gower would have

³³ Macaulay, p. xix.

³⁴ D. G. Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization of Genius in the *Confessio Amantis*', *Modern Language Quarterly* 33 (1972), pp. 240-256. Schueler lists Genius' 'transgressions' against love on page 243.

such a defective sense of internal consistency that he would not have noticed these serious flaws: it seems rather more probable that the source of these difficulties lies not in Gower's prejudices, but in our own.

All those who have examined the critical problems which Genius presents at any length ³⁵ have agreed that Gower's Genius can be understood only in the light of the two figures of the same name who appear in Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturæ* and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*. It is important to recognise that all three of these characters allowed their respective writers to explore the ways in which reason and sensuality, divine law and physical impulse, might be reconciled. Once it is realised that it is largely through the direction which Genius gives to the confession dialogue that Gower is treading his 'middel weie' between 'lust' and 'lore', then it becomes possible to understand this important character. The widely held assumption that Genius must, as the Priest of Venus, speak like an Andreas Capellanus is without foundation. As Schueler observes:

[these inconsistencies] can be resolved, and the Confessor's identity can be shown to be allegorically appropriate; but it is first necessary to abandon the presupposition that the priest must be the spokesman of courtly love.³⁶

Gower creates his Genius with one eye on his predecessors, and it is probable that he expected at least part of his intended audience, Chaucer and his other friends and literary associates, to be familiar with Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun. Such an audience would certainly not expect Genius to be the voice of sexual generation alone, but also the servant of Nature, the sublunar vicar of God.

Knowlton, Economou, Schueler and Baker have all examined Gower's use of de Lille and de Meun at some length, but they differ slightly in their conclusions. Knowlton, influenced by the generally accepted adverse critical attitude toward Gower, points out Genius' 'inconsistency'³⁷ and, while acknowledging that Gower combined aspects of de Lille and de

³⁵ Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization', E.C. Knowlton, 'Genius as an Allegorical Figure' *Modern Language Notes* 39 (1924), pp. 89-95, G.D. Economou, 'The Character of Genius in Alan de Lille, Jean de Meun, and John Gower' *Chaucer Review* 4 (1970), pp. 203-210 and D. N. Baker, 'The Priesthood of Genius: A Study of the Medieval Tradition' *Speculum* 51 (1978), pp. 277-291.

³⁶ Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization', p. 243.

³⁷ Knowlton, p. 90.

Meun's characters, observes that 'Gower's Genius was an everyday sort of person'³⁸ who lacked the grandeur of de Lille's Genius. This seems to be meant as an adverse criticism.

Economou builds on Knowlton's observations and traces the progression from *De Planctu* to the *Roman* to the *Confessio* in some detail. In de Lille, Genius is Natura's other self, her *sese altera*. She decrees that the only lawful expression of love is in marriage under the guidance of reason, and it is Genius who pronounces a solemn excommunication upon those who have wronged her by disobeying her precepts. Jean de Meun took these two figures and used them for his own satirical ends. In the *Roman* Genius is Natura's confessor as well as her spokesman, and he is used to ironic purpose. While in de Lille's poem Genius puts on priestly vestments to pronounce Natura's excommunication, in de Meun's he takes them off to address Love's Barons. Before he speaks, however, he is dressed in the vestments given to him by Venus and Amor. Thus dressed, and holding a candle which is not made of virgin wax, he becomes the priest of Venus rather than Natura and preaches a sermon against chastity.³⁹ 'That Venus and Natura can work at cross purposes,' Economou writes, '...is one of Jean's most clearly made points.'⁴⁰ According to Economou, Gower changed Genius from the priest of Nature to the priest of Venus simply because that is where he found him in the *Roman*.

It is Schueler who first recognises that Genius provides the path by which Gower treads his 'middel weie'. He observes that, in his characterisation of Genius, Gower is following a 'long precedent, established by Plato and adapted by Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun' which is 'essentially Christian in its world-view and attempts a reconciliation between biological impulse and orthodox doctrine.'⁴¹ He points out that in all of these poems Nature, Venus and Genius are all 'represented as the agents of God's plan' and that Nature is the figure 'which encompasses these other generative powers'.⁴² Nature, Venus and Genius are all working together to bring about God's will and Genius is the priest of Venus, but he is also subject to Nature. If Genius'

³⁸ Knowlton, p. 90.

³⁹ Economou, p. 208.

⁴⁰ Economou, p. 208.

⁴¹ Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization', p. 244.

⁴² Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization', p. 244.

role is to reconcile man's natural self and the divine will then many of his so-called inconsistencies disappear.

Genius certainly seems to be comfortable with his dual role. Early in Book One he describes the two parts of his job:

Thi schrifte to oppose and hiere,
My Sone, I am assigned hiere
Be Venus the godesse above,
Whos Prest I am touchende of love.
Bot natheles for certein skile
I mot algate and nedes wile
Noght only make my spekynges
Of love, bot of othre thinges,
That touchen to the cause of vice.
For that belongeth to thoffice
Of Prest, whos ordre that I bere.

(Bk I, ll. 233-43)

This speech mentions the *necessity* for him to speak of vice as well as love, a point which is emphasised a few lines later where it is stressed that the two are inextricably linked:

I wol thi schrifte so enforme,
That ate leste thou schalt hiere
The vices, and to thi matiere
Of love I schal hem so remene,
That thou schalt knowe what thei mene....

(Bk I, ll. 276-280)

According to Schueler, the idea that Genius should be the servant of both Venus and Nature would not have been a surprising one for his contemporary audience:

No one then needed to be told that Genius was long established as the spokesman not of Venus but of Lady Nature in the works of Jean de Meun and Alain de Lille. Nor was there any conflict in loyalties involved now that the poet was transferring Genius' service to the goddess of love. At least in a proper hierarchical scheme of things, she was herself subject to Nature's control; in serving the one the Confessor could also serve the other as easily as a real priest might serve both his bishop and the pope.⁴³

⁴³ Schueler, 'Gower's Characterization', p. 251.

The Venus whom Genius serves, according to Schueler, is the 'honest' Venus of medieval tradition⁴⁴: a figure representing sexual impulse, but who is also subject to the rule of Nature, the Vicar of God, and therefore of the natural order.

Attractive as Schueler's solution may seem, it fails to account adequately for the most difficult of all the supposed inconsistencies regarding Venus and Genius, the Confessor's denial of his mistress in Book V, ll. 1382-1483. Schueler declares that the 'passage is a muddle, the only one of its kind in this huge poem',⁴⁵ and goes on to say that Genius, in his revulsion against incest, is simply being more faithful to his convictions about natural love than he is to Venus. This solution is not entirely satisfactory. It seems unlikely that so practised a thinker and sophisticated a writer as Gower would have left 'a muddle' of this kind standing at the centre of his poem. This passage seems, rather, to be *intended*, uncompromisingly, to challenge the reader to examine and question the exact nature of the relationship between Venus and Genius. It cannot be dismissed as an off-hand aside of little significance to the poem as a whole.

Denise Baker identifies this problem with Schueler's analysis early in her own article on the problem: 'if Gower's Venus is the servant of the moral Natura, why then does Genius repudiate her in Book V?'⁴⁶ Obviously, Schueler's conclusion that Genius is the servant of Venus, who is in turn the servant of Nature, and therefore that Genius is the servant of both, is not the whole answer. She argues that the one attribute that Gower's figure shares with all his literary predecessors is his role as a tutelary guide. Genius' role, according to Baker, is to show Amans the relationship between 'kinde' and 'reson'. At one point he explains these two concepts to his pupil:

For god the lawes hath assised
Als wel to reson as to kinde,
Bot he the bestes wolde binde
Only to lawes of nature,
Bot to the mannes creature

⁴⁴ George D. Economou gives an interesting, though not altogether satisfactory, account of the varied careers of the two Venuses in his 'The Two Venuses and Courtly Love' in *In Pursuit of Perfection: Courtly Love in Medieval Literature* ed. J.M. Ferrante and G.D. Economou (Kennikat Press: Port Washington, 1975).

⁴⁵ Schueler, 'Gower's Characterisation', p. 252.

⁴⁶ Baker, p. 278.

God yaf him reson forth withal,
Wherof that he nature schal
Upon the causes modefie
That he schal do no lecherie
And yit he schal hise lustes have.

(Bk. VII, ll. 5372-81)

Genius has the task of reconciling Nature's (and, therefore, God's) moral order with Venus' figuration of essential sexuality *per se*. Thus, according to Baker, while Genius objects to Amans' love because it is unreasonable and sinful, Venus condemns it simply because he is old, and old lovers are unnatural.⁴⁷ This also explains Genius' repudiation of Venus in Book V; she stands for sexuality without the restraint of reason and as such is 'vulnerable to perversion';⁴⁸ therefore, it is appropriate that Genius the tutelary guide should steer Amans away from her example.

Baker's solution also is not free of difficulties, however. The poem stresses that Genius is a dependant of Venus: she refers to him as her 'oghne Clerk', the narrator calls him 'hire prest' and Genius himself refers to '...Venus the godesse above, / Whos Prest I am'. The poem makes it clear, therefore, that Genius is very much Venus' servant; while Baker's ideas imply a high degree of independence of and, in the 'denial passage', even opposition to Venus and her ideals on Genius' part. According to Baker, Genius' role as a tutelary guide is altogether more important than any allegiance he owes to Venus. Thus, while Baker proposes an explanation of why Genius repudiates Venus, she makes us question once again why the priest seems to be so much at odds with his superior.

Venus and Nature

Baker rejects Schueler's idea that Genius' loyalty to Nature and her moral laws is due to his role as a servant of a Venus who is herself subordinate to Nature. The reader who turns to Venus' reply to Amans' Supplication, however, will find Venus actually discussing her relationship to Nature. Amans' Supplication laments the fact that Nature moves him to love, but does nothing to help him attain his desire. Even the smallest of creatures, such as 'the litel

⁴⁷ Baker, p. 291.

⁴⁸ Baker, p. 290.

wrenne', achieves the desire implanted in it by Nature:

... and yit no certein sche compasseth
Hou I schal spede, and thus between the tweie
I stonde, and not if I schal live or deie.
For thogh reson ayein my will debate,
I mai noght fle, that I ne love algate.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 2233-2237)

Venus, like a medieval magnate examining the petition of a vassal, points out that Amans' document is addressed partly to Cupid and herself, but partly to Nature as well:

For I thi bille have understonde,
In which to Cupide and to me
Somdiel thou hast compleigned thee,
And somdiel to Nature also.
Bot that schal stonde among you tuo,
For therof have I noght to done;
For Nature is under the Mone
Maistresse of every lives kinde....

(Bk. VIII, ll. 2324-2331)

Nature, she argues, is the sublunary Vicar of God who inspires all creatures to act naturally, and it is not for Venus to answer for Nature why it is that the sexual desire, inspired in all creatures including humans, can often cause humans so much distress. However, Venus says that she refuses to accept into her court anyone who acts contrary to Nature:

... of these othre ynowe be,
Whiche of here oghne nycete
Ayein Nature and hire office
Deliten hem in sondri vice,
Wherof that sche fulofte hath pleigned,
And ek my Court it hath desdeigned
And evere schal; for it receiveth
Non such that kinde so deceiveth.
For al onliche of gentil love
Mi court stant alle courtz above
And takth noght into retenue
Bot thing which is to kinde due,
For elles it schal be refused.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 2337-2349)⁴⁹

So, while she claims that Amans' specific complaint to Nature is out of her jurisdiction, Venus assures the lover that her Court rejects any who act against natural norms. It is for this reason, she explains, that Amans is excused from her retinue, since:

... it is manye daies gon,
That thou amonges hem were on
Which of my court hast ben withholde...
Mi medicine is noght to sieke
For thee and for suche olde sieke...

(Bk. VIII, ll. 2351-2368)

The only conclusion which can be drawn from this is that Venus *does* consider herself required to enforce Nature's precepts to some extent. This passage raises some problems: it is difficult to reconcile Venus' condemnation of those who delight in 'sodri vice' with our knowledge of her own forays into incestuous intercourse. It is also hard to see any logical connection between those who have offended Nature by their immoral sexual activity and the hapless Amans who, quite obviously, is not indulging in active sexuality of any kind. The only solution to these difficulties must be that Venus objects to these things not because they are both sexually immoral (because Amans' situation is not), but because they are *sterile*.

If we interpret those who indulge in vice against nature to be those who practice unnatural, infertile sex such as sodomy, for example, then they are like Amans in that their pleasure will not result in generation. This Venus, therefore, represents not just unreasoned sexual pleasure, but purely *generative* sexuality. She is the embodiment of the impulse which drives all creatures to perpetuate the species. She condemns infertile sexual acts, such as sodomy, just as Nature does. She cannot condone an aged lover because his love is, to her way of thinking, sterile and therefore pointless. Other sexual love, however, even incestuous love, is acceptable to her if it has at least the potential to lead to generation.

Venus, then, stresses that she must follow the laws of 'kinde' as laid down by the sublunary Vicar of God, Nature, but her objection to Amans' love is based on the fact that it is

⁴⁹ Venus mentions that Nature 'fulofte hath pleigned' about those who act against 'kinde'; almost certainly a deftly oblique reference to *De Planctu Naturæ*.

unnatural in that it is infertile. She is not unaware that Amans' love is also contrary to reason, which as Genius has already explained (Bk VII, ll. 5372-81), is the moral guide instilled in man by God, through Nature, to ensure that he fulfils the sexual requirements of nature and still avoids 'lecherie'.⁵⁰ This is, however, simply of little concern to her. It is Genius who continually stresses that Amans must follow 'reson' and allow it to take precedence over his 'wille'. Amans' love is therefore unlawful on two counts, in that it is contrary to both 'kinde' and 'reson'.

What Amans consistently fails to realise is that all human sexual activity should comply with the demands of both these two forces. He is *not* like the 'litel wrenne', in that he has moral constraints on him as well as natural ones. As far as Venus is concerned the natural constraints are reason enough to excuse him from her Court, but Genius constantly tries to stress the other constraint put on human sexuality by Nature: reason. Genius *is* the priest of Venus in that he argues that love should be according to 'kinde'; but he is also the priest of Nature, his traditional role in de Lille and de Meun, in that he emphasises the constraint of 'reson', the basis of the *jus naturæ* and, therefore, the source of human sexual morality. What the reader finds as the *Confessio* draws to a close is a number of interconnected characters whose relationships bring about a deliberate and intelligent tension of forces rather than some kind of clumsy or unaware contradiction. Gower wants his readers to recognise this tension and to look carefully at the story's main figures.

The relationships among these four characters are remarkably complex; and certainly more subtle than the direct linear hierarchy proposed by Schueler. His analogy of an ecclesiastical hierarchy of layman, priest, bishop and pope which corresponds to the poem's hierarchy of Amans, Genius, Venus and Nature is useful, but it does not take Genius' repudiation of Venus into account. As has been discussed above, Venus is concerned primarily

⁵⁰ Hugh White argues ('Nature and the Good in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*' in Yeager, *John Gower: Recent Readings* pp. 1-20) that in the *Confessio* 'we find Gower dallying with a vision of reason and nature reconciled' but that, in the end, he depicts man as caught between these two forces. White accepts that reason is a natural attribute of men in Alain de Lille (p. 3) and acknowledges passages such as Bk. VII, ll. 5372-81 (p. 11), but his conclusion is based on other passages which appear to endorse nature over human reason. Careful analysis of these passages shows, however, that reason and natural law are always endorsed over natural sexual impulses throughout the *Confessio*. Baker's analysis of nature's role is entirely more coherent and convincing than White's.

with 'kinde', while Nature and Genius are concerned with both 'kinde' and 'reson'. Amans appears to be ignorant of both, and thus constantly blames his ill fate in love on 'chance'. Venus acknowledges Nature's requirement that all creatures act according to 'kinde' in that sexual action is to lead to generation, and accordingly disqualifies Amans from her retinue of lovers. Genius, however, lays constant emphasis on the constraint which 'reson' places on human sexuality, and on the fact that this human attribute is the source of human sexual morality. A person must act reasonably (i.e. morally) as well as naturally, according to Genius and Nature. Both Genius and his mistress Venus acknowledge Nature therefore, but in somewhat different ways. If Schueler's analogy of ecclesiastical hierarchy is to be replaced by a more useful perspective, the reason for this difference must be examined.

If Venus and Genius are different in their relation to Nature, it could be that a clue to the source of this difference lies in some other way in which they differ. As has already been discussed at some length in Chapter Two, the relationship between Amans and Genius is very much that of a confessor-priest and his penitent. Amans' relationship with Venus is, however, entirely different. From the beginning of Book I the language used to describe their relations is entirely that of secular feudal vassalage. He calls himself her 'servant', he claims to belong to her 'court' and her 'retenue', he makes obeisance to her when she approaches, he calls her 'Ma dame' and he presents a petition to her just as a feudal vassal would. Venus is clearly, therefore, considered to have authority as of a secular magnate over Amans. As has already been noted, she calls Genius her 'oghne prest', and grants him authority over Amans on the grounds that the latter claims to be her servant. So, it would appear that she has secular authority over both the priest and the petitioner, in much the same way that a magnate of Gower's time would have had secular authority over both a priest attached to his household and a member of his retinue.

On the basis of these observations, a more useful analogy than Schueler's can be devised if the complex interrelations between the figures in the *Confessio* are seen in the light of the equally complex interrelations between secular and ecclesiastical authorities of Gower's time. As Venus' 'oghne prest', Genius is in a situation which would have been familiar to Gower's

contemporaries. The primary concern of such a conscientious priest⁵¹ would have been with the Church and its needs, but the concerns of his secular lord also had to be taken into consideration. It is very likely that a conscientious priest and confessor attached to the house of a powerful feudal magnate would often find himself in the position where, while he had to maintain his allegiance to his lord, he was also forced to disapprove of certain actions performed by that lord as contrary to the teachings of the Church and, therefore, against the will of God. The entire medieval period was marked by this kind of tension caused by the inter-relationships between the secular and ecclesiastical worlds. Genius must keep his mistress Venus' concerns in mind as he goes about his duties, but is also aware of other concerns. It is he who stresses the importance of the constraint of 'reson' to Amans. He is concerned with the constraint of 'kinde', as his mistress is, but his continual emphasis on 'reson', as well as his exhortations toward 'honest love' and his approval of marriage throughout the *Confessio*, show that Genius also acknowledges the higher authority of Nature, who, as *vicaria Dei*, has jurisdiction over all. So, in his dialogue with Amans, he does encourage the penitent to be a worthy servant of Venus, but only in as far as this does not conflict with the precepts of the higher authority of Nature.

If Genius is viewed in this way, then his repudiation of Venus in Book V makes sense. Venus represents unrestrained, generative sexuality, for whom even incest is acceptable so long as it is fertile. For her priest, however, incest is entirely unacceptable since, although it obeys the law of 'kinde', it is against 'reson' and the *jus naturæ*. As a result, it is contrary to Nature and therefore to the cosmic order and the will of God. Genius is forced to condemn his mistress' actions when they are brought up in the course of his confessional dialogue with Amans in much the same way that a priest attached to the household of the Black Prince might well have been likely to repudiate that magnate's brutal sack of Limoges in 1370 if, say, the incident came up in a discussion on the sin of anger. Expressing disapproval of some aspect of his mistress's performance does not make Genius any less the priest of Venus than our hypothetical priest would be any less a cleric of the Black Prince's household. On the other

⁵¹ A priest in the position, for example, of the confessor in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* or (perhaps) King Richard's confessor, Thomas Rushook.

hand, Genius' disapproval does indicate his allegiance to the higher authority of Nature.

Indeed, it is primarily through Genius' side of the confessional dialogue that the concerns of Nature are expressed in the *Confessio*. Nature herself does not appear in the poem, and the first time she is mentioned directly is in Book VIII, l. 2224, when Amans addresses her in his supplication. The importance of her role is made explicit, however, in Venus' reply to Amans' petition in the passage discussed above. Genius certainly acknowledges her authority, and tries to instruct Amans to live according to her principles. Venus acknowledges her as an authority also; but her reply to Amans seems to indicate that, in this situation, she is citing Nature's principles because they agree with her own.

For the purposes of a working analogy, therefore, we can perhaps see Nature here as ranking like a higher ecclesiastical authority in the medieval social structure, such as a bishop or even the pope (she is, after all, the *vicaria Dei*). Genius, as Venus' priest, must pursue the immediate concerns of his (secular) mistress, but ultimately his over-riding priorities are those of his (ecclesiastical) superior, Nature. Nature's authority must also be acknowledged by Venus but, in the case of Amans, she is prepared to emphasise Nature's precepts regarding elderly lovers mainly because they happily co-incide with her own concerns. She is like a secular lord making use of a piece of church doctrine to solve a (minor) problem in his court. The hierarchy of authority in the poem seems to be usefully analagous to a hierarchy which would have been familiar to Gower's audience. We see a vassal (Amans), who is also a christian layman, and who is subject both to his feudal overlord (Venus) and to that lord's household priest (Genius). We see a priest who also owes allegiance to the lord, but whose priorities lie with the concerns of the Church as communicated and represented by the pope and bishops (Nature). The feudal magnate must also acknowledge the pope and bishop's authority, but she also has her own priorities. Gower's use of these inter-relationships between secular and ecclesiastical authorities and their concordant tensions skilfully highlights the complex demands of 'reson' and 'kinde' in a way that any bald or simple scheme could not. Indeed, it is the very complexity of this scheme which gives it its richness and intellectual vigour. It is *meant* to be puzzling and challenging.

Gower's readers are *meant* to wonder about the relationship between Venus and Genius, or about the role of Nature. Critics who find this complexity distressing or confusing should, perhaps, turn to a far balder, less challenging and less satisfying treatment of the same subject, such as Lydgate's *Reason and Sensuality*; a poem which highlights the *Confessio*'s challenging figural richness by its very unchallenging allegorical flatness.

To look on Gower's figures in this way bears rich critical fruit. For example, Venus does not seem to be without sympathy for Amans, and it would not be true to say that she seems to consider his situation trivial, but it is clear that she looks on his case from an entirely different perspective from that of Amans or Genius (or, for that matter, the reader). From her first encounter with Amans in Book I, it seems that she has a reasonable idea of Amans' character. She tells him that there are many 'faitours' in her court and orders Genius to 'schrive' him to see if he is guilty of 'feintise' (Bk. I, ll. 173-202). It appears, in the end, that he *is* an imposter of a sort, since he is amongst those who disobey Nature's precepts and thus 'kinde...deceiveth'. By deceiving 'kinde', Amans proves to be an imposter in Venus' court, but it is only through the confession dialogue and its analysis that he comes to be honest enough with himself to confront this fact.

The medieval listener or modern reader can sympathise with Amans, since we can understand his psychological condition through the confession process and his often difficult path to a greater awareness, but Venus' perspective is very different. She has known the source of Amans' distress from the beginning, and it is for this reason she addresses him 'as it were halvinge a game' (Bk. VIII, l. 2319) or beholds him 'halvyng of scorn' (Bk. VIII, l. 2397). When he has finally come to realise his true position and awakes from his swoon, Venus laughs and, in one of the poem's most significant moments, asks him 'as it were in game' (Bk VIII, l. 2871) what love is. Amans, having been transformed by his entirely new perspective, finds that he is literally unable to answer.

Venus' laughter and playfulness in these scenes are significant.⁵² Firstly, they

⁵² For an extended discussion of other aspects of laughter in the *Confessio* see Linda Barney Burke 'Genial Gower: Laughter in the *Confessio Amantis*' in Yeager, *John Gower: Recent Readings*, pp. 39-64.

convey vividly and succinctly the kind of self-assurance and confidence, the lordliness which the power of a major medieval magnate would surely have engendered; attributes which Gower, Chaucer and their associates would have surely have encountered regularly in their own dealings with the aristocracy. Venus' authority and importance are unquestionable as a result of these aristocratic attributes. Secondly, the difference between Venus' perspective on the situation and Amans' is indicated by her laughter, which is richly reminiscent of the laughter which marks juxtaposed perspectives in other Ricardian poems. It recalls the laughter which greets Sir Gawain's admission of what he considers to be his wrongdoing to Arthur's court:

The kyng comfortes the knight, and all the court als,
 Laghen loude therat and lovelyly acorden
 That lordes and ledes that longed to the Table,
 Uch burn of the brotherhede, a baudderyk schulde have...
 And that for sake of that segge in sute to were.⁵³

It also echoes Troilus' laughter as his soul looks back towards the Earth from the perspective of the Eighth Sphere:

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse
 This litel spot of erthe that with the se
 Embraced is, and fully gan despise
 This wrecched world, and held al vanitie...
 And in hymself he lough right at the wo
 Of hem that wepten for his deth so faste.⁵⁴

Gawain, having laboured so long to avoid the various pitfalls of Hautdesert, can see the only snare he did not avoid. Through their laughter and comfort, the court indicates another, wider perspective; they see the honour and 'gentillesse' from which his remorse stems. With characteristic swiftness and directness, Chaucer whisks Troilus from a battlefield outside Troy to the Eighth Celestial Sphere, where he responds to his change of perspective with laughter; a far healthier and more life-affirming laughter than the scornful mirth with which he greeted lovers in Book I. Similarly, Venus sees from the beginning what Amans does not see until the end. She knows that Amans needs to look at himself carefully before he will accept his true position.

⁵³ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* J.R.R. Tolkien, E.V. Gordon & N.Davis (ed.s) (1925; Clarendon Press Oxford, 1967) ll. 2513-2517

⁵⁴ *Troilus and Criseyde*, Bk.. V, ll. 1814-1822 in *The Riverside Chaucer*. L. D. Benson (ed.)

Once she has succeeded in making him do so, she greets the moment of final revelation with laughter. It is only when Genius and Venus have vanished that Amans gets a chance to think on all that has happened:

And thus bewhapid in my thought,
Whan al was turnyd in to nought,
I stod amasid for a while,
And in my self y gan to smyle....
Homward a softe pas y wente,
(Bk VIII, ll. 2955-2967)

Finally, Amans can begin to feel and express the joy which comes when new understanding removes or redefines conflict.

It is difficult to imagine that the close verbal and psychological similarity of Chaucer's 'And in hymself he lough...' and Gower's 'And in my self y gan to smyle...', coming as they do at similarly climactic and thematic points in their respective poems, could simply be the result of co-incidence. It is not unlikely that this kind of change of perspective, marked by affirming laughter, was something which the two poets discussed, and that Gower chose to pay homage to one of the greatest moments in Chaucer's poetry by echoing it in the resolution of his own great English work.⁵⁵ It may well also be significant that this section in Gower only appears in the second version of the conclusion. Here the overt reference to Chaucer ('And gret wel Chaucer whan ye mete...' Bk VII, ll. 2941*) has been replaced by a more subtle echoic reference to his friend's work; a reference which would perhaps only be noticed by those familiar with the *Troilus* ending.⁵⁶ Troilus' laughter is followed by Chaucer's famous dedication of the poem to Gower and Strode; and perhaps here, in both versions, Gower is repaying the compliment.

Venus' laughter and general attitude indicate that she sees the microcosm of the *Confessio* in a very different light from the other figures in the poem. Amans' slow, inward

⁵⁵ On the date of the *Confessio* see Fisher p. 116 ff. and Macaulay pp. xxi-xxviii. On the date of the *Troilus* see R.K. Root, *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde edited from all the Known Manuscripts* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1926).

⁵⁶ This would seem to indicate that the Chaucer reference was not dropped entirely, but prudentially toned down. If this is so, then it argues against the already discredited idea of a quarrel between the two poets. At the same time it lends support to J.H. Fisher's idea that the overt Chaucer reference was dropped by Gower to avoid associating his friend with his new political stance toward Richard II. (Fisher p.119). Chaucer is still acknowledged, but in such a way that only those 'in the know', such as their circle of friends, would realise it.

smile indicates that he has, at last, begun to see things in a truer perspective. It is Genius, however, who strives to effect this change in Amans. He is the figure who shows Amans, the archetypal lover and Everyman-figure, a way to reconcile reason and sensuality. It is interesting that when Amans has accepted his true condition, he looks around to find Genius only to find him vanished 'out of [his] sighte'. Similarly, Venus disappears with startling suddenness:

...with that word al sodeinly,
Enclosid in a sterred sky,
Venus, which is qweene of love,
Was take in to hire place above,
More wiste y nought wher sche becam.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 2941-2945)⁵⁷

Now that sexuality is no longer a concern of the aged Amans, Venus literally becomes a remote point in the heavens. Likewise, with sexual desire quenched, Genius' tutelary role is no longer required, leaving Amans to think, to smile, and to go 'ther vertu moral duelleth'.

The idea that there is some kind of contradiction between Genius' striving to impress on Amans this christian metaethical teaching and his status as a 'Priest of Love' is based entirely on a misapprehension. At no point in the poem is Genius called a 'Priest of Love'; though he *is* called the priest of Venus, i.e. a priest attached to her court, which is an entirely different thing. There certainly is some conflict involved in being a priest while at the same time serving in Venus' household, but this conflict is both useful and deliberate. Through it, Gower makes use of the familiar tensions which arose out of the inter-relations between ecclesiastical and secular powers and the tensions which arose out of their (sometimes concurrent, sometimes conflicting) demands on the average christian subject. The dual, God-appointed and often confusing demands of reason and sensuality on man are usefully examined by way of the parallel demands of the Church and the State. Genius acts to guide Amans on a 'middel weie' which reconciles the two.

⁵⁷ Indeed, Venus' entirely different perspective is succinctly indicated by this sudden removal to the celestial spheres. The similarity between this ascent to the heavens and Troilus' is again, surely, more than co-incidence. In *Troilus* it is the protagonist himself who experiences the change in perspective afforded by his change in spiritual and spatial situation. In the *Confessio*, Venus' sudden ascent shows both how different Venus' perspective is and how Amans has finally come to realise this.

In doing this, Genius places the *Confessio* alongside the *Roman de la Rose* and *De Planctu Naturæ* as a poem which attempts to achieve a compromise between the excessive demands of many ascetic moralists, whose aversion to things of the flesh which might even tend to border on Manichaeism, and the equally excessive ethos of some secular poetry, which espouses unrestrained sexual freedom.⁵⁸ The former tradition would sternly commend celibacy to Amans, the latter would freely encourage sensuality. Genius advises Amans to pursue 'honeste love'; to choose sexual love in marriage, and to be guided by unselfish *caritas* in all things. As a result of this confessional advice, the *Confessio* does tread a middle way between 'lust' and 'lore' as the Narrator promises in the Prologue.

Whatever else one may say about the *Confessio's* ending, it is far from simple. The ending, and therefore the poem as a whole, contains a knot of inter-related issues which are meant to challenge readers to question their assumptions and presuppositions. Like all the greatest of the Ricardian poems, the *Confessio* ends not so much with an exclamation mark as a question mark. Like *Troilus and Criseyde* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the *Confessio Amantis* ends with a certain amount of flourish, as though all has been resolved but, like those contemporary works, the ending of the *Confessio* opens up a great many questions. The sudden changes in perspective which mark the ends of these poems leave readers, like Amans, 'bewhapid in [their] thoght'; a state which, perhaps, would have intrigued and delighted Gower's hypothetical audience of friends and associates. What Richard II made of this 'newe thing', assuming he ever read it, we can only guess, though it would appear that the social and political side of Gower's 'middel weie' was largely aimed at him. The confession dialogue and its intriguing resolution embody the microcosmic aspect of the poem. To appreciate its equally ambitious macrocosmic dimension, we must examine the Epilogue, and look back across thirty thousand lines to the Prologue to gain a perspective on yet another dimension of Gower's 'divine comedy'.

⁵⁸ This is not to say, of course, that all three of these poems are entirely the same in their didactic points or philosophical orientation. Alain de Lille's work is quite Neo-platonic, while Jean de Meun's could be described as neo-Aristotelian

CHAPTER FOUR - Findings and Outcomes

The Politics of the *Confessio Amantis*

Readers could be forgiven for failing to remember the opening lines of the *Confessio* by the time they reach the resolution of the confession dialogue and witness Amans turning thoughtfully for home 2,960 lines later. It is important to remember, however, that in the original version of his Prologue (or his 'extrinsic prologue', to be precise),¹ Gower promised to write 'A bok for king Richardes sake'. In the final version of his poem this intention was broadened in scope to a 'bok for Engelondes sake', but his essential intention and motivation did not change. Whatever else it may be, the *Confessio Amantis* is, in its essence, an overtly political work.

To an extent, it is understandable that critics have been distracted from this aspect of the poem by C.S. Lewis' seminal chapter on Gower's poem in *The Allegory of Love*, which lays complete emphasis on the poem as a poem of 'courtly love'. Lewis' study was certainly a stimulus for closer study of the *Confessio*, but he overlooks the poem's great diversity in his zeal to examine it in the tradition of the *Roman de la Rose*.² This has, perhaps, been exacerbated by a lingering romantic ideal that poets should somehow be 'above' politics. Paul Strohm has observed of Chaucer:

Twentieth-century literary historians have rather wishfully thought him apolitical, a free agent between parties or even wholly free of factional ties. But any freedom of personal choice or perspective he enjoyed was achieved from within the conditions imposed from his factional situation, not by ignoring them but by manipulating them with patience and skill.

(Strohm, p. 25)

Such apolitical aloofness, however, tends to be attributed mainly to 'better' poets such as

¹ See Ch. One, p. 21 above.

² Lewis, pp. 198 ff. Lewis begins his chapter by analysing the line 'Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore'. He defines 'lust' rather too narrowly as 'courtly love', and 'lore' even more narrowly as 'ethical diatribe'. His study ignores the poem's social and political aspects entirely.

Chaucer. 'Inferior' and 'mediocre' poets, as Gower has been regarded until recently, *are* allowed to write poetry of a political nature, but are rarely praised for it. Fisher summarises the eighteenth and nineteenth-century assessment of Gower's (supposed) political stance:

Theophilus Cibber (1753) had been content to dismiss him as a timeserver. Joseph Ritson (1802) observed that 'his *Vox Clamantis* might have deserved publication, in a historical view, if he had not proved an ingrate to his lawful sovereign, and a sycophant to the usurper of his throne.' Charles Cowden-Clark, Keats's friend, added (1853): 'yet this execrable baseness attaches to the memory of Chaucer's friend Gower, who with the callous selfishness that not infrequently accompanies a blind old age, was among the first to welcome the new sovereign, spurning at the same time his fallen master and patron.'

(Fisher, p. 29)

Of course, it is highly unlikely that Richard was ever Gower's patron and Fisher's analysis, later in his book, conclusively disposes of the image of Gower the fawning ingrate who 'bolted to Bolingbroke' when the political tide turned. A reading of the whole poem shows that it is characterised by political themes which are marked not only by their sophistication but also by their passion. Gower was no fawning sycophant but, by the same token, neither was he a detached and remote commentator in an ivory tower at St Mary Overeys. The *Confessio* reveals an author greatly concerned for the Kingdom of England, for Christendom and for the whole world. Gower had an active interest in the politics of his time, and he saw his poetry as a way to influence it. It is through this aspect of the poem that we return to Gower's assumed authorial role as a sapiental authority.³ He sought to write a work that would be like the old books he mentions in the *Confessio*'s opening lines, 'newe som matiere / Ensampld of these olde wyse', that could instruct and guide a new generation. By dispensing wisdom, which is the subject to which the poem belonged according to his extrinsic prologue, he hopes to restore some of the harmony which the world lacks and which he passionately believes to be the source of political, social and spiritual stability.

As discussed above, the image of Gower as a solitary writer of turgid complaint poetry can usefully and legitimately be replaced by that of Gower as part of a vigorous group of

³ See Ch. One, p. 20 ff. above.

intelligent and literary-minded friends and associates including Chaucer and many of his circle.⁴ Similarly, it must not be forgotten that, as part of this group of like-minded friends and associates, Gower was close to the centre of the affairs of state and politics of his day and probably took an active interest in them. Paul Strohm usefully examines the evidence for Chaucer's political associations and his place in the complex arrangements of parties, factions and interest-groups which made up fourteenth-century English politics. He points out that:

The king or magnate was situated not (as in a hierarchy) at the *apex* of the affinity, but at its *center*, with followers arrayed around him in a series of concentric circles, widening out to less and less defined forms of interdependency.

(Strohm, p. 25)

Strohm delineates the first three of these circles of dependency: The Officers of State (such as the Chamber Knights), salaried servants (such as Chancery officials and Sergeants at Arms) and the General Retinue (royal esquires and knights).⁵ Chaucer, as Strohm points out, had a virtually continual association with the first circle, and was a member of the other two at various times throughout his career. Gower, by contrast, seems to have been only associated with these three innermost circles, belonging to none of them. Of all the associates of Chaucer whom Strohm examines, only Gower could be said to have been politically unaligned:

Chaucer's fellow poet, we may say in simple summary of a complex body of evidence, was effectively nonaligned. A landed squire of independent means who addressed admonitions and encouragement both to Richard and to Henry of Derby, Gower depended for his livelihood on neither.

(Strohm, p. 31)

The lack of evidence regarding Gower's associations means that any attempt at delineating which of the politicians and factionalists of the time were known to Gower is bound to be pure conjecture. As has already been argued, however, in a city as small as late fourteenth-century London it is likely that a great many of these men *were* known to the poet. Indeed, it would have been almost impossible to escape the intrigues of the last decade of the century, even

⁴ See Ch. One, p. 9-20 above.

⁵ Strohm, p. 25.

if Gower *did* attempt to cloister himself away in St Mary Overeys. The highly interlinked social circles in which Gower and his associates moved meant that people's paths tended to cross in all kinds of ways.

While it is true to say that Gower was nonaligned, this does not mean that he was in any way a political fence-sitter. This should surprise no-one; after all, it is highly likely that Gower took a very active interest in the politics of his time, and that he was well-placed to be a useful advisor and commentator on political matters. This is because he was not only in touch with many who were actively involved in politics, but he was also financially independent and therefore detached enough from the factionalism which marked late fourteenth-century politics to be able to see the affairs of state from a broad perspective. It is interesting that, as Strohm has pointed out, many literary critics and historians have been reluctant to acknowledge Chaucer's political allegiances, seemingly because they feel a man with a mind of such scope and depth could not possibly have involved himself with petty political squabbles. By contrast, Gower's poetry has traditionally been seen as being far more narrow-minded than Chaucer's, yet it would appear that he was rather less actively involved in politics than Chaucer. What must be kept in mind is that *both* men were thinkers and active participants in their society, and so it would be more surprising if they did not take an active interest in the politics of the time.

As Fisher's analysis of the textual history of the *Confessio* has made very clear, Gower was not afraid to take a political stance, even if that stance were a dangerous one.⁶ The first recension of the Prologue makes Gower's passionate political concerns very clear. This was to be primarily a 'bok for king Richardes sake'; a book of wisdom for the young king in the tradition of the *speculum regale*. The first ninety-two lines of the Prologue in this recension state his objects clearly and relate the anecdote about meeting the young king on the Thames. His concern is to:

...make a bok after his heste,
And write in such a maner wise,
Which may be wisdom to the wise
And pley to hem that lust to pleye.

⁶ Fisher, pp. 109ff.

(Prologue, ll. *82-85)

This section of the Prologue's first version emphasises that it was Richard who requested the poem, and celebrates this fact. While it is followed by an account of the social and political ills which Gower sees around him, he does not mention these yet. At this stage in the poem's political development the tone is optimistic; Richard II had only become king in his own right quite recently and Gower, amongst others, had great hopes for the young monarch. The ills which he goes on to catalogue certainly cannot be denied, but neither can they be laid at the door of a king who has only just reached his majority. Indeed, it is Gower's hope that Richard, with good guidance and wise counsel, will be able to combat some of these social and political ills. This note of optimism is repeated in the first recension of the epilogue at the end of Book VIII:

Upon mi bare knees I preye,
That [God] my worthi king conveye,
Richard by name the Secounde,
In whom hath evere yit be founde
Justice medled with pite,
Largesce forth with charite.

(Bk. VIII, ll.*2985-2990)

The political tone of the later version of the poem is very different. The book has now become a work 'for Engelondes sake', and Gower's account of the design of the book has changed markedly and is considerably more gloomy:

What schal befall hierafterward
God wot, for now upon this tyde
Men se the world on every syde
In sondry wyse so diversed,
That it welnyh stant al reversed,
As forto speke of tyme ago.

(Prologue, ll. 26-31)

This, the Narrator tells us, is the state of the world in the 'yer sextenthe of kyng Richard.' Not only does the catalogue of the world's woes begin much earlier in the Prologue in this second

version, but it begins with a reference to Richard's name and the precise year of his reign. This is very different from the pleasant anecdote about boating on the Thames which characterised this section in the Prologue's earlier version. The references to the wise taking wisdom from the poem, while others may simply take pleasure, have been toned down. Now the emphasis is on princes who 'deden thanne amis / Thurgh tirannie and crualte', and the reader is told that the work 'to wisdom al belongeth'. Most importantly, the work is now dedicated to 'myn oghne lord / Which of Lancastre is Henri named'. The new version of the epilogue also reflects this change in tone and in political orientation. The prayer for the king becomes a prayer for the state of England, and direct references to Richard are removed. Interestingly, the fairly brief mention of the qualities of a good king which can be found in the first recension is greatly expanded into a section fifty-two lines long (Bk. VIII, ll. 3054-3106).

Whatever else may be said about these changes, it seems clear that Richard had not lived up to Gower's hopes. In the second version of the Prologue, Gower associates the king with the social ills he discusses, while in the second version of the epilogue he follows an analysis of discord in all levels of society with an analysis of the attributes of a good king. It is the king who should be the source of unity in the land:

To him belongith the leiance
Of Clerk, of knyght, of man of lawe;
Undir his hond al is forth drawe
The marchant and the laborer;
So stant it al in his power
Or forto spille or forto save.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 3058-3063).

With this power, the poet cautions, comes great responsibility. A king must avoid vice, pride and lust, and dedicate himself to God:

Bot what kyng that with humble chere
Aftir the lawe of god eschuieth
The vices, and the vertus suieth,
His grace schal be suffisant
To governe al the remenant
Which longith to his duite;

So that in his prosperite
The poeple schal nought ben oppressid,
Wherof his name schal be blessid,
For evere and be memorial.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 3096-3105)

This is in stark and deliberate contrast to the parallel passage in the first version of the epilogue:

It proveth wel that he [a good king] eschueth
The vices and is vertuous,
Wherof he mot be gracious
Toward his god and acceptable.

(Bk. VIII, ll. *3032-3035)

In the earlier version Gower warmly recommends that the young king should live virtuously and rule well, but the lengthier passage in the second version has a sterner, more admonitory tone. The implication is, of course, that he no longer considers Richard to be conforming to the archetype of the virtuous king.

Fisher argues convincingly that the event which precipitated the change of heart which led to these significant changes was Richard's quarrel with the city of London in 1392.⁷ Whether this were true or not, the revisions are an indication of a bold and decisive change of political stance. There is a good chance that Gower would have presented Richard with a copy of the first version of the poem. If he then presented Henry of Derby with a copy of the politically revised second version, and there is some evidence he did,⁸ then the poet was publicly nailing his colours to the mast. Indeed, the manuscript evidence shows that this change of political stance was certainly not something which Gower did quietly, behind closed doors. The fact that the old, 'first recension' text in MS Fairfax 3 was scraped out and the new version of the poem written in its place, is one indication of the concern shown by Gower that his readers should be aware of the new version. In a political climate which engendered pithy comment such as:

The ax was scharpe the stokke was harde
In the xiiij yere of kyng Richarde,⁹

⁷ Fisher, p. 118.

⁸ See Ch. One, p. 13n above.

⁹ *Political Poems and Songs relating to English History composed during the period from the*

Gower's stance was certainly a courageous one.

The Poem in its Totality

It is significant, however, that most of the Prologue was left unrevised. Gower's perceptions of the local political milieu were certainly important, but his vision was far broader in its scope. The poem's concern was indeed primarily for the state of England, but his political conception also encompassed all of Christendom and, indeed, the whole world. Beginning at Line 92 in both versions of the poem, Gower discusses the state of the world in 'tyme passed' and compares it to that of his own day:

The world stod thanne in al his welthe:
Tho was the lif of man in helthe,
Tho was plente, tho was richesse,
Tho was the fortune of prouesse,
Tho was knythode in pris be name....

(Prologue, ll. 95-99)

This passage is marked by two features. The first is an emphasis on social order and a harmonious relationship between all levels of the social and political hierarchy:

Justice of lawe tho was holde,
The privilege of regalie
Was sauf, and al the baronie
Worschiped was in his astat;
The citees knewen no debat,
The poeple stod in obeissance
Under the reule of governance,
And pes, which ryhtwisnesse keste,
With charite tho stod in reste:...

(Prologue, ll. 102-110)

The second feature is the passage's emphasis on the rejection of vice, the wholehearted embrace of virtue and the harmony of unselfish love:

Of mannes herte the corage
Was schewed thanne in the visage;

Accession of EDW. III to that of RIC. III, ed. T. Wright (Longman: London 1859) *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores* No. 14, Vol. 1., p. 278. It is interesting that this jingle was composed in the year which lies between the first and second versions of the *Confessio* (according to Fisher's hypothesis).

The word was lich to the conciete
Withoute semblant of deceite:
Tho was ther unenvied love,
Tho was the vertu sett above
And vice was put under fote.

(Prologue, ll. 111-118)

Chaucer also contrasted an ideal past with his own time in 'The Former Age',¹⁰ but Gower's emphasis is not on this kind of idyllic, primitively arcadian world which has no need of kings, knighthood and riches. His vision is of a world which *does* have these things, and yet maintains harmony.

The situation which the Narrator surveys stands in contrast to this former world:

Now stant the crop under the rote,
The world is changed overal,
And therof most in special
That love is falle into discord.

(Prologue, ll. 119-121)

The 'comun vois' cries out against the social and political discord of the age. Law is two-faced, justice and 'ryhtwisnesse' are abandoned, and on every side people 'sen the sor withoute salve'. The absence of love is repeatedly stressed in these passages. The Narrator states that 'hem that ben the worldes guides', the aristocracy, should be able to 'kepe a regne out of mischief' if they are well counselled; 'for alle resoun wolde this'. 'Resoun', like 'love', is a word which punctuates this passage but, like love, reason has been abandoned. War is pursued where peace should, by reason, be maintained, even though 'the comoun worldes speche' cries out against it. A reckless and ill-counselled aristocracy pursues war at the expense of both reason and love, and universal discord is the result. The Narrator observes:

The hevene wot what is to done,
Bot we that duelle under the mone
Stonde in this world upon a weer.

(Prologue, ll. 141-143)

The reference 'we that duelle under the mone' is echoed in Venus' speech at the end of the poem where Amans is reminded that 'Nature is under the Mone / Maistresse of every lives kinde'. (Bk

¹⁰ 'The Former Age' in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

VIII, ll. 2330-2331) We that dwell under the moon stand in this world upon a difficulty, but the path of a balance between reason and natural impulse, as exemplified by Nature and argued for at length by Genius throughout the confession, is the answer to this problem. Reason and love have been abandoned by the world's temporal rulers and discord has resulted, but love tempered by reason will restore accord.

The Prologue continues with an analysis of the Church in terms which are reminiscent of Chaucer's 'The Former Age'. In 'daies olde' clerics were an example to all those who sought wisdom and virtue. They avoided earthly affairs, rejected simony and did not involve themselves in wars. Now the keys of heaven are turned into a sword, prayers into curses and:

That scholde be the worldes hele
Is now, men sein, the pestilence
Which hath exiled pacience
Fro the clergie in special.

(Prologue, ll. 278-281)

Through a series of vivid metaphors, the Narrator delineates the failings of the Church: avarice, sloth, luxury and, especially, envy. Envy marks the machinations of the Papal court at Avignon, and the division it causes has its result in both the Schism and the growth of heresies like Lollardy. Again, it is the abandonment of reason in the pursuit of personal gain and pleasure which is the cause of all this confusion and decay:

Upon the hond to were a Schoo
And sette upon the fot a Glove
Acordeth noght to the behove
Of resonable mannes us.

(Prologue, ll. 356-359)

The passages on the clergy and aristocracy occasionally mention the 'comun vois' which cries out against the injustices of the day. In the section on the Commons, the Narrator identifies this 'comun clamour' as the voice of the ordinary people who 'eche in his compleignte telleth / How that the world is al miswent'. However, he points out, the blame for society's

confusion cannot be laid:

... only upon ten ne twelve
Bot plenerliche upon ous alle,
For man is cause of that schal falle.
(Prologue, ll. 526-528)

To blame fortune or the stars is to miss the point, we are told; man and the cosmos are linked and what one does affects the other:

For after that we falle and rise,
The world arist and falth withal,
So that the man is overal
His oghne cause of wel and wo.
(Prologue, ll. 544-547)

Thus, the *topos* of man as a microcosm, which is used so richly throughout the poem, is introduced here also in the Prologue. Man cannot simply blame fortune, or the stars or the other estates in the social hierarchy. *He* is the cause of the discord which disrupts his world. *His* rejection of reason and love is the 'cause of wel and wo'. The Narrator expounds upon the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream,¹¹ pointing out that it is significant that the statue was in human form 'and of non other beste.' He attributes the idea that man is a microcosm to Gregory the Great,¹² saying:

Forthi Gregoire in his Moral
Seith that a man in special
The lasse world is properly:
And that he proeveth redely;
For man of Soule resonable
Is to an Angel resemblable,
And lich to beste he hath fieling,
And lich to trees he hath growinge;
The Stones ben and so is he:
Thus of his propre qualite
The man, as telleth the clergie,
Is as a worlde in his partie,
And whan this litel world mistorneth,

¹¹ For the fullest account and analysis of Gower's use of this image see R. A. Peck, 'John Gower and the Book of Daniel' in R.F. Yeager, *John Gower: Recent Readings*, pp.159-187.

¹² Macaulay, p. 465n.

The grete world al overtorneth.

.....

The man is cause of alle wo

Why this world is divided so.

(Prologue, ll. 945-966)

The judgement of God, represented in Nebuchadnezzar's dream as the great stone, is imminent and so:

Forthi good is, whil a man may,

Echon to sette pes with other

And loven as his oghne brother;

So may he winne worldes welthe

And afterward his soule helthe.

(Prologue, ll. 1048-1052)

A restoration of harmony will result not only in rich rewards here on earth but, ultimately, in a greater reward in heaven. As Morton Bloomfield has pointed out, while many late medieval mystics, such as Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich, emphasised the perfection of the individual, there were many others who stressed the need for social and political perfection first and foremost.¹³ He attributes this intellectual tradition to the apocalyptic writings of Joachim of Flora, and counts Peter John Olivi, Angelo Clareno, Wyclif, Hus and Langland amongst those who argue along these lines.¹⁴ Gower seems to owe much to this tradition, as his use of the apocalyptic image of the Dream of Nebuchadnezzar in two of his poems would seem to indicate, but he treads something of a 'middel weie' between the mystics and the apocalyptics in that, while he believes fervently in the need to reform society, he also felt that this could only be done by all individuals severally reforming themselves.

The Prologue covers a great deal of ground, but its argument is consistent. In days gone by, the world was in harmony; all levels of society worked together for 'comun profit', vice

¹³ M.W. Bloomfield, *'Piers Plowman' as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1961) pp. 98ff.

¹⁴ Bloomfield, p. 99. The similarities between the social and political ideas of John Gower and his fellow Ricardian William Langland is another area which deserves further exploration. For analyses of these features in Langland see also T.L. Steinburg, *'Piers Plowman' and Prophecy: An Approach to the C-Text* (Garland Publishing: New York, 1991) and A.P. Baldwin, *The Theme of Government in 'Piers Plowman'* (Brewer and Boydell: Cambridge, 1981).

was eshewed and reason and love held sway. Now discord reigns on all levels. The aristocracy give themselves up to pointless wars and the clergy embrace political intrigue and vice. The commons lament the chaos that results, but it is the responsibility of *all* people to reform the world by reforming themselves. If a new harmony can be achieved, the rewards for all would be immeasurable.

This section of the Prologue remained unrevised in both versions of the poem, so we can imagine, therefore, both Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke reading this complex and tightly constructed analysis of the ills of late fourteenth-century society in the light of all of human history, both sacred and secular. In conclusion the Narrator wishes for 'An other such as Arion', the harper of classical myth whose music bought harmony and peace:

And every man upon this ground
Which Arion that time herde,
Als wel the lord as the schepherde,
He broghte hem alle in good acord;
So that the comun with the lord,
And lord with the comun also,
He sette in love bothe tuo.

(Prologue, ll. 1062-1068)¹⁵

Such peace can only be good, the Narrator argues, but when 'wisdom waxeth wod / And reson torneth into rage' then division ushers in the 'comun drede'. The Narrator wishes for a figure who will act to restore harmony and accord as Arion did. This could be written with one authorial eye on Gower's intended royal audience, with Gower hoping that the King would benefit from this succinct analysis of the ills of the age and take up the suggested solutions offered in the Prologue. There is also the possibility that he sees himself as an Arion: an artist who can look upon the world somewhat from outside and, through the wisdom which that perspective engenders, re-establish accord by his counsel.¹⁶ The words 'reson' and 'love' are repeated throughout the Prologue because these are the keys to personal, political and social

¹⁵ There is a thematic similarity between Gower's use of the image of the Arion, the artist who brings harmony, and the *Orfeo*-poet's use of the same idea; see S. Lerer 'Art and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*' *Speculum* Vol. 60, (1985), pp. 92-109.

¹⁶ J.A.W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, edited and completed by D. Gray (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1986) p. 424.

harmony. Through a combination of these two elements the social hierarchy can work together, peace and prosperity can be achieved, the divisions, corruptions and errors in the Church can be healed and all people can live together in happiness in this world and the next.

As has already been discussed at some length, Nature and Genius urge the 'middel weie' of reason and love upon Amans, who finally apprehends these truths in the conclusion to the confession dialogue and turns quietly for home, his own internal discord having now been brought into harmony by his new perspective on his life and the world. In this way the theme of harmony and discord which marks the Prologue is taken up in the confession dialogue: Amans as Everyman achieves internal harmony through reason and love. Through counsel, he gains the wisdom and understanding required to find the 'middel weie' of love and reason espoused by Genius. He can now go on to achieve the inner, personal reform which all must achieve if the harmony of the 'former age' is to be regained.

In the beginning of Book I we see the Narrator put on the mask of Amans which he wears throughout the confession dialogue. By line 2971 in Book VIII he has achieved all he intended when he adopted this 'persona' and we return to the narrative voice of the Prologue. Book I began with the Narrator admitting that 'I may nocht strecche up to the hevene / Min hand, ne setten al in evene / This world', and so he now pretends to turn to 'othre thinges'; but the themes of love, reason, the reform of the self and the right ordering of society remain throughout the entire work. Once the confession dialogue is resolved the poem returns to the condition of England and of the entire world, making it clear that it has indeed been his intention to show a way to 'setten al in evene this world' from the very beginning. So, while Gower's explorations of love and sexuality are important parts of the total poem, his social and political themes are every bit as important, as we would expect of a work originally aimed at a king.

That the Narrator returns to the concerns of the Prologue in this concluding section is most evident in the second version of the poem. Here, the Narrator first prays for the State of England and then asks God to look to each of the three estates and set the land 'uppon good governance'. He asks that the clergy should work for peace and charity, that the knights should

not oppress the people, and that no man should seek 'singuler profit' which is the cause of division. After expounding on the duties of a good king, he says he will write no more of earthly love; he ends with a final, succinct assessment of another form of love. This is *caritas*: an unselfish love, a natural instinct, informed by reason, which seeks for internal reformation and for the 'comun goode'. It is this love which is Gower's personal, spiritual, political and social 'middel weie', the path to harmony and happiness here on earth and, ultimately, the path to heaven:

...thilke love which that is
Withinne a mannes herte affermed
And stant of charite confermed,
Such love is goodly forto have,
Such love mai the bodi save,
Such love mai the soule amende,
The hyhe god such love ous sende
Forthwith the remenant of grace;
So that above in thilke place
Wher resteth love and alle pes,
Oure joie mai ben endeles.

(Bk VIII, ll. 3162-3172)

This is a highly Ricardian conclusion to Gower's poem. In the Prologue the Narrator gives us a great sweeping survey of history and society. With the opening of Book I he *seems* to leave these large concerns behind and narrow the poem's focus to one individual's dilemma. From this point until when Amans turns quietly for home, the poem's scrutiny is concentrated the minute analysis of Amans (and, through him, all people). With the resolution of this analysis, the Narrator then takes the reader back out into the wider concerns of the world and its troubles and divisions, indicates how Amans' resolution applies to us all, connects the end of the poem to the social and political concerns of its beginning and then points us all toward heaven.

This is similar to the way in which the Cotton Nero-Poet takes his reader from Troy through time and space to Camelot at the beginning of his poem, and whisks them back again at the end. The way in which Gower finishes his divine comedy of love with our eyes on heaven is

also reminiscent of the ending of *Troilus*, where the protagonist and the reader are swept from the particular to the general, and where a change in perspective brings a new wisdom. How the young Richard II responded to the ending of this 'newe thing' he had requested, or what Henry of Derby made of it, we can only guess. Perhaps we can be permitted to imagine, however, that when Geoffrey Chaucer closed his friend's book and thought over the breadth of meaning it had achieved, 'in [him] self [he] gan to smyle'.

The Breadth and Wholeness of the *Confessio Amantis*

This study began by looking at reasons why John Gower should be brought out of Geoffrey Chaucer's shadow. Much critical writing on the *Confessio* is still restricted by many stereotypical preconceptions which have their origins in the poet's previously adverse critical reputation, and our understanding of this sophisticated medieval thinker can advance only when both the breadth and wholeness of his poetic conception are recognised. Rather than simply contrasting him with Chaucer, or trying to assess his work by examining it in the light of Chaucer's achievement, Gower must be examined in his own right. His breadth can be recognised only if he is examined within his social and wider literary context. Indeed, our understanding of the great blossoming of vernacular English poetry which marked the late fourteenth century must be advanced by examining Gower and his contemporaries as products of the same literary milieu. The many connections in thought, sentiment, themes, concerns and styles between *all* of the Ricardian poets is a rich field (which was only hinted at in J.A. Burrows' book, *Ricardian Poetry*) and it waits to be adequately explored.

Far from being a frame-narrative which has the intention, simply, of recounting stories of love, the *Confessio Amantis* is a work with a large number of aims and intentions. To examine sexual love and sexuality is one of the poem's more obvious aims; and the confession dialogue, the *exempla* it contains, and the second of the two calendrical schemes discussed in Chapter Three, combine to achieve a rounded, humane and penetrating analysis of this important human concern. The first of the two calendrical schemes, and the passages which follow it, examine the progress of life generally: from youth to old age, from vigorous activity to sedentary

contemplation. Gower also aims to examine, and attempts to resolve, the apparent conflict between 'lust' and 'lore'; and identifies 'honeste love' in marriage as the best way to temper sexuality with reason and to comply with the requirements of morality. He seeks to provide a background to these universal issues by including material on the sciences, religion and politics.

'Love', in its broadest, most universal and divine sense, is the idea which combines all of these elements into a coherent poetic and philosophical whole. Gower pretends to turn from the woes of the world, at the beginning of Book One, and discuss something simpler: love. As the poem reaches its conclusion, however, it becomes clear that he has not changed the subject at all. Through Amans, the Everyman and Everylover, the poem reveals unselfish, reasonable love to be the source of all harmony and the solution to all political, personal and spiritual discord. Through love, individuals can reform themselves and society, therefore, can be brought to universal harmony. This philosophy was Gower's major aim; but it was also his intention to entertain, to instruct and to intrigue whilst he did so. His poem was a work which he wished to be *used*, and used by many people for many purposes. As such, Gower's poem is a work of great complexity, great utility and great conceptual, philosophical and poetic breadth

The result of examining this breadth of poetic vision, which emerges from looking at Gower in his true context, is a realisation of the *wholeness* of the *Confessio*. Looking at it as a 'frame narrative', as another *Canterbury Tales* in other words, is less useful than examining the whole *Confessio Amantis* as a psychological dialogue between the penitent and the confessor, between the reader and the author, and between the artist and the world. Once the overwhelming emphasis on the 'tales' as the be-all-and-end-all of the poem is abandoned, the architectonic symmetry and the sophistication of the work become much clearer. Gower's macrocosmic concerns no longer seem like irritating digressions which halt the flow of the *exempla*, but can be recognised as an integral part of his broad scheme. The poem's encyclopædic material is no longer seen as wordy excess on the part of the poet, but as part of the intellectual utility which is one of Gower's main intentions for the work. Over-arching poetic effects, such as the two calendrical schemes of the Twelve Ages of Man, can be recognised; and the wider didactic

strategies which this very careful writer built into his poem can be examined. The challenging intricacies of the relationships between Genius, Venus and Amans can be seen as part of a broad conception instead of a confused muddle. Critical inertia makes abandoning the image of Gower as a *narrow* writer very difficult; but once the breadth and wholeness of Gower's 'middel weie' is realised, the results are rich indeed.

This holistic conception of the *Confessio* leads to many possible areas of inquiry which were beyond the scope of the present study. For example, both Gower and Chaucer make use of figures from classical mythology and set some of their most significant narratives in the pre-Christian world. The breadth and philosophical freedom which the pre-redemption universe gave these poets seems to have appealed to them, and the way in which they made use of this freedom is another area of inquiry.

Gower's use of ironic personæ in the *Confessio* also warrants further investigation. The image of Gower as a dour, conservative writer of dull polemic has generally retarded the reading of his work on anything but the most literal of levels. The comic potential of an elderly author 'feigning to be a lover' is obvious (though generally unacknowledged); but the possibilities of levels of thematic and ironic richness through his use of various levels of narrative voice (Narrator, Amans, Genius) are also likely to reward investigation greatly. The ways in which the individual *exempla* contribute to Gower's broad vision remains to be analysed in depth. Gower's theology and its sources, the influence of the concurrent mystical and apocalyptic traditions of the late medieval period, his place in the analysis (and satire) of the Three Estates – all these are still further areas which would add to our appreciation of this quiet but rigorous thinker.

Wherever these inquiries lead, it is becoming clear to us now why Chaucer submitted his *Troilus* to the careful, attentive, humane and perceptive eye of 'moral Gower' for correction. Perhaps we should have trusted Chaucer's judgement a little more.

CHAPTER FOUR - Findings and Outcomes

The Politics of the *Confessio Amantis*

Readers could be forgiven for failing to remember the opening lines of the *Confessio* by the time they reach the resolution of the confession dialogue and witness Amans turning thoughtfully for home 2,960 lines later. It is important to remember, however, that in the original version of his Prologue (or his 'extrinsic prologue', to be precise),¹ Gower promised to write 'A bok for king Richardes sake'. In the final version of his poem this intention was broadened in scope to a 'bok for Engelondes sake', but his essential intention and motivation did not change. Whatever else it may be, the *Confessio Amantis* is, in its essence, an overtly political work.

To an extent, it is understandable that critics have been distracted from this aspect of the poem by C.S. Lewis' seminal chapter on Gower's poem in *The Allegory of Love*, which lays complete emphasis on the poem as a poem of 'courtly love'. Lewis' study was certainly a stimulus for closer study of the *Confessio*, but he overlooks the poem's great diversity in his zeal to examine it in the tradition of the *Roman de la Rose*.² This has, perhaps, been exacerbated by a lingering romantic ideal that poets should somehow be 'above' politics. Paul Strohm has observed of Chaucer:

Twentieth-century literary historians have rather wishfully thought him apolitical, a free agent between parties or even wholly free of factional ties. But any freedom of personal choice or perspective he enjoyed was achieved from within the conditions imposed from his factional situation, not by ignoring them but by manipulating them with patience and skill.

(Strohm, p. 25)

Such apolitical aloofness, however, tends to be attributed mainly to 'better' poets such as

¹ See Ch. One, p. 21 above.

² Lewis, pp. 198 ff. Lewis begins his chapter by analysing the line 'Somewhat of lust, somewhat of lore'. He defines 'lust' rather too narrowly as 'courtly love', and 'lore' even more narrowly as 'ethical diatribe'. His study ignores the poem's social and political aspects entirely.

Chaucer. 'Inferior' and 'mediocre' poets, as Gower has been regarded until recently, *are* allowed to write poetry of a political nature, but are rarely praised for it. Fisher summarises the eighteenth and nineteenth-century assessment of Gower's (supposed) political stance:

Theophilus Cibber (1753) had been content to dismiss him as a timeserver. Joseph Ritson (1802) observed that 'his *Vox Clamantis* might have deserved publication, in a historical view, if he had not proved an ingrate to his lawful sovereign, and a sycophant to the usurper of his throne.' Charles Cowden-Clark, Keats's friend, added (1853): 'yet this execrable baseness attaches to the memory of Chaucer's friend Gower, who with the callous selfishness that not infrequently accompanies a blind old age, was among the first to welcome the new sovereign, spurning at the same time his fallen master and patron.'

(Fisher, p. 29)

Of course, it is highly unlikely that Richard was ever Gower's patron and Fisher's analysis, later in his book, conclusively disposes of the image of Gower the fawning ingrate who 'bolted to Bolingbroke' when the political tide turned. A reading of the whole poem shows that it is characterised by political themes which are marked not only by their sophistication but also by their passion. Gower was no fawning sycophant but, by the same token, neither was he a detached and remote commentator in an ivory tower at St Mary Overeys. The *Confessio* reveals an author greatly concerned for the Kingdom of England, for Christendom and for the whole world. Gower had an active interest in the politics of his time, and he saw his poetry as a way to influence it. It is through this aspect of the poem that we return to Gower's assumed authorial role as a sapiental authority.³ He sought to write a work that would be like the old books he mentions in the *Confessio's* opening lines, 'newe som matiere / Ensampled of these olde wyse', that could instruct and guide a new generation. By dispensing wisdom, which is the subject to which the poem belonged according to his extrinsic prologue, he hopes to restore some of the harmony which the world lacks and which he passionately believes to be the source of political, social and spiritual stability.

As discussed above, the image of Gower as a solitary writer of turgid complaint poetry can usefully and legitimately be replaced by that of Gower as part of a vigorous group of

³ See Ch. One, p. 20 ff. above.

intelligent and literary-minded friends and associates including Chaucer and many of his circle.⁴ Similarly, it must not be forgotten that, as part of this group of like-minded friends and associates, Gower was close to the centre of the affairs of state and politics of his day and probably took an active interest in them. Paul Strohm usefully examines the evidence for Chaucer's political associations and his place in the complex arrangements of parties, factions and interest-groups which made up fourteenth-century English politics. He points out that:

The king or magnate was situated not (as in a hierarchy) at the *apex* of the affinity, but at its *center*, with followers arrayed around him in a series of concentric circles, widening out to less and less defined forms of interdependency.

(Strohm, p. 25)

Strohm delineates the first three of these circles of dependency: The Officers of State (such as the Chamber Knights), salaried servants (such as Chancery officials and Sergeants at Arms) and the General Retinue (royal esquires and knights).⁵ Chaucer, as Strohm points out, had a virtually continual association with the first circle, and was a member of the other two at various times throughout his career. Gower, by contrast, seems to have been only associated with these three innermost circles, belonging to none of them. Of all the associates of Chaucer whom Strohm examines, only Gower could be said to have been politically unaligned:

Chaucer's fellow poet, we may say in simple summary of a complex body of evidence, was effectively nonaligned. A landed squire of independent means who addressed admonitions and encouragement both to Richard and to Henry of Derby, Gower depended for his livelihood on neither.

(Strohm, p. 31)

The lack of evidence regarding Gower's associations means that any attempt at delineating which of the politicians and factionalists of the time were known to Gower is bound to be pure conjecture. As has already been argued, however, in a city as small as late fourteenth-century London it is likely that a great many of these men *were* known to the poet. Indeed, it would have been almost impossible to escape the intrigues of the last decade of the century, even

⁴ See Ch. One, p. 9-20 above.

⁵ Strohm, p. 25.

if Gower *did* attempt to cloister himself away in St Mary Overeys. The highly interlinked social circles in which Gower and his associates moved meant that people's paths tended to cross in all kinds of ways.

While it is true to say that Gower was nonaligned, this does not mean that he was in any way a political fence-sitter. This should surprise no-one; after all, it is highly likely that Gower took a very active interest in the politics of his time, and that he was well-placed to be a useful advisor and commentator on political matters. This is because he was not only in touch with many who were actively involved in politics, but he was also financially independent and therefore detached enough from the factionalism which marked late fourteenth-century politics to be able to see the affairs of state from a broad perspective. It is interesting that, as Strohm has pointed out, many literary critics and historians have been reluctant to acknowledge Chaucer's political allegiances, seemingly because they feel a man with a mind of such scope and depth could not possibly have involved himself with petty political squabbles. By contrast, Gower's poetry has traditionally been seen as being far more narrow-minded than Chaucer's, yet it would appear that he was rather less actively involved in politics than Chaucer. What must be kept in mind is that *both* men were thinkers and active participants in their society, and so it would be more surprising if they did not take an active interest in the politics of the time.

As Fisher's analysis of the textual history of the *Confessio* has made very clear, Gower was not afraid to take a political stance, even if that stance were a dangerous one.⁶ The first recension of the Prologue makes Gower's passionate political concerns very clear. This was to be primarily a 'bok for king Richardes sake'; a book of wisdom for the young king in the tradition of the *speculum regale*. The first ninety-two lines of the Prologue in this recension state his objects clearly and relate the anecdote about meeting the young king on the Thames. His concern is to:

...make a bok after his heste,
And write in such a maner wise,
Which may be wisdom to the wise
And pley to hem that lust to pleye.

⁶ Fisher, pp. 109ff.

(Prologue, ll. *82-85)

This section of the Prologue's first version emphasises that it was Richard who requested the poem, and celebrates this fact. While it is followed by an account of the social and political ills which Gower sees around him, he does not mention these yet. At this stage in the poem's political development the tone is optimistic; Richard II had only become king in his own right quite recently and Gower, amongst others, had great hopes for the young monarch. The ills which he goes on to catalogue certainly cannot be denied, but neither can they be laid at the door of a king who has only just reached his majority. Indeed, it is Gower's hope that Richard, with good guidance and wise counsel, will be able to combat some of these social and political ills. This note of optimism is repeated in the first recension of the epilogue at the end of Book VIII:

Upon mi bare knees I preye,
That [God] my worthi king conveye,
Richard by name the Secounde,
In whom hath evere yit be founde
Justice medled with pite,
Largesce forth with charite.

(Bk. VIII, ll.*2985-2990)

The political tone of the later version of the poem is very different. The book has now become a work 'for Engelondes sake', and Gower's account of the design of the book has changed markedly and is considerably more gloomy:

What schal befalle hierafterward
God wot, for now upon this tyde
Men se the world on every syde
In sondry wyse so diversed,
That it welnyh stant al reversed,
As forto speke of tyme ago.

(Prologue, ll. 26-31)

This, the Narrator tells us, is the state of the world in the 'yer sextenthe of kyng Richard.' Not only does the catalogue of the world's woes begin much earlier in the Prologue in this second

version, but it begins with a reference to Richard's name and the precise year of his reign. This is very different from the pleasant anecdote about boating on the Thames which characterised this section in the Prologue's earlier version. The references to the wise taking wisdom from the poem, while others may simply take pleasure, have been toned down. Now the emphasis is on princes who 'deden thanne amis / Thurgh tirannie and crualte', and the reader is told that the work 'to wisdom al belongeth'. Most importantly, the work is now dedicated to 'myn oghne lord / Which of Lancastre is Henri named'. The new version of the epilogue also reflects this change in tone and in political orientation. The prayer for the king becomes a prayer for the state of England, and direct references to Richard are removed. Interestingly, the fairly brief mention of the qualities of a good king which can be found in the first recension is greatly expanded into a section fifty-two lines long (Bk. VIII, ll. 3054-3106).

Whatever else may be said about these changes, it seems clear that Richard had not lived up to Gower's hopes. In the second version of the Prologue, Gower associates the king with the social ills he discusses, while in the second version of the epilogue he follows an analysis of discord in all levels of society with an analysis of the attributes of a good king. It is the king who should be the source of unity in the land:

To him belongith the leiance
Of Clerk, of knyght, of man of lawe;
Undir his hond al is forth drawe
The marchant and the laborer;
So stant it al in his power
Or forto spille or forto save.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 3058-3063).

With this power, the poet cautions, comes great responsibility. A king must avoid vice, pride and lust, and dedicate himself to God:

Bot what kyng that with humble chere
Aftir the lawe of god eschuieth
The vices, and the vertus suieth,
His grace schal be suffisant
To governe al the remenant
Which longith to his duite;

So that in his prosperite
The poeple schal nought ben oppressid,
Wherof his name schal be blessid,
For evere and be memorial.

(Bk. VIII, ll. 3096-3105)

This is in stark and deliberate contrast to the parallel passage in the first version of the epilogue:

It proveth wel that he [a good king] eschueth
The vices and is vertuous,
Wherof he mot be gracious
Toward his god and acceptable.

(Bk. VIII, ll. *3032-3035)

In the earlier version Gower warmly recommends that the young king should live virtuously and rule well, but the lengthier passage in the second version has a sterner, more admonitory tone. The implication is, of course, that he no longer considers Richard to be conforming to the archetype of the virtuous king.

Fisher argues convincingly that the event which precipitated the change of heart which led to these significant changes was Richard's quarrel with the city of London in 1392.⁷ Whether this were true or not, the revisions are an indication of a bold and decisive change of political stance. There is a good chance that Gower would have presented Richard with a copy of the first version of the poem. If he then presented Henry of Derby with a copy of the politically revised second version, and there is some evidence he did,⁸ then the poet was publicly nailing his colours to the mast. Indeed, the manuscript evidence shows that this change of political stance was certainly not something which Gower did quietly, behind closed doors. The fact that the old, 'first recension' text in MS Fairfax 3 was scraped out and the new version of the poem written in its place, is one indication of the concern shown by Gower that his readers should be aware of the new version. In a political climate which engendered pithy comment such as:

The ax was scharpe the stokke was harde
In the xiiij yere of kyng Richarde,⁹

⁷ Fisher, p. 118.

⁸ See Ch. One, p. 13n above.

⁹ *Political Poems and Songs relating to English History composed during the period from the*

Gower's stance was certainly a courageous one.

The Poem in its Totality

It is significant, however, that most of the Prologue was left unrevised. Gower's perceptions of the local political milieu were certainly important, but his vision was far broader in its scope. The poem's concern was indeed primarily for the state of England, but his political conception also encompassed all of Christendom and, indeed, the whole world. Beginning at Line 92 in both versions of the poem, Gower discusses the state of the world in 'tyme passed' and compares it to that of his own day:

The world stod thanne in al his welthe:
Tho was the lif of man in helthe,
Tho was plente, tho was richesse,
Tho was the fortune of prouesse,
Tho was knythode in pris be name....

(Prologue, ll. 95-99)

This passage is marked by two features. The first is an emphasis on social order and a harmonious relationship between all levels of the social and political hierarchy:

Justice of lawe tho was holde,
The privilege of regalie
Was sauf, and al the baronie
Worschiped was in his astat;
The citees knewen no debat,
The poeple stod in obeissance
Under the reule of governance,
And pes, which ryhtwisnesse keste,
With charite tho stod in reste:...

(Prologue, ll. 102-110)

The second feature is the passage's emphasis on the rejection of vice, the wholehearted embrace of virtue and the harmony of unselfish love:

Of mannes herte the corage
Was schewed thanne in the visage;

Accession of EDW. III to that of RIC. III, ed. T. Wright (Longman: London 1859) *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores* No. 14, Vol. 1., p. 278. It is interesting that this jingle was composed in the year which lies between the first and second versions of the *Confessio* (according to Fisher's hypothesis).

The word was lich to the conciete
Withoute semblant of deceite:
Tho was ther unenvied love,
Tho was the vertu sett above
And vice was put under fote.

(Prologue, ll. 111-118)

Chaucer also contrasted an ideal past with his own time in 'The Former Age',¹⁰ but Gower's emphasis is not on this kind of idyllic, primitively arcadian world which has no need of kings, knighthood and riches. His vision is of a world which *does* have these things, and yet maintains harmony.

The situation which the Narrator surveys stands in contrast to this former world:

Now stant the crop under the rote,
The world is changed overal,
And therof most in special
That love is falle into discord.

(Prologue, ll. 119-121)

The 'comun vois' cries out against the social and political discord of the age. Law is two-faced, justice and 'ryhtwisnesse' are abandoned, and on every side people 'sen the sor withoute salve'. The absence of love is repeatedly stressed in these passages. The Narrator states that 'hem that ben the worldes guides', the aristocracy, should be able to 'kepe a regne out of mischief' if they are well counselled; 'for alle resoun wolde this'. 'Resoun', like 'love', is a word which punctuates this passage but, like love, reason has been abandoned. War is pursued where peace should, by reason, be maintained, even though 'the comoun worldes speche' cries out against it. A reckless and ill-counselled aristocracy pursues war at the expense of both reason and love, and universal discord is the result. The Narrator observes:

The hevene wot what is to done,
Bot we that duelle under the mone
Stonde in this world upon a weer.

(Prologue, ll. 141-143)

The reference 'we that duelle under the mone' is echoed in Venus' speech at the end of the poem where Amans is reminded that 'Nature is under the Mone / Maistresse of every lives kinde'. (Bk

¹⁰ 'The Former Age' in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

VIII, ll. 2330-2331) We that dwell under the moon stand in this world upon a difficulty, but the path of a balance between reason and natural impulse, as exemplified by Nature and argued for at length by Genius throughout the confession, is the answer to this problem. Reason and love have been abandoned by the world's temporal rulers and discord has resulted, but love tempered by reason will restore accord.

The Prologue continues with an analysis of the Church in terms which are reminiscent of Chaucer's 'The Former Age'. In 'daies olde' clerics were an example to all those who sought wisdom and virtue. They avoided earthly affairs, rejected simony and did not involve themselves in wars. Now the keys of heaven are turned into a sword, prayers into curses and:

That scholde be the worldes hele
Is now, men sein, the pestilence
Which hath exiled pacience
Fro the clergie in special.

(Prologue, ll. 278-281)

Through a series of vivid metaphors, the Narrator delineates the failings of the Church: avarice, sloth, luxury and, especially, envy. Envy marks the machinations of the Papal court at Avignon, and the division it causes has its result in both the Schism and the growth of heresies like Lollardy. Again, it is the abandonment of reason in the pursuit of personal gain and pleasure which is the cause of all this confusion and decay:

Upon the hond to were a Schoo
And sette upon the fot a Glove
Acordeth noght to the behove
Of resonable mannes us.

(Prologue, ll. 356-359)

The passages on the clergy and aristocracy occasionally mention the 'comun vois' which cries out against the injustices of the day. In the section on the Commons, the Narrator identifies this 'comun clamour' as the voice of the ordinary people who 'eche in his compleignte telleth / How that the world is al miswent'. However, he points out, the blame for society's

confusion cannot be laid:

... only upon ten ne twelve
Bot plenerliche upon ous alle,
For man is cause of that schal falle.
(Prologue, ll. 526-528)

To blame fortune or the stars is to miss the point, we are told; man and the cosmos are linked and what one does affects the other:

For after that we falle and rise,
The world arist and falth withal,
So that the man is overal
His oghne cause of wel and wo.
(Prologue, ll. 544-547)

Thus, the *topos* of man as a microcosm, which is used so richly throughout the poem, is introduced here also in the Prologue. Man cannot simply blame fortune, or the stars or the other estates in the social hierarchy. *He* is the cause of the discord which disrupts his world. *His* rejection of reason and love is the 'cause of wel and wo'. The Narrator expounds upon the meaning of Nebuchadnezzar's dream,¹¹ pointing out that it is significant that the statue was in human form 'and of non other beste.' He attributes the idea that man is a microcosm to Gregory the Great,¹² saying:

Forthi Gregoire in his Moral
Seith that a man in special
The lasse world is properly:
And that he proeveth redely;
For man of Soule resonable
Is to an Angel resemblable,
And lich to beste he hath fielinge,
And lich to trees he hath growinge;
The Stones ben and so is he:
Thus of his propre qualite
The man, as telleth the clergie,
Is as a worlde in his partie,
And whan this litel world mistorneth,

¹¹ For the fullest account and analysis of Gower's use of this image see R. A. Peck, 'John Gower and the Book of Daniel' in R.F. Yeager, *John Gower: Recent Readings*, pp.159-187.

¹² Macaulay, p. 465n.

The grete world al overtorneth.

.....

The man is cause of alle wo

Why this world is divided so.

(Prologue, ll. 945-966)

The judgement of God, represented in Nebuchadnezzar's dream as the great stone, is imminent and so:

Forthi good is, whil a man may,

Echon to sette pes with other

And loven as his oghne brother;

So may he winne worldes welthe

And afterward his soule helthe.

(Prologue, ll. 1048-1052)

A restoration of harmony will result not only in rich rewards here on earth but, ultimately, in a greater reward in heaven. As Morton Bloomfield has pointed out, while many late medieval mystics, such as Walter Hilton, Richard Rolle and Julian of Norwich, emphasised the perfection of the individual, there were many others who stressed the need for social and political perfection first and foremost.¹³ He attributes this intellectual tradition to the apocalyptic writings of Joachim of Flora, and counts Peter John Olivi, Angelo Clareno, Wyclif, Hus and Langland amongst those who argue along these lines.¹⁴ Gower seems to owe much to this tradition, as his use of the apocalyptic image of the Dream of Nebuchadnezzar in two of his poems would seem to indicate, but he treads something of a 'middel weie' between the mystics and the apocalypics in that, while he believes fervently in the need to reform society, he also felt that this could only be done by all individuals severally reforming themselves.

The Prologue covers a great deal of ground, but its argument is consistent. In days gone by, the world was in harmony; all levels of society worked together for 'comun profit', vice

¹³ M.W. Bloomfield, *'Piers Plowman' as a Fourteenth Century Apocalypse* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 1961) pp. 98ff.

¹⁴ Bloomfield, p. 99. The similarities between the social and political ideas of John Gower and his fellow Ricardian William Langland is another area which deserves further exploration. For analyses of these features in Langland see also T.L. Steinburg, *'Piers Plowman' and Prophecy: An Approach to the C-Text* (Garland Publishing: New York, 1991) and A.P. Baldwin, *The Theme of Government in 'Piers Plowman'* (Brewer and Boydell: Cambridge, 1981).

was eshewed and reason and love held sway. Now discord reigns on all levels. The aristocracy give themselves up to pointless wars and the clergy embrace political intrigue and vice. The commons lament the chaos that results, but it is the responsibility of *all* people to reform the world by reforming themselves. If a new harmony can be achieved, the rewards for all would be immeasurable.

This section of the Prologue remained unrevised in both versions of the poem, so we can imagine, therefore, both Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke reading this complex and tightly constructed analysis of the ills of late fourteenth-century society in the light of all of human history, both sacred and secular. In conclusion the Narrator wishes for 'An other such as Arion', the harper of classical myth whose music bought harmony and peace:

And every man upon this ground
Which Arion that time herde,
Als wel the lord as the schepherde,
He broghte hem alle in good acord;
So that the comun with the lord,
And lord with the comun also,
He sette in love bothe tuo.

(Prologue, ll. 1062-1068)¹⁵

Such peace can only be good, the Narrator argues, but when 'wisdom waxeth wod / And reson torneth into rage' then division ushers in the 'comun drede'. The Narrator wishes for a figure who will act to restore harmony and accord as Arion did. This could be written with one authorial eye on Gower's intended royal audience, with Gower hoping that the King would benefit from this succinct analysis of the ills of the age and take up the suggested solutions offered in the Prologue. There is also the possibility that he sees himself as an Arion: an artist who can look upon the world somewhat from outside and, through the wisdom which that perspective engenders, re-establish accord by his counsel.¹⁶ The words 'reson' and 'love' are repeated throughout the Prologue because these are the keys to personal, political and social

¹⁵ There is a thematic similarity between Gower's use of the image of the Arion, the artist who brings harmony, and the *Orfeo*-poet's use of the same idea; see S. Lerer 'Art and Artistry in *Sir Orfeo*' *Speculum* Vol. 60, (1985), pp. 92-109.

¹⁶ J.A.W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, edited and completed by D. Gray (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1986) p. 424.

harmony. Through a combination of these two elements the social hierarchy can work together, peace and prosperity can be achieved, the divisions, corruptions and errors in the Church can be healed and all people can live together in happiness in this world and the next.

As has already been discussed at some length, Nature and Genius urge the 'middel weie' of reason and love upon Amans, who finally apprehends these truths in the conclusion to the confession dialogue and turns quietly for home, his own internal discord having now been bought into harmony by his new perspective on his life and the world. In this way the theme of harmony and discord which marks the Prologue is taken up in the confession dialogue: Amans as Everyman achieves internal harmony through reason and love. Through counsel, he gains the wisdom and understanding required to find the 'middel weie' of love and reason espoused by Genius. He can now go on to achieve the inner, personal reform which all must achieve if the harmony of the 'former age' is to be regained.

In the beginning of Book I we see the Narrator put on the mask of Amans which he wears throughout the confession dialogue. By line 2971 in Book VIII he has achieved all he intended when he adopted this 'persona' and we return to the narrative voice of the Prologue. Book I began with the Narrator admitting that 'I may noght strecche up to the hevene / Min hand, ne setten al in evene / This world', and so he now pretends to turn to 'othre thinges'; but the themes of love, reason, the reform of the self and the right ordering of society remain throughout the entire work. Once the confession dialogue is resolved the poem returns to the condition of England and of the entire world, making it clear that it has indeed been his intention to show a way to 'setten al in evene this world' from the very beginning. So, while Gower's explorations of love and sexuality are important parts of the total poem, his social and political themes are every bit as important, as we would expect of a work originally aimed at a king.

That the Narrator returns to the concerns of the Prologue in this concluding section is most evident in the second version of the poem. Here, the Narrator first prays for the State of England and then asks God to look to each of the three estates and set the land 'uppon good governance'. He asks that the clergy should work for peace and charity, that the knights should

not oppress the people, and that no man should seek 'singuler profit' which is the cause of division. After expounding on the duties of a good king, he says he will write no more of earthly love; he ends with a final, succinct assessment of another form of love. This is *caritas*: an unselfish love, a natural instinct, informed by reason, which seeks for internal reformation and for the 'comun goode'. It is this love which is Gower's personal, spiritual, political and social 'middel weie', the path to harmony and happiness here on earth and, ultimately, the path to heaven:

...thilke love which that is
Withinne a mannes herte affermed
And stant of charite confermed,
Such love is goodly forto have,
Such love mai the bodi save,
Such love mai the soule amende,
The hyhe god such love ous sende
Forthwith the remenant of grace;
So that above in thilke place
Wher resteth love and alle pes,
Oure joie mai ben endeles.

(Bk VIII, ll. 3162-3172)

This is a highly Ricardian conclusion to Gower's poem. In the Prologue the Narrator gives us a great sweeping survey of history and society. With the opening of Book I he *seems* to leave these large concerns behind and narrow the poem's focus to one individual's dilemma. From this point until when Amans turns quietly for home, the poem's scrutiny is concentrated the minute analysis of Amans (and, through him, all people). With the resolution of this analysis, the Narrator then takes the reader back out into the wider concerns of the world and its troubles and divisions, indicates how Amans' resolution applies to us all, connects the end of the poem to the social and political concerns of its beginning and then points us all toward heaven.

This is similar to the way in which the Cotton Nero-Poet takes his reader from Troy through time and space to Camelot at the beginning of his poem, and whisks them back again at the end. The way in which Gower finishes his divine comedy of love with our eyes on heaven is

also reminiscent of the ending of *Troilus*, where the protagonist and the reader are swept from the particular to the general, and where a change in perspective brings a new wisdom. How the young Richard II responded to the ending of this 'newe thing' he had requested, or what Henry of Derby made of it, we can only guess. Perhaps we can be permitted to imagine, however, that when Geoffrey Chaucer closed his friend's book and thought over the breadth of meaning it had achieved, 'in [him] self [he] gan to smyle'.

The Breadth and Wholeness of the *Confessio Amantis*

This study began by looking at reasons why John Gower should be brought out of Geoffrey Chaucer's shadow. Much critical writing on the *Confessio* is still restricted by many stereotypical preconceptions which have their origins in the poet's previously adverse critical reputation, and our understanding of this sophisticated medieval thinker can advance only when both the breadth and wholeness of his poetic conception are recognised. Rather than simply contrasting him with Chaucer, or trying to assess his work by examining it in the light of Chaucer's achievement, Gower must be examined in his own right. His breadth can be recognised only if he is examined within his social and wider literary context. Indeed, our understanding of the great blossoming of vernacular English poetry which marked the late fourteenth century must be advanced by examining Gower and his contemporaries as products of the same literary milieu. The many connections in thought, sentiment, themes, concerns and styles between *all* of the Ricardian poets is a rich field (which was only hinted at in J.A. Burrows' book, *Ricardian Poetry*) and it waits to be adequately explored.

Far from being a frame-narrative which has the intention, simply, of recounting stories of love, the *Confessio Amantis* is a work with a large number of aims and intentions. To examine sexual love and sexuality is one of the poem's more obvious aims; and the confession dialogue, the *exempla* it contains, and the second of the two calendrical schemes discussed in Chapter Three, combine to achieve a rounded, humane and penetrating analysis of this important human concern. The first of the two calendrical schemes, and the passages which follow it, examine the progress of life generally: from youth to old age, from vigorous activity to sedentary

contemplation. Gower also aims to examine, and attempts to resolve, the apparent conflict between 'lust' and 'lore'; and identifies 'honeste love' in marriage as the best way to temper sexuality with reason and to comply with the requirements of morality. He seeks to provide a background to these universal issues by including material on the sciences, religion and politics.

'Love', in its broadest, most universal and divine sense, is the idea which combines all of these elements into a coherent poetic and philosophical whole. Gower pretends to turn from the woes of the world, at the beginning of Book One, and discuss something simpler: love. As the poem reaches its conclusion, however, it becomes clear that he has not changed the subject at all. Through Amans, the Everyman and Everylover, the poem reveals unselfish, reasonable love to be the source of all harmony and the solution to all political, personal and spiritual discord. Through love, individuals can reform themselves and society, therefore, can be brought to universal harmony. This philosophy was Gower's major aim; but it was also his intention to entertain, to instruct and to intrigue whilst he did so. His poem was a work which he wished to be *used*, and used by many people for many purposes. As such, Gower's poem is a work of great complexity, great utility and great conceptual, philosophical and poetic breadth

The result of examining this breadth of poetic vision, which emerges from looking at Gower in his true context, is a realisation of the *wholeness* of the *Confessio*. Looking at it as a 'frame narrative', as another *Canterbury Tales* in other words, is less useful than examining the whole *Confessio Amantis* as a psychological dialogue between the penitent and the confessor, between the reader and the author, and between the artist and the world. Once the overwhelming emphasis on the 'tales' as the be-all-and-end-all of the poem is abandoned, the architectonic symmetry and the sophistication of the work become much clearer. Gower's macrocosmic concerns no longer seem like irritating digressions which halt the flow of the *exempla*, but can be recognised as an integral part of his broad scheme. The poem's encyclopædic material is no longer seen as wordy excess on the part of the poet, but as part of the intellectual utility which is one of Gower's main intentions for the work. Over-arching poetic effects, such as the two calendrical schemes of the Twelve Ages of Man, can be recognised; and the wider didactic

strategies which this very careful writer built into his poem can be examined. The challenging intricacies of the relationships between Genius, Venus and Amans can be seen as part of a broad conception instead of a confused muddle. Critical inertia makes abandoning the image of Gower as a *narrow* writer very difficult; but once the breadth and wholeness of Gower's 'middel weie' is realised, the results are rich indeed.

This holistic conception of the *Confessio* leads to many possible areas of inquiry which were beyond the scope of the present study. For example, both Gower and Chaucer make use of figures from classical mythology and set some of their most significant narratives in the pre-christian world. The breadth and philosophical freedom which the pre-redemption universe gave these poets seems to have appealed to them, and the way in which they made use of this freedom is another area of inquiry.

Gower's use of ironic personæ in the *Confessio* also warrants further investigation. The image of Gower as a dour, conservative writer of dull polemic has generally retarded the reading of his work on anything but the most literal of levels. The comic potential of an elderly author 'feigning to be a lover' is obvious (though generally unacknowledged); but the possibilities of levels of thematic and ironic richness through his use of various levels of narrative voice (Narrator, Amans, Genius) are also likely to reward investigation greatly. The ways in which the individual *exempla* contribute to Gower's broad vision remains to be analysed in depth. Gower's theology and its sources, the influence of the concurrent mystical and apocalyptic traditions of the late medieval period, his place in the analysis (and satire) of the Three Estates – all these are still further areas which would add to our appreciation of this quiet but rigorous thinker.

Wherever these inquiries lead, it is becoming clear to us now why Chaucer submitted his *Troilus* to the careful, attentive, humane and perceptive eye of 'moral Gower' for correction. Perhaps we should have trusted Chaucer's judgement a little more.

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